

Report on initial exploratory focus  
group research into a decent living level

# Working Paper 9

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The National Development Plan (NDP) aims to eliminate all poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The poverty line used to benchmark poverty in the NDP is R418 per person per day in 2009 prices. According to the NDP, 39% of people living in South Africa in 2009 fell below this line. The objective is to reduce that to zero by 2030. However, alongside this very minimalist absolute poverty measure, the concept of an 'acceptable standard of living' or 'decent living level' has also been introduced in the NDP as a policy goal for the first time in any South African national policy document. The concept of a decent living level is informed by the multidimensional capabilities approach to development, and is to be realised progressively over time. Many would argue that this approach is far more beneficial as a foundation for the development of the necessary policies to address the rights- and development-based deprivations currently experienced by millions of people in South Africa than the minimalist poverty line. The NDP calls for a national debate to be held in order to build a consensus on what such a living level would include. The Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) and several of our partners are of the view that this is a critical conversation that should be nurtured in South Africa as a nation. We also believe, however, that considerations on what would constitute a *decent living level* must be consistent with the state's obligations in terms of the transformative and restorative obligations contained in the Constitution of South Africa, including the socioeconomic rights, and the inalienable rights to equality, dignity and life.<sup>2</sup>

Income, whether from employment, remittances or social security, is critical to achieving a decent living standard, but an income level does not reflect *what* people deem to be necessary to meet a decent living level. People need adequate nutrition, they need transport to get to work, and they desire safe communities and clean neighbourhoods, clothes, personal sanitation, and the ability to communicate and to obtain information about issues that concern them. Access to these goods and services demands a range of actions from individuals, government, communities and the private sector.

SPII, together with its current partners and under the auspices of the Community Constituency of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac), has

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See South Africa (2012).<sup>2</sup> Sections 9, 10, 11, 26, 27 and 28 of the South African Constitution.

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embarked on a project to identify the elements of a decent living level to contribute to the ongoing discussion on what constitutes the essentials of decent living in South Africa.

In this paper, we begin by setting out the underlying methodology employed in this project. As a precursor to the section on the findings of the research, we problematise past approaches to poverty discourses. For SPII, it is critical that we reject out of hand the survivalist approaches to defining poverty, and that we conclusively embrace an acceptance of everybody's right to a decent standard of living. From our findings, it is clear that people most cruelly feel the impact of poverty in the face of rampant inequality in South Africa. This social and economic gap must be acknowledged to enable us to address the dangerous potential of this inequality which is causing social, economic and political instability in this country. Our findings section reflects participants' views of poverty and its causes, their views on what would constitute a sufficient level for a national minimum wage, and we list the essentials that participants believed would be necessary to constitute a decent living level together with the range of costs that were seen as reflecting a sufficiency of these items. We then conclude with a reflection of what participants thought could provide critical policy solutions to enable people to meet a decent standard of living.

It is hoped that this paper, based on our initial work, will contribute to a discussion of a decent living level in people's lives. As SPII has indicated in past Policy Briefs (available at [www.spii.org.za](http://www.spii.org.za)), we believe that undertaking a national qualitative and quantitative study and the development of adequate household budgets or minimum income standards would dramatically advance our knowledge in this field. We hope that this is something to which the National Planning Commission would lend its support.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This report uses a qualitative approach to ascertain detailed descriptions of:

- people's perceptions, knowledge, and experiences about poverty and inequality;
- their aspirations in terms of improving their living conditions;
- the notion of what people think should constitute a minimum wage;
- the focus groups' opinion on what should constitute a decent living level, and the cost thereof in South Africa.

The areas included in the study by SPII constituted a periurban area (Evaton), an informal settlement (Zandspruit), a formal established black African township (Alexandra Township), all of which are situated in Gauteng, and a rural community, Giyani, in Limpopo. South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID) also hosted a focus group with women in Sandton, using the same questionnaire, and that data is included in this analysis.

