



Chapter 1

Introduction

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Introduction

Why all the fuss about economic inequality? Why does economic inequality matter? Is it just a political theme used to support (or win over) the have-nots? Or, at the very extreme, is it driven by socialists whose goal is to establish a utopia of a supposed ‘equal society’, eventually resulting in a pure communist state? Or is it, at the fundamental level, simply a (serious) threat to economic sustainability and social stability?

Yes, inequality does matter. The high levels of poverty and inequality in the world and South Africa justify that these related challenges matter and require continuous analysis, debate, reflection, and discussion. Poverty and its close relation to inequality, the likely increase in conflict and civil war, and the search for social justice need more inquiry into the complexity of inequality’s relationship with other economic variables. In this book, which targets the general public, policymakers, and anyone interested in inequality, the following essays will reflect on different aspects of economic inequality in South Africa, specifically focusing on the period after 1994. The chapters focus on the following topics: how to measure inequality, wealth inequality, wage inequalities, land distribution, access to banking services, inequality in service delivery, socioeconomic inequalities in health, and inequality in education. The final chapters focus on the informal sector, the consideration of a universal basic income grant, and economic inclusivity as some remedies for inequality in South Africa.

Conceptual Clarity and Origins of Inequality

The concepts of poverty and inequality are very often treated as synonyms. Although these concepts are closely related, their analyses require an in-depth study of each phenomenon. Different types of economic inequality exist, but inequality is generally regarded as an obstacle to economic growth and economic development, and correlates with multiple forms of social problems, such as poor health, mortality, substance abuse, and the breakdown of social structures. The various kinds of economic inequality include:¹

- income inequality: the extent to which income is distributed unevenly in a group of people or between different groups of people;
- wealth inequality: the unequal distribution of assets (e.g., property, stocks, bonds, etc.) in a group of people or between different groups of people; and
- remuneration inequality: the difference between people's remuneration for doing the same work, which may occur within one company or across all remuneration received in a nation/community. For instance, gender differences in remuneration in the workplace is known as the 'gender pay gap'.

Inequality seems to have originated during the period of man's moving into the era of hunter-gatherers.² The period that followed – farming and herding – further entrenched inequality where wealth could be accumulated by producing surpluses, thus escalating the potential of wealth creation for those who could produce surpluses. Two determinants are vital in establishing inequality: (1) ownership of land and assets and (2) the ability to transfer wealth to the next generation. Over time, numerous factors that contribute to inequality can be identified. These include political inequality (which reinforces economic inequality); empire-building; imperialism and colonialism; industrialisation; commercialisation; urbanisation; financial sector innovation; concentration within market structures; trade; globalisation; and greed. Ironically, several factors have also contributed to the leveling or reduction of inequality, such

as wars, revolutions, economic and financial crises, epidemics, education, public policies and spending, democracy, trade, tax policies, and economic development.

When the first significant overall gap in human inequality emerged after the 1st Industrial Revolution, distributive inequality differences were not yet substantial. They have been widening ever since, though not in a steady fashion. Estimates of the income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the wealthiest country and the fifth in the poorest were as follows:

- 1820: 3 to 1;
- 1870: 7 to 1;
- 1913: 11 to 1;
- 1960: 30 to 1;
- 1990: 60 to 1; and
- 1997: 74 to 1.³

Global inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, averaged between 0.50 and 0.61 from the 1st Industrial Revolution until World War I.⁴ Between the two world wars until 1950, a decline in inequality was observed, but the rise continued worldwide. The global Gini index rose to 0.64 after 1950. From 1980 to 1990, slow growth in China and India and the collapse of Eastern Europe increased global inequality. The downward inequality trend reversed as economic growth in China and India increased and the size of their middle-income groups increased.

By 2007, the top 0.1% of USA households had an income 220 times larger than the bottom 90%. The top 1% owned over a third of the nation's wealth. The global income Gini coefficient in 2005 has been estimated to be between 0.61 and 0.68. By 2020, it was 0.67, with the average income of the global top 10% 38 times higher than the average income of the bottom 50%.⁵ Figure 1 provides a perspective on the historical progression of this trend from 1820 onwards. Although global income inequality seems to have peaked around 1980, current levels of inequality – given the record number of people (global population) involved – exacerbate the crisis.

