

Publication: Cape Times - Opinion
Title: OPINION: Why social justice remains a pipe dream
Publish date: 20 Feb 2026
Page: 6

Reach: 10921
AVE: R 49612.79
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COMMENT

Why social justice remains a pipe dream

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ON FEBRUARY 20 every year since 2009, we celebrate World Day of Social Justice, a day initiated by the General Assembly of the UN. The purpose of this day is to unmask injustices and to promote justice for all in a manifold manner.

Besides this international commitment of the UN to social justice, we also have South African public commitments to social justice for all. In 1955, the Freedom Charter was adopted as a guiding document towards social justice for all. I remember how we sang the Freedom Charter as students in the Struggle years: "There shall be houses security and comfort..." In 1983, the United Democratic Front was established on the basis of this vision: We want one, united, undivided, democratic, non-racial, non-classist, non-sexist, democratic South Africa, where peace and justice reign supreme. We want all our rights, and we want them here and we want them now.

In 1986, the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church, nowadays the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, adopted the Confession of Belhar in which justice was prioritised.

This Confession proclaims unity in diversity, unity despite division, unity in freedom, and unity in proximity and closeness (Article 1 of Belhar). United, as one, we work to overcome discrimination, alienation and enmity.

As one, together, we overcome discrimination and dehumanisation like racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, patriarchy, ableism, ageism, xenophobia and ecocide. Together we work for reconciliation and embrace of each other (Article 2 of Belhar). Together we seek justice for all, especially the poor, the wronged and the destitute (Article 3 of Belhar).

Thirty years ago, in 1996, the late President Nelson Mandela signed the Constitution of South Africa into law, making it the supreme law of the land. The Bill of Rights, Chapter 2 of the Constitution, committed South Africans to a life of dignity for all, justice for all, freedom for all, equality for all, and healing of all past and present wounds for all: physical wounds, psychological wounds, social wounds, political wounds, economic wounds, ecological wounds, moral wounds and spiritual wounds.

We don't have a shortage of public commitments to social justice. We have very good visions, commitments, ideals and promises on paper. We look good on paper, but how do we look on the playing field, locally and globally?

We are living through a convergence of crises. Disease outbreaks, racism, drought, fires, and floods confront us with unsettling regularity. At the same time, the slow decay of our country's infrastructure has become impossible to ignore: buildings crumble, rail services falter, roads deteriorate, and basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, and refuse

removal remain unreliable for far too many. These are not isolated failures; they form a pattern. Underperformance and municipal indifference increasingly appear normal. Appointments are too often made without merit, and incompetence finds its way into key positions. Corruption deepens inequality, leaving a small minority with abundance while the vast majority struggles to survive.

Young people complete school – sometimes with good grades – only to encounter closed doors where there should be opportunities. Beyond our borders, the world feels equally unstable. Extremism gains ground, reckless leadership flourishes, and the spectre of global conflict looms. It is a time marked by suffering and uncertainty, by grief and fatigue, by brokenness and fear. This incomplete list of challenges that persists despite all the public commitments to justice, makes the ideal of social justice for all, especially the most vulnerable, look like a pipe dream.

Yet naming our reality honestly is not an act of despair. It is the first step toward justice, responsibility, renewal, and hope. Our list of troubles and betrayals of justice is long – and unfinished – but so too is the work that still lies before us. We need to move from looking good on paper to looking good on the playing field. For justice to look good on the playing field, we need not only human rights but also right humans. Right humans are people of character and virtue. People with character have good values inscribed and engraved in them. They are people of integrity, reliability, predictability, truth, truthfulness, trustworthiness, sincerity and authenticity.

Virtue refers to people of faith, hope, love, wisdom, balance, moderation, courage and righteousness. Virtue means we live with the habit, inclination, tendency, predisposition to be just and to embody and practice justice. Justice is in fact viewed as the supreme virtue. Love goes astray if it is not guided by justice.

We also need to build institutions that function well so that they can do good. We need strong institutions in civil society, including those of education, religion, sport, culture and art. But we also need strong state institutions like courts, commissions like the Human Rights Commission, state departments, and parliaments. Institutions in the corporate sector and a strong public media can serve the common good, shaping justice and dignity.

Celebrating World Day for Social Justice stirs us to ensure that social justice is not a pipe dream, but becomes a reality despite evidence to the contrary. We must drink from our spiritual, cultural, philosophical, moral and intellectual wells that enable us to move unstopably toward higher levels of social justice for all.

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CHALLENGES persist despite all the public commitments to justice, making the ideal of social justice for all, especially the most vulnerable, look like a pipe dream, says the writer. | DOCTOR NGCOBO Independent Newspapers