

**RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE AND WEALTH INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA:
EXPLORING HOW JOHN RAWLS' PRINCIPLES OF FAIRNESS CAN
ADDRESS THE WIDENING GAP BETWEEN ELITES AND THE POOR IN
NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

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Abstract

Nigeria is facing the severe inequality of wealth with 63 percent of the population facing multidimensional poverty in the face of Gini coefficient at 35.1. This essay examines the ways of using the Theory of Justice by John Rawls, specifically, the concepts of the original position and the veil of ignorance, to solve the inequality crisis in Nigeria. Through the analysis of the available socioeconomic data using the concepts of Rawlsian principles, the current study illustrates that the difference principle and fair equality of opportunity can be used to find policy solutions. The discussion shows that the existing trends of inequality do not only contravene the basic principles of Rawlsian justice but also provide the policy options basing on justice as fairness. The study brings on board the application of the Western political philosophy in the African developmental situation.

Keywords: John Rawls, Theory of justice, Nigeria, wealth inequality, distributive justice, and difference principle.

Introduction: Nigeria's Inequality Paradox

Nigeria is a very dramatic example of a paradox in Africa as the most populated country with a population of more than 220 million and, at the same time, the highest level of poverty. The greatest economy in the continent, Nigeria has to overcome inequality issues, which essentially challenge the notions of social justice and equitable allocation. According to recent statistics available on the World Bank, 30.9 percent of Nigerians live below the global extreme poverty line of 2.15 per day, with 63 percent living below the multidimensional poverty line (World Bank, 2023). At the same time, the top 6,355 individuals, which constitute 0.003 of the population, own 1.4 times as much wealth as one hundred and seventy million citizens (Harmon, 2023).

This theatrical inequality begs some underlying questions on distributive justice, and questions concerning the moral basis of the socioeconomic arrangement of Nigeria. The inequality level goes beyond the income measurement to include access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities. The rural poverty

level is 75.5 and the urban area has 41.3 percent of poverty, which shows the geographic aspects of the inequality crisis in Nigeria (Tunji, 2025). Poverty rates in the north are more than 90, as compared to the 27% in the south, especially in the Ondo state, which is most likely to have been impacted by security challenges (Ichedi, 2022).

A Theory of Justice by John Rawls is an outstanding piece of literature that provides a solid philosophical framework through which such inequalities can be analyzed and ethical response formulated. The ideas of the original position, the veil of ignorance, and the difference principle offered by Rawls can be used as an analytical tool to study the inequality crisis in Nigeria and devise a solution that is based on the principles of fairness. His theory has us ask ourselves what do justice principles rational individuals would select but they are unaware of their future place in the society-a thought experiment with far-reaching consequences on Nigerian policy.

The applicability of the Rawlsian analysis to the situation in Nigeria is evident after considering the nature of wealth concentration. Of the top 0.003% of the population are those who have wealth equivalent to 107 million individuals, and the top 1% is 37 times wealthier than the lowest 50% (Harmon, 2023). Income ratios indicate that those within the top 10 percent make more than 14 people in the bottom 50 percent make together. These inequalities are greater than those of most other similar economies and pose serious challenges to social mobility and inclusive development.

The present paper uses the Rawlsian theory in the modern Nigerian inequality to show how the justice as fairness theory can guide policy interventions in poverty alleviation and redistribution of wealth. This analysis will expand the literature on applied political philosophy by analyzing the existing patterns of inequality using two principles of justice of Rawls and applying the theories to African contexts of development. The analysis considers whether institutional arrangements that are currently in place in Nigeria can be explained by the initial stance and what would be required in terms of reforms by the principles of Rawlsian.

Rawlsian Justice: Philosophical Foundations and Core Principles

The Original Position and Veil of Ignorance

A Theory of Justice (1971) by Rawls is a contractarian theory of distributive justice that builds around the original position, which is a hypothetical state in which rational individuals are reaching the basic structure of society behind a veil of ignorance (Freeman, 2008). Such a veil does not allow people to be aware of their

social status, their class, their innate abilities, or even their ideas of goodness, making they remain unbiased in choosing the principles of justice.