A Fair Share: Reflecting Essays on Economic Inequality in SA

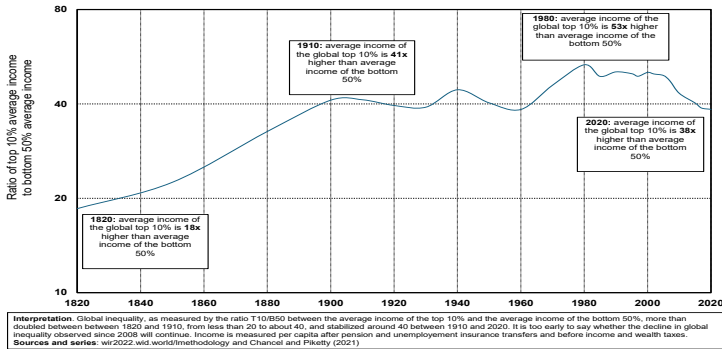


Fig. 1 Global inequality between top 10% and bottom 50% (1820–2020). Source: Chancel *et al* (2022:55)

The increase in global inequality is worrisome despite some countries recording improved Gini measures, such as India’s 37.8 (1997) to 33.1 (2013), China’s 49.1 (2008) to 42 (2013), and Brazil’s 55.3 (2001) to 54 (2013).⁶ Some countries recorded worsening Gini coefficients, such as South Africa’s 59.3 (1994) to 63.1 (2013), and Russia’s 36.9 (2001) to 40.9 (2013). Most countries with the highest indexes – which are therefore most unequal – are in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern and Northern Europe. Estimates of the current Gini coefficient globally can be seen on the map in Figure 2.

The fact that there is no consensus on the direction of global inequality and overall discrepancies in income and wealth are huge and without conceivable justification.⁷ Statistics reveal that over 3 billion people, almost half the world’s population, live on less than \$2.50 daily.⁸ It is estimated that at least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day, whereas the wealthiest 20% of the world accounts for three-quarters of world income. About 1% of the world’s population holds 46% of its total assets, while the wealthiest 10% of earners own 86% of all wealth, and the bottom half owns less than 1%.

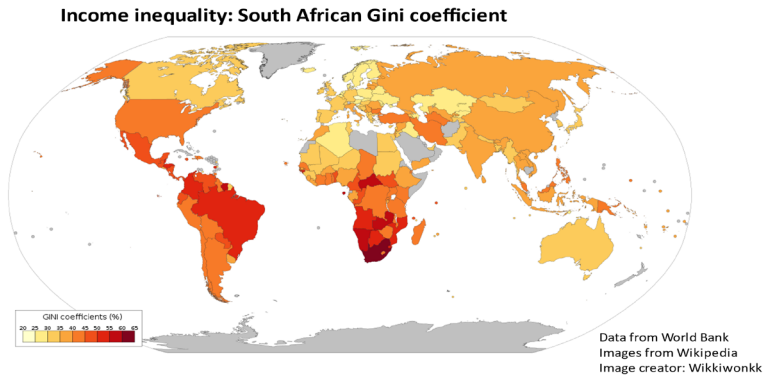


Fig. 2 Income inequality – global Gini coefficient comparisons.
Source: World Bank (2022)⁹

South Africa's newly obtained political freedom in 1994 created expectations for a transformation of the economy to move out of poverty, create employment, and reduce inequality. However, political freedom did not deliver economic freedom. As stated in the Freedom Charter of 1955, the ideal, "The people shall share in the country's wealth", has not been achieved.¹⁰ The fact is that high levels of inequality and poverty, rooted in historic injustice, provide a basis for conflict. Xenophobia attacks on foreigners, #FeesMustFall, #ColonialismMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, and various other social unrests are symptomatic of a society that is fighting for economic freedom and an inclusive economy for all.¹¹ Poor South Africans express their frustration publicly in so-called 'service delivery protests.' The need for a just and inclusive economic system has become paramount to ensure the alleviation of poverty, improve the circumstances of the marginalised, and sustain political freedom to benefit all.

In South Africa, it is estimated that more than 30% of the population lives in extreme poverty, and half of the population is in chronic, persistent poverty. Inequality amongst and between race groups has been high and persistent since 1994. Estimations are that the top 10% of the population owns 86% of total wealth.¹² The effects of COVID-19 and a contraction of 7% in economic growth during 2020 caused an increase of 2 million people living

below \$5.50 per day. Poverty levels decreased from 68% between 2005–2010 but increased to 57% in 2015 and to 60% in 2020. South Africa is an example of one of those countries that is rich (relatively speaking), but whose government is poor. According to the World Inequality Report of 2022, the top 10% in South Africa earn more than 65% of total national income, and the bottom 50% earn just 5.3%.¹³ The top 10% own close to 86% of total wealth, while the share of the bottom 50% is negative, meaning that the bottom 50% has more debts than assets. Since 1990, the average household wealth for this group has remained under zero.

