

The Impact of Apartheid on Urban Poverty in South Africa: What we can Learn from History

Diana Viljoen

School of Economics,
North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa.
E-mail: diana.viljoen@nwu.ac.za

Tshediso Joseph Sekhampu

School of Economics,
North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa.
Corresponding Author: E-mail: joseph.sekhampu@nwu.ac.za

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Abstract

South Africa's present day configuration of poverty and inequality bears overriding racial and gender dimensions as a result of the country's history. The distortions created by the now defunct apartheid system are still visible and continue to perpetuate poverty in South Africa, reducing people's ability to improve their standard of living. This article provides a historical review of the impact which the apartheid system had on urban poverty in South Africa. Three aspects of apartheid policy that caused black urban poverty are highlighted, namely racially enforced relocations, the nature of housing provision for blacks, the character and regulation of urbanisation.

Keywords: Urban Poverty, Apartheid, History, South Africa

1. Introduction

Poverty is seen in all its manifestations as a denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human development that would lead to long, healthy and creative lives, and would ensure a decent standard of living. Despite this, there is no single, universally accepted definition of poverty. People living in and out of poverty may all hold conflicting views on the definition, cause, effect and solution to the problem of poverty (UNDP, 2006). Gharajedghi (1986:44) defines poverty in terms of five elements: powerlessness; incompetence; meaningfulness; exploitation; and conflicting values. These attributes could equally apply to a wealthy person and fall short of a clear definition. The argument is that poverty is not just economic in nature but also possesses a psychological dimension. Those that are impoverished often experience a lack of expectations as they feel they cannot take decisions, given their limited resources, and are forced to just drift along. Those that are taught to think develop greater self-esteem as they can make decisions and are able to find alternatives. The cornerstone of economic development is providing people with the sense that they can take charge of their own destiny.

Recognising the multiple dimensions of poverty also directs attention to a range of factors that need to be taken into consideration in poverty studies. The underlying assumption of the discussions centred on poverty is that by identifying the problem, a unanimously agreed upon basis for action can be established. Disagreements over the definition of poverty are firmly entrenched in its cause, as well as its possible solution. In the absence of a universally accepted indicator of poverty or welfare, several measures are examined in an attempt to find common ground. The central issue to understanding poverty is defining it. In order to know where and when poverty occurs and how it can be measured and alleviated, one must know what poverty is (Alcock, 1997:1-2). The determinants of poverty are often seen as incommensurate factors. People with sufficient income usually develop strategies to cope with the problem. The inability to implement these strategies is an important indicator of the extent of their poverty (DBSA, 1998:37). The devastating impact of poverty is not only felt by the affected individuals and their families, but also by their greater community. This is a particular concern for developing countries like South Africa, but also applies to many economies around the world

(May, 1998:2). South Africa is classified as an upper middle-income country, yet a vast proportion of its population is living in absolute poverty and displays a level of human development more often associated with low-income countries. In addition, the distribution of income and wealth in South Africa is among the most unequal in the world, and many households still have unsatisfactory access to education, health care, energy and clean water (May, 1998:2).

In common with many countries, the inability of a great deal of people to satisfy their needs, while a minority enjoys extreme prosperity, stems from various sources. The specificity of this situation in South Africa has been, among others, the results of institutionalised discrimination (Hunter et al. 2003:3). Colonial and Union government policies directed at the extraction of cheap labour were built upon by apartheid legislation. The result was a process of state-driven underdevelopment that encompassed dispossession and exclusion for the majority of South Africans. This dispossession and exclusion included the loss of assets such as land and livestock, as well as the simultaneous denial of opportunities to develop these assets through limiting access to markets, infrastructure and education (Aliber, 2001:6).

Apartheid was a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation promulgated by the Afrikaner National Party government (the ruling party from 1948 to 1994) of South Africa, under which the rights of the majority black inhabitants of the country was curtailed. Apartheid ensured that the white minority government maintained control of the country's political, economic and military resources. The National Party instituted the apartheid regime was introduced following the 1948 general elections. The cornerstone of the regime was the Population Registrations Act which classified inhabitants into four racial groups (African, white, coloured, or Asian). The Group Areas Act of 1950 ensured residential segregation, sometimes by means of forced relocations. Non-white political representation was completely abolished in 1970. This meant that black people were deprived of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally-based self-governing homelands called Bantustans, four of which became nominally independent states. The government provided separate levels of service to the population groups with black people being provided services that were far inferior to those offered to whites. Apartheid sparked significant internal resistance and violence as well as international censure in the form of arms and trade embargos against South Africa. Since the 1950s, a series of popular uprisings and protests were met with the banning of such gatherings and the imprisonment of anti-apartheid leaders. As unrest spread and became more effective and militarised, state organisations responded with repression and violence. Although the official abolishment of apartheid occurred in 1990 with the repeal of the last of the remaining apartheid laws, the end of apartheid is widely regarded as arising from the 1994 democratic general elections.

