

## Socio-Economic Inequalities, the Less Privileged and the Quest for Social Justice in Africa

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### Abstract

This paper posits that the problem of political instability and social disorder is closely connected to the problem of unjustifiable inequality in the distribution of benefits and burdens in contemporary African societies. The paper argues that to effectively resolve the problem of socio-political instability and disorder in Africa today, adequate attention must be paid to the question of distributive justice. This work adopts John Rawls' Theory of Justice as his theoretical framework with emphasis laid on his Difference Principle, which prioritizes the demand for social equality over that of liberty. This would reduce the problem of social inequality and its attendant negative consequences, which include widespread poverty and unemployment. Also, this version of the Difference Principle is designed to ensure that social benefits and burdens are distributed equally to the advantage of everyone in the society. The philosophical methods of critical analysis and conceptual clarification are employed, while the significance of this work is to show that equality in the distribution of benefits and burdens would undermine ill-will between the privileged and the less privileged, which is a source of tension that generates political instability and social disorder.

**Key words:** Inequality; Distribution; Justice; Rawls; Equality

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of socio-economic inequalities is crucial to development in all nations of the world and this is not peculiar to African societies. Its causes and consequences are equally open to broad debate among scholars in different fields of study. However, our focus here is to philosophically examine the concept of socio-economic inequality and its implications on the less privileged ones who constitute the majority in Africa. In addition, the paper analyses the problem of political instability and social disorder as they are closely connected to the problem of unjustifiable inequality in the distribution of benefits and burdens in contemporary African societies. The paper argues further that, to effectively resolve this problem, adequate attention must be paid to the question of distributive justice. In doing this, an application of Rawls's Difference Principle, which prioritizes the demand for social equality over that of liberty, would reduce the problem of socio-economic inequality and its attendant negative consequences, which include widespread poverty and unemployment. Also this version of the Difference Principle is designed to ensure that social benefits and burdens are distributed equally to the advantage society.

### 1. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The concept of inequality according to Benn means "indefensible differences in treatment" (Benn, 1972, p.40). The demand for equality is very often directed against some specific inequalities in social arrangements. It may take the form of a protest either *against distinctions based on some specific ground (for example, racial equality, sexual equality) or against discriminations in a particular field (for example, equality before the law, economic equality)*. Each consideration necessarily involves

the other; complaints of sexual inequality imply that sex is made a ground of distinction in some fields, unspecified but understood, where it is considered by the critic to be inappropriate (for example, salaries, jobs in the public service, voting rights).

Following J. J. Rousseau, who identified that there are two kinds of inequality among the human species; one, is called natural or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or of the soul. The other inequality, "which may be called moral or political inequality," is the kind that depends on a "convention, and [it] is established or at least authorized by the consent of men" (Rousseau, 2009). This latter consists of the different privileges, which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others; such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful or even in a position to exact obedience.

Economic inequality is expressed through the unequal distribution of wealth in society. This has to do with unequal distribution of what that wealth may purchase, for instance, housing, health care, education, career prospects, etc. This has obvious ramifications in terms of the unequal distribution of what that wealth may purchase; housing, health care, education, career prospects, and status. In other words, economic inequality comprises all disparities in the distribution of economic asset and income. Social inequality is the expression of lack of access to housing, health care, education, employment opportunities, and status.

*It is the exclusion of people from full and equal participation in what we, the members of society, perceive as being valuable, important personally worthwhile and socially desirable. Put differently, social inequality refers to a situation in which individual groups in a society do not have equal social status, social class, and social circle. Areas of social inequality include voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, the extent of property rights and access to education, health care, quality housing, traveling, transportation, vacationing and other social goods and services (Anonymous, 2012).*

Social inequality is different from economic inequality, though the two are linked. Economic inequality is caused by the unequal accumulation of wealth. Social inequality refers to disparities in the distribution of economic assets and income; while social inequality exists because the lack of wealth in certain areas prohibits these people from obtaining the same housing, health care, etc. as the wealthy, in societies where access to these social goods depends on wealth.

To further capture the notion of inequality, Dennis Mckerlie argues that "some egalitarians think that inequality is not bad, but unfair." (Mckerlier, 1996) Dennis avers that, if an individual have goods to distribute, and the distribution is done unequally, the egalitarians would not appraise the action as bad in the way that suffering

or deprivation inside one life is bad. They would rather regard the treatment as unfair. Thus, inequality here is linked to unfairness rather than to the bad result of that particular action. The issue here is that to treat people fairly is a duty and that some ways of bringing about inequality violate that duty.

