The Changing Public Agenda: South Africans' Assessments of the Country's Most Pressing Problems

South Africans embarked on majoritarian, multiparty politics in 1994 facing a host of complex issues, including high expectations from the newly enfranchised black majority, and fears of what these changes would bring among many in the white minority. Almost a decade later, how have South African's perceptions of their country's problems evolved? To what extent have their expectations – or their fears – been realized, and how successfully is the current government coping with the issues that matter most in the eyes of the public?

A Changing Public Agenda
As part of Round 2 of the Afrobarometer*, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) commissioned Citizen Surveys (Pty.) Ltd. to conduct a survey of a nationally representative sample of 2400 randomly selected South Africans between 13 September and 13 October 2002.

These interviewers asked South Africans a question that Idasa has been asking since 1994: "What are the most important problems facing this country that the government ought to address?" The question was "open-ended," meaning that respondents provided an answer in their own words. They could give up to three answers. The responses were recorded verbatim and then grouped into larger categories to facilitate analysis.
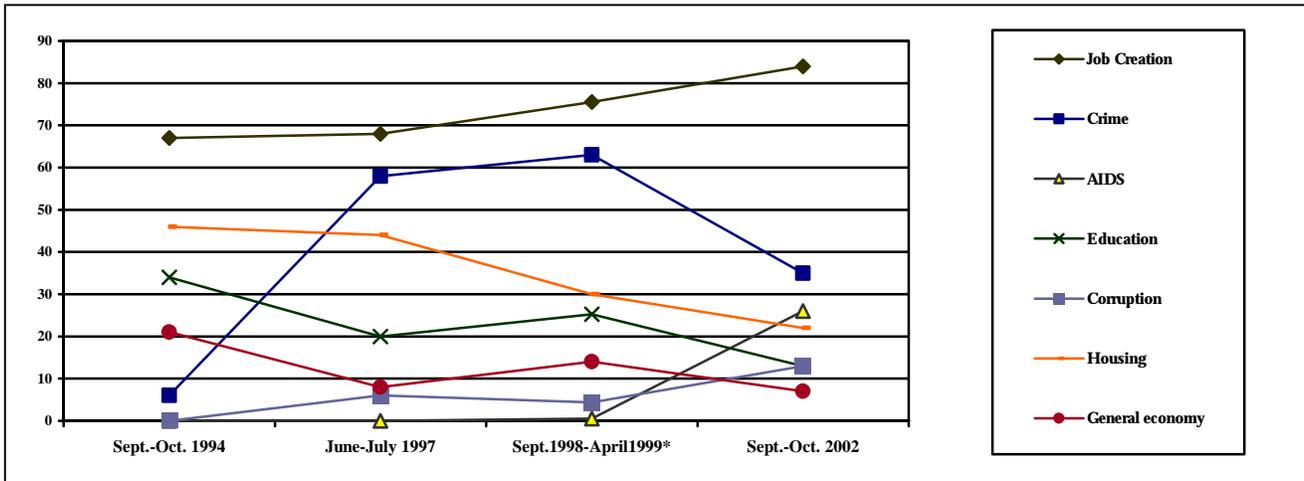
The top ten areas of concern that emerged are as follows:

1. **Job Creation/Unemployment:** Public concern over jobs has risen by 8 percentage points, from 76% who mentioned it in 2000 to 84% in 2002. This has consistently featured as the most often cited national problem since 1994, reflecting a solid national consensus (see Figure 1). It is the priority concern for all racial groups.

2. **Crime:** Public emphasis on crime has fallen from a high of 65% in 1999 to 35% in 2002, though it is still well above the mere 6% who mentioned it in 1994. Racial differences emerge in the extent to which people prioritise this problem; it is mentioned by 67% of whites and 57% of Indian respondents, compared to 39% of coloureds and just 25% of blacks (see Figure 2).

3. **Poverty:** Concern over poverty has more than doubled in two years, from 11% in 2000 to 28% in 2002. It has thus become the third most cited problem within a very short period. Worries about food shortages, a closely related issue, have jumped from 1% in 1999 to 9% in 2002.

