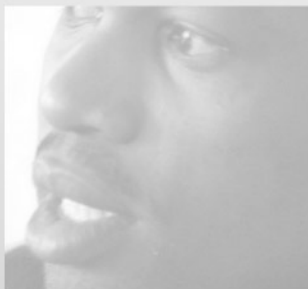




# WHAT IS POVERTY?

A QUALITATIVE REFLECTION OF  
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF POVERTY.



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DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

What is poverty? \_\_\_\_\_

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## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work seeks to set out some of the critical dynamics that inform the livelihood – and coping – strategies of poor people living in South Africa today. Specifically it seeks to explore the role played by social grants in a poor community from the perspectives of both grant recipients and people who are not eligible for any form of social assistance living in the same community.

In seeking to capture some of these dynamics, NALEDI undertook monthly interviews with thirty-one households living in Pimville, Soweto. In addition to this, NALEDI held a number of focus groups to explore some of the issues that were emerging from the household interviews in greater detail.

The result of this work is recorded in this report.

Through this report, NALEDI seeks to strengthen the renaissance of qualitative research that is taking place in the interdisciplinary field of poverty studies. The experiences and insights of the poor and the working poor need to be told and retold for a number of reasons. It is critical that in seeking effective policy solutions to existing patterns of poverty and unemployment in South Africa, poor people do not become relegated to a statistic. Instead they must remain first and foremost people with an equal right to the freedom and dignity enjoyed by any South African.

Rather than the 'poor' being viewed as a homogenous group, it is vital to acknowledge that every person has his or her own story to tell. People who live in impoverished circumstances are extremely well situated to advise on those interventions which would assist them to move out of poverty or strengthen their chosen livelihood strategies. Yet one of the main effects of poverty is the marginalisation of people from the mainstream, including from mainstream forms of media through which their experiences can be communicated.

Through this work we hope to provide some space for the experiences of, and the recommendations made by, the participants in this study to be heard.

NALEDI would like to thank everybody who contributed to the conceptualisation and subsequent design of this project. In addition we would like to thank SPARK! for undertaking the fieldwork.

This work would not have been relevant or possible in the absence of the willingness of the participants to open their homes and give of their time to our researchers, in the absence of any short-term material benefit accruing to them. We trust that this work will contribute to a greater understanding of the needs and desires of people living in poverty, and the various strategies that could be adopted to meet these in the short as well as the long term.

NALEDI thanks Open Society Foundation for funding this project.

*Finally, this work is dedicated to Hannah Leila, whose acquaintance with poverty studies began at an early age.*



# CHAPTER ONE:

# INTRODUCTION

South Africa is an upper middle income developing country with a population of approximately 44 million people. The country's history since the arrival of the Dutch colonisers in 1652 has been characterised by successive policies aimed at the impoverishment and oppression of the majority of people in the country. With the discovery of gold and diamonds in the late nineteenth century, foreign capital swiftly availed itself to local commercial interests. The resultant riches were jealously guarded by a small elite minority, while the introduction of new laws to ensure an inexhaustible supply of cheap black labour laid the foundation for a complicated system of dispossession and alienation of black people from mainstream economic presence and activity. The new laws were also responsible for the rise of the Bantustans.

While formal political liberation was won against the discriminatory apartheid system of racial capitalism in 1994, by then the levels of poverty among black South Africans was already structurally entrenched. South Africa rated as one of the most unequal societies in the world, where the ongoing prosperity of the elite was predicated on the exclusion of the majority from the wealth generated by the nation. Dispossessed through legislation from being able to own property and having the right to run any business limited by regulation, the asset base of most black South Africans was and still is severely depleted. Employment soon became the only way in which most people could access income, but even access to education, skills and employment opportunities for black people in South Africa was restricted by state policies. As a result of this, a very tight alignment developed between race and class as societal cleavages in South Africa grew.

The legal exclusion of black people from the nascent processes of industrialisation was reinforced by strict laws regulating the movement and right of abode of the majority of black people who were relegated to reserves, named Bantustans or 'homelands' throughout South Africa. From these reserves, people would be afforded the right of movement to the rest of South Africa, and especially the industrialising hubs, only in the form of necessary labour. Depending on the level of 'independence' of the various Bantustans, inhabitants could lose their South African citizenship. In any event, denied a formal vote by the apartheid government, the majority of South Africans had no formal political voice, and it became possible for the former government to dismiss the issues and pressures arising from poverty for black people as constituting Bantustan issues. Poverty among white South Africans however did receive a fair amount of attention, as covered in the First and Second Carnegie Commissions into Poverty.

When the ANC government won a landslide victory in the 1994 elections, they were faced with a highly unequal and divided society, and an economy that had been isolated by most of the international community in protest against the apartheid government. While keen to begin a process of reconstruction and development, government soon realised that access to the levels of investment necessary to fund programmes of reconstruction was conditional on the local and international business community being reassured that the liberation government would not succumb to populist programmes of redistributing the wealth of the nation.



The aim of eradicating poverty was, however, clear. In 1996, a 'War on Poverty' was declared in a national initiative headed by then State President Nelson Mandela. Civil society played a significant role in this campaign, and from these roots came the national 'Speak out on Poverty' hearings. These hearings were informed by the desire to enable people to speak about their suffering and the impact of apartheid discrimination on their lives in a way similar to the Truth and Reconciliation process. It was an avenue for people to articulate the injustices that had, among other things, robbed them of their voice in national discourse.

Nationally there was an appreciation of the lack of knowledge and information about the nature and extent of poverty, levels of poverty, its geographic spread as well as the resultant impact on equality and inequality. To address this, a number of baseline studies were undertaken during this period, including the 1995 *Key Indicators of Poverty in South Africa Study*, which was a quantitative analysis of the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development for the Reconstruction and Development Ministry, as well as the Poverty and Inequality Report and the South African Participative Poverty Assessment Study (Magasela, 2005). In addition to trying to understand the depth and impact of poverty, these studies emphasised the need to include the voices of people living in poverty in any study about them (PPA-SA, 1998).

With the adoption of government's Growth, Employment and Reconstruction programme (GEAR) from 1996, this focus on the poor and the inclusion of their stories and their contribution to the dilemma of solving poverty, grew silent. The development emphasis shifted from the previous rights-based focus grounded in the highly progressive South African Constitution<sup>1</sup>, to technocratic questions of economics, numbers and targets. Within government a prevailing sentiment developed that poverty would inevitably be addressed through the attainment economic growth. The classical neoliberal trickle-down approach to poverty eradication became the dominant policy approach under GEAR, and the RDP office and ministry were closed.

Since 2000, the earlier austere fiscal policies of GEAR began to show a slight relaxation. However, this mildly expansionary increase in national spending has still not been accompanied by a comprehensive statement of poverty eradication policies, objectives and goals.

While there is general consensus among South Africans that government is committed to addressing poverty, there is dismay that nothing seems to be really working to turn poverty and inequality and the resultant social and economic exclusion around. While people may anticipate that they might benefit from short-term alleviation programmes (such as targeted social grants or Expanded Public Works Programmes), there is concern about what will happen after this programme is completed, as well as what will happen to household and community members who do not qualify for the targeted assistance programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> The final Constitution of South Africa (Act 106 of 1996) was formally adopted in 1996.

People are also aware of the message from government that they should not wait for handouts, but should instead be actively developing their own livelihoods by starting small businesses etc. Yet the obstacles that people face in this regard often appear insurmountable, whether these manifest as disruptions by local government officials, lack of credit or lack of markets. Many of these frustrations became clear during the Focus Groups held in this project. While government holds imbizos, during which ministers and government officials visit communities and listen to their issues, providing a valuable forum at which people can be heard, and can feel that government is listening to their voices, these fora are not a structured system of feedback and accountability, nor do they give links to local development programmes or opportunities.

Alcock (2006), a British writer, writes that “(T)he history of poverty therefore reveals the complex interaction of academic research, political debate and policy development...”. The above illustrates that this is equally true of how poverty discourse has been developed in South Africa. What is missing from this equation is the voice of those who live in and experience the dynamics of poverty on a daily basis. Only in this way can one ascertain the extent to which structural attempts to eradicate poverty interact with questions of agency, be it self-agency or agency on a community-wide level, and what obstacles exist that frustrate such agency.

Poverty eradication policies almost always carry with them the potential to be politically divisive. According to Alcock:

“The identification of poverty is linked to political action to eliminate it: thus if poverty remains then perhaps it is because politicians have failed either to identify it accurately or to develop appropriate policies in response to it.”

How poverty is defined and measured and to what extent policies are seen to be effective in its eradication will have different resonances for people across the political spectrum. It is accordingly critical that the experiences and voices of people living in poverty are heard in the necessary policy deliberations, and this is too often the voice that is not heard.

