

# Economic security in a time of uncertainty: A South African public opinion perspective

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## Introduction

Popular revolts around the world in 2011 underscored the fact that the legitimacy of states, in whatever form they exist, rests on their ability to pursue the common good of all citizens. Inclusive development – the most basic principle underpinning the existence of the modern state – still matters, citizens reminded their governments in no uncertain terms.

What made this wave of protest so significant was that it swept across authoritarian and democratic states alike, and thus challenged the notion that political freedom alone is enough to make citizens content. The most fundamental of all human needs is to live in conditions of material and physical security. In both contexts, growing insecurity, resulting from a flailing global economy, and governments' perceived timidity in addressing inequitable (and often unlawful) elite accumulation, drove people to the streets.

As the revolts gained momentum across North Africa in early 2011, Western governments were quick to embrace the term 'Arab Spring', reminiscent of the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, as a catchphrase to capture what they branded as a rejection of undemocratic forms of government. When youths ransacked upmarket boroughs and districts of cities across England in August, UK Prime Minister David Cameron initially failed to see the parallels between what was happening in the streets of London and Cairo. At first, he dismissed the behaviour of the English youths as hooliganism, but later had to concede that it was rooted in a system that, despite the rights and opportunities that it extends in theory, marginalises people at the bottom of society and offers them little in the way of future prospects.

This same sense of alienation was obvious in skirmishes against government austerity in the streets of Athens, sit-ins on Spain's city squares to draw attention to poor economic management, protests in Israel against the cost of living, and marches by thousands across India in support of anti-corruption campaigner, Anna Hazare. *Financial Times* columnist, Gideon Rachmann (2001) cautions against simple generalisations, given the diverse contexts from which these protests had arisen, but notes they all do 'pit an internationally-connected elite against ordinary citizens who feel excluded from the benefits of economic growth, and angered by corruption'.

Responding to Azare's arrest in an editorial titled 'Corrupt, repressive, and stupid', the Indian daily, *The Hindu* did not hold back in articulating the degree of indignation referred to by Rachmann.

In South Africa, protests against poor 'public service delivery' – a catch-all that encompasses much more than the term implies – continued unabated as an increasingly pervasive form of political expression. Given their frequency, these protests have become less of an event to our media and, as a result, have received less coverage in recent years. It would have stayed that way, were it not for two significant incidents in the course of 2011. The first was the nationally broadcasted killing of Andries Tatane, a protester from Ficksburg, allegedly at the hands of riot police. The second, which should be read together with the first, is the fact that toilets became a key campaign issue of the local government elections in May, after it came to light that certain local governments had failed to enclose those that were provided to poor communities. It was a sad indictment on South African society that its most marginalised could get arrested, or even killed, for insisting on access to the most basic forms of dignity.

Incidents like these have called for introspection. Various contributions to consecutive editions of this publication have argued for a new vision and political will to accelerate inclusive growth. Over the years, its scorecards have pointed to important achievements with regard to GDP growth, and how it has been employed to alleviate poverty and provide broadened access to government services. However, they also have alluded to the slow progress in education, its devastating impact on the labour market, and its cumulative result of growing inequality.

What the case of Mr Tatane and the thousands of protests (here and abroad) over the past year have underscored is that development policy cannot rely only on report cards and compliance with monitoring and evaluation objectives. They also need to take proper cognisance of people's own sense of security and the extent to which progress on paper translates into experienced well-being. Progress and social justice are as much questions of perception as they are of hard statistics (OECD 2011). GDP and per capita income growth mean little if they are not perceived as affecting a critical mass of people.

In addition to the macro trends described in the preceding



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**Table 5.1: Main divisive elements in South Africa**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Political parties	22%	28%	18%	19%	12%	22%	23%	25%	22%
Income inequality	30%	24%	31%	30%	31%	29%	27%	25%	32%
Discrimination on the basis of HIV status	14%	16%	21%	18%	21%	17%	19%	16%	14%
Religion	7%	7%	6%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%
Race	20%	20%	17%	20%	21%	19%	19%	21%	20%
Language	6%	5%	6%	6%	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%

sections of this Transformation Audit, this chapter presents a brief overview of South Africans' sense of their own material security. It draws on data obtained from the IJR's annual SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey, which is conducted nationally with a representative sample of South Africans. It focuses specifically on respondents' sense of their own economic situation, expectations around employment, and general impressions of their own living conditions and how these compare with others around them.

