

South Africa: social mobility for a few?

By **Milfrid Tonheim and Frank Matose**

■ Executive summary

Many obstacles stand in the way of young South Africans from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited social networks and skills to afford them opportunities in a shrinking labour market. There has been upward social mobility of a “privileged” black minority into the middle and upper classes since 1994, but this is not the experience of the black majority. The state needs to re-strategise its educational interventions to ensure the quality of educational outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The need to create jobs cannot be overstressed. Opportunities that give rise to entrepreneurial skill development also need to be made available. Because creating jobs is the main solution, the international community could contribute through increased trade with South Africa. Donor countries could also contribute by supporting programmes that provide out-of-school youth with a second chance to complete their education, requesting a social cohesion component in educational programmes that receive financial support, and ensuring impact evaluations of such programmes.

Introduction

This report explores intergenerational social mobility in South Africa since the demise of apartheid, focusing particularly on the black African majority. Intergenerational social mobility is defined as the situation in which the socioeconomic status of a person is independent of his/her starting conditions such as parental or family background. The question we pose is whether young black South Africans experience upward mobility or inherit the social status of their parents. For the purposes of this study we focus on educational and occupational mobility. The analysis is based on a review of existing studies and literature on social mobility in South Africa, as well as some qualitative interviews with key informants and members of four purposively selected families who reside in Cape Town’s largest township, Khayelitsha. Interviews were conducted with parents, children and, in one instance, a grandchild. Statistical material was mainly collected from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the government statistical bureau.

Educational attainment

The enrolment rate at primary schools in South Africa has increased substantially since 1994: currently, about 98% of children are completing their basic schooling. The situation

is less impressive when looking at post-primary education. Individuals aged 20 years and older who have attained high school and tertiary education have slowly but steadily increased, reaching 27.4% and 11.5%, respectively, in 2011 (Stats SA, 2011). However, the fraction of matriculants that continues on to tertiary education has declined from 1994 to 2010 (Branson & Leibbrandt, 2013: 9). Racial differences are evident: only 3.5% of black Africans aged 18-29 years attended university in 2011, compared to 20% of whites. While representing about 80% of the population, black Africans constitute 57% of all university students in the entire country (Stats SA, 2011). Levels of educational attainment are similar for males and females: 9.5 years for both sexes in 2010 (Branson & Leibbrandt, 2013: 8).

Most of the children interviewed had moved upward in educational attainment compared to their parents. At least one parent in each family had completed primary school, while their children had completed high school (except one). The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) finds that the number of years of education has increased from an average of three years for grandparents, to between five and six years for parents, and ten years for the current generation (Girdwood & Leibbrandt, 2009: 4). Downward educational mobility was only found in one family in the

case study – the one with the highest-educated parents. Our case study indicates that girls attain higher levels of education than their boy siblings. One reason appears to be that boys who have reached a certain age are expected to financially contribute to the family household if need be. None of the interviewed children is currently studying. The two youngest interviewees wished to continue their studies, but were currently unable to due to economic constraints and poor grades. Among the rest, one had dropped out of college, one had dropped out of university, and one had completed a two-year college programme in a non-recognised college and therefore had not acquired a valid diploma.

The interviewees see lack of funding as the main obstacle to attaining higher education for young South Africans from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, the last national household survey in South Africa revealed that almost two-thirds of children and youth cited lack of funding as the main reason for not attending school, despite a sharp increase in no-fee schools over the past few years. Registration fees (which have to be paid up front at high schools and tertiary educational institutions), so-called “fund raising”, transport, and other education-related expenses continue to be obstacles for many disadvantaged South African families.

Mayer et al. (2011: 25) maintain that only “a small proportion (about 10%) of young people have access to high quality public school education, mainly in former white schools, where they can acquire high-level cognitive skills”, while the other 90% attend schools that produce students with weak cognitive skills. It is documented that South African primary school learners perform poorly relative to their peers in other countries (Mayer et al., 2011: 24). The quality of the schooling that black Africans have access to leaves many in a situation in which they are not eligible for a number of tertiary options, such as attending university. Interviewees highlight aspects like the inadequacy of teachers’ training, high teacher-learner ratios, poor infrastructure and school resources, and teacher absence as influencing the quality of educational institutions. Research shows the clear advantage of attending a school whose students are, on average, from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. A recent study shows that students’ performance in more than half of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries is more strongly influenced by the average socioeconomic status of the parents of other students in the same school than by the socioeconomic status of these students’ own parents (Causa & Johansson, 2009). The choice of school, therefore, becomes crucial. However, the Khayelitsha case study shows that children often make autonomous decisions on where to apply without guidance from either parents or teachers. It may be argued that better guidance increases the chances of upward social mobility.

