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Coercion or the social contract? COVID 19 and spatial (in)justice in African cities

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Still, in every adversity there might be opportunity”

- Jackline Wanyonyi, Slum Dwellers International, Kenya

As the novel corona virus sweeps across the globe, it is giving cause for much reflection. International, national and local policy makers are rethinking the role of aid agencies, and the state, and the relationship between labour and the economy. It is also raising fundamental questions about spatial justice in Africa’s rapidly transforming cities. Advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO) is clear: social distancing and frequent, soapy hand-washing will slow the viral spread. But as commentators have pointed out, adhering to these guidelines is almost impossible when you reside in informal settlements with limited access to water and space (Suttner 2020; Adegbeye 2020; Mitlin 2020). For

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millions across sub-Saharan Africa living under just such conditions, WHO's advice is a cruel joke. Accompanied by lock-downs and curfews, the poor must take this advice while struggling harder than ever for the daily wages that put food on the table. Many must decide between viral exposure and starving (Chen 2020; Reddy 2020; Adegbeye 2020). It is Sophie's choice, as a food seller in Abuja articulates: "I cannot afford to stay at home and not feed my children. I know it is risky to be out here, but if I don't come out to look for what to feed my family, we will die of hunger faster than being killed by the virus" (CNN 2020).

And this is just the beginning.

Together with Asia, Africa accounts for 90% of growth in the world's urban population (UNDESA 2018). Estimates are that by between 2010 and 2050, Africa's urban population will triple to 1,23 billion people (UN HABITAT 2010). Places we do not yet consider cities may soon have hundreds of thousands if not a million people. Yet unlike labour intensive industrialisation that drove American and European urbanisation, African cities are characterised by 'jobless urban growth'. Rather than work in factories or offices, the majority of those in cities navigate the precarious informal economy (ILO 2018). Without access to regular income, public housing or credit, majority households are likely to live in settlements that lack tenure security and where they access land, water, sanitation, and housing through informal mechanisms (Tusting et al. 2019). The result is that millions of African urban households are *de facto* part of the city, but live

and work in *de jure* unrecognised and illegal markets and economies. Viewed optimistically, these can be gateways to the cities: spaces of possibility amidst precarity. They are also almost always spaces that can be acted upon or excluded with little political consequence. It is in these sites that that the pandemic reveals the most acute spatial injustices.

Beyond the immediate Faustian bargains between eating and infection, the pandemic exposes and entrenches broader structural inequities. Urban resources do not distribute themselves, their allocations depend on underlying power and decision-making structures that determine who, where and how access is spread across space. More importantly, policy edicts like social distancing, hand washing, lock-downs, curfews and policing (which no doubt save lives) *entrench* these structural injustices. Not only are the urban poor disproportionately affected by urban crises like Covid-19, the policy interventions intended to address them will inadvertently erode what resilience poor households have built to survive. This exacerbates the vulnerability associated with economic and spatial marginalisation.

Already we have evidence of this.

Across Africa's cities, the pandemic is giving governments extraordinary license to evict, lock-down, and control the movements of urban communities. Violent stay at home

orders in Rwanda, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and elsewhere have seen state security agents shoot dead and publicly flog people caught in the wrong place (Butera 2020; Harding 2020; GhanaWeb 2020; Bearak 2020; Bearak and Ombuor 2020). These actions not only punish transgressors, but also collectively reinforce people's fears of state caprice and coercion. South Africa, ostensibly one of the continent's most progressive states, has already begun plans to 'thin' informal settlement residents in the name of health, (Wicks and Patrick 2020) as activists decry the eviction of informal dwellers in Durban (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2020). If COVID 19 exposes the frailty of urban basic infrastructure and public welfare systems, its mitigation reveals the violent inclinations of its militaries and security forces.

The COVID 19 crisis reveals both the reasons we have governments, and our reasons for fearing them. Without collective action we cannot save lives, but the brutality and repression exercised in the name of saving lives is disquieting. In Accra, simulating prison drills, those caught violating lock-down restrictions are forced to lie prostrate and perform calisthenics to punish and humiliate them and broadcast a message to others without the resources to drive or stay at home. In Cape Town's Masiphumelele township, journalist Jacques Marais recounts his encounter with abusive masked the South African Defense Force officers using 4ft long clubs to flog people on the street (Marais 2020). In Kenya, deaths by police have been reported, including a 13 year old boy shot dead by a stray bullet fired by police while enforcing the lock-down. In Durban's working-class

Cato Manor township, South African police arrested twenty-nine women and their children. Their crime was sleeping outside and contravening the lockdown after local authorities ordered their eviction from their homes (Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party 2020).

What the spread and responses to the novel corona virus in poor parts of the city highlight is that geography is not a neutral backdrop in which development activities take place. Rather space is a ‘social product’ (Pirie 1983) that significantly shapes individuals’ and households’ developmental choices and outcomes (Soja 2010). More than this, spatiality and (in)justice are in intrinsically bound with a dialectical mutually reinforcing relationship. Dikeç calls this the ‘spatiality of injustice and the injustice of spatiality’ (Dikeç 2001, 1792). Marginalised communities in African cities face a double disadvantage. For one, they live under conditions prone to spreading disease. They also occupy spaces where compliance with the law is difficult. Every failure to comply, every violation of an impracticable law or regulation becomes justification for additional restrictions and violence.

Covid-19 is not only a heuristic revealing the precarity of life for millions in cities across the global South. It also draws attention to the social bases on which people (barely) survive – informal and familial networks, precarious work, seasonal migration, and flexible housing options with limited entry costs. It is these very elements of urban life that now make them particularly vulnerable to disease. But this is nothing new. While

urbanites tend to live longer and healthier lives than similar people elsewhere, conditions are far from ideal. The danger is that these facets of urban life will now be turned against the poor in ways that further their social and geographic marginalisation. In the short-term almost any effort to save lives is potentially justifiable, but the imperatives to protect lives can not come at the cost of long-term livelihoods.

What is needed now are strategies that avoid stigmatising the poor or blaming them for their vulnerability. Regulations and practices exposing the poor as law-breakers and coding them as disease vectors make it more, rather than, less likely that they will be subject to coercion and urban exclusion. Humanitarian politics acts *on* people, ostensibly in their interests. This is no more sustainable than other forms of autocratic rule, especially when such rules are ultimately oriented to preserving existing socio-economic and spatial hierarchies. Instead, interventions justified by Covid-19 should be consultative and forward looking. As the continent's experience with Ebola shows, combatting the pandemic requires strengthening accountability and the social contract between the state and its vulnerable citizens (Christensen et al, 2020).

If this pandemic teaches us anything, it is that the virus has no boundaries, and the wellbeing of both rich and poor are codependent. The only way to disentangle the risk is to remove the poor entirely from cities -- but this is neither practical, possible or just. Rich and poor lives are imbricated within Africa's urban economies. To quote Wanyonyi (2020), 'this adversity presents us an opportunity' to erase the acute inequalities in the

distribution of urban resources in cities. With hope it may encourage policy makers to act with the urban poor rather than ‘for’ or ‘on’ them. What is clear is that we can not create the inclusive cities called for by the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda without a more just spatial politics.

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