
Access and barriers to post-school education and success for disadvantaged black adults in South Africa: Rethinking equity and social justice¹

Zelda Groener

University of the Western Cape

ABSTRACT

Widespread national higher education student protests against proposed fee increases and demands for free higher education in South Africa that arose towards the end of 2015 drew international attention to disadvantaged students' socio-economic conditions and the barriers that deter access to higher education. Adults' experiences of socio-economic barriers to accessing post-school education are similar. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and secondary data, I conceptualise a distributive justice perspective on access for disadvantaged black adults premised on the relationships between interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights, principles of social and economic justice, and redistributive policies.

KEYWORDS

access; barriers; adult learners; disadvantaged black adults; adult education; post-school education; equity; social justice; distributive justice¹

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Introduction

The South African government's National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2012) and the White Paper for Post-School Education (DHET, 2013) are among the prompts for writing this article.

I make the argument that the overwhelming majority of learners in post-school education can be considered adults. According to the White Paper, the government intends to establish, for adults, one million learning opportunities in community colleges and further opportunities through other post-school education institutions and initiatives by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012:59–61; DHET, 2013:xiii–xiv). In the DHET's White Paper (2013:4), it admits that

[d]eep-seated inequalities are rooted in our past; it is not by accident that the remaining disparities of wealth, educational access and attainment, health status and access to opportunities are still largely based on race and gender.

To address such racial inequality, the DHET (2013:5) states:

Education has long been recognised as providing a route out of poverty for individuals, and as a way of promoting equality of opportunity. The achievement of greater social justice is closely dependent on equitable access by all sections of the population to quality education.

I make the assumption that the government's intention to create one million learning opportunities in community colleges and through other initiatives by 2030 (DHET, 2013:xiii–xiv) is to target disadvantaged black adults and make post-school education 'a route out of poverty for individuals' (DHET, 2013:5). Given the statistics showing that the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged adults are black, I focus this article on access to post-school education for disadvantaged black adults, also referred to as 'black adults'.

Creating more than one million adult education opportunities, and access to them, requires the government to remove structural and institutional barriers related to funding that create socio-economic barriers undermining access for potential black adult learners. According to UNESCO (2008:10), 'adult literacy refers to programmes for the 15+ age group; within that, youth literacy most frequently refers to the 15–24 age group'. In view of the latter, I consider all learners in post-school education who are 15 years and older to be adult learners.

How can the government realise, for disadvantaged black adults, equality rights and socio-economic rights to social assistance that enable them to overcome their socio-economic barriers, and realise fair equality of opportunity and equitable access to post-school education as a 'route out of poverty' and as a social justice benefit?

This is the main question that this article responds to through the development of a conceptual framework.

To engage with this question, I adopt a distributive justice perspective that is predicated on conceptualising the relationships between interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights, principles of social and economic justice, and distributive policies. These comprise four building blocks: (1) disadvantaged black adults; (2) interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights; (3) social and economic justice principles; and (4) redistributive policies and social assistance.

To adopt this perspective, I draw deliberately and primarily on the South African academic literature to frame the central arguments in this article. I rely to a lesser degree on international scholars' literature about South Africa. Moreover, I acknowledge that there is an international literature concerning access, adult education and social justice, which I have drawn on. Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2017), in particular, provide a succinct review of some related literature that has emerged since 2003.

There are undoubted economic, social and cultural benefits of access to post-school education. However, as levels of poverty and inequality are extremely high in South Africa, and the government considers education as 'a route out of poverty', my focus in this article is on the economic benefits only.

I conclude that, when disadvantaged black adults achieve their equality and socio-economic rights to 'social assistance' which lead to equitable access to post-school education, the latter can become 'a route out of poverty' and a means of promoting equality of opportunity and social justice.

Disadvantaged black adult heads of households, education and poverty

The first building block of my theoretical perspective is a profile of disadvantaged black adults on whom the article focuses, in particular black adult heads of households.

My understanding of an embedded assumption in the White Paper (DHET, 2013) is that access to, and successful completion of, post-school education could raise disadvantaged black adults' levels of education. This, in turn, would enable them to secure income-generating opportunities, employment or higher-paid employment and, as a consequence, to shift out of poverty. However, several factors determine successful completion of post-school education and the possibility of it enhancing adults' employability and of improving their chances of finding employment and earning a sustainable income that could continue to reduce their poverty.

