

The Nawi Afrifem Collective: Bringing a Pan-African Feminist Voice to Macro-Level Economic Narratives in Africa

Gertrude Dzifa Torvikey

Introduction – Nawi Challenging Neoliberal Development in Africa

The African continent is a hotbed of macroeconomic policy experiments and changes. These shifts are not occurring by default but are linked to the continent's experiences with colonialism, coloniality, and imperialism. The legacies have shaped its interaction with the West and other countries in the Global South. These encounters are occurring at the same time as the consolidation of global restructuring of economies to fit into the market narratives. If Africa has become the recipient of macroeconomic advisories and loan-based conditionalities, and a site for the implementation of neoliberal policies, it is because the past structures are yet to be disrupted and reconstructed. In reflecting on the power dynamics that undergird Africa's position in the world, its policy choices, and the way in which its natural resources are extracted, pan-African feminist organisations are offering alternative framing and possibilities for enhancing sustainable, people-centred, and progressive development. In recent years, the negative consequences of market-oriented economic development have become more intense and widespread. As a result, the Nawi Afrifem Collective was formed to focus on feminist political economy analysis in Africa's development and how it affects the continent's position in the world. The feminist economist Stephanie Seguino coined the term "macro-level economic decisions" to encompass macro-level policies beyond the traditionally narrower definition of macroeconomics. Nawi's concept of "macro-level" policy refers to economic development efforts broad enough to have important aggregate or economy-wide distributional and welfare implications. Its concerns centre on taxation, transfers including social protection, public spending, and infrastructure provisions including those for childcare.

The Nawi Collective was founded in 2020 to “collectively disrupt and transform existing economic models that perpetually produce crises and gross inequalities” (Nawi 2023, 1). The Collective is a feminist movement actively engaged in macro-level economic and pan-African feminist analysis of the global economic order and how Africa can achieve policy autonomy and secure its sovereignty. In summary, “Nawi is an ode to an anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal struggle...Nawi is a home for African feminists building new worlds” (Nawi 2023, 1).

Nawi’s principles are rooted in the promotion of social justice, equality, fair distribution of resources and policies that advance the African cause. It pursues this cause by addressing questions about resource mobilisation and fair distribution.

Nawi Tackles Entrenched Development Models

The Collective is therefore seriously addressing the question of blended finance which comes in the form of public-private partnerships (PPPs) by showing the imperial origins of the financing model which are like the earlier structural adjustment reforms forced onto countries by the Bretton Woods Institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) through coercive loan-based conditionalities. In the current global economic context, African States are forced to put structures in place to support the functioning of PPPs. Nawi’s position is that PPPs are extractive and shift the prioritisation of development goals to profitable sectors. Many citizens have been restricted from access to services because the high costs associated with the profit motives of PPPs result in either high user fees or consumption taxes imposed to enable the State cover its contributions to the PPPs.

The PPP model brings into sharp focus how the poor are paying for the services even if they are unable to access those services themselves, since PPPs are profit-driven and do not consider the social objectives of States. Nawi’s advocacy demonstrates the lack of transparency in blended finance and PPP mechanisms and processes and how they distance States from their citizens. Because States are increasingly accountable to their PPP partners, citizens are

left out of the conversations and discussions around the economic paths their countries should take. The democratic regime to which African countries have signed up requires States to ensure that the social contract with citizens is fulfilled and upheld. Nawi places prime emphasis on the social contract between States and citizens and critiques how it is actively undermined on the continent by the normalisation of the neoliberal order. Nawi, therefore, calls for the reclaiming of privatised social services (remunicipalisation) and the creation and expansion of new public services (Nawi and FEMNET 2021).

Africa can Mobilise Resources Internally

The Collective is aware of how colonial and imperialist conditioning of the African policy space perpetuates injustice and poverty on the continent. In questioning the debt situation of African countries, Nawi also actively casts light on why African countries are unable to mobilise adequate financial resources to develop their economies based on autonomous economic policies. Through its analysis of the huge problem of illicit financial flows (IFFs) on the continent, the Collective has exposed the dynamics of the losses of the much-needed revenue to the State and how these can be avoided. Nawi's work on IFFs has questioned both national states, the international community, and multinationals on their role in the economic system which perpetuates Africa's weak position in the world.

UNCTAD and UNODC (2020) categorised four IFF types: illicit commercial and tax activities; illegal markets; corruption; and exploitation-type activities and financing of crime and terrorism. In Africa, tax and commercial IFFs are the predominant forms of capital flight. Estimates by the UNCTAD (2020) report show that IFFs surpass investment in Africa. It is estimated that the continent loses US\$88.6 billion annually to IFFs, constituting 3.7% of its gross domestic product. These losses, if recovered, will constitute half of the financing required to implement Sustainable Development Goals and transform the economies. Blocking the IFFs would enable African countries to develop on their own steam.