However, beyond the issue of fairness on this matter of inequality, is the question of minimum standard for everyone. Derek Bell pointed out that "the principle of distribution is that everyone has a right to a certain minimum standard but beyond that standard there is a room for variation" (Bell, 2004). The notion of a minimum standard as a requirement raises some questions here: is there a universal minimum standard binding on all human society? Or do we have a culturally specific minimum standard? Our efforts here is not to discuss fully the concept of minimum standard; rather, we wish to emphasize that irrespective of the criteria of determining the minimum, either by universal or cultural standards, every human being has right to live a minimally decent life in the society.

Given the above, there are three reasons identified by Rawls for being concerned with inequalities in the society (Rawls, 2003, pp.130-131). The first one is to relieve the suffering and hardships of the poor. The proportions of the citizens who are poor and exposed to suffering and economic hardship, who are living below the poverty line are in large proportion and the implication of this is that they cannot live worthwhile lives. The idea here is not that everybody should be equal in wealth but the fact remains that the minimum standard must be maintained. The basic need of life, such as food, shelter, good health facilities etc., should be available for all in order to live a worthwhile life in the society. The social system should be arranged in such a way that the less privileged would not be uncared for.

The second reason, which Rawls considers as important to reduce inequalities in the society, is that the gap between the rich and the poor often leads to some citizens being stigmatized and treated as inferior. Man, going by the words of Immanuel Kant, should be treated as an end and not as a means to an end (Copleston, 1960, p.328). For some people in the society who have acquired wealth not to treat the less privileged ones as inferior beings, Rawls argues for reduction in inequalities in the society. Thus, human beings deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. The dignity of man is experienced through his personal freedom and self-responsibility.

The third reason for considering inequalities among people concerns the role of fairness in the political process of the basic structure of peoples. This concern is evident in attempts at securing the fairness of elections and of political opportunities to run for public offices. Rawls identifies the liberty of individuals as a primary thing, which must not be tampered with. So, the basic structure of the society must be fair to all the citizens irrespective

of their socio-economic status, ethnic background or religious affiliations. Everyone should enjoy equality and fairness during the elections and opportunity should be open to all to run for public offices.

The above stated reasons, which are directed against inequalities as identified by Rawls, summarizes the main concept of social justice. Social justice is understood as the duties of organized society to cater for the individual's welfare and to provide a conducive environment that will enable the people maintain a reasonable standard of living. Given this, it is obvious that social justice demands the operation of society in the direction of welfare.

## 2. THE LESS PRIVILEGED

The second segment of this work is focused on the less privileged (least advantaged). These are those who are least favoured in their prospects of obtaining the primary goods of wealth, income, power, authority etc. In other words, the "least advantaged" refers to those persons who have the lowest prospects of gaining these goods. Schaller Walter in reaction to the position of Rawls in his attempt to explain the least advantage, claims that Rawls does not attempt to provide a single and precise definition of the least advantaged. Instead, he described the "least advantaged either as those with income and wealth less than that of, say, the average unskilled labourer (that is, by reference to some particular social position), or as those with less than half of the median income and wealth" (Schaller, 1998).

In a more concise way, Rawls (1971, p.98) succinctly puts it thus:

The serious difficulty is how to define the least fortunate group. One possibility is to choose a particular social position, say that of the unskilled worker, and then to count as the least advantaged all those with the average income and wealth of this group, or less. Another alternative is a definition solely in terms of relative income and wealth with no reference to social position. Thus all persons with less than half of the median income and wealth may be taken as the least advantaged segment. (Rawls, 1971, p.98)

The above reveal the difficulty involved as viewed by Rawls in determining the right position of the least advantage group. But the fact remains that their social status is characterized with the condition of being unskilled and of average income and wealth. Meanwhile, a critical look at the prevailing situation under which the majority of people in most nations of Africa are living reveals the less privilege (least advantaged) group as less difficult to define. They comprise those who are poor in relation to the social, economic, political and mental goods. These goods, following Rawls, are things that every rational man is presumed to want. Thus, Albert and Agwunwah-Nkawazema, agrees with Baratz and Grigsby that "poverty is the inability to attain a minimal standard of living and it is a severe lack of physical and mental

well-being closely associated with inadequate economic resources and consumption" (Albert & Agwunwah-Nkawazema, 2008).

