

Country profile: South Africa



HDI ranking: ranked 107 out of 173 countries

The UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) measures a country's achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income.

Country background

In April 1994, the African National Congress party won South Africa's first non-racial elections. Nelson Mandela became president of the newly formed Government of National Unity. South Africa's Commonwealth membership was restored and remaining sanctions lifted as the nation took its seat in the UN General Assembly after a 20-year absence.

The government has since succeeded in starting to address key areas of inequality in South Africa, while for the most part maintaining political and economic stability. Basic democratic rights of fair election, free speech and free press continue to flourish. Under the leadership of President Thabo Mbeki (since 1999), the government is slowly expanding its network of public services for the benefit of the country's disadvantaged people. Achievements have however been steady and gradual rather than sweeping and spectacular.

The government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme was formulated to drive down inflation, encourage foreign investment, cut the national deficit, and reduce poverty by relaxing restrictive labour laws and accelerating privatisation. The trade balance has been positive and short-term foreign debt is down. The narrow focus on the needs of the business and economic sector may be contributing to relative economic stability, but it is also blamed for reducing essential social services. 2001 saw South Africa's currency slide 38% as fears grew over instability in neighbouring Zimbabwe and the global economy slowed, but 2002 brought the recovery of the *rand* and a flattening of inflation, leaving the country poised for macroeconomic growth in 2003. Substantial growth is required to break South Africa's cycle of poverty, unemployment and violence, and to weather the encroaching drought faced by its southern African neighbours.

South Africa suffers from a grossly inequitable distribution of public goods and infrastructure for its 44 million people. The former apartheid government prioritised facility provision for the white population at the expense of black communities, who were corralled into the so-called 'homelands' or forced to eke out marginal existences in townships on the fringes of racially segregated urban areas. Black people, around 75% of the population, still receive a grossly unequal share (35%) of national income. Fifty-seven per cent of black people live below the poverty line, compared with only 2.1% of white people. The nine provinces in the 'homeland' areas now have virtual autonomy for delivering most essential services but they are struggling to upgrade services, attract qualified staff and overcome the endemic mismanagement and corruption from the previous administration. Seventy-two per cent of all poor families live in rural areas which suffer from a lack of access to education, health care and sanitation (80% have no piped water or sanitation), housing, employment, markets, food security, electricity and physical infrastructure.

Extravagant pre-election promises have been slow to materialise. The new government placed land reform at the top of its political agenda, but redistribution has delivered less than 2% of formerly white-owned land to black people. The government has built over a million homes, but there are still 7.5 million people living in squalor, waiting for promised housing. Unemployment is still discouragingly high at around 30%, and affects not only unskilled and uneducated people, but increasingly trained and experienced workers, as jobs in the formal sector are also streamlined. Extensive privatisation of public companies and services has resulted in the loss of around one

million jobs and a wave of industrial strikes since 1999. Among black people, unemployment is as high as 50%, and nine million people earn less than US\$1 per day. With work so hard to come by, crime is on the increase.

However, the HIV and AIDS pandemic is the single most important crisis facing South Africa, affecting development, social stability and the economy. The leading cause of death in the country, a Medical Research Council Report in 2001 warned that at present rates, AIDS will claim the lives of between five and seven million South Africans by 2010. Infection rates are estimated at 19% and rising, highest among rural expectant mothers (30%). In December 2001, the high court ruled that pregnant women must be given AIDS drugs to help prevent transmission of the virus to their babies, and in July 2002 the constitutional court ordered the provision of a key anti-AIDS drug at all public hospitals.

The human toll of AIDS in South Africa is terrible, placing unbearable stress on families and communities. As the disease tightens its hold on the most productive sectors of the population – those aged between 15 and 45 – the potential erosion of any development gains has become a grave concern. Thousands of orphaned children are stretching the capacity and resources of families and orphanages to breaking point. President Mbeki has been criticised for his sceptical attitude to HIV and AIDS, but in 2001, the government announced a 400% increase in spending to fight HIV and AIDS over the next three years.

Despite the discord and difficulties in neighbouring Zimbabwe, South Africa remains relatively stable. However, the country continues to receive a mixed profile in the international media which directly affects inward and external investment and the popularity of tourism. In early 2003, President Mbeki expressed fears that rocketing oil prices brought on by a Middle East war could condemn Africa to deep economic crisis, severe enough to undo any benefits from the 2002 NEPAD agreement for leading industrial countries to expand aid to Africa.