Black adult heads of households and the persistence of poverty

In his study of poverty and inequality in South Africa, May (2000:xiii) found that 50% of the population in 1993 were considered to be poor. By 2009, there were few indications of dramatic

change. Wilson (2011:1–2) states that ‘poverty is so widespread that somewhere between 40 and 50 per cent of the population is living without adequate means’. Substantiating his claim, Wilson cites Leibbrandt (2010, as cited in Wilson, 2011:2), who reveals the following:

In terms of poverty, the bottom 30 per cent of the households all earn well under R20 000 per annum ..., while we know from more detailed statistics that 70 per cent of the population earns only 17 per cent of the total income.

Zizzamia, Schotte and Leibbrandt’s (2019) analysis of the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) data for the first five waves provides significant insights into the levels of household poverty in South Africa during the period 2008 to 2017. Their findings with regard to ‘spells of poverty’ showed that, over the period 2008 to 2017, 40.08% of African household heads were ‘always poor’ and 8.83% were ‘never poor’. In contrast, they found that, among white household heads, 0% were ‘always poor’ and 93.55% were ‘never poor’ (Zizzamia et al., 2019:13). The persistence of poverty among African household heads is revealing and the inequality between African and white heads of households is startling.

Adult household heads, poverty and low levels of education, 1993–2017

In their study of the period 1994 to 2010, Branson and Leibbrandt (2013:6) found: ‘There has been a rapid increase in educational attainment in the past three decades, yet much of the increase is at the secondary, and often incomplete secondary level.’

In Leibbrandt, Wegner and Finn’s (2011) study on income inequality and poverty, they identified the following quintiles: no education (Noedu); primary education; incomplete secondary (IncSec); matric; and tertiary. Reporting on their findings of a study during the period 1993 to 2008, they highlight worrying trends: ‘Individuals with low or incomplete secondary education were more likely to be worse off in 2008, compared to 1993’ (Leibbrandt et al., 2011:1). Painting a gloomy picture, they reveal: ‘For no education, primary [education] and incomplete secondary households, the general trend was towards greater concentration in the lower quintiles’ (Leibbrandt et al., 2011:10). In other words, adults with low levels of education are migrating into the lowest income groups. Of concern here is that ‘there is a lot of shifting in both directions for those households headed by an individual with an incomplete secondary education’ (Leibbrandt et al., 2011:10). Most alarming, however, is that ‘matric households see shifts out of the top quintile and into the 3rd and 4th quintile’ (Leibbrandt et al., 2011:10).

Of interest, yet fairly predictable, is that ‘the most significant trend to come out of the data is that households headed by individuals with tertiary education become increasingly more likely to be in the top quintile’ (Leibbrandt et al., 2011:10). Of concern is the assertion by Leibbrandt et al. (2011:10) that, in contrast to households headed by tertiary education graduates, ‘the likelihood of being in one of the lower income quintiles increased in the period between 1993 and 2008’ for all other education groups, ‘with matric-headed households experiencing a sharp decline’.

The analysis by Zizzamia et al. (2019:30) of the first five waves of the NIDS data for the period 2008 to 2017 confirms that these trends are continuing. Their classifications of social class (2019:26) are useful in understanding the levels of education and poverty among ‘chronic poor’, ‘transient poor’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘middle-class’ and ‘elite’ household heads. They report that, among the ‘chronic poor’, 25.14% have no schooling; 28.54% have not completed Grades 1 to 6; 11.03% have completed Grade 7; 32.26% have not completed Grades 8 to 11; 2.82% have completed Grade 12; and 0.22% have completed tertiary education.

Their research findings about household heads reveal the relationship between levels of education and levels of poverty: of household heads with less than a matric (Grade 12) level of education, 41.87% are ‘always poor’, as opposed to 7.41% who are ‘never poor’; of household heads with a matric level of education, 11.65% are ‘always poor’, as opposed to 43.50% who are ‘never poor’; and of household heads with a tertiary education, 1.26% are ‘always poor’, as opposed to 62.51% who are ‘never poor’ (Zizzamia et al., 2019:12). They sum up: ‘Those in households with household heads [who have] less than matric are much more likely to experience multiple spells of poverty than those in households with better educated household heads’ (Zizzamia et al., 2019:12).

These research findings show a correlation between household heads’ levels of education, income and increasing poverty. I therefore suggest that, for disadvantaged black adults who are household heads, a strong possibility exists that they may qualify for precarious employment only and, consequently, experience limited regular income, which could result in poverty. Such poverty poses a socio-economic barrier which creates unequal opportunities for disadvantaged black adults that deter the enjoyment of the equality right of access to post-school education.

To contextualise this correlation between low levels of education and impoverishment, and to consider the extent to which post-school education can become a ‘route out of poverty’, I refer to recent academic research that has generated scholarly debates about the state of poverty and inequality in South Africa.

Poverty is reducing and inequality increasing

In examining the historical roots of such inequality, Wilson (2011:10) concludes:

The net result of all this history was that by 1993, on the eve of the assumption of power by South Africa’s first democratic government, the distribution of human capital in the country was such that a deep racial inequality was embedded at the very heart of the modern industrial economy.

