

Can't Get No Satisfaction

Quality of Life in the 1980s

Professor Valerie Moller

Centre for Social and Development Studies, University of Natal, Durban

There are many differing ideological perspectives on the the nature of poverty in South Africa and the manner in which it affects the lives of South Africans. One view is that poverty has deepened and detracted from the quality of life in the 1980s (Wilson and Ramphele, 1989). Racial inequality has become more firmly entrenched. Another view is that there have been marked areas of improvement in education, wage income, and basic spending on development infrastructure. Modest but meaningful socio-economic and socio-political gains have been achieved by black people as a consequence of the reform 'euphoria' of the early 1980s (Schlemmer et al, 1989).

The question as to whether social and economic inequality has deepened or receded in South Africa during the 1980s may be largely academic. In a divided society with ideological polarisation, conventional objective measures of economic and social welfare are subject to partisan interpretation. A more appropriate yardstick may therefore be people's personal assessments of their life circumstances.

Social Indicators

A set of social indicators devised specially to test feelings of personal well-being and social inequality in South Africa was developed by the Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS) in the early 1980s (Moller and Schlemmer, 1983). The indicators were applied nationwide among a representative cross-section of the population in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1983 (Moller, Schlemmer and DuToit, 1987). The same set of indicators were measured again by the HSRC in a comparative survey after a five-year interval.

Over 4000 persons participated in both surveys. They stated their personal satisfaction with 31 aspects of their lives and with their lives in general. The accompanying data base shows the emergent trends. The indicators cover many aspects of the government's reform programme during the last decade, including health services, urban infrastructure, economic development projects, and social security.

Quality of life studies are a specialised field devoted to the development and application of social indicators. Research is concerned with the degree of well-being experienced by individuals or aggregates of people under prevailing personal, social and economic conditions. Experts in the field consider satisfaction measures to be highly reliable indicators of subjective quality of life. They elicit rational and durable judgments which are not subject to day-to-day fluctuations in mood.

The aim of the quality of life project was to develop a practical measure which would capture the essence of quality of life applicable to South Africans living in a wide range of circumstances, i.e., a reliable and valid cross-cultural measure of well-being. Baseline data generated by means of such a quality of life measure were to serve as a yardstick against which improvement or deterioration in well-being in a rapidly changing society could be assessed at regular intervals.

Interpreting Trends

The perceived quality of life of a nation can be captured in the overall aggregate and specific life satisfaction ratings obtained from its citizens. Assuming that the quality of life of South Africans had improved during the last five years, one would expect a significant increase in the percentages of respondents indicating general satisfaction and specific satisfaction with various aspects of their lives in 1988 over 1983.

In South Africa in the 1980s, it is highly likely that equality or social justice considerations are the most significant reference standards for black South Africans.

Does the average black man feel that modest but meaningful socio-economic and political gains have been achieved in the 1980s?

For black people, it is highly likely that considerations of equality or social justice are the most significant yardstick of improvement

Objective improvements in life circumstances may not measure to this exacting standard despite the reform measures of the last decade.

A meaningful interpretation of quality of life trends must take technical factors (survey variations), external factors (objective improvements), and internal factors (subjective appraisal) into account (see box). Internal factors tend to confuse clear-cut trends in that they dilute or enhance the impact of policy interventions on people's personal lives.

For example, a well-timed policy intervention, attuned to the popular mood, may capture the public imagination, and activate a wave of citizen reaction which registers as increased satisfaction with life. Conversely, reforms may register no satisfaction increase or even a decrease if expectations have outpaced reforms. Furthermore, the effects of the interaction of internal and external factors are not necessarily uniform in all spheres of life. Relative deprivation may be felt more intensely in some areas than others.

Socio-Economic Issues

A comparison of the survey data shows that during the five-year period from 1983 to 1988, the overall perceived quality of life has decreased for all South Africans. However, the gradient in the South African racial hierarchy is less sharp and the cleavages between the white, Indian and coloured groups appear to have decreased. At the same time, the polarisation between Africans and the other race groups has increased. The main trends were:

- The general decrease in overall quality of life is reflected in virtually all aspects covered in the survey. Discontent is pervasive and not concentrated in any one domain of life. Dissatisfaction rates increased between 1983-1988 for all indicators with few notable exceptions.
- Discontent has risen, particularly in the economic sphere of life. Among all race groups, larger proportions are discontent with their earnings in 1988 compared to 1983. In 1988 small majorities among Indians and coloureds, and 85% among Africans express discontent.

