



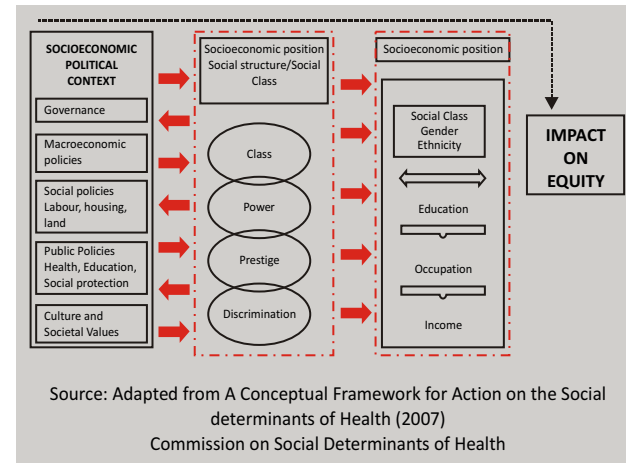
## Key Dimensions of Equity

Attempts to explain equity have resulted in changes in the conceptualisation of equity in policy. Kenneth Arrow's famous contribution to social choice theory, commonly referred to as the 'Impossibility Theorem' states that under standard assumptions about human behavior, no social preference ranking scheme can democratically translate what individuals prefer, into socially optimal results. In neo-classical economics, the most widely accepted notion of efficiency asserts that any form of redistribution of income is more efficient than the status quo if no one's situation worsens as a result. This has significant translation into the notion of equity.

Amartya Sen's discussion of the Bengal famine have brought out the difference in life chances of people. He argued that the famine was not the result of lack of adequate food supplies for the population; rather it was due to the inability of the people to access food in times of great need. He argues that it is 'functioning' (capability) that should be the aim of a policy for distribution or equity. 'Functioning' are of two kinds: basic as being in good health, nourished and sheltered; and a higher and more complex social functioning such as having self respect, being socially active etc. Inequalities such as those resulting from gender, income, ethnicity, community, class etc. act as a barrier and curtail human freedom, and thus limit capability to function properly.

Another recent commentator who progresses the ideas of equity is John Rawls who in his book, 'A Theory of Justice' presents two principles of justice and equity. According to the first principle, each person must have equal right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with similar liberties for others. His second principle of justice states that social advantages must be organised so that they are of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of the society, and that offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of fair and equal opportunity.

Thus we see that the discussion of equity has progressed from an approach of economic inequality to the recognition of differences. Different economic approaches revolved around the redistribution of resources as i) liberal individualism with a focus on ensuring that individuals have equal opportunities;



ii) social-democratic perspective with focus on the rectification of unequal distribution of social and economic benefits amongst groups within society; and iii) market individualism with equity being reconceptualised in terms of the requirement of a market-driven economy. Thus equity has moved in concept from social redistribution to people's entitlement.

Equity is defined in terms of three basic principles according to Anderson and O'Neil (2006) and Harry Jones (2009):

- i) Equal life chances or equal opportunity: There should be no difference in life chances due to factors such as gender, class or ethnicity over which a person has no control over or is responsibility for.
- ii) Avoidance of deprivation in outcomes particularly in health, education and consumption levels: This principle is aimed at assuring access to goods and services such as shelter, food and nutrition, water and sanitation, healthcare, basic education, physical security and environment, which are necessary for basic existence.
- iii) Adequate rewards for effort and ability based on fair competition: This principle calls for equal access to people to positions in society, jobs and other opportunities based on their capacities.

Equity is however, difficult to assess as it is embedded in a contextual reality. This has led to criticism of the concept from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which considers it to be subjective and vague, and think it is being used to dilute the fundamental legal principle of equality. They feel that use of terms such as 'fairness'

to define equity is not useful for policy and evaluation, as it is not measurable.

## Why equity is indispensable in the development dialogue

The World Development Report of 2006 discusses the lack of equal opportunity and equal life chances through an example of two children born on the same day in South Africa. Nthabiseng is black and is born to a poor family while Pieter is born to a rich white family. Nthabiseng could expect to live to 50 years in poverty without proper formal education while Pieter could expect to live to 68 years with formal schooling of minimum 12 years. The case study brings out the impact that different life chances have on the trajectories of lives. That these life chances are influenced by factors such as place of birth, caste, gender, religion or ethnicity is clearly unacceptable in a modern society.

One of the major fundamental drivers of inequity is inequality, it contributes to inequity. Inequity is systematic inequality. It is prevalent when people cannot break out of an unequal situation; when they have few options and very few opportunities to practice those options; and when they are systematically disenfranchised, that it becomes inequity. Patterns of inequality reinforce each other through intergenerational transmission and various formal and informal institutions, resulting in inequality between groups and geographical regions and chronic poverty passed between generations. Conversely, there is an inherent acceptance of inequity and unless we can recognize and transcend it, it would be very difficult to have both growth and development.

Inequity has a negative effect on growth, poverty reduction, social cohesion and in giving voice to the excluded. Social, cultural, and political differences between people create biases and rules in institutions that favour more powerful and privileged groups. These differences lead to systematic discrimination and social exclusion of people which is beyond their control. Not only are their needs not understood, appreciated and addressed but they are also unable to reach the table at which their demands and needs must be articulated. They are left voiceless and powerless and as a result, are never heard. The

government and its prejudices on marginalization translate into inequity at many operational and individual levels. Policymakers and service providers do not feel pressurised to provide the marginalised with entitlements and access to basic services. This in turn, has adverse impact in the form of poor health outcomes, high dropout rates in education, high economic burden as well as marginalisation and discrimination. Such political stances change the concept and ladders of equity. It becomes imperative to attune and moderate these frameworks under the lens of individual and group behaviours, exclusion, Preferences and economics.

## Operationalizing Equity

Conscious effort needs to be made to reduce inequity, and negotiate for an 'equity' outlook in all policy settings. This consciousness on the part of the development policy makers is evident from efforts at analyzing the relationship between equity and development. Equity has been identified as being essential for the pursuit of long term prosperity of people as well as nations. This means that individuals should have equal opportunities to pursue a life of their choice and be spared from extreme deprivation in outcomes.

For sustainable growth and development, it is essential that relevant policies and institutions are developed which provide the right environment for all members of society to achieve their full potential and allow them to contribute actively to sustained development. Unequal distribution of power leads not only to skewed distribution of wealth, but also of services and opportunities. It is essential that government policies should be designed to enable inclusion and empowerment of the most marginalized; allowing them self respect and esteem; and enabling participation in the development process. This would lead to social cohesion, utilization of available resources and create an environment free from strife and conducive for innovations, experiments and growth. However, the fact remains that although recognised to be important, equity is ignored in almost all development parameters.