

Research papers

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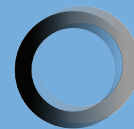
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Can the
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Inequality Matters: Can the Government of National Unity Solve Inequality in South Africa?

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Abstract

South Africa remains the most unequal society in the world, with persistent disparities rooted in the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Despite three decades of democracy and redistributive policies, inequality continues to manifest along racial, class, gender, and spatial lines. This paper examines the structural nature of inequality in South Africa, focusing on the interplay between wealth concentration, unemployment, education, and policy responses. It interrogates how post-apartheid reforms—such as Black Economic Empowerment, employment equity, and social grants—have produced mixed outcomes, often enriching elites while failing to reduce systemic exclusion. Against the backdrop of the 2024 “change elections” and the formation of the Government of National Unity, the paper analyzes the ideological diversity of coalition parties and their prospects for addressing inequality. It concludes by situating South Africa’s inequality agenda within global debates, highlighting the significance of the country’s 2025 G20 presidency as an opportunity to foreground solidarity,

redistribution, and sustainable development.

Keywords:

Inequality; structural inequality; unemployment; wealth distribution; Government of National Unity; South Africa.

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Résumé

L'Afrique du Sud reste la société la plus inégalitaire au monde, avec des disparités persistantes qui trouvent leur origine dans l'héritage du colonialisme et de l'apartheid. Malgré trois décennies de démocratie et de politiques redistributives, les inégalités continuent de se manifester selon des critères raciaux, de classe, de genre et spatiaux. Cet article examine la nature structurelle des inégalités en Afrique du Sud, en se concentrant sur l'interaction entre la concentration des richesses, le chômage,

l'éducation et les réponses politiques. Il s'interroge sur la manière dont les réformes post-apartheid, telles que l'émancipation économique des Noirs, l'équité en matière d'emploi et les aides sociales, ont produit des résultats mitigés, enrichissant souvent les élites sans parvenir à réduire l'exclusion systémique. Dans le contexte des « élections du changement » de 2024 et de la formation du gouvernement d'unité nationale, l'article analyse la diversité idéologique des partis de la coalition et leurs perspectives en matière de lutte contre les inégalités. Il

conclut en situant le programme de lutte contre les inégalités de l'Afrique du Sud dans le cadre des débats mondiaux, soulignant l'importance de la présidence sud-africaine du G20 en 2025 comme une occasion de mettre en avant la solidarité, la redistribution et le développement durable.

Mots clés :

Inégalité ; inégalité structurelle ; chômage ; répartition des richesses ; gouvernement d'union nationale ; Afrique du Sud.

Introduction

Inequality in South Africa has been recognised as one of the most salient features of our society. South Africa is the most unequal country in the world¹, with a deep-rooted history of colonialism and apartheid. This means that inequality operates along racial lines in the main. The country's inequality is significantly structural, with a Gini coefficient of around 0,67 despite efforts by government to reduce this through various policies and programmes implemented since our democratic transition in 1994 (World Bank, 2022). The World Bank report focusing on inequality further states that "race remains a key driver of high inequality in South Africa due to its impact on education and the labour market." (ibid., Stats SA, 2019) It is clear that the legacy of colonialism and apartheid continue to reinforce the high levels of inequality plaguing this country today which impacts significantly on its socio-economic development issues. These issues include the stubbornly high unemployment rate of 32,9% in the first quarter of 2025 (Stats SA, 2025), soaring poverty levels, poor education system which creates and further deepens the socio-economic divide between the rich and poor (Clercq, 2020). Education levels often determine access to either higher quality entrepreneurship or work opportunities and those without quality education tend to miss out on such opportunities.

South Africa's May 2024 National and Provincial elections have been termed "change elections" by many voters and commentators. The election ushered in

shifts in the governance landscape as the electoral fortunes of the once indomitable African National Congress (ANC) took a steep decline from an outright majority of 57% in 2019 to 40% in 2024 (Independent Electoral Commission, 2024), a shift that ushered in the necessity of the first national coalition government in South Africa since 1994. While the ANC named this coalition a Government of National Unity (GNU), the composition of the GNU post 1994 elections was determined by the interim constitution of 1993. Then, parties qualified to participate in the GNU if they held at least 20 seats in the National Assembly and further qualified to be considered for a deputy president position if they held at least 80 seats in the same house². The government formed after the 2024 elections forced the ANC into a coalition power sharing. Extraordinarily, the 2024 GNU brings together a record high of 10 parties into the governing coalition, compared with just only three parties that featured in the 1994 GNU.

