

HOARDED WEALTH, DIGNITY DENIED

Confronting South Africa's
Extreme Wealth and
Inequality Emergency



OXFAM
South Africa

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Wanga Mkabile- Zembe

Founding Committee, International Panel on Inequality

As the Oxfam South Africa inequality report shows, South Africa's ranking as one of the top 3 most unequal countries in the world has not changed much since 1994 when it held its first democratic elections.

While in one sense this speaks to the institutional stickiness of legislated structural inequality that we inherited as a country in 1994, it also most powerfully speaks to the meaninglessness of political and civil rights in the absence of realised social rights. As evidenced in this report, we have a world-lauded rights-based constitutional framework that has failed to deliver on its promise to bring to an end to inequality, specifically, racialized wealth inequality. While black and brown people have the right to vote, and can on paper, pursue life in South Africa as full equal citizens; social, economic and wealth inequality still have a colour: it is black and brown.

And the burden-bearers who carry the consequences of this inequality on their backs are black and brown women. They are the ones who bear the daily psychological toll of trying to bring together two ends that never seem to meet -in providing care, food, shelter and other essentials for their children and households with very few resources, and on very small incomes. Daily, they have to make impossible, dignity-eroding trade-offs -which meal to ration, and sometimes entirely skip, to make sure there is food for the most vulnerable member(s) of the household -a young child, a TB patient who needs to eat before they take treatment; to buy electricity or school transport; or to pay rent or a medical emergency.

These impossible choices, which are not choices at all, have to be made by someone, daily, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, and failure, because whatever decision the mother makes, someone will end up going without, an essential need will be unmet. While this is the reality for the bottom 90% in South Africa, they not only have to live daily life that denies their inherent dignity as human beings, but they have to watch the other 10% live entirely different lives, the assault of the opulence on their senses is unrelenting -they see it on TV, on social media, on their way to work menial, below-minimum wage jobs, in the suburban homes they clean, and the shiny, well-fed faces of the children they tend as nannies and domestic workers. They and their children get to embody what inequality looks like if you have nothing, while they watch and see every day what it looks like when you have too much, much more than you will ever need.

As wealth inequality widens and deepens in South Africa, with the top 1% accruing more wealth, more rapidly than they ever have, and the poorest 90% faring worse than they perhaps ever have, we must ask ourselves: where are we going to end up as a country? What is the logical conclusion for inequality of this magnitude, in a country with our particular history, where the same kind of person -black, brown -has borne the same unjust disproportionate weight of inequality for centuries? What kind of freedom is that?

Wanga Zembe-Mkabile is a South African researcher who works as a Chief Specialist Scientist at the South African Medical Research Council, and an extraordinary Professor of Social Policy at the University of the Western Cape's School of Public Health. Wanga's interests are research and teaching in Social Policy, insofar as this relates to social determinants of maternal and child health, with a specific focus on poverty and inequality.

Laura Alferts

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)

This report rightly draws attention to the extreme inequalities in income and wealth that continue to shape South Africa. But economic inequality is shaped not only by differences in income and wealth, but by the conditions under which people earn a living. In South Africa, racial and gender inequality continues to determine who owns productive assets, and who has access to secure incomes. Women informal workers sustain households, communities and the wider economy, but often do so without the protections, services, rights and infrastructure they need to secure their livelihoods and negotiate fairer terms.

Taxing wealth and investing in public services and social protection are essential. But we also need to change the economic arrangements that produce inequality in the first place. For workers in the informal economy, this means secure workplaces, basic infrastructure, childcare, and access to finance, technology, markets and public procurement. It also means regulating the firms, contractors and platforms that pass costs and risks onto workers while capturing a disproportionate share of the value they create. Above all, workers in informal employment must be recognised, represented and able to organise, not simply to have a voice, but to build the power to change the economic rules that shape their incomes and determine how economic value is distributed.

Laura Corrigall Alferts is International Coordinator of WIEGO, a global network working to improve the economic conditions and strengthen the collective power of workers in informal employment. A political economist and development scholar, her work focuses on social protection, worker organisation and building fairer, more democratic economies.

Colette Solomons

Women on Farms Project

Oxfam's Inequality Report challenges us to see inequality not simply as poverty or income disparities between rich and poor, but as a consequence of the profoundly unequal distribution of wealth, assets, opportunity and power. The Report demonstrates that South Africa's inequality is reproduced through economic structures, social injustice, and policy choices, all of which can and must be transformed.

Women farm workers stand at the sharpest edge of South Africa's inequality crisis. For generations, their labour has produced food, profits and wealth, while ownership and economic power have remained overwhelmingly elsewhere. This is not simply inequality: it is structural violence. It is embedded in an agrarian system that depends on women's labour while systematically denying them the security that their labour should make possible. Women endure poverty wages and precarious seasonal employment; many have insecure tenure mediated through a male partner or relative; they remain overwhelmingly landless; and inadequate public services and social protection push the costs of survival back onto women and their unpaid labour. These injustices are not separate from one another. They reinforce a system in which women provide productive and reproductive labour while accumulating little wealth, land or economic power of their own. The obscenity of this system is perhaps clearest in hunger: the women whose hands produce and harvest food for the nation and for export can struggle to feed their own families. When the harvest ends, wages disappear, but hunger does not. Children still need to eat, households still need to survive and care work continues—unpaid, unseen and overwhelmingly carried by women.

We must refuse to accept seasonality as a natural or inevitable feature of women's poverty. Seasonality is a gendered structure of economic insecurity, made more violent when social protection systems are designed around continuous employment and fail the women whose labour the agricultural economy deliberately employs intermittently. But justice cannot be achieved through wages and income support alone. Land is power: it is the possibility of food, livelihood, housing, autonomy, wealth and an inheritance for the next generation. Yet women spend their lives working the land without ever gaining rights to productive land of their own.