Employment

The South African economy is experiencing a serious mismatch between the number of new labour market entrants and the number of new jobs created. Unemployment officially reached 24.9% in 2012 (Stats SA, 2013a). This rate only includes those who have taken active steps to look for work or start some form of self-employment in the four weeks prior to the Stats SA survey. When those who have not – the supposedly discouraged long-term unemployed – are included, the unemployment rate rises to 40.3%. Youth, in South Africa defined as 14-35 years, is particularly hit by unemployment, constituting about 70% of all unemployed (Mayer et al., 2011: 17). Women are 1.2 times more likely to be unemployed than men (Stats SA, 2012). By the end of 2012 the female unemployment rate was 27.4%, while male unemployment was 22.9% (Stats SA, 2013b). There is also a distinct concentration of unemployment among black Africans. The high rate of unemployed blacks may relate to racial discrimination; perceptions of differences in formal qualifications not necessarily linked to the individual’s race, but rather to the educational institutions he/she attended; or to a lack of educational guidance and a mismatch between fields of study and the types of skills that are needed by employers.

There is an increasing demand for highly skilled labour in South Africa’s economy. Linked to rising numbers of matriculants, the returns of secondary education have flattened. Currently, a matriculation certificate is no longer a ticket to obtaining a job, but is still important for climbing up the socioeconomic ladder. Tertiary qualifications continue to enhance access to the labour market and increase the chances of starting one’s career at a higher income level. However, unemployment is also witnessed among university graduates. More than 60% of young people who have recently left training and education are unemployed for more than a year before securing their first job (Mayer et al., 2011: 21). These young job-seekers are particularly vulnerable, because they are not entitled to unemployment benefits.

Gaining employment in South Africa is also highly dependent on social networks. The Khayelitsha/Mitchell’s Plain survey (KIDS) shows that about two-thirds of participants had obtained their first job through friends and family (Seekings, 2005: 284). Thus, individuals with an employed social network have better access to employment opportunities than individuals from the poorest segment of the population, who very often lack the social capital of employed family members. Place of residence also appears to have an impact on employment opportunities, not least due to long distances that need to be travelled to jobs and unreliable means of transportation, but also because certain areas are associated with a criminal and violent social environment.

Household interviews in Khayelitsha provided a mixed picture of the attainment of occupational mobility across generations. Interviewed parents had low-income jobs as

domestic workers or general workers, with the exception of one parent who had a middle-income job and one who was long-term unemployed. Unemployment is more prominent among the younger generations: three out of seven of the children were without any income, while two others had contract-based or casual jobs. The NIDS survey supports the finding that occupational mobility across generations is limited. In fact, there is an average of 21% downward intergenerational occupational mobility (Girdwood & Leibbrandt, 2009: 12).

Social mobility trends since apartheid

Post-1994, democratic South Africa inherited huge inequalities in poverty, education, health and access to basic infrastructure such as safe water, sanitation and housing. The legacy of apartheid is still apparent and the unequal distribution of poverty continues to have a racial undertone. Statistics from 2009 show that black Africans constitute 93.8% of those living in poverty, while coloureds (people of mixed-race descent), Indians/Asians and whites shared the remaining 6.2% (Stats SA, 2009). Inequality is also apparent in income disparities. Thus, interracial inequality still remains high 19 years after the end of apartheid. Gender difference is also apparent, with the female poverty rate (53.6%) being 7.4% higher than that of males (46.2%) (Stats SA, 2009).

Nevertheless, South Africa has seen an important upward surge in social mobility into the middle and upper classes since 1994, notably of black Africans.¹ By 2000 the middle class was nearly half black, compared to 29% in 1994 (García-Rivero, 2006: 66). Within this category, those who were able to take advantage of the new opportunities brought by the democratic transition appear to come from relatively privileged backgrounds: the pace of upward mobility apparent among the “privileged” black minority is far from the reality encountered by the black majority. Social mobility among the poorest segments of the South African population is very limited and the few who are able to move up the socioeconomic ladder only do so at a modest pace. There are also indications of downward mobility among the less privileged. The KIDS survey showed a significant degree of downward intergenerational mobility among residents in Khayelitsha and Mitchell’s Plain (Ziervogel & Crankshaw, 2009: 247-48). Downward social mobility is also visible among the poorer group of white South Africans, due to the termination of the social advantages and protection they enjoyed under the apartheid regime.