A change election, however, must be measured by more than the changes it brings to a country's political configuration. Given South Africa's position as the most unequal country in the world, political change ought to translate into material change of the economic and social development indicators needed for delivering on the post democratic promise of "a better life for all" (African National Congress Manifesto, 2024)]. After hundreds of years of systemic and racialised inequality, a democracy that only delivers political change without real changes to the socioeconomic realities of the majority of

¹ Report by the International Center for Transitional Justice: <https://www.ictj.org/node/35024>

² Sections 88(2) and 84(1) of the Interim Constitution: Act 200 of 1993: Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

people is hollow and under constant threat of democratic decline.

1. Inequality in South Africa vs global structural inequality

Inequality is not unique to South Africa. Globally, the inequality trends exhibit structural dimensions owing to historical developments, governance evolutions and the interplay of domestic policies within the geopolitical spectrum.. In South Africa, inequality trends are mainly along class, race and gender. Brazil (previously the most unequal society in the world) similarly has a history of colonialism, racism and patriarchy that continues to influence structural inequality in the forms of spatial injustices and unequal access to education (Franca and Portella, 2024). South Africa is not much different.

South Africa faced a social and political system of colonialism, segregation and discrimination that intensified in the 1940s. Millions of black people faced economic oppression, this affected how they accessed jobs and business opportunities, the quality of education and they had no access to good schools, basic healthcare and faced restrictions on travelling or trading to certain areas that were deemed “white only”. They could not even vote. Inequality in South Africa today is not an accident of history but rather a by-product of meticulous and malicious policy and legislation during Apartheid. The effects of the Group Areas Act that entrenched spatial inequality, Bantu education that limited education quality and opportunities for Black people and the Jobs reservations Act that ring fenced more secure and high paying jobs for White people, are still felt today as White South Africans who make up less than eight percent of the population own 80% of private land, hold 77% of shares on the Johannesburg stock exchange and boast 8% unemployment when the country rate is 32% (Anwar, 2017, Statistics South Africa, 2025).

The world may have the notion that big socio-political gains have followed after Apartheid, but the legacy of racism and segregation remains visible. The constitution adopted in 1996, mandates the post 1994 democratic government to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights”³. Effects of Apartheid have created a system post 1994 where the government is still addressing some of the challenges we face as a society in 2025. The consequences of structural inequality fuel the challenges South Africa faces today of poverty, uneven healthcare, access to basic services – especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities in South Africa.

³ Contained in the founding preamble of the Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996

2. Wealth and income inequality

The World Bank in 2022 stated in their inequality report on Southern Africa that only 10% of the population owns more than 80% of the wealth. The report also identified race as the key driver of the persistently high inequality in South Africa due to the impact of the legacy of the Apartheid regime on education and the labour market, which further perpetuates socio-economic development (The World Bank, 2022). The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) report on inequality also alluded that 10% of South Africa's population owns 90% of the country's wealth, while the wealthiest 10% earns seven times more than the bottom 40% (SAHRC, 2018).

The distribution of wealth in South Africa remains extremely unequal. Wealth inequality is not only determined by the distribution; however, it includes inheritance such as land and ownership. A study by academics at the London School of Economics and Political Science used probate records to trace inheritance related information across racial lines. The results provide a sobering perspective on the scale of the racial wealth divide 30 years after the end of Apartheid. We estimate that 45% of White South African adults own inheritable wealth of at least R250,000, compared to 3% of Black, 9% of Coloured, and 23% of Asian South Africans, and these gaps have narrowed only modestly between 2009 and 2019 (Simoson and Mahmoudzadeh, 2024). Income inequality remains rife in the country beyond the other markers of inequality. Chatterjee et al. (2023) make some important observations that in 2019 almost 20% of the post tax income accrued to the top 1%, which was more than the bottom 50% combined. Though South Africa has adopted a redistributive taxes and transfers regime, it has been inadequate in tackling the much racialised income inequalities, despite a boom of some top Black income groups (ibid.). Therefore, these disparities in income inequality tend to sustain inequalities in wealth accumulation.

Wealth inequality impacts how the economy performs. Piketty (1997) and Ghatak (2002) explain that higher wealth results in the investment of financial products, resulting in capital being tied up in financial products rather than the real productive economy. This affects economic growth and hampers the creation of jobs. In South Africa, wealth inequality affects society in many ways. While the elite have the option to utilise top of the range services from the private sector, many poor people in the country remain with no option but to depend on public services offered by government. However, those services are often times unavailable or of poor quality. The bridge between rich and poor in South Africa continues to widen and undermines the democratic representation of all parts of society in favour of narrow interests. The achievement of substantive gender equality is still a long way off in Southern Africa, yet it remains a central part of the fight against poverty and inequality.