Data collection involved three months of fieldwork in the above areas between February and April 2014 using focus group discussions, which were facilitated by using a questionnaire, and proceedings were subsequently translated, transcribed and analysed. The focus groups were generally delineated into three groups: youth, older men and older women, except for the focus groups in Alexandra for which no youth focus group was formed. In Zandspruit and Sandton only one focus group was formed, due to external constraints. Youth focus groups included both young men and women from ages 15 to 35 years old, while the older women's and men's groups constituted women and men from 36 years to 60 years. The idea to separate the groups on the assumption that their understanding and experiences of poverty and notions of a decent living level would differ between the three groups and issues of power dynamics at a community level that might prohibit full participation by some participants. This is an established methodology in the make-up of focus groups.

The objective of the focus groups was to explore the following questions:

1. identify broad essentials for a basket of goods and services;

2. provide an indication of whether a majority (50%+) of participants agreed that an item constituted an essential for a decent standard of living;
3. agree on a threshold of value or cost or quantity for each such good or item for those items that were voted for as above.

The average number of people participating in each of the focus groups was eight. A total number of 83 respondents participated in all the focus groups discussions. The focus groups were semistructured and were recorded after obtaining permission, and this data was subsequently translated and transcribed. The major inclusion criteria for choosing the participants was that they should be South African citizens and 15 years or older.

**Table 1: Number of participants per focus group**

	Youth (n)	Older women (n)	Older men (n)	Combined total (N)
Alexander	NA	4	9	13
Evaton	8	8	8	24
Giyani	9	7	8	24
Glenwood/ Sandton	NA	NA	NA	8
Zandspruit	NA	NA	NA	14
<b>Total</b>	17	19	25	83

The focus groups explored the following subquestions:

- Are there people in South Africa that are poor and who are they? Are there people in South Africa that are rich and who are they? Why are people poor or rich?
- In South African society, when we say a person, family or household is poor what do you understand this to mean?
- What are the things that one would require to live a decent standard of living in South Africa?
- In the past 12 months what do you think have been the major causes of the increasing cost of living in South Africa?
- What do you think should be a national minimum wage for South Africa if this wage was to be introduced in 2014?

The questionnaire provided information concerning lists of possible essentials, ranging from the number of meals per day to household goods and services to other activities that could depict a decent living standard for any person living in South Africa. In order to reach a consensus on what essentials were required to make up a decent living level, focus group participants were asked to vote on essentials. All items attracting support from at least 50% of the participants were recorded. In addition, the respondents were also asked to add to the list of perceived essentials provided by the facilitators.

This study was not intended to be representative, but rather indicative of whether there might be general consensus on the components of a decent standard of life. A second methodological limitation of the study is that the focus groups were not constituted from random samples, but were conducted in communities in which SPII and partners are already working as this enhanced access to participants. Despite these caveats, the findings from this study are highly relevant in advancing knowledge regarding what people think is necessary to live a decent life of dignity in South Africa, in developing an understanding of gaps between these views and people's actual lived realities, and in capturing some quite serious gaps and perceived expectations and actual realities.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The overall finding derived from the study was that poverty is experienced as a dreadful disease in the lives of many people. Not having enough, or not having anything at all, is a regular challenge deeply prevalent in our society today. Poverty is seen as a social problem that affects every individual in society, but, partly due to the contested nature of poverty, 'belongs' to a selected few (SPII 2007).. It a burden that rests squarely on the shoulders of the poor and which adds to the existing social distance that is also a legacy of our segregated apartheid past. A feature of South Africa's current work environment is the prevalence of the working poor and underemployed workers, people who struggle to meet their basic needs and continue to experience socioeconomic lacks, despite their formal inclusion in the labour force.

### **3.1.1 Defining poverty**

Poverty is understood in many different ways. It is often defined in terms of simply material subsistence needs, without sufficient attention being placed, we argue, on the social deprivations that this lack causes. A household is considered poor if it lacks food, basic income and adequate shelter, but more recently through the work of development economists such as Amartya Sen, the notion of capabilities poverty – the inability to have adequate command or control over basic goods required by people to enable them to reach their full developmental potential – has become more mainstreamed into poverty writing.

