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Editorial

Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy

Ronald Labonté[*]

Abstract
With coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) receding, many countries are pondering what a post-pandemic economy should look like. Some advocate a more inclusive stakeholder model of capitalism. Others caution that this would be insufficient to deal with our pre-pandemic crises of income inequality and climate change. Many countries emphasize a 'green recovery' with improved funding for health and social protection. Progressive tax reform and fiscal policy innovations are needed, but there is concern that the world is already tilting towards a new round of austerity. Fundamentally, the capitalist growth economy rests on levels of material consumption that are unsustainable and inequitable. More radical proposals thus urge 'degrowth' policies to reduce consumption levels while redistributing wealth and income to allow the poorer half of humanity to achieve an ethical life expectancy. We have the policy tools to do so. We need an activist public health movement to ensure there is sufficient political will to adopt them.

Keywords: Post-Pandemic Economy, Health Equity, Green Recovery, Degrowth

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As the world enters a third pandemic year, we seem close to a return to 'normalcy.' After a year of rich country vaccine-hoarding, half of the world's population is expected to have access to a sufficient supply of vaccines by mid-2022 and quantity is no longer the major concern in reaching global vaccination targets. But the "road to recovery has never been a particularly smooth one."[1] And despite many billions eager to end the disruptions severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has imposed on their lives and livelihoods should we be eager to return to the 'normal' we left behind in early 2020? If the health of people and planet are of any concern, the answer is a resounding no. Prior to the pandemic, surging disparities in wealth and power undermined health gains, climate crises threatened human survival, the mass migrations of people were increasingly met by xenophobic populism, and the slow-burn rise in antimicrobial resistance was causing more deaths annually than HIV or malaria.[2]

That a post-COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) economy should look different was already mooted in the early months of the pandemic:

- The World Economic Forum (WEF) called for a 'Great Reset' to 'stakeholder capitalism.'
- The United States and other countries promised to 'Build Back Better.'
- The European Union (EU) and most other countries committed to a 'green recovery.'

Others called on governments to regulate markets to ensure economic activities achieved democratically determined health, social, and environmental goals. Some called for more radical proposals to transition rapidly to a 'degrowth' or 'post-growth' economy in which the world went on an extreme diet of material consumption. Common to all proposals was agreement on the common denominator linking diverse groups whose health suffered most from COVID-19: socioeconomic inequality:

> *"The pandemic brought home to us a hard truth. Unequal access to incomes and opportunities does more than create unjust, unhealthy and unhappy societies—it kills people."*[3]

Underpinning socioeconomic inequality are economic policies and practices that have allowed a tiny sliver of humanity – the world's billionaire class – to become wealthier as the overwhelming majority became poorer.[4] In this disequalizing context the question remains: what sort of post-pandemic economic world should we strive to achieve, if health equity and environmental sustainability are to be our collective goals?

From Shareholder to Stakeholder Capitalism: More of the Same?

The political economy that characterizes most of today's world – capitalism – is centuries old, although its most recent form – neoliberalism – only became dominant in the 1980s.[2] Neoliberalism's core elements (trade and financial liberalization, low taxation, minimal state intervention, strong property rights) birthed our now familiar globalized economy, criticized almost at its outset for the inequalities it was fomenting. To WEF founder, Klaus Schwab, the problem

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lay less with capitalism itself than with its neoliberal emphasis on maximizing shareholder value, where economic decisions are based on creating the greatest return on investment in the shortest time possible. Schwab's and the WEF's promoted solution is 'stakeholder capitalism,' in which everyone (and not just shareholders) should have a stake in capitalism's benefits.[5] Few might object to the idea of all gaining (even if not equally) from liberalized market activities, but as one economist argued, the stakeholder model is essentially:

> "*…just a way of bringing the opponents of capitalism to a common venture of extending its lifespan, while ignoring the system's intrinsic and destabilizing profit motive*" (W. Bello, interview communication, October 27, 2021).
>
> As one example, in a post-pandemic 'Great Reset' wealthy investors are encouraged to invest in businesses whose activities align with the Sustainable Development Goals. This, it is said, would allow them to "make a profit and still save the world."[6] To the extent that such investments go into non-fossil-fuel renewables this win-win hyperbole is a partial truth; but with many of these ethical investment portfolios being non-compliant with global climate change goals[7] this may simply be 'greenwashing' what remains fundamentally profit-motivated investing. We might also ask: What economic policies and practices enable investors to become disproportionately wealthy in the first place? As a recent study noted, the stakeholder capitalism model will do little to redistribute wealth but will strengthen the private sector's (not unself-interested and growing) role in global health governance.[8]

The Return of the State: Can Governments Mitigate Capitalism's Inherent Inegalitarianism?

The state is certainly a critical 'stakeholder' in capitalism since its policy choices enable or constrain the actions of economic actors within and across borders. The post-1980 drift to neoliberalism saw the state increasingly defer to market interests in efforts to have their countries remain globally competitive (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2021).[9] Tax rates fell, financial markets deregulated, and inequalities within most countries soared.[2] The 2008 global financial crisis saw a rapid *volte-face*, with wealthier country governments spending trillions of dollars to bail out 'banks too big to fail.'[2] The return of the state was brief, with austerity measures (fiscal contraction) quickly following to cover the public costs of rescuing private banks and investors[2] at the cost of eroding health systems that proved ill-prepared for a global pandemic.

The pandemic saw the state roar back once again, with many countries responding with wage support, cash transfer, credit schemes, tax cuts and delays, support to importers and exporters, policy rate cuts, support to businesses, and rent subsidies or deferrals.[10] This fuelled speculation of a turning point in state/market dynamics, which some attributed to the COVID-19 crisis being different from the one in 2008:

> "*It showed us that the people who matter most in society, the ones who protect our lives and care for us, the ones we applauded from our doorsteps during the pandemic, yet they were…left behind in terms of wages, security, the value of their jobs, their status in society*" (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2017).

Certainly, the need for greater public investment in health and social protection is an undisputed outcome of the pandemic, especially given how government responses to COVID-19 increased women's care burdens, employment losses and experiences of domestic violence.[10-12] Others saw massive government interventions in the economy as demonstrating that:

> "*…all that neoliberal talk about government intervention is bad, bad, bad just got thrown out the window…what we've seen is the ideological assumption of neoliberalism laid low*" (W. Bello, interview communication, October 27, 2021).

Early post-pandemic recovery plans for those countries with the requisite fiscal capacities appeared to embody such transformative optimism. The original US multi-trillion Green New Deal promised substantial environmental protection, a rapid shift away from fossil fuels, and expansive new social spending.[13] When it was later tabled as a 'Build Back Better' plan its ambitions were trimmed substantially, and then even more due to fossil fuel industry lobbying and the rise in right-wing populism.[14] There are concerns that polarized politics in the USA may prevent it from ever being enacted.[15] The EU's 'Next Generation' plan[16] has similar intentions to be green and socially more just and, while insufficiently generous,[17] it fares better than its American counterpart. It could still be undone by the EU's own right-wing drifts and, with geopolitical tensions rising globally, notably following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU and many other countries are pivoting back to energy (fossil fuel) independence, questioning their 2021 commitments to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.[18]

Tax and Fiscal Policy Space: Can We Build Back Fairer?

The potential for a substantially reformed and more state-engaged capitalism still exists. At a minimum the tax roll-backs that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries began embracing in the 1980s need a rapid reversal. Marginal income, dividend, corporate, wealth, and inheritance tax rates can all be increased substantially without negatively affecting (more likely improving) the quality of life for most.[19] This should be easiest for high-income countries which hold most of the world's economic wealth; it will be more challenging but not impossible for low-income countries with large informal labour markets and low gross domestic product/capita. There is also a need to reimpose or strengthen border control measures to stop capital flows from cash-strapped poor countries to tax havens, a corporate practice (often illicit) that costs developing countries hundreds of billions of dollars annually.[20]

Governments for some years have recognized the need to develop international taxation systems fit for a globalized economy. The 2021 agreement by 136 countries to implement a minimum 15% tax rate for multinational enterprises is a start, albeit at too low a rate to have much impact and with tax benefits likely to benefit wealthy countries disproportionately.[21] A small financial transaction tax applied internationally on currency exchange could create trillions more in shareable public revenues.[21] To put the global tax justice issue into some perspective: in 2002 the total untaxed monetized value of the global economy was $29.8 trillion. In 2019, this had swelled to $74.5 trillion.[21] There is no shortage of wealth, only a paucity in the fairness of its allocation and the health and social benefits (and pandemic preparedness) this would create.

