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The 'politics of poverty' in a post-apartheid South African metropolis

Abstract

More than ten years after South Africa celebrated its first democratic election the post-apartheid state finds itself confronting mass protests reminiscent of popular struggles in the apartheid era, as poor people demand houses, jobs and speedier delivery of basic services. South Africa is currently experiencing high levels of poverty and widening gulfs between the wealthy and poor of all racial groups.¹ Whether the circumstances of the poor are getting worse or not in post-apartheid South Africa has been a subject of heated debate between government officials, academics and civil society activists. Whilst government points to social grants and poverty alleviation programmes in place, critics suggest that the adoption of neo-liberal policies, rising unemployment and the failure to elicit the participation of the poor in constructing ameliorative interventions have undermined attempts to reduce economic hardship and improve people's lives. In this paper I draw on selected aspects of recent research on poverty by the University of Pretoria² in four communities in the vicinity of the city. The most striking findings, in analysing and comparing the quantitative and qualitative data, relate to grassroots perceptions of unchanging or worsening socio-economic circumstances and of the exclusion of poor communities from the benefits of a transforming political economy. In seeking to situate and explain the responses, the paper argues that the deep pessimism that infuses popular discourses is shaping a robust critique of state institutions as fundamentally indifferent to the plight of the poor. In addition, although the data reflect 'group specific' differences insofar as poverty and insecurities are concerned, there appears to be a coalescing of political discourses and rituals of protest across racial divides.

1. Background: Some basic facts

In 1994, at the time that a new political order came into being, seventeen million South Africans could be considered 'poor', with about seventy percent of them in rural areas. Seven of the nine provinces were particularly hard hit with high proportions of households enduring poverty: Limpopo (62 percent), Free State (57 percent), Eastern Cape (40 percent), Northern Cape (38 percent),

Mpumalanga (34 percent), Gauteng (30 percent), North-West (15 percent) and the Western Cape (14 percent) (May, 2000: 31). Most of those who were broadly categorised as ‘poor’ in the 1990s had limited access to basic services such as safe drinking water, electricity and sanitation. Many also did not enjoy adequate housing or have secure and decently remunerated work. Socio-economic inequalities were fairly entrenched and defined along racial lines. At the same time, intra-racial group inequalities were becoming fairly evident. For example, in their 1994 study of the distribution of income in South Africa, Whiteford and McGrath highlighted South Africa’s serious problem of economic inequality and pointed to the shifting circumstances of black households. They argued that whilst the richest twenty percent enjoyed significant growth in income in the 1990s (much higher than other sectors of the population) the poorest eighty percent suffered, in this same period, a decline in income. With respect to the poorest forty percent of households, they claimed:

The bottom 40 percent of [black] households have fared extremely badly with the mean income of this group declining by almost 40 percent since 1975. Households in this group would no doubt have been living in poverty in 1975 and the worsening of their situation would indicate a deepening of poverty in South Africa over the past two decades (Whiteford & McGrath, 1994: 43).

Between 1995 and 2000 the gap between South Africa’s rich and poor generally widened. Statistics South Africa (2002) data suggest that in this period mean household income declined by 19 percent, with the poorest half of the population earning only 9.7 percent of the total national income. The Gini-coefficients³ per racial groups depicted in Table 1, and as summarised by Daniel, Southall and Lutchman (2004), confirm that inequalities deepened within all four racial groups, but that the divide between wealthy blacks and poor blacks is becoming more striking than the inter-racial divide between blacks and whites.

Table 1: Gini coefficients by population group using per capita income

Year	1970	1975	1993	1995	1996	2000
African	-	0.49	0.56	0.57	0.68	0.59
White	0.43	-	0.47	0.47	0.52	0.49
Indian	0.42	-	0.50	0.49	0.53	0.51
Coloured	0.53	-	0.47	0.52	0.57	0.55

(Source: Daniel, Southall & Lutchman, 2004:495)

In offering a summary of key poverty-related data, Landman (2003: 1) maintains that there is now some consensus amongst analysts that (on average) about forty percent of South Africa’s population is enduring poverty, with the bottom fifteen percent facing ‘a desperate struggle to survive’. Seekings and

Natrass (2002: 2) identify the three principal classes in post-apartheid South Africa as being: (i) an extremely wealthy and multiracial elite or upper class, (ii) an intermediate 'middle class' group incorporating professionals and the organised working class, and (iii) the marginalised (or underclass) including lowly paid farm and domestic workers and the unemployed. The increase in the numbers of people without work and material resources remains a central factor in the resilience of poverty and the inhibition of transformation efforts. Thus, it is important to offer a further comment on unemployment in South Africa. South Africa's formal employment growth rate has been declining steadily since the 1970s: from an annual growth rate of 2.9 percent in the 1960s, it dropped to 0.7 percent in the 1980s and has been negative since the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1995, with shifts from labour-intensive production to capital-intensive processes, an average of 82,000 jobs a year was lost (Erasmus, 1999: 28). Between 1996 and 2001 some 600,000 formal sector jobs were lost (Naidoo, 2002). Recent estimates of unemployment differ and range from 45 percent (Torres, 2002) to 31 percent (Statistics South Africa, 2003). In general though, it is conceded that there is a serious discrepancy between the high demand and the slow creation of jobs (Bhorat, 2003). While alarmingly large numbers of people are without work, it is also clear that underemployment, declining wage rates in certain sectors, and wage discrimination also feature amongst the causes of poverty. For those excluded from activities of the 'formal economy', intermittent involvement with informal sector activities, and even illicit forms of earning a living, emerge as viable alternative survival strategies (Simone, 1998).

