

A Tale of Two Worlds Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: Is A New More Just Economic Order Possible?

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on it being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.” (Dickens, 1859: 1)

In July 2021, I got my second dose of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. And with this act, I became an outlier—one of the few Africans, and even fewer Ugandans, who were fully vaccinated. To date, only 2,47% of Africa’s population is fully vaccinated (Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) compared to 52,1% in the United States (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) and 67,3% in Europe (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021). In Uganda, at the time of writing, only about 1.5 million people had received at least one dose of the vaccine or both (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2021). In April 2021, when I got my first shot, the vaccine was being prioritised for the elderly, those with co-morbidities, and essential workers, including teachers and the police. However, vaccine uptake was incredibly low at the time, driven, in part, by vaccine hesitancy due to misinformation, lack of information about where to get vaccines, and a health infrastructure and supply chain that privileged Kampala, the capital, at the expense of further-off rural areas where the elderly predominate. This set of circumstances meant that people outside the priority categories, such as myself, were not being turned away.

Getting my second shot was a bigger battle. Vaccines had run out around the time my second shot was coming due and I spent countless hours researching what would happen to me if I missed the window for it. While other countries like Canada had hoarded vaccines and had enough to vaccinate their population several

times over, we had to rely on the uncertainty and the drip, drip, drip of donations coming in the hundreds of thousands for a population of millions. I got my second shot of the vaccine in the middle of the second lockdown in Uganda. Both public and private transport had been banned. The government's strategy was to set up vaccination sites as close to people's homes as possible. This, however, was not successful, as some sites were several hours away on foot. There were no exceptions for the elderly, disabled, or those with any ailments. We all had to walk.

While this struggle was happening in my backyard, a battle of a different kind was being waged in another part of the globe. Stories that elicited disbelief and threw into sharp relief the differences between our worlds were being told about the American government incentivising vaccination with offers of a free beer with every shot (Miller, 2021) while some states even introduced lotteries (Hassan and Kannapell, 2021). In the meantime, mostly away from the limelight, however, a political power struggle was happening at the World Trade Organization. Global North countries were refusing to support a demand for a waiver on the Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement that would give poor and middle-income countries access to the technology and knowledge to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines at scale (Meredith, 2021). Once again, the hierarchy of the value of life in the North and South were being made clear for all to see. Inspired by greed and undergirded by racism, Global North governments could justifiably be accused of colluding with privately-owned pharmaceutical companies to deny a chance at life and dignity for the majority of the world, because it threatened their bottom line and their soft power. While Global South countries demanded trade justice, to allow us all equitable access to manufacturing and purchase of vaccines, we instead got charity that allows the world's superpowers to burnish their White Saviour complexes, and causes Africans to be further debased by entrenching the narrative of the perpetual beggar. And in keeping with precedents of sending waste and subpar-quality products to the continent and to the Global South (Mwende, 2021), some of these vaccines have been nearing expiration at the time of donation (Newey and Brown, 2021). In effect, some of the donations are useless.

There are no circumstances that better illustrate the inequality between the two worlds—of the power brokers and the structurally excluded, the rich and the poor, of black and white—than those surrounding vaccine access. The tale of two worlds harkens to Dickens' telling of a tale of two cities—with the "haves" already fully vaccinated and safe, hoarding and living large, while the "have nots" eke out

a living while playing the vaccine hunger games⁴. Just like Dickens warns in his seminal work, this cannot end well for these nouveau aristocrats. And yet, this is but a sliver of the pandemic experience. Income inequality, gender injustice, eugenicist ideology against people with disabilities, homophobia, and racial inequality have all been inscribed in sharp relief in the story of the pandemic. I believe these are symptoms and manifestations of neo-liberal capitalism run amok.

Medical History: The Faux Utopia of the Time Before the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has now become a marker of time. There is now a time before and after the pandemic, signalling the massive shifts that have happened since its onset. Deep in the fog of the pandemic, it is easy to be lulled into thinking with fondness about the time before it. It feels utopian compared to the current reality. An examination of the world's medical history, if the analogy can be extended, shows that the time before was great only for a few, and that the world's structural anatomy was slowly but surely decaying.