### Inequality matters

Since first conducted in 2003, the survey has asked South Africans what they regard as the main source of division in South Africa. Although the issue of race features prominently in all rounds of the survey to date, the ‘gap between rich and poor’ – or income inequality – has been identified consistently as the country's major fault line. This was no different in 2011, with 32 per cent of respondents pointing to its divisiveness (see Table 5.1). This finding has to be read within the context of the strong overlap of race and poverty, which has also been alluded to in several editions of this publication. While the two cannot be separated completely, it nevertheless remains significant that when offered the opportunity, more South Africans would point to the predominance of class dimensions than they would to race dimensions.

The fact that inequality is an issue for South Africans is important. They observe it in their relationship to other South Africans and, significantly, regard it as a critical obstacle to creating a more inclusive society.

### The economic situation: South Africans feeling the strain

South Africa's dip into recession in 2009 was brief, but its impact disproportionately severe. Employment was haemorrhaged at the time, and has not returned to levels prior to the downturn. Although not an entirely reliable indicator of financial distress, the total number of liquidations in 2010 was 21 per cent higher than in 2008 (Stats SA 2011), and in mid-2011, 46 per cent of the country's 18.6 million credit-active consumers had impaired credit records (Moodley-Isaacs 2011). In sum, recovery thus far has been fragile, uneven and much slower than initially anticipated. During his Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement speech in October, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan acknowledged that the Treasury has underestimated the severity of the key factors that hold back global growth (National Treasury 2011).

To what extent has this impacted on South Africans' perception of the country's economic prospects, and on their own financial fortunes in the coming year? In this section, we report on respondents' opinions regarding these questions.

Table 5.2 summarises the trends in public perception of the country's economic prospects for the 12 months that follow the survey. The data show that since 2003 most South Africans have felt (at variable levels) that the country's economic prospects have been improving. In 2006, at the height of the pre-recession growth cycle, respondents recorded the highest level of optimism at 56 per cent. This, however, changed markedly in 2008 as economic activity slowed down and then slipped into recession in 2009. Optimism dropped by close to

13 percentage points in these two years. In 2010, as the economy returned to growth, it increased again by 10 points, only to slump back by 5 per cent to 46.3 per cent in 2011. Predictions about worsening conditions showed an inverse pattern, reaching their lowest point in 2006, then doubling during the years prior to and during the recession, followed by a decline to levels that remain somewhat higher than they were before the recession. It is more difficult to draw conclusions about responses indicating that the situation will 'remain the same'. Given that these responses reached their lowest levels during the recession (where the 'worse' category doubled and the 'get better' category declined significantly), we have to assume that sentiment generally worsened. An increase in the 'remain the same' scores after the recession, therefore, may also signify a sense that this situation is likely to continue.

Table 5.3 shows that South Africans generally have been less upbeat about their personal financial situation than they have been about the general economic prospects for the country.

In 2006, at the apex of the growth cycle, 44.3 per cent of respondents felt that their situation would improve in the subsequent year. Following several years of increased employment and growth, almost 40 per cent felt that similar circumstances would prevail and only 14.3 per cent sensed that it would become worse. Within two years, this situation turned around completely with more respondents feeling that their financial situation would worsen rather than improve in the 2008 and 2009 rounds of the survey. In 2010 and 2011, levels of optimism increased somewhat, while there was a decline in the percentage of those who felt that their situation would worsen. However, levels of optimism have not regained their pre-recession highs. A steady growth in 'the same' assessments suggests a stabilisation in sentiment, probably an acceptance that although the situation will not improve much in the immediate wake of the recession, it will also not get any worse.

## Employment: finding it is a tough job

As the review article in Chapter 4 indicates, high unemployment lies at the core of South Africa's entrenched levels of poverty and inequality. In September 2011, a quarter of working-age South African job-seekers were unable to find employment. When the broader definition, which includes discouraged work-seekers, is used, this percentage increases to over one-third of the labour force. With only one in three able-bodied South Africans working, this implies, firstly, a greater immediate burden on the fiscus and, secondly, longer-term social repercussions associated with a growing number of disillusioned (mostly young) people, frustrated by their lack of agency in determining their own destinies.

While major stakeholders have recognised the critical proportions and risks of unemployment, the dilemma of how to solve them remains one of the most contested policy issues.

