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Are poverty, inequality and unemployment here to stay in South Africa?

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the resilience of poverty, inequality and unemployment (PIU) in South Africa, despite several programmes and policies introduced to reduce and/or eradicate them. It further provides an overview of the suite of programmes and policies introduced from 1994 for the purpose of demonstrating what has been done. Given their inability to eliminate these challenges, seemingly, some of the programmes and policies have not been decisive enough to address the causes, which include unequal redistribution of the country's resources, deep structural inequalities and structural unemployment. Using narrative literature review as a research methodology, the study probes and critically analyses the PIU data. It draws attention to the fact that in 1994, unemployment was 20% and 32.9% in 2024; meanwhile, the 1994 poverty rate was estimated at 24% and the 2023 estimation was 21.6%. The 1994 Gini coefficient was 0.59 and the 2023 one was 0.63. Evidently, despite the efforts over the thirty years of democracy to address these challenges, the soft-hands approach has not worked. Literature suggests that unless something extraordinary is done, the next thirty years will also be characterised by similar challenges. As such, this study recommends constitutional adjustments to enable the urgent need for radical reform.

Keywords: Unemployment; Poverty; Inequality; South Africa; Policies; Economic Development; Post-apartheid Challenges

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1. Introduction

Poverty, inequality and unemployment (PIU) are some of the most obstinate challenges in South Africa. These challenges have persisted despite several plans, policies and recommendations made for addressing them. Although there are specialists and researchers, including research outputs such as books and journal articles, as well as gatherings in this regard such as conferences, summits, and meetings, all of them have not translated into the elimination of these challenges. To date, opportunities are still determined by factors such as race, class, gender, language background, and geographic location (Mthembu, 2024; National Planning Commission, 2012; Seekings, 2008). From the dawn of democracy in 1994, till to date, PIU have mostly increased in South Africa despite the various programmes and policies introduced to reduce and/or eradicate them. This raises several questions regarding the efficacy of these programmes and policies. The nature of the suite of programmes and policies is economic, educational, industrial, and political.

From around 20% unemployment rate in 1994, in 2024, the first quarter official unemployment rate was reported by Statistics South Africa (2024b) to be at 32.9% and the expanded unemployment rate was recorded at 41.9%. The 1994 poverty rate was estimated at 24% and the 2023 estimation was 21.6%, while the 1994 Gini coefficient was 0.59 and the 2023 one was 0.63 (African Development Bank, 2024; Central Intelligence Agency, 2013; Shapiro and Tebeau, 2011; Klasen, 1997).

The official unemployment rate is also referred to as narrow or strict unemployment rate. It excludes discouraged job seekers, that is, those who have not been actively seeking employment two weeks prior to the survey date. The international poverty rate is the share of population that is living below an equivalent of US\$ 2.15 per day. The Gini coefficient is a prominent indicator of income inequality using a 0–1 scale with 0 being perfect income equality and 1 being complete income inequality.

The resilience of PIU and the fact that “the unemployment, poverty and inequality challenges facing South Africa today have their roots in the apartheid system” (National Planning Commission, 2012, p. 356) is a strong reminder of the continued existence of the apartheid system and its legacy long after its formal abolishment. The Department of Monitoring and Evaluation (2014, p. 41) argues that “because they were so deeply entrenched, the inequities of apartheid continued to reproduce themselves after 1994”. This underscores the view that the termination of the legal tools of discrimination and apartheid did not end them as there is continued distribution of wealth, social capital and human capital along racial and class lines thereby reinforcing inequality of opportunities.

As Banerjee et al. (2007) attribute the rising unemployment rate in South Africa to structural changes in the economy, the National Planning Commission (2012, p. 38) argues that “South Africa needs an economy that is more inclusive, more dynamic and in which the fruits of growth are shared equitably.” To achieve this, difficult choices have to be made urgently because “the whites perfected the political economy of privilege over the three centuries of colonial domination and rule, and the subsequent implementation of an apartheid economic governance for 46 years” (United Nations Development Programme, 2022, p. 1). The National Planning Commission (2012, p. 41) adds that as “efforts to transfer ownership of productive assets have not yielded the desired results, ... a bolder approach and clearer targets are required.”

Thus, this paper examines the trend and nature of PIU in South Africa over the thirty-year period between 1994 and 2024. It gives an overview of the programmes and policies introduced between 1994 and 2024 to address PIU and evaluates them against the targets set to eradicate them. It gives the dimensions of PIU,

examines the factors contributing to their resilience, and makes practical recommendations for addressing them.

2. Problem statement

This study addresses the inability to eradicate PIU by the programmes and policies introduced to address these challenges between 1994 and 2024. It seeks to determine the progress made in addressing PIU over the last thirty years. Therefore, it aligns with the thinking of Francis and Webster (2019, p. 800) “that addressing poverty and inequality requires us to think beyond technocratic policy solutions, and beyond a focus on measuring and quantifying inequality, and instead to the ways in which we can harness political, economic and social power for the good society”. Hence, this paper critiques the value of setting of targets when they are not assisting in remedying the situation given that they have perpetually been missed. It thereby seeks to call for a change of strategy as the reliance on government policies and programmes has not eliminated PIU.