The global financial and COVID-19 crises both saw some governments adopt unusual fiscal responses (issuing bonds held by their central banks) to generate trillions in new money used to bail-out financial institutions, stimulate domestic economies, or provide pandemic relief. Described as 'modern monetary theory' (MMT), adherents argue that states with their own sovereign currency can never run out of money.

> *"[And] that fundamental insight gives us the space that we need to create monetary and fiscal policies that are flexible, that are coordinated and that give government the space to maneuver as we navigate these huge environmental and social challenges that are facing us…lifting the veil of the ideology that says the government cannot afford to spend in the well-being of its citizens"* (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2017).
>
> MMT was invoked by the World Health Organization's (WHO's) Council on the Economics of Health for All, established in November 2020 with the aim of ensuring "that national and global economies are structured…to deliver on this ambitious goal."[22] The Council's first policy brief chided governments for failing to impose conditions on the public monies that funded COVID-19 vaccines that would have required companies to share their technology[23] rather than allow monopoly intellectual property rights to create 'vaccine apartheid' and pharmaceutical profiteering.[24] Its second brief noted how a combination of progressive tax and fiscal measures (including MMT) could ensure that health and social protection systems are sufficiently strong to mitigate any future pandemic or other health crisis.[25]

There are, however, two problems with MMT as currently practiced. First, "central-bank resources (balance sheets) have been expanded and deployed in the private interests of vast, unregulated, and systemically risky capital markets across the 'shadow banking' system,"[26] fuelling the speculative asset bubbles that saw billionaire wealth climb precipitously higher during the pandemic. Re-nationalizing much of these assets is important, as is reorienting central banks' activities "away from…sustaining private gains in capital markets [and] toward public purpose."[27] Tax measures and price controls can be used to restrain any long-term risks of inflation,[28] with some economists arguing that current inflation risks are being intentionally over-stated to justify a return to the same austerity measures that followed the 2008 crisis.[28-30]

Second, not all countries have sovereign reserve currencies and must borrow on international markets, usually denominated in US dollars. This exposes them to volatile currency fluctuations and interest rate increases. Debt burdens (both public and private) are already extremely high, with many low- and middle-income countries on the verge of defaulting on their loans. Debt cancellation is one option, since some of this debt should be declared 'odious' and uncollectable.[31] With fiscal consolidation already rising in these countries, there are calls for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to issue Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), the Fund's reserve currency, to support such countries' pandemic recovery. SDRs are virtually interest-free and are non-conditional. The IMF already approved the release of US$ 650 billion in SDRs in response to the pandemic, but current rules mean that most of this amount is accessible only to high-income countries. Advocates are urging wealthier nations to allocate their share to low- and middle-income countries (some have) and for the IMF to issue an additional US$ 500 billion annually in SDRs for the next 20 years to finance climate change mitigation. The numbers are large, but still "trivial compared to the $25 trillion in liquidity fueled by loose monetary policies in advanced economies since the 2008 global financial crisis."[31]

Taxes, MMT, IMF reform: There are ways in which public wealth for public good purposes can be recaptured and equitably allocated. But doing so requires a shift in how states see their role in the economy, away from being the backstop to capitalism's inevitable market failures to actively regulating (shaping) markets towards democratically determined health, social, and environmental goals.

Degrowth/Post-growth: Should We Build Back at All?

Two common elements in many post-pandemic plans are commitments to decouple economic growth from carbon intensity, and to embrace a 'circular economy' in which all goods are reused or repurposed to reduce material throughput and to eliminate (or massively reduce) waste. Such measures are essential, but many environmental economists are sceptical that they are sufficient. They also allow societies to avoid confronting 'an inconvenient truth'[1]: That capitalism's growth imperative is predicated on ever increasing levels of material consumption. The human population already consumes annually 1.7 times the ecological resources the world can regenerate. If everyone consumed at the level of OECD countries it would require the resources of 4.7 earths,[21] even before accounting for the environmental damages such consumption generates.

A relatively new concept has entered the lexicon of environmental economics: degrowth[2], which captures the importance of reducing aggregate global consumption levels to avoid catastrophic ecosystem collapse. The bulk of this responsibility lies with citizens, governments, and corporate actors in the historically over-consuming Global North,[32] partly to make space for those in the Global South to reach consumption levels compatible with healthy life expectancies while remaining within safe planetary limits:

> *"…it's abundantly clear it's in the poorest parts of the world that income growth makes a huge difference to prosperity. Life expectancy increases. Infant mortality decreases. Maternal morbidity decreases. Participation in education increases…that's where growth makes a difference"* (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2017).

The implications of such a transition are enormous. The burden of change rests heaviest on the world's wealthiest regardless of which country they may live in. Their carbon emissions and consumption levels massively exceed those of the majority of the world's population, indicative of the link between rising economic inequality and environmental devastation.[33] But a degrowth (or 'fair growth') economy will demand substantial change for hundreds of millions, and although:

"*…degrowth is the only alternative at this point in time, there will need to be political and social psychological transformations from societies that have been weaned on overconsumption. I will not underestimate this cost [since] we're talking about transformations in the way that we have structured our lives*" (W. Bello, interview communication, October 27, 2021).

Others describe this as transitioning to a post-growth economy, one in which the pursuit of 'prosperity' replaces that of growth:

"*Many of our problems, both social and structural and environmental, arise from the idea that progress is about increasing productivity, the speed with which we create material goods and services, distribute them to people to buy and throw away as fast as possible, the belief that this material sense of productivity and progress is what human prosperity is really about. But what we saw through the pandemic is that health is really the meaning of prosperity. Health is the foundation for prosperity* (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2017).

This requires a very different economy:

"*…a care economy, one that enriches us as well as saving lives. It's a lower carbon economy, with a lower footprint because it is about engagement and attention and time in the service of each other*" (T. Jackson, interview communication, October 28, 2017).

Such an economy is an extension of what:

"*…feminist economists have always talked about. There is the direct care which is looking after people… Then there's extended care…doing things that help in adaptation to climate change…it is essential work that is being done in unpaid fashion by a significant part of the population*" (J. Ghosh, interview communication, November 14, 2021).[3]

Towards a Post-growth Caring Economy: Can We Challenge the Rise in Autocratic Regimes?

Transforming from a consumption-based capitalism to a sustainable caring economy requires governments willing to discipline markets for public good purposes, and to initiate tax and fiscal policies that radically redistribute access to the resources people need for healthy lives. The immediate challenge to this aspirational goal is reversing the fifteen years' worldwide decline in democratic accountability and parallel rise in authoritarian rule.[34] One of the pandemic's ironies is that even as it increased the state's role in health and economic protection, it incentivized alt-right populism and provided opportunities for autocrats to increase their grip on power. As Walden Bello, a sociologist and economist who was interviewed for this editorial, noted:

"*We are in a race between the forces of the far right and progressive forces [which threaten] any sort of coordinated global action on climate*" (W. Bello, interview communication, October 27, 2021).

In response, Bello ran as a vice-presidential candidate in the May 2022 Philippines elections in an effort to avoid that country's "resurgence of authoritarianism." He did not win, but remains committed to the scale of transition needed for a survivable post-pandemic economy, one in which democratic participation must remain strong:

"*We can't leave it just to the politicians. We've got to have civil society stepping in because if we leave it to the usual actors, we're not going to get anywhere*" (W. Bello, interview communication, October 27, 2021).

Even as the space for such participation is under authoritarian attack, the importance of civil society efforts to retain and expand it is more important now than in the pre-pandemic period. We know the political economy tools that can bring us closer to what the Sustainable Development Goals describe as 'the world we want.' But only organized citizen demand will create the political will to adopt these tools, with recent history bringing us evidence of unwavering activism in global climate strikes, Black Lives Matter, *buen vivir* and peasant's movements, and poor people's campaigns worldwide. The post-pandemic public health imperative now is to protect and support such movements.[35]

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Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

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RL is the single author of the paper.

Endnotes

[1] This is a reference to 'An Inconvenient Truth,' the title of the 2006 documentary on global warming narrated by form US presidential candidate, Al Gore.