Democracy was accompanied by the hope that income poverty and inequality would be alleviated. As such, one of the promises of South Africa's post-apartheid era has been economic empowerment through the deracialisation of public policies and private practices and the poor being enfranchised. For the majority of black people, empowerment meant the opening of a range of opportunities to improve their lives. For the youth and the employed that were previously marginalised, there was the promise of skills and career paths that were previously blocked due to racial discrimination (ANC, 1994:15). After the first democratic elections in 1994, one of the major challenges for the new government was how to address poverty and inequality and, thereby, advance economic development. The state had to be re-orientated towards overcoming the legacy of apartheid. However, an obstacle to setting up a national anti-poverty programme was the lack of information on the poor: who they are; where they live; why they are poor; and what would be the best way to overcome the problem of poverty and inequality (May, 2000). The correct identification of these factors and the introduction of remedial policies have been identified as priorities by both government and civil society. The importance of reducing poverty and inequality has been a consistent theme for the new government.

This article provides a historical perspective and discusses the diverse ways in which apartheid made people poor. Three aspects of apartheid policy that caused black urban poverty are highlighted. These include racially enforced relocations, the nature of housing provision for blacks, and the character and regulation of urbanisation.

2. Racially Enforced Relocations

The fact that a great proportion of South Africans are poor has an obvious and direct effect on their physical well-being. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2003) considers three ways in which the question of poverty is important to society. Firstly, being poor has an impact on a person's physical and mental well-being. Secondly, being rich or poor (or somewhere in between) leads to people experiencing the world in very different ways and forming different kinds of social structures to try and improve their lives. Lastly, poverty is more than just an unfortunate condition that some people happen to suffer from, it is an important part of how the world is currently organised. Poor people may have insufficient food; cannot afford to eat a varied diet (every 10th child in South Africa is malnourished); often work long hours; and usually do not have access to adequate heating, water and sanitation (WHO, 2003). The consequence of this reality is

that they are more susceptible to contracting a variety of poverty-related diseases including tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS. The evidence of this can be seen in South Africa's high infant mortality rate, namely 45 per 1000 live births (compared to, for example, 6 in the United Kingdom), and low life expectancy of 48 years (compared to, for example, 78 in the United Kingdom) (WHO, 2003).

The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and the Slums Act of 1934 forcefully removed African, Coloured and Indian families from the inner cities. As these relocations took place more than a generation ago we tend to underemphasize how important they were in creating patterns of contemporary urban inequality. The impact of these relocations is still felt by the families evicted from conveniently located properties in the heart of the city (Parnell & Mosdell, 1999:14). White families who were removed from slums in the 1930s either received state compensation for their housing or they were rehoused in better quality state-provided accommodation. Slum clearance for these select groups amounted to a welfare payout. These reformist anti-slum measures were also some of the most important instruments through which the state imposed a pattern of racial residential segregation, thereby disrupting social networks. Whereas white families were compensated or accommodated in sanitary public housing schemes, black people were often financially ruined by the forced relocation from slums (Hendricks, 1990:45).

Davenport (1987:60) cites that a second wave of racially enforced relocations took place after World War II. Many of the same families coming from the inner city suburbs, like Doornfontein in the 1930s, were once again forcibly relocated from their new homes in places like Sophiatown, to the mass housing developments that make up today's coloured, Indian and African townships. The social and personal costs of securing housing in apartheid South Africa cannot be ignored. Although for many the township offered a reprieve from persistent state harassment over housing, not everyone who moved into the township was guaranteed a secure place of urban residence (Davenport, 1987:60). In other areas, unauthorised urbanisation was met with massive forced removal throughout the apartheid years. Informal settlements that were established near places of employment in what apartheid's design deemed to be "white" cities were, throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, systematically removed. Hundreds of thousands of people saw their neighbourhoods bulldozed as shanty towns were levelled and their residents bussed off to the rural homelands where it was imagined they belonged. Those who were authorized to remain (i.e., those in proper employment) were rehoused in new townships, notable for their wide streets laid out on rectilinear grids.

