

Between Promise and Constraints: Social Justice, Development, and Cohesion in Eritrea

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social justice has become a central theme in global debates on equality, human rights, development, and political reform. Yet, much of this discourse remains shaped by Western frameworks, with limited scholarship engaging African perspectives on what constitutes a just society – and even less examining how African states themselves operationalize justice in pursuit of national development and peace. This paper contributes to filling that gap through a qualitative, multi-method study of Eritrea, where social justice is conceived not only as a moral imperative but also as a practical foundation for sustainable development, national cohesion, and long-term peace. The analysis traces the roots and manifestations of Eritrea's approach, highlighting achievements in areas such as gender equality, social protection, and inclusive development, while also acknowledging persistent structural challenges. Eritrea's pursuit of social justice is substantive, yet progress remains uneven and contingent on overcoming resource constraints, entrenched norms, and institutional limitations. Ultimately, Eritrea's experience provides valuable insights for broader debates on social justice in low-income and post-conflict contexts, illustrating both the possibilities of state-led progress and the enduring obstacles to transformative change.

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Introduction

In recent years, the term "social justice" has become a significant part of public discourse, often invoked in discussions about equality, human rights, and societal or political reforms [1],[2]. Although there is no singular and widely accepted definition, and it continues to evolve as a concept, social justice is broadly understood as a normative concept centred on the notion of fairness and rooted in principles such as equality, equity, rights, solidarity, and participation [2]-[4].

The relevance of social justice extends far beyond public debates, with it being prominent within academic discourse, as well as remaining a leading concern and issue of debate across multiple sectors of society, ranging from education and health to business and development [5]-[9]. Increasingly, social justice has come to be regarded as an "international crusade," reflected in the United Nations declaring February 20th as "World Day of Social Justice", and social justice being enshrined within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an international blueprint for peace and prosperity [10],[11].

However, even as social justice has become a prominent global concern, much of the discourse remains dominated by Western frameworks and there is a notable dearth of academic literature exploring the question of a good (or "just") society from the perspective of African thought [12]-[14], with even less that critically examines how African states themselves operationalize justice in pursuit of national development and peace. Within this context, the case of Eritrea is interesting and compelling. Since achieving independence (de facto in 1991 and de jure in 1993), the country has framed social justice not only as a powerful moral imperative but as a practical foundation for sustainable development, national cohesion, and long-term peace. Importantly, this pursuit has unfolded within a low-income, resource-constrained environment [15], raising important questions about how social justice can be implemented and sustained under such conditions. This paper explores social justice in Eritrea, highlighting its roots, manifestations, and how it promotes development and fosters internal peace and stability.

This paper is significant for several reasons. For one, we are living in a period marked by widespread injustices and cascading global crises – from armed conflicts, mass forced displacement, and threats of disease to climate change, economic shocks and rising inequality within and between nations, and deepening social fragmentation – with huge implications for societies and human and planetary wellbeing [16]-[18]. Against this rapidly evolving and complex backdrop, it is critical and urgent to understand how social justice is conceptualized and enacted in different contexts [4]. By exploring the Eritrean experience, this paper contributes to that broader global conversation. It allows for a more textured understanding of how social justice

can be embedded into national frameworks – not only as a moral goal, but as a guiding principle for navigating difficult social, economic, and political conditions.

Furthermore, through focusing on Eritrea, this paper contributes to the broader global discourse on social justice by introducing a grounded African example. As de Coninck notes, "further examination of important parameters of the definition of social justice in the local context... constitutes a worthwhile addition to current debates while reflecting the trajectory of local thought and theory" [19]. This study responds to that call, not by theorizing African justice frameworks, but by offering a detailed, empirical account of how one African state operationalizes social justice in practice. In doing so, it helps to diversify the global conversation and challenge the dominance of Western-centric narratives. Moreover, as one of the first detailed and far-ranging examinations of social justice in Eritrea, this paper provides a valuable foundation for future research and inquiry into the country's development model, governance, and social policy.

Additionally, this paper expands the discussion and broadens the existing body of scholarship on Eritrea. Like many countries in the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, Eritrea remains understudied in academic and policy circles. Research has often focused on a narrow range of issues, leaving large gaps in understanding the country's broader social, political, and developmental dynamics.

Compounding this limitation is the underrepresentation of Eritrean voices themselves. Although there are many capable Eritrean scholars and researchers, their work has historically faced marginalization in influential academic and policy platforms. One striking example is the persistently low acceptance rate of Eritrean-authored scholarship in major journals and outlets – despite the production of high-quality, original work. This marginalization restricts the possibility of developing more nuanced, contextualized understandings of Eritrea and undermines the inclusivity and diversity of global academic discourse.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section two outlines the methodology and analytical approach used in this study, while the third section offers a conceptual overview of social justice, tracing its historical and philosophical foundations and highlighting how it contributes to development, peace, and social cohesion. Section four introduces Eritrea, providing contextual background and presenting various manifestations of social justice in the country. Section five examines how Eritrea's approach to social justice has supported national development and contributed to internal peace and cohesion, while also identifying challenges and limitations. The final section offers concluding reflections and avenues for further inquiry.