Spicker et al. (2006) identified three approaches used in constructing definitions of poverty. The first is a material approach where people lack certain things that are essential, with defined patterns of deprivation and an attendant low standard of living. The second approach considers economic circumstances, which has to do with lack of resources, or having fewer resources than others (economic distance) to obtain the things they want. The third approach explores the social relationships whereby the social status, access to power and available opportunities are assessed. This approach rests on the principle that a lack of access to adequate income and basic infrastructure results in social exclusion and people not being able to fully participate in the society.

According to the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit to Social Development, which was signed by governments of 117 countries, poverty is a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It reflects not only on income, but also on access to social services (Spicker et al. 2006). A common feature to all definitions of poverty is usually the quality of life of individuals, social participation and meeting basic needs (SPII 2007).

### **3.1.2 Causes and effects of poverty**

The poor do not cause their own poverty. About half of the South African population (22 million) live in poverty and lack access to any kind of social security. Poverty is usually the result of structural failures and inefficient economic and social systems. It is the product of inadequate political responses, bankrupt policy imagination and insufficient international



support. The continued acceptance of poverty as an inevitable state of existence for so many people, however, expresses a lack of respect for fundamental human values.

The impact of poverty is huge and has a pervasive reality for individuals, families and society at large. It breeds poor health, reduced working capacity, low productivity and shortened life expectancy. For families, it leads to inadequate schooling, low skills, insecure income, early parenthood, ill health and often premature death. For societies, poverty hinders growth, fuels instability, and keeps poor countries from advancing along the path to sustainable development.

### **3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions**

Across the focus groups, participants voiced their opinion that in South Africa poor people are predominantly black, and that the majority of rich people are white. The two exceptions to this was government employees and business owners who were seen as being rich, while poor people are described as the low-income earners specifically including artisans, farm workers and domestic workers. The Giyani youth focus group viewed white people (due to accumulated resources) as having a strong culture of saving, investing and having fixed assets which exempt them from absolute poverty. This was in contrast to the black majority, who usually have to borrow in order to live, due to a lack of basic income. There was a debate among the Zandspruit focus group on the difference between being wealthy and being rich in South Africa: it was noted, for instance, that Patrice Motsepe is wealthy and not just rich:

*You see someone like Patrice Motsepe is wealthy not rich, and that is sustainable. Someone like Motsepe makes money even at 3 a.m. when he's asleep; he also doesn't have to wake up to work. Whereas someone who's rich has to wake up every day and go work and make their money, so they're not wealthy.*

In addition to that, it was lamented that people working in government who indulge in nepotism, bribery and corruption are much better off – in fact, rich – compared to everyone else in the community who has to continue to struggle with poverty and trying to make a better life for themselves. In other words, corruption was seen as benefitting government

officials to the detriment of the poor, both in terms of access to income and of the resultant lack of adequate services.

Poverty, or being poor, was defined as not having the minimal resources or purchasing power to meet one's basic needs. An alternative is usually borrowing or buying goods on credit. Using available credit facilities was seen as a contributing factor to people remaining poor. The Zandspruit focus group pointed out that most black people are in debt through loans obtained from loan sharks and also due to credit, especially with clothing shops. Also what has become a norm is that certain owners of 'spaza' shops will insist on charging interest on goods purchased on credit, such as bread, maize meal, and oil. This is because most people are only able to pay at month end after taking goods on credit throughout the month.

Lack of food can be used as an indicator for poverty and deprivation. An indication from the discussions was that many people go to sleep hungry every night because they cannot afford to eat. Nutritious food is necessary for proper growth and development and a lack of it results in sickness and diseases, especially among women and children. According to one respondent in the Alexandra group, *'poverty is when you take 3-4 days without a meal, not because it's by choice but it's because you are not able to afford anything to eat for those days'*.