Despite the substantial achievements made in some countries, like Namibia and South Africa in terms of legal equality, and despite the progress made in terms of women's representation in politics, patriarchal cultures and attitudes are still widespread. A particular focus of all policies must, therefore, be to lift women out of poverty and to liberate them from the trappings of inequality. Poverty and inequality have an extremely severe and disproportionate effect and impact on African women. Results on the income and

expenditure survey 2022/23 by Statistics South Africa show that, on average, South African households had an income of R204 359 per annum. Male-headed households had an average income of R239 590 per annum compared to R158 481 for female-headed households (Statistics South Africa, 2023). At the heart of these household income disparities are the levels of unemployment among different groups, with African women experiencing higher levels of unemployment than most of the disaggregated groups in South Africa.

3. The drivers of inequality trends in South Africa

South Africa's official unemployment rate has been persistently high, despite the decrease by 0,2 of a percentage point to 31,9% in quarter 4 of 2024 compared to quarter 3 of 2024 (Statistics South Africa QLFS, 2024). In 2023, South Africa's official unemployment rate has risen slightly, undoing the series of retreats recorded in 2022. According to Statistics South Africa's latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey released in May 2023, the country's official unemployment rate rose to 32,9% in the first quarter of 2023 (Stats SA, 2023). One of the biggest drivers of the persistent inequality trends in South Africa is unemployment. South Africa's unemployment rate fell to 32.1% in Q3 of 2024, down from a two-year high of 33.5% in the prior period (Trade Economics, 2024).

In many instances, long term unemployment is linked to structural economic challenges and poor education outcomes. The ANC-led government in 2012, attempted to create equivalents by inventing the triple challenge of unemployment, inequality and unemployment when launching the country's *Vision 2030* in its National Development Plan. However, the inability to find a job and be absorbed in the labour market affects any person's social and economic ability to contribute positively to the economy and the standard of living they provide for themselves and families. Of those who do have work, about 3 million people subsist in the informal economy, where incomes are very low. Another 900,000 people work in agriculture and about 1 million as domestic workers, where incomes are very low (Valodia, 2023). Even in the formal sector, wages, especially for non-unionised workers, tend to be extremely low. The lack of or little ability to afford a basic standard of living leads to poverty may be attributed to policies, low economic growth which affects employment and insufficient ability to create the resources needed to alleviate poverty, as well as rising population among other factors. While unemployment is so stubbornly high, so are the levels of poverty in this country (Valodia, 2023).

Besides the unemployment and poverty problems in South Africa, there is a critical factor of wealth inequality and income inequality. There have been some improvements on income inequality over the years, despite this not being significant, wealth inequality continues to widen and creates a deeper gap between the "have's" and "have nots". Despite wealth inequality being challenging to measure, inequalities in wealth have political and social consequences. Wealth generally determines anyone's chances in life from education to prosperity and accessing economic freedom in their lives. It further creates the ability to create intergenerational wealth and long-term benefits.

Since assuming power, the African National Congress (ANC) has advocated for the dismantling of systemic inequality inherited from apartheid, drawing on social democratic principles articulated in ANC policy frameworks since the 1940s. Frameworks like the declaration of the African Claims Conference of 1943 and the Freedom Charter of 1955 set the ANC and the broader liberation movement in South Africa on a progressive path toward greater equality for all who live in South Africa (Padayachee and Van Niekerk, 2022). Additionally, the ANC has aimed for full employment as a national goal, underpinned by a social compact between labor, capital, and government, focused on maintaining a welfare state and resolving industrial conflicts through consensus (van Niekerk, 2014). However, despite the formulation and implementation of various policies, the intended outcomes have not materialized, with inequality remaining entrenched and the majority of citizens still suffering from abject poverty.

4. The ANC's Struggle with Inequality: A Legacy of Structural Challenges and Policy Failures

In examining South Africa's persistent inequality, it is crucial to ask the question: *Cui bono?* Who benefits from the status quo? By identifying who has disproportionately benefitted from South Africa's post-apartheid dispensation, we can better understand why inequality remains entrenched. While economic redress mechanisms such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) were introduced to address the historical exclusion of Black South Africans, they have largely served to enrich a small, politically connected Black elite, producing billionaires, executives and a new layer of privilege (Seekings, 2016; Southall, 2004).