- In 1983 being black (i.e. African) in South Africa contributed significantly to depressed well-being (Moller and Schlemmer, 1989). This appears still to be the case in 1988. In 1983 between 4 to 5 out of 10 Africans stated general satisfaction with their lives; in 1988 only 3 to 4 out of every 10.
- The quality of life of Indian and coloured South Africans is more on par in 1988 than 1983, mainly as a result of perceived improvements to coloured people's life circumstances. Coloureds appear to suffer less from relative deprivation and educational disadvantages than formerly, while Indians perceive their life circumstances to have deteriorated in most spheres of life.
- In relative terms, white quality of life has decreased least during the past five years. Apart from loss of real income, deterioration is felt mainly in areas such as increased exposure to crime, and a drop in the standard of public services. In 1988 white South Africans tend to feel less free, less confident in themselves, and less able to enjoy life than in 1983.

The survey shows that the perceived quality of life has decreased for all South Africans between 1983 and 1988.

INTERPRETING SOCIAL INDICATORS

Over 200 social indicators were thoroughly tested before making a final selection of 35 indicators covering general and specific quality of life satisfactions, which were then re-applied in the 1988 survey. The multi-item instrument is considered ideally suited for the systematic monitoring of subjective quality of life across all communities in South Africa and for the description of changing patterns of social cleavages and racial inequality.

From a policy-maker's point of view, social indicators are most useful if they give a clear indication of popular reactions to policy interventions. Satisfaction ratings result from a mix of several interacting factors which need to be taken into account when interpreting subjective trend data on quality of life:

• **Technical Factors**

Theoretically, social indicators are measured under identical circumstances in each repeat survey to reduce sampling error. This is rarely the case in practice. For example, in the present case the research instrument was refined and shortened after the first wave of research.

Trend data compiled from cross-sectional surveys are also subject to changes in the target populations under study. Shifting satisfaction trends may partially reflect changes in the composition of the urban African population as a result of population movements during the review period. Newcomers may subscribe to different values.

• **External factors**

Shifting quality of life trends may reflect real changes in the objective life circumstances of South Africans during the review period. All other things being equal, positive interventions aimed at improving living standards are expected to register in higher satisfaction rates in the affected area.

- **Internal factors**

Satisfaction results from people's subjective appraisal of their objective life circumstances. Individuals measure the appropriateness of their life circumstances against various standards. Therefore, personal quality of life may be seen to improve or deteriorate because of shifting reference standards as well as actual changes in people's life circumstances.

Discontent with political rights has increased among Africans from 1983 to 1988, but decreased for Indians and coloureds.

REFORM RESPONSES

On the positive side, there are signs that race relations and respect between members of the different race groups have not deteriorated. They may even have improved.

At the same time, political reforms appear to have deepened cleavages and persisting inequalities. Firstly, rates of satisfaction with the right to vote have increased significantly among Indian and coloured respondents since the introduction of the tricameral parliament. Nevertheless, in 1988 only every second Indian and coloured South African express satisfaction with political rights. Secondly, discontent with political rights is more pronounced among the disenfranchised Africans in 1988 than in 1983. The proportion of Africans satisfied with their voting rights decreased from 27% to 19% in this period.

Despite the removal of influx control regulations during the review period significantly fewer Africans feel satisfied with their freedom of movement in 1988. Further, perceived inequality in terms of African versus white satisfaction differentials has increased in every sphere of life (see table 2). However, in the more private spheres of life which are less amenable to public intervention, inequalities are least pronounced.

Satisfaction with community services and infrastructure is the only area in which perceived inequality has narrowed during the review period. (This is due to white perceptions of the deterioration of public services in their areas and greater exposure to crime). Despite increased expenditure on African education and wage increases in excess of levels of inflation, education and income are the two areas which are dissatisfying for the largest proportions of Africans. Perceived inequality has increased from 1:2 in 1983 to 1:3 in 1988 in the educational sphere, and from 1:3 in 1983 to 1:4 in 1988 in the income sphere (see table 2).

Overall well-being has deteriorated significantly for Africans between 1983 and 1988. In 1983, on average, 8 in 10 whites compared with 5 in 10 Africans were generally positive about their life circumstances. By 1988 the racial divide had widened: 7 in 10 whites but only 3 in 10 Africans see their life quality as positive.

COMPARING INEQUALITY

Inequality in South Africa must also be reviewed in terms of international standards. People all over the world typically profess to being very satisfied or satisfied with their lives, i.e. they give themselves high to very high ratings on subjective well-being. Levels of well-being below this norm have never been measured in developed countries although they have occurred in surveys conducted in developing countries (Headey and Wearing, 1988:513). South Africa has the dubious distinction that the African sector of its population scores well below the universal norm.

The second quality of life survey undertaken by the HSRC in 1988 suggests that the reforms that occurred in South African society under Mr PW Botha's leadership have not been able to remove this stigma. It is anticipated that the HSRC will repeat the subjective quality of life test after a five-year interval in 1993. Time will tell if the ruling party's five-year plan and Mr FW de Klerk's initiatives will succeed in reducing racial inequality and improving the quality of life for all South Africans in the next decade. **IPSA**

REFERENCES

Headey B. and Wearing A. 'The sense of relative superiority central to well-being. Social Indicators Research No20,1988:497-516.