What is required is not a mere tinkering to an unequal agrarian system, but feminist agrarian transformation, including redistribution of productive land to women farm workers and farm dwellers; secure and independent tenure; decent work and a living wage; and guaranteed social protection that recognises the realities of women's seasonal labour. These measures must shift power away from those who control land, labour and wealth and towards the women whose work sustains the agricultural economy. There can be no meaningful struggle against inequality without confronting the unjust agrarian structures that reproduce it, and no gender justice while the women who feed the country remain landless, hungry, precariously employed and economically dependent. The demand is not simply for women farm workers to survive inequality. It is for the redistribution of land, wealth and power necessary to end inequality.

Colette Solomon is the Director of a South African feminist non-governmental organisation, Women on Farms Project (WFP), which has worked with women farm workers since 1996. Colette has been a passionate activist and feminist since her student years in the 1980s, when she was a co-founder of the Namibia National Students' Organisation (NANSO) and part of the anti-apartheid student movement in South Africa. With Master's and PhD degrees in Development Studies from the University of Sussex, Colette has worked in Namibia, Ghana, Ethiopia and Malawi on women's rights and rural development.

INTRODUCTION



South Africa has one of the world's highest levels of income and wealth inequality, and today's extreme levels of inequality amount to a violent assault on those at the bottom of the economic and social power ladder.

Inequality of income and wealth intersects with discrimination, – the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid, to create intergenerational traps of destitution that are undermining the prosperity and dignity of too many South Africans.

On average, someone in the bottom 90% of the population would need 345 years to accumulate the wealth held today by the average person in the richest 1%¹.

Post-Apartheid governments have invested in equalising racial access to public services and social grants, as well as interventions like the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment policy, demonstrating a level of commitment to progressive change. However, these measures have fallen far short of what is needed to meaningfully redistribute wealth, income, opportunity and power to redress the inequalities of the past or to achieve the kind of economic growth and transformation promised by democracy.

Today's high levels of public frustration at the unsustainable cost of living and high unemployment, along with declining trust in institutions, should be a clarion call for urgent action. Especially in a context of political uncertainty, with the recent election of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and local elections just around the corner. Now is the time to invest in putting the rights and needs of the many ahead of the privilege and greed of the few, by ending extreme wealth and the undue level economic power and control it affords to an elite few.

BOX 1: SOUTH AFRICA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

"The Extraordinary Committee was correct when it said that the world is facing an inequality emergency." President Ramaphosa, April 2026.

In 2025, under their G20 Presidency, the government demonstrated significant political will on the inequality agenda. They commissioned the 'G20 Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality' led by Professor Stiglitz and have played a key role in establishing the new International Panel on Inequality (IPI) to confront today's 'Inequality Emergency'². This leadership position on the global stage creates another urgent imperative for the South African government to tackle the domestic inequality crisis.

In this spirit, this short paper evidences the current scale of South Africa's inequality crisis and offers recommendations to help build towards a fairer and more equal future that ends the violence of extreme inequality. It advocates the urgent adoption of a more radical agenda to address the historical injustices and flawed policies that continue to concentrate wealth and power at the very top. This requires civil society and social movements to raise their voices together, and campaign for the radical redistribution of wealth and power that is needed to tackle South Africa's inequality emergency.

CHAPTER 1: EXTREME INEQUALITY IS DENYING DIGNITY FOR THE MANY



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Inequality is stubbornly high in South Africa by any measure. There is an extreme and growing gulf between the 'have lots' and 'have nots', compounded by and further exacerbating deep structural racial and gender divisions.

This vicious cycle represents a growing threat to economic, social, and political stability and is fuelling climate catastrophe. (See Box 2).

It is also an issue of deep concern to people in South Africa. A 2024 poll found that 85% of respondents in South Africa believe 'there's too much economic inequality' in the country. This was the highest percentage of all 22 countries (G20+) surveyed³. The levels of economic inequality have been described as the 'binding constraint' to economic growth⁴.

BOX 2: EXTREME INEQUALITY IS BAD FOR EVERYONE

It undermines Constitutional rights and guarantees of dignity. Extreme inequality goes against the Constitutional guarantee of dignity, and the principle of restorative justice which was inherent in the historic Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It also poses a threat to the attainment of fundamental human rights protected under the South African Constitution and in international frameworks. Section 9 of South Africa's Constitution explicitly guarantees the right to equality and prohibits unfair discrimination on multiple grounds, including race, gender, and socio-economic status. This section is also the legal foundation of positive discrimination policies such as affirmative action.

It is dismantling participatory democracy. High levels of inequality erode the social contract between the government and its citizens and destabilise democracy. A 2024 study modelling the relationship between inequality and democratic erosion estimated a predicted risk of democratic erosion of 31% for South Africa, compared with 4% for Sweden⁵.

When large groups of the population feel excluded from economic progress and decision-making, their faith in the political system erodes. Meanwhile rich elites can use their wealth and privilege to gain undue influence over policy-making and the ability to shape policy according to their own interests. This all paves the way for political capture by populist candidates and governments that promote divisive and damaging policies for their own gain. Even rich people are concerned about these risks. A 2025 survey of South African USD millionaires found that 79% agree that extreme concentrations of wealth allow some very rich individuals to buy disproportionate political influence, and that 65% believe extreme wealth is a threat to democracy.⁶

It is bad for economic growth. The OECD has found that higher inequality is associated with lower subsequent economic growth, while IMF research has found inequality to be associated with both slower and less durable growth^{7,8}.

It is putting the future of life on earth at risk. Evidence finds that the very existence of extreme wealth is fuelling dangerous levels of climate change. The extreme and disproportionate carbon use of the world's super-rich - through their consumption and investments - is burning through our remaining carbon budget and putting us all on a path to climate destruction⁹. This is compounded by fact that the wealthiest can use their undue influence to block climate and environmental action in favour of their own interests.

1.1 WEALTH INEQUALITY

South Africa's single richest billionaire owns more than twice the combined wealth of the poorest 70% of the population¹⁰.