[2] Not all critics of the unsustainability of current material consumption levels like the term, degrowth, especially since consumption (and economic) growth for poorer persons and nations remain important in providing the means for people to achieve reasonable health and life expectancies. 'Fair growth' may be a more marketable concept, but that the wealthier deciles of the human population must 'degrow' their current consumption patterns remains to ensure sufficient consumption space for poorer populations to 'grow' (improve) their own health and wellbeing.

[3] Some post-pandemic recovery plans include specific reference to the 'care economy,' and many include increased spending in health, social protection, childcare, and other social care sectors, including improved conditions for those employed in such work.

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Commentary

Pandemic's Experience Questioning Capitalistic Dominance

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Alexis Benos*

Abstract
Reflecting on the up-to-date global experience of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is of crucial importance in order to draw conclusions needed for the design of policies aiming the prevention of new epidemics and the effective protection, preparedness and response of any new emerging. Ongoing environmental destruction, excess mortality by COVID-19 and non-COVID diseases reflecting the dismantlement and commodification of both public health services and healthcare services, deep economic crisis, increasing and deepening social inequalities are the main characteristics raised by the pandemic. The causes of the causes of all these are the dominant rules of the capitalistic system, driven mainly by the unlimited greed for profit on the expenses of the majority of the society. The effectiveness of any proposed correction of this system is discussed and the need for another society responding to the needs of the population is argued.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Public Health, Healthcare, Causes of the Causes, Capitalism

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Closing its third year, the pandemic's dramatic impact on the lives and health of the populations globally is nowadays incontestable. Despite the initial approach that the pandemic is a socially neutral disease, continuously growing evidence, during the early months of the pandemic, proved the inequitable context of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.[1] The pre-existing social class inequalities that determine both unequal morbidity and mortality distribution, and unequal settings of exposure risks and disease courses, triggered syndemic dynamics with the advent of the pandemic.[2]

Labonté, in his editorial, is constructively contributing to the international exchange of views trying to answer the crucial, nowadays, question: "Are we eager to return to the "normal" we left behind in early 2020?"[3] Aiming to ensure global health equity he is thoroughly analysing and discussing different strategies for a different post-COVID-19 economy.

The recognition, awareness, and concern about social inequalities in health was dramatically risen during the 1990s based on ongoing and growing research evidence.[4] Consequently, health policy goals included as a priority target the reduction of social inequalities in health, adopting measures mainly addressing the existing socioeconomic gaps.[5] The next step in this pathway is the emergence and hegemony of the concept of social determinants of health mainly expressed by the homonymous WHO Commission with its 2008 report.[6] This concept stimulated an academic research movement that produced a wealth of evidence building up the characteristics of concrete factors and showing their association with the unequal distribution of ill-health within the populations. This process generated a shift of the public health research towards the social conditions where people live rather than the still mainstream deterministic biomedical approach. Within this context the fragmented focus and isolation to discreet factors is criticised as a concept that ignores the complexity and multidimensionality of social processes and dynamics.[7] The social determination of health paradigm was elaborated first by Jaime Breilh introducing the analysis of one holistic social, political, and economic totality.[8] This approach is tied to a grassroot movement defending collective health and struggling also epistemologically for the decolonisation of science.

Based on the above-described framework we come back to discuss the question where we want to go after the pandemic experience. It is undisputable that the causes of the causes of the pandemic global tragedy, more clearly than ever, are determined by the hegemony of the market rules, the uncontested dominance of the profit-making in a process of endless economic growth as the main goal and activity of modern society.

These are the well-known causes of the systemic determination of health: environmental degradation associated with the ongoing climate crisis, expanding multinational profit-making agroindustry, growing socioeconomic inequalities and predictable disease affecting the lower socioeconomic classes which are the great majority of human population. The intensification of social inequalities related to the pandemic, including refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants[9] are the cynical evidence of this causal chain.

These are the causes that have driven to the lack of

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prediction, preparedness and response against an expected emerging pandemic risk, as the non-profit-making public health services and research institutes are suffering after a long standing imposition of austerity policies that produced their structural dismantlement and inertia.

These are the causes of the unprecedent globally, COVID-19 and non-COVID excess mortality due both to the impotence of the public healthcare services as a result of the commodification process including chronic understaffing and underfunding and the deliberate concealment of the private health sector in order to avoid its infection by COVID-19.[10]

It is therefore more than clear that the pandemic from its emergence to its inadequate management and dramatic outputs is causally reflecting the systemic characteristics of capitalism.[11] As part of the same reality, unfortunately, the ongoing year we are experiencing an explosion of the profit-making activities of exploitative capitalism, including a continuing imperialist war that raises the threats of nuclear disaster. And above all we are suffering an antidemocratic shift and authoritarian ruling in global governance, blandly operating for the interests of the few. The management of the procedure of vaccines' provision dominated by a fundamentalist protectionism of the patents, is a cynical sign of what Benach is calling a "brutal class struggle."[11]

Under this perspective it is questionable if the proposals already addressed as solutions to the crisis are applicable. The World Economic Forum's "great reset to stakeholder capitalism," the US's "Build back better," the European Union's "green recovery," and tax and fiscal policy spaces have as an underlying concept the attempt to control the aggressive greed of the capital. As the massive shock, fear and anger expressed globally during the disaster of the first wave of the pandemic did not generate any substantial change of the dominant neoliberal policies, there are no, even theoretical, possibilities for any shift to the values prioritising the needs of the people. This is also cynically proven by the vaccine's gala. The provisional only, return of the state, as a useful tool for the management of the crisis is showing the unwillingness of the governments to "mitigate capitalism's inherent inegalitarianism."[3] Instead, authoritarian tactics, where applied, are enhancing the way to antidemocratic rule, militarism, and fascism.[12]

As for the degrowth strategy, if it is not related to systemic changes, it can easily be transformed in another victim blaming and though, disorienting policy that is transferring the blame and the subsequent socioeconomic burden to the poorer countries and to the lower social classes within all countries.

As Julian Tudor Hart wisely expressed it "…but this will be a redistribution, an intervention to correct a fault natural to our form of society, and therefore incompletely successful and politically unstable, in the absence of more fundamental social change."[13]

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that it is crucial to readdress health as a commons good and social right, a priority of social justice which can only be granted by democratic governance aiming an equitable and sustainable future.[14] The occurred tragedy in terms of human lives and social inequalities aggravated by the systemic trend of capitalism to catastrophe are not paving the way to many alternatives. The need to overthrow the ruling capitalist system is realistic, urgent and critical. The crucially important factor is the growing fight, especially by the working class activism, against the luting of the public structures and space and for the prevention of environmental catastrophe and future pandemics. A fight therefore obstructing the return to the previous dominance of profitability and international economic competitiveness.

The role of the international academic and scientific community is obvious by describing, analysing the situation, revealing the causes of the causes and speaking up for the need of another society built on the aim to cover the needs of the peoples.

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AB is the single author of the paper.

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Commentary

The Key Role of Social Movements in Protecting the Health of People and the Planet

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Chiara Bodini[1,2*]

Abstract

In his recent article, titled "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy," Ronald Labonté addresses a key challenge the world is facing, trying to 'build back' after the global crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic. He explores and critically examines different policy options, from a more inclusive 'stakeholder model' of capitalism, to a greater role of states in shaping markets and investing in the protection of health and the environment, to more radical options that propose to reframe the capitalist mantra of growth and look at different ways to value and center our societies around what really matters most to protect life. Social movements are key players in such transformation, however the political space they move in is progressively shrinking.

Keywords: Post-pandemic Economy, Degrowth, Social Movements, Democracy

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In his recent article, Ronald Labonté addresses a key challenge the world is facing, trying to 'build back' after the global crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] The author's central argument is that, if we do not want to go back to a situation that led to such crisis (both in terms of creating the conditions for a global pandemic, and of crippling the possibilities of a coordinated and just global response), we have to reconsider the premises of our whole economic and social system. This assumption is apparently shared by many, from global institutions to states, to civil society organizations and social movements. The key question that the paper tries to address, therefore, is what sort of post-pandemic economic world we should strive to achieve, if we assume that the collective goals to pursue are health equity and environmental sustainability.