In 2010, Leibbrandt, Woolard, Finn and Argent (2010:12) summed up the situation as follows: ‘South Africa has an infamous history of inequality with an overbearing racial stamp. The issue of inequality has continued to dominate the post-apartheid landscape.’ Moreover, Leibbrandt et al. (2011:2) reveal the persistence of inequality: ‘Aggregate inequality measures have shown

an increase in inequality over the post-apartheid years.’ Citing Leibbrandt’s empirical research, Wilson (2011:1–2) exposes the extreme state of inequality as follows: ‘Indeed the richest 10 per cent – with income over R400 000 per household – alone earns more than the other 90% combined.’

But research shows that poverty is reducing, albeit minimally, but that inequality is increasing.

Lamenting the minimal successes in addressing poverty and inequality, Wilson (2011:3) states:

Despite its best intentions, despite every effort to develop the most effective policy and despite the firm expectations of its voters, the democratic government of the new South Africa has been able to do little to shift the levels of poverty, of unemployment and of inequality which it inherited from the apartheid regime in 1994.

Recently, Branson and Leibbrandt (2013:5) reiterated that ‘reducing poverty and inequality are key challenges in South Africa’. In a similar way, Van der Berg writes: ‘Income inequality is a matter of great concern in South Africa. But so, indeed, is poverty’ (2014:197). Income inequality is determined by different instruments and techniques. According to Leibbrandt and Woolard (2001:675),

[a] busy international literature has developed around the derivation and refinement of techniques for decomposing inequality measures (in particular the Gini coefficient) by income sources. Such decompositions highlight those income sources that are dominating the distribution of income and, as such, offer a bridge between the description of inequality and the key economic processes generating inequality in a society. In South Africa these techniques have been seen to be particularly well suited to assessing the importance of wage income in driving household income inequality.

Proffering some advice, Wilson (2011:3) opposes the belief that ‘old-style economic growth alone ... would be sufficient to overcome the legacies of poverty and inequality’.

Despite the fact that statistics show a decrease in levels of poverty, the incidence of poverty is ‘critically high’. Structural constraints evident in South Africa’s context of poverty and inequality prompt a deeper investigation of the main question that this article addresses.

Access to post-school education: A route out of poverty for disadvantaged black adults?

The second building block of my theoretical perspective, ‘interrelated equality and socio-economic rights’, is informed by law scholars who advocate that interrelated equality and socio-economic rights be harnessed to accomplish the realisation of equality rights in the South African context of poverty and inequality.

The government established the post-school education sector after the promulgation of the South African Constitution. As it incorporates adult basic education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), higher education and workplace-based learning programmes, one could conclude that most learners in post-school education are adults, which is the reason for my focus on this age group.

The Constitution, in section 29(1), includes adult basic education as an equality right (and a basic human right) for all adults, expressed as follows:

Everyone has the right –

- (a) to a basic education, including adult basic education; and
- (b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.

To focus attention on adults in post-school education, I use as my starting point adult basic education as an equality right and argue that the Constitution promotes ‘education for adults’, that is, adults in post-school education.

In the South African context, however, the human right to education is also an ‘equality right’. Christie (2010:9) contends that ‘rights do not necessarily mean equality. This is particularly so in conditions of profound social inequality, as the South African situation illustrates well.’ As an alternative, Christie (2010:9) promotes ‘the status of education as a second-generation, socio-economic right’. While I agree with Christie, and following legal scholars’ arguments, I propose that equality rights and socio-economic rights to post-school education be interrelated premised on the following arguments.

Shifts in the debates about the limitations to securing education as a constitutional right mirror the changing debates among legal scholars about the failure to secure constitutional rights for citizens – in this instance, black adults who are disadvantaged by the socio-economic conditions that create poverty and socio-economic inequality. Pointing to the limitations of equality-based approaches are legal scholars Dugard (2004), Fredman (2007) and Fredman (2011), who alert us to the significance of socio-economic rights in addressing the transformation goals of the South African Constitution. Converging with the latter, Fredman (2011:585) stresses the importance of socio-economic rights, arguing that

[t]he South African Constitution has the advantage of containing express socio-economic rights. However, these rights are qualified: they do not give rise to immediate entitlements, but instead require the State to take reasonable measures within available resources to realise the right progressively. The equality guarantee in section 9, by contrast, gives an immediate right to equality.

What can we consider reasonable after 25 years of democracy? Following Fredman and other scholars, I contend that the pace of the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights to resources has been too slow and that this is contributing to a minimal decrease in poverty and to increasing inequality.

