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5 July 2018

UCT economists develop income comparison tool to help people understand inequality

South Africa's income inequality under scrutiny

South Africa is known for having the highest income inequality in the world. This is talked about a lot, but the country doesn't appear to be any closer to finding a solution. If anything, because inequality is such a big part of people's lived reality every minute of every day, some of its most distinctive features appear to have been internalised and normalised in society.

But what does South Africa's income inequality look like if plotted on a graph? Would the result be regarded as acceptable and normal? The University of Cape Town's Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU), based in the School of Economics, has developed an [income comparison tool](#) to help South Africans explore where they are located in the country's income distribution.

SALDRU's director, Professor Murray Leibbrandt, said: "The tool was designed to help people understand the nature and extent of South Africa's inequality. It is designed to help people see themselves in South Africa's story. By making the story about the person who interacts with the tool, SALDRU hopes that every South African who engages with it will reflect on where they fit in the bigger picture and consider what role, if any, they may play in changing the status quo."

By entering information about their incomes and family size, ordinary South Africans can use this interactive tool to see where members of their household are located in the overall income distribution. This tool is intended for personal use and understanding and SALDRU does not collect or save the information submitted via the online tool.

There is a tendency for South Africans to keep discussions about inequality at a comfortable distance from themselves and their daily lives. But this income comparison tool will challenge people's perceptions about the society we live in. Middle class South Africans may be surprised to see how privileged they are compared to the rest of the population.

SALDRU has been conducting surveys for decades, which includes collecting data on people's incomes. "Despite our familiarity with the data, plotting South Africa's income inequality on a graph and seeing what the disparity actually looks like is shocking even for us. It's quite devastating and challenging to be able to visualise the fact that 79% of the country's population live in households where the per capita income is lower than the minimum wage of R3 500," Leibbrandt added.

This is the daily situation for nearly all citizens in a society that reproduces itself in such a way that an enormous share of the country's income accrues to the best-off 10% of the population.

Measurement is just a start, Leibbrandt argues. The point about drilling into the data is to allow citizens to reflect on the texture of our society and how it works to distort the potential of our citizens in many ways.

[Access SALDRU's income comparison tool](#)

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