The debate around economic inequality in South Africa has up till now largely focused on income inequality and the efficacy of state fiscal policy (income tax and income transfers) to reduce inequality of incomes. It is time to broaden the scope of inquiry to include the unequal distribution of wealth and its significance as a structural driver of economic inequality.

Wealth in South Africa – including land and other assets – is highly concentrated in the hands of an elite few. The fortunes of these super-rich are booming and growing at an alarming rate. South Africa now has 8 billionaires – all men – with a combined wealth of R730 billion (44.3 billion USD)¹¹. In 2025 the country's then 7 billionaires added the equivalent of R382 million to their wealth every day¹². Their combined real wealth has grown by 130% since 2020, including an 18% increase in the past year alone¹³.

In 1994, the richest 1% of the population held just under half of the national wealth. This had increased to 54.9% by 2024. The 'wealth' of the bottom 50% of the population had fallen from a negative -2,1% to a negative -2,5% by 2024 of national wealth, meaning that their debts and liabilities outweigh any wealth and assets they own¹⁴. Despite the government policies adopted to increase equitable land and household asset ownership, to promote Black Economic Empowerment and to reduce market concentration, between 1993 and 2017 the concentration of wealth increased.¹⁵ Since 2019, the richest 1% have captured 56% of all new wealth created in South Africa, while the bottom 90% have gained just 14%¹⁶.

Wealth inequality in South Africa outstrips that of other countries. In 2024, the richest 10% in the USA and Brazil captured 71.9% and 69.5% of the wealth respectively, compared to 85.7% in South Africa.¹⁷

The existence of extreme wealth is self-perpetuating; the wealthiest own the assets that generate more wealth. In 2017, the richest 10% owned approximately 59% of business assets, 59% of housing wealth, 64% of pensions/life insurance and essentially 100% of bonds and stocks¹⁸. The state has often responded to economic inequality by pointing to income redistribution programmes and social protection policies. However, without significant changes in wealth ownership, sustained reductions in economic inequality will remain difficult to achieve.¹⁹

The Apartheid system denied Black South Africans access to land and property, business ownership and management, and higher-paid jobs under the colour bar, as well as quality education. This severely impacted their accumulation of wealth and other assets²⁰, and the legacy of this injustice is evident. On average, Black households own just 5% of the wealth of white households,²¹ and in 2019, 45% of white South Africans had wealth of at least R250,000.00 compared to just 3% of Black, 9% of Coloured, and 23% of Indian South Africans.²²

Today, great wealth for the privileged few exists alongside levels of poverty and deprivation that are indefensible in Africa's largest economy. Almost two-thirds (63.5%) of South African households are food insecure²³, and over one-third (37.9% or 23.2 million people) live below the lower-bound national poverty line²⁴. A greater share of women than men live in poverty²⁵, as do a disproportionate number of Black South Africans who comprise 82% of the population but 93.6% of those below this poverty line²⁶.

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BOX 3: LAND INEQUALITY

Land ownership is one of the most significant sources of wealth in South Africa, and access to well-located and serviced land represents a key opportunity for economic advancement. Thus, the legacy of Apartheid and colonial dispossession, forced removals, pass laws, and residential restrictions remains a fundamental driver of wealth inequality.

To redress the historical injustices caused by Apartheid, the government introduced several policies and legislation, including the Restitution of Land Rights Act, No. 22 of 1994, Land Reform (Labour Tenants) Act, No. 3. of 1996 and Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act, No.31 of 1996. While these laws have achieved some degree of protection of rights and restitution, only 25% of agricultural land previously owned by white South Africans has been redistributed, restored or transferred to state ownership, still short of government's target of transferring 30% of agricultural land to Black South Africans by 2030²⁷, and land ownership remains highly concentrated amongst white South Africans who have historically been able to own property. At the other end of the spectrum, black women face the greatest challenge in owning and accessing land thanks to the intersection of patriarchal norms, socio-economic status, and the legacy of Apartheid.

One of colonialism's most insidious legacies has been that of divide and rule - setting traditional authorities against their people. These tensions persist today and are exacerbated when it becomes apparent that communally owned land contains valuable minerals. For example, conflicts between traditional authorities and rural residents in the Platinum Belt ²⁸, the long-standing conflict and legal action over titanium mining in the Amadiba region in the Eastern Cape, and land-use struggles in Mokopane, Limpopo. In the latter cases, community groups are challenging government and business regarding granting mining company licences to operate without informed consent.

People are demanding change. In August 2025, 150 farm workers, mostly women, marched to Parliament in Cape Town demanding land redistribution in favour of farm workers and farm dwellers, especially women. Organised by the Women on Farms Project, the march called on the Minister of Land Reform to prioritise legislative reform to redistribute land, including a "One Woman, One Hectare" provision that would grant each farm woman at least one hectare of land. These women highlighted that despite producing much of the country's food, farm workers often face illegal evictions and live in precarious conditions, while hunger persists²⁹.

1.2 ENTRENCHED INCOME INEQUALITY

Persistently high levels of income inequality contribute to the extreme wealth and dire poverty levels in South Africa. Income Gini (ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating one person earns or owns everything) estimates differ - with some as high as 0.8³⁰ - but there is consensus that South Africa ranks higher than any other country and well above the threshold defined as 'high inequality' by the World Bank (Gini of over 0.4).

