Op-ed

African Philosophy and Social Justice:
The inclusiveness and limitations of a continent's political thought
By Dr Mutshidzi Maraganedzha

The central task of political philosophy is to specify a set of values to envisage a good society. But, as much of the philosophical work on social justice has emerged from the global north, the prevailing political thought of today is limited in its scope. Or, more plainly put, it's not inclusive of the whole of society.

One of the crucial ways to assess if an account of social justice is plausible, is in terms of the scope of its inclusivity. That is, who it accommodates as entitled to be a member of the political community and to the political goods – whether understood as rights, primary goods, or capabilities – due to them. The concern of inclusivity should make a strong intuitive appeal given a vast lived experience of discrimination in politics, which is the hallmark of what theories of social justice aim to avoid, address or redress.

A good example of philosophical tunnel vision is Kantian political thought, which excludes those living with serious mental disabilities, and animals, from the political community. This exclusion means that the interests of such entities do not count when we distribute important goods for survival or to afford them meaningful existence.

In addition, much of Western political thought has also been criticised for failing to include people of colour, women, and the LGBTQ communities in their political models of social justice.

But how does political thought on the African continent compare? In Africa, political thought is shaped mainly by the extensive and complex works of Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye. In Menkiti's approach, called radical communitarianism, the central thesis is that the state's and citizens' primary duty is the promotion of the common good. In Gyekye's account, called moderate communitarianism, he describes social justice in terms of the state's (and its citizens') duty to respect human rights and promote the common good.

As global discourse often excludes the African perspective, these two theories could add greatly to international considerations relating to social justice. Many philosophers, however, conclude that the theories are poor instances of accounts of human rights. Evidence points to the contrary. So much so that those schools of thought actually shun unjustified discrimination.

The basic point of departure for Menkiti's theory of radical communitarianism, in constructing an African theory, in any context, is the centrality of the community, which he succinctly captures in the term of 'I am because we are'. He goes on to explain how personal identity, a function of the individual, is "first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself". It is in relation to a community that the individual can navigate their personal and social identity. But the theory goes further than the individual and spans the moral

and the political. Menkiti notes that in African thought "morality demands a point of view best described as one of beingness-with-others".

In the context of political domain, Menkiti observes that African thought has its own distinctive way of conceptualising a robust political community by seeing the 'we' in 'I am because we are' as not an additive 'we' but a thoroughly fused collective 'we'. To illustrate this point, he points out that African societies tend to be organised around the requirements of duty, while Western societies tend to be organised around the postulation of individual rights. In the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collective, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to the exercise of their duties.

Interestingly, and perhaps concerningly, Menkiti limits the scope of his theory to persons, arguing that to be a member of the political community one must have the capacity for moral sense. The environment is also excluded as it too lacks the capacity for moral sense.

Moderate communitarianism emerged as a critical response to these supposed inadequacies of radical communitarianism. According to its creator, Gyekye, radical communitarianism is flawed as far as it considers rights to be secondary. A robust political theory ought to reckon with the indispensable and foundational status of human rights, he contends. In Gyekye's view, rights serve as a crucial protective political instrument that any robust political scheme ought to have. In short, radical communitarianism gets it wrong by relying on an erroneous conception of human nature, which portrays the individual as entirely constituted by communal relations.

Unfortunately, moderate communitarianism has its own flaws. In as far as the theory's focus on autonomy goes, membership to the political community excludes those living with serious mental disabilities. On the other hand, the theory is openly humanistic. A humanistic political theory is one, at least in the context of moderate communitarianism, "that is preoccupied with human welfare". On this basis, there might be an argument to include those living with serious mental disabilities. With regards to the environment, the implication of this political theory is so extreme that it seems to entail the exclusion of animals altogether from the moral community.

On the whole, African thought on the political community seems to diverge from that of the West in that it places far more emphasis on community as opposed to the theories of the global north, with their obsession of the individual as the central pillar of the philosophy of human rights. And even though this expanded African perspective can be seen as a step forward, the reality is that it still falls short.

In an ever-changing world, African considerations on the political community – and all considerations for that matter – need to incorporate thought on how values associated with personhood, dignity and community can be interpreted in ways that imagine inclusive polities to protect people living with serious cognitive disabilities, and the environment, amongst others.

This article is an extract from a paper prepared for the Inclusive Society Institute's Journal for Inclusive Public Policy by Dr Mutshidzi Maraganedzha. Dr Maraganedzha is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. This article has been written in his personal capacity.