

## The role of higher education

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Now that the elections are upon us it is about time that South Africans begin to look facts in the face and ask some tough questions and seek answers. The first substantive right provided for in our Bill of Rights is the right to equality: *everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection by and benefit of the law*. That should be so. After all, this society has been stratified according to race from the moment European settlers set foot on our shores. Even longer: class differentiation has been a feature of all societies from time immemorial. For us in this country the struggle for liberation has been a struggle for equality. We sought an end to apartheid and its pernicious racial bigotry. We believed that apartheid was a heresy because it made claims about God which were at variance with the theological doctrine of human nature. More seriously, the apartheid system sought to entrench racialism in a deterministic fashion and then invest it with divine sanction.

The effect was a society built upon the foundations of inequality, of racial stratification, of racial discrimination and unequal opportunity. It meant that South Africa became a society marked by exclusion from power and resources for the black majority of the population. It meant that the wealth of the nation was the monopoly of the racial minority. That of course bred suspicion and racial hostility; it meant interminable civil strife and war with neighbours. It meant that South Africans in large numbers, black and white, emigrated from its shores as refugees to seek better opportunity elsewhere. It meant that South Africa suffered a brain drain and South African scientists earned accolades elsewhere. At home the system bred poverty in unequal measure.

A recent study published in *The Guardian* based on a topical book, *The spirit level*<sup>1</sup> by Richard Wilson and Kate Pickett, states that the traditional wisdom that the wealth of the few would have a trickle-down effect, enabling the poorer to receive the benefits of the wealth of the few, is no longer true. "The wealth of nations", they say, "has little bearing on the great list of social evils examined. But in (almost) every case there is a link to inequality." Unequal societies are unhealthier, they have higher and early mortality rates, sicknesses like HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, high infant mortality, mental illnesses, high prison populations and illiteracy. *The spirit level*, however, goes on to show that inequality damages society right up the social scale. "The bottom of the heap," they go on to observe, "is the most unhealthy place to be."

The study records the spirit level of inequality in a number of developed countries with the United States as the most unequal and Japan as the most equal. For example, unequal societies record around three times more mental illness than more equal ones. Anxiety disorders, depression, homicide and addictions are the conditions most likely to be linked with the income gap. For example, in unequal societies like US and Britain, prescriptions for psychiatric conditions are particularly high. Prison populations are much higher in unequal societies. Many of them maintain the death penalty and attitudes towards crime are very rigid. Resources are spent on putting up barriers instead of opening up society. They are marked by distrust and people live in fear. Gun ownership is very high and violence, including domestic violence, is common. However, the prison population, Wilkinson and Pickett tell us, has less to do with the scale of actual crime committed and more to do with attitudes where sentences are harsher in unequal societies as the law seeks to respond to societal expectations.

Attitudes towards health and lifestyle are another measure. Unhealthy pursuits, unhealthy eating and diet habits, obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse are most marked in unequal societies. In each unequal society there is a marked link between social status and obesity, for example. Those most likely to suffer from chronic stress are most likely to indulge in unhealthy habits. Economically polarised societies have up to ten times more teenage pregnancies than more equal societies. That may have something to do with the stresses and strains of home management, lack of education and illiteracy and a society with low expectations of young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, R & Pickett, K 2008. *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. Allen Lane, London. Available at: [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk).

There is evidence that education is also a factor. In a family where there is more education, it is likely that children will finish school and may even proceed to higher education for professional training and skills development. In less equal societies more children leave school early, are unemployed and caught up in juvenile delinquency. The same pattern continues in death rates. Death rates overall, even in the upper classes, are higher in unequal societies than in more equal societies. Death rates through disease and non-natural causes like motor vehicle accidents, violence and preventable diseases are higher in unequal societies. This, of course, has the effect of putting a strain on the economy; there is insufficient skilled personnel, extra expenditure on health care to a larger population, and a detrimental effect on pensions and unemployment; and poverty means that the state pays social grants to a growing number of the population who cannot look after themselves.

I find this a sobering study and I ask myself why it is that political parties, including government, have just not focused on the pathology of inequality in our society. Another question that should be asked is why scholars and researchers are not paying enough attention to the phenomenon of growing inequality in our society and the effect it has on social attitudes, on resources, on skills, on the economy and the general wealth of our nation. Inequality is the single deadliest sin of post-apartheid South Africa.

Fifteen years into democracy South Africa remains a divided society. Not only have societal structures retained the apartheid geography in housing and communities to an extent that is striking to any visitor; South Africa remains unintegrated in many respects: churches on Sundays, sport at weekends, the growth of private clubs and estates, barricaded communities. Our prisons are overpopulated and the rhetoric of revenge is stronger than that of compassion and correction; our courts are struggling with court rolls and we are employing ever more police but none of this is making any impact. In education and in health the same phenomenon is to be found. The hospital services in many places are on the point of collapsing – not enough young people are joining the care professions and even fewer of them are becoming teachers. Instead, I suspect, many more will become police, prison officers and army recruits.

It seems to me that power sharing as a moral concept and condition suggests that, for power to be effective, it has to be shared and it must be owned responsibly by society at large. If power were shared, society would be self-correcting. We would be the government, the caring neighbour, our brother's keeper. Clearly none of the interventions have addressed adequately the great divide that characterises our society. The result is that corruption and bribery are rife, even at the highest levels of society and have become acceptable means of social intercourse – and with these come attitudes of intolerance. We find authoritarianism in politics and in the way the state functions and, by its nature, it is exclusionary. It excludes the weak and vulnerable, and those without connections to the powerful elite in society. There is increased reliance on policing and we are in danger of becoming a police state. All the measures referred to in the Wilkinson and Pickett study are to be found in South Africa: mental conditions and a psychotic society are evident everywhere; the inability of society to dialogue rationally; an education system that is not coping and fails to meet expectations; drugs at schools and violence on the school playground; ill discipline; hospitals on the point of breakdown and a health system that is not coping; persistent racial divides, especially racism that is an element of an unhealthy society; poverty levels and dependence on the social grants system for survival by whole families; high mortality rates and teenage pregnancies.

It seems to me that somehow we are not getting it right. If I were a politician I would simply call for a national initiative on social cohesion as a matter of urgency in order to seek consensus on initiatives that would address social attitudes, the widening income gap, crime and corruption and the deteriorating moral fibre of society. Unless we get down to business the promise of 1994 is fast becoming but a chimera.