During the height of apartheid, blacks were not allowed to own property outside of the so-called homeland areas in terms of the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950. In the rest of South Africa, they were treated as temporary visitors. The basic services provided to black townships were also of a temporary, sub-standard nature (Reddy, 1996:53). As a result of past apartheid policies, urban and economic development is manifested in a geographically dualistic manner. The spatial economy is characterised by areas of economic activity closely surrounded by medium to high income areas, each with comparatively adequate urban facilities and economic centres. Many of the townships are located on the urban fringes and, in some cases, isolated in rural areas where limited or no economic development takes place. The low income townships are economically dependent on the economic activities in the medium and high income areas. As a result, commuting between the township and the affluent areas where the residents are employed becomes a daily chore.

3. Poverty and housing supply

Apartheid controls regulated not only where people lived but also the condition of their private accommodation. The regime ensured that African people were physically confined to impoverished parts of urban or rural areas (Seekings, 2007). Both segregation and apartheid were founded on the practice of migrant labour. The most extreme form of accommodation for migrant labourers is the hostel. The far-reaching and detrimental impacts of forcing men to live alone in compounds or hostels are difficult to assess (Wilson & Ramphela, 1989:204). The obvious impoverishing aspects of migrating are the low wages paid to the so-called single workers and the costs of commuting from home to work. Across cities of South Africa, the negative conditions of the dwellings that black people occupy can be ascribed to poor levels of affordability. Residential domestic service and migrancy undermined the quality of urban development in South Africa. Valodia (in Budlender, 1996:53-56) cites that, aside from the incalculable social and political costs of destroying the African family unit, the fact that a major portion of the income of the poor has been devoted to unproductive investment in transport between town and countryside, rather than in consolidating their already tenuous positions in either places, makes little or no economic sense.

Additional evidence of the apartheid government's commitment to migrancy and segregation was the decision to place a moratorium on building houses in African locations in white urban areas during the 1970s. Urban population growth and urbanization continued apace, and drastic overcrowding ensued. As a result, many African households defied

the township regulations and began sub-letting in backyard shacks. Throughout the 1980s, when the occupants of the main houses were involved in rent boycotts, these sub-tenants continued to pay rent. Not surprisingly, renters were among the first to abandon the violence-torn township areas for squatter camps in the mid-1980s (Delius & Schirmer, 2000:45). The inadequate physical environment of the township houses provides the backdrop to the domestic stresses of how to distribute inadequate income so that it covers schools, transport, and basic food and health requirements. Poor primary, secondary and tertiary performance among black students has to be set against overcrowding, lack of electricity and even the absence of running water. The 1970's student uprisings unleashed waves of student activism that severely disrupted education. A considerable number of students were unable to concentrate on their studies and many never completed their education. Since then, they have assumed an insecure and inferior place in the labour market. School boycotts disrupted generations of pupils' learning and created a lost generation of illiterate, uneducated and unemployable people (Yawitch, 1982:45).

The inferior quality of much of the black urban housing stands in stark contrast to the affluence of white suburbia. The unequal physical standard of housing created under segregation and apartheid links directly to the residential property assets of the different urban race groups. Leaving aside the issue of the private housing market and concentrating on the public stock, the racial hierarchy is clearly evident (Petty & Brown, 1998:69). Individual accumulation of wealth occurs not only through wages, but also inheritance and speculation. Poverty occurs when individuals are excluded from the sources of wealth.

4. Poverty, inequality and urban jobs

Poverty is about not having enough money to buy basic food, clothing and other essential commodities, like health and education (World Bank, 1993:13). In an urban context, the fact that everything needs to be purchased, means that the cash costs of survival are high. Chicchi (1999:14) notes that in the large urban centres of South Africa, black people rarely had enough cash to survive. Chicchi (1999:14) further argues that one reason for this widespread poverty among black workers was institutionalised job reservation, Job reservation notably meant that blacks were excluded from skilled and semi-skilled work, but that differential wage rates applied to black and white workers for the same job.

According to Kingdon and Knight (1999:44), even in the declining years, once skills shortages necessitated greater inclusion of people of colour into better-paid jobs, poor educational levels among blacks prevented significant entry into the high-paying professions. The racial allocation of jobs, racially unequal wages and poor black occupational mobility lies at the heart of urban poverty in South Africa. Lipton (1985:37) reiterates this by saying that wages for black urban labour were generally too low to meet the needs of a family in town. Individual accounts of hunger, sharing and borrowing pervade the life histories of black South Africans. Urban poverty in black South Africa is directly related to restrictions on free-trading rights for all, and racist employment codes. According to Abraha & Goldblatt (1997:14), the schism between urban Africans and those who were barred from the city by influx controls is well understood. Those Africans who live in cities in South Africa are better off than those in rural areas (but this may not mean that they are less poor). Parnell & Mosdell (1999:16) mention that this urban group was, itself, internally split. Stable employment and relatively secure rental housing in urban areas for selected families provided a level of permanence unknown to hostel residents, sub-tenants and others in the townships or inner city slums. This is the constituency that is now able to make the most of the post-apartheid opportunities. Enconced in the old council houses, which they now own, established urbanites have a far greater chance of optimising the opportunities of the new South Africa than those who were left in the reserves working in industrial incentive zones for low wages.