Material and Methods

This paper employs a multi-method qualitative research design, combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with extensive document analysis. Primary data was gathered through interviews with individuals and key informants across various regions of Eritrea. Participants were selected through convenience and snowball sampling techniques, which are widely used in qualitative research across disciplines such as sociology, political science, anthropology, and human geography [20]-[22]. Respondents included individuals affiliated with national institutions, government ministries, and the private sector. Collectively, they brought extensive experience, first-hand knowledge, and deep insights into the historical, institutional, and practical dimensions of social justice in Eritrea.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews remain a widely used method across the social sciences, particularly valuable for generating rich, contextualized data. This approach was especially appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and its aim to develop an in-depth understanding of the topic [23]. Open-ended questions were used to allow respondents to express their perspectives in their own terms, potentially enhancing the validity and nuance of responses. Interviews also incorporated common follow-up prompts such as “can you elaborate,” “what do you mean by that,” or “why,” to encourage deeper reflection and clarification [24]-[26].

All interviews were conducted in person, after obtaining informed verbal consent to ensure ethical standards were upheld. The interviews, conducted in either Tigrinya or English (or a combination of both), ranged in duration from approximately 30 minutes to two hours. Handwritten notes were taken during each interview, followed by transcription on the same day or within several days to minimize error and maximize accuracy [27].

In addition to primary interviews, the study draws upon an extensive review of secondary data and documentary sources. These include publications and materials from global and regional institutions, government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and public open-access databases, as well as documents collected from local libraries and archives. A wide array of English and Tigrinya-language materials were examined, including books, reports, government publications, newsletters, press releases, websites, datasets, and academic articles from peer-reviewed journals and digital platforms such as EBSCO, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Scopus [28]-[30]. This wide net ensures the inclusion of relevant information often overlooked or excluded by standard academic indexing systems.

Data analysis was guided by the principle of triangulation—an approach that seeks to cross-verify findings by drawing on multiple sources and methods [31]-[35]. While this method can be complex and time-intensive, it enhances credibility and reliability, reduces potential bias,

and allows for a more holistic and balanced understanding of the topic [36]-[38]. As Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh note, triangulation provides "a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation" [39]. Through this approach, the study aims to offer a grounded, multi-perspective account of how social justice is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in the Eritrean context.

Results and Discussion

A. Social Justice: foundations, development, and peace

An exhaustive historical review of social justice is beyond the scope of this article. While ancient and classical traditions did not use the term 'social justice' as it is understood today, the foundational notion of justice – concerned with fairness, obligation, and societal balance – has deep roots that stretch back thousands of years [40]. Plato and Aristotle, regarded as foundational figures in Western philosophy, held distinct views on social justice, yet were united in the belief that justice was crucial for a well-functioning society and the well-being of its citizens [41],[42]. The second-century Roman jurist Ulpian defined justice as "the constant and perpetual will to give each his due," a foundational formulation later codified in Justinian's Digest (Justinian, 1985, Digest 1.1.10). In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas connected justice to natural law and Christian moral theology, presenting it as both a cardinal virtue and a key requirement for the common good [43],[44].

Conceptions of justice also developed across non-Western traditions. Justice has remained a central theme in Islamic teachings and jurisprudence, deeply embedded in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical legal thought [45],[46]. In Confucian philosophy, justice is grounded in an elastic ethic of universal but differential care, where harmony is the central societal goal. It emphasizes a strong principle of fairness, while adopting a more subdued view of equality [47]. Likewise, Ubuntu, a deeply rooted philosophical concept found across many African cultures and societies, principles of dignity, community, reciprocity, and shared humanity that align closely with modern ideas of social justice [13],[48].

Contemporary understandings are relatively recent, emerging from the social upheavals, economic inequalities, and political transformations associated with the French and Industrial Revolution and the rise of socialist critiques of capitalist society [49],[50]. In the mid-1800s, one of the earliest known uses of the term "social justice" was made by a little studied Italian Jesuit priest and philosopher, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, who positioned it between commutative and distributive justice [51],[52]. Over time, the meaning and understanding of social justice expanded as activist movements incorporated issues of race, gender, environment, disability, and other intersecting forms of inequality into their agendas [50]. Today, social justice has become a

powerful and universal concept – institutionalized across regional and international bodies, embedded in public discourse, serving as a guide for public and private organizations, and increasingly central to national and transnational policy frameworks [53],[54].

Beyond its conceptual and normative foundations, social justice carries significant practical implications for society. A considerable body of work has shown that social justice, through multiple interlinked pathways, can foster inclusive growth and sustainable development. For example, addressing structural inequalities and expanding access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities raises human capital and improves workforce skills and productivity, boosting long-term economic output [55],[56]. In addition, there is growing evidence that social protection systems – central instruments of social justice – are an effective tool for reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion. By doing so, it contributes to the integration of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development [57]. According to the World Health Organization, social justice, "is a matter of life and death" [58]. Robust research shows that inequities – especially in childhood – significantly affect health, development, and life outcomes. While the burden of these disparities is greatest in low-income countries, even wealthy nations see poorer children facing worse health and developmental trajectories. From birth to adolescence, the risks of morbidity, mortality, and delayed development are deeply shaped by social conditions, with lasting impacts across the life course [59]. The centrality of social justice to development is explicitly recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals, which embed equity and justice across targets related to poverty, education, health, decent work, and reduced inequalities [2],[60].

Social justice is also deeply linked to peace and social cohesion. While the relationship is complex and not deterministic, high levels of inequality and exclusion have consistently been associated with political instability, social unrest, and even conflict. Research has shown that social and economic exclusion can increase support for extremism, radical ideologies, and violence [61]. Experimental studies further demonstrate that exclusion heightens individuals' willingness to fight and die for a cause, increases support for extremist political parties and actions, and raises the likelihood of engaging in illegal or violent political acts [62],[63]. Empirical evidence also suggests that greater equality among groups tends to reduce the risk of violent conflict, while greater individual-level equality reduces criminality [64]. Similarly, Rothstein and Uslaner argue that greater equality – both economic and of opportunity – fosters higher levels of social trust, a foundation for peace and social cohesion. They suggest that equality promotes more honest, inclusive governments and universal welfare policies, which in turn reinforce fairness and trust. Their cross-national analysis shows that inequality drives levels of generalized trust, not the reverse, highlighting that building trust requires first addressing inequality [65]. In contrast,

social injustice and the systematic violation of human rights can create cultures of harm and normalize violence [66].

At the global level, the United Nations describes social justice as "an underlying principle for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations," and the General Assembly, the main policy-making organ of the organization, has recognized that social development and justice are indispensable for achieving and maintaining peace and security both within and across countries [11].

These global dynamics of social justice, development, and peace also resonate – albeit in contextually distinct ways – in specific national settings. Eritrea offers a particularly compelling, yet underexamined, case.

B. Social justice in Eritrea

1. National context

One of the world's youngest nations, Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa, at a strategic crossroads connecting Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Red Sea. The country gained independence in 1991, following one of the longest armed liberation struggles on the African continent. Today, Eritrea has a population of approximately 3.6 million people and is marked by significant diversity [67]. Its population is divided among nine ethnolinguistic groups and is roughly evenly split between Christianity and Islam, with each religion representing close to half the population. As in many sub-Saharan African and broader Global South contexts, about two-thirds of Eritreans continue to live in rural areas, though rates of urbanization are rising steadily [68]. Classified as a low-income country [15], Eritrea's gross national income per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity, is estimated at approximately $US 2,029 [69].

2. Roots of social justice

Social justice was a core pillar of Eritrea's liberation struggle, which extended from 1961 to 1991. Alongside the fight for national independence, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) pursued a broader vision of social transformation – seeking to fundamentally reshape the structures of inequality, exclusion, and marginalization inherited from colonial and imperial rule [70]-[73]. This vision was translated into tangible action through concrete initiatives rarely matched by other revolutionary movements of the era [74].

Among the clearest reflections of the EPLF's commitment to social justice was in the area of health. Amidst widespread destruction and instability during the long conflict, the EPLF – having supplanted the Eritrean Liberation Front as the leading force in the 1970s – established a remarkably effective health care delivery infrastructure. This system provided services to both fighters and civilians, targeting underserved populations and extending

access to marginalized rural communities – demonstrating equity-focused pragmatism amid severe resource constraints. Hundreds of skilled Eritreans, including doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff, either joined the EPLF from within the country or returned from abroad to support the movement [75]-[77].

The EPLF's health policy was guided by two key principles: first, that health services should reach the broad masses – especially workers, peasants, and nomads – and second, that given constraints, preventive care should be prioritized over curative care. Beginning in the early 1970s, the EPLF set up dozens of stationary and mobile clinics, health stations, regional hospitals, and a central hospital in Orotta, equipped with laboratories and operating rooms. An underground drug production plant was established, manufacturing infusions, intravenous fluids, tablets, capsules, syrups, and ointments. Alongside this, a training and information unit produced a wide cadre of health personnel: barefoot doctors, midwives, paramedics, X-ray technicians, pharmacy and lab assistants, dental technicians, and anaesthetists – signaling a systematic effort to build inclusive, community-rooted health capacity [72],[76]-[79].

Gender equality – a fundamental component of social justice – was also integral to the liberation struggle. The National Democratic Program adopted after the EPLF's first congress in 1977 clearly stipulated gender equality and women's rights as core principles of the movement [80]. Two years later, the Constitution of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), a group that was founded and joined the struggle under the EPLF umbrella, outlined the organization's objective to advance women's equality and empowerment in all spheres of life [81]. The group's slogan, "Emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" [82], succinctly captured this ethos, linking gender justice directly to the broader goals of liberation and national transformation.

In practice, the NUEW, played a vital role in both the independence movement and in promoting gender-focused social transformation. It organized literacy campaigns, conducted political and health education, and provided vocational training to women in liberated areas. The organization also helped to mobilize women into the EPLF's ranks, challenge entrenched gender norms, and amplify women's voices within the movement. Through these efforts, the EPLF not only underscored its ideological commitment to equality but also took pragmatic steps to build a more inclusive and just society [82].

A powerful illustration of the commitment to gender equality was the scale and scope of women's participation in the independence movement. Greater than one third of EPLF members were women, serving across all ranks and roles – as combatants, medics, political cadres, educators, logisticians, and leaders [83]-[85]. This level of involvement was

extraordinary within Eritrea and strikingly rare among global liberation movements [86],[87], reflecting not only the EPLF's pursuit of inclusive social transformation, but also the central role of women in shaping it.