Reflections from the group discussions indicate that in townships, many people cannot afford to meet their basic needs and lack basic infrastructure in their communities. Such needs include electricity, water, decent housing, education, transport and healthcare services. For instance, a lack of electricity was linked to an inability to preserve food, thereby increasing the cost of daily food consumption. Also, people who live in shacks and townships are regarded as poor given their environment. As stated by a participant in the Alexandra men's focus group:

*Poverty is about lack of access to basic services. There are impoverished communities that are in that situation because government doesn't take care of their needs; for example, you find that there are places in South Africa today that still use a bucket (toilet) system.*

Constitutionally, people have rights to these basic needs and infrastructures, but it is perceived that these are not enjoyed due to negligence and corruption. Not being able to afford these basic essentials was attributed to earning low incomes, or no income at all, and the general increased cost of living. According to one respondent in Alexandra:

*For me, from what I understand about poverty in South Africa, is not about people not having food to eat or something, rather it's about the low incomes that the majority of working South Africans get paid and they contribute towards a situation in which people struggle to meet their daily needs. For example, the cost of public transport is very high and people have children to support and take to school, but their salaries/wages are still very low and do not keep up with the increasing cost of living. That's why a majority of South Africans are unhappy with the low wages and most people do not even like the kind of jobs that they find: it's just about survival that people settle for anything as long as they can survive.*

A lack of job satisfaction is a major challenge facing most workers in South Africa. The recent protests on wage increases by miners and other sectors of the economy reflect how unhappy many people are with their wages and with their inability to live a decent life. The jobs referred to in the above extract are jobs generally referred to as 'piece jobs', which in most cases are for the unskilled, the illiterate, and unqualified, and include irregular low-earning cleaning, washing, ironing, gardening, and construction jobs. 'Piece jobs' do not provide any of the basic protection that is part of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) definition of 'decent work'.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the lack of employment and basic education were identified among the majority of the focus group participants as the major driving force of increased poverty in South Africa today. It was said by some participants that in the past, no one was unemployed, even in townships, and people could easily change from one job to another in every sector in the country. They further attributed corruption, nepotism and black empowerment as part of the cause of high unemployment levels in South Africa today.

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<sup>3</sup> According to ILO 'decent work' sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

There was a feeling among the Giyani focus group participants that residents in rural areas are the poorest people in the country and those who live in cities are better off than those who live in the rural areas with regard to access to employment opportunities.

It has been argued that poverty is widespread in society but women are becoming more visible among the poor because of a process of feminisation of poverty (Spicker et al. 2006). Women are gradually becoming the sole breadwinners in an increasing number of families to keep the family out of poverty. The income earned by single mothers is often insufficient to support their families with dependent children, which is why most single mother families are usually poor.

Women in Giyani spoke about the need to change traditional gender roles. Some women reflected that although there is a need for an extra income in the household, their husbands wouldn't allow them to work. Reasons were given such as 'other men will see you' and that 'other men might take you' is what their husbands worry about when it comes to them working. There has been an increase in rural to urban migration because more job opportunities exist in the cities; this allows for remittances for the families left behind in rural areas. Women also noted that men, especially those who work in the cities (Johannesburg), tend to have city-based families and this depletes the money that they are able to send home.

The older male focus group in Evaton mentioned that access to basic services is quite a challenge in their community, and people feel hopeless due to the general lack of development in the area. They suggested that government should use their tax monies to build infrastructure in their community instead of spending it 'on themselves'. Another major cause of poverty identified by the focus group is lack of competitiveness among South Africans. They claim that foreigners (Somalians and Ethiopians) are taking away their business clientele by selling goods at cheaper prices, thereby inhibiting them from expanding their businesses. It was said that foreign nationals' business model is much better than that of South Africans because they combine their profits to buy goods in bulk and then distribute accordingly among themselves; that is why they seem more successful than South Africans. Also, a major challenge that was identified as a hindrance to South African

business was tribal affiliation which led to people not doing business with others from a different group.

As stated by a participant in Zandspruit:

*You see when you open a spaza shop and sell a cold drink for R11.00, there are Somalis who will also sell the same cold drink atfor R9.00. On top of that you have to spend money on petrol to purchase your goods. You will also see people with an empty cold drink bottle passing your spaza shop to go to that cheaper one and that for me contributes to people struggling to make a living out of spaza shops. At least that's what I have observed in my community.*

Interestingly, poverty was also viewed by some respondents as a choice that people make, although others said that individuals remain in poverty because they do not see 'choice'; or if they do, they do not know how to access proper resources or reasons to get them to the point of actually being able to 'choose', to organise, and enable them to take responsibility for making an informed decision about their future. As stated by a respondent from Evaton:

