

FIGHT INEQUALITY THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAY

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Civil society helped topple apartheid, but the struggle is not over. The gap between rich and poor has widened and corruption and poor governance is evident (Delwyn Verasamy/M&G)

“We will never manage to fight inequality, corruption and bad governance both within South Africa and our own union. Our enemies are just too strong. So, what can we do?” I had just given a talk at the Wits School of Governance when a trade unionist from the proud roots of labour federation Cosatu posed this question. “Of course you will find a way,” I replied. “You fought and toppled the apartheid regime. These current challenges, big as they are, are peanuts compared to that.”

Four or five years on, this exchange is still stuck in my head, prompting me to ask myself: how could South African civil society — once so brave, active and muscular — get to this point? How could Cosatu implode and so seriously weaken civil society along with it? How could South African trade unionists lose faith in their power to change the world? And how, in heaven’s name, will we fight inequality and take the struggle forward without the belief that it is possible to win? Even worse: how are we going to avoid major breakdowns and escalating conflicts unless we fight inequality?

One thing is for sure: none of this is possible without strong civil society mobilisation and organisation.

Ben Phillips has written an important book: *How to Fight Inequality — And Why That Fight Needs You*. He takes on the challenge of how to fight inequality and addresses many of the questions that the South African trade unionist asked me years ago. It should be read by everyone who is worried about growing inequality and how to fight it, both the people paying the costs of inequality and those who correctly see it as the greatest challenge for peace and security in our time.

Inequality has already risen dramatically in many countries over the past decades. [According to Oxfam](#), extreme inequality was out of control globally before the pandemic. In early 2020, hundreds

of millions of people were living in extreme poverty while huge rewards went to those at the very top. This year saw more billionaires than ever before, with fortunes that have grown to record levels while the world's poorest people got even poorer. Phillips highlights how extreme inequality has exploded to the point where seven out of 10 people now live in countries where the gap between rich and poor is greater than it was 30 years ago. By 2019, the 26 richest people in the world have the same wealth as the poorest half of the world, [according to Oxfam](#). And in Africa the richest 10 families have the same wealth as the poorest half of the continent.

Due to a combination of short- and long-term supply and demand shocks, inequality [may now worsen](#) considerably. As we have seen over the past months, the unemployed, informal sector employees and lower paid workers do not have the same resilience as better-off groups to get through this pandemic. They do not have the money to pay for tests, medicines and health care either, because they are not covered by health insurance, including sick leave provisions, or because they do not have the cash to cover increased health costs in the short- to medium-term. Vulnerable groups are losing their jobs, without money to survive beyond the next few days. Vulnerable service sector workers in London, precarious workers in Addis Ababa, Johannesburg, Bogotá and Madrid are losing their families' savings and survival kits. While many professionals, civil service employees and similar groups have moved to working online, others do not have the same facilities or provisions. The digital divide has become a new class divide. And South Africa is the world champion of the world's most embarrassing and devastating competition.

South Africa remains the most economically unequal country in the world, [according to the World Bank](#). If anything, the country is even more divided now than it was in 1994. In many ways, the legacy of apartheid endures. Inequality has been exacerbated as a result of policies, strategic choices and systemic failures by governments since 1994. Previously disadvantaged South Africans hold fewer assets, have fewer skills, earn lower wages and are more likely to be unemployed. South Africa's richest households are almost 10 times wealthier than poor households, according to World Bank estimates.

Fighting inequality is not about us not knowing what to do or struggling to find the right policy solutions to do so. It is also not about convincing people about its importance. Phillips lays out how the debate about the importance of inequality has been won over the past decade. Politicians and leaders are well aware that inequality is a threat to growth, welfare, democracy, trust and to security and peace. We also know a lot of the policies and actions needed: taxation, investments in health systems, social security and universal welfare systems. Yet, in spite of this, and despite key players and policymakers pledging to fight inequality, the gap is still increasing. Why? Because the power balance is not in favour of changing it.

Civil society thought the struggle was won after 1994. Yes, the vote and equal rights were a crucial part of that struggle. But inequalities remained and power imbalances were not sufficiently addressed. Civil society trusted its political leaders and demobilised. "We gave it away for free," one trade union leader said to me. Coupled with brain drain in Cosatu and other organisations and a demobilised civil society, the power balance tilted against redistribution and in favour of the old and emerging new elites.

Phillips argues that it is time to start organising again. We can't rely on leaders to change things for us, at least not alone. That seldom happens. (And even on the rare occasions when it does happen –

– with elite compassion and solidarity — the peoples’ backing is always needed.) Building collective muscle is always the best strategy. So, with South Africa at the edge of the cliff, this is a crucial time to go back to basics and build strong democratic civil society organisations again. South Africans know better than most how to do this. The country needs it. The government needs it. And the people most definitely need it. Isn’t it about time for the next phase of the struggle?



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