Many countries have initiated procedures to track IFFs and to get the resources to the State treasury. This includes tightening the rope on IFFs and on tax evasion. The result is an additional EUR1.7 billion mobilised in selected countries which boosted tax revenues. A key mechanism is the Africa Initiative launched in 2014 through which participating countries have been recovering lost taxes. The 2023 report of the Africa Initiative, *Tax Transparency in Africa Report 2023*, indicates a 47% increase in taxes collected through the Automatic Exchange of Financial Account Information (AEFAI) platform. The report also confirms that the total revenue gains from Exchange of Information (EOI) in Africa since 2009 are over EUR1.69 billion “...through offshore tax investigations including EOIR [i], voluntary disclosure programmes (VDPs) launched in the context of the implementation of AEOI [ii] and making effective use of the data received automatically” (OECD 2023, p16).

Equitable Resource Distribution and Feminist Concerns

Nawi has also underscored the need for revenues to be equitably distributed. The Collective ties in its pan-African and feminist economy analysis with the provision of social infrastructure and economic opportunities for citizens across the continent. For example, UNCTAD (2020) statistics show that countries that have recorded high IFFs invest 25% less in their health sector and 58% less in the education sector.

Nawi links the existence of these services and infrastructure to the well-being of women and other marginalised social groups. From a feminist standpoint, Nawi links the intricate ways resource mobilisation connects with many other welfare, developmental and well-being indicators. In the following statement, the Collective reflects on how all sectors of the economy are interconnected. It ties the oppression of women on the continent to the deleterious conditions of social service provision across the continent. It states that,

When you're the one who makes the food, fetches the water, births the babies, rears the children, cares for the sick, sows the seeds, and harvests the crops, you feel the effects of macroeconomic policies differently. Birthing babies is easier and safer with properly resourced maternity wards, girls are more likely to go to school regularly if there are suitable bathrooms and

sanitary products available to them, they are more likely to stay in school if school feeding programs are available to them decreasing financial burdens on their families, they are most likely to finish school if they don't have to work or get married to support their parents and siblings, women's time spent on fetching water is reduced or eliminated with water infrastructure, their lives are safer with paved lit roads, and on and on and on (Nawi n.a, 3).

For example, estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division show that Sub-Saharan Africa still records the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. The rate is estimated at 545 deaths per 100,000 live births. In 2020, 70% of all maternal deaths occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa alone (World Health Organisation 2023). The statistics are a visible reflection of the dismal state of the health sector in many African countries.

Through advocacy, Nawi argues that PPPs are diverting state resources to sectors and sub-sectors that are not addressing these kinds of immediate priorities. Therefore, while some countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Lesotho are using PPPs in the health sector, the model has not improved the health situation. Nawi members Simeoni and Kinoti (2020) demonstrate how a controversial health sector equipment leasing PPP signed between the Kenyan government and five global corporations – Shenzhen Mindray Bio-medical LTD (China), Esteem Industries (India), Bellco SRL (Italy), Philips Medical Systems (The Netherlands) and General Electric East Africa Services (USA) – are problematic on many fronts. The authors found that 29 of 47 sub-national counties were not using the equipment due to the lack of expertise or needed supporting infrastructure even while the state continued to pay the leasing fees and funds were deducted from county budgets by central government authorities. Simeoni and Kinoti (2020) argued that investing in large medical equipment instead of prioritising primary healthcare for women and children was a misuse of public funds.

Conclusion

Nawi's work focuses on state and citizen ownership of policy objectives which are devoid of profit motives. The Collective has taken its advocacy into national, continental, and international spaces, highlighting the power dynamics that continue to perpetuate global inequalities and how these are also transmitted at the local level and between women and men. Their work provides a lens to analyse the developmental challenges in African countries. Nawi's work has also provided alternative narratives about resource mobilisation including blocking IFFs and making judicious use of resources to achieve social justice, economic transformation, and progressive and sustainable development based on the principle of sovereignty and policy autonomy.

Through the weaving of all these themes from a pan-African feminist perspective, everything that Nawi does is intended to serve people. Nawi is driven by curiosity, exploration, and the courage to try. Part of this persistence is evident in the way Nawi works - oscillating between the technical analysis and the creative/cultural work. Nawi continues to ask of the world, our economic systems and policies, our governments, our work and our relationships: Is it fair? Is it just? Is it kind?

References

- Nawi Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective. 2023. *Strategic Frame: 2023 to the Future*. Nairobi: Nawi.
- Nawi. n.d. *Our Way in This World: A Nawi Manifesto*.
- Nawi and FEMNET. 2021. *Weaving our Fabric: Framing an African Feminist Public Services Agenda*. Nairobi: Nawi/FEMNET.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2023. *Tax Transparency in Africa 2023: Africa Initiative Progress Report*. Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. Paris: OECD, 2003. <https://www.oecd.org/tax/transparency/documents/tax-transparency-in-africa-2023.pdf>.
- Simeoni, Crystal and Wangari Kinoti. 2020. *Medical Equipment Leasing in Kenya: Neocolonial Global Finance and Misplaced Health Priorities*. Suva (Fiji): DAWN.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). *Tackling Illicit Financial Flows for Sustainable Development in Africa*. Geneva: UNCTAD, 2020. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcafrica2020_en.pdf.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Conceptual Framework for the Statistical Measurement of Illicit Financial Flows*. Vienna: UNCTAD and UNODC, 2020 https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/IFF_Conceptual_Framework_EN.pdf
- World Health Organization. 2023. *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2020: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division*. Geneva: WHO. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/366225/9789240068759-eng.pdf?sequence=1>.