The position of migrant workers contrasts starkly with that of the occupants of formal township houses. Restricted to hostels or domestic servants' quarters, these African workers were commonly employed in less skilled and less stable employment (Jenkins & Thomas, 2000:2). Beyond the veneer of sophisticated urban shopping precincts, street lighting and waterborne sewerage of the apartheid Bantustans' administrative centres, lay a very different reality. Across South Africa, tens of thousands of people are clustered in the settlement camps that were laid out without access to work, services or viable rural production. Displaced urbanization led to housing being created far from places of employment. Issues around migrancy and land tenure are difficult to address. Not only does defining an urbanisation policy demand extensive inter-departmental discussion, but also challenges the interests of political constituencies such as traditional leadership. Opportunities for wealth creation depended largely on what kind of urban centres individuals found themselves in. Addressing the urban poverty legacy of apartheid necessitates an examination of the entire system of urbanization and the long-term viability of dormitory towns (Parnell & Mosdell, 1999:17).

Poverty is a function of both income and essential expenditure. Beinart (1994:45) recognizes the following ways in which apartheid increased the cost of urban living for blacks relative to whites:

- The framework of segregation meant that residential development for blacks was located in isolated areas on the urban periphery, thus dramatically increasing the cost of commuting.
- Low levels of funding for township schools placed considerable burdens on parents to provide books and other essentials for educational achievement.
- The state's failure to establish a retailing infrastructure within townships meant that the poor were forced to purchase goods from small, often informal outlets that charged higher prices than those available to affluent suburbanites at local supermarkets.
- Many urban residents were able to spend only a small portion of their incomes on their urban homes, either because they supported rural families or because the prospect of inadequate pensions and high urban costs encouraged them to remit a portion of their wages to maintain their own rural base as an insurance policy.

The impact of segregation and apartheid on the disproportionate cost of urban services relates to the structuring of urban-fiscal base. Traditionally, money generated from rates from lucrative industrial and commercial zoned properties is redistributed to residential infrastructural investment. As Lipton (1985: 49) states, the rates and taxes paid by residential households do not necessarily cover the full costs of services provided by the local authority. The principle of commercial and industrial cross-subsidization in South Africa never really extended to African areas. Thus, despite the fact that blacks were shopping in centrally located retail establishments, the rates never contributed to the development of their generally poor neighbourhoods. Instead, the rates from commercial property were invested in white suburbs. Under apartheid, there were only limited opportunities open to coloureds and Indians to speculate in prime residential, commercial and industrial land. For Africans, there were no opportunities for investing in property within white urban areas. As a result, the sizeable gains in capital made by many white South Africans through urban property investment over the decades have not been shared by all. Moreover, black South Africans have now entered a mature property market and they must compete with well-established investors to secure property in good locations (Petty & Brown, 1998:69).

5. Conclusion

In the relief and satisfaction of the successful deposing of apartheid, it is easy to forget what the campaign to make the township ungovernable entailed for black urban residents. As the full power of the state's security forces were diverted into containing civil war, any form of effective township policing was derailed. In the dying days of apartheid, the line between criminal activity and resistance blurred, but the negative impact on ordinary people who bore the brunt of escalating rates of theft, rape and murder was unambiguous (UNDP, 1998:45). At the heart of the term 'township' lies the fact that apartheid not only controlled where people lived, but also the conditions of their housing. The poor quality of housing occupied by many blacks negatively affected their urban productivity and performance. There were missed opportunities for black investment in urban property. Forced relocations in many parts of South Africa robbed black people of their property or tenancies, and disrupted established community structures. Furthermore, victims of removal did not get proper compensation. Under apartheid, black urban residents earned very low wages in unskilled jobs and, therefore, did not have enough money to meet basic needs. Even once job reservation was lifted, Africans struggled to compete because of poor educational levels associated with inferior, segregated education. Many students who stayed away from schools during the political upheavals did not complete their education. Land dispossession, followed by race-based separate development policies together with influx controls, have left a legacy of misdistribution of wealth and marketable skills, spatially divided households, and inferior living conditions for the majority.

South Africa's present day configuration of poverty and inequality bears overriding racial and gender dimensions, which are a result of the country's history. Even though one might forget and live in harmony in the new South Africa, the distortions created by apartheid are still visible and continue to perpetuate poverty. South Africa is a complex and dynamic country that is still dealing with the consequences of institutionalised discrimination.

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