The veil of ignorance is a device of thought which ensures fairness by removing information that would favor certain interests in making a decision. Those behind the veil have general information about the workings of human psychology, politics, the principles of economics, and social structure, instead of having specific information about their community or their role in it (Philosophy Institute, 2023). This informational limitation compels the decision-makers to think about what is acceptable irrespective of where they would eventually end up in the society.

Rawls contends that this hypothetical choice scenario results in the adoption of the principles that will be acceptable to free and equal individuals none of which will have a privileged bargaining advantage. The initial stance therefore offers a procedural meaning to the categorical imperative of Kant, which translates the abstract moral conditions into the practical principles used to critique social institutions (Freeman, 2008). In the case of Nigeria, this model poses the question whether the existing institutional set-up could be justified in the eyes of those who may hold any of the social classifications such as the Lagos elite or the northern rural poor.

The Two Principles of Justice.

Rawls argues that rational members of the original position would choose two principles of justice, which should be ordered in the lexicographic order. The First Principle (Equal Liberty Principle) defines that every individual has an equal claim to the greatest possible basic liberty that is not incompatible with a similar liberty of other people. This value ensures such basic rights as political freedoms, freedom of speech, and assembly, freedom of conscience, right to personal property, and the absence of arbitrary arrest (Davies, 2018).

The Second Principle deals with social and economic inequalities by having two requirements: (a) Fair Equality of Opportunity- positions and offices should be available to all under fairly favourable conditions, and (b) The Difference Principle- the inequalities can only be justified when they yield maximum benefits to the least advantaged members of the society (Freeman, 2008). This principle allows inequality, though limits the allowable types and levels of inequality according to implications on the worst-off.

The lexical order implies that the First Principle has stayed on the top of the agenda absolutely--there is no way a basic freedom can be sacrificed in favour of economic benefits. Equality of opportunities is preferred over the principle of difference, and the society should guarantee equal opportunity to all its citizens to get advantaged

jobs before deciding whether such inequalities favor the least privileged (Davies, 2018).

The Maximin Principle and Justice as Fairness

Rawls claims that the veil of ignorance would make people tend to use the maxima rule of decision-making, i.e. maximizing the minimum. Rational choosers would choose principles that would maximize the worst possible result as conducive to them without knowing their position in society in the future (Ethics Unwrapped, 2024). The approach puts the interest of the least privileged first, and allows inequalities to occur, but only those that benefit the situation of the worst-off.

This is in contrast with utilitarian theories that maximize aggregate welfare which may be at the expense of the minorities. Rawlsian justice safeguards the vulnerable as it does not allow the interests of the vulnerable people to be sacrificed in favor of the inherent utility benefits (Ekmekci & Arda, 2015). This protection is reflected in the difference principle, which requires economic inequalities to benefit people at the lowest end of the society not just to generate more total wealth.

Philosophical Analysis of Nigerian Inequality

Violations of the Difference Principle

The inequality tendencies in Nigeria show the basic breach of the principles by Rawls. The principle of inequality that is allowed by the difference principle only allows inequalities that will add benefit to the situation of the least advantaged. However, wealth distribution in Nigeria shows that extreme concentration in the 0.003 is not correlated with more desirable outcomes in the 63% living in multidimensional poverty. The continuation of great deprivation and the increasing elite wealth is an indication that the already existing inequalities infringe the principle of difference instead of fulfilling it.

Discuss the structural characteristics of the Nigerian inequality. More than 80% of export earnings are from the oil industry which employs less than 1% of the population, whilst 83% of Nigerians are engaged in small-scale agricultural and non-farm enterprises with limited ability to reduce poverty (World Bank, 2023). This system of economy is concentrated without establishing opportunities of widespread prosperity. In the view of Rawls, such arrangements cannot be justified since they do not favor the least favored members of the society.