In this section, we look at respondents' perceptions of their chances of finding a job. We then proceed to report on sentiments regarding job security, looking finally at whether it is better to have a low-paid job or to have to fend for yourself, which raises the question of lowering the minimum wage – one of the biggest sticking points in current labour debates.

The responses in Table 5.4 speak volumes about the depressing situation in the labour market. Apart from in 2006, South Africans have felt that their chances of obtaining employment or new employment within the job market have decreased. In 2009, the recession year (and in the year prior to it), negative responses peaked at around 40 per cent and declined again to 34 per cent in 2011. While positive sentiment in 2011 grew slightly by just over three percentage points from its recession low, the proportion of those indicating that things would 'stay the same' under these adverse circumstances has grown steadily, suggesting that close to two-thirds ('the same' and 'worse' responses combined) are distinctly pessimistic about opportunities within the labour market.

Given the responses reported in Table 5.4, those in Table 5.5 should not come as a surprise. Since 2006, close to 40 per cent of South Africans responded that they were likely to be unemployed in the year to follow. This comes close to the number of unemployed in terms of the expanded definition of unemployment. A combination of the 'agree', 'uncertain' and 'don't know' categories suggests that close to three-quarters of respondents consistently experienced a sense of job insecurity.

Turning to the question of whether it is better to have a low-paying job than no job at all, the majority of respondents have agreed consistently that this is indeed the case (see Table 5.6). The figure has decreased from its highest mark of 60.7 per cent in 2005 to 48.2 per cent in 2011. However, the decline has not boosted the 'disagree' responses, but rather has increased the 'don't know' and 'uncertain' responses. In sum, while the trend seems to be downwards, most South Africans still seem to agree that when in dire straits they would accept a low wage rather than having to fend for themselves.

## Access to government services

The South African government's achievement in providing its people with access to basic services has been widely acknowledged. The statistics provided at the outset of Chapter 4 graphically depict the great strides that have been made in terms of the provision of formal housing. Furthermore, the state has been able to extend social welfare, in the form of a pension or social grant, to around 15 million of its neediest citizens (National Treasury 2011). Figure 5.1 shows the exponential growth in grant recipients over a fairly short period. This rate of expansion is without doubt unsustainable, but it does signify a considerable and commendable response in addressing immediate need.

Despite the great strides that have been made in terms of the provision of services and grants, population growth has

**Table 5.2: How do you think the economic situation in South Africa will change in the next 12 months?**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Get better	46.0%	54.0%	48.4%	56.3%	51.3%	38.9%	38.9%	48.3%	43.6%
Stay the same	25.5%	24.6%	26.0%	24.6%	25.1%	23.4%	23.6%	26.1%	30.7%
Get worse	21.4%	14.6%	18.3%	10.7%	15.5%	30.8%	31.7%	19.2%	17.9%
Don't know	7.2%	6.9%	7.2%	8.3%	8.1%	7.0%	5.8%	6.3%	7.8%

Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

**Table 5.3: How does your financial situation compare to what it was like 12 months ago?**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Better	40.8%	38.0%	44.3%	35.0%	28.1%	27.95	32.1%	32.0%
The same	37.1%	37.2%	39.6%	42.7%	37.3%	36.7%	41.5%	43.8%
Worse	19.5%	23.0%	14.3%	20.6%	33.1%	34.3%	24.6%	22.5%
Don't know	2.6%	1.8%	1.7%	1.7%	1.4%	1.1%	1.7%	1.7%

Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

**Table 5.4: How do the chances of you finding a job compare to what they were like 12 months ago?**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Better	29.8%	27.4%	32.1%	25.7%	23.4%	22.4%	26.1%	25.8%
The same	25.6%	24.2%	27.4%	27.5%	27.7%	26.7%	28.6%	31.5%
Worse	30.2%	37.0%	27.5%	34.9%	39.1%	40.6%	34.6%	34.0%
Don't know	13.2%	10.5%	12.2%	11.5%	9.9%	10.2%	10.5%	8.7%

Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

**Table 5.5: It is highly likely that I will be unemployed at some stage during the next year**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Agree	33.0%	39.9%	37.9%	40.2%	42.8%	43.5%	40.7%	37.8%
Uncertain	20.3%	19.2%	19.5%	17.7%	20.2%	19.1%	17.9%	21.5%
Disagree	28.7%	26.4%	24.6%	25.8%	24.7%	22.7%	25.8%	25.2%
Don't know	15.2%	14.5%	16.6%	15.0%	12.3%	14.5%	15.3%	15.2%

Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

**Table 5.6: It is better to have a low-paying full-time job than it is to have to make your own living**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Agree	53.0%	60.7%	60.6%	57.2%	50.2%	51.1%	51.8%	48.2%
Uncertain	18.5%	12.6%	13.5%	13.8%	18.0%	16.0%	15.4%	19.6%
Disagree	24.5%	24.4%	22.9%	24.5%	28.4%	29.1%	29.4%	26.6%
Don't know	4.0%	2.2%	2.9%	4.6%	3.4%	3.8%	3.5%	5.7%

Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

dictated that pure numbers only tell part of the story. Figure 5.2 shows that while close to four million households gained access to formal dwellings between 1996 and 2009, it represents only a 7 per cent increase from 63.7 per cent to 70.7 per cent for this period. Close to one-third of the population, therefore, did not live in formal dwellings in 2009.

Figures relating to the provision of other basic services, like sanitation and running water, provide similar pictures. Despite progress, the challenges remain as big as ever and, in a context of scarce resources and great demand, the frequency of public protests about delayed delivery should not be surprising.

Given South Africa's history of unequal development along racial lines, as well as its current challenges in providing services to communities that remain largely separated along these same lines, it is necessary to ask whether citizens perceive access to public services to be more equitable than in the past. As suggested by the OECD (2011), it is important to gauge perception on this issue, because it provides clues to patterns of cohesion and conflict in society.

In the figure and tables below, we look at the extent to which South Africans still perceive race to be significant in terms of their access to services. In essence, the survey question asked respondents whether they perceived their chances as better, the same, or worse, given the historically defined racial group that they belong to.<sup>2</sup> Figure 5.3 provides the overall national response for all South Africans, while Tables 5.7 and 5.8 summarise respondents' perceptions in terms of their historically defined racial categories, and their Living Standards Measurement (LSM) categories, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

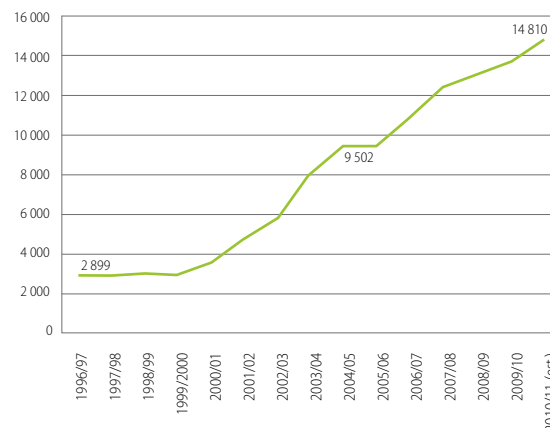
Figure 5.3 shows that just less than a third of South Africans (29 per cent) feel that they are getting equal treatment when it comes to accessing the services of the post-apartheid state. The same proportion feel that they have better access than other groups, but a majority of respondents indicated that their racial category puts them at a disadvantage in this regard. Six per cent are unsure whether this was the case.

Table 5.7 provides an overview how South Africans from historically defined racial categories responded to this question.

About a third of white and Indian South Africans (32.3% and 33.7% respectively) indicated that their racial background did not influence the extent to which they have access to public services. The figures for black and coloured South Africans were only slightly lower at 28.9 and 29.0 per cent, respectively.

The more telling feedback is within the 'better' and 'worse' response categories, where different groups recorded more divergent sentiments. Majorities in all groups, with the exception of respondents in the black category, suggested that they were being disadvantaged by their 'racial background'. Even within the black group, only a fraction of a percentage separated the 'worse' category from being the majority response. At least as far as public services are concerned, many across South African society seem to view themselves as a victim of

Figure 5.1: Total number of grant and pension recipients ('000s)



Source: National Treasury (1999, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010)

Figure 5.2: Access to formal dwellings in numbers and as proportion of population



Source: Stats SA (1996–1999, 2000–2001, 2002–2009)

their racial heritage. Coloured and white respondents were most likely to agree with this. The percentage recorded for coloured respondents was 46.9 per cent, while the comparative percentage for white respondents stood at 45.0 per cent. Responses for Indian South Africans came in somewhat lower at 37.3 per cent, while black respondents (at 32.1 per cent) were the least likely to believe that their skin colour puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing services.

