

How the emergence of COVID-19 has highlighted the deep inequality in South Africa

By Anke Nel

University of Pretoria

The emergence of COVID-19 in South Africa has magnified the inequalities that exist throughout the country. Although praised for its peaceful transition into a democracy, structural inequalities in South Africa have and still require change. This cemented what former President Thabo Mbeki referred to as a [two nation state](#) (Justice Malala 2020).

The announcement of the 'state of disaster' and the resulting 35-day lockdown in the country has seemingly reaffirmed the growing division between the country's rich and poor. While the privileged flocked to supermarkets and bottle stores - stocking up on everything from toilet paper to cartons of cigarettes and bottles of wine - the poor questioned what the lockdown would mean for their livelihoods. Those who managed to get to the stores, once they were paid, were quickly judged by the wealthy – who already sat at home with their pantries stocked, leaving a national television anchor to remind them to 'check themselves, check their wallets and lastly, to check their privilege' (Kabelo Chabalala).

The situation only seemed to worsen during the first days of the lockdown. While middle and upper class individuals in the country complained about the fact that they had to resort to exercising in their gardens, work from home and watch Netflix for the duration of the lockdown, others saw themselves '[plunged into the depths of extreme poverty](#)' (Sarah Smit 2020).

The fact that so many South Africans rely on jobs that require their [physical presence](#), means that they have been unable to earn an income and as a result have become subject to food deprivation (Katharine Child 2020). This has been [amplified threefold](#): firstly, by the Department of Social Development's apparent incapacity to manage food security needs in the country; secondly, the politicisation of food distribution to areas governed by the ruling ANC; and lastly, the alleged theft of food parcels by some department officials (Rebecca Davis 2020).

Security forces tasked with enforcing the lockdown have subjected the country's most vulnerable to extreme acts of [humiliation](#), brutality and even murder (Jackie Dugard 2020). The situation has worsened to the extent that the UN Human Rights Office has called out the country for its '[toxic lockdown culture](#)' (The Citizen 2020). Meanwhile security patrols have been absent in some wealthier suburbs.

Easter weekend saw more than [100 homes demolished](#) by the City of Cape Town's Law Enforcement Unit, reportedly leaving individuals homeless in a time where evictions are unlawful (Pauli Van Wyk 2020).

Furthermore, measures implemented to encourage citizens to stay healthy include social distancing and isolation, something that is quite easy to do in your average middle-to-high income household. In an informal settlement, this request is near impossible. Crowded public transport and houses are commonplace amongst poorer communities, which means that those individuals are very susceptible to the virus no matter how much they may fear contracting it. Once contracted, it is easily spread as social distancing under these circumstances remains [unachievable](#) (Jackie Dugard 2020).

Clearly the two nations that exist in South Africa appear to have two very different versions of the lockdown. With Finance Minister Tito Mboweni declaring a deep recession for 2020, it is not surprising that South Africa's economic situation is forecasted to worsen in the coming months, with hundreds of thousands of people losing their income (The Citizen 2020).

A possible way to solve the current trajectory is to aim at long-term transformation of the structural inequalities' remnant of the apartheid era, an initiative touted by the ANC for decades. Unfortunately, the tenure of former President Jacob Zuma has eroded much of the effort made by the ruling party in previous years. As a result, President Ramaphosa has basically had to restart under a cloud of infighting in the party, essentially making any valuable progress difficult to achieve. This, coupled by the downgrade of the South African economy by the world's top rating agencies and the emergence of COVID-19, has pulled the attention further away from the most vulnerable

in society and the structural reform necessary to start bridging the gaps between rich and poor.

There is no overnight solution, it is a problem that requires cooperation from all members of society to transform the two-nation state into an equal whole. But with new emerging problems, each one worse than before, the goal of structural economic transformation is getting harder to achieve.

The decades preceding the new era in South Africa have witnessed the initiation of various elaborate economic strategies. One may argue that the ruling party has little difficulty drawing up strategies to revive the economy to favour the country's previously disadvantaged and levelling the playing field. The problem seems to present itself in the implementation of these strategies, as too much emphasis is placed on each new cabinets' plan of action, whilst the output lags behind. Progress is slow to occur and any progress is burdened by new, mostly political woes. Furthermore, recent developments of state capture, with grotesque levels of corruption and mismanagement of state resources, have taken away the possibility of the most basic levels of social change. This means that, in the case of South Africa, the country seems to take one step forward and two steps back and has continued to do so to the point where we find ourselves today.

The emergence of the virus has illustrated the country's uncomfortable distance from a one nation state. The possibility of a largely equal and prospering society seems less and less of a reality.

Ultimately, an important question is whether the economic stimulus package introduced by government to deal with COVID-19 and revive the economy, focusing on the needs of the poor, will finally be able to addresses some of the country's most pressing structural inequalities. If not, then every crisis that arises may push the government further away from achieving this goal, and therefore widen the gap between rich and poor to a potential breaking point.

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