Figure 1: Selected Most Important Problems Over Time

*Responses from several surveys between September 1998 and April 1999 were combined and averaged.

4. **AIDS:** AIDS, which was hardly even mentioned before 1998, has now taken over as the fourth most important problem at 26%, up from 13% in 2000. But once again, there are significant variations by race: 31% of black respondents mentioned it, compared to 15% of whites, 18% of coloureds and 12% of Indian respondents.

5. **Housing:** Concern over housing continues to fluctuate, but it remains an important issue. Beginning at 46% in 1994, it peaked at 54% in 1995, but has now dropped to 22%. Blacks and coloureds are somewhat more concerned than whites and Indians about this problem.

6. **Education:** Worries about the state of the education system were at their highest in 1994, when 34% of respondents listed it among their key concerns. Between 1995 and 1999 it remained fairly stable, ranging between 20% and 28%, but it has now dropped to just 15%. There are sizeable racial differences here as well: 35% of Indians still identify education as a key problem, compared to only 14% of blacks, 13% of coloureds, and 10% of white respondents.

Figure 2: Racial Differences in Perceptions of Most Important Problems
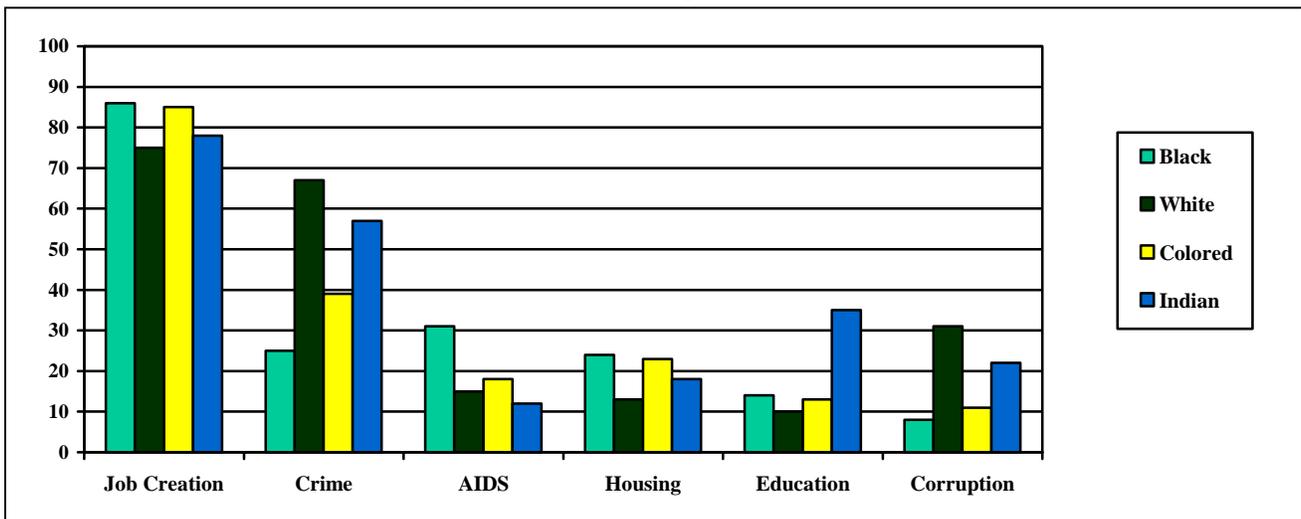
7. **Corruption:** The perception that corruption is an important problem has been increasing steadily since 1994, when it was not even reported as an issue. It was first mentioned in 1995 by 2% and has now climbed to 13%. Whites are more concerned about this issue than others, with 31% mentioning it, compared to 22% of Indians, 11% of coloureds, and just 8% of blacks.

8. **Health care:** Concerns about health care have remained fairly steady at about 10%.

9. **Water:** Lack of adequate clean water is mentioned by 7%, down from 13% in 1999.

