

# Who's Telling the Story on Inequality?

**A look at how rising inequality has been reframed by anti-rights movements—and why reclaiming the narrative is essential to building a just future.**

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## Introduction

The past four decades have witnessed an unprecedented surge in [wealth inequality](#) and left us buffeted by one financial crisis after another. As we stand on the brink of [yet another recession](#), a historic realignment in the global order, unfolding in real time, has made the world more unpredictable and transactional than ever.

One consequence of this larger trend of instability has been the emergence of a 'new' wave of anti-rights leaders and movements in the aftermath of the 2007–2009 global financial crash. These movements defy easy categorization—often labeled as 'populist right-wing,' 'autocratic,' 'fascist,' 'illiberal democracy,' or 'far-right'<sup>1</sup>—but what they share is a common playbook; a willingness to offer answers to the widespread fear, anxiety, and grievances people are experiencing.

Yes, they wield significant economic, social, and cultural capital, and despite often inconsistent messaging, they're often the loudest (and often the only) voices addressing these concerns, albeit through distorted narratives of inequality, class struggle, and identity politics. They frame society as a struggle against a corrupt elite that is more invested in “woke” agendas than ordinary families. As a result, division and polarization have become the dominant response to rising precarity and distrust, and indeed, inequality.

Instead of advancing a compelling alternative economic vision, many progressives—broadly including 'social democrats,' 'liberals,' 'center-left,' the 'populist left wing'—remain fixated on internal debates over [whether some are going “too far”](#) and continue to cling to a failing status quo that led us here in the first place.

Meeting this moment requires more than defending “civility” or “democratic norms.” It demands acknowledging that the inclusive societies many claim to protect never fully existed and that this ‘mess’ is, in part, a product of policy and political choices made well before these anti-rights groups entered the mainstream political stage.

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid the limitations of traditional “left-right” definitions, from here on out, this piece will refer to this new strain as “anti-rights” in opposition to “progressives.”

# 1. When Policy Fails: The Strategic Rise of (Not So) Reactionary Economics

Many anti-rights movements have been particularly adept at recognizing the declining credibility of “traditional” economic narratives and adapting their messaging accordingly. In 2025, the promise of “shared prosperity,” “increasing the size of the pie,” so that “wealth will trickle down” rings hollow—cynical even. The campaign tactic of “this time if you vote for us, your lives will improve” has expired. This is reflected in the [Pew Research Center’s](#) analysis of 2024’s historic election year, which saw “incumbents [...] getting a crack on the shins.”

What the anti-rights movements have understood that many progressives have not is that you cannot campaign on the same promises over and over (and over) again and not deliver. You have to switch it up and offer something different.

Around the world, we are witnessing the (re)emergence of a [potent mix of anti-gender, anti-migrant, and anti-establishment narratives](#). While the specifics vary by context, a common thread runs through them. Often described as a “backlash” against too much progress, too soon, this phenomenon may be better understood as a deliberate and strategic political project—an alternative economic narrative that scapegoats rather than challenges the rules of the global economy. One that redirects frustration away from the beneficiaries of the rules that govern the global economy and instead towards “*them*.”

At its core, this narrative insists that the neoliberal system *works*—the real problem lies not in its structure, but in the corrupt elite and *the Other*, [whose identity shifts depending on the context](#). The message is simple: precarity, instability, job scarcity, restricted access to services, and the struggle to belong are because of *them*. Whether it is ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, criminals, feminist movements, LGBTQI+ communities, “freeloaders,” and “scroungers,” it is the threat from within, and the threat at the border, trying to [take your place](#). Behind it all is a self-serving elite (foreign or domestic), a corrupt establishment enabling this displacement, and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, and academic community, who are indifferent at best, and conspiratorial at worst.

That is not an evidence-based argument built on facts and figures, but neither were the narratives of trickle-down [economics](#) nor [meritocracy](#). It is a leveraging of the emotions of those who sense, justifiably or not, that they don't matter and that there's no place for them in the home, family, or society, stripping away pride, community, and a sense of belonging.