Before the pandemic, the global community was already charting a dangerous path. Market-based approaches were being fronted in response to the world's most pressing issues, most of them caused by the same neo-liberal market approaches. In Africa, the legacy of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s could be read in every decaying or closing public school or hospital, quickly replaced by a shinier, pricier private-run version that the majority of the population could not afford. In response to the global proliferation of neo-liberal market ideology, Africa sought to position itself as a continent open for business, trading the interests and wellbeing of its citizens by looking the other way instead of regulating rapacious business practices. The race to the bottom as each country tried to outwit the other in providing the lowest tax rates in order to attract foreign direct investment came at a cost—nearly \$90 billion lost in illicit financial flows annually (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020), a figure that pales in comparison to annual official development assistance of about \$49 billion (World Bank, 2019) that the White Saviours like to splash about as part of their soft power strategies. The same strategies that allow the continent to haemorrhage crucial resources has also

¹ This term has been used to describe the extreme difficulties experienced by minoritised groups in accessing vaccines, in contrast to the relative ease that the rich and privileged have had; very much like the characters in the *Hunger Games*, a dystopian novel by Suzanne Collins where children from poor communities have to kill each other in order to survive, for the amusement of the rich ruling class.

allowed the gross amassing of personal wealth such that eight men own as much wealth as half the world's population, i.e., 3,6 billion people (OXFAM, 2017). The same school of thought that considers this obvious injustice to be a result of hard work and business smarts, instead of gross exploitation, also believes that economies should be left to grow unchecked, regardless of the cost to the environment and the people living in it. The singular pursuit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at the expense of anything else has led to the massive felling of forests to create room for cash crops like palm oil and sugarcane. With forests, which serve as carbon sinks, gone, alarm bells are now being sounded that the extreme and unpredictable weather events that have been experienced across the globe are here to stay and shall keep getting worse. Further, in an economy where money has become the only means of exchange, poor people have traded in subsistence farming for plantation agriculture, putting themselves and their families at risk of hunger. Amidst all this, women and poor people have been lifting up this unjust economy at the expense of their wellbeing. Their bodies have existed in service of the neo-liberal capitalist machinery, toiling in low cadre, low wage jobs in the garment industry, on flower farms and as domestic workers, while also subsidising the economy through unpaid care work.

This economic system designed to benefit only a few at the expense of the majority is untenable. Economic growth alone is not an indicator of a healthy economy, because the daily lived experiences of the majority remain that of struggle, even in rich countries. The COVID-19 pandemic thrown into the mix greatly reduces this entity's chances of survival. To treat this problem, we need a complete change of course.

Add A Pandemic and Stir

Almost two years into the pandemic, however, we have not changed course. We have continued on as before and picked up some even worse habits. The rich have become so pompously wealthy that some of them can even afford to take a five-minute joyride to the edge of space (Wattles, 2021), while the majority of the world's workers lost US\$3,7 trillion in income (International Labour Organization, 2021) and women bore the brunt of it with their loss, due to unemployment, comparable to the combined wealth of 98 countries (OXFAM, 2021). This chain of events is now triggering an oversupply of people willing to do any job at any cost. Workers need to feed their families, and thus have had little choice but to continue working under

the worst of circumstances, “prefer[ring] the lottery of infection over the certainty of starvation” (de Waal et al., 2020).

The pandemic has also blown wide open the burden of care work and shown how much it has been neglected in policy and practice. State-mandated restrictions, including shutting down schools, have confined more people to the domestic sphere where the amount of work undertaken by women has increased exponentially. Women now have to work doubly hard, serving as teachers for home-schooled children, cooks, and the invisible workforce nursing COVID-19 patients back to health at home. There was also an increased level of violence against women in the home during state-mandated lockdowns.

No sustainable measures have been put in place to address inequality in COVID-19 treatment. In a poor country such as mine, private healthcare players have, in response to increased demand for COVID care, arbitrarily set the prices of treatments so high that people have had to trade in their land titles or other valuable assets to be able to afford it.

The macro-economic policy decisions taken in the past have complicated and limited the ability of governments to respond to the myriad crises arising from the pandemic. For the Global South that loses billions annually in tax evasion and avoidance, carted off to finance and build some of the Global North’s cities, there could not be sufficient revenue to devise responsive social protection mechanisms to cater to millions of newly unemployed, and buttress significantly reduced income streams. The reliance on debt and aid, with potentially more dire consequences this time, has continued, despite warnings to African nations about inching towards unsustainable indebtedness. Global South countries banded together and tried to influence a global minimum tax rate that would enable them to raise revenue from multi-national corporations, but these efforts were frustrated. African countries argued that the 15% minimum rate agreed upon by the G7², together with its attendant conditionalities, would not enable economies to collect sufficient revenue to be able to rebuild during and after the pandemic, and neither would it address the unjust repatriation of profits off the continent by multi-national corporations (Tax Justice Network Africa, 2021).