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In fact, income distribution trends are moving in the wrong direction. According to the World Inequality Database, South Africa's income Gini increased by 17 percentage points between 1994 and 2024³¹. In the same period the income share of the top 1% of earners doubled from 11 to 22 percent, while the income share of the bottom half fell from 13 to just 5 percent³². The fact that the lion's share of income is flowing into the pockets of the richest, doubles down on already extreme economic divisions.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF REAL ANNUAL AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY POPULATION GROUP OF THE HOUSEHOLD HEAD (2006, 2009, 2011, 2015 & 2023)

Population Group	2006	2009	2011	2015	2023
Black African	98,407	109,623	125,597	136,071	143,632
Coloured	207,206	202,833	242,404	253,310	260,816
India/Asian	351,093	311,740	454,092	404,963	417,432
White	732,938	533,719	691,929	647,571	676,375
South Africa	194,641	174,682	209,883	205,794	204,359

Source: 2022/ 23 IES Statistics South Africa Table 2.7³³

Income inequality is also shaped and characterised by inequalities of race (see Table 1 above) and gender. White-headed households are five times more likely to be in the top income quintile than Black African headed households³⁴, and 45% of Black African-headed households are in the poorest two income quintiles compared to just 5% of white-headed households³⁵. A recent study finds that the average per capita income for white South Africans is like that of Denmark, while for Black South Africans it's comparable to Bangladesh³⁶. Female-headed households also tend to be lower-income. In 2023, 59% of households in the lowest-income quintile were headed by women, versus 31% of those in the highest-income quintile³⁷.

1.3 THE LABOUR MARKET REPRODUCES INEQUALITY

Trends in employment and wages play a significant role in maintaining high levels of economic inequality, and undermining prosperity and dignity for the many. Very high unemployment, insecure and informal work, wage inequality, and the unequal distribution of care work continue to leave Black South Africans, women, and young people disproportionately disadvantaged.

Unemployment is high and rising, with the same groups worst affected. The official rate has increased significantly from 25% in 2015³⁸ to 33,6% in the second quarter of 2026. ³⁹ In 2025 the average unemployment rate in G20 countries was 6,14%⁴⁰. The official rate vastly underestimates the true scale of South Africa's unemployment problem. In Q2 2026, 43.8% of the extended labour force were either unemployed or part of the potential labour force⁴¹. In Q1 of 2026, there were 8,1 million officially unemployed people in South Africa, with a further 17 million working age adults 'outside' of the formal labour market for a variety of reasons, including people who had given up looking for work.⁴²

As of early 2026, Black South Africans were four times as likely to be 'officially' unemployed as their white counterparts, and 17 times as many were outside the labour force. Women are also more likely to lack employment ⁴³; the official unemployment rate among women was 37.5% in Q2 2026, compared with 30.3% among men, representing 4.4 million unemployed women⁴⁴. A further 2.1 million

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women are discouraged work seekers. This is, in part, due to their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work. In 2025, 2.1 million women cited ‘homemaker’ as their reason for not working, compared to just 280,000 men^{45, 46}.

Emerging technologies add a further layer of risk to this picture. PwC estimates that as many as 3.3 million South African workers are in occupations significantly exposed to AI-related disruption, with entry-level and routine jobs among the most vulnerable⁴⁷. Without deliberate policy attention, the transition to AI could deepen rather than ease South Africa’s unemployment crisis.

BOX 4: THE TRUE VALUE OF UNPAID CARE WORK

Unpaid care and domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly, disproportionately falls on women and girls. In South Africa, women and girls, aged 10 and above, spend around 15.6% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared with 6.5% for men and boys⁴⁸. This burden falls particularly heavily on Black African women and girls. In Q3 2024, around 854,000 people were employed as domestic workers in South Africa, a sector that predominantly employs Black African women⁴⁹. This constrains their engagement in education and paid employment, and undermines their civil and political participation, and thus their ability to advocate for their rights and hold decision makers to account.

Far from being ‘unproductive’ labour, it is estimated that unpaid care work contributes around 14 percent of the country’s GDP⁵⁰. It subsidises public service failures, especially in times of austerity and crisis. Feminist and care-centred budgeting to adequately resource care infrastructure, and measures of progress that go beyond GDP to account for its vital contribution, are key to social and economic development and to tackling inequality.

Wage inequality is persistent and growing. Real wage increases have primarily benefited the highest paid earners in skilled jobs in the formal sector. Between 2003 and 2015, the top 5% of earners saw their wage income grow by 5.1%, which was double the rate of gross national income growth, while for the remaining 95% of the population wage income stagnated or showed marginal growth⁵¹. For instance, in less than four hours today, one of South Africa’s highest paid CEOs will earn what a domestic worker earning the minimum wage will earn in an entire year.

Minimum wage legislation is failing to address this inequality. South Africa’s National Minimum Wage Commission finds that the March 2024 increase resulted in a 19% increase in the real hourly wage of sub-minimum wage workers, but it also found evidence of poor and partial compliance⁵². This is exacerbated by high levels of informal employment which is characterised by low wages and poor minimum wage enforcement, weak labour rights and protections, a lack of social security benefits, job insecurity, and vulnerability to economic shocks. In 2025, more than 2 million women were in vulnerable informal work, representing more than a quarter of employed women⁵³, and it is estimated that nearly a quarter of all workers in South Africa (24%) lack formal labour rights⁵⁴.

CHAPTER 2:

THE PUBLIC POLICIES THAT CAN TACKLE INEQUALITY AND RESTORE DIGNITY



Although legal mechanisms of segregation ended with Apartheid, it is clear that South Africa remains highly segregated by income, race, geography, and gender, undermining the dignity of the many. But inequality is not natural or inevitable; it is the result of policy choices.

After 1994, the new democratic government sought to redress past inequalities based on a new democratic Constitution which guarantees equality as a fundamental right. But the post-Apartheid government's approach to equality was not truly transformative. It focused on policies to expand access to services, employment, and asset ownership but only incrementally, and the fiscally conservative Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy introduced austerity measures that constrained social spending during the late 1990s and early 2000s undermining progressive change. Land is one of the clearest illustrations of this: three decades into democracy, white South Africans, who make up around 7% of the population, still own 72% of individually owned farmland, compared to just 4% owned by Black African individuals⁵⁵. By 2024, estimates suggested that around 25% of white-owned farmland had been redistributed since 1994⁵⁶.

Thus today, historically disadvantaged groups remain limited in their access to quality schools and healthcare, as well as jobs and other opportunities, undermining their future prosperity. Greater family wealth is correlated with significantly better educational outcomes, underpinned by the ability to pay for private services, as well as access to decent employment which is often the result of social networks and home ownership.