The solution offered is simple: crush the establishment, purge the enemy within, and fortify the border. Strip away checks and balances, weaken the opposition, gut regulations, and concentrate power in the hands of those willing to “get things done.” When the election is won, a wave of policies that serve a symbolic function often follows, such as targeting minorities, undermining hard-won rights and protections, attacking parts of the state perceived as corrupt or wasteful, or even censoring language seen as indicative of shifting cultural norms. Each move is designed, in part, to signal that, unlike previous politicians, they will deliver on their promises, thus legitimize their authority, and build trust.

Do this, and the promise is that *pride, well-being, and belonging* will be restored. Bring (back) jobs, family, safety, and prosperity. Freedom. And if it doesn't work? There's a built-in excuse: “*They*” (the establishment) won't let us, and repeat the cycle.

## 2. The Vicious Cycle of Inequality and Division

While the future can't be predicted, we can be sure that on the current trajectory, things will not get better.

[Reducing inequalities is a prerequisite to sustainable development.](#) In a world where a minority have too much power, improved well-being for the majority requires some amount of redistribution of power, wealth and income—both within and between countries—dignified conditions for workers across supply chains, access to care, sustenance, education, energy, housing, healthcare and a safe environment, legal protections and a culture of respect, recognition, and solidarity across genders, race, class, and origin. None of this is part of the anti-rights playbook.

As inequalities deepen and life remains difficult for many, dynamics emerge similar to what political theorist [Karl Polanyi](#) described in the first half of the twentieth century: a “double movement.” As tensions rise—like a stretched rubber band—there will be increasing pressure to subvert market forces in service of the people. In response, those benefiting from the current system will work even harder to redirect this frustration, grievance, and anger towards an “Other.” They will double down on polarizing political strategies and scapegoating, enacting ever-harsher policies—anything to keep attention from [the top 1 percent, who now control more wealth than 95 percent of humanity.](#)

Is it a coincidence that, amid extreme inequality, stagnating living standards for the majority, and subsequent mounting pressure to enact redistributive measures, there has been a rise of [anti-gender](#),<sup>2</sup> anti-migrant, and anti-establishment narratives?

The social consequences—radicalization, violence, hate speech, and crimes, a society gripped by fear, division, and distrust, and a further breakdown in international cooperation to meet shared challenges—will be the inevitable trickle-down effects of this political-economic strategy.

### 3. Pattern Recognition: People Know When They Are Being Left Behind

It is tempting to blame “the people” for these circumstances. It is not uncommon to hear people blame the public for “voting for inequality,” “voting for despots and demagogues,” or “voting to take their rights away.” Yet, no one votes to make their lives worse. We cannot dismiss millions of people as merely ignorant, hateful, prejudiced, or irrational. Many vote for change, not necessarily because they believe in specific policies but because they distrust the system and the status quo for having “failed to deliver.”

For instance, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2025 finds that a [majority of people polled \(61 percent\) across 26 countries report having a moderate to high grievance](#), believing that government and businesses make their lives harder, serve narrow interests, and that wealthy people benefit from the system. Their 2024 data found that [2 out of 3 people believe that government leaders](#), business leaders, and journalists are intentionally trying to mislead them. This sense of grievance and distrust is even more significant for those living on a low income.

Moreover, to suggest that people don't want to live in a democratic system is inaccurate. Global polling data, such as [Gallup](#) and the [Democracy Perception Index](#), finds that a majority of people surveyed want to live in a democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> In short, 'anti-gender' encompasses a wide range of issues related to sex and gender, manifesting differently depending on the sociopolitical context. Drawing on the research led by Professors Clare Hemmings and Sumi Madhok at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), [Transnational 'Anti-Gender' Movements and Resistance: Narratives and Interventions](#), we see that 'anti-gender' attacks are on the rise globally. These attacks take the form of violence against feminists and LGBTQI+ communities, as well as efforts to dismantle the institutionalisation of feminist thought in universities, NGOs, and governments. 'Anti-gender' aggression is also deeply entwined with religious, ethnic, cultural, and nationalist fundamentalism, in which gender equality is demonized as a foreign imposition—often linked to migration, liberalization, or Westernization.

However, the issue is that **many are losing confidence in their democracies** (as they have experienced it). For instance, the [Gallup study finds](#) that only 35 percent of people polled believe that the will of the people in fact rules their country, and under 50 percent of people believe that their elections are free and fair—the very foundation of representative democracy.

