

The Challenges of Inequality in South Africa's Communities: The Role of Indigent Policy

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Abstract. Most South African communities faced issues of inequality as a result of the skewed policies of the pre-1994 era. This indicated that the vast majority of the villages were impoverished. In order to address these issues of inequity, the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) was quickly tabled. The provision of basic services to all citizens was the main goal of the RDP, among its many other purposes. Therefore, it was the responsibility of municipalities to provide tools that would facilitate the delivery of these services to the communities. The Indigent Policy was created in the South African townships as a result of this exercise. In an effort to understand the role that indigent policy plays in eradicating the inherited poverty, this study adopted a systematic review. The results show that the practice of not paying for essential services appeared to make the policy's execution difficult. The registration process also appeared to be difficult for several homes. Since the indigent policy is not nationally recognized and accepted as a national policy because of the aforementioned challenges, it is recommended that a national indigent policy be cascaded from the national government to all provincial governments and must be pushed down through all municipalities.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africans anticipated that democracy would be a process in which all citizens would participate and that poverty would be eliminated by offering free basic services. Various authors such as Alford and Phillips (2018) and Marais (2021) noted that there was an indication of unfulfilled expectations between what was anticipated and what is currently prevalent in South Africa's social viewpoint. There has been growing number of protests as a results of disgruntled communities due to poor or no service delivery (Mothelesi et al., 2022; Mamokhere, 2020; Adanlawo, 2017). For most South Africans, democracy has not been able to ensure stability in their socioeconomic surroundings according to Gebrihet and Gebresilassie (2025). Numerous issues facing the nation stem from inherited disparities that the democratic state is gradually failing to eliminate (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2025; Tshishonga, 2019).

The persistent disparities in wealth, education, and access to basic services continue to fuel discontent among the populace. Without effective measures to address these systemic issues, the prospects for meaningful change and improvement in the quality of life for many South Africans remain bleak. According to Gumede (2021) and Francis and Webster (2019), South Africa is among the most unequal societies in the world with a Gini coefficient that is closer to one and 47 percent of the population still living in poverty. Through new policies and implementation, the new regime in 1994 aimed to do everything within its ability to reduce the disparities in wealth among the nation's population (Jansen, 2002). However, despite these efforts, significant disparities in wealth and access to resources persist, often exacerbated by systemic issues such as unemployment and inadequate education.

As a result, many South Africans continue to struggle, highlighting the urgent need for more effective strategies to address these entrenched inequalities. Making sure that residents have access to the essentials they need to live better lives was an obligation given to all state organs (Sabela et al., 20025; Chaka & Adanlawo, 2024; Zondi, 2021). The study focuses on the policies that addressed poverty in South African families because there are a lot of actions involved in closing the gaps in inequality. Regardless of household status, the Indigent Policy sought to provide basic services to all South Africans. This policy seeks to address the disparities in access to essential services by providing support tailored to the economic conditions of each household. By doing so, it aims to uplift the living standards of those in need and promote greater equity within society. This meant that no households should be without basic services because of a lack of sufficient income to pay for these services.

1.1. Indigence

According to Erten et al. (2019) and Endris et al. (2017), lack of income, inadequate daily enabling resources, and susceptibility to social, political, environmental, and economic shocks are characteristics of indigence status. Households that are unable to access or pay for basic services due to unemployment and poverty are identified as indigent households (Pillay & Mutereko, 2022; Masuku & Nzewi, 2021). The definition of indigent households was found to be problematic in the South African situation (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024). According to Xaba et al. (2025), a household's financial status tends to fluctuate over time between being impoverished and not, particularly in townships.

While the Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) recommended that a destitute home should be living on R1600 or less, the Department of Water Affairs (2008) defines an indigent household as one that earns R800 or less. The City of Johannesburg introduced Siyasizana, a new Extended Social Package policy, in 2009. The Siyasizana package changed the definition of impoverished households to include those with an income of R4 257.58 or less (Masipa et al., 2022). The definition of an indigent household by the municipality remains somewhat unclear (Pillay & Mutereko, 2022; Enqvist & Ziervogel, 2019). These different definitions show potential implementation difficulties. According to the municipality's working definition, "indigent" families are those that cannot afford or obtain basic utilities including power, water, garbage collection, and sanitation (DPLG, 2005).