2. Issues: Contemporary understandings and responses to 'poverty'

Poverty has a range of dimensions and meanings. Although early approaches to poverty simply equated the state of being poor with insufficient material resources, today more complex conceptualisations also take account of 'capabilities', 'livelihoods', 'social exclusion' and 'rights' (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 2004; Hall, 2003). While many academics working within the field of poverty acknowledge, as Amartya Sen (1983) does, that 'there is an irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty', there is, at the same time, criticism of the reductionism inherent in approaches focussing almost exclusively on basic needs or minimum requirements for physiological survival. As Kabeer (1994: 139) states: 'Human need is about more than physiological survival; it is also about living a healthy active life and participating in the life of the community. These are the "beings and doings" that people value...' More inclusive definitions, such as that offered by Robert Chambers, strive to link both the tangible and non-tangible aspects of socio-economic hardship. The link that Chambers (1988:8-9) makes between 'poverty proper' and physical weakness (the tangible aspects) to isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness (the intangible

aspects) is very relevant in the South African case. There is an important connectedness of material well-being with political and socio-economic rights. Intangible needs might include a desire for incorporation and participation in the institutions, political processes and social networks of society. Barriers to inclusion (as was evident in apartheid society) deprived groups and individuals of access to state resources, and prevented them from pursuing independent livelihoods. Although contemporary analyses of poverty in South Africa tend to place much emphasis on economic determinants, there is also some interest in the ways in which enfranchisement and the acquisition of rights have led to the shifting of 'poverty proper'. Poverty in South Africa manifests itself as more than material hardship and involves simultaneously the ability (or not) to wield power, display agency and control personal destinies (Kabeer, 1994; Du Toit, 2005).

Much current writing on poverty in South Africa wrestles with the paradox of change and stasis. From one angle a lot appears to have improved, from another, things remain the same. Clearly South Africa in 2006 boasts a greatly altered political landscape from the one suffered more than a decade ago. Legal racism no longer exists and democracy has replaced the segregationist doctrines of separate development. There is freedom of movement and expression in place of influx control, pass laws and detention without trial. Notwithstanding this new political reordering, anecdotal evidence consistently reiterates that for the poor not much has changed in terms of the larger socio-economic context the government sought to confront in 1994 (see the recent work of Schlemmer, 2005). It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the post-apartheid state has initiated few or no steps to address poverty. A quick perusal of the reports of government departments will serve as a reminder that a fair amount of energy has been invested in addressing basic needs (such as housing, water and electricity) over the past ten years. In addition, state departments have established numerous poverty relief projects, including more substantial pensions, grants and feeding schemes, human resource development and training, and a series of anti-poverty funds for indigent individuals and households (Van Donk & Pieterse, 2004). Government officials often confront critics, sometimes with much emotion, by pointing to the initiatives in place to address poverty. They have been at pains to 'correct mistaken views that the poor were worse off [in post-apartheid South Africa] than they were during apartheid years' (Roberts, 2005: 485). On the eve of the first democratic election in 1994 the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), with a strong social development orientation, provided a blueprint for the large-scale building of infrastructure, the provision of basic services and the 'opening up [of] previously suppressed economic and human potential in urban and rural areas' (ANC, 1994: 6). The RDP's effective lifespan, however, was short. As pressure to appease local and international capitalist interests mounted, the neo-liberal, market-orientated, Growth, Employment and Redistribution

Strategy (GEAR) replaced the RDP in 1996, contradicting its developmentalist spirit with considerable negative effects (Everatt, 2003: 82). Many critics of post-apartheid state policies have blamed growing intra-group inequalities, increases in job losses and the resilience of poverty on the adoption of GEAR, which some regard simply as a self-imposed structural adjustment programme (Desai & Pithouse, 2003: 2). With its focus on growth, GEAR has encouraged privatisation, the opening of markets, the commodification of services and cuts in social spending (ibid). There has been a lack of fit between GEAR and other pro-redistributive state strategies initially in place (Bornstein, 2000). Thus, while access to infrastructure and basic services has increased in parts of the country, the positive spin offs have been considerably undermined by job insecurity, unemployment and declines in household income of the most economically disadvantaged of all racial groups. The contradiction between pro-growth and pro-redistributive strategies has led to what Bornstein (2000:202) calls 'institutional dissonance'. Dissonance has also been at the base of the triggering of numerous, and spontaneous micro-uprisings that South Africa has been witnessing, particularly over the past five years, as poor people resist the high costs and the cutting of municipal services due to their inability to keep up payments. The visual images of poor people being tear-gassed and assaulted in confrontations with police have ignited critical discourses striving to make sense of the impasse of the poor and the conditions structuring their life chances.

In this paper I offer some newly acquired data on the politics of the poor in four sites in the vicinity of South Africa's administrative capital, Pretoria. As a case study of poverty the data offer a snapshot of quite large numbers of people dealing with an assortment of hardships. The data are used to describe their political perceptions and attitudes, and the paper finally considers the implications of what can be termed the 'coalescing of discourses' and experiences across racial boundaries.

Numerous studies utilising survey data have recently shown the increasing unhappiness of working class communities and the generally negative evaluations of state performance. This developing trend is attributed to perceptions of 'a general economic downturn and the accumulating political problems confronting the Mbeki government' (Mattes, 2002: 31-32). A consistent curiosity in recent years has been to assess which categories of the poor have begun to feel the effects of democracy and socio-economic transformation. Discourses can be deemed to be useful instruments to track changes in people's lives: invariably shaped by history and past practices of privilege or disadvantage, they shift us closer to the 'true nature' of the current state of affairs (Foucault, 1971). To summarise: against the context sketched above, the paper seeks to achieve two specific aims. The first aim is to offer comparative data on poverty and vulnerability as they affect people in the four selected areas of Pretoria. The second aim is to assess the changing politics and assimilating

conditions of deep poverty that are acting to connect the poor across racial divides.