Levels of inequality differ and vary throughout history. According to Scheidel, the most dramatic leveling of inequalities occurred through violence, specifically mass mobilisation of warfare, transformative revolutions, state failure, and lethal pandemics.¹⁴ Unfortunately, in these cases, the effectiveness of the levelers is determined by the scale and intensity of the occurrence. The period between World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII) has already been indicated as a period of declining levels of inequality. Similar trends were recorded during pandemics (such as the Black Death in 1347), economic crises, and revolutions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 have been notable exceptions to this trend.

Communist revolutions such as the Russian Revolution (1917), China's revolution in the 1930s, North Vietnam's revolution (1945–1953), and the Cambodian revolution (1975–1979) led to the restructuring of societies, but also physically destroyed wealth, and expropriated and redistributed assets and resources violently. All this is at the cost of millions of human lives and the wiping out of a tremendous amount of wealth.¹⁵ Although these revolutions resulted in a decrease in inequality to some extent, extreme poverty levels increased and led to the deaths of millions of people.

Research has shown that for 99% of the world's history, 99% of humankind was poor, hungry, dirty, unwise, sick, and unpleasant.¹⁶ However, everything has changed in the last 200 years, especially since 1880 (during the 2nd Industrial Revolution). Humanity has become wealthy, well fed, clean, safe, intelligent,

healthy, and beautiful. On average, humanity is currently experiencing the highest standard of living ever in history.¹⁷ This is attributed to how land, capital, labour, and technology have been applied to meet our unlimited needs and wants. Technological advancement has contributed immensely to raising living standards, yet unfortunately, to the deterioration of the environment and at a high social cost. What stands out the most is that, despite the advanced lifestyles and abundance of goods and services, there are still extremely high levels of poverty and inequality globally.¹⁸ This is a significant concern as we move into the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR).

In 1800, over 80% of the world lived in what we would today consider extreme poverty (see Figure 3). At the time, only a small number of predominantly Western countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States (US), saw meaningful economic growth. Research found that between 1 CE and 1800 CE, the majority of places around the world saw minuscule economic growth (only 0.04% annually).¹⁹ By 1975, global income distribution became *bimodal*. Most citizens in developing countries lived below the poverty line, while most in developed countries lived above it, with incomes nearly ten times higher on average. Post-World War II, growth was unusually rapid across developed countries, opening a great divide between the haves and the have-nots of the world. The various (global) financial crises that have ignited in different parts of the world significantly since the 1990s have exacerbated this great divide – not only between the developed and developing countries, but within these countries – to alarming degrees. COVID-19 further aggravated this situation. According to the IMF, the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected in the numbers: more than 3.1 million deaths and rising, 120 million people pushed into extreme poverty, and a massive global recession. As suffering and poverty have risen, some data show an increase in another extreme: billionaires' wealth.²⁰

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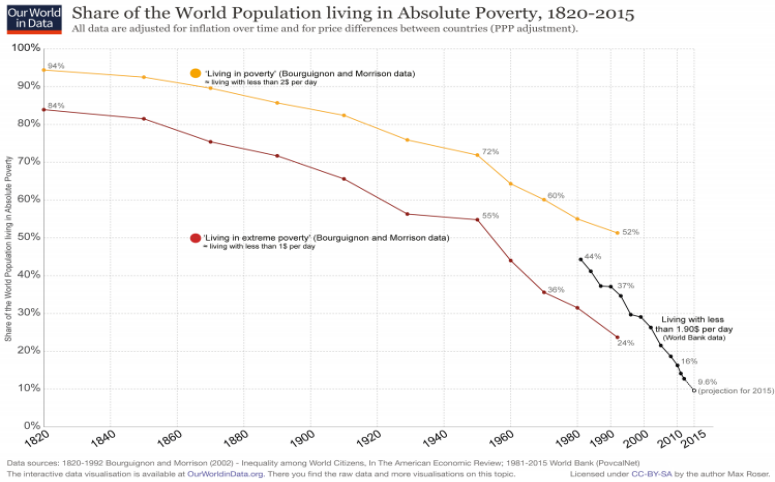