The Employment Equity Act (EEA), designed to ensure workplace transformation, has also produced uneven outcomes. According to the 24TH Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report (2023-24), representation gaps remain stark: Black (African and coloured) employees dominate lower occupational levels, often exceeding their Economic Active Population (EAP) share, while white and India/Asian individuals continue to occupy the highest-level roles, particularly in senior (67.8%) and top management positions (58%). Gender disparities persist as well. Women are still significantly underrepresented in top management, occupying a meagre 26.9% with current progress indicated it could take decades to reach full gender equity in the workforce (Department of Employment and Labour, 2024). Concerning persons with disabilities, this group remains severely underrepresented with only about 1.6% in top management positions. This is far below their presence in the workforce, and this raises questions about the effectiveness and implementation of equity policies. The report concludes by highlighting that "it is evident that we have not substantially moved a needle in narrowing the racial and gender gap in ensuring that we create workplaces that are free from unfair discrimination, are inclusive and diversified" (Department of Employment and Labour, 2024:55). Despite this acknowledgement, the commission remains positive that the current Employment Equity amendments and the proposed sector EE targets are critical instruments to expedite the pace of transformation and to ensure the equitable representation of all the designated groups across all occupational levels of our workforce in all economic sectors.

The ANC's redress agenda has tended to focus on extremes. On the one hand, facilitating economic empowerment for the Black elite and on the other hand, barely staving off poverty for the most vulnerable. Social welfare programs such as child support, old-age pensions, disability grants and social relief of distress (SRD) grants have provided essential lifelines to over 19 million South Africans while the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has expanded access to higher education (Statistics South Africa, 2025). It is true that South Africa arguably spends more on social security than most countries globally. But it has been highlighted that "social security in South Africa has been argued to be inaccessible for a large share of the working-age population" (Bhorat et al., 2024:2). Therefore, the country's social security is premised on the assumption that those who are able-bodied and do not belong to the 'dependent' groups, are able to take care of themselves in the labour market. This, however, did change during COVID-19 when the SRD grant was introduced to target unemployed people of working age. It is proving a nightmare to reorient or abandon this grant that remains unaccounted for in the country's architecture of social security, as stated by Professor Michael Sachs, a former national treasury employee as head of the budget office.

The negotiated settlement that led to the 1994 transition to democracy preserved certain economic interests of apartheid-era beneficiaries, effectively limiting the potential scope of transformative policies. One of the clearest expressions of this compromise was the ANC's acceptance of Section 25 of the Constitution – the property clause. This decision entrenched existing property rights and curtailed more ambitious redistributive efforts. This compromise meant that the economic power of historically privileged groups remained intact, preventing the effective redistribution of wealth and resources (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Bhattacharya & Lowenberg, 2010; Chetty, 2019). The ANC's centrist posture, consistent throughout its time in government, has prioritized macroeconomic "stability" over radical structural reform, thereby constraining the adoption of bolder redistributive policies. Additionally, entrenched interests such as business lobbies and landowners have actively resisted equitable redistribution. These external pressures, combined with poor intergovernmental coordination, corruption and fragmented implementation, have produced widespread policy inefficiencies. As inequality deepens, many argue that a more left-leaning policy orientation is needed to dismantle structural disparities, but such a shift would likely provoke economic turbulence, making progressive reform a politically and economically fraught path.

Many may argue that the ANC's inability to fundamentally shift and transform South Africa's economic architecture is at the heart of the party's decline. The party has growingly embodied complacency in government while some people within its ranks have prioritised corruption over good governance, ineptitude over meritocracy and in some instances party patronage over the best interests of the country. These political attitudes delay the pursuit of solutions to fight inequality, thus giving further opportunities to its entrenchment. Some ANC sympathisers often argue that the party is a victim of its own successes, in that its ability to extend basic rights such as water, education, health and social security has created greater expectations from citizens. Whilst this might be through, our reading and conclusion is that the party has suffered electoral losses because the perceptions of its failure and inadequacy in government far outweigh the so-called "its own successes".

5. The Rise of the GNU: A New Political Landscape

The formation of the GNU in 2024 introduces a new political dynamic in South Africa. The GNU is composed of a diverse group of political parties, each with varying ideologies and priorities. This coalition has the potential to bring a broader range of solutions to the problem of inequality, but it also introduces new challenges in terms of policy alignment and governance. Understanding the different positions of the GNU's partners is essential for evaluating its prospects to successfully address inequality. In the Medium Term Development Plan 2024 – 2029, the GNU proposes a number of priorities such as creating a more just society by tackling poverty, spatial inequalities, food security and the high cost of living, providing a social safety net, improving access to and the quality of basic services, and protecting workers' rights. However, this will remain to be seen in practice and policy execution.

The table below examines the stated commitments on inequality by each of the ten parties in the coalition. This is conducted by interrogating the party manifestos, subjecting them to word searches and careful reading of some of their areas of focus on policy proposals that have potential to tackle inequality in South Africa. Manifestos are a party's offer to the electorate and form the basis of a policy platform in South African elections. They ought to be taken seriously as a measure of a political party's offering.

Table 1: GNU Partners and their party perspective on Inequality

Source: Rivonia Circle

Political Party	Mentions of Inequality	Mentions of Cost of Living	Dedicated Section on Inequality	Key policy propositions on inequality	Key policy propositions on the cost of living	Focus on inequality
ANC	14	6	YES	Land Reform Public Employment Programs Education Healthcare Re-Industrialization	Food Security Programs Social Grants Expanding Affordable Public Transport	The ANC's focus on redistributive policies like land reform, education, and healthcare shows its commitment to addressing systemic inequality. Its state-driven approach targets historical injustices while seeking to uplift the marginalized.
DA	12	0	NO	Market-driven growth Infrastructure Development Education Job Creation	Cutting red tape Energy security Tax Relief Fostering Private Sector Growth	The DA's manifesto acknowledges inequality but prioritizes economic growth, private-sector development, and infrastructure investment as solutions. While these measures are important, the party's market-driven approach may

						underemphasize the structural roots of inequality.
IFP	0	0	NO	Decentralized governance Traditional leadership empowerment Rural Development	Supporting traditional economies Localized service delivery Decentralization	The IFP's focus on decentralization and traditional governance highlights a localized approach but does not fully engage with the systemic causes of inequality.
FF Plus	0	0	NO	Protection of Minority Rights Economic Freedom Privatization	Reducing Taxes Promoting small businesses Protecting Property Rights	FF Plus emphasizes free-market policies and minimal government intervention. While it promotes economic efficiency, it lacks a detailed strategy to address inequality's systemic and historical dimensions. Its focus on minority rights is narrow and does not address broader societal disparities.
PA	0	0	NO	Community Empowerment Job Creation Safety Focused Initiatives	Localized job creation Programs Reducing Municipal inefficiencies	The PA's localized focus on empowering communities and creating jobs addresses inequality at a pragmatic level but lacks a broader systemic perspective.
UDM	2	0	NO	Equitable resource distribution Anti-corruption Inclusive governance	Infrastructure investment Job creation Anti-corruption measures	The UDM's emphasis on equitable resource distribution and anti-corruption measures aligns with addressing inequality, though its solutions are less detailed compared to others.
Rise Mzansi	3	0	YES	Community Driven Development Tax Relief for Single Mothers Ethical leadership and governance	Addressing corruption Ensuring Transparency	Rise Mzansi's citizen-centric ideology emphasizes community engagement, grassroots empowerment, and ethical leadership. Its approach is particularly adept at addressing

				Anti – corruption Participatory Democracy	Empowering local economies	inequality's localized impacts.
GOOD	5	1	YES	Ethical governance Anti-corruption Community centered Development Infrastructure investment	Affordable Housing Basic Income Grant Renewable energy initiatives Investment in Public transport	The GOOD Party's manifesto highlights ethical governance, equitable infrastructure development, and social justice, demonstrating a strong grasp of practical measures to reduce inequality
Al Jama- Ah	3	0	NO	Ethical governance Cultural preservation Job Creation	Halal Certification industries Supporting Small businesses Public-Private partnerships	While Al Jama-ah promotes ethical governance and cultural preservation, its policy proposals lack depth in addressing systemic inequality comprehensively
PAC	4	0	YES	Land Redistribution & restitution Planned economy with equitable wealth distribution Rural Economic Empowerment	Food Security Reduced dependency on grants Local processing Industries	PAC proposes a structural approach to inequality, targeting historic dispossession through land reform, wealth redistribution via planned economy mechanisms and enabling sustainable rural livelihoods. Though they don't explicitly label it "inequality," their emphasis on African- centric ownership, rural economic development, and decolonised structures shows a clear focus on rectifying systemic disparities

6. Ideological Diversity within the GNU

South Africa's post 2024 elections Government of National Unity (GNU) reflects a range of ideological positions, from socialism to liberalism to religious-cultural conservatism, which significantly influence approaches adopted by parties to address inequality. The ANC, as the leading party in the GNU, continues to advocate for state-driven initiatives to address inequality, emphasizing social justice and public sector expansion. Its 2024 manifesto continued to focus on land reform, public employment programs, and expanding access to education and healthcare. However, the ANC's centrist position and its compromise with market interests limit the scale and urgency of these measures. The DA, with its market-oriented, centrist approach, advocates for private-sector-driven growth, job creation, and fiscal conservatism. While it acknowledges the problem of inequality, the DA's focus is primarily on boosting economic growth and reducing state intervention. The DA's proposal for tax cuts and reducing public sector expenditure could limit the resources available for redistribution programs that aim to reduce inequality.

The PAC, with its strong socialist and Pan-Africanist ideology, calls for radical land reform. Central to its manifesto is land redistribution, framed as a precondition for dismantling colonial economic legacies and achieving genuine self-determination. The PAC views state ownership of land, public control over key resources, and a planned economy as essential tools to confront entrenched inequality and sever dependency on Western capitalist structures (PAC, 2024). By contrast, the Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus) promotes a fundamentally different vision. Its 2024 manifesto calls for the protection of private property, market driven economic growth and minimal state interference in wealth distribution. While both parties acknowledge inequality, the FF Plus attributes it to economic mismanagement and corruption rather than structural injustice. The party insists that free market policies, fiscal discipline and cultural autonomy particularly for Afrikaner communities are the best pathways to prosperity (FF Plus, 2024). Unlike the PAC, which sees redistribution as a moral and historical imperative, the FF Plus resists state-led redistribution, fearing it threatens economic stability and individual freedoms. This fundamental ideological divergence on the role of the state, land ownership, and the nature of redress places the two parties on opposite ends of South Africa's political spectrum.

Other parties in the GNU, such as the UDM, IFP, PA, Rise Mzansi and GOOD Party, bring additional perspectives. UDM, Rise Mzansi and GOOD have openly adopted social democracy as their ideological leaning. Rise Mzansi, GOOD Party, and the DA converge on the importance of ethical governance and grassroots participation, albeit through different means: the DA emphasizes institutional reforms, while Rise Mzansi and GOOD Party lean towards community-driven initiatives. The Patriotic Alliance (PA) and Al Jama-ah share community-focused approaches but differ in execution. The PA emphasizes local empowerment and pragmatic economic initiatives to uplift disadvantaged communities, while also centering God in its politics (PA, 2024). In the PA's conception, one of the problems with modern day politics is that God has been absented from public and government discourse. However, this is expected in a secular country such as South Africa; however, it appears that there is contestation as to where the country derives its moral authority.

Al Jama-ah, rooted in Islamic values, incorporates ethical governance and cultural preservation into its framework, while still advocating for job creation and poverty reduction (Al Jama-ah, 2024). The IFP prioritizes decentralization, advocating for governance reforms that empower provincial and traditional authorities to better address localized issues (IFP, 2024). The UDM, while also supportive of inclusive governance, focuses more broadly on anti-corruption and equitable resource distribution.

6.1. Land Redistribution: A Flashpoint for GNU Cooperation

Land redistribution remains one of the most contentious and critical issues in addressing inequality in South Africa. The PAC's focus on land reform aligns closely with the ANC's goals but offers a more radical approach, framing it as a foundational tool to dismantle colonial economic structures through a planned, Africanist socialist state (PAC, 2024). Minister of Land Reform and Rural Development, PAC leader Mzwanele Nyhontso has championed the recently assented Expropriation Act (Act 13 of 2024) as a key instrument to enable land reform.

In contrast, both the DA and FF Plus have vocally opposed this act. The DA has taken judicial steps to review its constitutionality, warning that it grants "sweeping powers to expropriate property without compensation" and undermines economic stability (DA statement, 2024). Similarly, right-wing lobby groups like AfriForum and Solidariet, within the FF Plus/DA ecosystem, have challenged the law in court and successfully lobbied the Trump administration, leading to a February, 7 2025 executive order in which the US halted aid to South Africa and offered resettlement of Afrikaners as the order claimed the Expropriation act permits "seizing ethnic minority Afrikaners' agricultural property without compensation" (White House, 2024). FF Plus leader Pieter Groenewald welcomed the US action, framing it as international validation of property rights defenders (TimesLive, 2024). This highlights stark contrasts in ideology: the PAC's radical redistribution agenda versus the market-oriented, property-rights-focused approach of DA and FF Plus. Yet amid this divide, the GNU could seek compromise by improving tenure security and supporting land-based economic opportunities. This would balance PAC's equity goals with DA/FF Plus concerns about stability and investor confidence.