3. Pretoria: Limited profiles of the racially demarcated areas

Pretoria, once the headquarters of a repressive apartheid state, now hosts the administrative machinery of the new democratic order. Pretoria is located within the larger Tshwane unicity, a vibrant, densely populated, economic hub. Despite political transition, most residential areas in Pretoria continue to exhibit the general racialised contours of the apartheid era. Thus, four historically racially demarcated areas were intentionally selected for study in this region.

Danville, a white working class area situated relatively close to the Pretoria central business district, as well as to other white residential areas like Phillip Nel Park, Elandspoort and North View, was regarded as an appropriate choice to capture 'white poverty'. The area is adjacent to the black and Indian townships of Atteridgeville and Laudium. The original suburb dates back to the 1940s when it was created specifically to cater for Afrikaans-speaking blue-collar workers employed on the industrial and steel (ISCOR) plants in Pretoria West. Since the closing down of these plants, and the change in government, white workers in Danville have been reportedly disgruntled about their inability to find permanent public-sector jobs and attain promotion and security of tenure. In field trips the physical deterioration of the area in terms of run-down homes and disused facilities creates an impression of steady degeneration. It was also noted that a small number of households were dependent on feeding schemes and soup kitchens for their survival. The area remains predominantly white, but changes can be witnessed, as black civil servants buy up properties, particularly in the newer extensions, at relatively cheap prices. Danville has held much interest for scholars over the years because of its class character and right-wing politics.

Eersterust is Pretoria's only 'coloured' township and was therefore selected on that basis. It lies about twenty kilometres east of Pretoria. The township was established in 1963 to accommodate scattered populations of coloured people forcibly removed from places like Marabastad, Lady Selborne, Eastwood, Claremont and Booyens which were set aside in 1958, ten years after apartheid became official policy, for white occupation only. Recent statistics suggest that about 35,000 people reside in Eersterust. Most economically active residents hold working class occupations, with nearby Silverton and Watloo being the main places of employment. Levels of unemployment are increasing and a growing number of people (both young and old) are becoming self-employed or seeking paid work in informal sector enterprises. Media reports consistently draw attention to illicit forms of making money and to survivalist strategies adopted in Eersterust, particularly regarding the drug trade and sex work.

Faith-based organisations have a strong presence, but community-based and political organisations have dwindled in number and significance. In August 1997, violent protest erupted in the area as people demonstrated against the cutting off of power supply to the area. This action by the municipal authority was in response to non-payment for services. Many residents, particularly in the section known as Nantes, continue today to struggle to meet payments for basic services.

The vast majority of Indian South Africans living in Pretoria in the 1950s resided in the area known as Marabastad (or the Asiatic Bazaar). With the passing of the Group Areas Act, Indians were forcibly removed by 1962 and relocated to *Laudium*, a relatively small area about 30 minutes away from the Pretoria city centre. Since the dismantling of the Group Areas Act in 1991 many wealthier, and younger, Indians have moved out into previously white suburbs in the Pretoria vicinity. Laudium currently has an established middle class and professional sector, but a sizeable minority of people live in sub-economic houses with insecure and ad hoc jobs. Networks of friendship and religious affiliation appear to exist, as does some semblance of kinship and familial bonds. Most of the Indian poor live in a demarcated section (a social ghetto) known as the 'White Blocks' area. The residents of White Blocks have been accused on many occasions of offering a safe haven for drug dealers. In 1996 about 500 people in Laudium from the nationwide organisation PAGAD (People against Gangsterism and Drugs) demonstrated against the drug peddling they believed was occurring in White Blocks. The selling of drugs persists today as an illicit alternative livelihood strategy. Although a number of civic and political organisations in Laudium were active in the 1990s in mobilising people around a range of grassroots issues, today few such groups remain. Laudium was selected as a site, despite its concentration of middle class residents, because it is the only historically Indian area in Pretoria.

Soshanguve is a historically black residential area approximately thirty kilometres away from Pretoria central. Prior to Bophuthatswana's 'independence' in December 1977, Soshanguve was known as Mabopane East, forming part of the greater Mabopane-Boekenhout-Winterveld Complex. Mabopane East was renamed 'Soshanguve' in 1977 when the area was incorporated into the Bophuthatswana Bantustan. Since the late 1970s, Soshanguve has been a vast expanse of semi-developed territory with formal housing flanked by informal settlements, some well-established and some less so. As a dynamic and expanding area, it exhibits all the problems of a peri-urban settlement that has become home to migrants from all over Gauteng, the North West Province and Limpopo. The bulk of Soshanguve's residents, however, have over the years come from a range of surrounding black townships such as Mamelodi, Wallmannsthal, Mabopane, Winterveld and Atteridgeville. Population estimates have ranged from 440,000 to about a million people. Studies in the 1990s claimed that more than forty percent of Soshanguve's residents were

unemployed or underemployed. Poverty levels are high and informal sector trading and illicit forms of earning a living are common. Since formal employment rates are low, only small numbers of people have been organised by trade unions. Support for the ANC is strong, with negligible support for other parties. Soshanguve was selected as a site for this study, as opposed to the range of other black areas available, simply because its history and dynamics are a source of much current academic interest and scrutiny.

None of the four areas are racially exclusive anymore, although, as places in which the poor and marginalised are concentrated, they retain strong pre-1994 characteristics with predominantly white, coloured, Indian or black populations (Anon, 2004; Faul, 1989; Schurink, 1995; Freund, 1995; SA townships, 2004; Huggins, 1989; Anderson, 1992; Gaither, 2000).

4. Research design and methods

The four separate survey sites were purposively selected to meet a set of study objectives. A probability sample of 1567 households was proposed across the four areas; a dissimilar number of households was allocated to each area in a fairly judgmental fashion, taking account of the relative sizes of the areas, the heterogeneity of each sample area, and the probable presence of individuals from the target population, that is, people enduring poverty and unemployment and who manipulate various survival mechanisms in their day-to-day lives.

Table 2: Allocated sample size

Area	Sample size	Percentage	EAs X Vis pt/EA
Danville	354	22.6%	13 x 28
Eersterust	270	17.2%	9 x 30
Soshanguve	676	43.1%	24 x 28
Laudium	267	17.0%	9 x 30
TOTAL	1567	100.0%	

(Source: Poverty and Health Recode File, Department of Sociology, UP, 2003).

Enumerator areas (EAs) were randomly selected in each area using multistage cluster sampling and the 1996 Census Enumerator Areas. Although preliminary results of the 2001 census had already been released by the time the samples were drawn in June 2003, the full census 2001 data-set was still awaited. In the absence of sufficient information to draw the various samples, older data from the 1996 census had to be used. Approximately thirty households were allocated per EA. Field workers systematically selected households across selected EAs using an interval and a random starting point. In case of multiple households on a stand, a single household was randomly selected.

A single questionnaire (with household and individual sections) was used to gather survey data. In the household section, information on all household members was gathered, whilst the individual section was applied to randomly selected individuals from these households. The questionnaire included a range of questions probing the broad research concerns of the study. Any individual, preferably the head of the household, was entitled to serve as a respondent for first section (household section) of the questionnaire. The respondent responsible for the second section (the individual section) of the questionnaire was selected using a random grid. To be eligible for selection household members had to be at least 18 years old. No substitution of visiting points was allowed. The number of visits as well as the outcome of each visit was indicated on each questionnaire.

Fieldwork was contracted to MarkData (Pty), a reputable Pretoria-based market research company. This company was responsible for the execution and co-ordination of fieldwork in the four selected areas. All activities were co-ordinated by a Project Manager and a Project Leader in the organisation. Fieldwork co-ordinators were appointed in each location to co-ordinate data collection by trained field workers. As minimum requirement, all field workers had to be in possession of a matriculation certificate, or equivalent, and be fully bi- or multilingual. A coding co-ordinator was responsible for the coding of questionnaires using separately trained and supervised coding clerks. An independent team performed fieldwork back-checks. Fieldwork was conducted between 13 August and 3 September 2003. Data quality was ensured during this time by maintaining frequent contact between field workers, MarkData, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria.

Just over 94 percent (94.4 percent) of the anticipated 1567 households were surveyed successfully. The lowest completion rate (82.5 percent) was observed in Danville and the highest in Laudium, where the full complement of households was sampled. Slightly more than 99 percent of sampled households were enumerated in Eersterust and about 97 percent in Soshanguve. The greatest proportion of refusals was noted in Danville (12 percent) followed by Soshanguve (2.4 percent). Correspondingly, Danville also led the way with the largest proportion of non-contact situations (4.5 percent), again followed by Soshanguve with one percent.

The survey was followed in 2004 by in-depth qualitative interviews in the poorest sectors of all four areas. Graduate students of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria completed a total of 62 in-depth interviews. The vast majority of these interviews were conducted in the same vicinities as the households surveyed, but with different respondents. Thirty-eight of the respondents within the randomly selected households were women, and twenty-four were men, with ages ranging from eighteen to eighty-one. The fieldwork was intended to illuminate discourses predominant in all four areas and amongst all racial groups; thus a systematic attempt to engage poor people

representing the different groups in the respective field sites was made. Some of the discourses will be referred to in the sections that follow specifically to explain current perceptions of the poor.

5. Considering the data: general and particular findings

5.1 Glimpses of hardship and vulnerability

Two broad categories of data will be presented here. First, an indication of 'hardship' and 'vulnerability to poverty' is offered in Table 3. These findings will be followed by a more detailed focus on political perceptions in Tables 4, 5 and 6. Hardship can be defined in both subjective and objective terms. People's perspectives regarding their own socio-economic situations offer a lens into subjective estimates of 'lived poverty'. These perceptions need to be supplemented by more objective criteria. In this paper, these criteria pertain only to household income, households dependent on welfare, and numbers of people facing food insecurity and unemployment. Although not comprehensive, they offer what are considered to be an objective indication of people enduring 'hardship'. 'Vulnerability' in the present study is measured only in terms of proportions of households that have no social networks or support structures that could be drawn upon in the event that income-earners die, disappear or become unemployed.

5.1.1 Subjective assessment of poverty

One of the questions in the survey required respondents to categorise their 'household situation'. Notwithstanding the problems associated with such intrusive kinds of inquiry in one-off surveys, and the possibilities of respondents offering expected comments, we found it useful to invite respondents to offer subjective accounts. About 21 percent of all respondents categorised their households as 'poor' and a further 39 percent as 'struggling to make ends meet'. In Soshanguve, more than one-third (35.5 percent) claimed that their households were poor. A larger proportion of white respondents described their households as facing financial struggle than did coloureds and Indians. This is despite the fact that in objective terms, particularly with regard to employment and access to welfare, whites were in a better position than the other groups. Although the objective indicators showed coloureds in Eersterust to be experiencing much hardship, a larger than expected proportion chose to dignify their situations by categorising them as adequate and not struggling. When probed in the course of fieldwork, a far greater number of individuals in similar households admitted contending with enormous financial difficulties. Surveys, as demographers, commonly concede have an inherent tendency to reflect a downplaying of subjective experiences.