In order to answer this question, the author critically examines a set of options that are being considered by states and other institutions in order to shape a post-pandemic economy different from the one we know. In his journey he is accompanied, and somehow informed, by the reflections of three economists he interviewed and who have given considerable thoughts to the issue: Walden Bello, Tim Jackson, and Jayati Ghosh.

The author's starting point is a lucid analysis of the 'existential (health) crises' that were there before the pandemic: rising inequalities (wealth, income, resources), ecological collapse (climate change and more), and migration (within and across borders). According to his view, and to the economists he interviewed, the current economic system is to blame for allowing a minority of the world's population (the billionaire class) to continue increasing its wealth as the overwhelming majority becomes poorer. Moreover, the myth of capitalist growth economy — resting on levels of material consumption that are inequitable and unsustainable for a finite world — is responsible for a degree of environmental degradation that threatens life on our planet.

Facing such a dire situation with a determination to look for alternative paths, the author takes into consideration different policy options, that have been mentioned in relation to the post-pandemic recovery by a number of countries, mainly in the Global North, and international institutions.

A first option, promoted by the World Economic Forum in its call for a 'Great Reset,' is a shift from the current 'shareholder' to a new form of 'stakeholder' capitalism, where everyone, and not just shareholders, may have a stake in the system's benefits. Investing in activities aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, may at once produce profits and generate benefits for the people.[2] However, as pointed out by critics of this model, profit is the driving force behind such investments, and — without robust systems being put in place to ensure accountability and redistribution — the gains they generate will continue to be unequally distributed. Moreover, as illustrated in a recent study on the flaws of so-called 'multistakeholder capitalism,' such model will likely strengthen the role of the private sector in global governance, reducing the accountability of governments and multilateral institutions.[3]

A second option sees an increased role of the state in

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mitigating the inequalities generated by the market, something that — although theoretically denied by the neoliberal doctrine — clearly happened during the 2008 economic crisis. In that case, public money was used to bail out banks 'too big to fail,' but this was quickly followed by a round of austerity measures aiming to reduce public expenditure and government debt. Citizens paid the price for such measures in terms of weakened welfare state. For instance, a consequence of such policies was the dismantling of healthcare systems in many European countries, something that had a visible impact on the (un)preparedness towards the COVID-19 pandemic. This in turn made manifest the need for new and greater public investments in health and social protection, with governments of the United States and Europe committing to new plans to increase public spending and at the same time protecting the environment. However, these efforts seem insufficient in their scale, and are now additionally threatened by the energy crisis linked to the war in Ukraine.

A third option considered in the paper looks at the possibilities to increase tax revenues, by expanding the fiscal space (that has progressively been shrunk in the past decades), contrasting tax heavens, and introducing taxes on financial transactions. Together with bold monetary policies and a reform of the International Monetary Fund loan system, more redistributive tax systems may have the potential to recapture public wealth for public good purposes and allocate it equitably. However, doing so requires a quite dramatic shift in how states see their role in the economy, as entities whose role is to shape markets and make them work towards democratically determined health, social, and environmental goals.

Finally, the author turns to what he seems to consider the most promising options, centered around a deep rethinking of the current economic system. In a spectrum of discourses, such options go under the names of 'degrowth,' 'fair growth,' or 'post growth.' In short, they all postulate the need to reduce aggregate global consumption levels to avoid catastrophic ecosystem collapse. Given that consumption patterns have historically been very unequal between the Global North and the Global South, there is one part of the planet who needs to significantly reduce the amount of resources it consumes, while for still a large part of the world's population growth is indeed important to achieve healthy life expectancies. According to these perspectives, it is not only important to reduce and redistribute consumption, but also to center our economies around the common good, which includes protecting our ecosystem and valuing the occupations that help us to live better. The ecological economist Tim Jackson, interviewed by the author, speaks about 'care economy,' centered around engagement, attention, and time in the service of each other.

In order to achieve a transformation towards an economic system that is not centered around growth, a substantial change in the role of governments is needed, towards a system in which the state has and exercises the power to regulate (shape) markets, increase its revenues to invest in health and social protection, support an economy centered around the protection and promotion of human and non-human life. This brings the author to a set of conclusive considerations, acknowledging that – in the words of Walden Bello – "we can't leave it just to the politicians." The issue of democracy and government accountability, particularly facing the rise of authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world, becomes central if states have to shift towards policies that truly protect their citizens. The paper ends by mentioning social movements (global climate strikes, Black Lives Matter, *buen vivir* and peasant's movements, and poor people's campaigns), claiming that it is now a public health imperative to protect and support them, as with them rests the possibility (and the power?) to push for a system change.

In fact, history indicates the importance of organized civil society engagement in the achievement of institutional and social change locally, nationally and globally, from legal reforms (eg, the abolition of slavery), to institutional development (eg, environmental protection), to cultural change (eg, gender relations).[4] The history of people's movements is also full of acts of resistance that, though limited when considered as such, become relevant when combined in a joint narrative.[5]

The role of social movements is not only that of building coordinated action that may have the power to bring about change, but also that of growing and nurturing alternative approaches to structuring society and improving health and wellbeing.[6] Providing a space for different struggles and lived experiences to know, learn from and mutually strengthen one another, social movements have the potential to show today what a different, more caring society may look like tomorrow.

The People's Health Movement (PHM), a global network of activist organizations formed in 2000 in response to the failure to achieve Health for All, a goal set in the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration of primary healthcare, is an example in this direction.[7] From its foundation, PHM activists have argued that "the struggle for health is a political struggle," one "which challenges the fundamental practices of our society and the trends which shape them."[8] Moreover, with its leadership strongly rooted in movements from the Global South, PHM has shown in practice that change can be brought by below particularly if those who suffer most from the current system are engaged in first person in shaping the alternatives.

For PHM, as for many social movements, the COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in several ways. As restrictions were imposed on many aspects of social life — including the possibility to organize, show dissent, and practice alternative ways of building society — activists were forced to rethink their practices and move many of them from physical to virtual environments. The availability and accessibility of critical information increased, although linguistic and digital barriers remain, particularly for activists in the Global South. In parallel, during the pandemic the already shrinking space for civil society was, according to reports from human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations, increasingly marked by violence against human rights defenders and representatives of social movements, with activists and socio-cultural workers — including from PHM — subjected to intimidation, bullying, false accusations, unlawful arrests, kidnappings, and murder.[9] The rise in use of new technologies, a field that saw an exponential growth in the pandemic period, was a powerful way in which increasing governmental control was exerted.[5]

On the other hand, the pandemic magnified the structural roots of health inequities and made the reasons for health activism even more clear and compelling. PHM saw a rise in engagement at the local and global level, oriented both at supporting those who suffer the most from social injustices amplified by the pandemic, and at striving to bring about the radical changes needed for a more ecojust future (for instance, fighting against vaccine apartheid and the intellectual property regime that makes it possible).[5]

In this respect, some of the more radical options explored by Ron Labonté in his paper are also being critically debated within PHM. However, this is done in tight connection with the strategies — or theories of change — that may lead from having a vision of how things should change, to making that change happen. Moreover, being aware of the links between colonization processes and knowledge generation, the movement combines visions and practices from different sources, from critical analyses such as the one Ronald Labonté offers, to the ancestral knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous peoples, to the views and practices of the feminist, LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and many other terms), and decolonial movements. Building convergence across different social movements and increasing popular participation are key strategies to build the power that is needed for a radical change to happen. Following Ursula Le Guin's famous quote that "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."[10]

Ethical issues

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Competing interests

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Commentary

Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy: Words Count!

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Mariska Meurs*, **Myria Koutsoumpa**, **Valeria Huisman**

Abstract

The authors wholeheartedly agree with Labonté: global health equity needs radical changes in economic thinking and policies, including degrowth and reducing consumption in parts of the world. But to mobilize sufficient people for radical change, reducing overconsumption and for degrowth, we may need to stop calling it that. Language is important and using the same frames and words as our opponents do can be counterproductive. Global health advocates need to be strategic about framing, use hope-based communication and develop attractive and convincing narratives. By doing so, hopefully we can bring these messages across to larger groups of people and increase the push for social change.