Fig. 3 Share of the world population living in absolute poverty (1820–2015). Sources: Bourguignon & Morrisson (2002); University of Oxford (2022)²¹

As global income distribution started to even out, economic output has trended in the opposite direction. GDP *per capita* was much more equal across regions in the 19th century, when it lingered around \$1,100 *per capita* globally, as Figure 4 shows. Despite many people living below the poverty line during these times, the world also had less wealth. In 2021, the global average GDP *per capita* was \$12,263, almost 12 times higher, but it is less equally distributed.²² At the highest end of the spectrum are Western and European countries. Strong economic growth, greater industrial output, and sound legal institutions have helped underpin higher GDP *per capita* figures. Meanwhile, countries with the lowest average incomes have seen different levels of growth. This highlights that where one lives heavily influences poverty, economic prosperity, and equality of opportunity.

Introduction

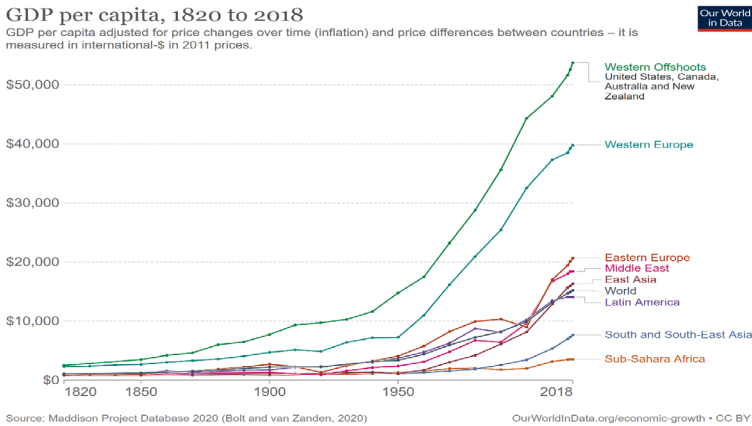


Fig. 4 GDP per capita (1820–2018). Source: Bolt & Van Zanden (2020)²³

In his book, *A Brief History of Equality*, Thomas Piketty explains that from 1780 until the 2020s, the world has become more democratic than at any period in history.²⁴ Conflicts and revolts against injustice led to the replacement of structures by new institutions to create new social, political, and economic rules. The peasant revolt of 1788–1789 (events of the French Revolution) led to the abolishment of noble privileges; the slave revolt in Saint-Dominique (Haiti) in 1791 marked the beginning of the end of the Atlantic slavery system; the civil war in the United States resulted in the end of slavery; and the two world wars are examples of these conflicts and revolts. In addition, economic and financial crises and pandemics also served as turning points where power relationships were redefined. Institutional arrangements, such as equality before the law, universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy, free and obligatory education, health insurance, progressive taxes, and freedom of the press led to what Piketty calls the “Great Redistribution” of 1914–1980 and to more equality in the world.

Piketty argues that the Washington Consensus of 1980–1990, which emphasised a minor role for the state, budget austerity, commercial liberalisation, and financial deregulation, is not contributing to an egalitarian society.²⁵ Also, the Global

Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 indicated the need to replace the imbalanced neoliberal system. Fast forward only 40 years to 2015, and world income distribution changed again. As incomes rose faster in poorer countries than in developed ones, many people were lifted out of poverty. Between 1975 and 2015, poverty declined faster than at any other time. However, still, severe inequality persisted.

Statistics from the World Bank indicate that extreme poverty declined over the past 25 years, but it is expected to rise in 2022 and 2023 as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic takes its toll.²⁶ Globally, extreme poverty rates fell to 9.2% in 2017 from 10.1% in 2015. This equals 698 million people living on less than \$1.90 daily. Using higher poverty lines, 24.1% of the world lived on less than \$3.20 per day, and 43.6% on less than \$5.50 per day in 2017. In 2018, four out of five people below the international poverty line lived in rural areas. Women represented most low-income people in most regions and among some age groups. About 70% of the global poor aged 15 and over had no schooling or only some primary education. Almost half of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) lived in just five countries: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Madagascar. Of the 28 poorest countries in the world, 27 are in SSA. More than 40% of the global poor live in economies affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, and that number is expected to rise to 67% in the next decade. Estimates are that climate change will drive 132 million into poverty by 2030.²⁷ Climate change is a particularly acute threat for SSA and South Asian countries – the regions where most of the global poor are concentrated. In several countries, a large share of people with low incomes lives in areas affected by conflict and facing high exposure to floods – for example Nepal, Cameroon, Liberia, and the Central African Republic.