3. Methodology

This study uses narrative literature review as a research methodology. Narrative literature reviews are predominantly qualitative interpretations of extant knowledge that summarise and/or synthesise extant literature for the purpose of demonstrating a particular point (Paré and Kitsiou, 2017). It addresses a particular research question by synthesising research evidence as well as evidence from other credible sources. The sources used in the study were secondary data from published books and journals as well as reports from government departments, national agencies like Statistics South Africa, and international agencies like The World Bank.

Given the purpose of the paper, which is to determine the progress made in addressing PIU over the last thirty years, this study critically reviewed the literature on PIU in South Africa for the purpose of establishing the status quo then and now. A narrative literature review was then an apt method for this purpose because it includes a broad range of studies, provides an overall summary, and gives critical interpretation of the issue under investigation (Sukhera, 2022). Its appraisal component allows it to transcend the conventional literature review practice that is predominantly a description, overview, and summary of a research area for the purpose of determining a research gap. In addition to giving a descriptive and historical perspective, this approach evaluates the progress made, determines the evaluation outcome, and recommends feasible strategies that could be explored in light of what the programmes and policies introduced between 1994 and 2024 to address PIU have achieved and not achieved.

Moreover, to further enhance the quality of narrative reviews, Ferrari (2015) suggests that one may borrow from the systematic review methodologies that are designed to lessen bias when choosing articles to review. According to Snyder (2019, p. 334), “systematic reviews have strict requirements for search strategy and selecting articles for inclusion in the review, they are effective in synthesizing what the collection of studies are showing in a particular question and can provide evidence of effect that can inform policy and practice.” To this end, while this paper predominantly used narrative literature review, it benefitted from the principles of systematic reviews for the purpose of enhancing its rigour.

3.1. Data comparison and measurement challenges for the 30-year period (1994 - 2024)

Data availability and integrity for the thirty-year period is a challenge; thus, reliable comparison and measurement of PIU trends is difficult (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2015). Given the dynamics of South Africa's transition from 1994, a caveat is necessary because data challenges preclude certainty about the actual figures around 1994. The dynamics included the incorporation of the independent and self-governing homelands or Bantustans into the Republic of South Africa, establishment of new nine new provinces, establishment of new government departments, "unprecedented influx of African women into the labour market" (Banerjee et al., 2007, p. 2), and changing of the Central Statistical Service of South Africa into Statistics South Africa. Consequently, sometimes there is data discrepancy, although the general status quo with respect to PIU is the same. For instance, Banerjee et al. (2007, p. 1) report that "in 1994, unemployment was substantially lower than it is today. A nationally representative survey conducted just before the transition indicated that unemployment was 13 percent. Another nationally representative survey in 1995 found unemployment to be around 15 percent". Conversely, Cronje (2016) reports that in 1994, the official unemployment rate in South Africa was recorded at 20% and the expanded unemployment rate was recorded at 31.5%. Altman's (2003) recording for official unemployment rate, however, is also 20%; but for the expanded unemployment rate, the recording is 28.6%, whilst Hirschowitz and Orkin (1997) recorded 20% and 33% respectively. Other reports concur with these scholars regarding the 20% official unemployment rate; however, their caveat is that "unemployment rate at that time did not include the Bantustans and the black majority" (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2019, p. 25; BusinessTech, 2019).

Another important point for consideration is the nature of comparison during this period as it is important to compare apples with apples. Some of the realities of this country do not allow for this kind of fair comparison to be done. For instance, the apartheid restrictions that were repealed at varying stages after 1994 included the lifting of restrictions that prevented African women from being economically active. The 1994 unemployment rate thus excludes a significant portion of the population, that is, African women who had not been actively seeking work. Moreover, Banerjee et al. (2007, p. 4) argue that while discrimination is one of the explanations for the persistent unemployment of predominantly Africans, "the data cannot distinguish between the observable attribute (race) and the many economically relevant but unobserved attributes (quality of education, distance from where jobs are located, personal networks that might lead to employment, etc.)."

The Department of Monitoring and Evaluation (2014, p. 6) notes that "the trends in inequality from 1994 are difficult to measure due to weak data especially in the 1990s". For instance, according to Hundenborn et al. (2016), in 1993, South Africa's overall inequality as per the Gini coefficient of income was 0.681, the World Bank (2024) recorded 0.59 for 1993, while the Central Intelligence Agency (2013) recorded 0.59 for 1994. Leibbrandt et al. (2009) differ slightly as they conclude that the Gini coefficient in 1993 was 0.66 while Borhat and Van der Westhuizen (2012) conclude that in 1995, it was 0.64. Despite these data disparities, it is clear that around 1994, inequality was approximately 0.6, and the unemployment rate was around 20%.