*Well, my understanding is that some people choose to be poor. Besides having a job in government, people who are rich work hard. For example, if you want to be a lawyer you work hard to become one. Each and every person must take the initiative of ensuring that they work hard to take themselves out of their situation. For me that would be understanding why some people are rich. If you want to be poor you work hard and if you want to rich it's also about yourself. Everything is about you.*

Another respondent added:

*For example, I live in a shack and my parents are struggling, but there are a lot of opportunities made available by government. So if I've surrendered myself to being poor I'll always struggle. Say, for example, there are people who tell you that there are grass cutting opportunities in my community and then I tell myself that it's not the kind of work that I want to do. But you never know, maybe if I went to apply for grass cutting I might be able to improve my situation as I will be receiving an income. So many young people do not favour some kind of job available in the community because it doesn't suit them and they would rather stay at home doing nothing. So*

*sometimes it's about the choices we make that we find ourselves stuck in poverty instead of taking advantage of available opportunities.*

The above extract illustrates that one's poor parental background should not deter people from breaking out of intergenerational poverty. There is need for individuals to work hard to earn a living instead of total dependence on government for daily livelihood. It was suggested that education, among other things, is a major tool for uprooting people from poverty and deprivation and, importantly, rising out of intergenerational poverty.

Also, the Alexandra male focus group compared South African nationals with foreigners and concluded that South Africans will not take up jobs that will not provide them with a certain level of income, unlike non-nationals. It was stated that non-nationals will settle for less in terms of wages just to survive while South Africans do not compromise. In effect, it does not mean laziness as it has been claimed. For example, non-nationals may work for less than R100 per day while nationals will not settle for very low wages. They believe that it will not sustain them and their families; hence they would 'rather starve than earn peanuts'.

*You come across a situation where a white man hires you and wants to pay you R100.00 a day and you know you must turn down the job because you cannot survive on that But then you find foreign nationals coming into South Africa who don't mind working for that R100.00 and even less, like R70 or R50.00. So when you look at the situation in South Africa now, it's not as if we don't want to work compared to foreign nationals, it's just that we don't want to work for very low wages. That contributes a lot to poverty. We come from rural areas and our parents depend on us to come here and obtain better wages so that we can send money back home for our parents to buy food, belong to burial societies and stokvels and that is why you cannot survive by working for very low wages. (Zandspruit focus group)*

The issue of the rising cost of living was also raised. Poverty would not be as unbearable if the cost of living was not so high. It was deduced from the discussions that the high cost of living emanates largely from constant increase in prices of petrol. As the petrol price increases, the price of most goods and services such as transport, electricity and food, tends to go up. Strike actions have been a way through which workers and trade unions bargain for increases in wages or show disapproval about failing government policy. However, the

respondents pointed out a comparative failure of consumer action in response to the incessant increase in the prices of food items such as bread, meat, rice, which occurs at any given time.

*We have a problem in South Africa: essential things such as bread can go up and we never complain. Instead we will complain and protest about roads and houses and never protest when the price of bread is going up beyond our means, I mean it's a basic need for a majority of households.*

Many suggestions were made on the way forward towards eliminating poverty and inequality in South Africa. Basically, it was suggested that government should create equal employment opportunities for all: both blacks and white. Basic infrastructure such as housing, education transportation, healthcare should be available and maintained constantly. Also, there was a call for an increase in grants for women, children, the old and the disabled in order to enable people to command a decent life. Corruption among government officials must be checked and corrupt officials should be flushed out. Lastly, there should be a swift monitoring of illegal migration into South Africa, as it causing lot of harm to existing residents.

### **B. Minimum wage**

In the recent past there has been no comprehensive wage or income policy in South Africa, thus the apartheid wage structure has not been fundamentally altered (Coleman 2013). The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has played an influential role in determining labour market and industrial relations policies in the country. As set out above, it was held that the majority of black workers, particularly in the private sector, continue to live in poverty. The current salary of workers does not usually cover expenses and most people basically survive on grants, especially women, children and old people. This is true both in the most vulnerable sectors, but also for many blue-collar workers. The sense of introducing a decent national minimum wage would be to protect all low-income workers against poverty (Ibid.).