Liebenberg and Goldblatt (2007) discern an interrelatedness between equality rights and socio-economic rights. Similarly, Fredman (2011:585) proposes that the interrelatedness between equal rights and socio-economic rights be recognised for the purposes of reducing poverty, declaring that ‘the equality guarantee can considerably strengthen socio-economic rights’ as a response to the ‘potential and limits of an equal rights paradigm in addressing poverty’.

Pertinent to the assertion that post-school education is a ‘means to promote equality of opportunity’ is Fredman’s (2007:214) assertion that status-based inequalities are generally dealt with through constitutional rights and socio-economic inequalities by way of social policy. However, she challenges the distinction between these and proposes that we consider them as interdependent instead. I agree with her on the following grounds. As the status-based inequalities reflected in the statistics show that the overwhelming majority of black people are poor, I assert that these are also socio-economic inequalities. In a scenario where income in the higher quintiles did not increase substantially, such social assistance could reduce both poverty and income inequality.

In the light of this interpretation, I propose that the application of interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights to post-school education provides the rationale for framing socio-economic rights to social assistance and promoting equality of opportunity. Such financial assistance could enable disadvantaged black adults to deal with their socio-economic barriers and achieve equitable access to post-school education as ‘a route out of poverty’ and as a social justice benefit. Such social assistance, however, may not necessarily address ‘socio-economic’ inequalities and ‘status-based inequality’.

Critical questions arise: ‘What should the rationale be for the distribution of such public funds?’, and ‘What principles should be used to select disadvantaged black adults as beneficiaries?’

To respond to these questions, in the next section I discuss a third building block of my theoretical perspective ‘social and economic justice principles’.

Social and economic justice principles and access to post-school education: A ‘route out of poverty’?

Knight (2014:23) proposes three theories of distributive justice: ‘justice as fairness’ (Rawls, 1999), ‘utilitarianism’ (Bentham, 1970) and ‘luck egalitarianism’. Kymlicka (2002) suggests large-scale, non-racial ‘redistribution to the benefit of the poor, who in South Africa are predominantly black’.

Building on Knight's (2014) proposition, I derive four principles of social and economic justice from the following theories of justice: Rawls's (1971; 2001) 'theory of justice' and 'justice as fairness'; Van der Walt's (2004) 'transformation-based approach to the theory of social and economic justice'; and Knight's exposé of Bentham's (1970) theoretical perspectives about 'utilitarianism'.

The following principles constitute the third building block of my theoretical perspective: (1) advantage to disadvantaged black adults; (2) equal right to post-school education for disadvantaged black adults; (3) conditions of fair equality of opportunity for disadvantaged black adults; (4) redistribution 'above and beyond the minimum threshold' for disadvantaged black adults. I explain each of these four principles below.

Within the broader parameters of my theoretical perspective, these principles, premised on relationships between interrelated equality and socio-economic rights, social and economic justice principles, and redistributive policies, could provide the underpinning rationale for the distribution of public funds and the selection of disadvantaged black adults as beneficiaries of social assistance that could make possible access to post-school education.

Social and economic justice principle 1: Advantage to disadvantaged black adults

According to the social and economic justice principle 'advantage to disadvantaged black adults', black adults should be considered as the primary beneficiaries of social assistance in order to give them access to post-school education. These are further characterised as 'least-advantaged members of society' (Rawls, 2001:42) who experience 'extreme need or deprivation', according to Michelman (Van der Walt, 2004:273), and who are the 'worst off' (Knight, 2014:31).

Disadvantaged black adults are the 'least-advantaged members of society as individuals'

As discussed earlier, research findings show that disadvantaged black adults experience poverty that arises from socio-economic inequalities and that these create socio-economic barriers which prevent them from enjoying basic human rights and 'fair equality of opportunity' to access post-school education.

Concerned about the fulfilment of basic rights in relation to social and economic inequalities in a democratic society, Rawls (2001) argues that 'fair equality of opportunity' should constitute 'the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society', whom he describes as earning 'income below the median income in society' (Rawls, 2001:42). Furthermore, he states (2001:42) that 'disadvantaged black adults' who are in the bottom quintiles and who have limited or no income can be characterised as 'least-advantaged members of society'.

It is important to point out that Rawls (2001:38) developed his theory of justice premised on democratic societies, specifically the United States. Rawls's (2001:5) theory draws

attention to the ‘least-advantaged members of society’ living in democracies who are disadvantaged by socio-economic inequalities. While South Africa is not comparable to the United States in relation to levels of affluence, both societies are classified as ‘democracies’ and are characterised by similar kinds of social and economic inequality, which prompted Rawls’s prioritisation of ‘least-advantaged members of society’.