3.2. Consideration for the heterogenous nature of poverty, inequality and unemployment

This paper acknowledges that the use of different tools for measuring PIU, due to various dimensions of these challenges, may lead to different conclusions. For poverty, for instance, the use of money-metric and non-

money-metric measures could give different results also because poverty has varying levels and dimensions, that is, poor people are not all equally poor and they do not all lack the same thing. For this reason, care should be taken in understanding the figures, particularly those from the early stages of democracy and because the intention is to determine the extent of changes over the thirty-year period, year-on-year trends have not been given attention. The comprehensive view of the phenomena is also helpful for obtaining a holistic understanding that encompasses the varying outcomes of drivers because economic growth has not always translated into job creation as some economic models suggest. Therefore, the continued uncritical acceptance of this assumption is unlikely to yield the desired outcomes, because while economic growth is a critical factor in job creation, without due consideration of all the other factors that contribute in this regard, it may fall short. In fact, the econometric model by Herwartz and Niebuhr (2011) that examines the relationship between growth and unemployment shows that this relationship is also determined by labour market structure and framework. Furthermore, Lingens' (2003) study revealed that this relationship between growth and unemployment, depending on the extent to which highly and low-skilled personnel can be substituted for one another, may have a positive or negative connection between the two variables.

The divergent views on job creation include macroeconomic changes, fiscal and monetary policies and microeconomic and structural reforms paying closer attention to black empowerment, skills development, labour market policy and industrial policy (Ferreira and Rossouw, 2016). However, Chibba and Luiz (2011, p. 310) argue that as structural inequalities inherently mean inequitable economic growth, the government's strategy in this regard has not been effective because, for instance, "BEE policies have incentivised the emerging black business elite to pursue individual rather than collective agendas with government". Furthermore, given its limited reach, "the BEE programme has been discredited and it is widely viewed by the poor black masses as a high-minded black empowerment scheme that has gone awry" (ibid.).

Furthermore, Soudien et al. (2019) note that poverty and unemployment are characterised by lack that can be remedied through policies of provision, yet inequality is a relational reality that is mediated by power. Chibba and Luiz (2011, p. 310) advocate for a deeper approach as they argue that "structural inequality is embedded and growth by itself will not address PIU problems but appropriate and innovative policies and programmes need to be assessed, planned, budgeted / funded and implemented".

4. Overview of programs and policies introduced between 1994 and 2024 to address PIU

Since the dawn of democracy, various programmes and policies have been introduced to address PIU. The first ones included the Reconstruction and Development (RDP) whose objectives were poverty eradication, employment creation, inequality reduction, and economic growth (Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, 2014).

The planning and implementation component of the RDP was the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy that was introduced in 1996. Its objectives were a rapidly expanding and competitive economy that produces enough jobs for all job seekers; redistribution of opportunities and income in favour of the poor; universal access to high-quality education, healthcare, and other services; and a safe, secure home and workplace environment. The GEAR strategy sought to reconstruct and restructure the economy in accordance with the RDP's objectives (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). However, it was unable to achieve its goals for economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction and this is attributed to

its adoption of a neoliberal policy, which meant that the government was heavily depending on the private sector to generate jobs and eventually lower poverty (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Chibba and Luiz, 2011).

In 2004, the South African government was given a mandate to halve the rate of poverty and unemployment by 2014, hence the introduction of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) in 2006 (The Presidency, 2008). ASGISA was also meant to improve the rate of economic growth and reduce inequality. Moreover, “given the structural nature of unemployment, it further necessitates an overhaul of South Africa’s human capital production” (Chibba and Luiz, 2011, p. 311), hence the introduction of the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) whose objective was to mobilise stakeholders so there could be a more co-ordinated, quicker, and targeted approach in the provision of priority skills.

Succeeding ASGISA was the New Growth Path (NGP) that was established in 2010 to mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis and address economic stagnation. Its focus was economic restructuring and growth so as to, inter alia, enhance the economy’s labour absorption capacity, hence it paid considerable attention to “the identification of ‘job-drivers’, areas that have the potential for creating employment on a large scale, and second, efforts to align national economic policy with industrial policy” (United Nations Development Programme, 2022, p. 5). The NGP’s target was to “create 5 million new jobs between 2010 and 2020” (National Planning Commission, p. 39) as it sought to promote a more labour-absorbing economy.

The NGP was followed by the National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP was “a plan for the country to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 [by] growing an inclusive economy, building capabilities, enhancing the capability of the state and leaders working together to solve complex problems” (National Planning Commission, 2012, p. 1). The NDP currently serves as the foundation for all economic, social, and sectoral policies in South Africa (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). The range of the other programmes and initiatives include the following:

- National Youth Commission was established in 1996 to promote and support youth development.
- National Skills Fund was established in 1999 to provide funding for skills development initiatives.
- Umsombuvu Youth Fund was introduced in 2001 to enhance youth entrepreneurship.
- Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) was introduced in 2004 to contribute towards poverty reduction through the provision of temporary work.
- Operation Phakisa was South Africa’s “adaptation of the Big Fast Results Methodology of Malaysia” that was adopted in 2014 to expedite the implementation of the issues highlighted in the NDP such as PIU (The Presidency, 2014, p. 1).
- Employment Tax Incentives Bill (ETIB) was introduced in 2014 with the intention of encouraging companies to employ more young people by giving them the necessary training and experience.
- Ministry of Small Business Development was established in 2014 to support and promote small businesses.
- Presidential Jobs Summit 2018 was a convergence of key stakeholders such as government, labour and business to explore strategies for addressing the high unemployment rate in the country.

