Social and Demographic Issues in South Africa

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Key Points

- Significant internal migration is a feature of South Africa and presents challenges for the government.

- Unemployment is around 26 per cent and youth unemployment is considerably higher, at around 50 per cent.

- The income disparity between ethnicities has narrowed with the emergence of the Black middle class. At the same time, however, income disparities among Black South Africans have increased.

- Although access education has improved in general, the quality of primary and secondary education continues to be of concern.

- The increasing prevalence of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a challenge, but life expectancy for those infected has actually increased.

Summary

The end of apartheid in 1994 was met with great celebration with South Africans looking optimistically to the future. During the 2000s, the government spent more each year on housing, services, health and education with the understanding that the substantial challenges confronting the country would compound if they were not addressed. Fast forward to 2016 and the optimistic sentiment appears to have been dampened by the numerous social, political and economic issues facing the country today.
Unemployment remains persistently and stubbornly high at an official rate of 26.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2016. It is even worse for the country’s youth cohort (15-24 year-olds), who must contend with a youth unemployment rate of 50.1 per cent. Subsequently, many people have migrated internally in search of the better opportunities available in the more populous provinces of Gauteng and Western Cape. This phenomenon can challenge the ability of government authorities to provide adequate services to fast-growing areas, but the high-density nature of urban living can help to make the provision of services more efficient. On the other hand, the threats of economic stagnation and stiff competition for finite government resources continue to prevail in those regions that are losing residents.

People also migrate to gain access to the perceived higher quality education available in the urban centres. Although access to education has improved over the past two decades, many students continue to receive a substandard quality of education while others fail to complete grade 12. The government recognises the importance of education in improving the living standards of its citizens, but many obstacles remain to the provision of high-quality education to all South Africans, including the limited funding that is available for better school infrastructure and teacher training.

The health of South Africans is also of concern, although positive trends are evident, such as the increase in life expectancy even for those infected by HIV. This increased life expectancy exists despite the rate of HIV prevalence increasing to 11.2 per cent in 2015 – an increase that could be caused by a possibly complacent attitude towards the risks of HIV in light of the evidently successful mass rollout of the anti-retro viral (ARV) medication programme. The challenges highlighted above are just some issues that the government – sometimes with varying degrees of success – is attempting to address.

**Analysis**

The challenges associated with internal migration, unemployment, uneven wealth distribution and demand for health and education services all pressure the government for a suitable response. That response is naturally constrained by other considerations, such as finite fiscal resources and endemic poverty. This paper examines these issues, highlights the level of government awareness of those issues and comments on the success of the responses to them.

**Population Changes and Internal Migration**

The population of South Africa is distributed unevenly over the country’s nine provinces, with each province having experienced various population changes over time, as indicated in the graph below. According to the [2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates](https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications) published by Statistics South Africa, the country’s total population stood at 55.6 million, which grew by over 14 million between 1996 and 2015, and is currently growing at around 1.3 per cent annually.

Some 80.2 per cent of South Africans identify as Black, 8.4 per cent as White, 8.8 per cent as Coloured and 2.5 per cent as Indian/Asian. This multiethnic population is distributed
unevenly across the nine provinces. Black South Africans constitute the majority population in all but one province, Western Cape, which is home to the highest concentration of Coloured South Africans and the second-highest concentration of White South Africans. Whites are most concentrated in the smallest and most populous province of Gauteng, although Black South Africans are still the largest ethnic group by a considerable margin. Gauteng also has the second-largest Indian population after KwaZulu-Natal province.

Western Cape is home to the largest number and second-highest percentage of Afrikaans speakers, where it is spoken by 49.7 per cent of the population as a first language. Only Northern Cape has a greater percentage of speakers of the third most commonly-spoken of the eleven official languages in South Africa. Zulu (11.6 million speakers) and Xhosa (8.15 million speakers) are the two most widely-spoken languages. English, in fourth place, also fills the role of a lingua franca.

Gauteng is home to approximately 24 per cent of the country’s population, or 13.2 million people, based on 2015 mid-year estimates. The province is the dominant economic hub of South Africa and is the location of Johannesburg — the country’s largest city, and Pretoria, the administrative capital. The lure of employment and educational opportunities has attracted large numbers of internal migrants, as well as many from abroad. Gauteng has experienced substantial population growth since 1996, when the population was less than
eight million. More than nine per cent of Gauteng residents were not born in South Africa, more than double the national average of 4.4 per cent. The lure of calling Gauteng home is no mystery considering that it produces 33.8 per cent of South Africa’s total gross domestic product and, in 2013, experienced the greatest GDP growth of all provinces: 2.6 per cent.

