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# INEQUALITY: THE GREATEST THREAT TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

As South Africa commemorates Human Rights Day, it is worth taking stock of the gains in achieving universal rights for all and the threats standing in the way of its attainment. By **BONGIWE NDONDO, HLANGANISA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**D**espite being one of Africa's largest economies, South Africa remains the most unequal society in the world, according to a World Bank Group report. Economic disparities, racial divides and systemic exclusion continue to fester, threatening not only social cohesion, but also the foundation of our democracy. The worsening gap between the wealthy elite and the struggling majority mirrors global trends, yet South Africa's unique history and socioeconomic context make the threat even more pressing.

South Africa's inequality is among the highest globally, with a Gini coefficient of 0.63 – indicating severe wealth and income

disparity. According to an Oxfam report, in South Africa, the combined wealth of six billionaires increased by \$4.1-billion in 2024, translating to \$11-million a day. This while more than 60 per cent of South Africans live in poverty, while unemployment remains alarmingly high at over 32 per cent.

## AN EVER-WIDENING WEALTH GAP

In terms of wealth, the top 0.1 per cent owns 25 per cent of the wealth. This unequal distribution of resources impacts the delivery of essential services that are the building blocks of a dignified life, including adequate housing and sanitation, access to quality health and education and economic inclusion.

The social and political consequences of this inequality are dire. The global rise in right-wing politics is partly due to a disillusioned working class feeling left behind as income and wealth gaps widen. However these right-wing politics threaten to maintain and, in some instances, worsen the status quo.

Globally, there is an alarming surge in inequality and the repercussions are playing out in the political landscape. From the rise of populist movements in the United States and Europe to mass protests in Latin America and Asia, economic disparities are fuelling unrest and weakening democratic institutions. The erosion of the middle class, coupled with a growing wealth concentration at the top, has resulted in political polarisation, social



fragmentation and declining trust in governance structures.

Similarly, the United States continues to grapple with economic policies that favour corporations and the wealthy while millions of citizens struggle with basic needs. Within the EU, the recent rise of far-right movements reflect growing public discontent over economic stagnation, energy insecurity and political apathy of the middle class.

In Kenya, protests against new taxation policies have demonstrated the frustration of citizens burdened by a widening wealth gap. In Nigeria, economic inequality has also fuelled instability. The rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram has been linked to widespread poverty and lack of economic opportunities, particularly in the northern regions. When citizens feel abandoned by the state and lack access to basic services, they become more susceptible to radicalisation and violence. The Nigerian government's struggle to address these economic disparities has only deepened

the crisis, reinforcing the link between inequality and national security threats.

### **A TICKING BOMB**

Inequality is more than an economic issue; it is a political time bomb. Countries with high inequality often experience erosion of democracy, where the majority of citizens feel excluded from economic participation, disengaging from political processes, leading to voter apathy or susceptibility to populist leaders.

Increased social unrest, protests, riots and strikes become more frequent in highly unequal societies as citizens demand better living conditions. Weak governance structures emerge as governments in highly unequal societies often struggle with legitimacy as public trust declines due to perceived corruption, nepotism and inefficiency.

### **POLITICAL INSTABILITY**

In South Africa, the July 2021 riots, triggered by former President Jacob Zuma's arrest, were more than just a political event; they were a manifestation of deep-rooted economic despair. The unrest resulted in over 350 deaths, billions of rands in damages and a stark warning: when economic exclusion reaches a tipping point, social stability risks collapse. The ongoing power crisis, corruption scandals, and governance failures further exacerbate public frustration, eroding trust in leadership and democratic processes.

The growing inequality crisis is thus a direct threat to South Africa's political stability, social cohesion and the attainment of basic human rights. If left unaddressed, we risk descending into deeper polarisation and socioeconomic instability.

### **RIGHTING THE WRONG**

What can be done to address further polarisation and instability?

We must adopt more redistributive policies to create more people with a vested interest in the economy, more people with something to

lose and therefore something to defend. For example, the slow pace of land distribution could result in a more chaotic land occupation process threatening a small minority of land barons. However, fast-tracking land distribution will likely result in more citizens vested in an orderly land redistribution programme.

We need to leverage the demographic dividend through intentional skills development programmes that promote the economic inclusion of more young people. An example is expanding our apprenticeship and vocational training to produce tradesmen and women able to make a living while contributing to the economy. This will fortify the middle class and create greater economic prospects for more citizens.

Lastly, we must guard against the rising influence of ultra-high-net-wealth individuals and corporations in our democratic processes. Globally, we are seeing a rise in oligarchs whose economic power has translated into unchecked political power. In South Africa, the past few decades have been characterised by greater influence of capital in both intra- and inter-party politics and elections. This could lead to a narrow agenda that perpetuates inequality, undermines our democracy, weakens social cohesion and threatens basic human rights. ●



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