Additionally, the EPLF advanced a range of initiatives aimed at dismantling structural inequalities and embedding social justice into daily life. It guaranteed equality before the law regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or region, thus rejecting entrenched hierarchies [80]. Land reforms prioritized equitable access for landless and marginalized communities, while training and veterinary services were extended to pastoralists and agro-pastoralists – responding to historically neglected livelihoods. As well, widespread food distribution, literacy campaigns, and education programs focused on rural communities, refugees, and displaced persons, seeking to reverse patterns of generational exclusion [83],[88],[89]. Across these efforts, the EPLF not only delivered essential services but actively restructured access to power and resources, reinforcing its vision of an inclusive and just society. These foundational efforts laid the groundwork for post-independence policy and continue to influence how social justice is conceived and pursued in Eritrea today.

3. Manifestations of social justice in practice

Eritrea's focus on social justice remained central following the achievement of independence in 1993, finding renewed expression in the National Charter adopted by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the country's governing party, in February 1994. The Charter, which sets forth the guiding vision and core aspirations for post-war development and nation-building, emphasizes national unity, self-reliance, and the equitable transformation of society – advocating broad-based development, fairness across regions and groups, and an intentionally inclusive political culture. Among its foundational goals is the commitment to social justice and an "equitable distribution of wealth, services and opportunities," with "special attention to be paid to the most disadvantaged sections of society" [90]. Translating these principles into practice has meant prioritizing those areas and communities that have historically been overlooked and marginalized.

In a sharp contrast to the urban bias that has historically characterized development policies in many countries, especially within Africa [91],[92], Eritrea has consistently directed substantial investments toward rural, remote, and traditionally marginalized regions. In practice, Eritrea's geographic development strategy functions as a social justice intervention, deliberately redistributing resources to vulnerable communities historically overlooked and excluded from national growth. As Eritrea's president, Isaias Afwerki, has emphasized, "Our development strategy is anchored on giving priority to deprived regions and segments of the population" [68],[93], reflecting a deliberate commitment to counter historical neglect and

ensure these areas are fully integrated into national development planning. This inclusive approach spans multiple sectors – from education and health to infrastructure and livelihoods – and is reflected in the construction of schools and health facilities, expansion of road networks, installation of water and sanitation systems, and deployment of mobile service units [94]. By ensuring that communities beyond major urban centres are systematically included in national development planning and service provision, the country underscores its commitment to equitable access for all citizens.

Alongside its geographic focus on rural and marginalized communities, Eritrea has made gender equality a core principle of its social justice agenda, aiming to ensure that women and girls are equal stakeholders in national development. This redefinition of women's place in society reflects a core social justice aim: dismantling systemic barriers so that half the population can participate fully and equally in national life. The stance marks a decisive departure from the country's historical reality as a conservative, patriarchal society in which women were often regarded as less intelligent, second-class citizens, subject to restrictive norms, harmful practices, and systemic exclusion from public life [82],[83],[95]. Traditional proverbs captured and reinforced these attitudes – for example, "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with a brain" and "women and donkeys need the stick" [96]. In sharp contrast, the National Charter recognizes gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamental to building an equitable society, declaring: "A society that does not respect the rights and equality of women cannot be truly liberated" [90].

Since independence, Eritrea has repealed colonial-era laws that discriminated on the basis of sex and enacted progressive legislation guaranteeing equal rights in nationality, land ownership, marriage, labour, political participation, and business. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child marriage, bride price, dowries, and abduction have been criminalized, with complementary laws protecting women from violence and ensuring equal rights in divorce, child custody, inheritance, and property [68],[93]. In 2015, new penal, criminal procedure, civil, and civil procedure codes replaced the post-independence legislative framework, further strengthening these protections by addressing gender-based violence, safeguarding the rights of women and girls, and prohibiting the production and dissemination of pornography – a measure reflecting broader concerns about its role in perpetuating exploitation and discrimination [97],[98].

Eritrea's gender commitments are reinforced through active engagement with international and regional rights instruments – including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic,

Social and Cultural Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child - as well as global frameworks such as the Beijing Declaration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [99]-[101]. By aligning domestic commitments with global rights frameworks, Eritrea situates gender equality not as an isolated goal but as a central pillar of its broader equity agenda. Participation in mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review and the Commission on the Status of Women provides platforms for transparency and accountability, with reports prepared through inclusive consultations involving ministries, national unions, and community-based organizations. These processes embed women's rights within a broader architecture of national equity, aligning domestic policy with global norms and reinforcing Eritrea's stated principle that equality is integral to liberation.

Institutional measures further translate this principle into practice, operationalizing the principle that equitable representation and opportunity are prerequisites for genuine social justice [6]. A national quota reserves 30 percent of seats in parliament for women, while affirmative action policies facilitate women's entry into higher education to address historical exclusion from professional pathways. The NUEW and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) work to strengthen women's livelihoods, expand access to credit and services, raise awareness of legal rights, and combat harmful practices [68],[93],[102]. Guided by national gender action plans, these efforts deliberately target vulnerable and marginalized groups, ensuring that gender equality is not merely an abstract commitment but an operational priority embedded in the structures of governance and development.

Building on its commitment to equity across geography and gender, Eritrea extends its social justice agenda into sectoral policies, with education serving as a central pillar for dismantling structural inequalities and ensuring equal opportunity for all citizens. The system is designed not only to expand access but also to level the playing field across income groups, genders, ethnicities, and regions. A key measure is the provision of free education at all levels, guaranteeing equitable access regardless of socio-economic or demographic background. Particular emphasis is placed on rural and underserved communities through initiatives such as school construction, deployment of mobile educators, and – especially for nomadic and remote populations – the establishment of mobile and boarding schools. Currently, 65 such schools are in operation [68],[93],[103].