Arising out of this perceived lack, NALEDI developed the vision for this current project, which entailed qualitative research to hear from people living in a poor community how their lives are affected by poverty, how they define poverty, what their sources of income are, how they have benefited from government poverty-eradication programmes, and vitally, what initiatives would assist them in addressing their vulnerabilities and eventually, in moving out of poverty.

The study was premised on a number of key assumptions about poverty and the effects of chronic (long-term) poverty on people’s lives. The first assumption is that poverty in South Africa is structural in nature rather than being caused by individual laziness or lack of agency or self-initiative. Poverty is the result of the unequal distribution of resources, skills and income sources, and is exacerbated in many cases by both gender

and spatial dynamics. The second assumption is that social grant income represents the single source of regular income in many poor households. The third assumption is that despite this, poor people in general have not developed a 'dependency' on social grant money, but continue to try to generate income from other sources, and through this study we wished to try to identify a number of the activities undertaken in this regard.

Given the seminal quantitative study undertaken by the Economic Policy and Research Institute (EPRI) discussed in the next section, it was agreed to target households that received some form of social grant to try to understand further the dynamics around grants, both social and economic at a household and community level, and then to test these against a small control group of households that did not receive grants.

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# CHAPTER TWO:

## PROJECT

### OBJECTIVES AND

### OUTPUTS

The project is made up of two parts. The first part entailed identifying the 30 participating households in Pimville, Soweto. Twenty of the households received grants, and the remaining ten did not. All 30 households participated in a monthly structured interview for three months that delved into some of the above issues. The second part of the project then explored broader community dynamics through five focus groups that were held with youth, women, the elderly, men and the disabled, drawn from organisations around Johannesburg.

NALEDI received funding from the Open Society Foundation for this project.

While the goal of the project is ambitious, resources were restricted. It is hoped that this work will make it possible to undertake a more ambitious research project to continue with this inquiry to understand what poverty means and to hear from people living in poverty what interventions would help them become more secure.

Findings will be distributed in the form of this report to participants of the project, as well as to other civil society organisations and campaigns to assist in their development projects and programmes. The report will also be shared with government policymakers and at policy development forums such as NEDLAC. It will also be available electronically on the NALEDI website.

Over the last few years the South African government has defined itself time and again as being at essence a developmental state. However the question of what this vision entails has not been set out in detail. Very diverse examples of developmental states abound, from South Korea to Cuba, and the full continuum in between. What we do know is that this developmental state is firmly situated within a democratic and highly progressive national constitution that, of itself, must be seen as a framework for the fleshing out of a developmental agenda in South Africa.

Given the obligations on the State not only to ‘protect’ and ‘respect’, but also to ‘promote and fulfil’ the rights enshrined in the Constitution, including the socioeconomic rights, it is not surprising it seems to have adopted an interventionalist approach to ensuring the fulfilment of these rights. This is articulated in the ‘Towards a Ten Year Review’ document released by the Presidency in 2003.

*“The Government has made less immediate progress in a significant number of areas that require partnership with others ....(I)n those areas that depend significantly on private sector and civil society attitudes and behaviour and are only indirectly influenced by the State (investment and employment creation) it has had even less success”.*

(Ten Year Review, 2003).

This suggests that the State acknowledges its need to play an interventionalist role in the implementation of programmes as well as the development of target-specific policies.

One of the most critical areas in which it has to assume such a role is in developing and

implementing successful strategies aimed at reducing levels of poverty and destitution in South Africa. To date, arguably the most important State intervention in this regard has been the roll-out and extension of social security, and in particular, social assistance programmes.

At the beginning of 2006, just over ten million people were receiving some type of State grant. The social assistance programme is made up of a number of different means tested grants aimed at covering people who are traditionally excluded from the labour market, namely pensioners, children under 14 and people living with disabilities. A social grant also exists for foster children. There is thus no effective social assistance available for poor people of working age, even for people who are living in a state of persistent poverty.

The value of grants differs significantly, from R820 per month for the State old age pension, to R190 per month for the child support grant. The relatively low values of social grants are something that was raised in a number of the focus groups of this study, especially where the grant money represents the only reliable source of income into a household.

Despite concerns that have been raised about the size of the holes in the coverage of the social assistance safety net from various quarters, what is undisputed is the positive impact that social grants have had on the lives of the recipients, many of whom had little or no previous access to any form of regular income.

**Table 1: Available social grants, eligibility and values, April 2006.**

	<b>Who qualifies</b>	<b>Means test</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Duration</b>
a) Old Age Pension	Women – 60 or older. Men – 65 or older. South African citizen or Permanent Resident.	Single person – net income less than R18 024 a year. Married persons- combined income less than R35 448 a year. As above	R520 per month	For the rest of the aged person's life, unless they get more income than the means test. As above.
b) War veterans' grant	A person, who is 60 or older or who is unable to provide for his/her maintenance owing to any physical or mental disability, and served in the First or Second World War or the Korean War.	As above	Maximum monthly amount: R820 old age pension plus R18 = R838.	
c) Disability Grant	A person, who is between 18 and 59 (woman) or 65 (man). Must submit a medical/ assessment report confirming disability. Payable for both permanent or temporary disability. Must meet the means test. South African citizen or Permanent Resident.	As above.	R820 per month.	Until a permanently disabled person dies or qualifies for a state old age pension, or the end of the period of temporary disability.
d) Child Support Grant	Child and primary caregiver must be South African citizens or Permanent Residents. Applicant must be primary caregiver of child. Child must be under 14 years. Applicant and spouse must meet the means test. Cannot apply for more than 6 biological children.	The household income of the primary caregiver is below R9 600 a year, or R13 200 a year, and the child and the primary caregiver either live in a rural area, or live in an informal dwelling (no brick, concrete or asbestos walls). Income of child cannot exceed R12 720 per month.	R190 a month for each child.	Until: Child's 14th birthday; or death of child or primary caregiver; or child no longer in custody of primary caregiver.
e) Foster Child Grant	Applicant must have a 13 digit bar-coded Identity Document. Court order indicating Foster Care Status.		R570 per month.	Until: Foster child turns 18 (can be extended to 21 if at school); or last-living foster parent or foster child dies; or child no longer in custody of foster parent/s.
f) Care Dependency Grant	Applicant must be a South Citizen, except for foster parents. Child must be a South African citizen or a Permanent Resident. Child must be between 1 and 18. Must submit a medical/ assessment report confirming disability. Applicant, spouse and child must meet the means test.	Income of parent not to exceed R48 000.00 per annum, and that of child must not exceed R17 760.00 per annum.	Maximum monthly amount: R820 for each child.	Until: Child is 18 (can then apply for a disability grant); or parent or child dies; or child admitted to a State institution for care; or death of beneficiary.
g) Grant-In-Aid	Must require full-time help by someone else due to physical or mental disabilities. Must be in receipt of a social grant. Must not be cared for in an institution that receives a subsidy from the State for the care housing of the beneficiary.		R170 per month.	Until death of beneficiary.
h) Social Relief Of Distress	A person in need of temporary material assistance – in various types of crisis situations.	Person not entitled to a grant and social relief of distress at the same time (except where Director-General believes that severe hardship would result).	Nor more than the maximum social grant payable per month (up to R820 a month). Child – not more than the maximum child support grant a month (R190 a month).	Issued monthly for a maximum period of 3 continuous months. The Director-General may, in special cases, decide to extend the period by a further 3 months.



The positive aspects of the social grant system that have been enumerated in a number of reports (Aliber, 2002. EPRI, 2004) include:

- Simplicity of directing money into poor households;
- Benefits of reliability of income;
- Developmental impact in terms of human nutrition and health, promoting job search, promoting social and community capital.

In fact, according to Aliber (2002), the impact of social grants on promoting small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) development was clearly more significant than designated small business promotion funds and programmes, simply because of the direct access and regular arrival of the grant.

Notwithstanding the emergence of such positive findings of the impact of social grants, government has continued to sound a conservative warning about the risk of social grants:

- Creating dependency on government handouts;
- Promoting laziness and enabling people to elect to survive on grant income into households in favour of taking up paid employment;
- Undermining initiative;
- Eroding poor people's dignity;
- Being unsustainable in the long run.

Some of these concerns arise out of an assumption that poverty is caused by a pathological cause, such as inherent laziness or indifference. It is important that these assumptions are challenged in South Africa today – not because they are right or wrong, but because they are not based on any proven empirical research, and as such should not inform the decisions of policymakers until they have been thoroughly and rigorously interrogated.

