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A study on the effects of prolonged correction of historical imbalances in South Africa

Sheperd Sikhosana ^{1,*} and Humphrey Lephetha Motsepe ²

¹ *Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Commerce, University of Azteca, Mexico (South African Division)*

² *Department of Public and Development Administration, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, University of Venda, South Africa.*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the long-term effects and sociopolitical ramifications of South Africa's post-apartheid, corrective policies that have been in place for three decades. The study uses a qualitative, systematic literature review (SLR) design to evaluate academic, policy, and institutional sources from 1994 to 2025, all within the framework of constructivism and interpretivism. Following PRISMA guidelines, a purposive sample of 85 academic publications and policy documents was selected from well-known databases such as SABINET, Web of Science, and Scopus. In addition to document analysis of national transformation strategies and socio-economic evaluations, data collection involved a thorough review of peer-reviewed literature. With the aid of Atlas.ti software, analytical procedures adhered to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, which made it possible to identify recurring patterns, conceptual conflicts, and important gaps in the literature. Despite the fact that there has been a noticeable improvement in access to education, public services, and representative institutions, the results are still uneven and frequently tainted by elite capture, symbolic compliance, and enduring structural disparities. Furthermore, ideological differences point to the need for reevaluated frameworks that go beyond essentialist dichotomies, especially in relation to the ongoing use of racial categorization.

The study calls for equity frameworks grounded in intersectionality, local implementation, and inclusive policymaking. It emphasizes the need to build institutional capacity and empower communities. These reforms aim to ensure redress is historically accountable, socially sustainable, and democratically sound.

Keywords: Transformation; Redistributive Policy; Post-Apartheid; Socio-Economic Redress

1. Introduction

In order to address the severe socioeconomic disparities left by apartheid, South Africa has set out on an ambitious and morally required journey since the country's transition to democracy in 1994. The adoption of race-conscious policies like affirmative action, land reform, and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has been a key component of this transformation agenda. These policies seek to promote inclusivity, redistribute opportunity, and restore dignity among historically marginalized groups (Alexander, 2002; Hall, 2025). The effectiveness, social legitimacy, and effects on national cohesion of these policies are still being questioned, despite the fact that they have resulted in notable improvements in access to political representation, healthcare, and education. Questions concerning sustainability, elite capture, and the moral boundaries of protracted racial redress are becoming more prevalent in South Africa's policy discourse after thirty years of democracy (Gumede, 2008; Chatterjee et al., 2021). The nation is still struggling to uphold its historical obligations while moving toward a more intersectional and inclusive conception of justice that acknowledges the complexity of disadvantage without reifying racial identities (Fraser, 2008). In post-apartheid South

* Corresponding author: Sheperd Sikhosana.

Africa, this study aims to examine the efficacy, ideological coherence, and sociopolitical effects of protracted corrective measures.

Background to the Study

Spatial segregation, unequal access to high-quality education, limited land ownership, and economic exclusion are all examples of the deeply ingrained system of racialized inequality that apartheid left behind (Van der Berg and Moses, 2012). The newly established democratic government recognized the systemic nature of this injustice, enacted a rights-based Constitution, and started implementing a number of restorative justice-based redistributive measures. The first all-encompassing plan to improve the socioeconomic circumstances of Black South Africans was the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which was introduced in 1994 (South African History Online, 2014). The National Development Plan (NDP), GEAR, and other legislative tools intended to advance equity and institutional change came next.

Even though there have been notable improvements, especially in healthcare, education enrolment, and the rise of the black middle class, there are still large gaps. These include persistent unemployment, spatial inequality, and intergenerational poverty among Black South Africans, all of which some academics attribute to institutional fragility and policy fatigue (Creamer, 2024; Kohler, 2024). The moral legitimacy of redress programs has also been undermined by recent empirical analyses that indicate policies like BEE have unintentionally promoted elite accumulation without adequately addressing mass empowerment (Gumede, 2008; Hall, 2025). Given South Africa's constitutional commitment to social justice, democratic inclusion, and non-racialism, these developments raise significant concerns regarding the ideological continuity of racial redress.