COVID-19 has unleashed a worldwide economic disaster whose shock waves continue to spread. Without an adequate global response, the cumulative effects of the pandemic and its economic fallout, combined with armed conflict and climate change, will incur high human and economic costs well into the future. Under these conditions, the goal of bringing the global

absolute poverty rate down to less than 3% by 2030 and reducing all forms of economic inequality – which was already at risk before the crisis – will be out of reach if appropriate economic policies and systemic changes are not implemented to turn the tide.

Reactions to Inequality

Voices of disapproval and dismay with the current situation in the world regarding the way goods and services, wealth, and opportunities are being shared have been echoed from all corners. The youth uprising which started in 2010 in Tunisia, then spread to Egypt and then to other Middle Eastern countries (known as the Arab Spring), indicated how people are willing to voice their unhappiness about what is happening in their countries and the world. The power of social media to organise protests in the 2000s has been particularly evident. These uprisings led to more protests, such as ‘Occupy Wall Street’ in 2011 in the USA, because many Americans lost their jobs and houses during the GFC of 2008–09.

Although the grievances of the protests differ from country to country, the common thread is that the current economic and political system is failing most people and is regarded as unfair and unjust.²⁸ Trust is lost, and the social contract is broken. The themes echoed worldwide are that markets are not enough, political systems have failed to deliver, and there is an urgent need to correct market failures. The heart of the matter is that current political and economic systems do not reflect fair play. Ordinary citizens are not protected against the existing political and economic forces at work, which allows the enrichment of the wealthy at the expense of the rest of society. There is no problem with creating more wealth, but taking it from others is not fair play. The political ripple effects of inequality entail that protesters are voicing their concerns – often quite violently – against market and government failure, with severe implications for social stability.

Around the world, a new consciousness is emerging for social justice, fairness, and political and economic systems to

provide equal opportunities for all. Unacceptance of inequality due to unjust policies, wars, and discrimination is evident in the protests opposing such policies, especially where inequality is predominantly visible amongst different racial, religious, and cultural groups. However, it should be noted that some inequality is inevitable because some individuals work harder, have different abilities, and should be rewarded differently. This is called 'constructive inequality'. People are not born equal, but they have different talents, characteristics, abilities, and goals in life, and therefore outcomes would not be the same. 'Good' inequality incentivises people to study and work harder, become entrepreneurs, and create wealth. Therefore, inequality amongst individuals is also more acceptable than inequality amongst groups. However, continuing unjust and unfair policies should be eliminated and replaced by a shared value system acceptable to society. The issue is called 'destructive inequality,' which relates to inequality of opportunity, limited social mobility, and inhibition of growth.²⁹ What must also be remembered is that complete equality is the socialist's denial of actual differences in any community. At the same time, unlimited inequality is the capitalist's denial of interdependence and true community solidarity. On balance, it is the exploitative effects of inequality that must be dealt with, particularly those which entrench systemic poverty.

We live in a world where market forces still play an important role in answering the economic questions of (1) What to produce? (2) How to produce? and (3) To whom it is distributed? A different approach to answering the distribution problem is needed. Market forces or the price mechanism is regarded as efficient in determining the most needed products and services by consumers and allocating resources to the most needed goods and services. However, a more efficient and fairer society must apply just and fair principles in distributing goods and services. In this context, the question of efficient distribution, or how to ensure that economic distribution becomes more inclusive, is critically important.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift from the current economic system to a fair and just economic framework. Pope Benedict XVI called for “integral human development” in the global economy in the publication of *Caritas in Veritate*, the first social encyclical of the 21st century.³⁰ The pope objected to the excesses of an unrestricted market economy. He stated that our social and economic policies must be guided by a radical devotion to the welfare and dignity of human persons, which must account for the present economic conditions that marginalise so many of the world’s people. According to the pope, economic models and political institutions are not morally neutral, but are vehicles for our moral commitments and reflect our commitment to human freedom and justice.

The reflecting essays in this book were written by scholars who are experts in their specific fields or research areas. The essays attempt to provide more insights, policy recommendations, and contributions to the debate on inequality in South Africa (and the world). Not all aspects of inequality are covered in this book. However, the book seeks to provide and stimulate more collective wisdom, reflections, discussions, and different perspectives on critical aspects of inequality in South Africa after 1994. Enjoy the reading.

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