The legacy of one of the most indebted and inequitable regimes in the world will linger for a long time yet, not least in terms of lawlessness, social disruption and lost education. Optimism remains and transformation is happening, but high unemployment and the rapid spread of AIDS are compounding the government's difficulties in redistributing wealth. With two successful national elections under its belt since the end of white rule, a democratic culture appears to be taking hold, allowing the people at least some say in the quest for solutions.

The VSO programme

Number of volunteers in-country: 24

VSO's South Africa programme focuses on fighting AIDS and supporting initiatives in gender advocacy and rights in townships and rural communities in the three provinces most affected by multiple disadvantage: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

VSO South Africa is part of VSO's Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa, RAISA, where volunteers in all skill areas work to support efforts by government and civil society organisations to fight the AIDS pandemic.

RAISA volunteers work at strategic levels within specialist HIV and AIDS organisations which demonstrate a range of responses to the disease: prevention and positive living; combating stigma through advocacy; youth awareness and life skills; community education and empowerment; health education, and care and support to vulnerable sectors of the community affected by HIV and AIDS, including orphans and vulnerable children.

Current volunteers include an IT specialist with the AIDS Foundation of South Africa, a finance consultant with the Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa, and a community worker with a rural community outreach AIDS NGO. One IT volunteer working in an AIDS service organisation has compiled an information pack on possible donors. Another volunteer, placed within the government at national level, networked with a volunteer in a rural location, providing her with information that was not available locally.

Awareness-raising plays an important role in reducing discrimination around the AIDS pandemic, and VSO seeks to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach to prevention. We encourage all volunteers to mainstream HIV and AIDS awareness into their work, by promoting HIV and AIDS prevention initiatives and addressing behaviour change in their workplaces and communities. For example, at Fort Hare University in Eastern Cape, the combined efforts of volunteers have led University authorities to prioritise the issue. The post of HIV/AIDS coordinator has been created and volunteers integrated HIV and AIDS issues into teaching modules, changing students' attitudes and challenging myths surrounding transmission. Volunteers encouraged talking points such as the creation of a large HIV and AIDS-themed mural on the wall of the staff complex in the University campus, helping to break down stigma surrounding the disease.

South African crime studies by organisations such as the Medical Research Council confirm that gender empowerment and combating violence against women are areas of crucial importance. Women are among the least empowered people within disadvantaged communities in South Africa, particularly in terms of their vulnerability and lack of access to power and decision-making. VSO is placing more volunteers in gender advocacy and women's rights initiatives, focusing on tackling violence against women, assisting women in realising their reproductive rights, and enabling women to attain economic security.

Three volunteers are working to promote women's rights and safety at community level by helping to educate social services, law enforcement, community leaders and health professionals about victim empowerment; providing a safe environment for survivors of domestic violence (including many who are HIV positive) and their children; working to combat violence in peri-urban township areas; and educating communities about their constitutional rights.

Another volunteer is working on combating sexual harassment at national level by working primarily through the network of Trade Unions. New partnerships have also been developed with large umbrella organisations such as the National Network on Violence Against Women and small peri-urban organisations such as Men for Change and ADAPT, which seek to bring on board men as agents of change in combating gender violence and negative stereotypes. Work carried out to date has concentrated on capacity-building support to NGOs involving training and establishing administrative and managerial systems.

Volunteer perspectives

"I have learned that life is not just about working to make money... it is about helping people to gain self-worth, to recognise that they have potential and to maximise that potential by using their skills and abilities."

"Today we have to make an assessment of a project proposal for a village water supply. The water committee turns up and the meeting begins under a tree. It's a small informal gathering, but some days it's the other extreme – 200-plus people, tables with cloths and flowers. Two of us are excused to drive around the village looking at the existing supply and discussing what is proposed. We return to the meeting before taking our leave and driving away in our dust cloud. Back to the office, more paper for the heap and a renewed sense of urgency. Scribble and fax away... Time to go home and the prospect of a wild night with a sasko loaf and a tin of chilli pilchards. Drift off to sleep with the strange thought that VSO is my first job that really needs a briefcase and a Filofax."

"I am sometimes emotionally swamped by what I come across. However, I feel this is probably the most crucial work I have ever done...It all feels worthwhile." [Valerie Henry, South African Youth Workers Association.](#)

Partner perspectives

"I value very highly the commitment and efforts of VSO volunteers coming to provide basic amenities where most needed in our country." [The most reverend Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town, 1996](#)