The fact that poverty is geographically concentrated also depicts the violation of the difference principles. There is a systematic poverty level in Northern states, where it is more than 90 percent in Sokoto, and southern areas are more prosperous (Ichedi, 2022). Such spatial disparity is a historical and political

phenomenon that has focused developmental resources in some areas and not others. Rawlsian analysis would question that these disparities in the region could be justifiable to people who may be born in the less privileged regions.

Others justify the current inequality by stating that concentration of wealth will result in investment and other growth that will trickle down to all citizens. This is natural with market economies since they bring about unequal results and trying to bring about equality would make the whole prosperity less. Also, there is a certain degree of inequality that can be considered as justifiable differences in efforts, ability, and taking risks to be rewarded.

Nevertheless, these objections are unsustainable with Rawls. The principle of difference explicitly allows inequality when it helps the least privileged- so it is not a question of inequality but whether inequality will be used to the advantage of the lower. The evidence of Nigeria gives it reason to believe that it does not. Long-term multidimensional poverty rates of 63% of the population, coupled with excessive wealth concentration, show that the status quo in inequalities serves the elites and not the situation of the worst-off. The trickle-down theory is highly testable, and what Nigeria is going through does not support arguments that elite wealth hoarding contributes significantly towards the poor majority.

Fair Equality of Opportunity Deficits

The education and employment systems in Nigeria contravene the principle of fair equality of opportunity that was presented by Rawls. The data of multidimensional poverty shows that a fifth of adults are never enrolled in primary school attendance, and 1 in 9 families has no school attendance (Ichedi, 2022). Such disparities in education have systematic disadvantages that deny the individuals with talents of a disadvantaged background a chance to compete favorably in securing a job that would improve their conditions.

The principle of equitable equality of opportunity goes beyond legal equality of opportunity and entails that individuals with similar capabilities and drive have equal life opportunities irrespective of social station of origin (Davies, 2018). The reality of Nigeria does not match this requirement. Children born by affluent Lagos households have access to good education, health and social contacts that help them move up the ladder. The children who are born in the poor households of the north have systematic disadvantages; poor schools, their cognitive development is being compromised due to malnutrition and they have restricted access to opportunities through which they can exercise their talents.

This is an opportunity gap that facilitates intergenerational transmission of poverty. Once the possibilities to improve the situation of children in their lives are based on the family factors, but not on their own skills and efforts, the society

does not correspond to the standards of fairness according to Rawls. This is aggravated by the geographic aspect in that being born in northern Nigeria as opposed to southern Nigeria has a tremendous impact on life opportunities with no fault or preference of the person.

The opponents would say that fair equality of opportunity would be impossible to attain in socially scarce societies. It is the natural act of a family to invest in the benefits of their children, and as such, denying them the chance to make a decision would amount to infringing upon the autonomy of parents. Furthermore, cultural aspects such as regional orientation to education are one of the reasons why inequalities in outcomes are observed, and inequality seems to be a selection, not an unjust organization.

These arguments misinterpret the demands of fair equality of opportunity. Rawls does not require an outcome equality or also does not forbid parental investment in children. Instead, he demands that social institutions be so organized that the individuals with similar natural endowments and motivation not be systematically hurt by social circumstances (Freeman, 2008). The imbalance in education in Nigeria is beyond the possible justifications of the family option or cultural difference- it is indicative of institutional failures to offer surpassed opportunities to the underprivileged groups.

The Original Position Test Applied to Nigeria

Using the original position thought experiment by Rawls in the application to the situation in Nigeria shows how unfair the existing set up is. Logical people under the veil of ignorance would not choose the current institutional frameworks that Nigeria is experiencing since they could have a 63-percent chance of living in multidimensional poverty without knowing whether they would be born into families of Lagos elite or poor families in the North.