Questions about a minimum wage for all workers in South Africa revealed a gap between current wages and that which was viewed as being a living wage. The view of all the focus

groups was that most workers are underpaid, settling for less, just to make ends meet or as a participant said 'working to work'. Minimum wages in sectoral determination reveals that half of South African workers earned below R3 500 per month in 2012 (Ibid.). For instance, domestic workers earn less than R2 000 per month, farm workers earn about R2 500 per month while salespersons earn less than R3 500 per month.

In all the focus groups, the older men's and women's groups proposed a minimum wage level of at least R2 500 per month, with an emphasis on domestic workers. On the other hand, no member of the youth focus group thought that they should earn anything less than R5 000 per month given the present cost of living in the country. The youth focus group in Evaton's discussion on a minimum wage revealed two other interesting views. The first was about social value of specific jobs in the society. Teachers, nurses and social workers were believed to have an important role to play in the growth and development of the country and they should earn a salary that affirms this social value. Also, police officers needed to earn good salaries to avoid being corrupt because their current salaries are seen to make them susceptible to corruption.

### **C. Consensus on a decent living level?**

The focus group participants were asked what they thought were key elements to ensure a decent living standard, and its cost in South Africa today. The need for money, food and jobs topped the lists of the majority of the participants with various other basic needs also being identified. However, the responses were subjective reflecting the age differences between the youth focus group and the older men and women.

The list of food items that were considered basic staple items for most households on a day to day basis included maize meal, red meat, cabbage, spinach, beetroot, cooking oil, oranges, bananas, apples and lettuce while non-food items were made up of household essentials such as electricity, transport, education, clothing, a television set, fridge and personal hygiene costs. But the question is whether the identified foods items listed are nutritious. According to experts, a nutritious basic diet should comprise 40-50% carbohydrate (bread, rice), 30-40% protein (diary, meat, chicken, and fish) and 20% fat (Kumar 2012). Other important ingredients are fruits and vegetables that contain large amounts of fibre and vitamins. Obviously, the food items listed by the participants have a



component of nutritious food. However, there is no avenue to investigate the quality, quantity or how the food is being consumed.

In addition to the above, we presented a list of essential elements required for a decent living level and normal mental and physical health, ranging from food (how many meals per day), household goods and services to other extracurricular activities. Participants were then asked whether each item was necessary for a decent living.

Out of 56 listed essentials on the questionnaires, 38 (67.8%) had unequivocal consensus on the constituents of a decent living level. The result showed that some essentials are of paramount importance in many households regardless of age, and without which they cannot function properly. From all indications, essentials such as food, a fridge, television set, clothing (including a warm coat in winter), savings for emergencies, electricity at home and a shower or a bath in the house topped the list. Worthy of note is the fact that access to these essentials requires a regular steady income in order to cover costs.

Food security was seen as difficult to achieve without a fridge and a source of electricity for its preservation. About half of the respondents strongly agreed that having three meals a day with fruit and vegetables (costing, ideally, a median of R2 900 per month) is important for a decent standard of living, while only about 10% proposed that two meals per day would provide a decent living (at a cost range of between R900-R1 650 per month for food and R150-R1 500 for fruit and vegetables). It is interesting to note that among people who thought that only two meals a day were sufficient, the ideal pricing of the food was also lower. This could reflect either that less food in total was being consumed, or that people in this category generally spend less on food.

Respondents were clear to point out that food items (especially meat) spoils because they do not have fridge and/or no electricity. The cost of sufficient electricity for a decent life was estimated to be between R150 and R450 per month. An alternative to this dilemma is using a neighbour's fridge, but most times the owners of the fridge will consume their meat without permission. The sad truth is that poverty will continue to thrive in the midst of these challenges.

Although there was no direct question on housing in the focus group questionnaire, respondents stated that having a shower, a bath and an extra room for a visitor is important in maintaining a decent standard of living. Poor housing conditions are a trademark of most townships and informal settlements in South Africa. In Alexandra township, according to participants, there is little decent housing or proper toilet systems among the shacks found in the area. A respondent mentioned that ‘they have holes in their shacks and rats can easily come in at night and the roofs are leaking’. There is need for proper maintenance of houses to avoid further depreciation and decrepitude.