To date, more than 2,350 educational institutions have been established nationwide – up from just over 500 at independence, with many more in the planning or construction stages – helping to reduce overcrowding and accommodate rising enrolment. To further remove

barriers to access, roads have been built or refurbished, public transport services expanded, and bicycles distributed, particularly in remote and disadvantaged regions [68],[103].

A cornerstone of Eritrea's inclusive education policy is the mother tongue instruction system, which ensures that children receive elementary education in their native language. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Education (MoE), this approach is implemented across all nine ethnolinguistic groups, reinforcing cultural recognition and linguistic equity. The MoE, in close collaboration with global partners such as the Global Partnership for Education, has trained thousands of teachers and distributed over one million textbooks and teaching guides in nine languages. A national language committee also supports the policy's rollout and works to raise public awareness of its significance [103]-[105].

To further promote inclusive access, education is compulsory for both girls and boys, and national legislation has been enacted to curb child marriage – helping retain more youth, particularly girls, in the education system. Complementing these efforts, a school feeding program operates in some schools in certain communities, particularly in rural and food-insecure areas, helping to address child hunger while supporting regular attendance [68],[93].

In parallel with these education initiatives, the health sector has been developed according to the same principles of universal access, prioritization of underserved areas, and targeted support for the most vulnerable. Health services and medicines are heavily subsidized, with fees wholly waived in cases of financial need, while many essential services are provided free of charge. All individuals with chronic diseases and other disorders, such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, hypertension, diabetes, and mental disorders, among others, receive free care and prescribed medications. Many public and preventive services – immunization and growth monitoring, pre- and post-partum care, nutrition and supplementation, health education – are also provided at no cost [68],[75],[93].

Accessibility, the expansion of health infrastructure, and human resource development have been major priorities for Eritrea. The country has constructed and renovated numerous hospitals, health centres, health stations, and clinics, and has considerably increased the number of doctors and health professionals. There are now 335 health facilities nationwide – a nearly fourfold increase since 1991 – with approximately 80 percent of the population living within a 10-kilometre radius of a health facility and 70 percent within 5 kilometres [75],[93].

One innovative social justice intervention within the health sector is the "barefoot doctors" program. Reviving a model first used to deliver care during the liberation struggle, the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with development partners, trains and equips community-based health workers to provide essential services in remote and hard-to-reach areas [106],[107].

Complementing these investments in health and education, Eritrea's poverty eradication and social protection measures operationalize its vision of social justice by addressing the economic roots of inequality and safeguarding basic human dignity. Poverty eradication remains a central national priority in Eritrea, with a range of progressive, egalitarian policies and social protection measures implemented to support individuals and households in meeting their basic needs. Social protection measures function as a practical embodiment of social justice, directly supporting those most vulnerable to exclusion and ensuring a baseline of dignity for all [108],[109]. The Saving and Micro-Credit Program, alongside village banks, provides small loans and extends other forms of credit to expand access to financial services and socio-economic opportunities for tens of thousands of beneficiaries across the country, the majority of whom are women [68],[93],[110].

One of the flagship social protection measures, the Minimum Integrated Household Agricultural Package (MIHAP), distributes agricultural inputs and offers various forms of assistance to poor or vulnerable rural households, many headed by single women. Launched in 2013, this initiative supports smallholder agricultural production and the strengthening of rural livelihoods [93],[111].

Another important nationwide program is the National Martyrs Fund, which provides regular financial assistance to the families of those who lost their lives in the struggle for independence or in defence of the country's sovereignty. Given Eritrea's long and costly liberation struggle, as well as subsequent conflicts, the number of martyrs is considerable, and the Fund serves as a vital social support mechanism for a significant portion of the population. In addition to direct financial aid, the Fund offers loans, grants, resources, and training to assist recipients in establishing business enterprises or small income-generating activities [93],[112].

C. Social justice, development, and peace in Eritrea: gains and enduring challenges

1. Advancing development

Through embedding social justice into the fabric of administration and governance, Eritrea's policies have not only advanced human development but have also served as a foundation for peace and national cohesion, fostering a sense of shared stake in the country's future.

Within education, it is estimated that in 1990, on the verge of Eritrea's independence, the adult literacy rate in the country was 46 percent, with male literacy standing at 59 percent and female literacy at 35 percent. These low figures reflected decades of neglect under colonial and post-colonial administrations, where rural communities, women, and marginalized groups had limited or no access to schooling. By 2018, adult literacy had

improved to about 77 percent, with male literacy moving to 84 percent and female literacy increasing to 69 percent [113],[114]. This sharp rise, and the narrowing of the gender gap, underscores the impact of Eritrea's free and universal education policy, its investment in rural and nomadic schools, and targeted measures to enrol and keep girls in the classroom.

During the same period, even steeper increases were achieved in youth literacy, indicating that the country's efforts to strengthen the supply and quality of basic education programs have contributed to positive outcomes. In 1990, youth literacy was about 61 percent, with male literacy at 73 percent and female literacy lagging behind at 49 percent. However, in 2018, youth literacy had climbed to approximately 93 percent, with male literacy rising to 94 percent and female literacy jumping to 93 percent [113],[115]. These figures not only stand out positively within the region and across the continent, they reflect Eritrea's deliberate social justice orientation in education – prioritizing access for the most disadvantaged until gender and geographic disparities narrowed substantially in younger generations.

