



In September 2018, the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ), a progressive economic policy think tank, was launched by a group of South African academics, activists and former government policy makers. The IEJ is an autonomous institute affiliated to the University of the Witwatersrand.

## KEY CHALLENGES

The IEJ responds to the following key challenges:

- The inability of existing social and economic policy, and the ideas and research upon which these rest, to adequately address deep economic and social crises that manifest in extreme levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment and undermine democracy and democratic institutions.
- The lack of coherent and viable alternatives and the failure of progressive social forces to organise a social consensus around such interventions.
- The need to build capacity for policy-relevant economic research that responds to the concerns of labour, community activism, civil society, and progressive politics; and develop research and policy which directly contributes toward leveraging social change.

## STRATEGIC MISSION

The IEJ's core objective is to provide policy makers and progressive social forces in South Africa with access to rigorous economic analysis, and well thought through policy options, as a basis for concrete interventions.

By acting as a research and policy hub, the IEJ builds links between the research community and the labour movement, progressive civil society and activist organisations, and elements within the state and business. The research agenda is developed in on-going collaboration with these social partners, and the project outputs are made accessible and appropriate for policy work. By remaining independent the IEJ is able to collaborate broadly, promote engagement across factional lines, and build consensus on long-term policy programmes, while conducting research not tied to a particular party line. Such an organic relationship between an economics research institute and organisations with a mass constituency is unique.

In addition to proposing immediate economic reforms the IEJ contributes towards the development of a coherent longer-term programme aimed at deeper structural change. This requires new thinking, which responds to changing domestic and international conditions, and begins to reimagine progressive economic alternatives, by going beyond old paradigms.

The envisaged research outputs of the IEJ, while rooted in academic scholarship published in working papers, journal articles and books, go beyond this to include: policy briefs, fact sheets, newspaper articles, and blogs; online courses; creative new media: infographics, podcasts, animated videos, etc.; public seminars; and organisational education.

The work of the IEJ reaches beyond the borders of South Africa and the IEJ seeks to collaborate with other African and global-South research and advocacy institutions, civil society groups, and trade union formations in furthering these same objectives across the African continent.

Interventions proposed by the IEJ must advance social justice, promote equitable economic development that realises socio-economic rights, and ensure a thriving, democratic, environmentally sustainable, and inclusive economy that places the needs of the majority at the centre.



# RESEARCH AGENDA

The Institute will fill important gaps in the research terrain. Our four focus areas are:

- the economic supply chains associated with equitable access to basic social goods, such as food, water or transport;
- the role of the South African state and how state owned enterprises, state financing, and infrastructure can be leveraged to achieve equitable development;
- macroeconomic policy, including tax justice, monetary and financial sector policy, and participatory budgeting to advance socio-economic rights; and
- the changing nature of work (globalisation, mechanisation, and precarity) and its relation to the decent work agenda, redistribution, public employment, and new forms of organising.

All research is tackled with due attention to the appropriate regional and international context, and South Africa's place as a semi-industrialised African country. The research is also approached through the lenses of class, race, gender, and environmental impact, while taking account of the interconnectedness between these lenses.

Such an ambitious research agenda will need to be phased in over time, in tandem with building the capacity of the IEJ towards a planned staff complement of up to 30 people over 3-5 years.

The research themes are complemented by two overarching projects on:

- 'rethinking economics', which aims to bolster progressive economic thinking, particularly in our universities among a new generation of students, and economic literacy in general; and
- 'reimagining economic alternatives', to engage creatively in long-term programmatic thinking, in collaboration with leading intellectuals and fraternal organisations.

The work of the IEJ contributes towards changing the national dialogue around economics and including the currently marginalised within that dialogue.

A long-term initiative such as this provides an opportunity to institutionalise progressive economic research capacity, and an agenda of training and transformation will be a key element of our work.

# BACKGROUND TO FORMATION

The project broadens, and institutionalises work successfully undertaken through the *National Minimum Wage Research Initiative* (NMW-RI) at Wits University.

The NMW-RI provided extensive academic research in support of a carefully-crafted national minimum wage, and contributed a much-needed progressive voice to the public debate. The research was drawn upon by Labour, Community, and others within the NEDLAC political process, and was used for organisational education.

The NMW-RI showed how academic research can be made policy relevant and directly assist in achieving a desired policy outcome. It is unlikely that the outcome of the negotiations would have been the same without the NMW-RI research. The Deputy President's Expert Panel, amongst others, adopted its key arguments.

Following this a group of academics, activists, unionist and former government policy makers began laying the groundwork for the establishment of the IEJ. A scan of 38 existing research institutions in South Africa was undertaken and consultations with over 50 academics, union and civil society activists, policy makers, and government officials conducted. The process was led by a reference group of (mainly young) black intellectuals. Leaders of this initiative already have a track record of undertaking high quality, policy relevant research, not least through research on the national minimum wage.

# CONCLUSION

It is our belief that economic policy research is a vital part of building a social justice agenda that can be advanced by progressive social forces in order to achieve a more just economy. We are excited by this new endeavour and believe it can make a serious contribution towards building a more equal, prosperous, inclusive, and just South Africa.