The 'dole syndrome' of dependency on the State and perceived associated laziness may have some resonance in countries with generous social security programmes, but these claims sound hollow if the majority of poor and unemployed people have no access to social grants. In addition, it is difficult to substantiate claims that unemployed people are not working due to a desire to be lazy when the South Africa economy has so clearly been shedding jobs for over a decade. Nonetheless, it is true that certain unintended consequences may arise out of means tested social grant programmes.

Government has been keen to explore the extent of the social and economic effects of social grants on individuals, households and communities. As part of this approach, the Department of Social Development commissioned a seminal piece of work from the Economic Policy and Research Institute (EPRI) in 2004 to investigate quantitatively what could be concluded about the impact of social grants. The findings of the work clearly conclude the following:

- Social grants provide potential labour market participants with the resources and economic security to invest in high-risk/high reward job search;

- Living in a household receiving social grants is correlated with a higher success rate in finding employment;
- Workers in households receiving social grants are better able to improve their productivity and as a result earn higher wage increases.

An important question is the extent to which social grants are capable of eradicating poverty among those who receive them in the short-term. Poverty eradication policies are generally based on one of two underlying approaches, namely the structural approach, which seeks to address societal obstacles that force people into poverty, and the approach based on agency, which is premised on the belief that State interventions should be aimed at empowering the individual to move beyond his or her own current state of poverty.

If poverty is a structural issue, then social grants could be seen as a way of ameliorating the structural impact of social and economic exclusion, and by extension, should be set at amounts that are sufficient to eradicate the poverty of those who have been affected by structural forces and dynamics that create and recreate poverty. If one adopts the perspective that poverty can only be addressed through agency, then it could be argued that social grants should be sufficient to act as a catalyst to enable the recipients to move themselves out of poverty.

Poverty dynamics also shift: some interventions enable people to move out of poverty. However, some people live in a state known as ‘persistent poverty’, and appear unable to overcome this condition (Alcock, 2006). Again, the dynamics between structural obstacles and agency in addressing states of persistent poverty are critical to the design of effective and developmental anti-poverty measures.

Naledi thus conceptualised this project to contribute to national debates and discussions on understanding the effects of these dynamics by listening to people living in poverty about how they view their income and expenditure streams. It also gives an understanding of what things are foregone as a result of poverty and how this impacts upon the quality of life of people, households and communities, as well as an insight into how people have experienced government’s broader poverty eradication initiatives. This inquiry was placed against an understanding that poor people are not and never have been passive recipients of handouts, but have always forged their own coping mechanisms. Further issues for research include: are government programmes designed in such a way that they assist these coping mechanisms; how do households that are not able to access relief through the flagship poverty eradication programme (namely social grants) access income; and what are the critical areas of support that are not currently being provided that would benefit people’s attempts to move out of poverty.

The initial idea was to try to finance an ambitious twelve-month project that would track individuals in households to understand these dynamics. As a result of limited resources, this was in the end greatly reduced (see Chapter 4 on Methodology) in time duration,

although the number of households was increased on advice to 30 (in the end, 31) rather than 20 for purposes of statistical significance. Furthermore, for purposes of resources and capacity issues, the number of focus groups was reduced finally to five, although the total number of participants increased beyond our original plan.

The outcomes of the project thus consist of:

- Four interviews with 31 households;
- Five focus groups.

In Chapter Four we set out the characteristics and findings from the structured interviews, and in Chapter Five we reflect at length the findings from the focus groups discussions. In Chapter Six we set out recommendations for further research that have arisen from this project.

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# CHAPTER THREE:

*three*

# METHODOLOGY

This chapter sets out the methodology employed in both the structured interviews and the focus groups. The first section refers to the structured interviews and begins with a socioeconomic overview of Pimville, the area in which the participating households are based. Pimville is located in Soweto, Gauteng.

The interviews were held between January and April 2006, and the focus groups were held in June and July 2006.

## 3.1 STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

### 3.1.1 STUDY AREA – PIMVILLE

The area of Pimville was identified as constituting a fairly complex cross-section of lower-income households which include both formal, standard four-room brick dwellings and newer RDP (reconstruction and development) houses. In addition, the section known as ‘Braam Fischer’ includes informal dwellings<sup>2</sup>.

Pimville falls into Region Ten of Johannesburg Metro City<sup>3</sup>, which includes Diepkloof, Jabulani, Meadowlands, Orlando and Eldorado Park, among other suburbs. According to the Johannesburg Metro, the key socioeconomic challenges identified for this region include unemployment, healthcare and education (especially about TB), environmental degradation and housing.

The total population for Region Ten in 2001 was 570 635 people, with the largest age group for both males and females being between 15 and 34 years old.

**Table 2. Population by Age Group in Region Ten in 2001.**

Age	Male	Female
0-4	24 033	23 967
5-14	43 965	44 973
15-34	126 945	115 554
35-64	79 668	85 173
Over 65	9 090	17 379

Source: [www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm](http://www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm)

According to the statistical analysis of the region, the largest growth in the population between the two national censuses of 1996 and 2001 was for females over 65 years old. This category grew by 20%, from 14 485 women in 1996 to 17 739 in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> In 2001, 107 916 people lived in formal houses, 41 220 in informal houses, 1065 people lived in “traditional” dwellings and 222 lived in other forms of shelter, according to [www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10](http://www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10)

<sup>3</sup> The socioeconomic statistics were obtained from the City of Johannesburg’s website, [www.joburg.org.za](http://www.joburg.org.za), and are drawn from the 1996 and 2001 national Census data.

In terms of levels of formal education, while the number of people aged over 20 with no formal education rose by 11% between 1996 and 2001 from 28 778 to 31 815 people, the number of people who had attained Grade 12 rose by 59% and those who attained a higher education level increased 58%, from 13 100 to 20 718, over this period.

The unemployment rate is currently 42.1%. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of employed people in Region Ten out of a labour force of 405 456 in 1996 and 409 710 in 2001<sup>4</sup>, fell by 14% from 151 495 to 130 125 people, and the number of unemployed people rose by 35% from 110 143 to 148 236 people.

**Table 3.** *Labour force status in Region Ten in 1996 and 2001.*

Status	1996	2001	% change
Employed	151 495	130 125	-14%
Unemployed	110 143	148 236	35%
Not economically active	143 818	131 349	-9%
<b>Total Labour Force</b>	405 456	409 710	1%

Source: [www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm](http://www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm)

In 2001, the majority of people (391 815) reported earning no monthly income. A further 188 029 people earned between R1 and R1 600 per month as set out in the table below.

**Table 4.** *Individual monthly income for persons in Region Ten in 2001.*

Income Band	Number of People	% of Total Population
None	391 815	68.66
R1-R400	20 190	3.53
R401-R800	51 483	9.02
R801-R1 600	46 356	8.12
R1 601-R3 200	38 538	6.75
R3 201-R6 400	16 206	2.83
R6 401-R12 800	4 554	0.79
Over R12 801	1 515	0.26

Source: [www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm](http://www.joburg.org.za/stats/region10.stm) and own calculations.

Although Pimville is located in the wealthiest province in South Africa, the levels of poverty and unemployment resonate with those throughout the country. Proximity to the economic hub of the country clearly does not equate with better prosperity.

### 3.1.2 STUDY SIZE

The initial conceptualisation of the project included 20 participating households, half of which would contain at least one member who received a social grant. After further consideration and consultation, it was agreed that 30 households would provide a better statistical

<sup>4</sup> A change of 1%.

representation than 20. Accordingly, field workers were tasked with enrolling 30 households, 10 of which were to be non-grant recipient.

### 3.1.3 ENROLMENT FOR INTERVIEWS

Households were selected according to a random sampling basis.

The project and anticipated commitment was explained to a member of the selected household, and details of the nature and structure of the accommodation/ dwelling were captured.

The respondent was then asked whether anyone in the household received any social grants, and what types, as well as general information about the people making up the household, their ages and employment status.

No incentives were given to participants who agreed to be part of the project. Many participants indicated that they wished to receive copies of the final report. Some of the participants indicated a general dissatisfaction with research units that are seen as using the participants without respecting them as autonomous individuals. Discussion by the field-workers with participants on this dynamic led to the agreement that those participants who wanted to would receive copies of the report.

The household interviews consisted of four structured questionnaires completed by the field-workers. Each questionnaire also made provision for field-worker observation.

In the end, thirty-one households were enrolled to participate. Twenty-two of the households received at least one grant. One household that had originally enrolled dropped out as the respondent’s husband indicated that he was not happy for the household to participate.

The following table summarises the types of grants received.