Additionally, the expansion of schools and educational facilities has helped increase capacity, reduce overcrowding, and raise enrolments. The number of students at all levels rose from 346,266 in 1997/98 to 619,180 in 2020/21 [93]. These gains represent the tangible outcomes of a policy ethos that views education as a fundamental right for all citizens, regardless of income, gender, ethnicity, or location.

A notable element in Eritrea's educational progress has been the adoption of the mother tongue policy in the early years of schooling. UNESCO emphasizes that "education in the mother tongue is a key factor for inclusion and quality learning…[and is] crucial, especially in primary school to avoid knowledge gaps and increase the speed of learning and comprehension," while also fostering mutual respect and preserving cultural heritage [116]. Research likewise finds that learning in the mother tongue during the first years of schooling can strengthen cognitive skills in numeracy and problem-solving [117], increase enjoyment of school and likelihood of grade progression [118], and enable teachers to instruct more effectively in their native language [119]. In Eritrea, this approach has ensured that children from all linguistic backgrounds can participate fully in education, reducing barriers that often marginalize minority language speakers and contributing to the country's gains in literacy and enrolment.

In health, Eritrea's social justice–driven approach – grounded in ensuring equal access to essential services for all communities – has led to important gains. In terms of the child mortality rate, regarded by health experts worldwide as a key proxy for overall child health and described by UNICEF as "the indispensable gauge of child health" [120], Eritrea has

improved dramatically, from 146 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1991 to 35 in 2023. This shift has taken the country from one of the worst under-five mortality rates in the world to among the leaders in Africa and the broader developing world, with an average annual reduction rate of about 4.4 percent, one of the fastest globally [121]. The improvements reflect deliberate investments in rural clinics, community health workers, and outreach services that target the most underserved populations [75]

A cornerstone of this achievement is the national immunization program, designed to reach every child, regardless of geography or household income. It has expanded from six vaccines at independence to more than a dozen today, covering preventable diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, and smallpox. National coverage rates have surged from about 10 percent in 1991 to over 95 percent – among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa and far above continental and global averages [75],[106],[122]. This universal reach exemplifies how a social justice framework, when applied in the health sector, can produce measurable and equitable improvements in well-being.

Eritrea's social justice–oriented approach has also been linked to progress in improving maternal health, particularly for rural and marginalized women who historically had little or no access to skilled care. Once recording one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world – estimated at over 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births – the country has reduced that figure to under 200, placing it among the best performers on the continent and on track to meet the relevant United Nations Sustainable Development Goal targets [93],[123]. This progress reflects sustained investments in maternal care facilities in rural and remote areas, the deployment of trained midwives and community health workers, and public health campaigns aimed at ensuring that every woman – regardless of location, income, or background – has access to skilled birth attendants and emergency obstetric services [75],[124].

Additionally, through high-impact interventions and a comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategy grounded in equitable access to prevention and care, Eritrea has recorded measurable progress in halting the spread of HIV. Prevalence has declined to 0.4 percent and an incidence per 1000 population of about 0.09, moving the country from some of the highest figures globally to among the best in Africa and the wider developing world [125],[126]. Malaria has been steadily pushed back through universal prevention campaigns and rural health outreach, with Eritrea now transitioning from pre-elimination to elimination status. Its record in prevention, reduction, and control is comparable to, and in some areas exceeds, the results of large-scale international health initiatives funded with far greater resources.

Major inroads have also been made against tuberculosis, hepatitis B, and neglected tropical diseases [93],[127]-[130].

As a result of these sustained efforts, life expectancy has risen dramatically – from under 50 years at independence to above 69 today [131],[132]. This increase, relatively uncommon in both speed and scale for a low-income post-conflict country, reflects the cumulative impact of expanded health coverage, improved disease prevention, and better living conditions. Together, these gains demonstrate how Eritrea's social justice–oriented policies have translated into measurable improvements in population health and overall well-being.

Another critical dimension of Eritrea's development shaped by its social justice approach has been the advancement of gender equality. Rates of harmful traditional practices, such as FGM/C and child marriage, have been sharply reduced, while literacy, enrolment, and labor participation have risen – with once large gender gaps significantly narrowed. Girls and women now contribute across all areas of society in diverse and vital ways, playing an essential role in families, communities, the nation's socio-economic progress, and overall development [68].

Eritrea has also made important strides in other areas of social services, where improvements reflect the central role of social justice in extending essential support to all citizens. Access to safe water and sanitation has expanded significantly through nationwide infrastructure projects and community-based initiatives, improving public health and reducing the burden of waterborne diseases. Social protection programs, though modest in scale, have prioritized vulnerable groups such as orphans, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and war veterans, ensuring that basic needs are met even in resource-constrained settings. Housing and electrification initiatives have reached remote villages, narrowing the rural–urban gap in living standards.

Although challenges remain, the advances achieved across various sectors highlight how Eritrea's social justice–oriented policies have influenced development outcomes and pathways.