The maximin principle predicts that this uncertainty would cause people to become risk-averse and choose they would rather be in an arrangement that maximizes the worst possible outcome instead of betting on landing into the elite. They would require better social safety nets, fairer access to education and economic systems that would provide opportunities to the poor instead of placing wealth in the hands of the elites. The downside risk that is extreme in the current system in Nigeria, which is the lack of becoming a child born in chronic multidimensional poverty, would seem unacceptable to rational choosers who may find themselves in that state.

This conclusion is enhanced by geographic inequality. The clustering of poverty in the north and the rural regions implies that those in the initial position would have a high risk of being born into low-education infrastructure, health care

accessibility, and economic opportunities regions. Rational choosers would demand institutional solutions to ensure the much fairer geographic growth and allocation of opportunities, and they would not take a system in which circumstances of birth play a drastic role in predetermining life opportunities.

Others may answer that the initial state of thinking thought experiment, though philosophical, does not work in the practical policy-making. Real people are aware of their status and will not willingly oppose redistributive policies which will not favor them. The political realities render the application of the principles of Rawlsian in the situation of the elite capture and poor institutions in Nigeria impossible.

This objection confuses normative principles and empirical predictions of political viability. Rawls does not give forecasts, but criteria of judging justice when it comes to political action. The initial stance shows that the existing plans of the country are not morally viable to the entire population as equitable conditions of social coexistence. This normative understanding is not only important when implementing such reforms is hindered by politics- it sets the direction of reform and offers an ethical basis upon which to question unjust institutions. The challenges in seeking justice do not nullify the responsibilities of seeking justice.

Policy Implications: Implementing Rawlsian Justice

Rawlsian principles agree with the progressive taxation and redistribution schemes that help the situation of the less privileged. The existing tax system in Nigeria, which mainly relies on oil revenues and not on the concept of progressive income taxation, does not reflect the wealth distribution of the elite and does not give sufficient resources to poverty reduction initiatives (Tunji, 2025). The difference principle is an explanation of why progressive wealth and income tax rates should be significantly increased, and revenues used on programs that directly benefit the multidimensional poor, such as expanded cash transfer programs that exist today to cover 15 million households, but need extensive coverage.

Equal opportunity fairly requires huge investment in education, especially in the underprivileged areas. The priorities in the policy should be universal quality primary education, focused investment in educational facilities in the North and the rural areas, school feeding programs to deal with child poverty and technical training to accompany economic diversification. The future of Nigeria lies in seeing that bright children born out of unfortunate backgrounds will be able to grow and use their potentials without any biases in respect to family situations or place of origin.

The oil dependence would be better diversified to labor-intensive sectors that will serve better the Rawlsian principles. The present economic systems have amassed opportunities in extraction industries that are capital-intensive with few workers. The difference principle is pro-policies which bring productive jobs to 70 per cent of the Nigerians who are engaged in agriculture and informal sectors. This involves the need to invest in agricultural value chains, small and medium manufacturing enterprises, infrastructure linking the poor regions to the economic opportunities and policies that promote labor intensive growth.

The policies of regional development should take care of the systemic geographic disadvantages. The spatial clustering of poverty is unfairness which would be opposed in the original position. Nigeria requires a thorough regional development that takes care of the historical injustices and offers equal opportunities to all the states by distributing federal resources equally, special intervention programs to the poorest states, infrastructure development of connecting poor regions to the markets and to enhance security and governance in the conflict-related regions.

Implementation Challenges and Responses

The application of the principles of Rawlsian encounters significant political economic hurdles. Current arrangements have elite beneficiaries who will be opposed to redistributive policies that will take away their benefits. The federal system of Nigeria, with high levels of state autonomy, makes it hard to have nationally coordinated efforts in redistribution. The poorer states can become counter to funding schemes favoring other areas, and this creates collective action issues.

These challenges are very tough yet not impossible. To create partnerships that will champion reforms, it is necessary to show that fairer distributions are better in the society in general, and not only the poor. Extreme poverty alleviation increases domestic markets, reduces social instability and provides human capital to growth. Local reform efforts can be helped with international pressure and help. Most essentially, justice as fairness moral arguments can inspire change despite materialistic interests; they can appeal to the fairness of the citizens and acknowledge that present arrangements could not be deemed to everyone to be just.