<b>Table 5. Types of grants received by participating households.</b>	
<b>Type of grant/s received</b>	<b>Number of households</b>
Single Child Support grant	5
Two Child Support grants	3
Three Child Support grants	1
Disability grant	2
Old Age Pension	3
Old Age Pension and one Child Support grant	3
Old Age Pension and two Child Support grants	1
Old Age Pension and three Child Support grants	2
Old Age Pension and Disability grant	1



### **3.1.4 STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

On enrolment, complete data was captured about the household members, including sex, age, employment status and education levels attained by means of the first structured questionnaire.

The following three interviews were used to confirm whether there had been any change to this status, and then a separate topic was explored in each interview:

#### **Interview One**

The main thrust of this interview is to investigate patterns of income into the participating households and expenditure out of the households. As part of this information-gathering, an events register was used to ascertain what events had taken place in the last year and what costs were associated therewith. These events ranged from visits to doctors to payment of Lobola and funerals.

Income amounts as well as sources and frequency were examined and captured for all the members of the household.

Expenditure details were captured on a monthly basis, ranging from food to transport, payments for energy etc.

#### **Interview Two**

The second interview explored in greater detail the items listed for expenditure as well as the household profile, including education levels, and the relationships between the members of the households.

#### **Interview Three**

In the last interview, in addition to exploring any changes in household dynamics and spending patterns, more in-depth details were captured about income sources and employment, including the various sectors.

This information was tabulated using SPSS to assist in analysis. Given the qualitative nature of the study as well as its small size, most analysis is narrative as set out in the following two chapters.

## **3.2 FOCUS GROUPS**

In the conceptualisation of the project, it was decided that focus groups would be held to explore gaps or areas of interest that came out of the interviews.

For optimal probing it was decided that the focus groups should be as homogenous as possible. Accordingly they were delineated into five groups of youth; the elderly, women,

What is poverty? \_\_\_\_\_

men and people living with HIV/Aids.

The average number of people participating in each focus group was 8.

The focus groups were semi-structured, and were recorded, which was subsequently transcribed. The participants in the focus groups were selected with the assistance of community-based organisations within that specific sector.

The structure developed for the focus group explored the following questions:

- What is poverty?
- Describe how you have experienced poverty.
- Discussion on the sociopolitical dynamics of poverty.



CHAPTER FOUR:

*four*

FINDINGS FROM  
STRUCTURED  
INTERVIEWS

- What is your experience of social grants?
- Are social grants good or bad?
- What coping mechanisms do the poor use to survive?
- What is the impact of HIV/Aids on poor people?

For ease of analysis, the responses to the questions have been tabulated and are annexed to this report as Annexure A.

The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore certain dynamics with regard to household economies peculiar to poor households, as well as to begin to understand whether there were any dynamics more characteristic of households that received social grants compared to those that received no social grants.

## **HOUSEHOLD INTERVIEWS**

### **HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS**

Among the 31 participating households, household size ranged from two members to nine, with the average size being 5.4 people.

#### **House structure and amenities**

All of the participating households were housed in structures with permanent roofs. All had access to piped water inside their houses. Of the 31 households, 20 had an inside flush toilet, while ten had outside toilets<sup>5</sup>, five of which were communal toilets, and five of which were designated for the use of the household alone.

All of the participating households had access to electricity. Two households augmented this source of energy with gas, four with coal and one with gas and paraffin.

One of the households claimed to have no access to any form of telephone. Three households had a fixed Telkom line within the house, while five households contained a member who owned a cellphone. One respondent said that they used their neighbour's phone. Twelve respondents said that they used a cellphone service provided in a nearby container (which is part of the Universal Service Agency's provision of telephony coverage). Nine respondents said that they used locally-situated public phones when they needed to make telephone calls.

#### **Household size**

Bearing in mind the caveat concerning the small sample size in the household survey, the average grant-receiving household size was 5.7, while the average size of the non-grant-receiving households was 4.8. For the participants in this project it appears as if people congregate around social grants.

<sup>5</sup> This information was not captured in one of the participating households.

## **Permanent employment**

For all participating households, seventeen households contained at least one member who had permanent employment<sup>6</sup>. Four of the nine households that received no social grants had no-one who was permanently employed. All of the households contained at least one adult member who was not employed.

## **Self-generating activity**

Nine households contained one person who was involved in some form of self-generating activity, while no household had more than one person undertaking such activities.

## **Main source of income**

For fourteen of the households, the main source of income into the households was social grants. Full-time employment provided the main source of income for a further eleven households. Self-generating activities, including renting out property, provided the main source of income for a further four households, while part-time employment provided the main source of income for just one household.

Of the twelve households in which no-one had permanent employment, three households undertook self-generating activities. Of the nine households that received no social grants, three had no-one who had permanent employment and no-one who was engaged in self-generating activities. One of these households, however, received both remittance income and income from rental.

## **Total income from social grants into households**

The total amount received by households from social grants varied from R190 per month per household, where a single child support grant was being received, to R1 640, where one household was receiving both an old age grant and a disability grant. Three households received R1 390, which represented an old age pension plus three child support grants. This reflects that there are a number of multi-generational households which generally are able to benefit from the pooling of social grants.

## **Total income into households from other sources**

This was extremely difficult data to gather. Most of the respondents were uncomfortable talking about this, and a number of women stated that it was not culturally-appropriate for them to know or enquire about their husband's earnings.

Eight of the households reported receiving income from temporary employment, although the majority of these respondents could not quantify what this amounted to on a regular basis.

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<sup>6</sup> In one household, the respondent was uncertain about this response.

Eight households responded that they received income from renting out part of their property, and two of these same households were also the only two that received remittance income.

### **Income/expenditure**

Five of the households received no income from any source apart from social grants.

Four of the non grant-recipient households reported having no-one in permanent employment. Of the four, one reported a monthly income of between R400 and R500 made up of both remittance and rental income; one reported that a member of the household undertook a self-generating activity that brought in between R200 and R350 per month. The two remaining households reported income from temporary employment. The first one had one member who regularly found temporary employment that brought in a monthly household income of between R400 and R500 per month, while the second household had five members who found regular temporary employment, and these members brought in an income of between R1 200 and R1 500 per month.

Information about total income into the household for four households was incomplete for reasons mentioned above. However, of the remaining 27 households, thirteen experienced monthly expenditures in excess of their incomes. Total income ranged from R400 a month to two households that reported an excess of R4 000 to R5 000 per month. Monthly expenditure per household ranged from a three-person household that spent between R200 and R350 per month, to the same two households that spent in excess of R4 000 per month.

### **Medical expenditure**

Seven of the households that received social grants had benefited from free medical attention over the previous twelve-month period. Each of these households either received a child support grant or a disability grant, thus the targeted recipients of the State's free medical services appear to be successful. No household that was not eligible for a social grant received free medical treatment.

Eleven of the remaining households responded that they had spent an average of up to R200 per month on medical treatment in the past twelve months. While one household of six members, which received two child support grants, reported having spent an average of between R200 and R350 per month on medical treatment over the past twelve months.

### **Education**

Most of the households for whom this data was captured spent up to R200 per month on education, with only two households reporting that they spent more than this (both spent between R20 and R400). Neither of these two households received social grants, and their monthly income was in excess of R4 000 per month and R1 200 per month

respectively. The first of these two households contained two children and the second, one.

Social grants clearly act as a major source of income into poor communities, and act as the greatest source of regular income in most grant-receiving households.

Employment income is scarce, and often irregular. In addition, there are few permanently-employed members in most of the households involved in the study. The daily challenges of making ends meet for many households is rather bleak. The fieldworkers usually returned from these interviews in a very sombre frame of mind.

One fieldworker reported one day that she had asked one household which contained an unemployed father, and a disabled mother and two small children why they had not applied for child support grants for the two children. The mother explained it as follows: she was receiving a disability grant, which was the main income into the household. Although it is very small, they survived, and to her mind, there were more needy people out there who would need the child support grant more than they did.

The need to fit poverty eradication policies to people's daily requirements is clear. The challenge for policymakers as to how to address the needs of people not currently eligible for any social assistance is also pressing, given that for some households not in receipt of grants, there can be no source of regular income, and certainly not any dependable employment income.

The above story illustrates two points of government's grants policy. Firstly, that it is imperative that communities are flooded with better information about available assistance, even if this risks a flood of new applications from eligible applicants. But secondly, that the perceived fear of a culture of dependency married to a notion of entitlement that exists among some politicians and policymakers cannot be seen as being representative of many ordinary people.

It is also interesting to note that while entrepreneurial activities existed, they did not guarantee any notable form of income into households. Given the very tight budgets of the majority of households that participated, it would seem that precious few resources exist to provide a sustainable market for such activities on a scale to make a significant dent on the very high levels of unemployment in South Africa.