One of the most significant challenges in the GNU's ability to address inequality is managing the tensions between its ideological diversity. While parties such as the ANC and PAC will push for more extensive state intervention and wealth redistribution, the DA and FF Plus are likely to prioritize economic efficiency, deregulation, and the protection of private property rights. These divergent positions could lead to gridlock or watered-down policies that fail to effectively address South Africa's deep inequality. Corruption, poor implementation, and inefficiency are persistent problems in South Africa's political landscape. A coalition government could exacerbate these issues, as the competing interests of coalition partners may hinder decisive action. Furthermore, the risk of captured or compromised state institutions, particularly in areas such as land reform, could undermine the GNU's ability to deliver on its promises.

6.2. Synergies and Areas of Collaboration: Balancing Ideological Tensions

Despite the significant ideological divides, there are potential areas of collaboration that could allow the GNU to make meaningful progress in addressing inequality. First, the broad-based agreement on infrastructure development, particularly in housing, education, and healthcare, presents an opportunity for collaborative action. Both the ANC and GOOD Party emphasize social justice through investment in public infrastructure, while the DA advocates for increased efficiency and better service delivery through market-driven mechanisms. By combining the state-led approach of the ANC and GOOD Party with the DA's focus on efficiency and effectiveness, the GNU could create a more balanced and sustainable approach to inequality.

Similarly, there is common ground on addressing unemployment through job creation. While the DA and ANC have different visions for how this should be achieved—market-driven growth versus state-driven public employment programs, there is alignment on the need for job creation in disadvantaged communities. The introduction of policies to support small businesses, especially in rural areas, could become a key point of synergy, with the PA, IFP, UDM and Rise Mzansi contributing to localized empowerment programs. The incorporation of anti-corruption measures across all GNU parties will be crucial. Ensuring transparency and accountability in the allocation of resources for redistributive programs will help mitigate the risk of state capture and corruption, which has historically hampered efforts to reduce inequality.

7. The Role of Opposition Parties in Addressing Inequality in South Africa's GNU: A Focus on MK and EFF

Opposition parties are vital for fostering accountability, exposing inefficiencies, and presenting alternative solutions to entrenched socio-economic challenges (Democracy Works Foundation, 2023). The credibility of a democratic system relies heavily on opposition parties demonstrating that they are viable alternatives to the ruling government. When opposition parties fail to present credible options, remain absent from public discourse, or only appear during election periods, the democratic process is significantly weakened (Democracy Works Foundation, 2023). A lack of clear alternatives from opposition parties hinders meaningful debates on policy, the country's trajectory, and its future. The overall strength, quality, and effectiveness of democracy are closely tied to the ability of opposition parties to remain relevant, efficient, and prepared to govern. As such, the effectiveness of opposition parties plays a critical role in ensuring the quality of democracy, the functionality of the state, and efforts to combat corruption (Democracy Works Foundation, 2023). In the context of the GNU, the need for strong opposition is even greater. The coalition of ideologically diverse parties' risks policy stagnation due to competing interests, which could leave inequality unaddressed. It is also the fact that the GNU constitutes about 70% of the National Assembly, giving it a super majority that could easily make it invincible if there are

no fundamental disagreements among the GNU parties. Opposition parties like the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) must take up space and force debate with the GNU to lead to meaningful accountability, ensuring inequality remains central to the political discourse and propose actionable, pro-poor strategies.

8. Can MK and EFF Collaborate to Address Inequality?

The MK Party and the EFF share a common understanding of South Africa's structural inequality but diverge in their methods and focus areas. The MK Party emphasizes community-driven development, labor protections, and localized economic empowerment, while the EFF calls for radical redistributive policies such as land expropriation without compensation, nationalization of key industries, and a wealth tax. Despite their differences, through the Progressive Caucus Charter, the two parties have committed to working together to amplify their shared goals of addressing economic exclusion and fostering equity. Both parties recognize the need for land reform as a means to address historical injustices. While the EFF's approach is more radical, advocating expropriation without compensation, the MK Party's focus on sustainable land use and community ownership provides a complementary perspective. A joint strategy could blend these approaches, ensuring that land reform benefits the poor while maintaining agricultural productivity. The EFF's proposed wealth tax aligns with the MK Party's emphasis on labor rights and poverty alleviation. By advocating for increased fiscal revenue through progressive taxation, the two parties could push for expanded social grants, universal healthcare, and free education to alleviate inequality. High youth unemployment exacerbates inequality in South Africa. Both the EFF and MK Party prioritize job creation, with the EFF focusing on state-led industrialization and the MK Party emphasizing community-driven initiatives. A coordinated policy could combine large-scale public works programs with localized skills development, addressing unemployment comprehensively.