Cultural factors should be taken into consideration. Opponents believe that the theory of Rawls, which is based on Western liberal individualism, might fail to reflect African communitarian values of collective responsibility and extended family groups. Other traditional social systems and patron-client networks also

account for some of the Nigerian inequality instead of individualistic systems proposed by Rawls.

Nevertheless, the cultural concerns do not oppose but support the issue of the underprivileged. African philosophical laws such as ubuntu provide importance that the community has to the vulnerable- communal solidarity and responsibility- which are in line with the Rawlsian philosophy of prioritizing the least advantaged. The conversation of the difference principle about advancing the position of the worst-off appeals to communitarian adherence to common good. Fair equality of opportunity is in accordance with the common values which people do not need to experience impassable obstacles because of the circumstances they cannot control.

Measuring Progress and Accountability

To apply the Rawlsian justice, there are metrics needed in determining the extent to which the policies are favorable to the least advantaged. The multidimensional poverty index of Nigeria is a useful tool, which must be updated and extended on a regular basis to monitor the welfare of populations that are the most disadvantaged. Among the key indicators, one should also single out multidimensional poverty rates (with the focus on children), measures of educational opportunities, the disparity in health outcomes across regions and income profiles, measures of economic mobility, and geographic inequality patterns.

These measurements are expected to drive the evaluation of policies and the distribution of resources. The difference principle requires that economic policies should be evaluated based not only on the growth of the GDP, but also on whether growth would ameliorate the position of the worst-off. The investments in education must be analysed based on their effectiveness in lessening the opportunity differences between the advantaged and those less fortunate. Regional development programmes need to be evaluated about the extent that they reduce geographic differences in life chances.

Conclusion

This discussion shows that the Theory of Justice by Rawls offers impressive resources on the analysis and solution to the inequality crisis in Nigeria. The present socioeconomic order has deep-rooted injustices when assessed through the Rawlsian concepts. The high level of wealth concentration that exists with 63% multidimensional poverty contravenes the difference principle by raising inequalities that only benefit the elite as opposed to the lowest-income earners. The educational and economic opportunity gaps breach the fair equality of opportunity as they result in the life opportunities being anchored heavily on the

familial backgrounds and places of birth as opposed to the personal capacities and efforts put in it.

The original position thought experiment indicates that the rational people who are not aware about their future social status would not accept the current institutional arrangements of Nigeria with the likelihood of encountering extreme disadvantage. The maximin principle would compel them to seek tougher safeguards to the worst-off, more generous educational opportunities, and economic organizations that generate general opportunities as opposed to amassing wealth in elite hands.

This analysis has suggested policy suggestions that would include progressive taxation reform, more redistribution, provision of more educational opportunities in poorer regions, more economic diversification such as more labor-intensive industries, and development of regions to focus on geographic inequality. Implementation has significant political and practical issues; nevertheless, Rawlsian principles are morally clear regarding what reform directions should be.

The research is a significant addition to the literature in applied political philosophy because it can be applied in policy analysis by representatives of the West, showing that Rawlsian analysis is useful but must be accompanied by making local decisions and prioritizing local culture. Future studies ought to focus on particular institutional provisions to the attainment of the Rawlsian principles in federal systems, how African communitarian ideals can supplement justice as fairness and comparative studies of successful inequality reduction where similar models are involved.

The inequality crisis in Nigeria is not only the moral issue but also the barrier to sustainable development. Rawlsian principles provide guidelines on how to establish more fair institutions that defend the weak at the cost of allowing positive inequalities that are advantageous to all the citizens. The future of Nigeria as a democratic society that upholds human dignity and inclusive development of all the citizens will essentially be determined by whether or not the country is headed in the right direction towards justice as fairness or still follows the elite capture patterns.

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