Moller V. and Schlemmer L., 'Quality of life in South Africa: Towards an instrument for the assessment of quality of life and basic needs'. Social Indicators Research No 12, 1983:225-279.

Moller V. and Schlemmer L., 'South African quality of life: A research note'. Social Indicators Research No 21, 1989:279-291.

Moller V. L. Schlemmer, and SHC du Tort 'Quality of life in South Africa: Measurement and analysis'. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1987.
Schlemmer L., Stack L., van Dyk H., and Berkow C. 'South Africa's ideological football: Development, quality of life and socio-economic reform'. South Africa at the end of the Eighties: Policy perspectives 1989. Johannesburg:Centre for Policy Studies, Wits, 1989:157-228.

Wilson F. and Ramphela M. Uprooting poverty. The South African challenge.

Data Base

TABLE 1
QUALITY OF LIFE TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

	Whites		Indians		Coloureds		Africans	
	1983 834 %	1988 752 %	1983 1 316 %	1988 991 %	1983 970 %	1988 829 %	1983 1 516 %	1988 1 199 %
Percentages of survey respondents perceiving themselves to be 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with:								
1.1. DOMAINS OF LIVING								
• Health								
Own health	91	88	90	82	92	83	67	51
Family health		89		65		71		64
• Housing								
Own present dwelling	93	92	82	71	73	68	60	45
Size of dwelling	89	89	74	68	64	61	35	30
Availability of housing	65	80	57	50	43	40	33	29
Choice of where to live	89	89	69	59	57	61	50	43
• Community facilities								
Public services	80	73	68	54	55	51	39	33
Transport costs	63	66	37	43	44	48	21	21
Security against crime	77	68	50	49	41	52	31	35
• Family life								
Family happiness	93	91	94	89	92	84	83	76
• Education								
Own education	71	74	65	60	52	64	39	26
• Occupation								
Job opportunities	66	73	37	35	47	46	19	17
Independence at work	92	87	88	78	87	79	60	51
Treatment at work	92	88	89	77	86	81	61	52
• Income								
Own wages/salary	70	59	55	44	57	47	26	15
Ability to provide for family	87	89	83	65	77	71	51	32
Insurance against illness/death	83	83	51	51	53	51	16	13
Income in old age	73	69	47	42	47	45	14	11
• Food								
The food you eat	94	95	96	89	94	89	67	59
• Socio-political issues								
Voting rights	90	93	31	48	20	44	27	19
Life compared with other race groups	84	85	68	68	50	60	30	27
Respect from other race groups	85	84	73	68	59	64	38	38
Race relations	90	90	80	79	70	80	40	36
Freedom of movement	96	90	76	68	68	71	48	36
• Intimate, private and social life								
Yourself as a person	89	85	95	91	95	90	89	77
Respect in the community	93	91	91	90	85	85	64	60
Loyalty of friends	91	90	92	86	87	83	69	65
Peer group adjustment	92	92	94	92	94	91	72	76
Intimate relationships	94	92	90	83	89	81	75	71
Spare time activities	86	83	80	68	79	81	69	42
Fun in life	89	84	84	75	85	81	61	42
1.2 OVERALL WELL-BEING								
Overall life satisfaction	89	82	89	77	81	77	48	32
Global happiness	93	92	88	83	80	83	53	38
Rewarding (vs frustrating)life	63	62	53	50	53	55	46	34
Life getting better (vs getting worse)	61	55	53	51	59	57	49	34

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the HSRC (ISODEM) for permission to reproduce unpublished data (1988) and to Ms Penelope Qeerds and Professor SHC du Tort of the HSRC for their assistance with data retrieval. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the HSRC.

Table 2
Comparative Satisfaction Levels for Africans and Whites

	Average %	Average		Average increase
	African	African/White		African/White
	satisfaction	satisfaction		satisfaction
	levels	differentials		differentials
	1988	1983	1988	1983/1988
Overall life quality	35	1:1,57	1:2,09	0,52
• Specific domains:				
Family	76	1:1,12	1:1,20	0,08
Private life	62	1:1,28	1:1,42	0,14
Food	59	1:1,40	1:1,61	0,21
Health	58	1:1,35	1:1,53	0,18
Work	40	1:1,77	1:2,08	0,31
Housing	37	1:1,87	1:2,38	0,51
Socio-political issues	31	1:2,41	1:2,84	0,43
Community infra-structure	30	1:2,43	1:2,30	-0,13
Education	26	1:1,82	1:2,85	1,03
Income	18	1:2,89	1:4,17	1,28
Average over domains				0,40