In order to compile empirical, theoretical, and policy-based contributions from 1994 to 2025, the study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology. In doing so, it seeks to (a) evaluate the long-term effects of redress policies, (b) analyse their socio-political ramifications, and (c) provide recommendations for a redesigned transformation framework that is in line with participatory justice and inclusive development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

South Africa has enacted a number of redistributive and corrective measures since gaining democracy in 1994 in an effort to alleviate the long-standing socioeconomic divides brought about by apartheid. These policies include targeted social spending, affirmative action, land reform, and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). The long-term effects of these extensive interventions, which have lasted for more than three decades, on social cohesion, economic justice, and institutional transformation are critically examined in this review of the literature. It assesses the efficacy, constraints, and unforeseen consequences of these revolutionary endeavours by consulting both classic and modern literature.

2.2. Historical Context and Policy Foundations

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was the first post-apartheid plan designed to address past injustices by giving previously underprivileged groups access to jobs, housing, and basic services (South African History Online, 2014). But due to implementation issues and budgetary limitations, it was replaced in 1996 by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, which prioritized neoliberal macroeconomic stability over direct social redistribution (Bond, 2000). Racial exclusion was made official during apartheid by laws like the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, especially in higher education and the workplace. This legacy was meant to be reversed by post-1994 policies such as the Employment Equity Act (1998) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) (Mabokela and Mlambo, 2017).

2.3. Economic Redistribution and Structural Inequality

South Africa continues to rank among the world's most unequal societies in spite of persistent redistributive efforts. According to Chatterjee, Czajka, and Gethin (2021), the pre-tax incomes of the bottom 50% fell between 1993 and 2019, but the top 1% saw a 50% increase. However, the growth of government services and social grants has helped to reduce poverty, especially in marginalized and rural areas (Van der Berg and Moses, 2012). Although land reform is still a vital component of economic remedy, its effectiveness has been constrained by inadequate execution, a dearth of support services, and ineffective bureaucracy. Despite having great symbolic significance, its economic impact is still minimal (Mukarati et al., 2020).

2.4. Education and Human Capital Development

With the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF) encouraging equitable school finance in historically underprivileged areas, the education sector has seen significant growth (Sambo, 2020). Even though there has been a significant improvement in access to education, quality outcomes are still uneven, especially between rural and urban schools. According to Kohler (2024), graduates from underprivileged backgrounds face limited economic mobility, despite the fact that overall levels of educational attainment have increased. The returns to education also vary significantly by race and socioeconomic status.

2.5. Employment Equity and Institutional Transformation

A black middle class has grown as a result of policies like the Employment Equity Act and BBBEE, which have strengthened black representation in public institutions. These policies, however, have also come under fire for disproportionately favouring a small elite while largely ignoring systemic poverty and unemployment (Gumede, 2008; Hall, 2025). Public trust in transformation initiatives has been further damaged by worries about nepotism, corruption, and administrative inefficiencies (Creamer, 2024).

2.6. Social Cohesion and the "Rainbow Nation" Ideal

Debate is still sparked by the ideological contradiction between post-apartheid South Africa's non-racial ideals and race-specific redress. Some academics warn that policies based on race could further exacerbate social division (Alexander, 2002), but others contend that in a society still reeling from the effects of apartheid, race is still a useful indicator of past disadvantage (Nadvi et al., 2018).

2.7. Emerging Perspectives and Policy Recalibration

A growing corpus of research supports a multifaceted equity framework that takes into account not only race but also class, gender, geography, and historical disadvantage. The creation of more complex redistributive models that can accomplish social justice without compromising unity is encouraged by Chatterjee et al. (2021). These concepts are reflected in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which calls for inclusive development based on widespread public participation and institutional renewal (National Planning Commission, 2012).

2.8. Summary

According to the literature, South Africa's long-term corrective policies have produced significant advancements, especially in the areas of institutional diversity and service delivery, but they have not yet eliminated long-standing structural inequalities. In order to adopt a more inclusive, transparent, and intersectional approach that both recognizes historical injustice and gets ready for a united, equitable future, future transformation initiatives must reorient current frameworks.