These interviews raise the critical question: in the absence of employment, what is government's policy for ensuring that the overwhelming majority of poor people in South Africa have access to regular and sufficient income?

What is poverty? \_\_\_\_\_





CHAPTER FIVE:  
*five*  
ANALYSIS OF  
FOCUS GROUPS

## MEANINGS OF POVERTY

Many definitions and measures of poverty exist and, of themselves, have proven to be highly contested in our recent South African past. Contestation is often informed by the fact that any acknowledgement of poverty for a government immediately raises questions about the policies and resources that such State will allocate to the eradication or alleviation of those identified levels of poverty (Alcock, 2006). Such indicators, if publicly available, also avail themselves to civil society pressure or lobby groups calling for an expansion of poverty eradication funds.

Currently various poverty measures are being developed and negotiated in South Africa. The aim of this project, however, was to understand how people who are poor see poverty in its various manifestations, including both indicators of poverty and the more elusive impact or effect of poverty on their lives.

The substance of this chapter is based on the five focus groups that were held as part of this project. The five groups targeted different participants as set out in the chapter on methodology, namely Youth, Women, Men, the Elderly and People living with HIV/Aids. Comments from each focus group are indicated by a number in the following sections, thus Youth is indicated by 1, Women by 2, Men by 3, the Elderly by 4 and People living with HIV/Aids by 5.

### HOW IS POVERTY EXPERIENCED?

#### Social exclusion

Social exclusion refers to certain of the effects of poverty on poor people – namely feeling or being excluded from community or national associations, activities or interactions. These can range from not being able to afford a club fee or not playing football as a result of being unable to afford boots, to a greater sense of alienation from the rights of political as well as economic citizenship.

Social exclusion thus reflects a relative sense of inclusiveness and it depends on what the threshold for inclusion is for the person in question.

Three aspects to social exclusion were emphasised by Atkinson and Hills of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) of the London School of Economics in 1998, namely:

- Relativity – social exclusion is manifest in social relations not individual circumstances
- Agency – social exclusion is the result of actions taken by those who exclude others, and
- Dynamics – social exclusion is the result of experience over time and can be transmitted across generations.

*(Quoted in Alcock, 2006).*

One of the most widespread responses of the focus group participants related to the impact of the resultant social exclusion. This was described variously by respondents. One of the main indicators of poverty and the attendant social shame was identified as a poor person's house. While one could try to hide one's level of poverty in many ways, it was agreed that poverty can really be seen by going inside someone's house, and thus those who feel shame about living in poverty do not invite people into their houses (2). One elderly woman said:

*"I clean the house as my mother used to tell me that if the house is clean then no one will notice poverty. If there is nothing to eat then just go on cleaning." (4)*

In addition the more obvious indicator is the actual construction of your house. As one person put it, "I live in a shack and am poor" (5). People who have access to sufficient resources do not live in shacks. Where you live and come from is accordingly understood as providing a recognised point of reference for peers about your economic status.

Poverty also identifies itself in people. Children from poor houses can be identified because they look unhappy: "they look totally different from other children" (2). Another woman agreed that:

*"The face can tell a lot and the person's appearance also says something about that person. You can just see someone who lives in poverty by looking at the face." (2)*

A major indicator for the youth regarding poverty and resultant issues of social inclusion or exclusion involved clothes. The youth in South Africa have been accused of succumbing to pressures of conspicuous consumption. The following comment illustrates how deeply status and inclusion is identified by what you wear.

*"You know where I live in Alexandra there is a street called John Kani, that street is considered to be the street where you find people wearing leather jackets - you know, very expensive stuff. If, as Sfiso, I also live in that street I would want to dress like that and you find that now the people who used to dress like that are no longer staying in the same street, they have moved to other areas. So as an upcoming guy I would feel like wearing like that in order to belong, so that people will look at me as someone who is rich. If you wear RT (River Trader) jeans or other cheap stuff people look at you as someone who is poor so people force themselves and want to buy expensive clothes. Those are the things that I would say have an impact on poverty. These things separate people from one another like the rich and poor." (1)*

Or as another of the youth said, "Basically poverty can affect your image." (1)

Living in poverty affects your access to basic goods. These were identified as including shelter, food and sanitation by all the groups. In fact, one of the participants of the youth focus groups said that poor people smell bad: "It is not a question of seeing poverty but rather a question of smelling poverty." (1) This same point was expressed by a woman who said that "It is hard when you don't even have a roll-on or body lotion because you don't work." (2)

The relative nature of social exclusion and the impact of poverty was well captured by one participant in the HIV/Aids focus group, who said:

*"I also think that the improvement of technology is actually costing us a lot because many things which were luxury are no longer luxury, they have become basic things; cellphones, cars are no longer luxury nowadays they are basic things." (5)*

Poverty also prevents you from being able to access transport, blankets and importantly for someone who is living with HIV, it prevents you from being able to access a doctor. (5)

Being poor thus affects your access to basic goods, services (including electricity and water), food, transport and medical treatment. This compounds experiences of other examples of social exclusion.

### **A lack of control over your life**

There was broad agreement that living in poverty negatively affected one's ability to determine or control your life, or "achieve your goals" as one woman said. (2)

Older participants identified this through referring to a sense of resignation, that there was nothing that one could do but rely on God's will. (4)

In addition, poverty makes you dependent on others which may develop into a level of patronage. This emerged from the following comment from one of the youth:

*"When you are poor, you become a victim of politics because your life depends on politics; your life depends on people who are above you. They tell you how much you will get on the grant and how you will spend it." (1)*

### **Gender**

Internationally, studies on poverty and the social dynamics of poverty conclude that women in general suffer far higher levels of poverty than men, and that this is true not only for women-headed households, but also within households of both men and women. In other words, greater deprivation is experienced by women as a result of unequal distributions of resources, which has been described as representing a state of 'compulsory altruism' (Alcock, 2006), whether this refers to greater periods of unpaid domestic work within the household, or self-denial in favour of husbands or children.

These findings found resonance in the focus groups as well. From the women's focus group it emerged that they felt that women carried the burden of living in poverty.

*"If you are a mother, you will know what poverty is. If there is not enough food, you end up not eating just for the sake of your child, the father just wants food but as a mother you know that your children have to eat." (2)*

*"The mother is responsible for everything in the family even the father tells the mother if there is no food. The mother is there to take care of everyone in the family."*

*Even when the father is sick, the mother is always there. The mother can always go around looking for help, you can see the mother asking for R2.00, she doesn't even know what to buy with that R2.00 but she will go to other people asking for R2.00 until she is able to buy something for the family.*

*Other fathers are not able to cope with poverty. They end up not sleeping at home. They don't want to be unsupportive. You find that the mother is left alone at home looking after the children with no money because the father doesn't find work." (2)*

*"Sometimes if the mother is not open enough about the situation in the family we also keep quiet as neighbours, until she speaks out about the problems. That's when she can get help." (2)*

There was an interesting difference between the women and men's focus groups in regard to survivalist income generating activities. Many women said that they tried to sell things to get by or to make a little more income, such as the following participant:

*"I can say that it is a person who is not working, who has kids or a person who is a hawker in the streets trying to make some money to support the family by selling tomatoes or fruits." (2)*

From the men's focus group a very different picture emerged from that of the women's adoption of survivalist activities. Most of the men agreed that if they were offered a job, it would have to provide an income of between at least R1 000 and R1 500 a month. Any income less than that was considered not worthwhile or acceptable. The men's focus group also felt strongly that job creation was the obligation of government.

Again this reflects an international trend that women tend to take up work or employment with worse working conditions and benefits than men. This can be caused by their availability to work (some women take up part-time work in order to be able to care for children), to the type of work (women are more likely to take up informal work than men), to the impact of stopping work to care for children on pensions and work-related benefits, to an inherent and pervasive discrimination regarding levels of pay and promotional opportunities for women in formal working situations (Alcock, 2006).

Discrimination is felt not only in working conditions but more broadly too. Some of the men actually identified the guarantee of equality between sexes contained in the Constitution of 1996 as being responsible for the loss of their jobs and rise in poverty: "We suffer a lot because of equal rights." (3) However, the men also agreed that it was correct for social grants to be accessed by women, both because they were not seen as being main employees in the household, and due to the recognition that the greater burden for caring for children fell on the shoulders of women.

## **Impact of poverty**

Poverty was seen as having a self-perpetuating nature. Poverty prevented children from going to school, which of itself prevented the acquisition of skills (4). One elderly person

described it as follows: "If you live in poverty, even if you try something it doesn't succeed."(4)

## Causes of poverty

The main cause of poverty as identified by all the focus group participants was the **lack of employment** and hence the related regular income. One woman she identified the incident which threw her into poverty as being the death of her husband who had been the breadwinner (4).

