

IT'S ALL ABOUT POLICY



SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH CHAIR IN THE ECONOMICS OF SOCIAL POLICY

Along with members of his Research on Socio-Economic Policy (ReSEP) group, Prof. Servaas van der Berg is highly respected for the way he uses the analytical tools of his trade to study subjects like poverty, inequality, income distribution, public finance, social spending, labour markets, migration, regional development and social policies. This he does in an effort to put rational facts and figures behind changes in education, health matters and social grants.

Some of his studies and recommendations have given impetus to major changes in the welfare grants system for children, to the implementation of the Annual National Assessment system that gauges the numeracy and literacy levels of Grade 3 learners, and the use of standardised workbooks to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum are addressed in all schools.

When working in the policy field, one must realise that most of what you recommend will never be implemented. You can merely hope that in the process you are able to influence opinion for the better. That's the sobering advice from Prof. Servaas van der Berg, holder of the South African Research Chair (SARChI) in the Economics of Social Policy.

"However, it is very satisfying when your work does influence policy and does make a clear difference in people's lives," he admits humbly in his office in the Department of Economics, surrounded by files and reports relating to various challenges South Africa is facing in the fields of education, health and labour. Human needs are driving this economist's work – all packaged clearly in policy briefs and working papers that aim to influence policy and principles.

"Our work is unashamedly policy driven," acknowledges Van der Berg, who regularly consults with South African government departments and international organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). "It means much more to me to stimulate debate locally and influence policy positively than to only publish international research articles."

Around South Africa's transition period in the early 1990s, he was asked by people close to the ANC to have a look at the welfare grants system. The analysis he wrote during a sabbatical at the World Bank highlighted the ineffectiveness of the child welfare grant system.

"It was then a very big grant, almost on par with the old age pension scheme," he recalls. "It sent all the wrong signals, because it was only paid out to unemployed single parents whose partners did not support them financially."

"Now it is much smaller, and is paid out whether you are a single parent or not," he explains the current child support grant, which was recommended by the Lund Commission on which he also served. In 2012, the grant was worth R280 per month.

"In the decade since 2000 the number of children who go to bed hungry have halved, largely thanks to its impact," he says. "This grant probably grew further than we initially envisaged, but is now worth billions and makes a significant impact to alleviate poverty."

"Anyone's woolly opinion about poverty and development isn't enough when you do analysis and recommendations," warns Van der Berg, who in 2007 became the first member from Africa of the International Academy of Education. "You must work quantitatively with good data and figures, all within a strong theoretical framework."

Therefore his team uses large secondary datasets from Statistics South Africa, census data or labour force surveys, as well as huge international studies on education.

"It helps you to make accurate international comparisons of how South Africa is faring," he explains the use of datasets such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study that tests Grade 12 learners from 60 countries.

Van der Berg's three brothers all studied law, but as a student he was more intrigued by the methodologies and instruments of economics. "I was attracted to values and how it impacts on human needs and social development," he says, reflecting on the topic of the PhD thesis he completed in 1987 at Stellenbosch University.

"Social questions of any form always interest me, irrespective of which country or which question is on the table," adds Van der Berg, who briefly worked as a journalist for a morning paper before pursuing a career in academia.

"We have the most wonderful social laboratory in the world," he says of South Africa, which he believes faces similar dynamic changes than many other countries. "Of course, it is wonderful for someone who studies it, but as someone who has to live with it one sometimes has one's reservations."

"You know that in the end the country will get through these and other contortions," he believes. "The question is actually how many years it will take and how much time will be lost in the process."

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TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The ReSEP Analysis of education performance indicators in Microsoft Excel screencast series was developed in 2012 as part of a host of workshops presented to staff of the national Department of Basic Education. It guides them in the use of data analysis tools so that they can accurately interpret the Annual National Assessment and numeracy performance of Grade 3 learners, the annual matric pass rate or compare the School Based Assessment with matric examination marks. The series of six screencasts is available on YouTube.

www.resep.sun.ac.za



A WORK IN PROGRESS

Members of ReSEP are regular contributors to the influential Stellenbosch Working Paper Series, which is published by the Department of Economics and the Bureau for Economic Research. It diffuses the results of research done at SU and by other economists, by making available even preliminary outputs from research. Although not peer-reviewed, papers are published online that might otherwise not be published elsewhere.

More than 20 papers were produced in 2012. Some of these shed light on the gap between school enrolment and the population of South Africa, the country's much exaggerated graduate unemployment rate, working hour trends of the employed, and on how poverty and privilege influence primary school inequality.

www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers

CHAIR REVIEW

SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL ENERGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SANERI) CHAIR CHANGING BELIEFS ABOUT BIOFUELS

His advocacy work to help change public opinion and political will in support of a sustainable future – one in which biofuels and food security both have an easy fit – has literally taken microbiologist Prof. Emile van Zyl from Bothaville in the Free State to the headquarters of the African Union in Ethiopia.

He uses every opportunity to vociferously yet pragmatically champion the cause of a developing biofuels industry in South Africa and on the continent – be it on radio, in newspaper opinion pieces or as a speaker at a sugarcane conference or an interest group.

“Every time I speak to people, be it on grassroots level, with farmers or with politicians, I have the opportunity to provide rational facts about the subject,” explains this yeast expert, who is the Senior Research Chair in Biofuels and Other Clean Alternative Energy Sources since 2007.

“We need a paradigm shift in public opinion that can stimulate and influence new policy and the uptake of new technology, in an effort to ultimately ensure a more sustainable future,” says Van Zyl, whose career in biofuels development started at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in the 1980s, at a time when South Africa was still at the forefront of research on the field.

“So far, second generation technology to produce bioethanol from woody materials has only been proven in the lab or in pilot projects,” adds Van Zyl, who is one of Africa's major drivers of the Global Sustainable Bioenergy Project that aims to provide definitive answers about the biofuels sustainability debate. “The complexity of the process and the various types of technologies involved understandably makes investors cagy to fund big commercial plants of billions of Rands, and adds to the hesitance of decision makers to agree upon new policy.”

On sentiments that a strong biofuels industry could undermine food security, Van Zyl says it is possible to achieve both if the necessary policies and goals are in place. “A growing biofuels industry can open up new markets to a strong bioeconomy.”

Van Zyl is a B-rated scientist, whose laboratory has developed various patents and innovations on the use of yeast to convert cellulose in woody plants to ethanol. Some of these are used in the technology of the leading American biofuels company Mascoma.

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