Keywords: Post-pandemic Economy, Health Equity, Green Recovery, Degrowth, Hope-Based Communication

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In his editorial "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy,"[1] Labonté hits the nail on the head: socio-economic inequality and our unsustainable economic growth model are main drivers of health inequity and they require solutions that many consider to be radical. As Labonté describes, the policy tools to implement several of those solutions are already there. Some more and others less elaborated, but still, they are there: a larger role for states in the economy, progressive tax systems—including fair international taxation—, monetary policy reforms and a reform of international financial institutions. Academics have thought them through, activists have been calling for them, and in some cases, politicians are implementing them. What we need, Labonté says, is an activist public health movement to mobilize the political will for implementing these policies. While we wholeheartedly agree, we believe that we need to use different framing, language and words to reach larger groups of people and grow such an activist public health movement that can push for change.

After hopeful calls for a "green recovery" and "building back better" from many countries and international organisations, as Labonté observes, ambition levels are already declining. In many regions of the world, populist and far-right political groups are gaining votes by electoral promises to continue business as usual. Moreover, civic space is under authoritarian attack in many countries. Meanwhile, in others, ruled by liberal democracy, large groups of voters support political parties whose policy promises do not serve their well-being. Not in the long run and in many cases not even in the short run. Why? And, more importantly, how can we persuade people to support the change we want to see?

Not by calling for degrowth, for reducing overconsumption or for a radical overhaul—even if we agree with it. The prospect of change, especially radical change, instils feelings of uncertainty and therewith resistance in many people. Even though high-income countries will need to change, a lot, using these terms fosters a feeling that people need to give up something valuable. As Labonté quoted from Walden Bello: "*…there will need to be political and social psychological transformations from societies that have been weaned on overconsumption.*" As activists and part of a social movement, we know that changing the public opinion, is a very complex and multifactorial process.

To create socio-economic equality and a sustainable economic growth model we need more than an activist public health movement. We need a much more widespread public push for change. To get such a widespread push, we need to weigh our words with care. As global health advocates, we are keenly aware that the framing of a message is often more powerful than its content to convince people and persuade them into behaviour change. However, language, framing and using the words that 'make people tick' remains uncharted territory for many of us. While it is exactly the language, framing and words that have the potential to take people to the streets, push for change and possibly change their voting preferences.

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As Anat Shenker-Osorio says: *"A great message doesn't say what's already popular; a great message makes popular what needs to be said."*[2]

Therefore, we are making a case for using convincing framing and hope-based communication. Research shows that framing is essential to convince people of your message. Cognitive scientist George Lakoff explains it like this: *"facts matter enormously, but to be meaningful they must be framed in terms of their moral importance. […] If the facts don't fit the frames in your brain, the frames in your brain will stay and the facts are ignored or challenged or belittled."*[3] So, people's brains take shortcuts to interpret what you are saying, and those shortcuts are based on the ideas they already have.

Often, advocates try to counter a narrative by using the same words as their opponents. Think of the 'Brexit' versus 'No Brexit' campaign. This is counterproductive. When using words that strongly link to the opposite frame, you activate that frame, undermining your own views. It is important to use your own frames, choose your own words, not those of the ones holding a different view. According to Lakoff, effective reframing is more than presenting the facts in an effective way. It is about ingraining certain ideas, developed over time, consistently and precisely enough to create an accurate frame for our understanding.[3]

Hope-based communication builds on that idea. It emphasizes the importance of creating strong, positive narratives (frames) based on our shared values. At a high level, our values are quite similar; we all want to be as healthy as possible; we want the best for our children; and we desire to be loved and treated with respect. As Bonanno et al say: *"[These] shared values are widely held beliefs among the population of interest."* and *"[serve] to build a connection between the speaker and the audience, creating a willingness to listen to further information."*[4] A telling example to illustrate this point is given by Anat Shenker-Osorio: *"Marriage equality won out precisely because LGBT people made the debate about values of commitment and family. When they stopped talking 'rights' and started talking 'love,' the tide turned."*[2]

Next, we must paint a clear and appealing picture of what our ideal world looks like. If people recognize themselves in that view, it becomes easier for them to follow ideas and call for or adopt policies that will help realize this world. Thomas Coombes, communication strategist and hope-based communication champion, explains that hope-based communication does not ignore the problems, but instead it puts them into the context of how things should be.[5] So, rather than reacting to our opponents' ideas — merely focusing on what we are against —, we must show that it is possible to make the changes, offering a hopeful perspective that is activating.[6] For example, research in the environmental field shows that people are more likely to change their intentions when they receive a positive framing of an issue, whereas fear can leave them overwhelmed and not action oriented.[7-9]

We recognize that there is no silver bullet when it comes to effecting social change. However, we do think, and evidence supports, that creating a positive perspective is more activating than focusing only on the problems.[10] And thus, worth exploring in our quest to realize global health equity.

Redirecting the Growth Narrative

Let's look at the framing around economic growth and degrowth. People often relate growth with something positive, like improvements in health and well-being. And when we think about economic growth, the shortcut in our brains usually leads us to the most common, most used indicator for it: gross domestic product (GDP). We quickly link GDP with positive outcomes, not leaving room to reflect that focusing on GDP growth without taking measures to equitably distribute wealth and invest in the social sectors, will not be beneficial for all of us. Or that GDP also grows as a result of activities that are downright harmful, to the environment, to health, to the well-being of many. The United States, for example, stands out as a country with one of the highest GDP growth rates and GDP per capita in the world. Nevertheless, among other GDP-high countries, it also has the highest economic inequality and poverty, and lack of universal access to healthcare, heavily influencing the life expectancy and well-being of the population.

In fact, economic equality correlates far more closely with happiness, longevity and well-being of the population than GDP. According to the World Health Organization (WHO),[11] evidence shows that even a modest redistribution of wealth has considerably greater impact on poverty reduction than economic growth alone. And according to Wilkinson and Pickett, it is not so much the growth of an economy that matters, but rather how wealth is distributed within it.[12] Economic growth does not, in itself, improve well-being. Tax revenues may indeed increase with GDP growth, but what matters is whether and how governments invest those revenues in good quality and universally accessible health and education, infrastructure and other public services.

Unfortunately, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have legitimized the use of GDP as the most appropriate economic indicator. It has become and continues to be part of our vocabulary as civil society and in the global discourse, as we often refer to the SDGs as 'the world we want.' But if the world we want is fair and just, with well-being for everyone, we need to measure different things.

Alternatives exist and have for many years. They can be very useful for building a new narrative of what our ideal world looks like. The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) is one. It starts with a measurement of GDP but then considers positive externalities like household and volunteer work, and subtracts negative externalities, such as pollution, resource depletion and crime; and it adjusts for inequality.[13] So, it basically tries to net the positive and negative outcomes of economic growth to evaluate whether or not it has benefited society. Another alternative is Bhutan's Gross National Happiness indicator (GNH). The central concept of GNH is that sustainable development should give equal importance to non-economic aspects of well-being, like sustainable and equitable socio-economic development. We need to move away from the eternal chase of GDP and growth as we know it.

If governments and the global community would shift their policies and approach towards maximising the GPI or GNH or any other sustainable indicator instead of GDP, then they would adopt policies that improve social well-being and allow for a fairer distribution of wealth, and health and well-being, across the world.

How do we get them to do that, when economic and GDP growth continues to dominate the headlines of major news channels and to drive decision-making? Well-framed information is only one piece of the puzzle of change, which is a wide and complex territory that social movements, including the global health community, are still trying to fully grasp. Knowledge is important, but change is a dynamic, iterative process that also differs across contexts and time.

To garner the widespread public support that is needed, we must create strong and convincing framing. Let's be deliberate and creative with words. Terms like "no Brexit," or even "degrowth," do not convey a vision of the world you want to create, instead it activates and strengthens the opposite view. Do not assume people think from the same starting point as you do. Keep emphasizing what you want the world to look like and why – linking to our shared values. Once people share your frame, your ideas for change will stick much better. We must find the right words and the right frames to help make that happen.

Rather than calling for 'degrowth,' let's call for growing a care economy, as suggested by one of the interviewees of Labonté in his article. Instead of emphasizing the need to reduce consumption, we can focus on the need for increased consumption of what is essential for well-being, such as clean air and universal health coverage. If we can paint a picture – in our own words – of a world in which all can flourish, then hopefully we can activate people at the grassroots level to bring change from below and sufficient people to vote into office those political leaders that will raise and maintain ambition levels for a green, caring and inclusive economy.

