

How do the poor survive?

Through conducting surveys in four townships **Mandla Seleokane** assesses the poor's means of survival and speculates on whether certain kinds of support are counterproductive.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal undertook a study on 'giving' in South Africa in 2004. As part of that, four case studies were done on the flow of resources in poor communities - namely, Mdantsane (Eastern Cape), Mokasa 2 (North West), Mandela Village (Gauteng), and Graskop (Mpumalanga).

Mdantsane is a township some 30kms outside of East London. It is probably the second biggest township in South Africa after Soweto. Mokasa 2 is a rural village in Taung about 600kms north-west of Pretoria. Mandela Village lies 30kms to the east of Pretoria. It is mostly an informal settlement area. Although in the study reference is made to Graskop, the area that was studied is Glory Hill, a little township 5kms outside of the small town of Graskop. The case studies therefore cover two areas in an urban setting, one rural area and one semi-urban.

DEFINING POVERTY

It is difficult to produce a generally accepted definition of poverty. The difficulty arises partly because poverty tends to be seen in relative terms, we tend to see a person as poor in relation to another. The

result is that whenever you assert that a particular person is poor, you open yourself up to the question: *in relation to whom?*

Another difficulty is that poverty is very hard to speak about without slipping into ideological differences. It is therefore common that when people discuss it, they very quickly find themselves disagreeing on how society should be ordered. Be that as it may, I have used the *Poverty and Inequality Report in South Africa*, the *Hunger Report*, as well as *Wilson and Ramphele*, and I have taken poverty to mean:

- Lack of access to the necessities of life in the form of food, clothes, and shelter so that life becomes uncertain.
- Limited access to the necessities of life in the form of food, clothes, so that, although one's life is not in danger, it is nevertheless not possible to maintain a fully healthy body.

INCOME FROM THE STATE

The case studies show that resources among the poor flow primarily from the state, business, the church, non-governmental organisations and members of the poor communities themselves. I will



indicate the resources and in the closing section look at a few issues thrown up by some of them.

All four case studies indicated that social grants from the state are a significant source of livelihood amongst the poor. Poor people listed the following types of grants from the state on a monthly basis:

- Old age pension (R700)
- Disability grant (R700)
- Child support grant (R160)
- Foster child grant (R500)
- Care dependency grant (R700)
- Grant in aid (R150)
- Social relief of distress (R120)
- War veteran grant (R718).

INCOME FROM BUSINESS

In Mokasa 2 there was no involvement by business in trying to address poverty. Mdantsane by comparison showed many more businesses that were involved in community projects aimed at addressing poverty. The businesses made more substantial donations than we could find in the other case studies, although it appeared that donations were once off.

The Mandela Village case study revealed only one initiative involving business. It was a joint venture which did not make any donations as such, but sought rather to promote entrepreneurial skills among young black people. In Graskop there were a good number of businesses donating food and small amounts of money either to community-based organisations or directly to individuals. Although the amounts or quantities involved were small, they were on an ongoing basis.

INCOME FROM THE CHURCH

The Mandela Village and the Mdantsane studies did not inquire into resources from the church. In Mdantsane, however, the involvement of the church was evident in some of the community

initiatives that were reported. The Good Samaritan Children's Home, ministering to the needs of 'street children', is a church initiative. The Masiphatisane Home-based Caregivers, dedicated to helping people living with HIV/AIDS, also depends partly on sponsorships through contact with church people.

The Mokasa 2 study indicated about 17 churches that raised money during church services from congregants. Much of this money is used to support orphans who belong to the churches. Each church looks after its own orphans. Money collected also occasionally assists church members whose dwellings have been destroyed through bad weather. The churches in this area occasionally get assistance from the Roman Catholic Church in town in the form of donations of clothes and blankets. Township churches then distribute them among their members.

A similar picture emerged from the Graskop case study. Churches in Glory Hill mobilise resources from sister churches in town. They also raise donations from their own members, and indeed from sister churches in other parts of the country and abroad. These resources may take the form of food parcels or clothes, and are distributed among members of the church. Only after the needs of their own members are looked after do these churches consider poor people of other churches or who are non-church-goers.

INCOME FROM NGOS

In all four case studies there were non-governmental organisations that tried to soften the effects of poverty. The Mdantsane case study indicated by far the largest number of such organisations. The Mdantsane NGOs also enjoyed much better support from business.

SUPPORT FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Members of the community either act together or separately in trying to soften the blow of poverty on one another or other community members. Examples of people acting together included:

- Sharing of newspapers in order to search for employment and tender opportunities.
- Buying different vegetables, throwing them into a common pool and then dividing them up to ensure that each participant has a bit of everything.
- Buying different cleaning/laundry materials, throwing them into a common pool and then dividing them up to ensure that each participant has a bit of everything.
- Communal vegetable gardens. Participants consume the vegetables they produce and sell the remainder. They also donate some to needy households.
- Stokvels among 'spaza shop' owners aimed at ensuring the sustainability of their 'spaza shops'. Money is not given to the owners, but paid directly to the supplier in order to ensure that stocks are not depleted.