Given that the overwhelming majority of poor South Africans are black, I argue that ‘the least-advantaged members of society’ are black disadvantaged people who earn the least income.

Disadvantaged black adults experience ‘extreme need or deprivation’

American legal scholar, Frank Michelman (1969), developed a ‘needs-based theory of social (and economic) justice’ according to which people who experience ‘extreme need or deprivation’ feature as his central concern. His identification of this grouping of people is instructive, because there are among ‘disadvantaged black adults’ those who experience extreme need or deprivation. According to Michelman’s theory, those who experience extreme need or deprivation should be provided with a minimum threshold of social insurance ‘before other distributive concerns are considered’ (Michelman, 1969 in Van der Walt, 2000:289).

Disadvantaged black adults are the ‘worst off’

Drawing on Rawls, Knight (2014:31), with reference to South Africa, asserts that righting inequalities ‘requires that distributions maximize the income and wealth of the worst off’. Who are the ‘least-advantaged members of society’ or the ‘worst off’ in South Africa that could be considered as the potential beneficiaries of ‘social wage stipends’? According to Statistics South Africa (2017:8):

Social wages in South Africa are provided through a wide array of mechanisms. This includes free primary health care; no-fee paying schools; social protection (most notably old-age grants and child support grants); RDP housing; and the provision of free basic services (namely water, electricity and sanitation) to poor households.

Based on this explanation, I define a ‘social wage stipend’ as a regular payment that augments other forms of ‘waged income’.

Giving the advantage of ‘social assistance’ to ‘disadvantaged black adults’ who are the ‘least-advantaged members of society’, people who experience ‘extreme need or deprivation’, the ‘worst off’, ‘chronic poor’, ‘transient poor’, and ‘vulnerable’ (Zizzamia et al., 2019:22), could enable them to surmount their socio-economic barriers, achieve ‘equal rights’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ and attain access to post-school education as a ‘route out of poverty’ and as a social justice benefit.

Social and economic justice principle 2: Equal right to post-school education for disadvantaged black adults

This principle promotes an ‘equal right to post-school education for disadvantaged black adults’ and is informed by Rawls’s theorisation of ‘society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal’ (2001:42).

Rawls (2001:3) posed a key question: ‘What principles of justice are most appropriate to specify basic rights and liberties, and to regulate social and economic inequalities in citizens’ prospects over a complete life?’ Implicit in this pertinent question are conceptualisations of the interrelationships between distributive justice, basic rights, and addressing social and economic inequalities, which underpin the central concern of this article. To address this question, Rawls (2001) presents the following revised statement of the two principles of justice (the second principle is stated below), first:

- (a) Each person has the same infeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all (Rawls, 2001:42).

Given that the government’s constitutional imperatives are intended to respond to inequalities, I argue that the above principle of justice is relevant to considering the realisation of the equal right to post-school education that benefits disadvantaged black adults as ‘the least-advantaged members of society’.

Social and economic justice principle 3: Conditions of fair equality of opportunity for disadvantaged black adults

This principle promotes ‘conditions of fair equality of opportunity for disadvantaged black adults’, which I derive from Rawls’s second principle discussed in his revised statement:

- (b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle) (Rawls, 2001:42).

The White Paper (DHET, 2013) views post-school education ‘as a way of promoting equality of opportunity’. This resonates with Rawls’s second principle. Knight’s (2014:29) interpretation for the South African context is useful: namely that Rawls’s principle of ‘fair equality of opportunity’ extends beyond the sphere of employment. Knight (2014) asserts that ‘Rawls understands it as requiring that “those with similar abilities should have similar life chances”’ (Rawls, 1999:63). Knight (2014) points out that the imperatives to address inequality make Rawls’s (2014:29) proposition appropriate to considering ‘fair equality of opportunity’ in

education. He claims that ‘affirmative action in South Africa might be justified on a Rawlsian basis, as necessary to secure good opportunities for those with good abilities who are impeded by poor education’ (Knight, 2014:29).

I pointed out earlier that rights-based approaches are limited in establishing ‘conditions of fair equality of opportunity’ for all. Socio-economic rights in South Africa’s Constitution can be interpreted as those which secure ‘conditions of fair equality of opportunity’. Institutionalising socio-economic rights in concert with the ‘difference principle’ constitutes the rationale for distributing social assistance for disadvantaged black adults so as to grant them access to post-school education as a ‘route out of poverty’ and as a social justice benefit.

Social and economic justice principle 4: Redistribution ‘above and beyond the minimum threshold’ for disadvantaged black adults

This principle, ‘redistribution “above and beyond the minimum threshold” for disadvantaged black adults’ is informed by Van der Walt’s ‘transformation-based approach to the theory of social justice’ (2004:291).

