



# POLICY BRIEF



Nairobi, Kenya. Source: iStock

## The care economy and the state in Africa's Covid-19 responses

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State responses to the care crisis which the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated in Africa should be understood in concrete relation to the structure of economies that support care, and the social and political questions arising at the conjuncture of social provisioning and economic collapse.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

It has been estimated that 2.7 billion workers, or around 81 percent of the world's workforce, have had their employment and earnings affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with the greatest losses occurring in lower- and middle-income regions including parts of Africa (ILO 2020). Governments have in response, adopted various monetary and fiscal measures aimed at reviving economic activity, including cash transfers to households, extending unemployment insurance or social security benefits, temporary deferment of tax payments, and increasing guarantees and loans to businesses (Chowdhury

### KEY RESULTS

- For the vast majority of working people in the global south, the material basis of social reproduction is determined by a neocolonial economic structure that retains a critical dependency on land and landed resources in the absence of a living wage.
- Under the current conditions of neoliberal capitalism, all three predominant categories of labour (wage labour, petty commodity production, and peasant agriculture) are linked by the gendered care labour that is central to their functioning.
- The conjuncture between neoliberal capitalist dispossession, its attendant decimation of labour, and declining production due to Covid-19 is one in which processes of production, reproduction, and consumption now link the household directly to the state in the absence of stable wages.

and Sundaram 2020). Yet most existing policy responses and recommendations do not account for the reproductive structure of African households, and essential-care activities remain uncounched by GDP. While data on the social and economic cost of the pandemic on the continent is still scant, available data highlight the grossly underestimated household reproductive needs in state provisioning (e.g. NIDS-CRAM 2020).

The responses of African governments to the Covid-19 pandemic highlight the limitations of targeted economic policy that is not based on the lived realities and capacities of the people. The capacity of African states to implement relevant macroeconomic policies ought to be understood in relation to the enduring legacies of economic liberalisation, which from the 1980s and 1990s, reduced African states to caretaker capacity for international financial institutions (IFIs) and significantly weakened states' capacity to implement social welfare programmes on behalf of the people (Geda 2020). The neoliberal states that emerged from that period of austerity are fully co-opted into global financialised demand and supply chains, and retain weak capacity to act as agents of economic stimulus independent of a new cycle of IFI assistance.

State responses to the pandemic are further constrained by historical and structural dimensions of African economies. In particular, the care crisis precipitated by the pandemic highlights the structural nature of the gendered dimensions of the crisis: that is, dependence on a regime of gendered labour and care that historically sustained the survival of the global south populace amid neoliberal gutting of decent employment and public welfare, and which has again taken shape in response to the Covid-19 induced economic shock. This political economy refers to the social substratum that meets the daily and generational needs of poor working class households in the absence of adequate provisioning by the state and market.

To understand the inadequacy of state provisioning, Lyn Ossome (University of the Witwatersrand) sets out to examine this realm of gendered care labour that links various labour processes. These include wage labour, subsistence agriculture, and petty commodity production, all of which are undermined under capitalism, and whose significance to household survival remains impervious to the policy responses of the neoliberal state.

## KEY FINDINGS

**For the vast majority of working people in the global south, the material basis of social reproduction is determined by a neocolonial economic structure that retains a critical dependency on land and landed resources in the absence of a living wage.**

The contemporary significance of land is closely tied to the effect of capitalism's systemic crisis tendencies – at the core of which lies the question of social reproduction – on working people's ability to survive (Naidu and Ossome 2016). Economic policy has therefore to engage with challenges that rural movements face under imperialism, namely the concentration of agrarian capital and political power at national levels, and its alliance with financial and industrial capital (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 2). The nature of the demands that the surplus populace being expended by capital place on the state and economy must also be considered.

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Gendered care labour is today central to the stabilisation of all three classes of workers because it is a condition of their reproduction (Naidu and Ossome 2016). The cost to African states of neglecting this realm of the economy is as such likely to be a deepening of inequalities based on gender, a betrayal of the democratic project, and a continuation in the structural dispossession of more than half of the continent's population.

**The conjuncture between neoliberal capitalist dispossession, its attendant decimation of labour, and declining production due to Covid-19 is one in which processes of production, reproduction, and consumption now link the household directly to the state in the absence of stable wages.**

The condition of dependence on gendered care labour and its relation to land highlights the contradictory role of the state as both a guarantor of

rights (through social provisioning), and mediator of capital (through which it aids dispossession of the people, including of land). This contradiction has been intensified by the loss of wage income due to the pandemic, and the intensified reliance on gendered care labour for survival.

## POLICY INSIGHTS

**Fiscal and monetary responses across African countries belie economic structures that are predominantly engaged in the precarious and informal sectors, and which retain fundamental (if statistically, increasingly insignificant by GDP measure) links with the agrarian economy.**

Due to this link – that is, the fact that the existing agrarian classes in most of the global south now include wage labour, the peasantry and petty commodity producers in combination, all of which in turn depend to a certain extent on access to private and common lands – the agrarian structure of many African countries emerges as a core analytical variable in the post-Covid-19 outlook. Contrary to early predictions, agrarian economies seem to have been much less susceptible to stress on their food chains. Part of the explanation lies in the structure of rural production, at the centre of which gendered labour accounts for the majority of non-commercial food production (Carreras, Saha & Thompson 2020). The pandemic highlights the need to revisit agrarian questions in the global south as a prerequisite of social and economic policy.

**The failure of social provisioning at the level of the market shifts the core problem of social reproduction from the wage labour-capital nexus – that is, the insufficiency of wage provisioning under exploitative capitalist conditions – towards the fundamentally political relationship between the state and households.**

At the same time, the gradual shift from agriculture as a basis for national income, towards manufacturing and industry belies the still largely agrarian structure of much of the continent, in particular the reliance on land and landed resources for survival and livelihoods in lieu of wages and income from the formal sector. The role of the state needs to be understood in relation to this shift. Countries with a pre-existing welfarist regime such as South Africa responded better to distressed households through social grants. Yet on the whole, most state

responses to Covid-19 were inadequate and showed precisely this disarticulation between the agrarian economy of care and the caretaker neoliberal capitalist state, and also the enduring links between the care economy and the agrarian structure.

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