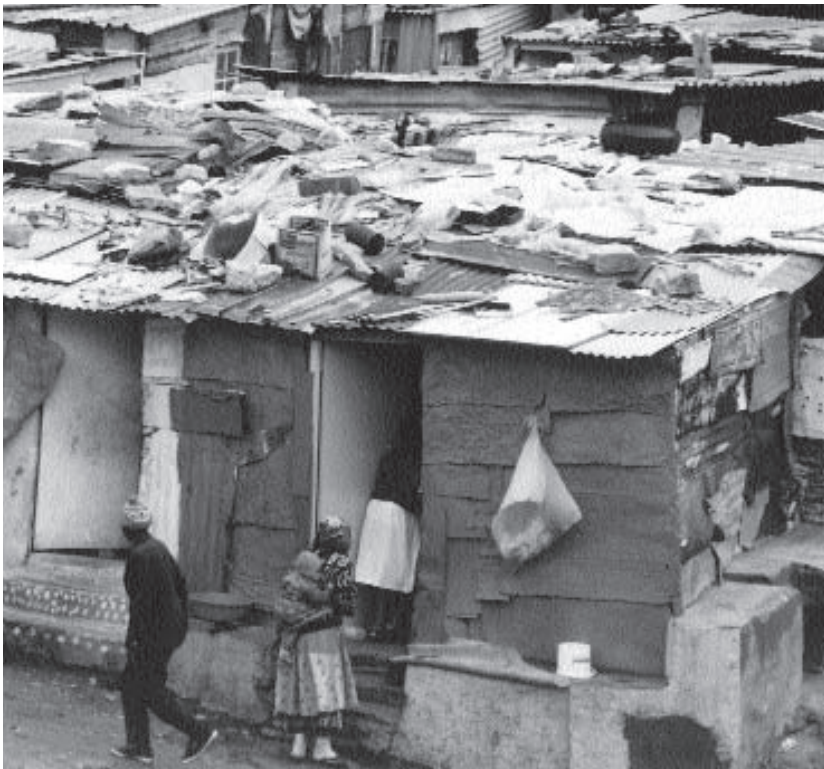
Examples of people acting alone included:

- Giving their time to looking after the sick and/or vulnerable on a voluntary basis.
- Assisting one another to set up a shack.
- Young people queuing up for the aged on pension or mobile clinic days in exchange for food.
- Young people fetching water for the aged in exchange for food.
- Donating food and clothes to needy families.

REVIEWING THE ISSUES

There is a view that social grants should be reconsidered because





they create dependency on the part of those who receive them. There is evidence that whole families depend on such grants. Therefore it would be disastrous to discontinue them.

In any event some of the case studies showed that some recipients use these grants in order to generate more income. The notion that the grants yield a dependency syndrome must therefore be questioned in the light of indications that some recipients try not to depend on them entirely. True, they do not try to wean themselves off the grants but try to augment them.

Business involvement that we could find did not seem generally to be geared towards the elimination of poverty, but rather at softening its impact. This is significant in the light of the school of thought that requires the role of the state in poverty alleviation and development to be limited. Not only did we find that the role played by business in poor communities is an inadequate response to poverty -

business causes poverty for many of those it employs!

The manner individual churches distribute resources throws up the question of whether their method of distribution is not designed to grow the churches concerned. It seems that the message to those outside of the church is that they had better appreciate the benefit of being part of the flock. Indeed, one pastor who was pressed on this issue conceded that his church would not have grown to what it is without the goodies it distributes to the poor.

The point is not to argue that it is wrong for churches to grow themselves in this manner. Neither should the value of the resources it makes available be diminished - the poor would be much worse off without these resources! The point is whether, in a consistent religious approach, churches should be concerned with the plight of the poor regardless of their denominational affiliation or even lack of it.

NGOs play an important role in

mobilising resources in the interests of the poor and vulnerable. It is however interesting to note that their tendency was to focus on HIV/AIDS and its orphans. In itself this is laudable but it does raise the question of whether it is poverty they are concerned with or the plight of people living with or orphaned by the AIDS pandemic.

The literature suggests that some 25% of black South Africans are members of stokvels. People who have studied the phenomenon of stokvels suggest that the annual turnover commanded by stokvels is in the order of R12 billion. It would therefore be expected that the case studies would have picked up the prevalence of stokvels but this was not the case.

Only Mandela Village revealed the existence of stokvels. In Mokasa 2 there were activities that might be construed as a manifestation of the thinking that underpins stokvels such as people pooling vegetables and cleaning/laundry materials and sharing them among themselves. It remains a question however as to why stokvels were not more prevalent in the case studies. Curious, but not incomprehensible.

Stokvels presuppose, not only that members have some income but that they have enough to save as well. This is what stokvels are generally about, saving money without going to banking institutions. Where, however, people who live from hand to mouth, there is nothing to save. There is nothing to take to the common pool in the way that stokvels normally function. So perhaps it is not so surprising that, bar the Mandela Village case study, we did not find evidence of stokvels in the other case studies.

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