Provinces such as Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (the second-most populous and home to 19.9 per cent of South Africans), have also experienced significant population increases over the 1996-2015 period. These increases stand in contrast to the marginal population growth experienced by Northern Cape and Free State. Statistics South Africa expects Eastern Cape and Limpopo to experience out-migration over the 2011-16 period estimated at 243,118 and 303,151, respectively. Those outward movements are forecast by the end of this year to result in net population losses for the two provinces of 53,143 and 47,357 residents. On the other hand, Gauteng is expected to receive 1,169,837 migrants from other provinces (a net gain of 543,109 people), and Western Cape will take in an estimated 350,569 new residents, a net gain of 156,964. Those provinces experiencing out-migration face sustained low population growth and the challenges of reduced economic growth and higher unemployment, as well as increased competition with more populous provinces for government services.

On the other hand, the influx of people to already heavily-populated urban centres such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, presents challenges as well as opportunities. In response to population growth, the central and provincial governments must provide roads, schools, sewage systems, health facilities, policing, electricity and adequate waste disposal systems to ameliorate the negative consequences that can result from increased migration to high-density township areas with poor infrastructure: crime, high under- and unemployment, the potential increased spread of disease and environmental damage. The provision of such services by the country’s governments has been moderately successful, but the sheer increase in the number of residents in such poorly resourced areas can dilute those efforts. To the government’s advantage – it must be noted – is the greater efficiency that delivering services to densely populated urban areas can offer. The prospect of subsequent savings – if realised – raises the possibility of investing funds into other important areas that will help to improve living standards.

**Employment and Wealth**

Securing employment is a major concern, with the persistently high unemployment rate of around 26 per cent casting a long shadow on the future prospects of many South Africans. Youth unemployment is even higher at around 50 per cent. Simply put, population growth has seen the labour force outgrow job creation while limited or inadequate training and education places many higher skilled jobs out of reach. Growth in the manufacturing sector has been stagnant; jobs in agriculture have been affected by drought, increased mechanisation and the introduction of the minimum wage in 2013; and unskilled and semi-skilled mining jobs have been lost in light of the fall in commodity prices and constraints associated with inadequate infrastructure and reliable energy supplies ("load shedding"). Only the tertiary services sector has added jobs, but not enough to meet jobseeker demand.
South Africa has progressed along the demographic transition of high fertility and mortality rates being replaced by much lower rates. The median age of South Africans has subsequently increased from 18 to 25 years over the past three decades and will continue to rise as the fertility rate falls, as is evident when comparing the 6.4 live births per woman in the 1950s to the figure of 2.4 in 2005-10. The inequalities that are the legacy of apartheid mean that this transition has occurred without many of the assumed economic and social benefits (the demographic dividend). It is expected that as the dependency ratio of young and old people relative to the labour force decreases, there is a prospect for greater workplace participation as people are freed from caring for those dependents. In theory, this results in an increase in per capita income and, thus, an increased standard of living. The problem for South Africa in reaping the benefits of that transition is the acute shortage of jobs compared to the size of the workforce. This relates in part to levels of education and training.

Income inequality is another marked feature in South Africa. The country consistently ranks poorly on the Gini coefficient scale – a key measure of income equality. Since the end of apartheid, the income gap between ethnicities has narrowed, but a widening has actually occurred between Black South Africans. The growth of the Black middle class from 300,000 persons in 1993 to three million in 2012 sees this group earning significantly more and enjoying a higher standard of living than millions of their less skilled, under- and unemployed counterparts. For millions of non-middle class Black South Africans, the unskilled labour that they offer is, unfortunately, in oversupply. The government is, accordingly, seeking to improve the quality of and access to education, especially considering that the fastest-growing sector of the economy – the tertiary, or services, sector – requires educated and skilled employees. Education and improved employment prospects can also work to reduce poverty-driven crime, which is a considerable burden on the social fabric of the Rainbow Nation.

**Education**

Access to education for Black South Africans has improved greatly since the end of apartheid. The number of South Africans with no formal education fell from 16 per cent in 2001 to seven per cent in 2011, while overall enrolment has increased.

Education levels vary between provinces. For example, 17.3 per cent of persons aged 20 and above in Limpopo have no education, compared to the national average of 8.6 per cent, or 2.7 per cent in Western Cape. There are also evident disparities when it comes to educational attainment by ethnicity. Black South Africans have the highest percentage of persons with no schooling, at eight per cent, compared with 0.8 per cent of White South Africans. For tertiary education, 1.6 per cent of Black South Africans, 1.5 per cent of Coloured, six per cent of Indian/Asian and eight per cent of White South Africans had attained Bachelor’s degrees. Of the students who completed Grade Nine – the earliest age at which one can legally leave school in South Africa – 54.1 per cent went on to complete Grade 12. Of those, 78.9 per cent were White and 49.3 per cent were Black.