Table 3: Hardship and vulnerability, by area

	Danville ("white area")	Eersterust ("coloured area")	Laudium ("Indian area")	Soshanguve ("black area")	Totals
Subjective categorisation: of economic position					
<i>Well off</i>	10.4%	10.5%	18.2%	1.9%	8.1%
<i>Adequate</i>	32.5%	44.0%	48.2%	18.8%	31.3%
<i>Struggling</i>	45%	33.1%	28.5%	42.9%	39%
<i>Poor</i>	12.1%	12.4%	4.8%	35.5%	21.1%
<i>Don't know</i>			0.4%	0.1%	0.5%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Objective indication: of hardship & vulnerability					
<i>Households: income below R2000</i>	23.4%	51.3%	13.1.2%	59.7%	42.4%
<i>Households: enduring food Insecurity</i>	19.1%	20.5%	7.6%	33.1%	23.4%
<i>Households: Dependent on welfare</i>	21.6%	21.6%	17.4%	19.1%	19.7%
<i>Individuals: unemployed and actively seeking work</i>	10.3%	34.3%	12.9%	42.2%	29.2%
<i>Individuals: without any support networks</i>	30.66%	37.83%	35.87%	49.22%	41%

(Source: Poverty and Health Recode File, Department of Sociology, UP, 2003)

5.1.2 Indicators of economic hardship and vulnerability

In the qualitative work, roughly R2000 per month tended to be talked about as the absolute minimum required to sustain a household of about four people. This amount covered payment for rent, water, electricity (or energy resources), food, school fees and other basic necessities. Since South Africa does not have an official or generally accepted poverty line, households in which the accumulated income is less than R2000 per month will be viewed as being very poor. Recently the All Media Products Surveys conducted a national survey in which 'the poor' in mean national terms were assessed as those earning 'less than R1400' (Schlemmer, 2005: 6). It is reasonable in the case of Gauteng, however, to propose a slightly higher minimum household subsistence level because poor communities, locked into the urban economies of South Africa's industrial heartland, are subjected to higher living costs than most other places. This

also correlates well with the Bureau for Market Research's minimum living level (MLL) of R1871 for a household of 4.7 people in 2003 (cited in Landman, 2003: 4). With this figure as the indicator, more than forty percent of all households in the areas surveyed revealed themselves to be enduring economic hardship. Soshanguve and Eersterust have the largest concentration of low-income households as well as the largest numbers of people actively seeking work. It was interesting to note that close to twenty percent of households in all four areas are dependent on state welfare (state pensions, child and disability grants). Compared to most other African states, South Africa's welfare system is well established. Notwithstanding this situation, in the course of fieldwork, many people (once again, coloureds and blacks) claimed to be eligible for welfare benefits but could not find a route around the cumbersome bureaucratic welfare system to access these entitlements.

A clear indicator of hardship is, of course, food insecurity. Apart from Laudium, the Indian area, the other areas revealed sizeable proportions of people who stated that they periodically endured hunger because they could not afford to buy food. Both the survey and the qualitative work reveal that the majority of Pretoria's poor live a socially isolated existence. Few have close friends. The most destitute of people spoke of the absence of friendship networks and of abandonment by close kin. In general, though, if faced with financial crises, most people will rely on themselves and household members only, relatives to some extent, and to a lesser extent, neighbours. Whilst the most vulnerable in these terms was the black area of Soshanguve, very high numbers of respondents in all other areas also make reference to inaccessible or unreliable familial networks of support. Partly in response to this, many people were aligning themselves to organisations and extra-familial groupings.

National estimates of poverty per racial group have been calculated by May, Woolard and Klasen (2000) to be sixty-one percent for blacks, thirty-eight percent for coloureds, five percent for Indians, and one percent for whites. Although such statistics consistently reinforce the idea that Indians and whites are not affected by poverty, the present study reveals large numbers, representing all race groups, categorising their households as 'struggling' and 'poor' and with monthly household incomes below R2000 (See Table 3). This background on experiences of economic hardship of the different racial groups in the Pretoria region helps, in part, to explain an emerging politics and critique of the state that is beginning to reshape and connect discourses prominent in the poor sectors of Pretoria.

5.2 *Grassroots perceptions of state responses to poverty*

Respondents were asked a range of questions in the survey about voting behaviour and whether they were going to be voting in the 2004 general elections. Table 4 shows that whilst many people voted with much optimism in 1999, the political mood has become quite pessimistic. Respondents (repre-

senting all class categories) described the state as ineffective and as not addressing their needs. In fact, most people of all racial groups claimed that since 1994 the government has 'not at all' taken into account their needs. Black respondents in Soshanguve were more aware of the presence of local government representatives than people in the other areas, indicating a stronger link to political processes than is the case with residents in the other areas. Interest in politics was strongest in places where mass-based organisations had previously been active: that is mainly in Soshanguve, to some extent in Eersterust, and less so in Laudium and Danville.

Table 4: Voting and political participation, according to suburbs

	SUBURB				Totals
	Danville ("white area")	Eersterust ("coloured area")	Laudium ("Indian area")	Soshanguve ("black area")	
Percentage that voted in the 1999 local election	62%	59.5%	60.8%	74.1%	66.6%
Percentage that voted in 1999 general election	62.3%	68.4%	60.4%	75.9%	69.1%
Extent to which the state has addressed the needs of people (since 1994)					
<i>A lot</i>	4.2%	5.2%	1.5%	4.9%	4.2%
<i>A little</i>	27.3%	34.2%	24.8%	41.4%	34.3%
<i>Not at all</i>	68.5%	60.6%	73.7%	53.6%	61.5%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Percentage that know who the local government representative is	9.6%	37.8%	21.7%	52.1%	35.6%

(Source: Poverty and Health Recode File, Department of Sociology, UP, 2003)

The survey was followed by qualitative work that sought to engage 'the poor' of all four areas. Thus, the selected vignettes that follow have been taken out of interviews conducted only with people in households that were enduring much hardship and struggle.

5.2.1 Interviews with whites in Danville

When interviewed in 2004, many 'poor whites' in Danville expressed ambivalence on the question of whether or not they were going to vote in 2004. Whilst

for some it was a ‘pointless exercise’, others were being urged to vote to sustain some platform for white concerns. Many of these concerns related to perceptions of ‘reverse-discrimination’ which were reiterated consistently in the interviews. As one person said:

These days it’s mainly about [reverse] racism. The whites do all the work while the others get bigger salaries for doing nothing. It’s happening all over. There are a whole lot of people resigning because the whites are being discriminated against (D7).