## 4. When the System Really Works—But Only for the Few

This distrust may be a consequence of the fact that the promises of the dominant economic policies of the last forty years have not been delivered. It is now widely established that there is almost no “trickle down” of wealth, but instead, there has been a massive transfer and privatization of wealth. As the Oxfam International Executive Director, Amitabh Behar [stated](#), “The capture of our global economy by a privileged few has reached heights once considered unimaginable.”

Billionaires are multiplying; there are now 3,028 billionaires in the world, and even *Fortune* [reported](#): “Money is power, and the world’s elite are grabbing enough to outpace the wealth of most countries.” Billionaire wealth grew by [USD 2 trillion in 2024 alone](#), at a rate three times faster than the year before (while [5 billion people](#) have become poorer since 2020). And while there had been limited improvement in the levels of inequality between countries, the [last five years](#) have seen that trend reversed (and even then, it was still unacceptably high). Wealth concentration is so extreme that there is even inequality between those with single-digit billions and the centibillionaires.

Unlike what people were told, wealth doesn’t appear to be trickling down, nor does hard work guarantee a good standard of living. The number of people living in poverty has barely changed [since 1990](#). As the world rapidly urbanizes, [75 percent of the world’s cities](#) have higher levels of income inequality than ever. For many, the cost of living is a daily struggle—one study finds that [less than a third](#) report living comfortably. While the total value of the world’s property stood at [USD 379.7 trillion](#) (four times the global GDP) in 2022, at least [2.8 billion people](#) couldn’t access adequate housing.

Extensive data demonstrates that the circumstances of birth—luck—such as the country one is born in, the family’s wealth, gender, race, or disability, greatly determine life outcomes. This is also true for those at the top, as the Oxfam report “[Takers not Makers](#)” finds that at least 60 percent of billionaire wealth “comes from either inheritance, cronyism and corruption or monopoly power”—not hard work.

## 5. Inequality by Design: The Policies that Transferred Wealth to the Top

Joseph Stiglitz and many others have argued for years that [the inequality today is the result of deliberate policy choices](#)—a concerted effort to shape the economic and political landscape in favor of the powerful. In other words, the system has been rigged—the technical term being ‘[state capture](#).’ As Ha-Joon Chang notes, one of the great myths of our time is the [portrayal of “the economy” as an independent entity](#), detached from political choices and power structures. Markets do not exist in a vacuum; they are structured by rules and regulations implemented by people.

Decades of deregulation, privatization of public wealth and state assets, austerity, regressive tax policies, and aggressive tax avoidance strategies and attacks on labor organizing, all of which have contributed to transferring [wealth to the top](#). Many governments have lowered [corporate tax rates worldwide since 1980](#), and even inheritance taxes have declined across wealthy nations—nearly half of the world’s billionaires now reside in countries with no inheritance tax at all. Conservative estimates find that tax abuse costs lower-income countries [USD 47 billion](#) annually, equivalent to nearly half their combined public health budgets.

Meanwhile, according to the [Commitment to Reducing Inequality \(CRI\) Index 2024](#), 9 out of 10 countries are implementing policies and actions likely to increase inequalities. 84 percent of countries have [reduced their spending](#) on education, health and/or social protection (95 percent of countries under IMF programmes saw budget cuts), labor rights have been eroded, [official development assistance](#) (ODA) has been cut, and an international debt system that prioritizes wealthy creditors over struggling nations has been supported. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that [global public debt will exceed USD 100 trillion](#). Before the developments of the last few weeks, debt distress already loomed over [more than half of the 68 low-income countries](#), more than double the number in 2015. 3.3 billion people live in countries that have to [spend more on debt payments](#) than on health and education.

## 6. The Crisis in Multilateralism Didn't Start Today

While some suggest that we are witnessing a [new crisis of multilateralism and global order](#), many of its structural challenges have been [evident for decades](#). On the global stage, promises of progress over the past few decades—such as the United Nations (UN)'s commitment to “leave no one behind,” or the World Bank's vision of “shared prosperity”—remain unfulfilled, regressing even ([30 percent of the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) targets have regressed below their 2015 levels). Moreover, the past few years alone have exposed the shortcomings of international cooperation, inequalities in decision-making power, and double standards of global norms.

