HOW GEOGRAPHY CAN TRAP CHILDREN IN POVERTY


Despite progress in the policy and economic sphere since the political transition, many South African children are still caught in poverty traps and are socially excluded. Poverty traps occur where there are self-reinforcing mechanisms that cause poverty to persist. Poor children require an enabling environment in terms of health, education, assets, social and family networks, and geography to escape a poverty trap. Children caught in poverty are also potentially subject to social exclusion, the process that excludes them from full participation in society.

One manifestation of poverty traps is a high degree of chronic poverty. Recent data indicate that about 41% of South African children are chronically poor, while another 32% are in households that moved into and out of poverty between 2008 and 2012. Almost all chronically poor children are also in structural poverty. That means that their households have too few assets and productive potential to allow them to break out of poverty – a real poverty trap. Children caught in structural and chronic poverty are likely to become poor adults, whose children in turn will grow up poor, illustrating that the poverty trap has an intergenerational dimension. That also makes it more likely that such children will experience social exclusion.

The persistent nature of poverty traps means that the characteristics of the poor are slow to change. Today, as before the political transition, children caught in poverty traps are most likely to be black Africans, to live in rural areas of the former homelands, and to have poorly educated parents. Weak family structures also mean that they often do not live with both parents.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
The geographical or spatial concentration of poverty and poor access to services in South Africa is inextricably linked to the apartheid-era policies of racial segregation and skewed allocation of resources to different areas. The spatial characteristics of poverty manifest at various scales; neighbourhood, municipality, region and province. Under apartheid, Black Africans not born in urban residential areas were denied the right to settle there permanently, entrenching migrant worker arrangements whereby urban workers were temporary migrants with families in the homelands. Black women were refused urban residential permits unless they were married to an employed person or employed themselves. The apartheid-era “black homelands” endured severe underinvestment in economic infrastructure, poor quality education and poor access to market institutions that condemned most inhabitants to poverty. Although migration today may provide a means of escaping poverty for some, migration of many skilled and educated people contributes to the persistence of poverty-creating factors in the sending regions.

After 1994, new rural municipalities were established to oversee areas not previously under local government. New municipalities in former homeland areas faced especially serious backlogs in municipal infrastructure and service delivery. Despite efforts to ensure an equitable allocation of government services and revenue amongst municipalities, rural municipalities still have low revenue due to poverty amongst their inhabitants, and often lack skilled personnel. Although living conditions in the former homelands have improved somewhat, these improvements had not transformed these regions in terms of economic activity. Many households in these regions remain dependent on social grants. Differentials in service delivery between more rural and more urban municipalities are still quite large and persistent, contributing to migration pressures. Urban-rural differences in delivery of education and health still prevail.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHILD POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA
Many South African children grow up in neighbourhoods and regions where poverty is endemic and difficult to escape. Apartheid’s footprint is still clearly visible in the way poor people are crowded into townships and former homeland areas. Such areas often are very poor and also suffer from poor infrastructure and service delivery. For instance, in large parts of Limpopo province the absence of proper sanitation and running water makes it extremely difficult to establish Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres, and many such centres have inadequate water and sanitation with potentially detrimental effects for the health of the children. Despite economic progress and decreased poverty since the end of apartheid, the former ‘homeland’ regions, which experienced gross underinvestment in the past, remain the most deprived areas. The geographic or spatial patterns of poverty can still be seen quite clearly in maps showing the level of poverty in different regions.
The map above shows the percentage of the child population below the poverty line by municipal district in 2001. The pattern closely resembles maps showing the apartheid era homeland areas, with high levels of child poverty in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Kwazulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, provinces that contained many former homeland districts.