The black group was also the most likely to agree that their racial category puts them at an advantage. Responses for the three minority groups on this option again clustered together around the 20 per cent mark, with the white group (at 17.7 per cent) the least convinced that their skin colour provides them with any advantage.

In conclusion, Table 5.8 reports on the same question in terms of respondents' living standards measurement categories (LSM).

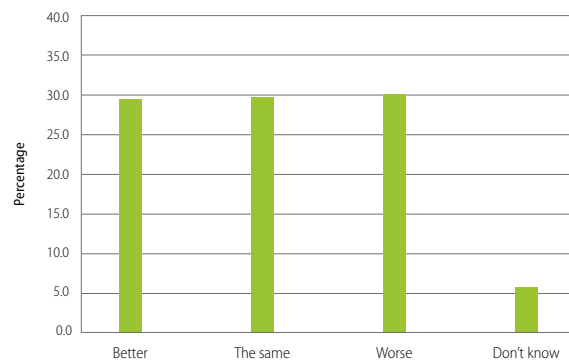
An interesting feature that emerges here is that respondents who found themselves in the upper-middle categories of LSM 5–7 seemed most content about their access to services. Sixty-six per cent of those in LSM 6 felt that their group gets either the same or better treatment than other groups. For LSM 5, this figure was about 63 per cent and for LSM 7, 62 per cent. The most negative sentiments were to be found in the lowest three categories (55.0, 42.5 and 43.5 per cent for LSMs 1, 2 and 3 in turn) and the top two categories (37.7 and 43.5 per cent for LSM 9 and 10, respectively). From an access inequality point of view, this finding that South Africans at the top and bottom of society perceive their racial background as a disadvantage in accessing the state is important to note. Given the country's income distribution patterns, we have to assume that a strong racial overlap is likely in terms of responses. This raises issues for further research, such as the question of whether this sense of being disadvantaged at either end of the income spectrum makes South Africans at these extremes more receptive to direct or subtle forms of racial political mobilisation. Conversely, it must be asked what the more positive responses in the middle LSM categories can tell us about creating greater cohesion across groups in terms of their relationship to the state.

### Living conditions: 'struggling, but getting by'

In the final section of this chapter, we present data that show how South Africans feel about their own living conditions in general (the sum total of several factors, including these that have been discussed above) and, importantly also, how they perceive their position to be in comparison to those around them.

Table 5.9 summarises South Africans' perceptions about their personal living conditions. In terms of the general national response, close to a quarter of respondents described their living conditions as being either 'very well off' or 'living comfortably'. White South Africans were the most likely to respond in this way, with 46 per cent agreeing that this is

Figure 5.3: Perceptions of whether respondents' racial category affects their chances of access to public services in 2011



Source: IJR (2011) SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey

Table 5.7: Are your chances of accessing public services...than other people in 2011?

	Total	White	Asian/Indian	Coloured	Black
Better	29.4%	17.7%	20.4%	21.2%	32.7%
The same	29.5%	32.3%	33.7%	29.0%	28.9%
Worse	35.2%	45.0%	37.3%	46.9%	32.1%
Don't know	5.9%	5.0%	8.6%	2.9%	4.9%

Table 5.8: Are your chances of accessing public services...than other people in 2011? (LSM)

	Living Standards Measurement									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Better	14.6%	19.2%	22.4%	26.6%	33.5%	36.4%	37.6%	31.8%	21.1%	17.8%
The same	27.4%	30.1%	24.1%	31.1%	29.1%	29.4%	24.8%	30.4%	36.2%	36.7%
Worse	55.0%	42.5%	43.5%	36.8%	31.1%	28.7%	32.7%	34.4%	37.7%	43.5%
Don't know	3.0%	8.3%	10.0%	5.5%	6.3%	5.5%	4.9%	3.5%	5.0%	2.0%

the case (almost 10 per cent indicated that they were very well off). Indian South Africans followed at 34.3 per cent, with the coloured group at 28.1 per cent and the black group at 20.1 per cent in third and fourth place.

Nationally, and within each of the population groups, most respondents indicated that they were 'struggling, but getting by'. The overall national figure stood at 53.8 per cent, and there was little variation in the responses of each of the country's historically defined population groups. A difference of only seven percentage points separated the highest affirmative response, by black South Africans at 54.7 per cent, and white South Africans at 47.7 per cent.