Concluding remarks

With half of its population still living in poverty, it may be argued that South Africa has failed to improve the living

conditions of large segments of its population, not because of lack of resources, but due to unequal distribution of these resources. Recent developments, however, indicate that interracial inequality, although still high, is slowly diminishing (Leibbrandt et al., 2010: 9). Intra-racial inequality, on the other hand, is on the increase. The policies of affirmative action and black economic empowerment have largely benefitted a few, namely those in the emerging African elite and middle class who experienced rapid upward mobility, including substantial occupational leaps within a short period (Schlemmer, 2005). New policies should address the problem of intra-racial inequality and aim particularly at facilitating the social mobility of those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds rather than focusing solely on redistribution *between* racial population groups.

At the same time, access to education, particularly primary schooling, has clearly improved since 1994, and intergenerational educational mobility is consequently evident. The expansion of free schooling is one important change in the educational system that can be credited for this development. The number of learners who attend such schools increased sharply over the past few years, from 0.7% in 2002 to 55.6% in 2011. Relatively large spending on education and funding availability for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter tertiary institutions and universities may also have assisted this mobility. Nonetheless, as noted above, the returns on education are limited, particularly for those without tertiary education. Educational returns are also linked to the quality of education received, and attending schools of inferior quality clearly limits future opportunities of those living in disadvantaged and poor areas.

South Africa is currently reaping the fruits of the apartheid educational policies, which for decades denied or limited the educational opportunities of large segments of the population. However, despite improvement potentials with regards to education, it is lack of employment opportunities that stands out as the major obstacle to intergenerational social mobility. Given a low-growth economy and high unemployment, it is not surprising that, overall, people in disadvantaged groups have not experienced much upward social mobility. The recent proliferation of service-delivery protests and protests by frustrated unemployed or poorly paid workers, which have been characterised by violence and anger over the poor living conditions of the majority of South Africans, presents worrying warning signs of the potential consequences of a failed economic emancipation process.

¹ It should be noted that the racial composition of the upper and middle classes depends on the class definitions used. See, for instance, Visagie & Posel (2011) and Visagie (2011).

Recommendations

To the government of South Africa:

- Ensure equal access to high-quality schools irrespective of where people live. Implement incentives to attract experienced teachers to disadvantaged areas to improve the quality of education.
- Design ways of managing diversity through mixing children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with others from better-off social circumstances in order to improve the school performance of disadvantaged students.
- Review the practice of the upfront payment of high registration fees and create some welfare means to assist disadvantaged students to get past this system.
- Focus government policies on job creation and fair access to employment. The South African Jobs Fund is currently only assisting with limited and short-term funding interventions, while many entrepreneurial development projects need a long-term reduction of risk barriers for them to succeed. Opportunities for job creation support must be publicised and made accessible to the general public.
- Support skills development, career guidance and entrepreneurial capacity development at tertiary colleges to enable job-seekers to match the needs of the labour market and create their own opportunities. Emphasis on the value of artisanal skills should be included in the school curriculum to encourage students to look beyond white-collar jobs only.
- Create greater incentives for employers to hire young people, particularly first-time job-seekers. One important measure is to increase apprenticeships in both the public and private sector. Parallel to this, the government must put in place incentives that make apprenticeship programmes attractive to the private sector.
- The criteria for receiving benefits from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) should be reviewed. Currently only about 10% of the unemployed receive UIF benefits.
- Novel approaches to bridging social segregation along racial and class lines need to be developed to improve social cohesion. New forms of housing that directly address this concern would facilitate the achievement of equality in education and enhance prospects for upward mobility.

To donor countries and international institutions:

- Support or initiate programmes that provide out-of-school youth with a second chance to complete their education and assist students to continue on to tertiary educational institutions.
- Request a social cohesion component in educational programmes that receive financial support from donors.
- Ensure more critical impact evaluations of support given to, for instance, teachers' training programmes.
- Initiate artisanal training exchange programmes with tertiary institutions in donor countries.
- Increase trade with South Africa so as to contribute to employment creation and economic growth.

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