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Commentary

The Values of the Care Economy

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Jennifer Cohen[1,2*]

Abstract

Labonté proposes that health equity and environmental sustainability may be best obtained through a care economy. Because a care economy plays a key role in Labonté's formulation, its position in the capitalist political economy, the work it entails, and the workers who do it all merit further reflection. I aim to complement Labonté's editorial by elaborating on care economies and the work of social reproduction. The existing care economy is a structural part of capitalism that largely generates and sustains inequities, reinforcing Labonté's argument that transformation is needed. Transformation could, and should, change the perceived value, status, and material rewards of work in the care economy. I then touch on the policy tools Labonté describes, highlighting how they connect to my broader point: that the care economy is currently an integral, but devalued part of capitalism. For a transformation to take place, raising perceived value, status, and material rewards of caring work and the people who do it must be an explicit policy goal.

Keywords: Care Work, Inequality, Inequity, Capitalism, Gender, COVID-19

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Introduction

In his insightful editorial, Ronald Labonté writes that the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that socioeconomic inequality is lethal.[1] I agree. Recognizing that the pandemic is internal to capitalism sharpens the contradictions between a world shaped by the profit motive and health justice.[2] Labonté identifies capitalism's economic growth imperative as the underlying problem. As such, reforms like stakeholder capitalism, the pursuit of capitalist 'green recoveries,' and policy options that could improve well-being within the growth paradigm cannot address the problem. He concludes that a transformative shift away from an economic system centered on economic growth to one that enhances health, prosperity, and well-being is necessary. Labonté proposes that health equity and environmental sustainability may be best obtained through what he calls a *post-growth, sustainable caring economy*.

Hence, given the importance of care in formulating alternatives, I wish to complement Labonté's editorial by elaborating on 'care economies' and the work of social reproduction. I begin by noting that the existing care economy is a structural part of capitalism that largely generates and sustains inequities. The ways in which capital organizes production and reproduction combine with systems of oppression by gender and race to generate vulnerability among the diverse populations.[3] This reinforces Labonté's argument that transformation is needed; that minor changes compatible with the growth imperative are unable to address the problems it creates. I then clarify the meaning of transformation in relation to care economies and the labor they entail. Transformation could, and should, change the perceived value, status, and material rewards of work in the care economy. It should shift the gender division of labor and reduce related socioeconomic inequality and gender inequality/inequities. Finally, I touch on the policy tools Labonté describes, highlighting how they connect to my broader point: that the care economy is currently an integral, but devalued part of capitalism; for a transformation to take place, raising perceived value, status, and relative material rewards of caring work and the people who do it must be an explicit policy goal.

Care and transformation

Care economies appear in Labonté's comments in two forms: (*a*) as an economy that already exists and (*b*) as something to transition to — a future to be achieved. I'll call the former the *care economy* and the latter a *Health and Social Care Economy* (HSCE). Linking the two is the transformation away from the existing political economy in which the capitalist pursuit of profits dominates the pursuit of human well-being.

At present, profit-seeking drives production and consumption; it is the engine of capitalist growth. Growth has multiple sources but cost minimization, particularly minimizing the cost of the unique input — labor — is key. Profit-seeking incentivizes and exploits discrimination at multiple scales and reinforces inequities to reduce costs, for

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example by clustering marginalized populations into a smaller set of gendered and racialized jobs. Occupational segregation depresses wages and workers' bargaining power in those jobs while reducing competition for higher status, better paid work. A care economy is present but is seen as marginal to 'The Economy'; popularly imagined as production and paid work outside of the household. Care economy work is essential; however it is often low status, poorly paid or unpaid, and is disproportionately done by women. The care economy is therefore integral to socioeconomic inequality and inequities in the capitalist political economy.

In a transformed world a different engine would displace the profit motive. The sustainable reproduction of life is a powerful alternative. It is already present in many of the activities undertaken by individuals in the care economy, such as childbirth (labor), childcare, eldercare and the day-to-day tasks typically done in the household. It is life-making. The transformation to a HSCE therefore hinges on changes to the perceived value, status, and material rewards of caring work — the work of *social reproduction*. A broadscale economy guided by the sustainable reproduction of life could offer a far more egalitarian economic system. Work would no longer need to be organized around profit maximization; its pay and status could reflect its *social value*. Where the profit motive incentivizes using inequities to enhance economic growth, its replacement could incentivize equity-enhancing production and reproduction of public goods. The incentive to deploy social oppressions to minimize costs by systematically paying, ie, women less than men would evaporate, at least in theory. Health, education, and social services, all sectors in which women are concentrated, could become the most highly valued and well-paid sectors of the economy, over the financial sector, for example. This possible HSCE should shift the gender division of labor and reduce related socioeconomic inequality and gender inequality/inequities.

Such a transformation may seem implausible. The entrenched interests of capital have used inequities to serve capital accumulation, hence a transformation is likely to be resisted by entities that profit, or otherwise benefit, from inequities. Labonté notes that the immediate challenge to transformation is the rise of authoritarianism and the decline of democratic accountability. Authoritarianism, and conservatism more generally, are heavily invested in maintaining inequitable social relations. The maintenance of inequity is their raison d'être.[4] The profit motive is compatible with authoritarianism; both rely on and reinforce inequities.

However, a transformation *of some kind* seems inevitable. In the context of mass consumption primarily in the Global North and ecological devastation, the reproduction of life itself is increasingly unsustainable. Labonté notes several policy tools that could facilitate a socially desirable transformation. Women, the care economy, and the gender division of labor are missing from the policy discussion but are salient to conversations about tax justice, fiscal and monetary policy, and the lending practices of international financial institutions. I will return to this point after I elaborate on the substance of the existing care economy.

Capitalism and the Existing Care Economy

The care economy consists of the day-to-day work required to "maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation."[5] Women are disproportionately tasked with this work through the gender division of labor. People are produced, both physiologically through women's [going into] labor and through ongoing effortful activity done primarily by women. In this way, societies rely on women and their labor for their ongoing existence. Despite its obvious importance most care work is unpaid or poorly paid and relatively low status.

Gender is central to the capitalist organization of work. It influences the paid and unpaid work activities that women and men are expected to take on. In unpaid work, the burden of reproductive labor on women increased during COVID-19, as is reflected in data about who left the labor force.[3] During the pandemic, people, especially women, were forced to act as "shock absorbers" by providing home-based care for the sick and taking on additional household labor. However, pandemic damage mitigation expands the already-fraught work of reproducing life in non-pandemic conditions, potentially to the detriment of health generally and to women's health in particular.[6,7] It also increases women's risk of exposure and reinfection at home.

The care economy includes paid work in health, education, and social services. Women are concentrated in these sectors (ie, 85% of nurses and midwives are women globally) which also entail high risk of exposure.[9] Higher infection rates for working-age (20-59 years) women are documented during COVID-19 peaks.[8] In one case women were 80% of care workers but up to 90 percent of care workers with COVID-19. Just as societies rely fundamentally on women and their labor, healthcare systems depend fundamentally on women's continued participation as suppliers of care.

There is a substantial gender pay differential — globally, women earn 24% less than men — in the care sector, even after accounting for age, education, occupational category, working time, and public/private sector employment.[9] Occupational demands, such as inflexible work schedules or long shifts, may conflict with women's responsibility for care and other household work. Likewise, gendered responsibility for household work can limit women workers' ability to meet occupational demands because paid occupations are not designed to accommodate realities of women's lives.[6,7] Many women in the paid care economy experience related distress and burnout. The household can be a dangerous worksite as well.[10] Responsibility for care can be detrimental to one's own well-being.[6,7]

The paid and unpaid work in the care economy is therefore an integral part of socioeconomic inequality: the capitalist organization of work generates and reinforces inequities with material consequences. Therefore, in its present form, the massification of the care economy is not particularly appealing. However, the lamentable problems of reproductive labor and paid care work are emphatically *not* their existence. *The problems are the inequitable gender roles that task women with the work and the gendered value systems that leave it un- or poorly-compensated and devalued.*

Policy for a Health and Social Care Economy

The points above clarify that gender inequality/inequities are not "women's issues." They are social problems, constraints on the supply of care, and sources of systemic instability in healthcare and society. The pursuit of gender equity is crucial to any transition away from the existing organization of work. Without it, a transition is unlikely because of the low status of care as "women's work" — but even if there were a transition, there is little reason to expect that the gender division of labor would change automatically or appreciably. In other words, for a transformation to take place, raising the perceived value of women and the work they are tasked with must be a policy goal. Policy, economic and otherwise, is not likely to change perceived value or the gender division of labor unless that change is an explicit aim for policy-makers.