Adanlawo and Chaka (2024) aver that as the state's representative organs in the townships, the municipalities were responsible for carrying out the following tasks: households had to fill out an application form, after which the municipalities would select indigent households, register them, screen them, approve their applications, implement Free Basic Services to the chosen households, monitor service delivery and determine its impact, and plan the indigent households' exit. This process ensures that assistance is properly allocated to those in need, while also allowing for oversight and evaluation of the services provided. By following these steps, municipalities can effectively manage resources and support indigent households in their communities.

1.2. Rights and Responsibilities of Communities and the Indigent Policy

The South African Indigent Policy was specifically created to safeguard communities' dignity and provide them with access to essential services so they can live respectably (Takalani & Odeku, 2023). These services include water, electricity, and sanitation, which are essential for improving the quality of life for those living in poverty. By ensuring that these basic needs are met, the policy aims to empower individuals and foster sustainable development within their communities. However, every service must yield a return on investment under the neoliberalist policies of developing nations like South Africa (Hidayah et al., 2021). This focus on return on investment can sometimes lead to prioritizing profit over the welfare of the population, potentially exacerbating inequalities. As a result, while the intention behind providing basic services is to uplift communities, the execution may inadvertently favour those who are already economically advantaged, leaving vulnerable populations at risk of continued neglect.

The South African Indigent Policy articulates the obligations of communities to utilize the services that are offered to them (Kuhlangisa et al., 2024). It is necessary for the communities that utilize the basic services to bear the financial burden of resource overhead. This indicates that households are willing to cover such overhead if they are utilizing the Indigent Policy's provisions. Grönwall and Danert (2020) state that basic human services are a right to all citizens. For instance, the water services providers were being overburdened by the responsibility of supplying water to the expanding population, as is becoming the case in South Africa. This strain not only affects the quality of water supply but also highlights the urgent need for sustainable management practices.

As the demand for water continues to rise, it becomes imperative for both the government and communities to collaborate in ensuring equitable access to this essential resource. Communities bear the responsibility of managing water as a finite resource, irrespective of their constitutional right to access it. Chaka and Adanlawo (2024) suggest that households that use the designated basic provision must be able to afford it. The willingness to pay will affect how the resource is used. This implies that households must recognize the value of water and be prepared to contribute financially to its management, which can lead to more sustainable usage practices. By fostering a sense of responsibility through financial commitment, communities can better ensure the long-term availability of water for all.

According to Abate (2019), willingness to pay is the highest amount a buyer is willing to spend for a specific quantity of products and services. González-Viralta et al. (2023) analyze the willing to pay notion and show that it depends on a number of factors, including culture, loyalty, and satisfaction. The idea of communities' willingness to pay is largely regarded as separate from its uniqueness, and its success primarily rests on an awareness of the constitution. The MGD's objectives, according to which citizens have rightful rights and obligations, served as some inspiration for the constitution. Despite the democratically elected government's initiative to fulfil the MGD objectives and the constitution's preamble, responsible beneficiaries should have benefited from the services provided. Only from a rights perspective are the difficulties encountered when communities attempt to deconstruct the indigent policy. Price was the only way to guarantee accountability, and it was a sign of the limited supply of services. Ríos et al. (2022) express dissatisfaction on the viability of towns' free basic service provision. The provision of FBS to the impoverished was at jeopardy since municipal finances were gradually running out (Moatshe, 2018).

The following supports the statement:

- The MGD objectives are clear about the rights and obligations to guarantee a human life that is worthy of dignity. The preamble of the South African Constitution makes it abundantly evident that, although persons have the right to a dignified life, this right must be upheld without endangering the environment or the lives of future generations.
- Rights and responsibilities cannot be separated.
- Receiving FBS of services, if properly implemented, has the ability to teach the efficient use of limited resources.
- The inability to automatically identify households who are impoverished leads to the inability to identify households whose financial situation has improved.
- When a household's financial situation improves, declaring and accepting responsibility for service payments will save municipalities' finances from running out.

1.3. The Selection Criterion of the Municipalities

In order to provide free services to impoverished households, municipalities relied on citizen registration, according to Linders et al. (2018). The Indigent Policy emphasized the rights and responsibilities of citizens through the provision of Free Basic Service. According to the authors, the implementation of the policy involves both the municipalities and communities' rights and responsibilities. With the aid of ward committees, the towns' primary duty was to accurately target low-income residents. On the spectrum, the communities fulfil the following duties in addition to having a right to these services:

Informing the municipalities about faulty devices of services provision.