The pandemic has shrunk or even completely closed spaces for organising and strategising for movements and social justice actors. With a lot of organisations moving online due to socialising restrictions, large swathes of people, particularly women, with limited internet access because of high internet data costs and

poor internet infrastructure are excluded, further deepening the digital divide. Governments have also taken advantage of COVID-19 restrictions to muffle political dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and restrict the activities of minoritised groups such as the LGBTQI community (Ghoshal, 2020).

A Responsive Remedy for An Ailing Political–Economic Order

In a widely publicised statement, African feminists set the tone for the kind of change that they want to see to course-correct this path of destruction that we are currently travelling. I agree with their assertion that “this crisis is an opportunity to dislodge structural inequality and re-frame the political economy which contributed to this tipping point” (African Feminism, 2020). These are some of the changes we should push to see as we remake the world into the image we want.

We must challenge prevailing economic orthodoxy and propose alternative economic systems that foreground the wellbeing of people and planet, and not GDP growth, and that quash unchecked consumerism and the exploitative nature of capitalism. We must be bold in dreaming of and demanding a welfare state that invests in public services and protects and promotes the economic and social wellbeing of its citizens. The resources to fund this sort of enterprise would require a rejection of the models of development and growth proposed by international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. We should focus on domestic resource mobilisation by developing and enforcing just tax systems, and progressively wean ourselves off debt financing. The odious debt being held by African states, many times negotiated under unfair terms, and ballooning because of compounded interest, must be forgiven and cancelled. There is no way around it without completely decimating the economies of poor countries. The agenda of rethinking economic policy should centre care work performed by women as critical to its sustenance and should therefore not only seek to set up social infrastructure and services that lessen the burden on women, but also actively work to recruit men as equal partners. We need to realise that removing the yoke of unpaid care work is indispensable for women’s liberation. The time for unrewarded subsidisation of the economy at the expense of women should become a thing of the past.

We must also advocate for a COVID-19 response and recovery plan that is cognisant of the gross historical disadvantages suffered by people on the margins

and centre their needs. Maintaining dignity under the worst of circumstances requires a fundamental understanding that human dignity should always prevail, no matter the situation. The informal sector, which drives the economies of many developing nations, especially in Africa, and which is populated by mostly women and yet remains largely invisible in policy formulation, should be a point of critical focus because of heightened vulnerabilities amidst the pandemic.

Of course, none of these aspirations will come to bear without organising. As splintered groups with varying messages and limited knowledge and strategies for resistance, we are easy to pick apart. “To get women to submit to flagrant mass exploitation, they have to be made afraid, they have to be silenced. Fear and silencing women are strategies for political and economic domination” (Kachingwe, 2019). We know that collective action aggregates the little power that each individual has into a formidable force that has to be listened to. And so, we must organise to be one unimpeachable unit. As one voice, we also create opportunities to influence. “Radically different voices and ways of thinking about how our economies can and should work – in the interests of the majority – are rarely at the decision-making table due to the gendered and racialised ways knowledge production systems have been created” (GADN, 2020: 40). We must therefore invest in raising political consciousness that rejects widely held models of politico-economic governance and also create spaces for dreaming and re-imagining feminist futures.

To address our current problems and to prevent its re-occurrence, I have recommended a range of policy options. But all of this will come to nought if we do not have access to vaccines. This is the most urgent, deferred matter of our time. Inequality in vaccine access is entrenching inequality in everything else along racial and class lines. However, inevitably, the false sense of security created by vast wealth crumbles away. Inequality breeds anarchy and if Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus’ metaphor about the impracticality of putting out half a fire when the whole block is ablaze (Ghebreyesus, 2021) is anything to go by, this state of affairs shall end in carnage. For everyone.

Re-imagining a new world order seems too idealistic, particularly when the cards are stacked against us so deliberately that we cannot see our way out. But it is idealism that enabled our foremothers to imagine a world where women could live with autonomy. Every revolution needs a dash of idealism and hope; after all, that is what keeps us waking up in the morning. Nonetheless, our dreams will be snuffed out if they remain only that, with no strategy,

organising and funding in place. It is possible to create a more just economic order and more equal world when our collective energies and ideas are put together. “We have overthrown empire before, we can do it again” (Kachingwe, 2019).

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