The map below for 2007 generally has lighter shades, reflecting the improvement in child poverty between 2001 and 2007, largely because Child Support Grants reduced child poverty substantially. It is encouraging how much child poverty has declined in the six years between the 2001 census and the 2007 Community Survey. In 2001, 221 municipalities had child poverty rates of more than 50%. By 2007 that number had decreased to 145 municipalities. Targeting of the grant system has improved dramatically in the post-apartheid period. Government grants now far surpass remittances as contributor to household income in the former homelands (more than R1000 on average in grants per household compared to R214 per household measured in current Rand values).
GEOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS OF CHILD POVERTY

Table 1 shows the poverty headcount for adults and children by province, ordered from lowest to highest child poverty headcount in 2007. As children tend to live in poorer households, there is more child poverty than adult poverty. Although economic deprivation has been reduced substantially between 2001 and 2007, child poverty is still worst in those provinces which contain former homelands. The relative shares of child poverty by province in 2007 is much the same as they were in 2001, a testament to how intractable child poverty is. The table also shows that employment is scarcer in poorer provinces, with about two-thirds of children with household heads in the age group 15-64 having heads that are employed in the Western Cape, but less than one third in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Moreover, analysis of multi-dimensional poverty (poverty in terms of income and access to services) shows that rural children experience far more of such poverty and that the three provinces with the highest levels of monetary poverty – Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo – also experience most multi-dimensional poverty among children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Child poverty 2001</th>
<th>Child poverty 2007</th>
<th>Adult poverty 2007</th>
<th>% of children in households whose head is employed, 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauteng</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Cape</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free State</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mpumalanga</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KwaZulu-Natal</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Cape</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limpopo</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1: Poverty headcount for adults and children and % of children whose household head is employed (Own calculations using Census 2001 and Community Survey 2007)

Female-headed households are more often poor. In 2007 just over 50% of children lived in such households. There are distinct regional differences as well; even when one only considers the richest 20% of households in different provinces, poorer ones such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo have a greater preponderance of female-headed households.

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An analysis of a Kwazulu-Natal panel survey (KIDS) reveals that households that have migrated tended to improve their relative welfare status. While poor households grow faster on average, some preconditions for catching up do not apply to many rural areas. Only regions with sufficient infrastructure and connection to the main economic centres experienced growth after the political transformation.

ACCESS TO SERVICES
Despite improvements between 2001 and 2007, there are marked differences between provinces in terms of children’s access to quality sanitation. Only 11% of children in Limpopo and one-quarter of those in Eastern Cape had access to quality sanitation in 2007. Poor sanitation and poor access to clean water are major contributors to diarrhoeal disease and are responsible for 4% of deaths globally and 5% of disability due to illness. While children in affluent provinces have almost universal access to piped water within 200 metres of their homes, more than 40% of children living in the Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal and Limpopo do not get water from a piped source within 200 metres.

MIGRATION
As geographic location is highly correlated with race in South Africa, the poorest people are black and live in rural regions of the former homelands. This is also reflected in migration patterns. Since those who migrate are often relatively productive members of the sending region, their departure serves as a loss. Policies aimed at addressing poverty traps resulting from migration should both focus on those left behind and try to facilitate the migration process. Migration has strong implications for child development. Those who migrate tend to particularly be men, but also women in their most productive years, typically younger adults. Children left behind must often contend with their adverse environment in the absence of a parent. Oscillating migration, a feature of the apartheid period where rural men often went to work on the mines and then returned to their areas of origin, still continues, though there is now also more permanent migration.
Data on one of the main migration streams helps to illustrate the effect of migration on age and gender structures. Figures 2 and 3 contrast the Eastern Cape to Western Cape migration stream between 2002 and 2007 to those who remained in the Eastern Cape to show the impact of migration on population age structures by gender. Of the migrants, more than 60% were between the ages of 20 and 39, whereas only about a quarter of those left behind in the sending province were in the same age group. Young children (0 to 4 years old) also migrated on relatively large scale, indicating that migrants tended to take young children with them. However, this was not true for somewhat older children; 28% of males and 28% of females in the sending province of the Eastern Cape are aged 5 to 14, whereas only 8.7% of males and 10.3% of females who migrated were from this age group.

So clearly, many parents leave their children behind when they migrate in search for economic opportunities. This is even more evident in smaller sending regions, which further contributes to weak household structures that affect children. The South African Child Gauge reports that whereas about a third of all children live with both parents, about a quarter live with neither parent. Only 28% of black African children below 15 live with both biological parents, compared to 81% of white children. Amongst the poorest quintile of households, only 19% live with both parents whereas for children in the top quintile the proportion was 73%. Because returns to education differ dramatically by region, younger and more educated adults are often those most likely to migrate to more affluent regions, leaving a highly skewed population age structure in the sending region.