This all serves to pass wealth and privilege – as well as poverty and marginalisation – down through generations.⁵⁷ It is no accident that South Africa is one of the countries with the lowest levels of income-mobility in the world, according to recent World Bank analysis.⁵⁸ Austerity, and 'soft' forms of discrimination – including patriarchal norms and social structures that continue to put women and girls at a severe disadvantage – are also perpetuating inherited advantage and undermining social mobility.

While we argue that specific interventions are required to tackle pre-distribution inequality, including through fair access to assets and dismantling monopolies, there is a lot more than can be done in reshaping the whole conceptualisation and the design of existing state policies in a way that is transformative rather than at best palliative.

There is a strong body of evidence globally that demonstrates the power of public policies such as highly progressive taxation, free public services, and universal social transfers to reduce extreme inequality. This chapter examines the gap between today's reality and the inequality-busting potential of such policies.

2.1 MORE PROGRESSIVE TAXATION CAN RESTORE DIGNITY

"Taxes that target the rich allow tax to play its redistributive function by constraining the growth of income and wealth inequalities." Chenai C. Mukumba, Executive Director of Tax Justice Network Africa and Board Member of ATAF Women in Tax Network (AWITN)⁵⁹.

Progressive taxation of wealth, capital and income is one of the key inequality-reduction tools at the disposal of governments everywhere. Levying higher taxation on those who can most afford to pay helps to level the economic playing field directly and raises significant much-needed resources to invest in public services and goods including social security that benefit everyone and can further reduce inequality.

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South Africa continues to rely on indirect taxation, while the taxation of wealth and capital remains limited. This contributes to a tax system that is less redistributive than it needs to be to address the structural drivers of inequality^{60 61}. But this can change; it is a credible and realistic policy choice to increase taxation on income and wealth of the richest individuals, and the profits of the wealthiest companies. This requires strong political will.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Personal income tax (PIT): Tax levied on the taxable income of individuals, including income from employment and certain other sources of capital income. Typically, capital income taxes are taxes generated on income from assets (like dividends or interest), while capital gains taxes apply to increases in the value of assets when they are realised or sold.

Corporate income tax (CIT): Tax levied on the taxable net profits of companies.

Value added tax (VAT): A consumption tax charged on taxable goods and services at different rates depending on the applicable tax treatment, including standard-rated, zero-rated and exempt supplies.

Net wealth tax: A tax on an individual's net wealth, meaning the value of their taxable assets minus relevant liabilities, usually above a specified threshold.

Average effective tax rate: The average of actual tax paid as a proportion of income, profit or wealth.

Tax Burden or tax contribution: How much tax falls on an individual or a company, all taxes included, in relation to their consumption, income, wealth or profits.

The Inequality of the Unfair Tax Burden

Analysis of the period 1993 to 2019, the most recent data available on this specific measure, finds that while government transfers became more progressive over that period, particularly from the late 2000s onward, the tax system as a whole became increasingly regressive⁶².

During the period 1993 to 2019, the average effective tax rate (combining direct taxes such as personal income tax with indirect taxes such as VAT and local taxes) for the top 10% increased by 8% to 40% of pre-tax income, however over the same period, the average effective tax rate of the lowest 50% of South Africans increased by 75% from 40% to 70% of pre-tax income, due to increases in regressive indirect and local taxes⁶³.

Although the top income tax bracket increased by four percentage points, from 41% to 45% in 2017, it is argued that the progressivity of this move has been undermined by tax avoidance behaviour, as well as by rebates on medical aid and retirement fund contributions that disproportionately benefit wealthier taxpayers who can afford to make such contributions in the first place^{64,65}.

In the 2024/ 2025 tax year, 39,5% of all tax collected was Personal Income Tax (PIT), 24,7% was VAT and 17,4% was Corporate Income Tax (CIT)⁶⁶. VAT negatively affects low-income households disproportionately - and therefore more female-headed households and Black South Africans - even when essential food items are exempt. Despite this, and in the context of a huge poverty and cost of living crisis, the government's 2025 budget proposed raising the VAT rate by 0.5 percentage points in 2025/26 and a further 0.5 percentage points in 2026/27, taking the rate to 16%⁶⁷. The proposals were subsequently withdrawn following political and legal contestation⁶⁸.

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It also means closing loopholes at national and international levels that allow the wealthiest to dodge taxes. Tax Justice Network estimates that South Africa loses over 2 billion dollars every year in global tax abuse (including both legal avoidance and illegal evasion), which they calculate is equivalent to around 11% of the health budget or 8.8% of education spending⁶⁹. Recent OECD analysis finds that Illicit Financial Flows cost South Africa between USD 3.5 and 5 billion annually, which equates to between 1 and 1.5% of the country's GDP⁷⁰.

Increasing the tax contributions of the wealthiest is fundamental to ensuring public services and benefits are adequately funded now and, in the future, including the social wage allocation by the National Treasury which is about 60% of national expenditure estimates⁷¹. And there is potential for additional revenue raising while at the same time reducing inequality. It is estimated that if South Africa applied a moderate progressive tax on net wealth *alone*, this could raise an extra 9.15 billion dollars per year⁷². A wider ambitious package of reforms could raise far greater sums.

A truly redistributive tax system requires the government to prioritise policies that dramatically expand the tax contributions of the very wealthiest individuals and corporations. This means increasing taxation of wealth, assets and profits, implementing higher top tax rates – including on income – and reducing exemptions that worsen inequality.

Tax reform to increase tax on the super-rich have strong public support, among rich and poor South Africans alike. In a 2025 poll of over 500 South African millionaires, 64% supported increased taxation on 'very wealthy individuals' to fund public services and deal with the cost-of-living crisis⁷³, echoing a 2024 survey where respondents from across income groups consistently supported higher taxes on the income and wealth of the rich⁷⁴. The poll of millionaires also found 70% supported a wealth tax if it paid for social protection, education or the energy transition⁷⁵.