Given this, *poverty manifests as lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It also manifests in form of lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life.* The availability or otherwise of basic need in this context, therefore, could be a parameter to identify those who are poor. Our concern at this point is to determine what constitutes basic needs. That is, those things which are necessary for survival and those things reflecting the prevailing standard of living in the community, state or nation. In doing this, we may need to examine poverty from economic, mental, political and social angles.

Firstly, economic poverty has to do with lack in relation to income and productive resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood. In this regard, the economic condition of most people in Africa is so poor to the extent that basic necessity of life such as food, shelter and clothing are beyond their reach. Examples of those groups of people which are popularly known as "area boys" can best represent this situation. This set of people often sleeps under the bridge and bus-station because they cannot afford to pay for accommodation especially in major cities like Lagos in Nigeria. The "Almajiris" are young teenagers who are no longer under any parental guide. They are homeless and daily walk around the streets begging for alms and sleeping in public places of major cities in the northern part of Nigeria. There are also those who by circumstances are unskilled and as a result, find it difficult to feed themselves and afford a place of abode. These groups of people among others would, in a better way, describe the level of economic poverty in most nations of Africa.

Secondly, mental poverty has to do with limited or lack of access to education, lack of skills and inability to think, which result in feeling of inferiority. This is no material aspect of poverty with a serious implication on human and material development in any given society. The third type of poverty is political poverty. This is noted in the area of lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and political life. There is apathy to vote and a reflection of dirty politics. In short, this aspect of poverty is what is responsible for a large extent for the ineffectiveness in the running of the affairs of the state in most contemporary African nations. Lastly, social poverty implies social inequalities, social cohesion, disunity and disregard for social responsibilities. In other words, social poverty creates the existence of social stratum definable by, among other things, lack of wealth and social position.

Given the above, it may be argued that all these types of poverty enumerated, described the position of the least advantaged, but the most important one which is central to the focus of this work is the economic poverty. The less privileged that lack the basic necessity in relation to income and resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood are usually the majority at least here in Africa. They form over ninety percent of the population, hence, it is against this background that Rawls's difference principle, which allows social and economic inequalities to be arranged to the benefit of those who are less fortunate, is employed as a theoretical framework for tackling this all important problem. The above clarification provides a basis for our argument, in line with Rawls position that differences in treatment which inequalities entails is what the Difference Principle attempts to regulate. This kind of regulation is such that permits inequalities only if it will maximally benefit the least advantaged class in the society. Rawls' aim is to ensure that the less fortunate ones would not be worse-off in the society.

In practical terms, most of the postcolonial African nations are characterized with inequalities. There are wide gaps in wealth, income, powers and positions and the implication of these is that the less privileged group is grossly affected. Inequality in Africa states makes among other things the rich to be richer and the poor to be poorer. Thus, Rawls Difference Principle receive its justification against the background of ensuring a regulation, which would make social structure distributes income and wealth to improve the condition of the less fortunate, so that no one will be worse-off in the society. According to Smith, "a common sense view suggests that if there are profound inequalities there will be resentment and discontent with a system of decision making that is unable to redress the imbalance" . (Smith, 2003, p.236). He stressed further that misdistribution of income is likely to be a strong predictor of political violence. Following this, it may be inferred that the wide gap of inequalities in Africa is a further proof of the fact that poor countries lack the capacity to produce enough wealth to satisfy basic needs and make the standard of living of the poorest reason. The increase in violence rate in Africa can therefore not be otherwise, unless there is a measure to redress the imbalance.

### **3. THE QUEST AND THE NECESSITY FOR DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN AFRICA**

In his Theory of Justice, John Rawls defines justice as fairness, he defends two principles of justice, namely: First: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others. Second: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all (Rawls, 2003, p.60). Put

differently, social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: First, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and, second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least- advantaged members of society (the Difference Principle) (Ibid., pp42-43).

Following Rawls, the role of these principles is to regulate the basic structure of society: "The main political and social institutions and the way they fit together as one scheme of cooperation" (Ibid., p.4). To him, a society should aim to have a "basic structure," that is, political, economic, and social institutions, including a constitution, laws and property rules that can satisfy the two principles of justice better than any alternative arrangement. Rawls theory of justice therefore, requires that the first principle of justice, which is the equal basic liberties principle, must first be satisfied, and then, the Difference Principle comes into play. The difference Principle requires that the basic structure of a society be organized to allow inequalities only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. In other words, this principle requires that the basic structure of a society be organized so that all social and economic inequalities maximize the lifetime expectations of the society's least advantaged members (where those expectations are measured in terms of social primary goods such as income and wealth).