Close to 20 per cent of South Africans regarded themselves as very poor. The difference is quite stark here between the 2.8 per cent of white respondents and the 23 per cent of black South Africans who answered in the affirmative to this category. Virtually the same proportion of coloured and Indian South Africans (12.1% and 12.2%, respectively) regarded themselves as very poor.

Of course, such perceptions, more often than not, differ in varying degrees from the realities that macro statistics might present, but they do provide an indication of the level of existential pressure faced by ordinary people. Therefore, they should be seen as indicators of the material insecurity that South Africans experience.

From here we proceed to report on the findings of South Africans' perceptions of their own material circumstances in relation to other people in the community where they live. Given that most South Africans continue to live in residential areas that are largely racially homogenous, we recognise that the term 'community' may be interpreted by some as a proxy for people from the same historically defined racial group.

Table 5.10 shows that on average most South Africans feel that they are living in communities that are struggling to get by. Responses amongst black, coloured and Indian South Africans clustered together in the lower fifties, with 54.7 per cent of black respondents feeling that this is the case, followed by 53.9 per cent of coloured respondents, and 51.3 per cent of Indian South Africans. There is a significant gap between responses from these groups and those of white respondents, amongst which a much lower 31.0 per cent felt that people in their communities were struggling to get by. Predictably, therefore, the white group's responses to the three remaining categories also diverge strongly from those of respondents in other categories. While only 5.7 per cent of white South Africans sensed poverty in their community, close to a quarter of black South Africans, or 24.9 per cent, suggested that it was prevalent where they live.

Following on perceptions of community well-being, we report in Table 5.11 on how respondents perceived their own living conditions in relation to other South Africans. Here respondents were asked whether they regarded their living conditions as 'better', 'the same' as, or 'worse' than those of most other South Africans.

**Table 5.9: How would you describe your own living conditions in 2011?**

	Total	White	Asian/ Indian	Coloured	Black
Very well off	4.6%	9.20%	2.20%	3.50%	4.00%
Living comfortably	19.9%	36.80%	32.10%	24.60%	16.10%
Struggling but getting by	53.8%	47.70%	52.50%	55.90%	54.70%
Very poor	19.2%	2.80%	12.10%	12.20%	23.00%
Don't know	2.5%	3.50%	1.10%	3.80%	2.20%

**Table 5.10: How would you describe the living conditions of most people in the community where you live in 2011?**

	Total	White	Asian/ Indian	Coloured	Black
Very well off	4.1%	12.4%	3.0%	1.2%	3.1%
Living comfortably	18.8%	42.8%	28.7%	17.8%	14.5%
Struggling but getting by	51.5%	31.0%	51.3%	53.9%	54.7%
Very poor	22.1%	5.7%	14.5%	23.7%	24.9%
Don't know	3.5%	8.1%	2.5%	3.3%	2.8%

An interesting result here is that nationally, and within each of the historically defined racial groups, people regard their situation as being the same as that of most South Africans. Almost 30 per cent regard themselves as being better off, and close to 23 per cent as being worse off. South Africans of Indian origin, on average, regard themselves as being better off than most other citizens, followed by white, coloured and black respondents, in that order. Almost a quarter of coloured and black respondents, with 24.5 per cent and 24.9 per cent, respectively, indicated that they were worse off than other South Africans.

Of particular interest is the fact that almost half of white South Africans (46.6 per cent) regarded their material conditions as being the same as those of other South Africans, and 11.4 per cent within this group felt that they were worse off than other South Africans. Developmental statistics, of course, show that for the average white South African these perceptions do not hold true at all. Although we must assume that when answering the question, respondents did not compare themselves with other racial groups, but with what they regard the living conditions of the average South African to be, this finding still seems to reflect a view that is divorced from reality. Whether this is an indication of the extent to which white South Africans' relative affluence insulates them from the experiences of the majority of their countrymen and women is a question that deserves further analysis and research attention.

In Table 5.12, we report on the extent to which citizens have sensed year-on-year improvements in their living conditions.