2. Fostering peace and social cohesion

The effects of Eritrea's social justice framework have extended beyond development, contributing to the country's record of internal stability and social cohesion. For years, the Horn of Africa – and much of the continent more broadly – has been among the most unstable regions in the world, marked by a chronic mixture of poor governance, civil wars, insurgencies, territorial disputes, and violent extremism [133],[134]. Against this backdrop, and despite significant ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, Eritrea has largely avoided major internal conflict since independence.

A contributing factor has been the government's emphasis on equitable distribution of services, inclusive governance structures, and the avoidance of overt favoritism toward particular groups. This is significant because, as Stewart notes, when economic, social, or political inequalities coincide with ethnic cleavages, identity can become a powerful mobilizing force for political violence [135]. Similarly, groups become more insecure if they are marginalized because of their ethnicity, gender, culture, or religion, which can lead to wider societal insecurity if those groups resort to violence to address their grievances [136] . More broadly, peace and conflict research consistently finds that systematic inequalities between culturally defined groups – so-called "horizontal inequalities" – are strongly associated with civil war and other forms of political violence [137]-[139]. By addressing potential sources of inequality, Eritrea's approach and policies have helped limit the structural grievances that often fuel instability.

Social justice principles have also shaped state-building efforts in ways that strengthen cohesion in Eritrea. Universal access to education and healthcare has fostered a shared sense of inclusion and integration, reducing perceptions that some communities are excluded from national progress. This reduction in perceived exclusion is important, as research suggests that it is not simply the presence of objective inequalities that fuels unrest, but whether such inequalities are perceived as unfair and transformed into grievances. Using novel survey data, one study found that individuals who believe their region is treated unfairly are the most likely to support and participate in civil unrest [140]. Additionally, analyses across European countries indicate that individuals receiving higher-quality social services perceive stronger social cohesion, while those experiencing economic strain perceive lower cohesion; notably, access to quality services can offset the negative impact of economic strain on perceived cohesion [141]. Through ensuring that all groups experience tangible access to basic services, Eritrea's approach helps prevent the kinds of perceptions that can become politically salient and mobilize conflict.

Furthermore, the preservation of multiple languages alongside common working languages, as opposed to privileging one above others, has balanced inclusivity and reinforced cohesion, reflecting Deen and Romans' argument that "for states with diverse societies, a balanced language policy should be considered an essential element in maintaining internal cohesion and promoting regional security" [142]. Comparative evidence from post-Yugoslav states demonstrates that assimilationist language policies can act as both indicators and causes of ethnic conflict, whereas policies promoting balanced bilingualism and equal linguistic rights have contributed to conflict resolution and greater intergroup stability [143]. In addition, longitudinal survey research conducted in South Africa finds that multilingual

repertoires facilitate communication, foster better relationships, and deepen mutual understanding between diverse groups, thereby strengthening social cohesion in complex, multi-ethnic settings [144]. In the process of embedding this multilingual approach within its state-building strategy, Eritrea has mitigated linguistic marginalization, promoted mutual respect across communities, and reinforced the foundations of national unity.

Additionally, infrastructure development, particularly in roads, has reduced geographic isolation, expanded mobility, and facilitated trade and mutual exchange between different groups and regions. Notably, evidence from a large-scale meta-analysis of 515 studies finds that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice across a broad range of group settings, with especially strong effects when contact is sustained and cooperative [145]. Furthermore, recent research on transport infrastructure connectivity further shows that such investments can significantly enhance a country's capacity for conflict resolution by promoting trade facilitation, fostering more balanced gender employment, and improving income levels [146]. More broadly, the prominence of infrastructure in contemporary peacebuilding reflects a growing recognition that built environments are deeply entwined with security and stability, as peacebuilders in contexts from around the world have sought to use roads and other infrastructure to foster integration and resilience [147]. In Eritrea, the expansion of road networks has created sustained opportunities for contact and cooperation, while reinforcing the economic and social linkages that underpin cohesion and help safeguard internal stability.

Alongside infrastructure, social protection measures have also played a role in reinforcing cohesion and stability. By targeting vulnerable populations across all ethnic, regional, and social groups, such programs strengthen the perception that the state serves all citizens equally. Evidence shows that social protection is critical for reducing inequality, which has been empirically linked to outbreaks of violence, social conflicts, and crime. Inequality limits access to health, education, and life opportunities, eroding trust and weakening bonds of solidarity; when these disparities align with ethnic divisions, the risks are magnified, potentially fueling polarization, extremism, and even state failure [57],[136]. Well-designed social protection schemes can also enhance citizens' confidence, sense of inclusion, and trust in public institutions, particularly when they are universal or well targeted to those in need. This perceived fairness is especially important in multi-ethnic settings, where selective or uneven distribution of welfare benefits can heighten group grievances and erode trust in government institutions [65],[148],[149]. In Eritrea, the equitable provision of such support has helped prevent the entrenchment of regional or ethnic inequalities, thereby bolstering national unity and political stability.

Collectively, Eritrea's social justice measures – equal access to health and education, inclusive language policies, investments in connective infrastructure, and equitable social protection – have reinforced mutual trust among diverse communities, strengthened social cohesion, and laid a more resilient foundation for enduring stability.