It is worthy of mention that persons living in an urban environment generally obtain a higher level of education than those living in a traditional or rural setting. Despite any number of
challenges, this can be due to the potentially greater efficiency of allocating educational resources in densely-populated urban environments, as well as the difficulty of attracting teaching staff to remote areas and the longer distances that students must travel to attend school in remote or rural settings.

The government is acutely aware of the impact that inadequate education has on economic development and on the role of education in reducing poverty and improving living standards. The major education-related challenge is to increase the number of people completing secondary, vocational and tertiary education, while also improving the quality of that education. A 2005-10 education policy research study by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, ranked the quality of education in South Africa as tenth and eighth for literacy and numeracy, respectively, when compared with 15 other regional African states. The government has subsequently embarked on a programme of teacher training, the replacement of substandard school infrastructure and the provision of after school support programmes. Education spending has increased steadily from 92.1 billion ($8.4 billion) rand a decade ago to R228.8 billion ($20.7 billion) in 2016. Despite the challenges of underinvestment and quality that remain, positive measures to improve educational outcomes have been taken.

**The State of Health**

Communicable diseases such as hepatitis, human immunodeficiency disease (HIV) and tuberculosis, as well as the effects of non-communicable diseases associated with tobacco and alcohol abuse, poor diet and a lack of physical activity all threaten the health of many South Africans. The South African Department of Health states that, in seeking to ensure a long and healthy life for all South Africans, it has adopted four strategic goals: to increase life expectancy, decrease maternal and child mortality, combat HIV/AIDS and to decrease the burden of tuberculosis, in addition to strengthening health-system effectiveness.

HIV is a continued concern given the burden that the disease places on families, the national health system and national productivity. The statistics relating to HIV/AIDS are a mixed bag. HIV prevalence in South Africa increased from 8.8 per cent of the population in 2002 to 11.2 per cent in 2015. This represents 6.19 million South Africans living with the disease – the highest number in any country worldwide. Among young people aged 15-24 years, the prevalence of HIV has fortunately declined. Even despite an increase in HIV infection among the overall population, average life expectancy has increased from 54.6 years in 2002 to 62.5 years in 2015. In fact, life expectancy at birth for persons with HIV increased from 53.4 to 61.2 years between 2002 and 2014. Deaths caused by AIDS have decreased from 44.6% in 2002 to 30.5% in 2015.

The government states that the increase in life expectancy cited above demonstrates drops in the infant mortality rate and AIDS-related deaths. The infant mortality rate has fallen from 51.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2002 to 34.4 in 2015. The Health Department claims that the delivery of antiretroviral medication to HIV-affected citizens is among the factors contributing to a higher life expectancy. South Africa has the largest antiretroviral (ARV) treatment programme in the world with millions being treated since its implementation in 2003. Despite life expectancy for people with HIV increasing since the rollout of the mass
ARV programme, the incidence of infection has increased as people have perhaps become more complacent. This is a major challenge for the government due to the cost of providing medication to an increasing number of HIV-infected patients and also the subsequent economic cost to productivity. Another concern will be the likely spike in the number of AIDS-related deaths over the coming decade because antiretroviral medication is ultimately only able to buy so much time for those infected with the virus.

The more recent government responses to the country’s health challenges have been successful to a large extent and continue to progress with the announcement of new programmes such as the rollout of the National Health Insurance (NHI) programme, set to be phased in over 14 years and which is to provide universal health cover. An obvious challenge to this programme is the cost the budget should economic growth remain stagnant. An additional programme aimed at reducing the HIV infection rate is the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission Programme. Another is the HIV Counselling and Testing Campaign which seeks to provide early detection of HIV, a programme deemed by the government to be a success. Government spending on health in the annual state budget has increased year-on-year over the past decade from R54.5 billion ($4.9 billion) in 2006 to R168.4 billion ($15.2 billion) in 2016. The commitment to health, despite the fiscal constraints of the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis and the downturn in commodity prices, indicates the importance placed by the government on improving the health of South Africans.

Despite the increased spending, however, medical workers continue to be drawn to private sector jobs, lured by the prospect of better pay. Other challenges that will need to be addressed relate to the heavy workload associated with working in the public health system and the lack of incentive to work in remote areas.

**Conclusion**

Like many other countries, South Africa is experiencing significant social and demographic challenges that must be overcome if the cycle of poor health, substandard education, high unemployment and poverty is to be broken. The legacy of apartheid means, of course, that, in South Africa, the severity and scale of those challenges are frequently amplified. Certain factors, such as commodity prices and the rate of global economic recovery are simply outside Pretoria’s control, but many others can be managed and the South African Government is both well aware of them and committed to making improvements. The commitments to spending on health and education are positive and, combined with the provision of adequate infrastructure, will help to raise living standards and improve educational, health and employment outcomes for many more South Africans.

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