- Any misuse of these services.
- Constantly make sure the facilities are in good shape.
- Reporting and avoiding illicit connections; monitoring.
- Preventing abuse of the services offered.

After registering, citizens had a right to free water, free energy, garbage collection, sanitation, transportation, healthcare, and education (Mestrum et al., 2021; Bulled, 2015). The poverty index was used to assign points to impoverished homes because, according to COJ (2008), the levels of poor households varied. The municipalities were able to provide various degrees of subsidies to households and communities with the use of the poverty index. According to the City of Johannesburg (COJ), aid was provided to individuals with varying levels of need starting on July 1, 2009, based on the poverty score index. In order to renew their destitute status, households had to go to their local towns every six months. The municipalities used the poverty index

income score as a means of distributing this aid.

Table 1: COJ poverty index: Sept 2008-individual income scoring.

Personal poverty index points	Annual income level per person	Monthly income
1	40 392	3 366.00
5	38 466.43	3 205.54
10	36 059.48	3 004.96
15	33 652.52	2 804.38
20	31 245.57	2 603.80
25	28 838.61	2 403.22
30	26 928.00	2 244.00
35	23 995.13	1 999.59
40	21 583.83	1 798.65
45	19 172.52	1 597.71
50	16 671.22	1 396.77
55	14 349.91	1 195.83
60	11 938.61	994.88
64	9 527.30	793.34
70	7 116.00	593.00

Note: 1 to 30 is regarded as vulnerable, 35 to 70 is regarded to the surviving households.

Source: COJ (2008) http://www.joburg-rchive.co.za/2009/pdfs/soc_assistance_poverty_index.pdf.

COJ developed a points-based scoring system to determine which homes were considered impoverished. In order to assign ideas that would match the interference needs for the households to raise their living conditions, this approach used monthly and annual scoring systems. According to this approach, the monthly salaries of both spouses are subtracted by both incomes and the number of legal dependents in order to receive points in households with monthly incomes below R2000. Households with monthly incomes over R2000 are considered vulnerable. Because the number of lawful dependents is divided by the single income, they are considered vulnerable even though their salaries are higher.

1.4. COJ Poverty Index and the Provision of Water

The purpose of the COJ Poverty Index was to categorize the households that were eligible for various aid levels. According to COJ, various levels of aid are made available to Johannesburg City through its constituent municipalities based on the poverty index. The goal of this exercise was to ensure that the homes that require the most assistance would receive it. Anyone who lived in their local municipality as an owner or renter and made less than R3360.00 per month had to register. For the households without their personal information, the registration process was simplified. If a household knew their ID number, they could register without presenting an identity proof. Fingerprints were utilized in these situations to confirm the individual's existence. Households had to re-register every six months in order to confirm their socioeconomic standing. A household was informed of any improvements in their financial situation so they might challenge the results. Water was supplied differently for each scoring band, as shown in the COJ Poverty Point Scoring chart above. The scoring method that towns used to offer water to families as a basic, free service is shown below.

Table 2: the provision of FBW using the point scoring systems.

Band	Score on prevailing COJ Poverty Index	Allocation of additional free water per person per day (litres)	Monthly allocation cap of free water per household in which at least 50% of registered social package recipients qualify for the band in question (Kilo-litres)
Band 1	1-34	251	10kl
Band 2	35-70	351	12kl
Band 3	70-100	501	15kl

Source: http://joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4012&Itemid=114#ixzz3h9zJCoom.

According to Table 2, households with monthly incomes below R3360.00 receive more than the first 6000-liter FBWP. Assuming that a household cannot afford to purchase water given their existing socioeconomic situation, the higher their score, as indicated by bands 1 through 3 in the table, the more water is provided. The policy is judged to go much above the MDG targets' requirements. According to Grönwall and Daner (2020), each person's water supply and sanitation needs must be continuous and sufficient for their own needs as well as household purposes. The author claims that in order to ensure that the majority of fundamental needs are satisfied, each person must consume 50 to 100 liters of water every day. A family cannot go a month without water if it uses the allotted water sustainably.