In 2006, a very large proportion of South Africans, 45.3 per cent, indicated that their living conditions were better than they had been in the previous year. This finding is not entirely surprising, given that in that year the country attained its highest level of GDP growth since the advent of democracy. The economy was steaming ahead, and unemployment, although still high in internationally comparative terms, was at its lowest in years. The picture looked decidedly different in 2008 when the South African economy, in response to the recession in the United States and several large European countries, slowed down significantly. While the country only dipped into recession during 2009, much of the damage to the economy had already been done in 2008. Although positive sentiment increased again and stood at 31 per cent in 2011, nearly 50 per cent of South Africans felt that not much had changed in terms of their material circumstances. In 2011, 18.3 per cent of South Africans – the second highest percentage for the reported measurement years after 2008 – sensed that their living conditions had worsened.

For all the measured years, black South Africans were the most likely to report an improvement – and the least likely to report deterioration in their living conditions – when measured against the previous year. Given that they constitute the single largest historically marginalised group, this can be regarded as a positive evaluation of government efforts to improve the

**Table 5.11: Comparing your living conditions to those of most other South Africans in 2011, do you feel you are...?**

	Total	White	Asian/ Indian	Coloured	Black
Better	29.5%	37.6%	42.8%	29.8%	27.7%
The same	44.8%	46.6%	40.8%	42.2%	45.0%
Worse	22.8%	11.4%	15.3%	24.5%	24.9%
Don't know	2.8%	4.5%	1.1%	3.4%	2.4%

**Table 5.12: How do your living conditions compare to what they were like 12 months ago?**

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2011
<b>National</b>					
Better	39.8%	45.3%	28.9%	34.5%	31.4%
The same	45.6%	42.4%	43.3%	47.0%	48.3%
Worse	12.8%	10.6%	25.7%	16.9%	18.3%
<b>White</b>					
Better	25.6%	37.3%	16.8%	22.3%	28.2%
The same	55.8%	48.3%	39.6%	51.1%	52.5%
Worse	17.8%	12.7%	41.2%	25.8%	17.3%
<b>Asian/Indian</b>					
Better	43.0%	55.6%	15.6%	30.7%	26.0%
The same	41.1%	36.1%	57.8%	53.5%	57.1%
Worse	13.9%	7.6%	25.7%	14.2%	14.9%
<b>Coloured</b>					
Better	37.7%	50.3%	25.8%	30.2%	24.8%
The same	48.2%	41.7%	41.1%	46.3%	51.5%
Worse	13.9%	7.6%	25.7%	14.2%	14.9%
<b>Black</b>					
Better	46.7%	45.9%	31.8%	37.1%	33.2%
The same	40.7%	41.6%	43.6%	46.2%	46.7%
Worse	4.9%	4.5%	10.4%	7.2%	8.4%





Over the past 17 years major gains have been made in addressing the immediate needs of society's most vulnerable, but given the scale of the challenge, the question remains whether it is enough.

livelihoods of those who bore the brunt of apartheid. However, the level of positive evaluation has subsided substantially from the high of 46.7 per cent in 2004 to 33.2 per cent in 2011. Conversely, reports of deterioration in living conditions have almost doubled from 4.9 per cent to 8.4 per cent. These changes have been relatively small, but nevertheless do communicate a message.

In 2011, lower percentages of respondents within each of the population groups were able to report an improvement in their living conditions, when measured against the previous year. While positive sentiment is still much higher than three years ago, the 2011 scores remain significantly lower than they were at the height of economic expansion in 2006. Given the prevailing gloom around the global economy at the end of 2011, it seems highly likely that a further deterioration in these personal evaluations will be evident in the results of the 2012 survey.

### Political implications: leaders, pay attention

Against the backdrop of profound discontent and impatience with political leadership around the world, it must be asked how this country's steady, but slow, pace of developmental gains have translated into South Africans' views on their political leadership's commitment to accelerate change.

One option is to look at general election results. At first glance, observers may point to overwhelming consecutive victories of the African National Congress (ANC) as a resounding endorsement of government action. Deeper analysis of these figures, however, shows that in 2009 only 60 per cent of South Africans of voting age (not to be confused with registered voters) turned out at the polls. This has a number of implications. The most obvious of these is that 40 per cent of the South African voting-age population did not vote (see Schultz-Herzenberg 2009). Importantly, it also means that an absolute ANC electoral majority of 65.9 per cent of registered voters is reduced to a simple majority of only around 39 per cent of the voting age population. This, obviously, has similar implications for all other political parties. The question, therefore, arises as to whether the current party configuration offers voters enough choice to express their preferences. Moreover, it needs to be asked what the longer-term consequences of the status quo would be for the ways in which citizens express their existential preferences and anxieties.