- Operation Vulindlela was the government's programme that was adopted in 2020 "to accelerate the implementation of structural reforms and support economic recovery", and "to address obstacles or delays to ensure execution on policy commitments" (The Presidency, 2022, p. 1).
- Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) manage education and training in various sectors.
- Youth Employment Service (YES) programme was introduced to provide work experience to the youth and thereby facilitate their labour market entry.
- Work Readiness Programmes train individuals on specific job requirements, skills and attributes, and prepare them for the world of work.
- Job Placement Interventions match individuals with employment opportunities.
- Youth Wage Subsidy was introduced as an incentive for hiring new labour market entrants by providing subsidy for recruitment and supporting learnerships.
- Education and skills quality improvement interventions, such as learnerships, internships, apprenticeships programmes were introduced to enhance the students' practical skills in addition to the theoretical knowledge they acquire through workplace learning.
- National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) was established to facilitate youth development.
- Youth Job Creation Initiative is akin to the 'learnership' model. It is offered by an alliance of stakeholders from the private sector, public sector, and philanthropic institutions.
- Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) outlines key actions and timeframes for the implementation of South Africa's industrial policy.
- Special Development Initiatives (SDI) were meant to enhance government operations in targeted areas.
- National Empowerment Fund facilitates black economic participation by supporting black-empowered businesses.

Ferreira and Rossouw (2016, p. 826) conclude that "the general assessment of these policies, ... is that they are not breakthrough policies capable of promoting increased growth and employment. Each new policy has hardly differed from the previous one and has prompted a laid-back approach to addressing South Africa's many socio-economic challenges". Hence, a decisive course of action is required. In his criticism of the South African government's adoption of the neoliberal economic policies that have perpetuated the extant structural problems, Mosala (2022) advocates for the adoption of a course of action that draws lessons from developmental states such as Japan, South Korea, China and Brazil. Among other things, "these developmental states have used land reform, protectionism, and investment regulation to industrialise and grow their economies" (Mosala, 2022, p. 65).

5. Dimensions of poverty and progress made to eliminate this challenge

The definitions of poverty (absolute poverty, moderate poverty and relative poverty) are duly acknowledged in this paper and the strengths and limitations of each definition that are offset by the other are recognised. According to literature (Decerf, 2022; Triegaardt, 2006), absolute poverty refers to a household's inability to provide for its basic needs, thereby it is perpetually hungry, cannot afford health care, sanitation, education for

some or all children, and appropriate shelter. Moderate poverty refers to circumstances whereby a household affords to meet its basic needs but just barely. Relative poverty refers to circumstances whereby a household's income is below the average national income. As the purpose of this study is not a survey, rather it seeks to give a broad overview of the status quo, the use of either definition will not be useful. The intention of this study is to show trends rather than definite granular details of PIU across all dimensions such as race, gender, age, and geographic location. For this reason, poverty in this study refers to 'overall poverty' which is a combination of the different definitions. The same applies to the Gini coefficient index. While it is a prominent measure of income inequality, it is a relative measure that does not capture absolute differences in income (Chitiga et al., 2014). In fact, while the picture of income inequality is skewed, the World Bank (2018) is of the view that wealth inequality is even worse. Moreover, guidance from Francis and Webster (2019, p. 799) in this regard, "is that a focus on the technical aspects of poverty and inequality – measurement and quantification, and temporal changes – has distracted us from directing our inquiry into how to effect change."

Finn et al. (2013) observe that the headcount poverty ratio was 37% in 1993. However, the poverty levels were at 41% in 1993 when measuring poverty through the use of the food poverty line that measures the intake of basic calorie and does not factor in social grants, and they were 33% when social grants were factored in (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2015). By 2030, the NDP seeks to "eliminate income poverty – reduce the proportion of households with a monthly income below R419 per person (in 2009 prices) from 39 percent to zero" (National Planning Commission, 2012, p. 34). At this rate of change, with 2023 poverty rate at 21.6%, this target is unlikely to be reached.

6. Dimensions of inequality and progress made to address this challenge

The dimensions of inequality which include, *inter alia*, income inequality, resource inequality, and economic inequality are duly acknowledged but not examined separately in this paper. Data on inequality has not been consistently collected on all the dimensions since 1994, therefore in this study, inequality refers to 'overall inequality' which encompasses the different dimensions.

