

Satisfaction with government

Low levels of satisfaction with local government cause for concern, says survey

As the next round of local government elections approach in March 2011, the issue of how happy South Africans are with their municipalities is growing in importance. A recent survey shows that Gauteng residents have a low opinion of local government, compared to how they feel about the provincial and national spheres. 6 out of 10 people are 'satisfied or very satisfied' with national government, and 5 in 10 are satisfied or very satisfied with provincial government. But satisfaction drops to only 4 in 10 for local government.

The quality of life survey, undertaken by the Gauteng City-Region Observatory in late 2009, sampled 6 636 residents from Gauteng and parts of surrounding provinces. The results reveal varied levels of government satisfaction by race, municipal area, and respondents' living circumstances.

61% of African respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with national government, followed by 59% of Indians and 51% of 'coloureds'. White respondents has a much lower opinion of national government, with only 38% being satisfied or very satisfied.

A roughly similar pattern was found when respondents were asked about provincial government, although Indians (at 57% satisfied or very satisfied) were happier with this sphere than Africans (at 52%) and 'coloureds' (at 50%). Whites were again the least satisfied at 36% satisfied or very satisfied.

However the results for municipal government are remarkable: only 41% of Africans were satisfied or very satisfied with their municipality, compared to 51% for Indians, 37% for 'coloureds' and 38% for whites. "In our survey results more white respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with local government than with national government", says Graeme Gotz, Research Director at the GCRO. "Contrast that with the big drop amongst Africans, from 61% happy with national government to 41% happy with the local sphere."

Respondents were also asked what level of government they think has contributed the most in improving their quality of life. Half (50%) of Africans thought that national government had done the most for them, 14% provincial government and 11% local government. A quarter (24%) of Africans thought that no sphere of government had done anything for them. Whites placed much lower value in government generally, with 41% saying than none of the spheres of government had made a contribution to improving their quality of life. 28% of whites thought that national government had made the greatest difference, 14% provincial government and 16% local government.

"Again this question shows African respondents thinking highly of national government, and quite poorly of local government, and white residents with a more positive perception of municipalities than their African counterparts," Gotz pointed out.

The GCRO's survey results show big differences in satisfaction between municipal areas. The top scoring municipality was Midvaal with 52% of residents satisfied or very satisfied, followed by Johannesburg with 46%. But satisfaction rates drop to 38% in Emfuleni (Vereeniging), 29% in Mogale City (Krugersdorp), and a low of 18% in Westonaria using the same scale.

According to Gotz, "These low levels of satisfaction with local government, particularly amongst African residents, and especially in some areas, are a concern. The unhappiness with municipalities amongst African respondents corresponds with the service delivery protests, some of them violent, that we've been seeing in informal settlements and some townships. The survey sheds some light on factors driving service delivery protests. Only 27% of residents in informal settlements are satisfied or very satisfied with municipal government, compared to 42% of residents living in a house."

"Its too early to tell how these attitudes will affect the local government elections," says Gotz. "Elections in some municipalities may be hard fought, but its equally possible that low rates of satisfaction may translate into much lower levels of voter turnout than we saw in the 2009 national and provincial elections".

Gotz says the survey results are most interesting when the data is more carefully scrutinised and more nuanced relationships are analysed: "We were intrigued by satisfaction trends across housing typologies. For example there has been a big push in Gauteng over the last decade to live in secure lifestyle estates and clusters. Residents in this housing type tend to be happier, with a massive 72% either satisfied or very satisfied with their life generally. Compare that with only 17% of those residents in informal settlements or 22% of those in hostels.

But this doesn't mean that residents in estates and clusters are more satisfied with local government. 40% of residents in cluster-type housing are satisfied or very satisfied with local government, compared to say 49% of residents living in a block of flats. "In fact you're more likely to be happy with your municipality if you lived in an informal dwelling in the backyard of a township home, than if you lived in a lifestyle estate," according to Gotz.

"This says a lot about the challenges cluster developments pose to municipalities. People like living in them, but it has been difficult for municipalities to keep up with the pace of their development with secure water and power supplies, and to find solutions to the problems they pose for public space, road capacity, emergency and maintenance vehicle access, and so on."

The data also reveals much about the feelings of people in RDP houses. While respondents in clusters and lifestyle estates are content with their lives, but less happy with government, the reverse is true of those living in RDP settlements. 44% of respondents who were living in RDP houses were satisfied or very satisfied with local government, compared to 40% of those living in a house they had bought, on which they were still paying off a bond. But only 34% of those in RDP housing were satisfied with their lives as a whole, compared to massive 74% of those in homes they had purchased. According to Gotz, "This is a useful insight for officials and elected leaders in charge of government housing programmes, especially given the shifts in recent years towards thinking about integrated human settlements, not just unit delivery numbers. Households will certainly be thankful for the asset they have received, but this does not mean that will then be content. Something other than receiving something from government is needed for people to feel they have quality of life."