10. **Management of the economy:** A seesaw tendency is apparent in perceptions about management of the economy. While mentioned by 21% in 1994, concerns over the general economy fell to 10% in 1995, but increased again to 18% in 1998-99 as the country's economic problems mounted. It is now down to 7%.

Meanwhile, in some cases it is also noteworthy what is not identified as significant problems. In particular, only 1% mention land issues as a priority problem, a very small number given the backdrop of the Zimbabwe crisis and a few highly publicised land invasions in South Africa over the past two years.

Within limits, especially given the fact that respondents had to prioritise their three most important problems, these responses should not simply be dismissed as "perceptions." One of the key findings of Round 1 of the Afrobarometer is that public opinion can provide quite accurate measures of on-the-ground realities, whether it is the extent of democracy, the degree of human rights actually enjoyed, the extent of lived poverty, or, in this case, the real problems people encounter in their daily lives. Public opinion is not only an important aspect of democracy, it can also provide a valuable feedback mechanism to government.

Ability to Solve Problems

We went on to ask respondents: "What proportion of this country's problems do you think government can solve?" Nearly six in ten (57 percent) say that government should be able to solve all or most of the country's problems; 29 percent expect government to solve at least "some of them." Only about one in ten say that government can solve "very few" (11 percent) or "none" (2 percent).

Differences in racial categories are among the most important demographic factors that distinguish between perceptions of government capacity (Table 1). Black respondents are the most optimistic about the capacity of government to address society's problems, Indians the least.

Table 1: Ability to Solve National Problems, by Race

	Total	Black	White	Coloured	Indian
All of them	17	19	11	15	8
Most of them	40	43	34	38	29
Some of them	29	27	38	28	30
Very few of them	11	9	13	14	25
None of them	2	2	2	3	8
Don't know	2	1	3	3	2

Weak Government Performance on the Highest Priority Problems

The key issue in measuring the performance of any democratic government is the degree to which it responds to the needs of the people. How well is the South African government addressing the problems identified by its citizens? We asked respondents how effectively the government is handling a range of policy issues (Table 2).

Government does receive quite positive evaluations in some areas, for example the distribution of welfare payments (73%), addressing the educational needs of all South Africans (61%), and delivering basic services like water and electricity (60%).

But when it comes to the problems identified most frequently by the voters, the government generally receives quite poor marks. For example, while 84% identify unemployment as the most important problem facing the country, a mere 9% say the government is handling this issue "fairly well" or "very well." Similarly, while 35% mention crime and security, just 23% give the government positive marks in this area. The government's poor performance ratings for handling crime and security problems makes the substantial decline in concern about crime since 1998-1999 a particularly surprising finding; perhaps the decreasing mention of crime (although it remains the second most important problem) actually reflects an increasing concern about other problems, rather than a decreasing concern about crime.

Table 2: Public Approval of Government Performance on Most Important Problems (2002)

Issue	% Citing Issue as MIP	% Who Say Govt Is Handling Problem "Fairly or Very Well"
Unemployment	84	9
Crime and security	35	23
Food shortage/famine*	9	21
AIDS	26	46
Housing	22	50
Education	15	61
Corruption	13	29
Health	10	54
Water and Electricity	7	60
Management of economy	7	38

The question did not ask specifically how well the government was handling the problem of "poverty."

While the survey did not ask specifically about how well the government is handling poverty, the third most important problem, respondents rate the closely related efforts of the government to deal with problems of food shortage and famine very poorly, with just one in five saying that these problems are being addressed effectively.

It is notable, however, that about half of respondents do give the government good marks in handling the growing AIDS crisis, and a similar number think it is doing a good job of addressing housing issues. The government's more effective handling of housing problems may explain the waning priority of this issue: while it was seen as one of the most critical challenges facing the new government in 1994, it has now dropped to fifth in priority.

For more information contact Tanya Shanker (021-467 5600 tanya@idasact.org.za).
For comment, contact Bob Mattes (083 2340333) or bob@idasact.org.za, Derek Davids (083 4484383),
Annie Chikwanha, annie@idasact.org.za, or Paul Graham, Executive Director of Idasa (082 571 3887).