South Africa "is one of the most unequal countries in the world, if not the most unequal. Half of all South Africans continue to live in poverty, and there is little to indicate that the poorest will see a reversal in their misfortunes in the coming years" (Francis and Webster, 2019, p. 788). While the Gini coefficient around 1994 was approximately 0.60, and 0.63 in 2023, the NDP seeks to reduce inequality and have a Gini coefficient of 0.6 by 2030 (Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, 2014; National Planning Commission, 2012).

Francis and Webster (2019) argue that wage income is a major contributor to household poverty and the main cause of income disparity in South Africa, and wage inequality is the main cause of South Africa's persistently high income inequality. The International Monetary Fund (2020) observes that increased social expenditure, targeted government transfers, and affirmative action to diversify asset ownership and encourage entrepreneurship among the formerly disenfranchised have been the main strategies used to combat inequality. However, reforms that support employment, inclusive growth, and private investment must also be implemented in addition to these measures.

As economic growth alone cannot eradicate inequality, it is important to interrogate the labour market as some scholars are of the view that unemployment is one of the key drivers of inequality (Pellicer et al., 2011). In fact, Chibba and Luiz (2011, p. 311) argue that "PIU problems are complex in South Africa and any

comprehensive pro-poor strategy has to also address one of the root causes of poverty which lies in the labour market – the increasing inability of the labour market to create opportunities for those who are relatively unskilled”.

Another complexity is the fact that post-apartheid data indicates that intra-race inequality has developed at a high rate, surpassing inter-race disparity which indicates that inequality in South Africa is not limited to between-race groupings (Francis and Webster, 2019). This underscores the fact “that power is produced and reproduced at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality and other aspects of identity” (Francis and Webster, 2019, p. 793). Moreover, Hirschowitz and Orkin (1997) argue that compared to other population groups, Africans are more likely to live in shacks and traditional homes, as well as have less access to basic utilities like power, water, and sanitary facilities. They are also less qualified to compete with others for jobs in the formal sector since they have gotten less schooling, and they have a substantially lower Human Development Index than Whites, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

7. Dimensions of unemployment and progress made to address this challenge

The opening up of global markets subsequent to the official demise of apartheid was a curate’s egg for South Africa. It exposed different sectors to market competition that was immensely difficult for some of the sectors, hence the demise of operations and job losses in, for instance, the clothing, mining, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors. Conversely, the wine and motor industries benefitted as they gained global market penetration thereby created jobs. However, the extent to which these gains have compensated for the jobs lost evidently falls short, due to, *inter alia*, changed nature of labour demand as the growing sectors tend to require more skilled work force than the skills possessed by those who lost jobs in the diminishing sectors. The net effect of the changes is that post-apartheid, the supply of labour increased, yet the demand decreased due to increased use of machinery and technology, and opening of markets. Bhorat and Hodge (1999) conclude that unemployment in South Africa is due to the openness of the economy and globalisation as these have shifted the industrial policy in favour of capital- and skill-intensive economy at the expense of labour. This, however, requires thorough examination considering the complexity of the issue. Altman (2001) brings to attention another element as she argues that in a middle-income economy such as South Africa, job creation through labour-intensive exports is not feasible because in order to be competitive, firms would then have to pay low salaries.

These job creation challenges have been aggravated by increased mechanisation, slow economic growth, fast population growth, and fast technological changes, particularly following the commencement of the fourth industrial revolution. These do not augur well for job creation, thereby decrease labour demand and increase the unemployment rate. The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (2019) attributes the persisting structural unemployment to the economy’s inability to create sufficient jobs, high-level of entry requirements, skills mismatch, and poor absorption rate of the South African labour market.

Something else to be considered is that South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy contributed to the high population growth as it made the conditions more favourable for labour migration. Consequently, there has been many migrants who have come into the country in search of employment opportunities. Statistics South Africa (2024a) acknowledges that labour migration is a global phenomenon that is driven by factors such as political instability, unemployment, poverty, and discrimination. The estimates of the number

of immigrants living in South Africa vary markedly, as they range from *around 2.4 million* (Mitchley et al., 2023) to around 13 million (Department of Home Affairs, 2024). Moreover, the African Centre for Migration and Society (2017, p. 1) reports that [in some sectors] “a higher percentage of foreign-born migrants are employed than the percentage of South Africans who are employed.”

In addition to these factors, the UNDP (2022, pp. 67-68, 71-73) is of the view that job creation in South Africa has been compromised by “Inadequate electrical infrastructure”, “Lack of capacity and skills mismatch”, “Labour market regulations”, and “Corruption and political interference”, “Inadequate and inappropriate education”, “Lack of needed skill sets”, “Poor labour market mechanism and inadequate information”, “Biased processes of recruitment”, “Inadequate entrepreneurial skills”, “Lack of support from established corporates”, “Inadequate funding and resources for young entrepreneurs”.