Raising more revenue is only half the task; it must also be well spent. The Auditor-General's most recent local government report found that only 39 of South Africa's 257 municipalities achieved a clean audit in 2024/25, with R40.1 billion in irregular expenditure recorded that year alone⁷⁶. With local government elections due on 4 November 2026, restoring public trust in how public money is spent is as urgent as raising more of it.

2.2 UNIVERSAL SOCIAL SECURITY

Tax-funded universal social security directly reduces income inequality, and smooths income supply in the economy. Social assistance provides basic income support for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and unemployed people, and can be designed to reduce the negative impact and income losses resulting from shocks, including climate impacts. Social security spending in addition to income smoothing also provides an economic stimulus and has a positive social and economic multiplier effect⁷⁷. Social security, including social assistance for those unable to provide for themselves and their dependents, is also a justiciable socio-economic right in South Africa⁷⁸.

There is no doubt that means tested social protection grants play a significant role in enhancing the incomes of a large number of the poorest South Africans. In March 2023, over half (54%) of the population relied on some form of social cash transfer from the government, and according to OECD analysis they provided as much as 71% of income for households in the bottom income quintile.⁷⁹ However, evidence indicates that these transfers are too few and too meagre to effectively tackle poverty and inequality or to safeguard decent living conditions for the majority of people in South Africa.

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Despite the constitutional guarantee of universal access to social security, the social security system continues to exclude many from its net. Informal workers are excluded from the social insurance schemes, and many working age poor and unemployed adults have no support from the meagre means tested social assistance grants, despite the glimmer of hope that came during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 crisis there were temporary increases to the existing social assistance cash grants, as well as the introduction of the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grants. The latter temporarily improved income of vulnerable populations by covering some unemployed and informally employed working age people. The SRD social assistance grant covers just over 13% of the population, or 8.5 million individuals, leaving many poor adults without any access to income security. In addition to not reaching many poor people, the value of the SRD grant is less than half the value of the Food Poverty Line, leaving recipients unable to afford basic food, let alone any other necessities of life.

In January 2025 the Gauteng High Court found that the design of the SRD failed to meet a number of basic standards⁸⁰. The court ordered the state, amongst other things, to review the value of the grant and its means test and to provide a plan to the court to bring the value in line with the national poverty lines within four months of the judgment being handed down. The order has since been suspended by the state's noting of an appeal against the whole judgment, and the appeal was heard by the Supreme Court of Appeal in August⁸¹.

South Africa's most extensive category of social assistance grants is the means tested Child Support Grant (CSG). Again though, the level has been shown to be inadequate to tackle destitution including by the National Planning Commission in their 10-year review of the National Development Plan^{82 83}. According to the Children's Institute, in 2024, the Child Support Grant (CSG) of R530 was equivalent to only 70% of the food poverty line, which was valued at R760 in 2023 after accounting for inflation.

Given its critical role in reducing poverty and inequality, and protecting vulnerable households from economic shocks, the government must expand and further invest in universal social security. One policy that has been on the policy horizon since 2002 is the call for a system of Universal Basic Income (UBI). First recommended by the ministerially appointed Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System in 2002⁸⁴, a UBI would provide decent regular unconditional cash transfers to all, taxed back from richer people over a certain income threshold. This would also be a gender transformative policy given the crippling levels of poverty in women-headed households. It could also remunerate unpaid care work. For UBI to be effective in tackling poverty and inequality, it must be indexed to the Upper Bound Poverty Line. To avoid stigma and errors of exclusion created by means-testing, its universal nature is key; it would be paid to all, then recovered from those above the tax threshold through the income tax system.

2.3 DECENT AND ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC SERVICES CAN RESTORE DIGNITY

Research finds that essential public services like healthcare and education have the power to counteract today's highly skewed distribution of income; spending on services like healthcare and education acts as a kind of progressive 'virtual income,' benefiting the poorest most and directly reducing economic inequality.⁸⁵ Good quality education also improves job and income opportunities, including reducing inequality of earnings between men and women, as well as enabling people to better exercise their democratic rights and freedoms and hold decision-makers to account. This makes public investment in quality services for all, one of the most effective tools in the fight against extreme inequality.

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The drafters of the Constitution of South Africa recognised the potential to use public services to reduce inequality and dismantle the legacy of Apartheid, and in fact has been described as a ‘pillar of the political settlement’ of South Africa⁸⁶. The Bill of Rights in chapter two of the constitution provides for justiciable socio-economic rights. While it is true that the government has expanded access to education, healthcare and social protection, unequal quality and resourcing are driving greater divisions along lines of class, race and geography.

Underinvestment through state austerity is undermining the equalising effect of services and social safety nets, and the persistent inequalities in South Africa’s dual systems of private and public education and healthcare provisioning are leading to a growing gap in life-chances. Rather than tackling income and wealth inequality, and promoting social mobility, an unequal education system replicates disadvantage and privilege through the generations. Similarly, unequal healthcare provision and quality entrenches intergenerational patterns of ill-health, poverty and social exclusion. These persistent inequalities mean that the state is failing to break the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage or to fulfil the rights guaranteed to all in Sections 26, 27 and 28 of the Constitution.

The Reality: Education and Health are missing the mark

UNICEF reports that between 2020 and 2024, South African education and health expenditure fell by almost 1% and 2% respectively⁸⁷, and it is clear that a combination of population growth and increased life expectancy will put budgets under greater strain in coming years. Without a significant scale-up of investment there is no way public services can meet their inequality-busting potential or the government’s constitutional responsibility to ensure accessible universal quality services for all.