The EFF's call for nationalizing mines, banks, and other strategic sectors could be complemented by MK's advocacy for ethical and equitable resource management. By ensuring that profits from nationalized industries are reinvested into education, healthcare, and infrastructure, both parties could create a model of state-led development that prioritizes equity. Similarly, a wealth tax targeting high-income earners and large corporations would generate revenue to fund social programs, directly addressing inequality. Both parties should advocate for a foreign policy that prioritizes regional economic integration and trade with other African nations. This approach would not only create jobs but also reduce reliance on Western economies that perpetuate exploitative trade dynamics. Policies should include expanding the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) to benefit South African small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and promoting fair trade agreements that prioritize labor rights and environmental sustainability.

Opposition Parties and their perspectives on inequality

Political Party	Mentions of inequality	Mentions of cost of living	Dedicated Section on inequality	Key policy propositions on inequality	Key policy propositions on cost of living	Is inequality sharply understood?	Reason
MKP	0	0	NO	Radical Land Redistribution Free Quality Education Expanded access to public services Economic empowerment programs	Subsidized Food Prices Free Basic Utilities Increased Social Grants	NO	Deep focus on addressing historical injustices and economic exclusion through radical and redistributive policies but manifesto does not show clear plan to address inequalities.
EFF	8	0	YES	Nationalization land, mines and banks Free education Wealth Taxes Universal access to healthcare	Price controls on essential goods Expanded social welfare programs Support for worker owned enterprises	YES	Strong emphasis on dismantling systemic inequality through state ownership, wealth redistribution, and public services, though the feasibility of these policies has been critiqued by economic experts who raise concerns about potential capital flight and economic stagnation.

9. Conclusion: Spotlighting Inequality through the G20

South Africa has taken up the G20 presidency after it was held by Brazil, a country also struggling to overcome income inequality in their society. Under the theme “Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet”, Brazil demonstrated a commitment to practical programmes to undo structural inequality through housing programmes and wealth tax policies (Aryes, 2024, Garcia and Ramos, 2024). Until 2019 Brazil was the most unequal country in the world, until it was overtaken by South Africa (Scott, 2019). The irony of these two countries that have consecutively held the title of the most unequal societies globally as measured by the Gini coefficient, now hosting the G20 back-to-back, should be harnessed as a reason to double down on a need for global action to tackle inequality. The action must involve tackling structural challenges in sustainable ways not only in these countries but between countries and across regions too.

South Africa holds the G20 Presidency in 2025. Taking the mantle from Brazil, a country also burdened with historically high levels of inequality, South Africa has positioned tackling inequality as a G20 priority. Through the theme “Solidarity, equality and sustainability”, South Africa should craft a G20 programme that not only focuses on the urgent need to address national inequality but focus on driving an agenda engendering a more equal world in the face of a rapidly changing geo-political environment.

Brazil was unapologetic about foregrounding a global South positioning about collaboration with the global North to explicitly deal with inequality. Arising out of Brazil's G20 Presidency is the ‘G20 Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty’. This is a call to partner with countries like the UK to share resources and strategies to eliminate hunger and poverty in Brazil, modelling this cooperation for other North-South partnerships (Cabral, 2025). This included interrogating historic underdevelopment of the global South through extraction and unfavorable global financing arrangements (Kim, 2025).

Focusing on a clear metric like zero hunger, Brazil sought to move success measures from Inclusive growth to inclusive development (Ayres, 2024). Economic growth measured in GDP and trade is not meaningful unless they translate to material development outcomes like zero hunger and poverty. For South Africa a growing issue like hunger is also linked to questions of land and economic ownership patterns that speak to wealth inequality disparities in the global South.

Kim (2025) argues that South Africa should continue on the path that Brazil has set by including the future of employment into its basket of proposed interventions. With record high levels of unemployment in South Africa, income inequality across geography, race, gender and age could be a major focus in G20 under the South African Presidency. With the African Union taking up full membership of the G20 in 2024, issues like unemployment should no longer be seen as country specific. Regional and global dynamics must be factored in, as Africa contemplates how to leverage its human, mineral and growing technological competencies to increase work for particularly its youth.

Foregrounding solidarity in the 2025 theme signals South Africa's intention to reassert the need for new multilateral efforts between global North and South regional power blocks. Perhaps South Africa could enact its call to solidarity by doubling down on Brazil's commitment to tax the wealthiest 2% of their population, instead of austerity budgeting, attempts at VAT increases and fear of capital flight if a wealth tax were considered (Ayres, 2024, Moichela, 2025). Undoubtedly, BRICS will also be an important entry point for finding common ground on partnerships that advance the interests of countries in the global South. In this complex set of geo-political arrangements, South Africa and Africa can use inequality to focus conversations and formulate clear expectations and opportunities for a more just and equitable world.

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