Whilst there was much animosity directed at employers and the state for sidelining white workers and denying them privileges, there was also a perception that whites in general do not present a united front, and that poor whites are a distinct and disadvantaged stratum, operating separately from a prosperous white middle class. Thus, there were interesting references to the mingling of the poor with other poor people – and across racial divides. Two people made the following general points:

Some rich people don’t want to make friends. They are in the rich circles and they will want to do things like play tennis. They will tell their children that certain people are not good to join. There are those sorts of things. I think that poorer people have more friendships and can more easily associate with each other and other people (D10, a).

Man, you know. I have so many black male and female friends. I don’t go to white people and ask them for help because they will say, ‘no’. When I go to my black friends for help they will just take out the money if they have any to spare (D3, a).

5.2.2 *Interviews with coloureds in Eersterust*

In Eersterust coloured people expressed considerable frustration with retrenchment and widespread unemployment. There were three dominant discourses, all of which resonated powerfully during the apartheid era as well. The first relates to the futility of voting for institutions that are not committed to the plight of the poor; and the second to the marginal status of coloureds (not white enough in the apartheid era and not black enough in the post-apartheid context) who find themselves consistently excluded from enjoying state resources. A third set of voices claimed that poor coloureds endure immense poverty and that their circumstances were undergoing a process of systematic deterioration. The following quotations from interview material illustrate:

I am not interested in voting. I don’t think the new government will be any different from the old. New is always worse. Everything then will be as is. Everything now is more expensive than in the past. Everything is getting worse. They promised that there will be no more school fees and all the usual things. Look now at our own high school here. You must get everything at your own cost... the school fees are higher, you must buy your own books... yes, everything has become much worse (E9, a).

When de Klerk and Mandela were sitting in the chair, there was work for everyone. Now that Thabo Mbeki is sitting... there’s nothing... When Mandela was elected many people had registered. Now people are not worried about elections. They are not interested... it makes no difference. They keep saying that the youth must go... the youth must go and

vote... what for? There is no work. I am not working and I can see that there are many young people sitting at home in Eersterust... and it is also worse now in Mamelodi (E4, a).

In Eersterust people constantly compared their situations to that of black people in other areas. In the quotation above there is an indication of sympathy and identification with the black youth of Mamelodi who struggle to find work but at the same time strong antagonism is expressed towards the state for discriminating against coloureds. One of the field workers wrote the following after a long house visit:

From fieldnotes: Their ideas on politics are that nothing has changed since 1994 and they predict that the next five years will be even worse. They say that the new government has just taken off where the white government left off. They still feel as if they (coloureds) are being discriminated against, only now by blacks. They say that in the past they, the coloureds, formed a collective front, but today they are more disintegrated and must form a united front based on their common economic difficulties. The whole family but Robert has registered to vote. He says that it won't help to vote. The people must rather take action themselves in improving their lives and not sit around and wait for the government to do it for them (E3).

5.2.3 Interviews with Indians in Laudium

Like the poor living in Eersterust and Danville, the Indian poor in the White Blocks ghetto of Laudium described themselves as marginal both in terms of their separateness from Laudium's middle class, as well as a discriminated group in post-apartheid South Africa. Again, the prevailing sense was that the poor continued to suffer, and that there were no champions of the poor fighting for changes, despite the transition to a democratic system. Whilst here in Laudium there was some identification with the coloureds (in Eersterust) and blacks (in Atteridgeville), there was some sense that blacks are prioritised as state beneficiaries. There were also consistent commentaries about Laudium's wealthy exploiting the less fortunate. Some snippets of the many conversations are recorded below:

I don't think much has changed in the last ten years... Nothing... Nothing has changed... They just made it worse, now we are going to carry on for another five years to suffer... Can I tell you something? First, as Indian people being the minority in the country. First we were the wrong colour of white, now we are the wrong colour of black, and I mean, does it make sense to you? We are in the middle of everything. There is no way forward, so we do feel neglected by government (L11).

So what happens to the Laudium and Eersterust people if it's only for Atteridgeville people? So even the RDP houses is a one-bedroom house, one bedroom with kitchen and toilet and very small, half the size of this. But even that they don't want to give us. So I'm just telling you now how the people do things out there... You don't see any changes, you don't see nobody coming here and saying, you know, we are going to fight for Laudium... or that people in Laudium are not going to suffer anymore. You know the rich exploit the poor and that's what's happening here (L5).

The area that you are in now is poor. It is a poor area... Like all the people here battles and... it's like poor people that's only living here. There's no one rich in this area. We live in the same way as they live there in Atteridgeville. It is just the same (L4).

5.2.4 *Interviews with blacks in Soshanguve*

Although people complained bitterly about the lack of employment and about food insecurity in Soshanguve, some were sympathetic in noting the challenges of the post-apartheid state. Several respondents also spoke positively about having access to water and electricity, though there were many complaints about these services being discontinued because of inability to pay for them. Whilst there is currently much discontent throughout the country as regards the state's delivery of basic services to poor communities, in Soshanguve many people acknowledged the installation of water and electrical services as playing some part in improving their situation. Thus discourses restating that 'the government is trying its best but the problems it confronts are very big' were echoed frequently. At the same time, there was some cynicism about the slow delivery in respect of job creation, infrastructural development and welfare services which led to regular claims that 'things are getting worse'. Although the tendency of poor whites, coloureds and Indians was to argue that their black counterparts were given first preference when it came to jobs, housing and welfare, the fieldwork did not reveal any discourses in Soshanguve that showed poor people to believe that they were especially entitled. On the contrary, poor people in Soshanguve suggested that they too were being systematically overlooked by state agencies because of the area's historically marginal status. Black people in Soshanguve were regarded as being treated less favourably than other blacks in Atteridgeville or Mamelodi (and were subsequently not part of 'the lucky ones'). Statements, often contradictory, such as those below were commonly heard.

