

MONEY, POWER & SEX:

The paradox of unequal growth

Inequality has long been the forgotten crisis, regarded in passing – just as tourists and politicians gaze absent-mindedly over the wretched townships on their way into Cape Town from the airport – as merely a symptom of bigger problems, such as poverty and under-development, or as an unavoidable by-product of the capitalist system. But over the past year or so, inequality has finally found itself in the spotlight. While hundreds of millions of people have lived with the awful reality of inequality for generations, the world's decision-makers appear to have only just woken up to the fact that inequality is a critical challenge in its own right – and a root cause of many social, economic and political ills.

But just because inequality is the new buzzword – from the theme of this year's World Economic Forum in Davos to an in-depth briefing in the Economist – doesn't mean that the right questions are being asked or the correct answers being given, particularly in relation to Africa.

Swept away in the tide of optimism around the notion that 'Africa is Rising', many people seem to believe that economic growth can – and somehow will – simply wash the continent's troubles away. And of course there are reasons for cheer. But there are also reasons to fear that the tide will turn – that it will be dragged back by the weight of inequality. By the Paradox of Unequal Growth.

Because African economies are booming, but inequalities are deepening. Elections are spreading, but genuine democracies are few and far between. Technology is opening up amazing possibilities, but many governments are continuing to stifle free expression. Women's rights are expanding on paper, but not in reality as a fierce backlash threatens the gains made in recent decades. Popular protests have swept some corrupt regimes from office, but provoked greater oppression elsewhere.

You'll find all these issues – and many more – in this special edition of Openspace: the first to be published solely in virtual

form. The result is a wealth of information, analysis and comment about this critical issue, which you can browse with a swish and a tap. And share or comment on immediately.

And the content is worth swishing through. From short sharp snapshots from the inequality frontline to broader academic articles on the continent's deeply unequal economic and political systems – and how the changing world order is giving Africa the chance to build better societies based on fairer and more equal power relationships.

There are thought-provoking pieces on a diverse range of topics from a – from gender inequality and repression in post-revolution Egypt, to using new technology to fight corruption, from what a million Chinese migrants are really up to in Africa, to who is winning the continent's culture wars.

Or perhaps you are wondering about the role of the law in reducing inequality – how international law can be a weapon for the weak against the strong or whether judicial activism is the best way to achieve gender equality in southern Africa. Or about whether the growing demands for greater transparency around extractive issues might finally transform the resource curse into a blessing. Or how the changing face of African philanthropy might focus more money – and attention – on the struggle for social justice.

But new philanthropy is just one potential game-changer. We also highlight some of the new mobile technologies and some of the (old and new) artists that are helping to narrow the gap between the haves and the have nots. And we also showcase the work of some remarkable photographers, including the winner and runner-up in the inaugural OPENPhoto competition.

But there is obviously no way that a single issue of Openspace could cover every angle or answer every question about inequality. But hopefully the diverse range of articles will educate and entertain and will spark debate because inequality – despite its decades in the shadows – is one of the most critical issues of our time. ()