The 1994 distribution of the labour force was 63% (Black Africans), 13% (Coloureds), 4% (Indians/Asians), and 21% (Whites) (Statistics South Africa, 2014). The unemployment rate for Africans in 1994 was 26% and for Whites it was 4% (Mlatsheni and Leibbrandt, 2014). Unfortunately, unemployment distribution continues to be racially skewed, with Africans being the most unemployed. Black Africans have the highest unemployment rate (36.9%) in relation to other population groups, followed by Coloureds (23.0%), Indians/Asians (12.6%), and Whites (9.2%) (Statistics South Africa, 2024b).

Black African women have the highest unemployment rate (39.2%) in relation to other population groups, followed by Coloureds (23.5%), Indians/Asians (19%), and Whites (9.7%) (Statistics South Africa, 2024b). In fact, while “female worker participation rate increased by 16 percentage points from 38 percent in 1995, to 54 percent in 2019” (United Nations Development Programme, 2022, p. 30), given their education limitations due to apartheid restrictions, the “unprecedented influx of African women into the labour market” (Banerjee et al., 2007) meant that these new labour market entrants are predominantly unskilled. Furthermore, Black African men have the highest unemployment rate (34.9%) in relation to other population groups, followed by Coloureds (22.5%), Indians/Asians (9%), and Whites (8.7%) (Statistics South Africa, 2024b).

8. Factors contributing to the sustenance of PIU

Given the country’s status quo as far as PIU are concerned, it is evident that the mechanisms for eradicating them have not yielded the desired outcomes. So far, the measures taken to redress colonialism and apartheid seem to be skin-deep, ostensible, perfunctory and inconsistent. On the other hand, colonialism and apartheid were well-thought and effectively implemented systems whose implementers had courage, determination, and dedication. The UNDP (2022) acknowledges that apartheid was a racialised economic approach and a legal framework created to legitimise racial discrimination in South Africa. Racial prejudice as an economic lever was both a corollary and foundation of its evolution into a modern economy.

The second factor contributing to the sustenance of PIU is the labour market dynamics. Banerjee et al. (2007) argue that using a simple economic model, the expectation would be that the post-apartheid increased supply of labour, would translate to the fall of wages. However, although real wages decreased, the nominal decline required to clear the labour market was too great to be socially or politically acceptable. Institutional restraints also prevented wages from falling as much as they otherwise might have. They include the sustenance of relatively higher earnings for the employed union members, while presenting difficulties in tackling the issue of unemployment. The UNDP (2022, p. 30) adds further employment challenges which

include sluggish economic growth; structural shifts of the South African economy – “the demand for labour has shifted towards more skilled workers”; skills mismatch in the economy; poor quality education; and increase in labour supply.

The different recommendations for addressing PIU can be broadly categorised as those who are advocating for higher growth and greater labour market flexibility on the one side, and those who are advocating for deep structural reforms of the economy. A study by Qithi and Mkhize (2023, p. 1035) revealed contradictory findings regarding the notion that South Africa's economic expansion is the only way to combat inequality and poverty. The correlation between economic growth and poverty was negative, while the correlation between growth and income inequality was positive. The results also show that despite the economic expansion that occurred between 1994 and 2008, income disparity is not always reduced by growth in the economy, as shown by the persistently high Gini coefficient. Moreover, given that South Africa has had the jobless economic growth phenomenon, the notion that economic expansion leads to the creation of jobs should therefore be carefully considered.

While the paucity of skills is a serious challenge, care should be given so that it does not get to be used for deliberate blockage of entry into the labour market. Some countries with low skills base like Cambodia have managed to have low employment rate. O'Malley (2006) contends that the unequal level of education continues to be a contributing element in the scarcity of appropriately skilled labour, which is exacerbated by the effect of apartheid spatial patterns on labour costs. Furthermore, the cost of labour for the impoverished is increased because a large number of them reside far from their places of employment. The education quality issue is further corroborated by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2021) that revealed that South African Grade 4 learners who cannot read in any language for meaning have been increasing as they were 78% in 2016 and 81% in 2021, and those who cannot read at all were 13% in 2016 and 27% in 2021.

The third factor is what O'Malley (2006, p. 4) refers to as “deficiencies in state organisation, capacity and leadership” [because] “insufficiently decisive leadership in policy development and implementation all constrain the country's growth potential”. Francis and Webster (2019, p. 800) emphasise that “it is a common refrain that South Africa doesn't need good policy, it needs implementation”. Moreover, it is important to emphasise that there are hotly contested views regarding the reasons why the post-apartheid programmes, initiatives and policies have failed to eradicate PIU. However, space limitations would not allow for such to be unpacked in this paper. It is, however, important to note that political and economic forces play a crucial role in determining their success or failure, thus predominantly leaving it to the government to drive the transformation agenda has proven not to work over the thirty years in South Africa. This is evident in the dumping of the RDP, *inter alia*, due to its socialist ideals in favour of the neoliberal GEAR policy (Tshimomola, 2024).