Two of the men's group members linked the **move to urban areas** as aggravating poverty in the absence of employment.

*"I think that the main thing is that the family members can be in Gauteng but Gauteng is big and most of the things are happening in Gauteng. Urban areas are different compared to rural lifestyle, at home you might not be working but still be able to get food. There are many things, like ploughing. Here in Gauteng poverty is too much because money talks."(3)*

*"Yes I remember when I was not poor. I don't know whether I am wrong. You see for our forefathers there was no poverty. We grew up not poor. There were cows and we could plough mealie meal. You could find a man having five or six wives but without poverty."(3)*

*"The other thing that contributed to this current state of lifestyle is that before there were grandparents who were staying at home, you know, but things changed as time went on and everyone right now wants to come to Johannesburg and now there are so many people in Johannesburg which causes unemployment."(5)*

The general sentiment expressed is that these days employment is harder to come by, which supports the statistical figures on the rapid increase in unemployment.

*"I mean, before if you had standard two, you could get a job, my grandfather didn't go to school and he didn't even know how to write his name but he was working and he earned a lot of money and now I have a diploma but I can't find work."(5)*

Experience is also seen as being an obstacle, especially where people have got the formal qualifications, but are refused jobs due to not being able to gain a first placement.

*"If you are from a tertiary institution then where are you going to get that experience? Sometimes you have to know someone before getting something, which is a clear corruption especially in learnerships. That is what we get in this democracy, you must have connections."(5)*

*"The question of jobs is very disturbing because right now how many people are unemployed or jobs available? Do we have skills for those jobs or experience as they ask for experience when we look for jobs."(5)*

## COPING MECHANISMS

Kempson, quoted in Alcock (2006), developed a 'Hierarchy of Approaches' to coping with poverty over extended periods of time. These are:

### **Kempson's Hierarchy of Approaches:**

- Find work or better paid work
- Spend 'savings'
- Claim benefit
- Sell non-essential possessions
- Find part-time work with earnings disregard
- Use consumer credit for regular expenditure
- Delay paying bills
- Take casual work (often above earnings disregard)
- Cash insurance policies
- Pawn valuables
- Sell essential possessions
- Charity
- Petty crime
- Begging.

The main coping mechanisms identified were accessing social grants, prostitution (for women) and crime in general (for men).

The women's focus group identified that many young women are tempted to sell sex for money, but they lamented that the general cost of this included more babies coming into the household, and that the young women became infected with HIV (2).

One woman described how people resort to crime and prostitution as follows:

*"I think the only other way that people use to cope with life is when you find girls living together with their boyfriends because they are trying to survive, they know that they will eat everyday. If it's a young boy, he goes out at night stealing and his mother will say 'my boy is trying to make a living'. If they don't have a TV or DVD at his place then he will go out to steal that and come back with it so that his family can look like other families. He steals and robs people's money and gives his mother money to buy grocery, they play dice. Then the women go out if they don't stay with men, then they look at their bodies and check if their bodies can do something to buy themselves clothes*

*and eat as well. They even support their families with the money they get from selling their bodies. They say they can't find work.”(2)*

The men also identified prostitution as being a way that women made money for themselves and their dependants (3). One man concluded that “It is women who bring Aids home.”(3)

Another man described the following coping mechanisms:

*“People are different, they do different things to survive. Others do crime and others just sit and drink water, even more than two days without eating. Then maybe after those two days someone will offer a part-time job. Others get food from dustbins.”(3)*

Crime is also identified with being a way of trying to take control to improve your lot when poor, as identified in the following comment:

*“Most of the time people who live under poverty don't participate in the social gatherings, instead they do crime; they come up with ways to fight poverty. But there are people who do something about their situation they don't just wait for someone to come and help them rather they do something for themselves.”(1)*

Are people lazy? Why do they not heed government's exhortations to create their own jobs?

The men's focus group was clear that they did not wish to receive grants, they wanted jobs. To the participants, a job did not connote work for any price, but was identified as needing to provide them with at least R1 000 per month. When asked where these jobs would come from, they said that government should create the jobs.

Men identified grants as being sources of income for women, but only because women were targeted as conduits for the grant income to reach children. When asked their opinion of a grant for people who had no employment, there was general skepticism expressed by the men. Objections included that it would attract more 'immigrants', and that the youth would refuse to finish school but just accept the grant instead of looking for work.

One of the members of the HIV/Aids focus group expressed a deep frustration with the frequently-repeated sentiment that poor people should be more active in finding employment. She said:

*“I find it very funny if the government says to us that we must go and look for jobs whereas there are these big boards hanging outside the gate written no job and when I try to create something for myself going to Umsobomvu, I'm regretted without any reason being given on why I failed my application to be approved. I find it very funny to go and look for a job. Where will I get the job?”(5)*

One woman also described a sense of frustration about the difficulties experienced in trying to make a living for herself against apparently overwhelming odds:



*"I also get confused with this word 'Vukuzenzele'. I don't know what it means because when you do that you are arrested. When you do stand up and do something about yourself they arrest you. When you sell your body you are arrested, when you sell food in the streets you are arrested. It really confuses me because we are told that we must stand up and be counted. When we implement that, we are then arrested."*(2)

A further obstacle to finding employment was identified as age:

*"The other thing that is really killing us it's the age limit, it's really a problem. Once you are 30 years and above, they don't consider you for the job, like now I am 39 years old and I have children so when I apply for the job I am told 'no you are overage' so what am I supposed to do."*(2)

*"Like the Business Skills course that the government came up with, I attended that course at Wits last year, when I went to Umsobomvu to apply for the money I was told of the age group between 18-35. So that means that I can't get that money so I have that certificate at home, I can't make use of it."*(2)

*"The reason why we are selling in the streets, it's simply because we can't find work due to the age and we are skilled, we know how to work, we know how to operate the machines but because of age we can't find work."*(2)

There was broad agreement that government needed to create more income-generating projects for people, but at the same time there was a recognition that for these to be sustainable, markets for the products are needed, and these are currently lacking.

*"I think that the government must try to create some projects for the people to be involved in. Also when we need the government support, the government is not there to buy what we offer."*(5)

And again:

*"Well sometimes it is very difficult, like in our support group we make pillows and it takes time to sell them. Actually there is no market. We end up not having money. If we can get a company which needs maybe 250 pillows then we can be able to work and survive."*(5)

A number of women agreed that people should volunteer within their communities, both people who receive social grants, but also more broadly, for instance in cleaning and upgrading schools in the community:

*"I agree with the fact that also if you are receiving the grant, there is something that you should do in the community to show that you appreciate what the government is doing for you and you shouldn't get money just sitting at home."*(2)

*"People must volunteer at the local clinics as well."*(2)

*"They should participate at the schools by cleaning and doing all the chores at the schools."*(2)

*"You remind me of something at the Everest School in Newtown, they asked parents to come to the school to assist in painting the school. We went there with mothers and fathers, we painted the whole school and then we participated in other school chores."(2)*

Skills and education were identified as being important, but experience and actual job opportunities appeared to be the real obstacle. One man from the HIV focus group reflected on how much more difficult it was to obtain a job currently compared to previous times:

*"I mean, before if you had standard two, you could get a job. My grandfather didn't go to school and he didn't even know how to write his name but he was working and he earned a lot of money and now I have a diploma but I can't find work."(5)*

### **Attitudes to grants/state programmes**

Attitudes to social grants were mixed. In general, people were in favour of the State old-age pensions, since these were identified as providing stable income into households to use for school fees etc. The Child Support Grant was more contentious. Conversations within each focus group tended to snake around initial condemnation of women for falling pregnant in order to access social grants, to a general summation that some people used the grants well, while others again tended to abuse the grants. This latter position was generally reserved for young mothers who were seen as spending the money on themselves rather than their children.

There was a general concern expressed that the value of the grants was too low.

One of the youth described how his grandmother's pension was used.

*"From my experience, my grandmother when she receives her grant, she uses the money for the good purpose because she uses it for transport when she travels from Alexandra to Johannesburg Hospital to fetch her pills. The other grandmother uses her money for food so I think basically people use the money for food. Some people use grant for useful things whereas some people use it for other useless things."(1)*

The youth were adamant that women did not fall pregnant to be able to claim grants. As one said, R190 is too little to survive for a week, let alone a month. Children do have gendered implications. One young woman said that men persuade you to have a child to show that you love them and then leave you to take care of it, so the Child Support Grant is necessary to supplement the fathers who shirk their responsibility. Underlying many of the responses regarding poverty and children was the fact that the burden falls heavily on women, and in some instances, old women. (4)

One young woman said, somewhat cheekily:

*"I don't think that people get kids because of grant it's because of nature and the grant is a bonus."(1)*

And another woman said:

*"Let me put this like this, grants have only been available like maybe 4 to 5 years and girls have been making babies even before that, so grants are not an issue."*(5)

The amount of the grants – both the Child Support Grant which is R190 per month and the State Old Age Pension of R820 per month – was seen as constituting a problem, especially where the grant represented the sole income into a household. This corresponds with a State policy aimed at alleviating poverty rather than eradicating poverty.