3. Theoretical frameworks

3.1. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Overview: Critical Race Theory examines how race, power, and the law interact to create and maintain systemic inequality. It has its roots in legal scholarship and social justice discourse. CRT provides a lens through which to assess whether post-apartheid policies like land reform, affirmative action, and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) actually eliminate historical disadvantage or reshape power in novel racialized ways in the South African context.

Relevance to the Study: Underlying presumptions, power relationships, and institutional legacies ingrained in the formulation and application of policies are revealed with the aid of CRT. It also makes it possible to criticize "race-neutral" or "colour-blind" narratives that might ignore systemic injustices. This framework is essential for analysing the effects of long-term redistributive policies, particularly when it comes to comprehending the rhetoric surrounding transformation, elite capture, and ongoing marginalization (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda, 1991).

3.2. Social Justice Theory

Overview: A normative framework for assessing rights, equity, and fairness in a society is offered by social justice theory. The theory, which is based on the writings of philosophers like Amartya Sen and John Rawls, emphasizes participation in democratic life, the recognition of human dignity, and the fair distribution of resources.

Relevance to the Study: This framework facilitates the evaluation of whether equitable access to political representation, economic opportunity, land, and education has been improved by South Africa's redress policies. It aids in differentiating between substantive equality (like outcome-based justice) and formal equality (like legal access). When examining the transition from race-based metrics to multifaceted equity models based on intersectionality, capability enhancement, and inclusive growth, social justice theory is especially helpful (Fraser, 2008; Rawls, 1971).

4. Research methodology

With an emphasis on transformation, inequality, and socioeconomic redress, this study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to investigate the long-term effects of South Africa's post-apartheid corrective policies. This methodology's goal was to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the scholarly discourse generated over a thirty-one-year period (1994–2025) by critically synthesizing and consolidating the body of existing knowledge. This strategy was chosen to guarantee thematic coherence across various sources, analytical depth, and methodological transparency.

4.1. Research Paradigm

The study acknowledges that historical, cultural, and political interactions shape social reality and is guided by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm is ideal for reviewing complicated and value-laden issues like racial redress and national transformation because it values subjectivity, context, and multiplicity of meaning (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study aims to reveal how academic narratives surrounding post-apartheid policy have changed in content and ideological orientation by analysing various viewpoints over time.

4.2. Research Design

In contrast to conventional narrative reviews, the review followed a qualitative, systematic literature review design that minimizes selection bias and is dedicated to methodological rigor and replicability (Siddaway et al., 2019). By encouraging critical engagement with empirical, theoretical, and policy-based literature, the SLR design enables meta-level analysis of the ways in which concepts, conclusions, and frameworks have evolved, been disputed, or been left out over time. Additionally, it makes it easier to see trends and changes over time in the discussion of equity and redistribution in academia and policy.

4.3. Search Strategy and Sampling Process

The review found literature that is thematically related to the research focus through the use of purposive sampling. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which offered structured phases for source identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, served as the framework for the search (Page et al., 2021). There were 85 academic sources in all, gathered from reliable multidisciplinary databases such as SABINET, Web of Science, and Scopus. The search was narrowed down using Boolean operators and keyword strings like "post-apartheid transformation," "redistributive policy," "Black Economic Empowerment," "land reform," and "inequality in South Africa." The following standards were used to choose the articles:

publications in English with a South African or Southern African focus; empirical studies, meta-analyses, or theoretical discussions that directly address historical imbalances and equity; peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reports published between 1994 and 2025. There were more than 300 documents in the original source pool. 85 articles were judged eligible for full analysis following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which included screening of titles and abstracts, removal of duplicates, and relevance evaluation.

4.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

With the aid of Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program made to handle massive amounts of textual data, the chosen literature was methodically arranged and subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic dimensions like policy effectiveness, social inclusion, elite capture, racial classification, institutional transformation, and long-term equity impact were used to code each article. The coding process was guided by the six-phase model developed by Braun and Clarke (2019): becoming acquainted with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, evaluating themes, defining and naming themes, and creating the final synthesis.