For instance, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments of some high-income countries [hoarded vaccines](#) and [refused to overturn patents](#) (blocking a push by 80+ developing countries). In the face of climate breakdown, high-income [countries have refused to provide adequate financing and support through the loss and damage fund](#) to those who contributed the least to the crisis yet suffer its worst consequences. The same double standards persist in the debt crisis and international tax cooperation, as well as in the response to which conflicts and human suffering are deemed worthy of prevention, both domestically and globally.

The 2007–2008 financial crash, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic—two global events—also made it clear to the public that we are not, and never were, all in this together. As with any shock, everyone can be affected, but not equally, and [some may benefit](#).

For example, while the United States, European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom spent hundreds of billions of dollars/euros/pounds to bail out the financial sector, the super-wealthy became wealthier. Meanwhile, the rest of the world entered a recession in 2009. The least developed countries (LDCs), already weakened by the food and energy crises, experienced a “[perfect storm](#)” as financial resources, foreign direct investment, remittances from overseas workers, export earnings, and tourism revenue all dried up at the same time. Meanwhile, low- and middle-income countries have been spending, on average, [48 percent of their national budgets on debt repayments](#)—often to private creditors based in New York and London. Similarly, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while millions lost their loved ones and livelihoods, [131 billionaires more than doubled their net worth](#).



The widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo isn't random, nor can it be dismissed as mere ignorance or hatred; it is a direct consequence of the economic and political systems that shape our world today.

The consequences of policy can sometimes take years to see. All of the above is not the result of the last five or even ten years. Before the mid-2010s, this new strain of anti-rights was still at the margins for the most part. The sobering reality is that these policies were (and continue to be) implemented by so-called "mainstream" political parties and actors in key international financial institutions.

## 7. Reclaiming the Fight Against Inequality

**This is what reckoning looks like. As Naomi Klein warns, "Denial is so much easier than looking inward, or backward, or forward; so much easier than change."**

While in many contexts it seems as though the anti-rights movements are winning, one interesting impact is that they have, in a way, mainstreamed and normalized a narrative of inequality—an antagonism with elites and institutions that are not delivering for the public. If progressives wish to counter anti-rights movements, they need to reclaim this narrative and avoid empty rhetoric.

Ten years ago, it seemed to be a faux pas to talk about inequality, let alone question the legitimacy of billionaires. Today, the growing rejection of unequal societies is also reflected in the prominence of inequality and solidarity in the international agenda. Just recently, the [presidents of Brazil, South Africa, and Spain](#)—from three major regions—united to call for bold, coordinated action to meet the challenges before us: "rising inequalities, climate change, and the financing gap for sustainable development."

That comes after a growing momentum for serious policy to redistribute extreme wealth and putting resources to serve the public good in several key international processes such as the implementation of the [Pact of the Future](#), [Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development](#), calls for a [UN tax convention](#), a push led by African countries—which among other things calls for large multinationals to pay their fair share of taxes where they operate and a [minimum 2 percent wealth tax on billionaires](#).

There is a public mandate to fight inequality: [across 17 G20 countries surveyed](#), a majority of adults (68 percent) support the policy proposal where wealthy people pay a higher tax on their wealth to fund major changes to our economy and

lifestyles. [The Pew Research Center](#) finds that economic pessimism has deepened in many countries since the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, a large majority of people across 36 countries are concerned about economic inequality (84 percent) and the political influence of the wealthy (86 percent).

Rather than scapegoating immigrants or gender equality or ploughing ahead with “business as usual,” Spain has focused on tackling inequality—introducing a [wealth tax](#), raising the minimum wage by 61 percent over seven years (which impacts low-income, women, and ethnic minorities), and rolling out major housing reforms, while [leading anti-racism and discrimination awareness campaigns](#), and gender inclusive reforms. No economic collapse followed, nor did the imagined threats materialize. In fact, *The Economist* [ranked Spain as the world’s best-performing economy in 2024](#), crediting its success in part to the government’s “strikingly different approach to migration.” The country’s growth rate was four times the EU average.