9. Implications for the sustenance of poverty, inequality and unemployment

While the impact and marks of colonisation and apartheid will be embedded in the South African society for generations to come, there is a growing intolerance for the continued use of these misfortunes as excuses for the sustenance of PIU. Also, while there is no clarity on how long it would take to reverse the impact and marks of four centuries of colonisation and four decades of apartheid, there is a strong view that thirty years is a

considerable period to redress the status quo. Consequently, there is a strong dissatisfaction about the pace of transformation, particularly among the Africans as they bear the brunt of the systemic and structural sustenance of PIU. Mahadea and Simson (2010) observe increasing signs of disillusionment among the people as the unemployment rate continues to be extremely high. There is also an alarmingly high crime rate, significant service delivery challenges, widespread corruption, and a growing number of disgruntled workers voicing their displeasure with pay and working conditions.

Furthermore, the failure to address the challenge of PIU in South Africa is concerning considering the prediction by Newfarmer et al. (2018, p. 1) that “by 2030 more than three quarters of the world's absolute poor are projected to live in Africa”. Qithi and Mkhize (2023, p. 1035) argue that there had been limited success in the government's attempts to alleviate PIU as evidence suggests that the persistence of the prevalence of the three social ills “can threaten the quality of South Africa's democracy and perpetuate social conflict”. South Africa's high rate of unemployment and poverty are connected to many social problems such as crime, inequality and compromised health (Mbonambi and Olutola, 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2014).

The National Planning Commission (2012) observes that as a result of inequality, people are trapped in the conditions of their birth, the society is hardened into a class structure, and trust between people gets eroded thereby giving the impression that the rules are rigged. This is especially evident in situations when class and non-economic variables, like race, are aligned, as in South Africa, making the social order as a whole appear to be both deeply unfair and inequitable. Therefore, it argues that transformation will be superficial if South Africa manages to deracialise ownership and control of the economy without also lowering inequality and poverty. Corresponding to this, the nation's progress will be unstable and precarious if poverty and inequality are decreased without clearly altered ownership patterns.

The National Planning Commission (2012) also notices that even though apartheid is no longer official, its social, psychological, and geographic aspects continue to influence the perspectives and daily experiences of many South Africans. Racism is fuelled by the ingrained mentality of racial prejudice, collapse in morals, opportunity inequity, extreme poverty, and struggle for limited resources. If society does not address systemic racism, it will continue to be perpetuated and strengthen across generations.

10. Conceptual and policy considerations for the eradication of PIU challenges

Despite the fanfare surrounding the launch of various programmes and policies over the thirty years of democracy, none of them has been able to competently address the challenge of PIU in South Africa. Ferreira and Rossouw (2016, p. 814) argue that while post-apartheid policies sought “to tackle the negative consequences of apartheid, i.e. pervasive inequality, poverty and unemployment”, they have however fallen short as these challenges are instead on the rise. Therefore, practical and innovative solutions to address PIU are urgently required. In this regard, Chibba (2010) identifies the failures of conventional economics that have been made evident through its inability to address the poverty and inequality challenges. Owing to the multi-disciplinarity of the challenges, Chibba (2012) submits that behavioural economics should also be considered for addressing PIU challenges. Behavioural economics draws attention to the fact that poverty is not solely the lack of material resources. Hoff and Demeritt (2024) argue that individuals' thinking and demeanour are also affected by their external environments such as poverty because it affects the quality of one's decision-making.

Hence, new mental models, agency, and psycho-sociological factors should be taken into consideration when addressing the nature, causes and effects of poverty.

Skae (2018) argues that the NDP's strategy of tackling PIU, includes unemployment reduction to at least 6% by 2030, and this target cannot be achieved unless something extraordinary is done. Further, this is because the focus on the moribund NDP is a "continuation of a culture of ignoring hard facts" as the NDP "has been dead as a functioning blueprint for a while" (Skae, 2018, p. 1). This culture is also evident in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation's (2014, p. 19) conclusion that "the available data suggests that democracy has seen improvements in poverty levels", when the 1994 poverty rate was estimated at 24% and the 2023 estimation was 21.6%. These improvements are also not sustainable since a considerable change in this regard is due to increased social spending, social grants, and free food parcels (Mbonambi and Olutola, 2024). Hamse (2014, p. 67) concludes that "in reality, social grants only just sustain people and keep them alive. Therefore, it is referred to as the social grant trap."