- Thematic coding facilitated the identification of
- Prevailing trends, such as growing emphasis on multidimensional indicators of disadvantage;
- Points of academic and policy contention, such as the continued reliance on racial classifications;

Literature gaps, including limited intersectional analysis and underrepresentation of rural or community-level empirical work.

This method allowed the study to distil scholarly contributions into coherent narratives that reflect both convergence and divergence in the field.

4.5. Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

Clear selection protocols, consistent coding practices, and reflexive engagement with the data were used to demonstrate methodological rigor. While Atlas.ti offered an audit trail for thematic development and interpretation, the PRISMA model's application improved the review process's transparency. The study used triangulation across various source types and cross-validated emerging themes with pre-existing conceptual frameworks to ensure reliability.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Even though this study only used secondary sources, ethical research practices were upheld by properly citing all sources, refraining from deception, and critically assessing each one for relevance, bias, and quality. To reduce the possibility of institutional bias, policy reports and other institutional documents were included after their original context and authorship were carefully examined.

5. Data collection

Data was gathered using a thorough and methodical document analysis procedure, which was consistent with the study's qualitative, literature-based focus. The use of documentary sources was both methodologically appropriate and epistemologically congruent with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm that supports the research, which sought to synthesize various scholarly and policy-based perspectives on the long-term corrective measures implemented in post-apartheid South Africa (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Thanh and Thanh, 2015). This paradigm affirms the analytical value of contextual and historical interpretation while acknowledging the social construction of meaning.

To guarantee openness, reproducibility, and thematic coherence, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology was used. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which led the data collection process, made it easier to identify, screen, and evaluate the eligibility of sources in a structured manner (Page et al., 2021). To find texts of analytical importance, a purposive sampling technique was used, with an emphasis on scholarly books, policy documents, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1994 and 2025. Academic databases like Google Scholar, SABINET, Web of Science, and Scopus were used to retrieve the literature.

The requirements for inclusion included: (a) English-language sources; (b) papers that dealt with issues of racial redress, post-apartheid inequality, institutional reform, and socioeconomic change; and (c) works that were set in or directly related to the South African context. Duplicate entries, flimsy opinion pieces, and texts devoid of empirical or theoretical substance were among the exclusion criteria.

312 documents in all were found through the search process, and they underwent a multi-stage screening process. 85 sources were chosen as the final evidence base for analysis following reviews of the titles and abstracts, the elimination of duplicates, and full-text evaluation. Every text was examined by hand before being imported into the Atlas.ti program for thematic organization and methodical coding. Key variables, such as publication type, year, thematic focus, methodological approach, and main findings, were recorded using a data extraction protocol. This approach ensured fidelity to the research objectives while facilitating thorough coverage.

Finding discursive patterns, conceptual conflicts, and epistemological presumptions within the body of literature was the goal of the document analysis process, which served as more than just a data compilation exercise. Data collection thus functioned as the study's empirical and analytical cornerstone.

6. Data analysis

The analytical results of the systematic literature review (SLR), which drew from 85 peer-reviewed papers, policy papers, and empirical research projects released between 1994 and 2025, are presented in this section. In order to identify recurrent themes, areas of scholarly agreement, and points of disagreement regarding South Africa's protracted

correction of historical imbalances, the data were coded and interpreted through a qualitative lens using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019) and aided by Atlas.ti software.

6.1. Analytical Approach

According to Braun and Clarke (2019), the data analysis process was divided into six iterative stages: becoming acquainted with the literature corpus, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating and improving themes, establishing thematic categories, and creating the final synthesis. The codes were first developed inductively and then matched the conceptual framework of the study, which was influenced by social justice theory (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 2009) and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Both structural and normative interpretations of the data were made possible by this dual-theoretical lens.

6.2. Emergent Themes

6.2.1. Equity Gains and Policy Successes

Several studies demonstrate quantifiable progress in addressing historical disparities, especially in the areas of social protection, healthcare, and education (Van der Berg and Moses, 2012; Kohler, 2024). Improvements in public service delivery and tertiary education expansions show that redistributive policy frameworks have made a significant contribution to socioeconomic advancement. For example, Chatterjee et al. (2021) credit the growth of social grants and focused state interventions with a quantifiable decrease in post-tax inequality.

