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Op-ed

GROWTH, EQUALITY AND THE QUESTION WE KEEP AVOIDING

By Daryl Swanepoel

South Africa's debate about transformation and equality is increasingly framed as a false choice: moral justice on the one hand and economic realism on the other. On one side are those who argue that deliberate correction is required to undo inherited inequality and on the other are those who insist that economic growth alone will resolve inequality, and that further intervention risks confidence, cohesion and minority rights. The debate is usually conducted as though one must choose. This is a mistake.

Recent contributions to this debate, including those that place overwhelming emphasis on economic growth as the primary and near-exclusive solution to inequality, raise legitimate concerns. Growth is indispensable. No society has ever redistributed itself into prosperity. South Africa's prolonged failure to sustain meaningful growth has been devastating: it has crushed employment prospects, hollowed out public trust and turned transformation itself into a source of frustration rather than hope.

This is not ideology. It is fact.

But growth alone does not answer the deeper question confronting a democracy as unequal as ours. It never has.

Those who argue that inequality would resolve itself through growth often point to South Africa's experience in the latter decades of apartheid. They note, correctly, that from the 1960s through to the early 1990s, sustained economic growth coincided with rising black participation in income, expanding access to education and increasing representation in universities. They are right to say that the economic foundations of apartheid were already being eroded before 1994 and that growth played a role in that erosion.

Where this argument falters is in what it assumes next.

It mistakes correlation for sufficiency, direction for destination and movement for settlement.

Yes, growth loosened apartheid's grip. But it did so unevenly, partially and from a base of extreme suppression. Even by the early 1990s, per capita income disparities remained vast, asset ownership overwhelmingly white and occupational and spatial exclusion largely intact. What was unfolding was not exclusion ending, but its form changing. Growth opened doors, but it did not equalise starting lines, nor did it dismantle inherited advantage.

Most importantly, growth did not end apartheid on its own. Political mobilisation, institutional delegitimising, internal resistance and international pressure were decisive. To suggest otherwise is

to reduce a complex historical transition to a single economic variable. Growth mattered, but it was not enough.

This distinction matters deeply for how we think about South Africa today.

Unlike apartheid, our constitutional democracy depends on legitimacy, not coercion. It rests on consent, not control. In such a system, the question is not only whether the economy grows, but whether that growth produces a society that is experienced as broadly fair, inclusive and future-oriented by the majority of its citizens.

If one considers South Africa through the lens of lived experience rather than aggregate indicators, the limits of growth-alone reasoning become clear. For many black South Africans, post-apartheid growth periods did not translate into secure employment, asset accumulation or intergenerational mobility. They coexisted with township economies that remained spatially marginalised, schools that remained under-resourced and labour markets difficult to enter without inherited buffers, networks or capital.

This is not to deny the growth of a black middle class, nor the sharp rise in inequality within black communities themselves. Indeed, that is precisely the point. Inequality today expresses itself powerfully through class, but race continues to shape who enters which class, how easily and with what insulation against risk. To acknowledge this is not to assign contemporary blame. It is to recognise how history continues to work through social systems long after formal discrimination ends.

At the same time, it would be dishonest, and unhelpful, to dismiss the anxieties felt by many white South Africans. Economic insecurity cuts deeply into dignity, regardless of race. Fear of downward mobility is not imagined. It is lived. That fear deserves recognition, not caricature.

But empathy cannot flow in only one direction.

If it feels unjust to be told that historical insulation can no longer be guaranteed, how does it feel to grow up in a society where unemployment, precarity and marginalisation are not temporary setbacks, but inherited conditions? If patience is difficult for those experiencing relative decline, how much harder is it to demand indefinite patience from those who have yet to experience inclusion at all?

This brings us to the moral question beneath the statistics and policy debates, a question that growth figures alone cannot answer.

On what ethical basis can a democratic society justify the long-term coexistence of near-full employment and asset security for one group, alongside mass unemployment and structural vulnerability for another? For how long can such an arrangement claim legitimacy, even if it is explained by skills, contribution or market dynamics?

History offers a sobering answer. No majority in any democracy consigns itself indefinitely to diminished life chances while watching another remain largely insulated. Over time, such settlements do not produce stability. They produce resentment, withdrawal and, eventually, rupture. Growth that does not broaden opportunity may raise GDP, but it does not necessarily strengthen social cohesion or democratic trust.

This is the central flaw in the argument that growth alone will resolve inequality. Growth is necessary. It is not sufficient.

Without deliberate efforts to broaden participation, modern growth is increasingly capital-intensive, skills-biased and exclusionary. It does not automatically absorb millions of young labour-market entrants. It does not correct inherited asset gaps. It does not, on its own, produce a sense of shared stake in a deeply unequal society.

This does not mean levelling down, nor does it mean normalising hardship. The objective is not shared misery, but shared exposure to risk and reward. In societies where economic failure is borne overwhelmingly by one group, frustration hardens into identity politics and resentment. Where risk is broadly shared, dissatisfaction is more likely to be directed at institutional performance, rather than at other communities. Shared exposure does not make hardship desirable, instead it makes reform unavoidable.

This is why the relationship between growth and transformation cannot be framed as a zero-sum choice. Growth without inclusion is fragile. Inclusion without growth is hollow. The task is not to abandon one for the other, but to weave them together in ways that are constitutionally bounded, economically rational and socially intelligible.

There is also a broader consideration that speaks directly to the long-term interests of minorities. Holding onto relative advantage in a deeply unequal society is not a strategy, it is a gamble. History is unambiguous: societies that fail to broaden opportunity do not preserve privilege indefinitely, they destabilise it. What may feel like protection in the short term often becomes vulnerability in the long term.

Seen in this light, transformation is not only a moral imperative for those who remain excluded. It is a pragmatic investment in stability for everyone. Properly understood, it is not about demographic engineering or punitive redistribution. It is about aligning opportunity with a society whose starting lines were never equal, in a way that strengthens, rather than undermines the prospects for sustained growth.

This is not to defend every policy choice, nor to excuse the many failures of implementation. Much of South Africa's transformation effort has been poorly designed and badly executed, often captured by elites, rather than directed toward those most in need. That failure must be confronted honestly. But to critique failure is not to abandon purpose.

Perhaps what is required now is a modest recalibration of thinking. Less fear, more generosity. Less fixation on what might be lost, more reflection on what could yet be secured. A willingness to see the country not only from positions of relative security, but from the vantage point of those still waiting for growth to translate into dignity.

The real choice facing South Africa is not between freedom and equality, nor between growth and justice. It is between a shared future grounded in inclusion and legitimacy and a brittle settlement that protects advantage until it no longer can. The former requires courage, patience and reciprocity. The latter requires only inertia, and history suggests it is the far riskier path.

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