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Inadequate funding not only negatively affects the quality of services, it also leads to an increase in private provisioning for the middle class and elites, further deepening inequality. A lack of quality public services further erodes trust in the state, amplifying the effects of high inequality in undermining democracy and social cohesion. Where the wealthy opt out of state provisioning and turn to the private sector, political support for public service budget allocation falls. This reduces the ability of the state to maintain let alone improve services and pushes a greater share of costs onto individuals⁸⁸. Out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure in education has risen from 2.8% of household consumption expenditure in 2010, to 3.5% in the early 2020s⁸⁹, and OOP spending on healthcare has also increased in recent years, from 5.7% in 2019 to 6.7% in 2023⁹⁰. This spiralling cost also exacerbates inequality, reducing disposable income in a way that hits the poorest people hardest.

It is clear that education is failing to lift the fortunes of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups today. According to Statistics South Africa, well-off South Africans are around five times as likely as the poorest to complete secondary school (63% vs. 13%)⁹¹. Poorer schools (quintile 1-3) are designated 'no fee' institutions to ensure access for all, but this leaves them reliant on government funding alone, while wealthier schools - that tend to be in wealthier areas - can charge fees allowing them to invest in better facilities and more teachers⁹². A 2019 analysis found that the top 3% (200) of public high schools - of which 185 are former white-only schools and charge significant fees - produce more maths and science distinctions than the remaining 97% (6,476) of schools⁹³.

Inadequate funding where it is most needed, along with a legacy of basic infrastructure gaps, means that education quality is significantly better in richer former Whites-only urban areas, compared to poor townships and rural communities⁹⁴. These are more likely to experience overcrowding and teacher shortages⁹⁵, and to lack basic services like clean water, electricity, and functioning toilets.

Unequal access to services is also located in a history of racially defined budgeting, which is leaving historically marginalised groups ever further behind. Black students predominate in the poorer (quintile 1-3) schools, receiving lower quality education and achieving lower secondary completion rates than white students⁹⁶. 80% of white South Africans hold degrees - compared to just 27% of their Coloured and 22% of Black counterparts⁹⁷ - and white South Africans are more than four times as likely to hold any kind of tertiary qualification as Black South Africans⁹⁸.

Pregnant girls and school-going mothers, who are more likely to come from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, also face exclusion from schooling and discrimination.⁹⁹ This is driving an intergenerational cycle of gender and economic inequality, and it undermines their constitutional right to quality education.

BOX 5: SOUTH AFRICA'S MISSING TEACHERS

In January 2025, Minister Siviwe Gwarube of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) stated that more than 22,600 positions for principals, deputy principals, department heads, and teachers were unfilled in public schools¹⁰⁰.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) responded to the Minister's 2025 budget statement by pointing out that the budget constraints it imposes will prevent adequate teacher recruitment, and lead to persistently high learner-to-teacher ratios. The budget failed to provide for the employment of numerous unemployed teacher graduates, or for Grade R educators even after Grade R became compulsory¹⁰¹.

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Inequality of resourcing in healthcare is also stark, affecting both coverage and quality. The UN reports that almost half of South Africa's health budget benefits just 16% of the population covered by private medical schemes¹⁰². The majority of those enrolled in private schemes are wealthier households¹⁰³. The remaining 84% are left to rely on an underfunded and overstretched public healthcare system. This is 20% more people than in 2005, evidencing a growing need for quality public services¹⁰⁴.

Skilled health professionals are essential to quality healthcare provision, and those able to afford private healthcare are far better provided for. A 2019 study found that the public sector had 7 medical specialists per 100,000 compared to 69 per 100,000 in the private sector¹⁰⁵. It is widely acknowledged that there is a shortage of doctors and other medical personnel in primary healthcare, with poor and remote rural areas lacking access to quality healthcare and experiencing poorer health outcomes as a result¹⁰⁶. The government has also acknowledged that reducing health sector staffing has intensified the workload for remaining employees, affecting service provision as well as increasing stress levels and decreased job satisfaction for these vital frontline workers¹⁰⁷.

It is important to note that the dual health care system is not without its downside for the rich either. The private sector health care market continues to come under scrutiny for its poor returns and failing state oversight, with the state appearing unable to regulate the excessive profiteering. For example, the 2019 Health Market Inquiry by the Competition Commission found that the private healthcare market was characterised by high and rising costs, significant overutilization, high market concentration (on both supply and demand side), as well as declining benefit cover despite increasing premiums and no documented improvement in health outcomes for consumers. The investigation also found that high profits for the shareholders reduced any incentive to innovate or change the status quo¹⁰⁸.

This all highlights the urgent need to significantly scale up investment in public sector education and healthcare to adequately meet current need, and to invest in a healthy and more productive future for all South Africans.

BOX 6: TAX- AND TRANSFER FISCAL POLICY NEEDS TO WORK HARDER AND BETTER

South Africa's current fiscal policy does to some extent mitigate the extremely unequal incomes. An Oxfam analysis finds that public spending on public services and social protection reduces income inequality by almost a third (29%), and taxation reduces it by a further 4.3%¹⁰⁹. However, this is not enough to bring inequality down to an acceptable level. In 2023 the post-tax and transfer income Gini was still above 0.5, the threshold that the World Bank defines as 'very high'¹¹⁰.

Because of the multi-generational design of Apartheid policies that legislated inequality, it is clear that South Africa must commit to a more fundamental redistribution of wealth and asset ownership, and address the shortcomings of existing tax, social security, and public services policy that are undermining their inequality-busting potential.

CHAPTER 3: AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE



South Africa has the resources, institutions and policy tools to reduce inequality. Extreme inequality dilutes the power and voice of the majority in all facets of life.

What South Africans need is the sustained political commitment by those with the power to effect change to reshape society by reshaping the economy that currently continues to concentrate wealth, opportunity and power in the hands of a few. While no single intervention can reverse centuries of structural inequality, a focused set of reforms can begin to shift the country towards a more just, inclusive and resilient economy.

The missing piece in the change are people – the power of social movements for change. Below we set out a manifesto for change – what research has shown are critical levers that have the potential to cascade change across society and into every household if pursued collectively by government, organised labour, civil society, academia, business, the media and citizens.

FIVE ACTIONS TO BUILD A MORE EQUAL SOUTH AFRICA

Extreme economic inequality in South Africa is undermining progress, development, and growth; hindering poverty eradication and job creation; and risking the country's democratic gains.