While Ferreira and Rossouw (2016, p. 813) notice that "the NGP has earned a reputation for being overly gentle when it comes to driving the envisaged new growth", this phenomenon seems to cut across many of the programmes and policies of the democratic era as they have not been decisive enough to address the root causes of the problem which include unequal redistribution of the country's resources, deep structural unemployment and deep structural inequalities. Chibba and Luiz (2011, p. 308) argue that the "PIU problems in South Africa emanate from: the historical context and enduring legacy of apartheid era policies; post-apartheid governmental leadership and public sector capacity". Cognisant of this, Francis and Webster (2019, p. 799) lament that "there has been insufficient attention paid to the structures of economic, political and social power that continue to produce and reproduce poverty, and particularly inequality". This paper then submits that the structural issues must be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

South Africa is one of the countries with the highest unemployment rate in the world, as the World Bank (2022) recorded it at 29.8% followed by Djibouti (27.9%), West Bank and Gaza (25.7%), Eswatini (24.4%), and Republic of Congo (21.8%). It could be important for South Africa and these countries to draw lessons from those that are doing well in this regard, namely Qatar (0.1%), Cambodia (0.4%), Niger (0.5%), Thailand (0.9%), Burundi (1.0%), Bahrain (1.4%), Chad (1.4%), Cuba (1.4%), Solomon Islands (1.5%), and Benin (1.7%). Some of the lessons that could be drawn from these countries include prioritisation of the citizens in the allocation of jobs and market protection of the most labour-intensive industries through, inter alia, preferential procurement and favourable tariffs as is the case with China whose "tariff structure favours labour-intensive sectors" (Claro, 2006, p. 289).

A deep and fitting approach is required because of the complexity of the PIU challenge. Chibba and Luiz (2011, pp. 311-312) bring to attention another issue that, "South Africa also needs to address the question of where it wishes to position itself within the global production system and whether it wishes to compete on the basis of wage costs or on the basis of innovation – these require very different approaches to the human capital conundrum".

Care should be taken since Mahadea and Simson (2010, p. 403) argue that "the higher the degree of regulation in a country, the higher its unemployment rate tends to be. Greater flexibility in the labour market is a minimum requirement for employment creation." Ferreira and Rossouw (2016, p. 809) add that "the rising cost of labour and labour market rigidities have been posited as causes of rising unemployment". However, evidence from other countries suggests that the assertion by Mahadea and Simson is incorrect. For instance,

the U.S. Department of State (2024) observes that with a 0.07% unemployment rate for men and a 0.2% unemployment rate for women as of the first quarter of 2023, Qatar has some of the lowest unemployment rates in the world. The processes for the implementation of the Qatarisation strategy for the private sector are underway and this strategy aims to mandate that a certain percentage of the workforce in some professions, particularly those with leadership roles, must consist of Qatari nationals. It also seeks to provide incentives to private enterprises to hire Qatari nationals rather than foreigners in specific professions. Moreover, evidence from Cambodia also disputes the assertion by Mahadea and Simson. Similar to South Africa, Cambodia experienced a decline of labour participation in the agriculture sector due to labour replacement by machinery, the shift to larger-scale commercial farming, and migration, yet it is still one of the countries with the lowest unemployment in the world (Open Development Cambodia, 2015). This is in spite of Cambodian labour laws that protect the rights of employees and employers, Cambodia's ratification of thirteen international labour conventions, and shortage of skilled workers. Given these apparent contradictions, it is important to delineate the stage at which regulations that are amenable to job creation get to be harmful, because the concept of excessive regulations argued by Mahadea and Simson is not self-explanatory.

Given the current pace of the eradication of PIU in South Africa, it is evident that unless drastic steps are undertaken, the 2030 goals reflected in the NDP and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are unlikely to be met. The National Planning Commission (2012, p. 38) notes that "in 2030, the economy should be close to full employment, equip people with the skills they need, ensure that ownership of production is more diverse and able to grow rapidly". The UNDP (2022, pp. 77-78) suggests that "an inclusive or pro-employment macroeconomic policy framework is needed, which would simultaneously contribute to the fight against poverty and inequality".

Another issue is suggested by Francis and Webster (2019, p. 798) who argue that there is a need to question "to what extent the liberal constitutional regime in South Africa enables or hinders the need for rapid and radical socio-economic transformation". Presently, South Africa is in a predicament because of the non-alignment of the Constitution to the urgent need for radical reform. Michelman (2023, p. 264) aptly demonstrates this conundrum:

Suppose we have three factors in play: a national project of post-colonial recovery from distributive injustice, prominently including land reform; express constitutional protection for property rights; and a Constitution whose other main features bring it recognisably within the broad historical tradition of liberal constitutionalism. Have we got a practical contradiction on our hands? ... it may, even so, be true that the conditions of distributive justice within a national society will not always be achievable by means meeting the demands of an up-and running liberal constitutional order.

11. Conclusion

This paper depicts what was in 1994, what is in 2024, and what might happen going forward as far as PIU are concerned in South Africa. The different programmes and policies introduced between 1994 and 2024 to address PIU had varying degrees of success. They include the RDP, GEAR, ASGISA, NGP, and NDP. None of them, however, managed to reach all their targets, although it may be premature to conclude about the NDP since its

targets are set to be met by 2030. Indications, however, are that it will also follow suit. The persistence of PIU despite all the efforts to reduce and/or eradicate them translated to a continuous shifting of goalposts, and changing of strategies, but none of them have been decisive enough to address the root causes of the problem. The root causes include unequal redistribution of the country's resources, deep structural inequalities, and structural unemployment. Therefore, this study submits that PIU is here to stay in South Africa if bold measures are not taken to reverse the situation.

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