
The reason why service delivery successes in South Africa don't always translate into community satisfaction

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Despite the refrain to the contrary, living standards in South Africa today are much higher than at any point in the history of the country. Much of the credit for this must go to the service delivery efforts of the government, which, again contrary to mainstream opinion, have been much more successful than is commonly understood. Yet, despite the successes, protest levels are up and popular confidence in the future has fallen. In this piece, I try to explain the apparent contradiction.

When we first began to make the argument about service delivery success, it was met with incredulity. Even within the government, we found that the idea of service delivery success was received with astonishment. But the data on South Africa's housing, water, and electricity delivery efforts of the post-1994 era is unambiguous in telling a very different story from the near ubiquitous idea of "service delivery failure".

In 1996, 5.8 million families lived in a formal house. By 2016, that number had increased to 13.4 million or by 131%. On average, over the past two decades, more than 1 000 families have moved into a formal house every day – while just over 100 moved into a shack. The proportion of families in a formal house increased from 64% in 1996 to 79% in 2016 – more remarkable for the fact that the number of families increased from 9.0 million in 1996 to 16.9 million in 2016.

Also, in 1996 (there was a census that year, so we have a good base of data to work from) there were 7.2 million families with access to clean piped water. By 2016, that number had more than doubled to 15.2 million. The number of families with clean water in their own homes (as distinct from a nearby tap) increased from 4.0 million in 1996 to 7.5 million in 2016. The proportion of families with piped water increased from 80% in 1996 to 90% in 2016.

In 1996, 5.2 million families used electricity for lighting. By 2016, that number had increased by 10.1 million to 15.3 million or by 192%. Very few emerging markets come close to competing with these numbers. The proportion of families with electric lighting increased from 58% to 90%. The proportion cooking with electricity increased from 47% to 83%.

The improvement in living standards underpinned by service delivery successes is reflected by data on Living Standards Measures (LSMs). LSMs group people by their standard of living into one of ten categories. Category 1 is the lowest and Category 10 is the highest. Our analysis of LSM data shows that, since 2001, the proportion of South Africans in the lowest three LSM categories has fallen from almost 40% to just 10%.

And yet, for all the successes achieved, protest levels are up and opinion polls have turned sharply against the government as the South African scenario has darkened.

Protest data in South Africa is disputed, but that should not prevent analysts from seeking to identify broad protest trends within the country. Information received from the police suggests that the number of violent protests in the country has at least doubled over more than a decade. Opinion poll data shows that the proportion of people confident about South Africa's future has slipped by around 40 percentage points over the past decade and a half.

It seems incongruous that both sets of trends – remarkable delivery successes and steep falls in popular confidence – could be true for the same country over the same era. But it is in explaining that apparent incongruity that one of the most helpful keys to unlocking what is currently happening in South Africa is found.

We have always conceded, as one must, that many houses built by the state are shoddy affairs, that water services are often unreliable (and at times even dangerous to consume), and that electricity interruptions, especially in poor communities, are too common. Yet, for all those flaws, the sheer scale of delivery, when weighed against the desperate circumstances of so many people at the time of South Africa's political transition, means that substantive improvements in living standards have occurred.

Somewhat counterintuitively, however, rising living standards are politically dangerous. The risk lies in rising expectations. Readers will recall from my previous contribution to this forum that, at 40%, South Africa displays some of the lowest levels of labour market absorption among emerging markets. The key to the incongruity is this: South Africa achieved considerable improvements in living standards after 1994 – improvements that would rival those of a host of emerging markets. Yet, levels of economic participation (reflected by the labour market absorption rate) remained uniquely low. The tension between the expectations being created on the back of service delivery successes, and the inability of many families to meet those expectations because of their low levels of formal economic participation, created a crisis of rising expectations. It is this crisis that explains rising protest levels and declining levels of confidence – a more complex diagnosis than the refrain that “service delivery has failed”.

It follows that analysts should distinguish between the “trigger” behind a protest action and the deeper causal factors behind South Africa's protest trends. The trigger might be a broken water pump, but the reason why scores of communities rise up in protest against the state every month sits in the frustration of unmet expectations.

The upshot is that, without much higher levels of economic inclusion through higher levels of investment-driven economic growth, it will not be possible to maintain historical levels of service delivery or to place more families in a position to take a leading role in improving their own lives. South Africa's experience is turning out to be that development policy must ensure both that living standards improve and that people are at the same time positioned to take the next steps up the living standards ladder through their own hard work and entrepreneurship. Simply achieving the former is no guarantee of political or social stability – in fact, quite the opposite is turning out to be true.