The good thing is that economic inequality is a policy and political choice. That means with the right policy mix and political will, it can be reversed. South Africa has all the tools it needs to reduce it. To do so it needs:

1. A targeted reduction of inequality
2. Put Women at the Centre of Economic Policy
3. Tax Extreme Wealth for people and planet
4. Invest in Care, Public Services and Social Protection
5. International cooperation

1. Reduction of inequality

Through the adoption of a clear non-partisan inclusively agreed National Inequality Reduction Plan (NIRP), there need to be clear time-bound targets for a reduction in economic inequality, with a clear line of political accountability and regular oversight and re-evaluation by scientific experts as well as Parliament. The plan needs to include plans to reduce pre-distributive inequality as well as post-distributive programmes of redistribution.

The NIRP must be time-bound, realistic and measurable. The NIRP should aim to reduce the income Gini to 0.3 and the Palma ratio to 1 or less (where the income of the top 10% is equal to or less than that of the bottom 40%). Given South Africa's extreme economic inequality, the government should set milestone for the annual reduction required to hit the target by the stated year.

This requires a combination of progressive policy measures from the government, some of which are highlighted below.

2. Put Women at the Centre of Economic Policy

Women's economic inequality is not separate from South Africa's wider inequality emergency. It is one of its defining features. Policies aimed at reducing wealth and income inequality must therefore explicitly address the structural barriers that continue to limit women's economic participation, security and wellbeing.

3. Tax Extreme Wealth and Ensure the Richest Contribute Their Fair Share

South Africa cannot reduce inequality while extreme concentrations of wealth continue to grow exponentially, as demonstrated in this report, alongside deepening poverty and unemployment and, at the same time, the under-taxation of the richest individuals. Progressive taxation of wealth, capital and income remains one of the most effective tools available to reduce inequality, finance public investment and strengthen the social contract. South Africa should introduce a net wealth tax at rates high enough to reduce inequality, increase taxation of dividends, bring taxation of capital income closer to the taxation of labour income, and close ineffective tax expenditures that disproportionately benefit high-income taxpayers.

4. Invest in Care, Public Services and Social Protection

Reducing inequality requires sustained public investment in the services that allow people to live healthy, secure and dignified lives. Healthcare, education and social protection should be recognised as investments in South Africa's future rather than costs to be managed and contained. South Africa should also join the growing movement of countries committed to recognise, protect and reward care work as decent work.

5. International cooperation

There is also greater need for international cooperation to address economic inequality between and within countries. This includes on issues like global cooperation on taxation, fair representation of the countries of the Global South in multilateral institutions and fair global trade policies.

CONCLUSION

South Africa has lived with extreme inequality for far too long. While democracy has delivered important political equality, it has failed to fundamentally transform the structures that continue to concentrate wealth, opportunity and power. Reducing inequality will require political courage, sustained public engagement and a commitment to policies that place people before privilege.

The choices made today will determine whether future generations inherit a society defined by deepening inequality or one characterised by dignity, opportunity and shared prosperity. A more equal South Africa is not only possible. It is essential.

What This Requires

Reducing inequality is a shared responsibility. Success will depend on coordinated action across society, with each sector playing a distinct but complementary role. People have the power to shape a more equal future by participating in democratic processes, holding leaders accountable and supporting collective efforts that promote justice, dignity and social solidarity.

Government should place inequality reduction at the centre of economic decision making by pursuing progressive fiscal reforms, investing in quality public services, creating decent work opportunities, strengthening social protection and implementing policies that redistribute opportunity as well as income.

Business should contribute fairly to the societies in which it operates by paying its fair share of tax, creating decent work, reducing excessive pay disparities, respecting workers' rights and embedding responsible business practices throughout its operations.

Organised Labour Trade unions have a critical role in advancing living wages, protecting workers' rights, strengthening collective bargaining and contributing to a more inclusive and equitable labour market.

Civil Society organisations should continue building public awareness, holding government and corporations to account, amplifying the voices of affected communities, and advocating for structural reforms that reduce inequality.

Academia and Research Institutions should continue generating evidence, monitoring inequality trends, evaluating policy impacts and supporting informed public debate.

The Media has an essential role in keeping inequality in the public conversation by reporting not only on poverty and hardship, but also on wealth concentration, economic power and the policy choices that shape people's lives.

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Oxfam South Africa

Oxfam South Africa is part of a global movement of people working to end the injustice of poverty and inequality. We work with communities, civil society organisations, movements and allies to challenge the systems and structures that drive inequality and to advance a more just and equal South Africa.

This report forms part of Oxfam South Africa's ongoing work to understand and challenge the structural drivers of inequality, and to support collective action towards a more equal society.

Publication Manager: Amir Bagherioromi

Writers: Emma Seery, Isobel Frye and Amir Bagherioromi.

With significant contributions from: Pooven Moodley, Susana Ruiz Rodríguez, Anthony Kamande, Emilio del Río, Pubudini Wickramaratne, Wanga Mkabile- Zembe, Laura Alferts, and Dr. Colette Solomons.

Support: Laureen Bertin, Mandisa Dyantyi, Celeste Fortuin, Max Lawson, Ruizhen Ma, Bongani Maseko and Lerato Moiloa.

Designer: Nigel Willmott

Oxfam South Africa: www.oxfam.org.za

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Page 6: Informal settlements continue to expand across Cape Town.

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Page 8: An aerial view contrasting a township and an affluent suburb in South Africa.

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Page 14: An informal settlement in Enkanini on the outskirts of Stellenbosch, Western Cape province, South Africa. Photo: MrNovel/istockphoto.

Page 19: Students attend a class at the Seipone Secondary School in the rural village of Ga-Mashashane, near Polokwane, South Africa
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Page 22: September 2018. Protesters march to Parliament in Cape Town demanding land restitution. Photo: Tim Wege/Alamy

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Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods, also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org

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