Since 2006, the SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey has been measuring confidence in the institutions of national, provincial and local government, as well as public opinion on key aspects of leadership. Table 5.13 reports on these findings for the three spheres of government.

In 2011, confidence levels for the national government stood at a respectable 65 per cent; the comparable figure for provincial government was nine percentage points lower at 56 per cent. Local government, the sphere closest to ordinary people, managed to attract only 43 per cent. Approval rates for this sphere have been consistently low since measurement started in 2006, reflecting much of the discontent that has been voiced by both communities and national policy-makers. It is also noticeable that after the confidence slump that coincided with the ANC's damaging succession battle between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, none of the three spheres of government has been able to regain the confidence levels of 2006.

Table 5.14 reports on responses to three leadership-related statements, which have been put to respondents in consecutive rounds of the survey since 2003. The first posits that the country's 'leaders are not concerned about people like me'. With the exception of the survey's second round in 2004, agreement with the statement has varied within the 50 and 60 per cent band. In 2004, close to 70 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, 'I can trust national leaders to do what is right'. Seven years later in 2011, this figure has dropped significantly to just above 50 per cent. The only indicator where responses have signified an improvement is in relation to the statement: 'If public officials are not interested in hearing what people like me think, there is no way to make them listen'. Agreement with this statement has dropped by almost 10 percentage points from 2006 to the 44 per cent of today. It is nevertheless not insignificant that almost half of respondents have continued to agree about the intransigence of public servants.

These findings suggest, firstly, that there is a backdrop of disillusionment behind lower voter turnout. Secondly, they point to a definite degree of disaffection with processes and the mechanisms that are aimed at bringing about change. Thirdly, the findings raise questions about leadership at a time where low growth is likely to translate into existential anxiety amongst millions of South Africans.

### Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of public opinion on South Africans' sense of economic security at a time when slow and low growth is having a debilitating effect on the cause of creating a more inclusive economy.

The findings of the SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey show that a large percentage of South Africans are taking strain as a result of these conditions. They are less upbeat about the general prospects for the economy, but also about

**Table 5.13: How much confidence do you have in...?**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
National government	73%	63%	58%	57%	66%	65%
Provincial government	66%	57%	50%	49%	58%	56%
Local government	50%	43%	40%	39%	43%	43%

Note: The percentages here reflect the combined total of the 'a great deal' and 'quite a lot' responses.

**Table 5.14: Trust in leadership (agree with statement)**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Leaders are not concerned about people like me	57%	44%	53%	52%	53%	54%	58%	51%	51%
There is no way to make public officials listen	53%	46%	52%	53%	52%	49%	49%	46%	44%
Trust leaders to do what is right	55%	68%	61%	65%	57%	49%	50%	58%	51%

their own financial circumstances and living conditions. While policy-makers are scratching their heads about how to boost employment, two-thirds of respondents indicated that their prospects of getting a job would either get worse or stay the same. Thirty-eight per cent predicted that it was 'highly likely' that they would be unemployed next year, and a further 22 per cent were uncertain about their fate in this regard.

In these trying times, more South Africans will resort to the state for assistance. Over the past 17 years major gains have been made in addressing the immediate needs of society's most vulnerable, but given the scale of the challenge, the question remains whether it is enough. Resources alone may not be sufficient. A plan and leadership are also required to steer the country through these troubled waters. The data at our disposal suggest that a large section of South Africans believe that the country is not seeing sufficient direction and leadership. Again, these responses have to be read within the current context of material deprivation; in exceptional circumstances like these, most states would be stretched to respond comprehensively. Yet, when leaders live large at the

expense of citizens, or fail to halt maladministration, there must be swift and decisive action. The lesson of 2011 should be that the citizenry, especially when under material strain, will have no patience with those who offer timid responses or abuse their trust.

## Notes

1. IJR (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation) (2011) *SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey: 2011 Report*, Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.
2. The question posed in the 2011 SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey was: 'Now I would like you to think about whether a person's race affects their chances in certain situations. What about people like you? In these situations, are your chances a great deal better, better, about the same, worse, or a great deal worse than other people?'
3. The LSM is a composite variable, based on survey items relating to access to and ownership of a variety of items and services that provide an indication of an individual's living standard. It divides the population into 10 LSM groups, with 10 being the highest and 1 the lowest.