![FIGURE 2: Age structure in 2007 of migrants from Eastern to Western Cape in period 2002-7 (Own calculations from Census 2001 & Community Survey 2007)](http://children.pan.org.za)

![FIGURE 3: Age structure of non-migrants in Eastern Cape, 2007 (Own calculations from Community Survey 2007)](http://children.pan.org.za)
POLICY RESPONSES TO THE GEOGRAPHIC CONCENTRATION OF POVERTY

Two broad and apparently conflicting approaches are often contrasted for addressing rural poverty. The one focuses on shifting economic activity and resources to poor areas, while the other emphasises encouraging migration to bring poor people closer to economic activity and reduce pressure on agricultural and other resources. Put differently, one approach emphasises moving economic activity towards the population, and the other moving the population to economic activity.

Experience throughout the world, including in apartheid South Africa, shows that efforts to shift economic activity to specific regions run up against strong economic forces that are extremely difficult to overcome, particularly in a slow-growing economy. Overcoming spatial disadvantages is costly and unaffordable for a developing country that needs to create jobs and opportunities cheaply. Efforts to decentralise industries, for instance, conflict with their need to locate close to skilled labour, specialist resources, good infrastructure, and markets. Agriculture also offers only limited possibilities.

On average households with farmland in the former homelands derive 49% of their household income from government grants, 24% from salaries and 16% from remittances, while agriculture makes a very small contribution (Pienaar and von Fintel 2013: 13), emphasising its limitations as income source for the large rural populations.

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A closer match between the location of jobs and the labour force would thus have to come about through migration, making the continuation of large-scale migration inevitable. The transition for migrants should be made as easy as possible. This includes providing urban housing and urban infrastructure, so that migrants are not crowded into urban slums where children may be as much caught in poverty traps as in the rural regions from which they came. Evidence indicates that most urban migrants adjust quickly to urban lifestyles, that their job prospects improve as they become better integrated socially and economically into city life, and that they are generally far better off than non-migrants in the areas they came from.

But not all people will be able to migrate to cities, and cities will for a very long time not be able to accommodate all who are currently in poor rural regions. Thus there seems to be scope for a nuanced view that draws from both approaches. A suggested policy combination may consist of the following:

- Government service provision should target the population, wherever they find themselves, so that living conditions in poor areas improve. Good schools, clinics, hospitals, housing, water, sanitation and electricity should all be provided even to the poorest, and even in deep rural areas. It should not be necessary for families to move out of poor regions to get access to proper services that all citizens should enjoy. There is no justification for geographic discrimination.
- Government efforts at reaching into such areas should continue, as well support from national level to municipalities so that they can provide such services themselves. More can and should be done to provide adequate municipal services to all citizens, including those in remote areas.
- In rural areas, more should be done to assist small businesses. Social grants have increased purchasing power in deep rural areas and created markets for goods and services, construction and even light manufacturing which local entrepreneurs with vocational skills could exploit. This could provide some additional employment and may slightly ease migration pressure.
- A welcoming environment should be provided in urban areas for new migrants, particularly basic housing and infrastructure. Policies should focus on creating urban living environments that improve the lot of children and make it attractive for new migrants to bring their children with them. Good and affordable child care facilities in urban areas would make it more attractive for young migrants to bring along their children. Currently, many do not, with detrimental consequences for family structure and good parenting.

Such a mix of policies will not eliminate child poverty, but will reduce it substantially and weaken the grip of many of the conditions that trap children in poverty. Moreover, all of this is possible without attempting the impossible, namely to create large cities to offer employment to the many millions of people located in rural areas.
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- Poor regions and neighbourhoods act as poverty traps from which escape is difficult.
- Spatial inequalities in South Africa still largely follow patterns established under apartheid, despite some reduction in child poverty levels through the social grants.
- Shifting economic activity to rural regions will be expensive and is unlikely to be successful.
- Thus migration has to continue and a welcoming environment should be created for migrants in urban areas, including provision of affordable and quality child care facilities to make it more attractive for migrants to bring their children with them.
- Nevertheless, quality government services must be provided in rural regions as well, to improve living conditions of those who remain there.

The South African Human Rights Commission Report:
Poverty traps and social exclusion among children in South Africa


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