Labonté describes the disproportionate and negative impacts of COVID-19 on women as a rationale for greater public investment in health and social protection. He recognizes the consequences of the pandemic and of government policy on women that manifest through the gender division of labor. Yet women are missing from the discussion of policy — specifically taxes, modern monetary theory, and International Monetary Fund reform. Seemingly 'gender-neutral' policy is common, but policy rarely has gender-neutral outcomes. Gender analysis is needed to understand these effects.

Despite the silence, progressive policy reform is typically directed at improving the conditions of social reproduction. For example, to Labonté the aim of global tax justice is the reallocation of accumulated wealth toward health and social benefits that could support people and households. At the macroeconomic level, low interest loans without the structural adjustment policies that are well-documented as exacerbating gender inequality/inequities could enable social spending in underdeveloped countries. At a micro/sectoral level, higher pay or additional benefits for care workers would contribute to socioeconomic equality and gender equality. They could also raise the status and perceived value of the work, making it more attractive to workers. Changing the perceived value, status, and material rewards of caring work and the people who do it is what would make the transformation transformative in people's day-to-day lives.

Finally, I have not touched on the question of degrowth policy/language or on reduced consumption of material goods in the Global North.[11] The myriad other forms of sustainable, humanizing growth in capabilities and interdependency could be framed as regrowth. Higher 'consumption' of tangible and intangible things that improve quality life — like better health, time for leisure, solidarity, friendship — are likely to appeal to many people. Denaturalizing capitalism as the sole option in the popular imagination (of Global Northerners) can be empowering. I hesitate to use economistic language, but it could provide a bridge for a social rethinking what and who an economy, any economy, is *for*. Every society has an economy to provision life: the form and social possibilities beyond the profit motive are endless. There is much to be gained from valuing caring work and the people who do it.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Commentary

Things That Become Visible, for a While, Can Leave a Residue

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Nele Jensen*

Abstract
Professor Labonté's editorial is an important intervention that reiterates the stark socio-economic and health inequities that were exposed and perpetuated during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to call on the public health community to hold politicians to account for their promises of 'building back better.' The editorial makes present how quickly pandemic promises seem to have become dislodged by an ostensibly endless cycle of political and economic crises. But it also expresses a hope that lessons from the pandemic will eventually serve to challenge prevailing (economic) policy orthodoxy and feed a collective demand for more progressive social, economic and environmental justice-oriented politics.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Equity, Public Health, Social Justice, Capitalism

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Writing in the early months of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, as images of the mass migration of city-dwelling Indian labourers to their home villages visualised the radically uneven distribution of health, social and economic risks posed by both the pandemic and the containment measures implemented in response,[1] Indian writer Arundhati Roy compared the pandemic to both, a "chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things" but also a chance to "rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves."[2] Two and a half years later, Professor Ronald Labonté's editorial[3] is a clarion call aimed at the public health community to mobilise the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as evidence to ensure that empty post-pandemic promises of 'building back better' are superseded by a collective effort to foster a 'sustainable caring economy.' But it is also a timely reminder of how quickly such post-pandemic promises have become overshadowed by a seemingly endless cycle of political events and snowballing economic crises. As the United Nations warns of rebounding COVID-19 infection rates coalescing with an intensifying climate emergency, rising inflation, a severe energy crisis and spiralling food insecurity into 'cascading and intersecting global crises threatening human survival,'[4] Professor Labonté's editorial highlights the need to be aware of the politics of attention and neglect that legitimise a perpetual cycle of stopgap solutions in the name of crisis management at the expense of more radical structural change.[5,6]

Labonté's baseline argument is that the pandemic has exposed how health inequities are grounded in socio-economic inequities that, in turn, result at least partly from economic policies. I should note here that I am not an economist – I am a medical doctor and social scientist whose work draws on pragmatist philosophy, postcolonial science studies and the anthropology of biomedicine to inquire into the material-discursive practices of global health, their consequences and contestations. But then again, as Labonté shows, one does not have to be an economist to see that hopes for a COVID-19-induced rupture of (economic) policy orthodoxy seem to have been premature. Not for the first time, the doomsday machine appears more like an unstoppable juggernaut.

Insisting on the importance of economic inequities – in addition to colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia – as stratifiers of health risks is thus an important intervention in itself. Indeed, in the early phase of the pandemic, the unprecedented and haphazard nature of hastily-implemented worldwide containment measures sparked lively commentary on the societal 'fault lines' exposed by COVID-19. But as the pandemic dragged on, public discourse seemed to move on. With the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, media coverage and public attention also shifted onto the deficiencies of the COVAX initiative, inadvertently narrowing the issue of equity to a question of the unequal distribution of biomedical products. And yet, as my colleagues and I put it elsewhere, "inequities are not just the result of what happens when systems 'fail.' Rather, inequities are often the result of—and are refracted through—the way systems are set up and operate."[6] This means that ongoing

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efforts to boost vaccine manufacturing capacity in low- and middle-income countries are undoubtedly an important part of building a 'new public health order,' of the kind demanded by Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Director John Nkengasong and colleagues.[7] But so must be the insight that efforts to address health inequities need to go far beyond ensuring equitable access to healthcare technologies, however important this is.

In the United Kingdom, Michael Marmot's 2020 report *Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review*[8] has offered a devastating resumé of the structural inequalities that have driven the differential impact of the pandemic for different population groups: the United Kingdom experienced not just one of the highest level of 'excess deaths' in Europe, but data also showed stark economic and racial inequalities in mortality risk.[9] As the report makes clear, such health inequities are driven by 'causes of the causes of the causes,' such as structural racism, as well as distinct policy failures: as the report argues, the United Kingdom entered the pandemic after 10 years of Conservative government that left "public services in a depleted state and its tax and benefit system regeared to the disadvantage of lower income groups."[8] For example, widespread cutbacks to government spending have been argued to not only have left the National Health Service ill-prepared to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic,[9] but also led to rising child poverty, food insecurity and homelessness.[8] Indeed, more than a decade after the publication of the *Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health*, the importance of paying attention to the structural drivers of ill health seems to have become widely accepted, at the same time that an appreciation of individual and population-level (health) inequities has failed to translate into a radical transformation of those political-economic systems that differently distribute power and resources.

In their recently published treatise *Unprecedented? How COVID-19 revealed the politics of our economy*, Davies and colleagues note that "(o)nly during the periods of the deepest uncertainty do the true underpinnings of the system become visible."[10] They describe COVID-19 as a collision of the unexpected with the predictable: whereas the virus itself was novel and worldwide mitigation measures unprecedented, hastily implemented policies largely reiterated who and what matters in our current global, capitalist, economic system and revealed the "extraordinary social and political sacrifices and interventions that are made to sustain it."[10] One particularly revealing example, also picked up by Labonté, is how, after a decade of austerity imposed following the 2008 financial crash, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly occasioned an outpouring of public funds to mitigate the crisis. In the United Kingdom, alongside other G7 economies, government borrowing rose to over 100% of gross domestic product, the highest level since 1963[11] to fund, among other things, a huge economic rescue package to counterbalance the effects of government imposed lockdowns. But rather than celebrating a 'roaring back of the state,' it is important to highlight that not everyone benefitted equally from the huge injection of public monies, as lockdowns were only made possible because an underpaid and racialised workforce – health workers, shopkeepers, public transport staff, delivery drivers, etc – kept countries' critical infrastructures going while bearing the greatest (health) risk as they became the frontline of countries' pandemic response. At the same time, those who already owned assets saw their wealth multiply, not least as property prices and stock markets continued to soar.