# 2018 HIGHLIGHTS

The IEJ began operating at the start of 2018 although it was only officially launched on 7 September 2018. For an organisation with only one full-time staff member in 2018 a remarkable amount has been achieved. Highlights include:

## 1. Rethinking Economics – launching the movement for a more relevant and inclusive economics discourse

- A two-day inaugural Rethinking Economics for Africa festival held in September 2018. Over 475 attendees including students from at least six provinces and eleven universities were present. The festival included 33 parallel sessions and 3 plenaries with presentations by approximately 85 speakers, including 8 international contributors, some world-renowned. The cultural programme incorporated 3 films, spoken word poetry, physical theatre, and performance, and engaged participants through an interactive series of exhibitions. The 5 thematic foci were: reforming the economics curriculum, feminist economics, economics and social struggles, pluralism and political economy, and contemporary African debates (with a focus on South Africa). The IEJ led the organising of the festival together with 6 partners.
- The IEJ incubated the formation of a Rethinking Economics for Africa student movement, initiating the formation of the first chapter at Wits at the start of 2018. At the closing of the festival the students presented a manifesto. By the end of 2018, at least 5 student chapters will be active.

## 2. Budget and tax justice – contributing towards an anti-austerity politics and just tax system

- Drafting two submissions to Parliament's Finance Committees on behalf of a group of CSOs opposing austerity measures. The publication of the [research paper](#) *Mitigating the impact of VAT increase by extending zero-rating* and the drafting and presentation of the Budget Justice Coalition submission to National Treasury's VAT Expert Panel. Participating in the international Beyond Boundaries civil society convening in Peru that included a focus on these issues. Making a joint [submission](#) to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the occasion of South Africa's first compliance review before that Committee arguing that austerity policies are undermining human rights in South Africa.

## 3. Presidential Jobs Summit – supporting Labour advance progressive policy proposals

- A five-month negotiation between Business, Government, Labour and Civil Society preceded the Presidency's flagship Jobs Summit. The IEJ participated in organising a symposium for all social partners and provided research support for Labour. This involved *inter alia* the preparation of [22 policy briefs](#) authored by ourselves and a collection of leading progressive scholars we commissioned.

## 4. National minimum wage – seeing the legislation over the finish line

- 2018 saw the National Minimum Wage Bill go through Parliament. The IEJ and its partner the National Minimum Wage Research Initiative at Wits University consistently drove a progressive agenda in shining a light on the deficiencies of these Bills and advocating for their improvement. This included: six submissions and oral presentations to Parliament on the draft Bills, briefing the ANC and EFF Labour Portfolio study groups, fully participating in the Parliamentary deliberations, supporting Labour in their submissions, releasing three press statements and engaging with dozens of media outlets.

## 5. Launch of the IEJ

- The IEJ was launched on 7 September with a public (televised) lecture on the *Trajectory of economic thought in Africa and the implications for economic policy* with the world-renowned scholar Professor Thandika Mkandawire, together with Professor Jayati Ghosh, Oxfam South Africa's Director Siphon Mthathi, IEJ Chairperson Zane Dangor and music and poetry by Xhosa Opera singer Mthwakazi Lenga and Noluthando Buthelezi.

## 6. Governance and institutional building – establishing the IEJ on a sustainable footing

- The IEJ has established an Interim Board, held two board meetings, registered for tax exemption, is finalising its legal affiliation with the University of the Witwatersrand, has undertaken extensive partnership building and fundraising, and is in the process of purchasing office premises.





# LEADERSHIP

## THE INTERIM BOARD

The Interim Board consists of:

- Chair: **Zane Dangor** – community activist and former Director General of Social Development
- **Mcebisi Jonas** – former Deputy Minister of Finance
- **Professor Fiona Tregenna** – NRF SARChi Chair in Industrial Development
- **Tamara Paremoer** – economist and policy advisor in the Presidency
- **Ayabonga Cawe** – economist and public commentator
- **Kate Philip** – public works expert
- **Dinga Sikwebu** – Director of Tshisimani and trade unionist
- **Mandisa Dyanti** – Deputy General Secretary of the Social Justice Coalition.
- **Tony Ehrenreich** – former Cosatu Western Cape Provincial Secretary

## THE CO-DIRECTORS

- **Neil Coleman**, Institute Co-director, has been an activist, strategist and policy researcher in the South African Mass Democratic Movement, United Democratic Front, Tripartite Alliance, and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) since the late 1970s, and a COSATU official between 1989-2017. He participated in the constitutional negotiations, headed COSATU's parliamentary office, was special advisor to Department of Economic Development Minister Ebrahim Patel and Strategies Co-ordinator in the COSATU Secretariat. Neil led Labour's delegation in the national minimum wage negotiations 2015-2017.
- **Gilad Isaacs**, Institute Co-director, is an economist at Wits University, where he heads the CSID Research Programme, coordinates the National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, and lectures. He has worked as a consultant for the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) and Global Labour University. Gilad has a PhD in economics from SOAS University of London, and a background in civil society activism working for the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and founding the Social Justice Coalition (SJC).

The IEJ is committed to gender and racial equity and transformation and is prioritising this in the expansion of the staff and leadership.

## CONTACT

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