6.2.2. Elite Capture and Uneven Benefit Distribution

Notwithstanding the benefits mentioned above, a prominent theme in the literature is the rise of a small black elite that gains an unfair advantage from redistributive policies; this phenomenon is frequently referred to as "elite capture" (Gumede, 2008; Hall, 2025). According to academics, the redistributive spirit of transformation has occasionally been undermined by policies like Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which have favoured politically connected people. According to Creamer (2024), this dynamic has reduced public trust in state-led equity initiatives, especially among marginalized communities and the working class.

6.2.3. Persistent Structural Inequality

The persistence of structural inequality, especially in labour market and spatial outcomes, is a recurrent issue in the reviewed sources. Although policies have made representational equity better, they haven't done enough to address unemployment, intergenerational poverty, or access to productive resources like land (Mukarati et al., 2020; Kohler, 2024). One of the main obstacles to inclusive development is still the geographic concentration of poverty, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

6.2.4. Ideological Fractures and Racial Binaries

The ideological conflict between racial reparations and the "rainbow nation" ideal's goal of non-racialism is the focus of a fourth theme. Race is still a prominent axis of disadvantage in modern South Africa, according to some academics (Alexander, 2002; Dixon, 2023), while others argue that it is divisive and detrimental to social cohesion. Thus, the literature shows a discursive split between proponents of universal, post-racial equity models and those who favour targeted racial justice.

6.2.5. Calls for Policy Recalibration

Proposals to reevaluate redistributive policies constitute a final theme. In order to integrate race with intersecting determinants like class, gender, geography, and historical marginalization, scholars are increasingly advocating for a multifaceted approach to transformation (Fraser, 2008; Chatterjee et al., 2021). As stated in the National Development Plan, this would require the creation of focused, data-driven strategies based on institutional capacity and social justice (National Planning Commission, 2012).

6.3. Synthesis of Findings

Although South Africa's post-apartheid corrective policies have produced significant socioeconomic benefits, the thematic analysis shows that their ability to eliminate firmly ingrained structural inequalities is still constrained. Furthermore, the need for flexible policy frameworks that are socially inclusive, historically conscious, and future-focused is highlighted by the politicization of redistribution and inconsistencies within the ideological underpinnings of transformation.

7. Discussion of Research Findings

The main conclusions from the previous section are critically examined in this section, along with their relevance to the larger scholarly discussion of South Africa's post-apartheid transition and social justice. Drawing from Critical Race Theory and Social Justice Theory, the conversation synthesizes thematic findings from the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to assess the successes, paradoxes, and developing issues related to the protracted redress of historical injustices from 1994 to 2025.

7.1. Interpreting Equity Gains: A Conditional Success

Despite significant advancements in increasing access to basic services like healthcare, education, and social protection, research indicates that these benefits are still primarily conditional and stratified. The most severe types of poverty and marginalization have been lessened by targeted interventions such as the increase in social grants and funding for education that is pro-poor (Van der Berg and Moses, 2012; Kohler, 2024). These policies, however, have often lacked the structural depth necessary to eliminate long-standing patterns of inequality, especially those connected to generational poverty and spatial apartheid.

This partial success reflects Fraser's (2008) contention that distributive justice cannot be achieved in isolation from participatory parity and institutional inclusion. The persistence of racialised income gaps and educational disparities, despite formal access, indicates that policy redress has prioritised surface-level equity over transformative justice.

7.2. Elite Capture and the Moral Economy of Redress

Elite capture, a recurring theme, casts doubt on the morality and legitimacy of redistributive schemes like Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). According to several sources, these policies have disproportionately benefited a small group of politically connected people, which has led to the establishment of new forms of exclusion among the larger black population (Gumede, 2008; Hall, 2025). This phenomenon supports criticisms by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), who warn that elite actors have the ability to co-opt formal redress mechanisms, particularly when the state's regulatory apparatus is undermined. Elite capture also contributes to feelings of "transformation fatigue," where the redistribution agenda is viewed as a means of obtaining rent rather than as a national necessity, and feeds public scepticism about the fairness of transformation initiatives.

7.3. Racial Categorisation and the Dissonance of Non-Racialism

A discursive fracture in the literature is the argument over the continued use of racial classification in redistributive policy. On the one hand, supporters contend that, given the enduring differences in wealth, education, and land ownership, race is still an empirically valid indicator of historical disadvantage (Nadvi et al., 2018). However, detractors contend that continuous racial classification jeopardizes the aspirational spirit of a post-racial "rainbow nation" by solidifying binary social identities (Alexander, 2002; Dixon, 2023). This conflict highlights the limitations of using Critical Race Theory in situations involving prolonged transition. As transformation enters its fourth decade, its value in fostering racial solidarity and reconciliation is being questioned more and more, even though CRT is still a vital tool for examining systemic injustices. The literature therefore calls for a conceptual recalibration of redress, one that balances historical accountability with forward-looking pluralism.

7.4. Towards Multidimensional Equity: The Call for Adaptive Policy

The creation of a multifaceted equity framework that transcends race as the only axis of justice is a noteworthy recommendation found throughout the reviewed literature. More and more academics support transformative approaches that incorporate race along with other structural factors like gender, class, location, and institutional capacity (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Fraser, 2008). This reinterpretation is consistent with the National Development Plan's focus on inclusive growth, institutional reform, and engaged citizens (National Planning Commission, 2012). Crucially, this strategy avoids the essentialism and polarization connected to race-exclusive policy tools while maintaining the moral requirement of redress. Sen (2009) points out that capability expansion—the actual freedoms people have to attain well-being—must be used to gauge justice rather than just intent.

7.5. Synthesis: Complexity, Continuity, and Future Direction

When combined, the results show that South Africa's redistributive project has wavered between ideological clarity and public disenchantment, policy ambition and bureaucratic erosion, and material inclusion and symbolic exclusion. South Africa's redistributive legacy is strong because of its dedication to restorative justice; it is weak because of its inconsistent application, illogical ideology, and lack of institutional accountability. Accordingly, the study confirms that

transformation is a dynamic, generational endeavour that requires evolution in both design and discourse rather than being a static task. The challenge of creating a justice-oriented society that is both structurally adaptive and historically aware must be addressed in future research and policy.

8. Recommendations

This chapter presents a set of evidence-based recommendations meant to guide future policy, institutional design, and scholarly discourse in light of the study's findings regarding the long-term effects of South Africa's post-apartheid corrective policies. These suggestions aim to reorient the nation's redress agenda in order to guarantee inclusivity, sustainability, and public legitimacy. They are based on the ideas of equity, capability development, and transformative justice.

8.1. Reframe Redress Through Multidimensional Equity

Race should no longer be the only axis of justice used in policy interventions. Even though race is still a prominent indicator of past disadvantage, using racial classification as the main criterion runs the risk of strengthening essentialist identities and eroding social cohesiveness (Fraser, 2008; Alexander, 2002). Intersectional metrics that incorporate geography, gender, class, and generational poverty should be incorporated into future redress frameworks. The state will be able to identify and assist citizens based on their access to meaningful freedoms and opportunities rather than just their demographic markers if it adopts a capability-based approach (Sen, 2009). This reinterpretation would uphold historical accountability while encouraging a more inclusive equity mindset.

8.2. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Localised Implementation

The ability and responsibility of the organizations entrusted with bringing about change determine how effective redress will be. Policy delivery has been hindered by political meddling, a lack of bureaucratic capacity, and disjointed intergovernmental coordination (Creamer, 2024; National Planning Commission, 2012). It is advised that public institutions be equipped with knowledgeable staff, open oversight procedures, and performance rewards that are in line with developmental goals. Adopting decentralized implementation models will enable local organizations and municipalities to customize equity initiatives to their unique socio-spatial circumstances. This change would improve responsiveness, lessen reliance on orders from above, and restore public trust in the state's redistributive mission.