3. Enduring challenges and constraints

Despite progress and achievements, Eritrea's pursuit of social justice faces structural and contextual challenges that limit the full realization of its policies. One fundamental challenge is financing. Eritrea remains a low-income nation [15], with a gross national income per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity, estimated at approximately $US 2,029 [69]. International estimates suggest that providing comprehensive social protection to all potential beneficiaries in low-income countries typically requires around 8-9 percent of gross domestic product [150], representing a significant financial burden for states with limited fiscal capacity. The challenge is especially acute in Africa, where low-income nations face financing gaps that can exceed 50 percent of their annual gross domestic product [151]. Even though social protection is widely regarded as an investment – shown to boost incomes, reduce poverty, and overcome economic and social inequalities worldwide [152]-[155] – such fiscal constraints limit Eritrea's ability to fully implement social justice policies and to expand the scope and reach of its social protection measures.

Fiscal pressures in Eritrea are further intensified by the country's exposure to a complex combination of challenges, including an extended period of international sanctions and other coercive economic measures, alongside a volatile regional geopolitical environment marked by tensions, conflicts, and cross-border spillovers. These factors have further strained fiscal capacity and diverted substantial financial and institutional resources toward security and defense, thereby limiting the availability of funds and administrative attention for social services and protection measures.

Another significant issue for Eritrea lies in the persistence of deeply rooted social norms and traditions. Many social justice measures – such as those aimed at women's empowerment and advancing gender equality – directly or indirectly challenge established cultural practices and long-standing social expectations. Norms tend to change slowly and often encounter resistance, especially when intertwined with identity, community cohesion, or customary authority structures. As Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease observe, virtually every social justice initiative meets some degree of resistance [156], and Harper notes that "gender norms can be particularly difficult to shift" [157].

Although Eritrea has not experienced large-scale or widespread backlash to its progressive efforts, as has been common in many other contexts [156],[158], such challenges

can be more pronounced in rural areas, where exposure to progressive or new ideas may be limited and traditional practices and customary authorities retain significant influence – illustrating the "stickiness" of certain norms [159],[160]. For example, in some rural areas of Eritrea, particularly those inhabited by nomadic or semi-nomadic communities, the prevalence of FGM/C remains comparatively higher, while girls' school enrolment and educational attainment rates tend to be lower [68],[161],[162]. These patterns underscore how social justice measures – though present in policy and law – can have more limited reach and slower impact where cultural norms remain most deeply entrenched, requiring sustained community engagement and long-term strategies for change. In this context, the government faces the ongoing task of implementing progressive policies that promote equity and inclusion while navigating the sensitivities of altering entrenched beliefs and practices.

A further structural challenge concerns data and statistical capacity. Eritrea continues to face significant constraints in the production and availability of reliable statistics, including gaps in timely, disaggregated, and sector-specific data. At a general level, such limitations undermine development planning by making it difficult to monitor progress, evaluate outcomes, and design evidence-based policies [68],[93]. Beyond this, however, they also pose direct challenges for social justice: without accurate and disaggregated data – by gender, age, region, or socioeconomic status – it is difficult for the government to identify, prioritize, and effectively target those most in need. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that data can reveal unequal access to services and opportunities and thereby help to mitigate inequities [163]-[165]. Similarly, Ramos-Maqueda and Chen demonstrate the transformative role that data can play in enhancing justice systems and advancing equitable development outcomes [166]. In this way, weak statistical capacity not only constrains broader development strategies but also limits the inclusiveness and effectiveness of social justice measures.

Taken together, these challenges underscore that while Eritrea has laid important policy and legal foundations for social justice and exerted considerable efforts, structural constraints, entrenched norms, and limited data capacity continue to shape the scope and pace of progress and impact implementation.

Conclusion

Overall, Eritrea has made notable progress in embedding social justice principles into its policy and legal frameworks, with achievements in areas such as gender equality, social protection, and inclusive development. These efforts reflect a deliberate attempt to integrate social justice into broader state-building and nation-building strategies, often under difficult economic and geopolitical conditions. Yet, as this paper has shown, the translation of such

commitments into practice continues to face significant hurdles. Fiscal and financial limitations constrain the breadth and sustainability of social protection. Deeply rooted cultural and social norms – particularly in rural and remote areas – slow the diffusion of progressive reforms. Weaknesses in data and statistical systems further limit the ability to identify needs, target interventions, and measure progress. Together, these factors reveal that while Eritrea's pursuit of social justice is genuine and substantial, progress remains uneven and contingent on overcoming enduring structural challenges. Importantly, Eritrea's experience provides valuable insights for broader debates on social justice in low-income and post-conflict settings. Its case demonstrates both the possibilities of state-led progress in difficult contexts and the persistent constraints posed by resource scarcity, entrenched norms, and data gaps.

Looking ahead, further research could usefully explore several areas. First, reflecting the broader challenge within social justice research where more empirical evidence is needed, there is also a need for empirical study in Eritrea, particularly to assess the impact of its social justice measures at the community and household levels, especially in rural and marginalized regions. Such evidence is essential for generating concrete insights into how policies are enacted and experienced in practice. Second, comparative studies could situate Eritrea within wider African or global experiences, identifying where its trajectory converges with or diverges from similar contexts. Comparisons across various contexts not only help identify best practices, deepen understanding of the root causes of inequality, and strengthen theory development, but also help promote more just and equitable outcomes. Finally, qualitative research that centers voices historically overlooked in Eritrea – especially women, youth, nomadic populations, and those living with disabilities – would enrich understanding, add vital depth to policy analysis, and make visible the real-world consequences of social justice policies.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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