Van der Walt (2004) draws on Michelman’s (1969) theory of distributive justice predicated on a ‘needs-based theory of social (and economic) justice’ that draws attention to people who experience extreme need – which, in essence, refers to socio-economic need. Such need prompts thinking about the importance of socio-economic rights, which ‘ensures that a minimum threshold of social insurance should be provided before the normal economic balancing of rights can take place’ (Van der Walt, 2004:273). For the purposes of this article, I interpret social insurance in the South African context as social assistance.

Citing as an example the post-apartheid government’s ‘redistribution-of-property’ programme to provide access to land ‘through various state-sponsored programmes involving state subsidies, grants and incentives’, Van der Walt (2004:305) alerts us to the importance of redistribution for access to education, among other things.

While Van der Walt criticises certain aspects of Michelman’s theory, he concedes that the real power of the theory emerges from the fact that Michelman translates the moral obligation arising from the extreme need into a constitutional duty (Van der Walt, 2004:290).

Van der Walt’s (2004:291) ‘transformation-based theory’ therefore offers theoretical premises to combine ‘interrelated equality and socio-economic rights’ with the principle of ‘above and beyond the minimum threshold’ (Van der Walt, 2004:305–306); together, these should make possible, through redistribution, the access of disadvantaged black adults living in extreme poverty to post-school education as a route of poverty.

Like ‘least-advantaged members of society’, adults who experience extreme need or deprivation also experience low levels of education, or no schooling. The principles of social and economic

justice that can be derived from this theory imply that funding, such as public funds, should be distributed in order to attain a ‘minimum-and-beyond threshold’ of social insurance or social assistance. If this principle is applied, and such funding is sufficient, it could enable access to post-school education.

Social and economic justice principle 5: Non-racial radical redistribution for disadvantaged black adults

This last principle, ‘non-racial radical redistribution for disadvantaged black adults’, is derived from Knight’s (2014) assertion that three theories of distributive justice pertain:

- ‘Justice as fairness’ (Rawls, 1999);
- ‘Utilitarianism’, which he refers to as ‘having a corresponding theory of justice, which equates distributive justice with maximizing welfare’ (Knight, 2014:26), and
- ‘Luck egalitarianism’, which ‘seeks to make distributions sensitive to individual exercises of responsibility or, what it takes to be the same thing, equalize or neutralize the influence of luck on people’s prospects’ (Knight, 2014:27).

These theories imply a large-scale, non-racial ‘redistribution to the benefit of the poor, who in South Africa are predominantly black’ (Knight, 2014:13). More specifically, he asserts

that utilitarianism delivers a broadly similar result to Rawlsian justice in the South African context. It recommends a radical redistribution of resources from the rich to the poor, and does so on a non-racial basis (Knight, 2014:11).

‘This combination of redistribution and affirmative action with non-racialism’, Knight (2014:13) declares, ‘is a promising basis for addressing some of South Africa’s most pressing problems, including its outrageous poverty.’

Redistributive policies and social assistance: A route out of poverty and inequality?

The fourth building block of my theoretical perspective is redistributive policies and social assistance. Here, I point out that securing socio-economic rights to social grants has contributed to poverty reduction, and could therefore be instructive in considering ways of securing socio-economic rights to ‘social wage stipends’ as social transfers in order to foster access to post-school education.

It is evident that redistributive policies and mechanisms include social grants as a strategy for redistribution that benefits poor South African citizens. Leibbrandt et al. (2011:7) explain that ‘redistributive policies consist of direct social transfers that include both social insurance and social assistance’. Given the extent of poverty and inequality, the post-1994 government provides social insurance through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and social assistance consists of the Older Person’s Grant (formerly the Old-Age Pension) and the Child Support Grant.

Some social and economic justice principles derived from Michelman's 'needs-based theory of social justice' (Van der Walt, 2004:272) and Rawls's (2001:39) 'justice as fairness' are evident in the similarities between the selection of beneficiaries of social grants and the potential beneficiaries of 'social assistance' to make possible access to post-school education. These beneficiaries are 'disadvantaged black adults' who are the 'least-advantaged members of society', people who experience 'extreme need or deprivation' and 'the worst off', who have access to little or no income through disadvantage created by adverse socio-economic conditions of poverty and inequality.

This view is supported by Leibbrandt et al. (2011:1), who argue that

[g]overnment policies – especially social grants – have also been central in lifting people out of poverty. At the same time, these policies have not succeeded in reversing inequality trends and in providing equal opportunities for all South Africans.

Concurring with Leibbrandt et al. (2011) are Bhorat, Tseng and Stanwix (2014), who showed that social grants or social transfers have contributed to reducing household poverty. Using data from the 1995 and 2005/2006 Income and Expenditure Surveys (IESs), they show that

at the higher poverty line of R322 a month (in 2000 prices), aggregate poverty declined by 3.5 percentage points, from 52.5% in 1995 to 49% in 2005, while at the lower poverty line of R174 (also in 2000 prices) the decline was from 31% to 24% (Bhorat et al., 2014:221).

The larger decline at the lower poverty line suggests that those in deeper poverty experienced a relatively larger improvement in their welfare over the period.

Evidence shows that the government has implemented redistributive policies and mechanisms which have expanded access to education for disadvantaged black people in some education sectors. However, such access has not created equal rights or conditions of fair equality of opportunity for all students in post-school education, as the government's budget for post-school education has favoured traditional students who study full-time at higher education institutions and TVET colleges.

However, funding aimed at giving disadvantaged black adults access to post-school education requires different considerations. As discussed earlier, research findings indicate an emerging correlation between declining household income and low levels of education among adult heads of households. Most disadvantaged black adults require household income to cover their financial responsibilities in respect of their families; and these financial commitments prevent them from pursuing post-school education studies. This creates the need to consider redistributive measures so as to enable access for disadvantaged black adults by recognising their equality and socio-economic rights to public funds that

will enable them to overcome their socio-economic barriers, and to realise fair equality of opportunity and equitable access to post-school education as a 'route out of poverty' and as a social justice benefit.

I take my cue from the successes of redistribution through social transfers in reducing poverty and argue that similar policies and mechanisms could facilitate further distributive justice and enable access to post-school education for disadvantaged black adults.

In the next section, I explore the possibilities of expanding the redistributive policy frameworks into the realm of post-school education, and propose that socio-economic rights to public funding for disadvantaged black adults may lead to access to post-school education.

Access to post-school education as a route out of poverty: Rethinking equity and social justice

Thus far, I have put forward a distributive theoretical perspective that is based on the conceptualisation of a contingent relationship between interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights, principles of social and economic justice, and redistributive policies. Now I apply this perspective to framing the possibilities for disadvantaged black adults to access post-school education. I also point to some of the limitations.

'Social wage stipend', household income, 'a route out of poverty' and structural unemployment

I propose that a redistribution strategy be implemented. Through it, the government would provide social assistance to enable disadvantaged black adults to surmount the situational socio-economic barriers that deter access to post-school education. Such social assistance could be made available in the form of a 'social wage stipend', a term derived from the concept 'social wage'. The literature review of Frye et al. (2018) shows a 'social wage' to be a highly contested concept; for the purposes of this article, therefore, I rely on Aliber and O'Donovan's (2003:4) assertion that a social wage is 'the total value of in-kind benefits received by a person or household from the government'. This is more suited to the remedial measure I am proposing.

The potential beneficiaries of such stipends would be 'least-advantaged members of society', 'the worst-off', 'who experience extreme need', 'chronic poor', 'transient poor', 'vulnerable', 'unemployed', and 'precariously employed'. In addition to a full bursary for post-school education, a stipend should be considered as a supplement to household income. This proposal rests on two assumptions:

- That, for disadvantaged black adults, stipends could create household income that frees them from the daily grind of survivalist preoccupations that generate a meagre income to stave off hunger; and

- That, for ‘precariously employed’ disadvantaged black adults, stipends could create regular, albeit short-term, supplementary household income which would give them a chance to ‘step out of the livelihood economy of subsistence’ or ‘temporary employment’ in order to access post-school education opportunities.

To summarise: Earlier, I cited research showing that social grants have reduced poverty. Such policies and mechanisms in respect of social grants could be regarded as a precedent for exploring their applicability to using stipends as a strategy for redistribution, which Fredman (2007:215) states ‘is concerned with injustices rooted in the economic structure of society’. This view is supported by Spreen and Vally (2006:357), who remind us that the Peoples Budget Campaign ‘points out that, while the education budget is large, the redistributive thrust is limited’.

As a natural progression from this reasoning, the following critical question arises: ‘What public funds could be made available for stipends?’ At this time, the government provides bursaries or loans as income for students in post-school education institutions through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Through the National Skills Fund (NSF), the government also provides learnerships as income to enable adults and youths to gain a qualification. I suggest that a ‘social wage stipend’ should be considered similar to a ‘stipend’ that the NSF pays to learners who are registered for learnerships. It occurs to me that perhaps all post-school education opportunities for disadvantaged black adults should be considered in a similar way to the funding principles of a learnership model. A shift in this direction will require redistributive policies and mechanisms to be formulated that can coincide with the implementation of the White Paper on Post-School Education (DHET, 2013).