8.3. Introduce Equity Audits and Policy Impact Evaluations

To evaluate the distributive impact of current policies, regular equity audits ought to be institutionalized. Independent, methodologically sound, and informed by open indicators that gauge both formal access and lived outcomes are requirements for these audits (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Evaluations should look at qualitative indicators like asset accumulation, community empowerment, and perceptions of fairness in addition to more conventional compliance metrics (like demographic targets). This would prevent elite capture and symbolic compliance and allow for iterative policy refinement.

8.4. Prioritise Land Reform Through Integrated Rural Development

Instead of being a stand-alone policy measure, land redistribution needs to be reframed as a component of a larger rural development strategy. According to Mukarati et al. (2020), redistribution produces little in the way of developmental benefits if it is not accompanied by sufficient post-settlement support, such as market access, infrastructure, and technical assistance. Therefore, policy reform should tie land access to a coordinated framework that encompasses rural enterprise development, sustainable land use planning, and agrarian innovation. This would bring redress goals into line with the imperatives of inclusive growth and national food security.

8.5. Reinvigorate Civic Participation and Policy Co-Creation

Participatory governance, deliberative democracy, and civic engagement must all be used to co-produce transformation. Public support is essential to the legitimacy and viability of redress efforts, particularly among historically marginalized groups (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Fraser, 2008).

It is suggested that

- Community-led and community-based organizations be included as partners in policy formation, not just as beneficiaries;

- Civic education curricula be redesigned to foster critical engagement with transformation policy and citizenship responsibilities;
- Inclusive policy dialogues be institutionalized at the community, provincial, and national levels;
- Such participatory mechanisms would transform transformation from a technocratic process to a democratic project of collective justice.

8.6. Foster a New Narrative of Shared Development

Lastly, it is important to consider the symbolic aspect of redress. Social divides can be closed and the populist exploitation of transformation discourse neutralized by a move toward nation-building narratives that emphasize interdependence, shared responsibility, and restorative justice (Dixon, 2023).

A values-based narrative grounded in solidarity, historical awareness, and future-focused inclusivity should be promoted by leadership in all spheres, including political, academic, and civil society.

9. Conclusion

In order to address the long-standing socioeconomic and political imbalances left over from the apartheid era, South Africa has implemented a series of corrective measures, which this study has critically examined. Drawing from a comprehensive review of the literature covering 1994–2025 and based on Social Justice Theory (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 2009) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), the study has examined the complexity of change, the inconsistencies in redistributive policy frameworks, and the wider implications for equitable development and national cohesion.

The research shows that while South Africa has made significant strides in formal representation, healthcare, and education, these gains are often thwarted by enduring structural inequality, elite capture, and the uneven application of social justice (Van der Berg and Moses, 2012; Creamer, 2024). Race-based policies are still an important, historically based means of redress, but rather than promoting true socioeconomic empowerment, their operationalization has occasionally strengthened exclusionary practices and symbolic compliance (Gumede, 2008; Hall, 2025).

The study also highlights the increasing conflict between the post-apartheid social contract's aspirational vision of non-racialism and the ongoing use of racial categorization (Alexander, 2002; Nadvi et al., 2018). Because of this ideological ambivalence, transformation policy needs to be reevaluated in order to adopt an intersectional, capabilities-oriented model of justice that goes beyond demographic proxies (Sen, 2009).

As a result, the study has put forth a number of suggestions meant to improve the legitimacy, efficacy, and inclusivity of redressal tactics. These include developing multifaceted policy designs, conducting equity audits, bolstering institutional capacity, and redefining transformation as a participatory democratic process as opposed to a technocratic one. When combined, these suggestions represent a change toward a more responsible, ethically sound, and historically aware approach to national development.

Finally, the South African experience highlights the intricacy and dynamic nature of any sustained effort to achieve social justice in a post-conflict society. Not only must the past be addressed, but justice must also be future-proofed by developing inclusive, reflexive policies that can resolve conflicts between unity, equity, and democratic legitimacy.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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