The post-1994 policy priorities of government included a platform for better housing conditions through the Reconstruction Development Programme (RDP). Since 1994, more than 3 million RDP houses have been allocated to poor South Africans, most of which are, however, subject to some restrictive and pre-emptive conditions (Louw 2011). However, housing is still a main challenge for the country with many homeless and poorly housed people. Corruption seen in the allocation of these houses is seen to pose a major hindrance in providing good housing for all.

The study revealed people’s awareness of vulnerability in difficult situations. The culture of saving is seen as very important by most participants. Unplanned events such as funerals, hospitalisation and accidents can be very costly. It was suggested that each household should set aside savings for emergencies of between R500-R1 000 per month for ‘rainy days’. Also, clothing came out as important essential required for decent living standard. There is a saying that you are ‘addressed as you are dressed’. Most young people expressed a preference for buying new clothes compared to the older focus groups members. Importance was also attached to having warm clothing during winter periods at an estimated cost range of between R300-R1 500 per person.

**Table 2: Price range of selected essentials**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Price Range (Rands)</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Three meals per day	1 800-6 000	Per month
Two meals per day	900-1 650	Per month
Fruits	150-1 500	Per month

Vegetables	150-1 500	Per month
Savings for emergency	500 – 1 000	Per month
Clothing (for winter)	300 – 1 500	Once off
Fridge	2 500-9 999	Once off
Electric oven	1 000-3 500	Once off
Electricity	150-450	Per month
TV	1 000-8 000	Once off
Computer	2000-6 000	Once off
Cell phone	200-2 500	Once off
Internet access	40-150	Per month

The impact of globalisation is evident in recent technological advancement around the world today. Communication has become a key element or criterion for a better livelihood. There is dissemination of information and diffusion of ideas through the internet, radio, television, cell phones, newspapers and computers. Keen interest was shown from the focus groups on the need for information, especially the young people, with regard to job opportunities. The estimated need for internet costs ranged between R40- R150 per month.

There are other social activities that could constitute decent living standard outside food. The majority of the participants (70%) identified the importance of being able to have a holiday away from home, or to visit friends and relatives. Others prefer to travel 'home' to spend Christmas with loved ones, especially to maintain family ties. The cost of the activities is always saved for throughout the year because they are usually expensive. For instance, it was estimated that most people spend between R800-R10 000 during Christmas holidays. Also, a holiday away from home once a year may likely cost between R300-R7 000 depending on the duration and location.

#### **D. Conclusion and way forward**

The focus groups highlighted that poverty and a general lack of resources for a decent living level is something that is well understood by the majority of participants, but so too is an

awareness of what people believe should be accessible to all. There is a general sense of frustration but also resignation that this level of living will not be enjoyed by participants in their lifetime. The youth, however, feel most frustrated about this, and also have the highest levels of aspiration, which predict challenges for political leaders. There was also a sense of heightened autarky<sup>4</sup> – the increasing individualisation of society as the sense that things will not change sets in. Access to information about possible programmes for self-advancement and available services was identified as being crucial, as well as a sense that people are not just waiting for government to ‘hand out’, but that people have a sense of what is feasible and what is not from their positions of poverty. There is a definite level of consensus about what constitutes a decent standard of living, and based on this, SPII is committed to undertaking the next phase of their work, in partnership with key social partners, in terms of undertaking national, representative focus groups to advance this initial enquiry.

Finally, the following were identified by respondents as being critical for policy makers to adopt in order to enable people in South Africa to enjoy the promise of ‘a better life for all’:

#### **Recommendations for future poverty reduction policies by focus group participants**

- Increased minimum wage level
- Increased social grants to cover needs
- Skills acquisition programmes
- Job provision/creating employment opportunities
- Improved educational system
- Access to information
- Provision of basic social amenities
- Reduction in taxes on the poor (especially VAT and user fees)
- Increased exporting of locally produced goods and services (i.e. greater market access)
- Increased recycling of products

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<sup>4</sup> The quality of being self-sufficient.

- Family planning
- Spiritual guidance
- Increased rural development and economic activities.

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*Building up knowledge  
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