Summarily, the Difference Principle regulates permissible differences in rights, powers and privileges. It defines the limits of inequalities in wealth, income, powers, and positions that may exist in a just society. It says, first, that social positions are to be open to all to compete for in terms of fair equality of opportunity. Second, inequalities in wealth, income, and social powers and positions are permissible only if they maximally benefit the least advantaged class in society. The Difference Principle implies that a just economic system distributes income and wealth so as to make the class of the least advantaged persons better off than they would be under any alternative economic system.

Given this, Rawls Different Principles thus face some challenges from critics who opposed his theory from the left and right; notable among them is Robert Nozick. He sees the Difference Principle as an infringement on liberty. According to him, "the Difference Principle which requires redistributive taxation to the poor involves the immoral taking of just holdings" (Nozick, 1974, pp.150-151). Nozick's theory, which draws inspiration from John Locke's theory of property, argues that people are entitled to their property if they have been justly acquired. Rawls' response to this criticism is that expectations are "chain connected" (Rawls, 2003, p.80). This means that whatever brings advantage by raising the expectation of the lowest position, it raises the expectations of all positions in between. That is, the worst-off in the society will be better-off with respect to their initial position, but not that

the better-off will be cheated, or be made worst-off, but that their own position would also improve compared to their initial position. The point here is that, the Difference Principle reduces the wide gap of inequality in the society; this is with the aim of making no one worst-off with regard to the basic primary goods.

Moreover, there are critics who also charged Rawls for going too far by giving much to the worst-off through his Difference Principle. To them, is it fair to take away something from somebody who has worked hard for it? This critic insists, “the concept of desert should feature in any distributive justice and this, they noted is absent in Rawls’s theory” (Irele, 1999, p.20). Given the above, Rawls’ understanding of a society is in the context of social cooperation. The Difference Principle according to Rawls expresses a conception of reciprocity, which is a principle of mutual benefits. A person’s contribution to a social pool cannot be divorced from that of others, and hence nobody could deserve more than others in any joint cooperative effort. On the whole, Rawls believes that a person does not deserve more than another simply because he was lucky enough to have been naturally endowed. The well-being of each depends on a scheme of social cooperation without which no one could have a satisfactory life.

On the strength of these two principles of justice, Rawls’ considers political liberty (the right to vote and stand for public office, freedom of speech and assembly) and intellectual liberty (freedom of thought and conscience) to be more fundamental than economic equality and social welfare. But in a society where we have the majority as illiterate and where there is widespread poverty, what we refer to, as political and intellectual liberty would be secondary. Following Odera Oruka, poverty-stricken people want bread, not freedom of thought and speech. Their primary concern transcends the right to vote and stand for public office, unless the consequences of such are clearly explained to them in terms of their social frustration. Otherwise, a potential voter would easily sell his voting card for a loaf of bread or a small sum of money. Thus “what the majority of semi-literate and poverty-stricken people want is not liberty as ‘equal freedom’, what they want is ‘the worth of liberty.’” (Oruka, 2000, p.610)

Given this, the thrust of this argument is not to undermine the importance of liberty or take for granted that ignorance of a person’s right is enough an excuse for denying him that right, neither that these liberties are not what the majority of people in an underdeveloped world ought to have. Rather, our argument is that as things stand, such rights would not be their priorities. The right to economic and social equality is much more fundamental than freedom of thoughts and expression.

On this note, Rawls’ theory would only be suitable for Africa countries; if the first principle (equal liberty)

should be made second and the second part of the second principle which is the Difference Principle should be made first, while the lexical order is to be retained. It is in the second principle that the worth of liberty lies. To Oruka, “the purpose of the above reorganization is to salvage the egalitarian element in Rawls’ theory and to make it serve the aims of ensuring a communitarian social order” (Ibid.). The less fortunate are usually the majority at least here in Africa. They form over 90% of the population. It is therefore fitting that they are given priority.