One member of the youth focus group raised this point.

*"I would say that I am very happy that the government is trying to improvise. It's trying to close the gap with all efforts like with the Child Support Grant, if personally I was in power I wouldn't give out the R190 you know, and I think the government assumes that it's ending poverty. So what if the mother is not working and with two kids and getting R190, obviously it's not going to be enough you know. I feel that the government is trying but is not yet there because I think poverty is very broad, for me I consider poverty as being behind with education, hungry for education."*(1)

Again when probed about grants, the men's view was similar to that of work. If grants were available to men, they would have to be of a minimum of R1 000 per month to be worthwhile. One participant summed it up as follows:

*"We need to make sure that the grant is enough to eradicate poverty. The government will need a lot of money to give the unemployed. Even this child grant is nothing. I can say that the government can go ahead with the unemployed grant but if it is going to be R80 or R200, then the government must just forget about it."*(3)

*"This grant doesn't cover that much because it is too little. R190 doesn't do much because in a week it is finished. Who can survive for the whole month with R190 anyway?"* Asked one youth.(1)

One recipient of a State old-age pension said:

*"I also get the old-age pension grant. What I can say is that it is not enough because our needs, like our electricity bill, are more than the pension grant. You find that you get the bill which is about R1 200, and you have to pay at least half of the bill which is R600, which becomes a problem at the end of the day because they still come and cut electricity because we cannot afford to pay such amounts. Even with water accounts, it is very difficult. What can we do with the little money the government is giving us? We cannot live, we cannot eat. Our children should dress. This is not right. I am really pleading with the government to come and see our needs because we cannot live with this little pension money."*(4)

Women receiving the child support grant said that it was not enough to cover school fees and school clothes, let alone be used to support the household. This suggests a lack of fit between government poverty programmes, since State money through grants

appears to be used to pay school fees back to the State. This further affects the developmental potential of social grants, for instance the extent to which they can be used to improve children's nutrition and so improve their ability to absorb education which, in turn, would affect their future productivity.

A similar concern was expressed about having to pay for access to basic goods.

*"And now I think it's because things are costly and even today we buy water and before we were not buying water, we were getting water for free. There are water meters. If you put R20, when it's finished they cut your water and you have to take out R20 again and buy water. Everything now costs money."(5)*

However, satisfaction with the State for introducing the social grants was expressed by some of the participants, despite the monthly value. One youth said:

*"For example, where I live there is a family there. I think it was 1993. This family was so poor they had nothing, they had nothing to wear, nothing to eat but now I can say that their standard of living has improved since they are getting the support though they are still struggling but it's better now under this democratic era, they are benefiting from the initiatives that have been introduced compared with how they used to live."(1)*

One older woman remarked wryly:

*"It's ten years now. The government is trying and we even have grants now which were there before but we as blacks were not accessing them, they were only accessible to whites. I don't know exactly what can be done by the government to make us happy."(4)*

One member of the youth focus groups commented on how social grants were often used to support small businesses and so enable people to 'do something for themselves as well':

*"One way of surviving poverty is when you see a lot of people running their small businesses. People have small gardens, you know, to support the money that they get. Others get food parcels, others get support from the schools as other kids are supported so that R800 becomes substantial to them as they get other support from somewhere and it's a question of saying other people don't wait for the government, they do something for themselves as well."(1)*

## **Problems in accessing grants**

A number of people described the problems they had experienced in accessing grants. Administrative justice, while a constitutional right, is often not enjoyed by the poor and marginalised, who are in many cases not aware of their rights in this regard or how to enforce them. This includes the right to administrative actions being taken in a reasonable period of time, and the right to reasons for, or to appeal, a rejected application.

*"I do know welfare as I was dealing with welfare for three years. They were telling me*

*that I would get my money but nothing was happening. That year they started to pay in July, August and September and they said they are giving the people bonuses whereas those people were supposed to get their money since they applied. I went to Katlehong pay-point to check what was going on. When I got there I saw people getting R300 and R400 then I decided to check some of the papers which were given to the people. What I saw was very painful because the people were not given the money that they were supposed to get. One of the officials asked me what I was looking at because I don't know anything about those papers. I told him that I know more about what is going on there. These officials are keeping the money for themselves.”(5)*

*“They do it a lot, paying people less amounts. (4)”*

The one solution to administrative inefficiency suggested by an older person was that claimants should be informed and organised in order to enforce their rights.

*“The other thing is that we old people, we are not informed of these things and processes. The old people should be organised in order to know exactly who to report such matters to.”(4)*

## **Recommendations for improved services**

Various recommendations were raised that would improve the service delivery experienced:

*“I just want to know why old people have to apply for old age grant whereas the government has all the details like ID number to determine your age. There must be means of making sure that the people who get grants do deserve them.”(4)*

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

A succinct analysis of impact of social grants on a poor household was given by a member of the youth:

*“You know I live in a household where there are people who are receiving the grant and it's my two brothers and grandmother. The youngest one receives the child grant which is R190 and that money pays for creche and still we have to add about R50 on top. So I can say it's not enough but it's enough because we are getting something out of it. I know that my mother is working and people will expect that she should be able to pay the school fees, but I know that what she is getting is not enough to cater for everything as we are four brothers with no father so how are we expected to cope? The other brother's money, my mother uses it to pay school fees and to buy uniforms. The one for my grandmother, the money is used for basic needs like food and if she wants to go somewhere she uses her money and I can say that also we use my grandmother's money like maybe it's during the month and my mother no longer have money for transport she uses my grandmother's money to go to work to pay for transport. So the grant is very helpful as other people have said that we are different people, we use it differently and for different reasons.”(1)*

## **IMPACT OF HIV/AIDS AND HOW POVERTY AFFECTS PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO LIVE WITH HIV**

How poverty affects people living with HIV in South Africa has become, perversely, highly politicised. Poverty negatively affects peoples' ability to access sufficient nutrition, and a lack of access to services also correlates to more vulnerable living conditions, which aggravates compromised immunities. In the focus groups we explored how this was experienced by people living with HIV who had to live in such conditions and what they thought would assist them.

*"I would say that HIV has a great deal of effect on society, though people get money for being HIV but it's not enough and life becomes hard."*(1)

*"Even the child grant is not enough because the child dies as well due to the fact that it is not easy to take care of the child while sick."*(1)

One woman who works with Aids orphans said that the general ignorance about HIV/Aids leads families to discard the children of parents who have died from Aids. This is clearly something that can be addressed through greater public education about the methods of transmission of the HI virus.

*"To add on what she has just said now, there are families who are ignorant. Let's say for instance the mother of the child has passed away and the families think that since the mother died of Aids, this child will infect them so it's more of negligence. You know most families are not informed about HIV/Aids, that's why you find them being ignorant and chasing away kids, so I think that's basically the problem."*(5)

### **Employment and HIV**

*"They tell us to go and look for a job because to be HIV-positive doesn't mean that you have to sit down and not look for a job, so this is how this affects us."*(5)

*"Sometimes other doctors just look at you and say you are fit enough you can just go and look for a job."*(5)

There was ambivalence among the HIV focus group about people with HIV finding jobs. One respondent in the HIV focus group said that people living with HIV needed to proactively go out and look for work:

*"They must be encouraged that to be sick doesn't mean that you must just sit down and do nothing. We must be strong and work together. Death was there before and poverty has been there before so it is a matter of being strong."*(5)

This comment was immediately followed by a man who called for greater sympathy for people living with HIV who felt that they were not strong enough to work:

*"Well I do understand my sister's point that the HIV-positive people are lazy but I don't think that we must say that they are lazy because these people know their status and*

*they are sick. To say that they are lazy to me is a bit harsh considering that they always think that they will die. We must sympathise with those who are not showing that they accept their status.”(5)*

## **Grants and HIV/Aids**

There was general confusion about why people who are living with HIV are not eligible for social grants.