And Spain is far from alone. Around the world, effective policies for greater equity already exist. The [Inequality Solutions portal](#)—the Netflix of public policy—showcases proven, real-world examples, from [community-based healthcare in Costa Rica](#) to [community-based targeted cash transfers in Indonesia](#) and [extended land rights in Sierra Leone](#). Its growing database is a reminder: we don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but scale what works and push the boundaries of what’s possible.

However, the way forward is much more about power than policy. Across different issues and contexts, extensive research and evidence exist on what improves people’s lives and the planet’s well-being. The question we keep coming back to is: how do we get it implemented? If the obstacle is political will, what conditions are necessary to create it? How can broad public support be built to safeguard policies against easy reversal? Who needs to be brought on board? Who is standing in the way? There isn’t just a technical fix; the real challenge is strategy: how can necessary decisions be made in the first place?

**Building power requires numbers, and that requires a narrative to win people’s hearts and minds.**

Words alone are not enough, but their importance in building power cannot be overstated. Anti-rights actors have not won because they’ve offered better jobs or cheaper housing, but because they’ve created stories that resonate, divide, and mobilize. For progressives to build power, they need a clear narrative that unites

people, channels grievance into solidarity, and shines a light on those standing in the way of change.

From [research](#), [global case studies](#), and lessons from countries like Spain and Brazil, three strategic imperatives emerge:

First, **now is the time for accountability**. Progressives must be as clear as the anti-right in identifying who is responsible for the damaging policies in place and who is preventing inclusive policy change. Who is blocking a wealth tax or stopping workers from unionizing? Who is preventing increased funding for schools and hospitals? Who is trading in hate and dividing communities? If progress is blocked, the public deserves to know who is standing in the way.

Without that clarity, the vacuum will continue to be filled by scapegoating women, migrants, queer people, and the poor. Moreover, while societal problems are complex, structural, and often generations in the making, a story that recognizes that these are human-made decisions is vital. Framing them as human-made (as the anti-right actors do) makes change seem possible.

Second, **solidarity must be reclaimed**. Part of the anti-rights playbook is to weaponize difference to distract and divide. This tactic is not new, but remains highly effective and can be effectively exposed. A narrative of solidarity must be continuously reinforced—one that unites countries, communities, and individuals across race, ethnicity, faith, origin, gender, sexuality, occupation, and class—is the necessary ingredient to change. A narrative where people come together across differences rather than falling into the imposed divisions.

While it often feels impossible to find consensus, people have come together in even more dire circumstances—think of the abolition of slavery, independence movements across the previously colonized world, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the struggle for universal suffrage, and in more recent history, the [global campaign](#) that led to the cancellation of over USD 100 billion in debt for 35 low-income countries. These victories remind us that even the most entrenched systems can be transformed through collective action.

Third, **building hope is a necessary precursor to building trust**. According to new [Gallup research](#) spanning 52 countries, hope consistently emerges as the most important quality people seek in a leader. However, hope requires something to hope *for*. Sustaining long-term movements means going beyond rejecting the status quo and instead boldly articulating the world they are trying to create. And that world must look fundamentally different. To paraphrase communications

strategist Anat Shenker-Osorio, “There’s a reason Martin Luther King had a dream, not a nightmare.”

The [2030 Sustainable Development Agenda](#)—created through global consensus and extensive public participation—is not just a set of goals. It is a radical blueprint for the world we want to live in. A world where every person, regardless of where they live, what they look like, or how much money they have, has clean air to breathe, safe water to drink (SDG6), and a secure place to call home (SDG11). Where safety is a given (SDG16) and we are free to learn (SDG4), earn a decent livelihood (SDG8), and be treated with respect—no exceptions (SDG10, SDG5, SDG16).

This is not about going back to some imagined golden era of civility. It’s about confronting the reality that the conditions for today’s anti-rights movements were created by decades of choices made by those in power. If we continue down the same path, we shouldn’t be surprised by further polarization and instability. Because when policy fails, people look elsewhere. Effective messaging and policies must stop defending the past that failed so many and start fighting for a future rooted in justice, solidarity, and shared power.

**The brave choice is to do something different. If one wants to offer a better way forward, it’s time to be bold and change the story—and the system.**

## About the Center on International Cooperation (CIC)

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