The Difference Principle therefore provides solution to the problem of inequalities by making the poor in the society not to remain in the same condition. At this juncture, the question that may readily come to mind being how would the Difference Principle ensure that the distribution of benefit and burdens (distributive justice) meet or satisfy the need of the less fortunate, and thereby reduce inequality in society? An attempt to answer this question would be a revisit to what Rawls as earlier reiterated on the importance of having the basic structure in the society. The role of these principles is to regulate the “basic structure” of society: the main political and social institutions and the way they fit together as one scheme of cooperation. A society should aim to have a “basic structure,” that is, political, economic, and social institutions, including a constitution, laws and property rules that can satisfy the two principles of justice better than any alternative arrangement.

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#### **4. SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM AS A PANACEA FOR INEQUALITY**

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The need for an effective social welfare system, capable of reducing the problem of inequality in Africa is long overdue. Social welfare system among other things “demands the establishment of institutions that will cater for the basic security and the well-being of all members of the society. In a welfare state for instance, government is concerned with public health, unemployment, etc., and taking a large share of responsibility for the public welfare” (Sogolo, 1989, p.20). The establishment of a social welfare system is so important that the welfare of individuals is not to be left to customs or to informal arrangement and private understanding. For any society to develop to her capabilities, and realize its full potential to the optimum, there should be provision for social, economic and political needs of the citizens in order to live a full human life.

The establishment of social welfare system coupled with good infrastructures would help in ensuring that there is an appreciable improvement in the socio-economic lives of the less privilege group in the society. In other words, when there is a conscious effort within the society to reduce social and economic deprivation among the people, there is bound to be peace, security and stability in

the society. Thus, the institution of social welfare system is so important for the establishment and sustenance of distributive justice, because it provides the basic structures by which we can achieve just distribution of benefits and burdens to improve the lots of the least advantaged group in the society.

In more practical terms, the socio economic situation of the majority in most African nations, as earlier noted, requires a social welfare system. There is the need to organize the society on the basis of mutual benefit, in such a way that can promote economic co-operation. This will primarily be directed at improving the socio-economic status of the citizens and consequently reduce the gap of inequality in the society. To effectively cater for the welfare of the less privileged and reduce inequality, there must be a good tax system. Individuals, especially the privileged groups should be ready to contribute meaningfully through income tax, while corporate organizations and multinationals must be committed to payment of accurate taxes. It is the accumulation of such fund that would be diverted to the welfare system to cater for the less privileged and thus bridge the inequality gap. The physically disabled persons in most African societies are subjected to live a life below human dignity, but with the collective social welfare system, these category of people would be accommodated in such a structure and hence, be well taken care of.

To those who might find the above welfare system of taxation as being one sided, i.e. by robbing Peter to pay Paul, Rawls' theory as earlier noted, avers that the expectations are "chain connected" (Rawls, 2003, p.80). This means that whatever brings advantage by raising the expectation of the lowest position, it raises the expectations of all positions in between. That is, the worst-off in the society will be better-off with respect to their initial position, but not that the better-off will be cheated, or be made worst-off, but that their own position would also improve compared to their initial position. The point here is that, the Difference Principle reduces the wide gap of inequality in the society; this is with the aim of making no one worst-off with regard to the basic primary goods.

Given African traditional setting in the pre-colonial days, collective efforts were put together to build roads, and bridges, to erect mud and thatch houses for individuals, and this is often carried out in turns. In this context, the individuals' limited efforts are pulled together to achieve a common goal aimed at enhancing the welfare of each of the members. Thus, the indigenous communal system, which was in place in the pre-colonial African societies would be brought back in a more modernised version, when the social welfare system is established. For this to be achieved, the political leaders in Africa must as a matter of urgency, establish the welfare system and strengthened the existing structures in place to cater for the needs of the less privilege, which constitute the majority.

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## CONCLUSION

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Thus far, this paper has been able to examine the issues related to different forms of inequality and its socio-economic implications in Africa. The central argument of the essay is that the problem of inequality constitutes the bane of political instability and social disorder in most nations of Africa. One effective way to resolve the problem of poverty and unemployment which result from socio-economic inequality is the quest for distributive justice through the application of Rawls Difference Principle, which prioritizes the demand of social equality over that of liberty. It is a principle designed to ensure that social benefits and burdens are distributed to improve the lots of the people; especially the less privileged who forms the majority in Africa. The welfare institutions that can ensure a fair distribution of benefits and burdens are to be strengthened, this, would reduce the problem of socio-economic inequality and its attendant negative consequences, which include widespread poverty and unemployment.

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