*“My daughter, who is HIV-positive, doesn't get any grant because they say that her count is still high.”(4)*

*“I am HIV-positive and I was taking ARVs then after one year they stopped me from taking ARVs which was a result of my grant being stopped. After that I had to live a positive life but I can't be able to live normally as I don't have any income.”(5)*

*“We are running a support group. We have 52 orphans and 27 patients. Our main problem is that these orphans and patients don't receive grants. The government hasn't responded since we applied last year February. We also feel that we are responsible for our patients and we don't have anything to give them. We are even afraid to visit our patients because when they see us they expect us to give them food parcels but we have nothing to give them. We are also trying to sell outfits just to have some means of support for orphans so that we can buy bread and soup for them. The problem that we have is that some families even chase away the members who are infected and we can't even accommodate those people. The government procedure is very slow; the government must do something soon.”*

*“You find that there are parents who are dying of HIV and those parents are sent to us because the other members of the community say they can't look after them and they have too much responsibilities and they can't cope with their families or children because children ask for so many things.”(5)*

The general confusion about how people living with HIV are supposed to cope in terms of income was comprehensively put forward by one of the HIV focus group members:

*“People who are sick cannot be employed and at the same time they don't receive any income. The government must come up with a strategy or suggestion on what can be done for these people. These people don't get grants. Something must be done.”(5)*

What is poverty? \_\_\_\_\_





# CHAPTER SIX:

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Arising from this study, we would recommend that the following areas would provide very useful research:

## **1. Gender and Poverty**

Sometimes referred to as the ‘feminisation of poverty’, it is highly necessary that we are aware of the peculiar impact of poverty on the lives of women in South Africa if we are to be able to develop policies that make real the rights to equality set out in the Constitution.

## **2. Structure/Agency**

How do these different approaches to poverty eradication policies affect policy design and outcomes, and which of these informs the South African poverty eradication/alleviation policies and programmes? Do the outcomes of such policies in the past twelve years affirm or question these assumptions, and do policymakers need to revisit some of these?

## **3. Poverty and Inequality**

While the South African Constitution guarantees equality to all before the law as set out above, we have a highly divided society in which millions of people live in poverty and experience social and economic exclusion. What do people across the income and expenditure spectrum feel about this inequality?

## **4. Will the poor always be with us?**

Do people living in poverty believe that they will move out of poverty, and if so, how? What would the impact be on government anti-poverty policies if people do not in fact believe that they will ever not be poor?

## **5. Making ends meet**

Do self-help survivalist activities in fact move people out of poverty?

It is hoped that the fledgling National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) that is currently being designed for the Presidency of the South African government will be able to be used to answer some of these fields of enquiry. It is further hoped however that other researchers and funders will be able to collaborate to deepen our understanding of the broader dynamics of poverty and its effect beyond the highly necessary, but also restricted, quantitative research and statistical data collection that dominates the field of poverty research in South Africa to date.



# CHAPTER SEVEN: *Seven* CONCLUSION

Poverty is a basic state of existence for many millions of South Africans. In South Africa, debates around poverty have tended to become politically-charged, which has had the effect of closing down highly necessary work and research into the nature and extent of poverty and effective poverty eradication and alleviation policies which began immediately after the transition to democracy in 1994.

Government's response to criticisms about ongoing and sometimes deepening levels of poverty and inequality has been seen as defensive. Those who have critiqued government's policies and their effectiveness have been seen and have sometimes been deliberately portrayed as being 'anti-government', opposed to the African National Congress, destructive and even as being opposed to national transformation.

Yet we can see from international comparisons that questions of poverty policy will always be contentious and must raise uncomfortable questions about the allocation of resources, what within any given national context is possible, and what is desirable.

This study sought to investigate responses to social grants, and the responses are varied across the spectrum. For many of the households receiving grants, this income represents the largest regular source of income into the household, with some household members receiving income from casual or part-time work. For those households that were not eligible for grants, lack of employment for some meant having no access to any dependable source of income.

While social grants assist many households, it is clear that the value of the grants is not sufficient to move households out of poverty. People's expressions of frustration in this regard should not be seen as constituting a 'culture of entitlement', but rather as posing a real question about the nature of these interventions by government. The grants clearly are not designed, either in their value or the coverage of social assistance, as a poverty eradication intervention, but rather to alleviate the worst ravages of poverty among what has traditionally been seen as the most vulnerable – the elderly and young children. Advocates of social assistance, and indeed proponents of extending the social assistance safety net, argue that social grants can be developmental and provide a springboard for further economic activity by the recipients. If government endorses this as a positive consequence of distributing cash among poor communities, does the current value of the grants provide optimal resources to enable people to invest the income into small businesses? From the responses in the focus groups, it appears that for many it does not.

The concept of vulnerability in South Africa also needs to be reconsidered. People who live in a state of persistent poverty, whatever their age, are vulnerable. The impact of HIV and Aids in our communities must also shift our traditional appreciation of who is vulnerable, and this relates not only to those infected by the virus, but also those affected by it.

At the same time, the focus groups enabled us to hear another voice, especially from the youth, and that is of the awareness of the dynamic of social exclusion that is rooted in

being poor. The use of broad descriptions such as 'the poor' obscures the fact that 'the poor' do not constitute an homogenous group of disaffected people, but instead is made up of people who feel the stigmatisation of poverty on a daily basis, whether socially (including through the 'badge' of your clothing and wardrobe), or within a broader community. For a country that is intent on building a strong sense of nationhood, these levels of social exclusion must be taken seriously.

Employment and the impact of unemployment were raised in every focus group, and the household interviews showed how bleak the picture is for many people. Many participants expressed puzzlement that despite having access to better education and skills than any previous generation in their families have had, they are and seem destined to remain, unemployed. There just do not seem to be enough jobs, or access to the necessary experience to provide the foot in the door of the employment edifice.

The cutting impact of poverty on women was expressed in a number of the groups. The burden of providing for children and families on a daily basis falls especially heavily on women. Many women try to adopt livelihood strategies to augment what income they have access to. Hawking seems to be the most prevalent way, but that in turn is beset by administrative obstacles. We need to understand what types of interventions would enable women to move from vulnerable survivalist livelihood strategies to secure robust income-producing opportunities. But in addition to income strategies, how do we acknowledge the unquantified burden that rests on so many women in terms of caring for and maintaining families and households?

The inverse of this is how do we as a country with such high levels of unemployment ensure that men who lack employment do not feel marginalised and diminished in their roles as fathers, partners and sons?

Furthermore, to what extent does current social security policy perpetuate patterns of patriarchy, including notions about child-raising being the legitimate burden of women, rather than a shared responsibility? What is the role, and what are the responsibilities of social policymakers to use programmes such as social security to intervene in oppressive social dynamics and begin to encourage the building of a culture of equality? Ensuring gender equality in filling positions of leadership in South Africa is not sufficient to create the necessary groundswell to change the daily realities for many women, especially poor women. What policies are required that both empower women but also do not further alienate men?

Coping mechanisms identified suggested that poverty and lack of income does reflect in people resorting to crime, which in itself develops an acceptance of criminal activities if it is seen as a way of 'getting by'.

Our national understanding of poverty needs to deepen and develop, and we should benefit from international experiences, including the successes and failures of other countries.

Poor people's political voice with regard to the allocation and distribution of resources is far more muted than that of the middle classes and the elites. It is, however, imperative that we understand the effect and impact of poverty on people, including how structural obstacles may impact on people, how individual agency is affected by persistent poverty and what is required for people to move out of poverty from both these perspectives.

This project has been based on a very small study. Its aim however, and in this we hope that we have succeeded, was to bring back attention to the voices of people living in poverty in South Africa.

It is accordingly hoped that this study will contribute to strengthening a groundswell towards far greater qualitative work in South Africa to follow on from the Participative Poverty Assessment, and the civil society organised poverty hearings. Debates and discussions about poverty can be orchestrated in a representational fashion, namely on behalf of poor people, but in order for the realities of the impact of poverty to emerge, we need to be consistent in providing space for participation by ordinary people.

Issues of poverty and social exclusion however should not be seen as being the sole domain of poor people. Any country in which poverty is widespread is affected as a nation. It is important that institutions of the media, which form and inform public opinions and sentiments, understand the real challenge inherent in portraying poverty in its complex facets and provide space for poor people to talk about themselves and their needs, to provide the voices and faces to the statistical data which is more readily available.

In conclusion, we hope that this report is able to provide an insight into the conditions in which a small number of people live in South Africa. Although the data is not representative due to the small size of the sample, their conditions are certainly not unique.

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## USEFUL WEBSITES:

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[www.epri.org.za](http://www.epri.org.za)

[www.naledi.org.za](http://www.naledi.org.za)

[www.casasp.ox.ac.uk](http://www.casasp.ox.ac.uk)

[www.sarpn.org.za](http://www.sarpn.org.za)

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