1.5. Challenges of the Indigent Policy Instruments

Relationships between stakeholders, particularly municipalities and households, are essential to the execution and success of the Indigent Policy because it was created to target the poor (Khoza & Mukonza, 2024). For this reason, it necessitates a close engagement between communities and service providers. In order to implement sustainable services, the service providers also rely on municipalities. In the end, a solid relationship between communities and municipalities appears to be essential for the policy's effective execution (Hughes & Peterson, 2018). To implement and observe the outcomes of the Siyasizana extended package or the Indigent Policy project, continuous engagement and communication are necessary (Pillay & Mutereko, 2022). Mncwango and Adanlawo (2025) add that the policy was unknown to certain households.

South African townships are currently defined by heterogeneous social and economic classes (Scheba & Turok, 2020). The 1994 principles have been consistently violated, according to Ríos et al. (2022), as the ANC implemented neo-liberal policies that perpetuated historical injustice. The poor have been squeezed and pushed out by the ANC's shift to neoliberalist policies, according to Chaka and Adanlawo (2023). The township of Soweto is a prime example. The housing constructions in this township provide a clear visual representation of the various socioeconomic groups (Maphela, 2023). For example, housing in Soweto is designed with different economic statuses. Soweto has been increasingly defined by the disparities in the quality of life of

households grouped together. An RDP house, a four-room house, and mortgage houses are all located in one region (Maphela, 2023). The RDP dwellings are intended for communities with incomes of R800 or less according to the indigence policy. The old government constructed the four-roomed homes, and the occupant of the house immediately became the owner upon payment of arrears (Amoah et al., 2022). A potential owner must have paid back the loan in full before they can become the legal owner of the home they purchased through the bank. Squatter colony, however, continues to spiral out of control. Scheba and Turok (2020) declare that ineffective governance, unscrupulous practices, and failing policies were the causes of this informal settlement spiral. It is worth noting that the municipalities faced a difficult task because different socioeconomic classifications and definitions of poor households differed. Pillay and Mutereko (2022) state that designating the families and poverty in the townships was a difficulty to the destitute policy. Masipa et al. (2022) bemoan the lengthy process of adding households to the poor registry, which requires verification of residency, municipal bills, SA identity, household expenses, and incomes. Due to their lack of experience and recent graduation, those with formal education were having difficulty finding work. Other people had given up on obtaining official jobs and tried starting unsustainable businesses. These households primarily relied on governmental and medical grants for their income.

2. CONCLUSION

The meaning of "indigent" was thoroughly examined. It turned out that different state agencies had diverse ideas about what it meant to be impoverished. It is crucial to remember that, despite being pro-poor and consistent with the principles of SA's RDP policy, the policy also refers to the constitution, which states that rights come with obligations. Diverse socioeconomic groups hold varying opinions on the policy. Although it is provided for free on a fundamental level, water fits into the goal of the neo-liberalist approach because it is a scarce commodity. The relationships between the communities and their commitment to the democratic ideal are crucial for the policy's successful implementation (Maphela & Adanlawo, 2025). This highlights the importance of community engagement and commitment to democratic principles in ensuring effective policy execution. When communities feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, they are more likely to support and uphold the policy's objectives.

This study shows that the practice of not paying for essential services seems to make the policy's execution difficult. Because the registration process involved disclosure of the enrolling households, households appeared to find it difficult. It is crucial to improve the relationship between towns and households. The policy is not nationally recognized and approved as a national policy due to the aforementioned difficulties. The indigent policy seems to be interpreted differently in each municipality. This lack of uniformity creates disparities in access to essential services for vulnerable populations, ultimately undermining the policy's intended effectiveness. Ensuring consistent implementation and fostering clear communication between municipalities and households is crucial for achieving equitable outcomes. A national indigent strategy ought to be pushed down through all South African municipalities and cascaded from the national government to all provincial governments. For the policy to succeed, communities must also be open to participating in the agenda.

This study concludes that the successful implementation of the National Indigent Policy in South Africa hinges on a collaborative approach that cascades from national directives to provincial governments and municipalities. By ensuring that these policies are consistently applied and effectively communicated, the potential for equitable outcomes across diverse communities is significantly enhanced. Furthermore, fostering community involvement in shaping and executing the policy agenda not only empowers citizens but also enriches the decision-making process, leading to more tailored and impactful solutions. Ultimately, embracing these strategies will pave the way for a more inclusive society where the needs of the indigent population are met with compassion and efficiency.

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