THE MANDELA INITIATIVE
Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

Theme: Education

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1. What are the major issues you have identified about the manifestations of structural poverty and persistent, deep inequalities, in education and training?

Equity reforms introduced in the late 1990s attempted to equalise funding among the provinces, schools and socio-economic groups. South Africa has almost universal enrolment, and, relative to schools in other African countries, has a favourable enrolment of girls. However, many of these achievements are compromised by a context of persistent poverty and inequality and their social consequences. For instance, the high level of violence and sexual harassment often nullifies gender parity. South African learners also fare badly on local assessment tests and international benchmark scores, indicating serious problems with the quality of education. Numerous studies have tried to understand this desultory state of affairs, variously and specifically pointing to areas such as teacher training, quality and working conditions; infrastructure and facilities; language; early childhood development; leadership and management; and malfeasance and other egregious issues.

Addressing all these issues are necessary to ameliorate inequality in education but achieving curricular goals and the rights of a child to a meaningful quality education will depend upon confronting, for example, patterns of child poverty, illness and malnutrition, discrimination,

About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI Think Tank has identified the objectives for the gathering as:
- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's Action Dialogues; a report on an MI Community of Practice workshop with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's research programme; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

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spatial inequality and social exclusion. We cannot expect children to come to school ready to learn if they are without parents, if they are hungry, if they have been evicted from their homes, if they spend many hours walking to school or if they lack light by which to read at night.

Related issues concern safe public transportation where schools are not within walking distance, adequate nutrition for learners and sufficient facilities and infrastructure in schools. Issues of poverty and inequality are important and have a profound impact on achieving education rights. South Africa is one of the most unequal countries and recent figures released by the Statistician-General in 2017 show that 53.8% of South Africans are poor (surviving on under R779 per month). In 2016, the University of Cape Town's Children Institute showed that nearly two-thirds of South African children (63%) lived in poverty and 30% lived in households where no adults were employed.

The massive unemployment amongst youth under the age of 24 (75% according to some estimates) is also a huge issue and the strategies employed by the state and industry to address the issue has patently failed (see Vally and Motala, 2014, *Education, Economy and Society* for a critique of human capital theory, supply side 'solutions' and the issue of skills).

2. **What do you think are the main reasons for the persistence of the deep inequalities and poverty in education and training? These can include policy, capacity or implementation constraints/problems.**

Much of the policy research conducted in South Africa to date has primarily identified the lack of implementation and/or financial constraints as the biggest barriers to education reform, without fundamentally challenging or questioning the original policy assumptions. In order for policy aims to effect change, policy design and implementation have to reflect the needs, understandings and social realities of its primary constituencies – not powerful stakeholders, protected interest groups or articulate policy crafters – "good policy" should be measured by its relevance and applicability.

Inherent to dominant approaches to education policy is also the idea that human capital development is the panacea to social ills. Issues relating to the role of education and training in the creation and promotion of a democratic citizenry; meeting the aspirations for social justice; human rights and the promotion of the cultural life of communities are regarded as a distraction from the goal of economic growth and international competitiveness. Crucial to these perspectives is the view that human capital development has no other role than the narrowly described techno-economic aims to which it is attached.

Such approaches are often silent about the conditions under which human capital development takes place and ignore the structural, institutional and global constraints impeding the possibilities for addressing the social class challenges faced by South Africa's citizenry. The social fragmentation as a result of the policies of the apartheid state and the intractability of its effects which have passed into the post-apartheid state cannot be wished away. Similarly, the structural conditions which relate

poverty and inequality to education have a profound impact on development including deeply entrenched institutional factors which impede the possibilities for progressive and transformative education and training.

3. **What is being recommended at a macro policy/strategic level to deal with the major issues you have identified?**

Many education policies were formulated under the assumption that, after the 1994 elections, the new political dispensation would automatically translate into a better educational system for all—gleaming rhetoric that suggested that anything replacing the vile apartheid past was better. Moreover, dissimilar realities of 'race', class, gender and geographical location were not factored into the politics behind 'stakeholder' composition. Policy documents reflected a 'negotiated compromise'—a careful balancing act between contradictory political imperatives, which are chiefly social justice and international economic competitiveness. This attempt at consensus without addressing the cleavages in society left an indelible imprint on the evolution of policies.

Missing from most analysis of transitional policymaking in South Africa is a careful examination of social class, and particularly how and why social movements and social actors on the ground, who were initially central to policy formulation and critique, were largely marginalised once policies were institutionalised. Examining the trajectory of the latter trend, related to the class nature of the post–apartheid state and the political economy of the transition from apartheid to democracy is necessary. The upshot of neoliberal discourse in education has been to ignore the problems faced by public schools and to promote market solutions through private schools, vouchers, charters, and the like. This proposed 'market solution' to our education crisis, even with state regulation, is less a case of a pragmatic attempt at resolving the problem than a case of ideological wishful thinking.

4. **What do you think the potential impact of the recommendations will be on eliminating structural poverty and reducing inequality?**

The dominant strategy of the state will exacerbate poverty and inequality in education. Education reform must be linked to broader redistribution strategies. The patent failure of the public education system to provide quality education for most learners and to adequately poverty and inequality in education has dangerously spawned several suggestions including the crude resort to an apartheid-like disciplinary regime (as a backlash against the perception that 'learners have too many rights') and the privatisation of education. All these 'solutions' have the potential to undermine the hard-won gains in promoting a rights-based quality education system for the public good.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative: