



What if the real 'triple challenge' confronting South Africa is a question of policies?

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In his 2012 State of the Nation Address, President Jacob Zuma neatly captures post-apartheid South Africa's most vexing societal and human development predicament when he said: "...steady progress [has been made] in various areas such as health, education, the fight against crime, human settlements, energy, water provision, rural development and others. However, the triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality persists, despite the progress made. Africans, women and the youth continue to suffer most from this challenge."

Indeed, eighteen years since the formal end of discriminatory policies and practices, the president's characterisation is befitting the painful reality epitomising South Africa's fledgling developmental state. Blacks and particularly women and young people remain firmly locked in the yoke of post-apartheid South African unemployment, poverty and inequality tyranny. There is oft-repeated rhetoric which is historically premised that explains the "triple challenge" suffocating the 'new' South Africa, but more disheartening are indications that recent policy choices – on the economy, the labour market and social development – could be largely responsible for slow progress in addressing the tyrannies that the president terms "triple challenge" for South Africa.

It is worth, therefore, examining the wellbeing of "Africans, women and the youth" in order to find possible explanations for the tragedy confronting our society and economy – the story of Africans in general, and blacks in particular, is widely known, hence this article focuses on women and youth. It appears that youth in particular, and women to some extent, are the main losers in the post-apartheid transformation programme. This should be of special interest to policy makers and leaders in a country that has openly declared its ambitions to be a developmental and 'capable' state.

On paper there is a lot going for women and youth by way of human development in South Africa – human development broadly refers to the improvement of the quality of life, and wellbeing has to do with the lives people live and choices they make (in Amartya Sen's nomenclature). The post-apartheid society is littered with numerous legislative, policy and programmatic instruments aimed at improving the social and material conditions of those previously disadvantaged in general; and of women and youth in particular. These are, of course, in line with global commitments devised under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), other international conventions and the African Union.

It is indubitable, as government argues – in its various Reports or the Reports of the agencies of the government – that women and youth have generally benefitted from the broader socio-economic policies and programmes of the post-apartheid South Africa. Over the years, access to basic services such as water, sanitation and electricity for black people has increased and has, therefore, eased the burden on women and girls in executing 'traditional' household chores. In addition, we have seen a series of improvements in the institutional set-up to champion the cause of women and youth in the country.

However, in a context where women and youth constitute the largest share of the population, it is perilous to leave the much needed socio-economic development and inclusion (of women and youth) to random probability of policy impact. In other words, arguably, the human development of women and youth has been largely left to chance. More so now than any other time since 1994 a rethink of South Africa's political economy, especially complex policy questions pertaining to wellbeing, is pressing. The aspects of policy that have marginally improved the condition of youth and women since 1994 might no longer be the ideal ones for the current context – the context where the global

economy is falling apart, and its dragging the labour market with into the grave. The bleak reality of the status of women and of especially youth needs to change, sooner than later.

With regard to youth in particular, data suggests that the post-apartheid South African society and economy has failed youngsters. The failure is, simplistically, in two forms: labour market failure and economic policy failure. The performance of the South African economy remains at pedestrian levels, and as the global economy remains terminally ill the growth of the South African economy will remain at very low levels. Although infrastructure development and other such critical projects would mitigate the grim outlook, the economy will continue performing below par until such time that difficult economic policy questions are confronted. The fundamental questions that need to be addressed relate to the structure of the South African economy, as many have articulated. Similarly, the failure of the labour market is fundamentally a policy chasm – Africans, blacks, women and especially the youth are at a receiving end of a discriminatory labour market and the private sector that is doing far little to alleviate a potentially calamitous situation.

With regard to women, there is a lot to celebrate if the data is to be believed. However, in general terms, the situation of women in South Africa is quite dire. Women bear the brunt of poverty and a myriad of resolvable hardships. It is in this context that an argument is made that there could also be a social policy failure in SA – I view social policy as a comprehensive and overarching package of societal interventions that aim at directly advancing wellbeing.

In my analysis, therefore, it is difficult to imagine an effective social policy in an environment where there are no well articulated policies pertaining to, say, poverty and inequality. Because of the ubiquitous phenomenon of *feminization* of poverty, we would remain with more women in poverty than men in South Africa. Also, due to their 'traditional' household roles, women and girls in rural outskirts usually face the heavy responsibility of walking long distances to fetch water, for instance. Another serious threat is the devastating contribution of HIV and Aids epidemic to the hardships of women – more women than men are HIV positive and women are more likely to contract HIV at a younger age than men. When added to poverty and other forms of hardships that women endure, this becomes a serious social problem as it is mainly women that are primary caregivers to those infected with HIV and Aids. This, therefore, has palpable implications for the survival of other so-called vulnerable groups such as children, the youth, elderly, etc – thus the social fibre of communities and the country is threatened, especially in the context of the daily lived experiences of violence against women (and children) in our constitutional democracy.

In conclusion, an examination of the situation of the bedrock of any society – women – and of our future – the youth – imply that the programmes and institutions that are without a firm policy base cannot sustainably advance the respective wellbeing of women and the youth. Without doubt, the South African society has benefitted from broad programmatic interventions and some policy reforms since 1994. However, lack of well articulated policies to catapult the South African society and economy to the level it should be at remains a major human development obstacle. Although welcome, the pragmatic and programmatic interventions that the government plans to implement, going forward, it is the fundamental policy questions that, arguably, would achieve the society envisaged in the founding texts for the post-apartheid South Africa. A society free of poverty and so on and so forth would come about mainly through effective social and economic policies. The socio-economic development dilemma confronting South Africa requires, in the main, robust policy responses.