To reflect on these proposals, I next consider the two questions: ‘Is it possible that a stipend as a form of distributive justice can provide access to post-school education?’; and ‘What are the limitations of such a scheme?’

It is possible that such a stipend could augment household income to such an extent that it allows the beneficiaries to participate in post-school education studies. However, for a stipend to enable access to post-school education as a ‘route out of poverty’, it seems that a sequence of events must occur. It starts with the distribution of a stipend that reduces poverty in the short term. This is followed by the disadvantaged black adults gaining access to post-school education. Success in such post-school education may result in an individual gaining access to sustainable employment that provides a sustainable income, which, in turn, reduces poverty. These relationships are, however, tenuous. But if conditions are favourable and the sequence of events proceeds successfully, then post-school education can provide a ‘route out of poverty’ through the seminal event: the payment of a stipend.

The possibility of a successful outcome is linked to the realisation of socio-economic rights. Fredman (2011:585) recommends that the ‘state ... take reasonable measures within available

resources to realise the right progressively'. But, in my view, the slow progression of realising socio-economic rights presents a critical limitation. Dugard (2004:353) states that

[p]overty and unemployment are the main problems facing South Africa. No constitution can provide a means for the improvement of the quality of life of our people. This explains why they should be in the forefront of constitutional litigation. If social and economic rights are justiciable, a court challenge, which interrogates the social and economic principles that underpin the government's budget, may expedite the realisation of such rights.

While making a case for a stipend, I am also sceptical about whether it will be sufficient. Instructive in this regard is Liebenberg and Goldblatt's (2007:361) warning about the limitations of social assistance:

The grant system excludes many millions more very poor South Africans who do not fall into the aforementioned categories, but face endemic structural unemployment. They are thus not in a position to earn enough to escape poverty. Many of the individuals and families who live without grants are worse off than those who access grants and face dire poverty and even starvation.

Notwithstanding all the imponderables and limitations, based on theoretical debates and research evidence, I make the case that government should provide a stipend for disadvantaged black adults who have low levels of education and are experiencing declining income that may place them at risk of extreme poverty. This form of social assistance would provide household income that could go some way towards enabling access to post-school education as a 'route out of poverty' and as a social justice benefit.

Conclusions

In this article, I constructed a distributive justice perspective predicated on drawing relationships between interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights, principles of social and economic justice, and redistributive policies. This perspective served to identify the possibility that social assistance can enable disadvantaged black adults to surmount their socio-economic barriers and access post-school education as 'a route out of poverty' and as 'a way of promoting equality of opportunity'; it would also be a means of realising 'equitable access' for the 'achievement of greater social justice'.

Probing this perspective, I drew attention to the possibility that redistribution through social assistance can promote access to post-school education as 'a route out of poverty' and as a social justice benefit. I also considered the limitations of such a scheme. Framing poverty as an individual concern poses some limitations for conceptualising post-school education as a 'route out of poverty'. Further theoretical perspectives must take into account structural poverty, as suggested by Fredman (2011:580), who reminds us: 'At the

other extreme, the structural approach recognises that poverty is based on forces beyond the control of any one individual.’

In my view, it is only when increased levels of education enable disadvantaged black adults to secure sustainable income generation that one can argue that post-school education provides a ‘route out of poverty’. At the same time, I am aware that poverty is also structural and suggest that a stipend could alleviate individual poverty but be limited in reducing structural poverty.

Looming in the background is the question: ‘Can stipends reduce racially defined, status-based income inequality?’ The statistics show that the overwhelming majority of poor people are black. Government social grants paid to black people increase their income and have the potential to reduce income inequality both between black and white people and among black people. It is, however, the case that, if income for the lower quintiles, through social assistance, increases slightly and income for the higher quintiles increases substantially, inequality will increase. In this regard, Fredman’s (2011:575) assertion is illuminating:

[M]easures directly addressing poverty might tackle some of the main causes of status disadvantage. For example, minimum wage legislation, which directly addresses socio-economic disadvantage, has made a significant contribution to narrowing the gender pay gap in the UK.

From this, a further question arises: ‘If a stipend is set at a minimum wage level, can it enable post-school education as a vehicle that addresses racially defined, status-based income inequality?’

Further theoretical perspectives on distributive justice must take into account Liebenberg and Goldblatt’s (2007:342) assertion that ‘substantive equality thus requires a dismantling of structural inequality and necessarily focuses on patterns of group-based disadvantage’. Theoretical assertions by Dugard (2004), Liebenberg and Goldblatt (2007) and Fredman (2011) converge with the currently emerging debates about addressing structural inequality in South Africa. The theoretical perspectives that emerge from these debates will present opportunities to reconsider a distributive justice that includes the contribution of post-school education to reducing inequality in the country.

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