The municipality has cut off water supply in our home, saying that the water is not for free and we owe them. If you owe an amount from R200 to R300, you are presented with an option of making payment arrangements, wherein you pay as little as R19 and as much as R110 to settle your debt. And with electricity, you get R20 and R60 worth of volts per month. But since we have electrical appliances such as a fridge, stove and Hi-Fi, they never last for long (S9, s).

Our government is trying hard. It is just that there are many people in our country and that is why not everybody will be catered for. The government is doing all it can and unfortunately some of us are not part of the lucky. It is impossible to create employment for everybody in ten years (S11, s).

During the period of the Boer's government you would find that the jobs are there, poverty similar to this one was not there. Nowadays we are failing by the ANC that we voted for and the ANC that we used to protect. What can we say if things are like this? ... A poverty of a person is a government that is not providing for the people... I have registered already, and yes, we are going to vote for the ANC. But on the other side I am crying (S18, s).

You see the government, if they can, must just change the situation of the people now. It must not look like the past situation, they must make everything better for us... I think it is getting worse, it is worse... The people of Soshanguve are the poorest of the poorest because of government's neglect (S7, s).

The survey revealed some important data on people's sense of 'being enfranchised' and 'having power' to shift poverty and live better lives. People saw themselves as having rights in varying degrees. This was measured by the extent to which they could influence progressive changes in their lives.

Table 5: Perceptions of changing circumstances, according to suburbs

	SUBURB				Totals
	Danville ("white area")	Eersterust ("coloured area")	Laudium ("Indian area")	Soshanguve ("black area")	
Rights/Power to shape your life course?					
<i>No rights</i>	18.1%	43.1%	20.5%	16.7%	22.5%
<i>Few rights</i>	17.7%	12.3%	17.2%	30.6%	22.5%
<i>Some rights</i>	19.1%	15.2%	29.3%	31%	25.4%
<i>Most rights</i>	25.9%	14.9%	24.7%	17.7%	19.9%
<i>All rights</i>	19.1%	14.5%	8.4%	4%	9.7%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Socio-economic circumstances improved or not since 1994?					
<i>Improved</i>	16.2%	14.5%	10.2%	37.8%	24.3%
<i>Stayed the same</i>	20.3%	26.0%	39.1%	35.0%	31.2%
<i>Worsened</i>	63.6%	59.5%	50.8%	27.3%	44.5%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Parents living conditions better or worse than yours?					
<i>Better</i>	64.7%	50.7%	56.1%	58.7%	57.9%
<i>The same</i>	21.7%	16.8%	23.1%	20.7%	20.6%
<i>Worse</i>	13.6%	32.5%	20.8%	20.7%	21.5%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Believe that your children will be better or worse-off than you are?					
<i>Better</i>	36.3%	48.3%	25.6%	59.8%	47.1%
<i>The same</i>	18.1%	13.8%	29.5%	13%	17.1%
<i>Worse</i>	45.6%	37.9%	45%	27.1%	35.9%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

(Source: Poverty and Health Recode File, Department of Sociology, UP, 2003)

Table 5 shows that whites in Danville consider themselves to have more rights than do blacks in Soshanguve. In an era of black empowerment and enfranchisement, these statistics resonate in a strangely familiar way with inequities of the past. A large proportion of whites nonetheless consider their circumstances to be generally deteriorating. This is unsurprising since white workers no longer enjoy the range of privileges that they enjoyed under an apartheid government. Amongst blacks, the mixed fortunes of Soshanguve are clearly apparent: some acknowledged better circumstances, some did not see any real change since 1994, and a substantial section suggested that conditions are getting worse. It is this latter section that expressed deep resentment and animosity towards state officials during field trips. A majority of coloureds and Indians saw their positions as getting worse. As minorities there was ambivalence and insecurity about rights and entitlements in the post-apartheid era. It was surprising to note the high proportions of people in all four areas who similarly claimed that their parents lived better lives in the past than they do at present. This deep pessimism was also extended to people's beliefs about the way their children would live in the years to come. The most pessimistic were whites and Indians, though high proportions of coloureds and blacks were also fairly negative when contemplating the future.

6. Concluding comments

The empirical work reveals that only small proportions of people in the selected racially demarcated areas of Pretoria consider their material circumstances to have improved over the past decade, with surprisingly large numbers of people claiming that their lives have become worse. In general, poverty in these four micro-contexts resembles the larger South African scenario in terms of white and Indian historically demarcated areas having considerably fewer people enduring poverty than coloured and black areas. Recent descriptions of South Africa's class dynamics show the easing of the coincidence of race and class, but also the deepening of poverty for the bottom strata (Seekings and Nattrass, 2004). Although debate persists on the extent of social and economic changes the poor have reaped in post-apartheid society, there is little argument about growing divisions between the better off and the poor of all racial groups. As Butler (2004: 69) puts it: 'There are new "income gaps" in the society, between a multi-racial middle class and the rest of society, and between an African urban and industrial working class and the African unemployed and very poor'. The further dip downwards of poor households is attributed in part to the adoption of middle-of-the-road policies and a series of bureaucratic inefficiencies that have led to the sustaining of high unemployment, inadequate redistributive mechanisms and the reduction of the poor's share in the national income. The proportion of black respondents in Pretoria claiming to be living under more challenging times now than in the past (27 percent) compares quite favourably

with recent Afro-barometer survey results which show that 31 percent of blacks in South Africa perceive their lives as being worse now than during apartheid (Mattes, 2002: 32). These perceptions of deteriorating conditions are accentuated by the starkly visible contrast between those deemed to be benefiting and those effectively excluded from a growing economy: it is the 'sense of inequality' and not just large-scale absolute poverty that is most threatening to the survival of democracy and social solidarity in South Africa (Sen, 2000: 93; Everatt, 2003).

The debate on poverty is often reduced to talking at cross-purposes when lack of clarity surrounds use of the concept 'poverty'. The uncertainty over meanings is most often apparent when analysing state discourses alongside positions articulated within non-government sectors. Whilst much is made of conflicting meanings within these respective sectors, the range of meanings that poverty holds in the everyday language of the poor is not interrogated with the same vigour. Even amongst the very poor, poverty is not simply about physiological survival but about living meaningful social existence: this necessitates simultaneously political enfranchisement, socio-economic rights and the power to actively intervene in shaping one's future (Chambers, 1988). As Harrison (2002: 83) states: '[O]ne cannot separate political and economic rights, therefore it makes no sense to celebrate a process of political opening which makes no difference to the material well-being of the masses... This is not just a question of understanding democratisation as "bread and butter" issues; it is also a question of keeping an eye focussed on the scope of democratisation, that is the boundaries of state action and popular influence over the latter'. Against the background of a highly acclaimed constitution it was startling to note the very small proportions of all racial groups who acknowledged the possession of 'rights' and the many conversations in the field in which people argued that they felt generally excluded and disempowered.

Ironically, more blacks saw themselves as being without rights and power than whites. It was also noteworthy that these responses were recorded on the brink of a general election. The strong critique of the state's disregard for the poor can be interpreted as being particularly heightened because of the fervour of election time. As political rituals, elections attempt to reinforce or engage national traditions and bonds but can also facilitate rituals of protest as people secure opportunities to offer complaints, make claims and express dissent (Baringhorst, 2001: 300). In January 2006, on the eve of the national municipal elections, violent demonstrations erupted in Soshanguve. The anger was not simply about a lack of service delivery but because active attempts over a ten-year period to negotiate with the state for delivery had borne no positive results. Thus, the popular claim that democratic transition and the acquisition of political rights is a necessary condition for the promotion of socio-economic rights does not resonate in the poor enclaves of Pretoria's communities. For the poor, dichotomised understandings of rights (as 'first' and 'second' gener-

ation) do not really exist. Acknowledgement that poverty is not shifting and that attempts to influence state structures through democratic processes has not been entirely fruitful led to claims that 'rights' in general have not yet been attained. Whilst such feelings were strongly expressed in Soshanguve, they were also expressed in the other areas where 'rights' and 'power' to shape personal destinies were regarded as both ambiguous and fluid.

There are two points regarding the 'voice' of the urban poor that should be added here: the first concerns poor people's turn to local organisations that have greater legitimacy than popular organisations of the past, and the second suggests possibilities of alliances between poor people, despite differing racial identities, in pursuance of common interests. With regard to the first point, criticisms were directed not only against the state but also against civil society organisations that have either disappeared, remained ineffective or no longer speak for the poor within the different communities. Poor people's references to 'nobody is fighting for us' and 'the people must take action themselves' highlights what Friedman (2002) describes as one of the characteristics of the current political scenario, which is the pro-poor groups' lack of a base among the poor. He states: 'the fact that the poor remain without effective political representation ensures that political support for fighting poverty is weakened. The lack of a voice for the poor also means that even where political support is available for fighting poverty, the policies misread the needs of the poor and are therefore ineffective' (Friedman, 2002: 4). The survey revealed that the vast majority of people in all four areas align themselves to a wide range of organisations. A listing of the most important of these organisations shows 310 different groups to which people affiliate. Few of these groups are political in nature; most ensure that individuals are not completely isolated but linked (to some extent) to social structures and networks. Despite the limited incorporation of the very poor into market and mainstream activities, much agency is reflected in the way people seek inspiration from and connectedness to these various local groupings. A critical element in addressing poverty and mobilising around the key concerns of the poor would be to develop substantive understandings of these structures to which people are attaching themselves and through which they exchange information, ideas and thinking about their situations and how they could and ought to be addressed.

In the current era of global connectivity much is being written about strategies and alliances that connect struggling poor communities within and across national boundaries. As Patel et al., (2001) state: 'Partnerships and alliances need to be established, nurtured and expanded so that voices, concerns and needs and aspirations of micro-grassroots communities are heard, listened to and ... Become part of the choices that are made by policy makers wherever they are'. On this point of building alliances, it was intriguing to note in assessing the discourses that many of the grievances of Pretoria's urban poor were articulated in very similar language. Whilst different insecurities and

fears of disempowerment temper the discourses, a more widespread pessimism regarding the state's disregard for the poor is serving to connect the poor across geographical location and social and historical contexts. In a recent legal battle in Pretoria, both black and white inhabitants of an inner-city block of flats came together to resist the city authority's attempts to forcibly relocate them to the outskirts of Soshanguve (Neocosmos & Naidoo, 2004). This, together with other evidence of spontaneous and grassroots organisation in the vicinity of the city, suggests that it is not impossible to imagine adversaries in the past and competitors for state resources, coming together to explore spaces for engagement and common struggle. The glimpses of sympathy and identification with the poor of 'other' communities or racial groups represent starting points of larger networks of alliance bringing together previously segregated sectors of Pretoria's urban poor in common struggles against poverty and inequality.

Notes

1. Notwithstanding political transformation, the use of racial classifications is still common practice in South African social science research and used frequently for the purposes of comparative analysis. Consequently, this paper makes reference to 'whites', 'coloureds', 'Indians' and 'blacks' as the four primary racial categories.
2. The study was made possible by a generous three-year grant (2002-2004) from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, New York.
3. As an indicator of inequality, the Gini-coefficient measures absolute equality as 0 and absolute inequality as 1.

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