'Rentier capitalism' is the term used by Brett Christophers and others to describe this system that rewards ownership of income-generating assets rather than, say, producing things.[12] But although even proponents of the virtues of capitalism increasingly acknowledge the inequalities perpetuated by the growing disjuncture between capital- and production-based income,[13] post-pandemic proclamations of 'building back better' have largely remained tethered to programs of tinkering around the edges rather than radical transformation. One example provided by Labonté is the resurrection of calls for a 'stakeholder capitalism' that sees companies shift focus from maximising shareholder value to creating long-term societal benefits. The World Economic Forum's vision for stakeholder capitalism centres around the idea of multi-stakeholder platforms, which Labonté also recalls, has reignited long-standing concerns about the incursion of private sector actors and strategies into the global health governance sphere. Indeed, the COVAX scheme has arguably been the most prominent example of such a platform that, championed by Bill Gates as global health's most renowned messenger of a benevolent capitalism, promised to leverage corporate power to tackle the health inequalities – and yet ultimately missed its own targets while being accused of eschewing public accountability.[14]

One of the stakeholder capitalism's blindspots, as a recent report argues, is that it disregards the ongoing trend towards corporate monopolisation and the associated accumulation of economic and political power that corporations are able to exercise.[15] Indeed, what the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably underlined is that states do not harness corporate power (the tired justification for the privatisation of national assets and public services) but rather enable and defend it. In the health space, this became clear in the way wealthy country governments underwrote the financial risk of vaccine R&D and safeguarded the profit of pharmaceutical companies while propping up an international IP system that thwarts the transnational flow of life-saving products and know-how.[16]

Even as it becomes increasingly obvious that COVID-19 has not, in fact, disrupted the status quo, one of the virtues of Labonté's editorial is its refusal to capitulate and its insistence on an alternative future pursued through a number of tangible economic policy proposals. Among Labonté's concrete suggestions are more progressive tax regimes (higher tax burdens for the better-off, stronger regulations to address tax evasion, a financial transaction tax), fiscal tools ('modern monetary theory'), International Monetary Fund reforms, and a transition to a 'de-growth' economy. Among these, modern monetary theory – the proposition that there are, principally and under certain conditions, no fiscal limits to government spending – involves what is arguably the most innovative but also the most contentious set of recent economic ideas. But after the 2008 financial crash and post-COVID-19, it must be a legitimate question to ask why the public balance sheet can be used to bail out the economy by ensuring the liquidity of the market but not to improve working conditions, safeguard public services, re-common critical infrastructures, and fund the transition to a zero-carbon economy.

Unfortunately, at least in the United Kingdom, we recently witnessed not the dismantling of the capitalist juggernaut but the Conservative government's attempt at turbocharging it – with Liz Truss and her former chancellor proposing to cut funds for public services and taxes for high earners in the name of unleashing economic growth. And yet, the sustained backlash that these proposals caused may also be seen, optimistically, as a sign of a spreading discontent and an increasingly pandemic awareness of the inequalities and injustices at the heart of our dominant economic system. As Davies and colleagues note, "(t)hings that become visible, for while, can leave a residue."[10] Even if the COVID-19 might thus not have (yet) provided enough impetus for radical change, there is hope that its exposure of who and what gets to matter under capitalism will feed a collective desire for progressive social, economic and environmental justice-oriented politics.

One of the most hopeful developments during the COVID-19 pandemic was the emergence of new forms of solidarity and care as well as a new wave of political protests. While I therefore agree with the sentiment of the call, at the heart of Labonté's editorial, for the global public health community to support worldwide activist movements that, in turn, can put pressure on politicians and decision-makers, this could have perhaps been pushed further. As researchers, educators, colleagues, line-managers, supervisors, mentors and as citizens, we are not just part of the system but also already in a position to make a difference. Let's make sure that a legacy of the pandemic is not just a legion of armchair epidemiologists – and, in my case, armchair economists – but a community of shoe-leather activists as well.

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Commentary

Austerity by Design

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Indra de Soysa*

Abstract
Several scholars across many disciplines argue that neoliberal, free-market economic conditions drive inequalities, generating poverty and misery due to unfair austerity, ultimately affecting human health. Professor Labonté's prescription is that we jettison these policies targeting economic growth and development for generating greater fairness for the world's poor. This rejoinder argues contrarily that the criticism of neoliberal policies are misplaced, and that degrowth is really "self-imposed austerity," which will not benefit the poor. This rejoinder scrutinizes some simple stylized fact and assesses the soundness of the broader arguments. The evidence suggests clearly that becoming wealthy and following prudent economic policies is the best path to improving population health, equity, and other progressive outcomes. Badly required growth for the poor comes from free markets and good governance, and equity for the sake of fairness neither results in better health outcomes, nor an improved environment.

Keywords: Inequality, Population Health, Economic Development, Degrowth, Climate Change

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Professor Labonté has written a thought-provoking editorial[1] on the need to "reset" the global economy from its globalized, neo-liberal path to one where government intervention ensures greater fairness in terms of health equity and other favorable, progressive outcomes, not least the mitigation of climate change. Blaming globalization and neo-liberal policies for all the world's ills is nothing new, nor just the preserve of public health scholars. From the climate crisis to pandemics, the underlying problem is blamed on the "unfairness" of neo-liberal policies, which generate inequalities (within and between societies), resulting in continued poverty and misery, authoritarianism, and environmental destruction. Many of the arguments tread a well-worn path, but they beg deeper scrutiny and supporting empirical evidence, particularly since Labonté's main policy prescription for fighting neo-liberal austerity seems to be *degrowth,* which is a euphemism for "self-imposed austerity." In an age of fake news, where populistic politicians everywhere offer simple solutions to complex problems, the need of the hour is well-considered theory and empirical evidence for guiding policy. This rejoinder, thus, will scrutinize some simple stylized fact and assess the soundness of the broader arguments, relying on the existing evidence in the specialized literature. There is much in Labonté's article that is easy to agree with, and this author does not disagree with the larger claim that many global economic and policy processes are unfair to the poor, but what is questioned here is the empirical basis for relying on degrowth as a solution to questions of poverty, health, and fairness.

First, I examine the issue of how the rich and poor have performed in the pre-pandemic world in terms of healthy life expectancy (HALE), which is perhaps the best way of evaluating population health because it assesses simultaneously how mortality and morbidity trends have evolved over the last three decades based on 369 known causes of mortality. According to the latest Global Burden of Disease study, all regions of the world have seen considerable improvements in HALE.[2] Figure 1 shows the regional trends in HALE (all cause) for both sexes above the age of 20.

All regions have increased health-adjusted life years on the aggregate, and sub-Saharan Africa shows the steepest gains in the past two decades. Interestingly, after decades of so-called neo-liberal governance, Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa have similar HALE scores as the former Soviet States. There is little in this highly aggregated stylized view to suggest, thus, that egalitarian governance structures are a necessary condition for increasing healthy life and wellbeing. It is wealth created by good policy that allows both public and private investment in health to increase overall population health standings. While public action is important for achieving many health outcomes and human capital improvements, such as in Singapore, it is not at all clear that much could be achieved without growth of incomes and myriads private investment in health and education that happens when societies experience growth. Fortunately, countries such as China and Vietnam are following neoliberal policies, and their life improvements are palpable. Ultimately, levelling up the health gradient within poor countries is a

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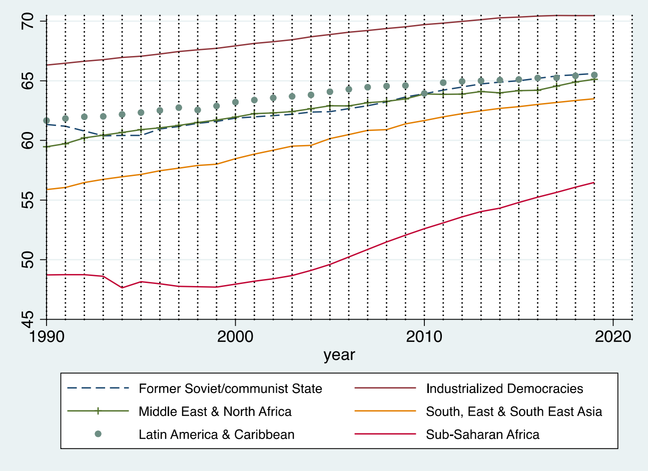

Figure 1. The Annual Average Regional Trends in Healthy Life Expectancy, 1990-2019.

noble objective, but increasing average wealth and health standards of the population at large is the surest path to achieving health equity. Neither higher government spending, nor equality alone, achieves better human health.[3,4]

Consistent with the specialized literature, it is income levels, or wealth creation through economic growth, that matter for securing better life, not necessarily the distribution of wealth *per se*.[3,5,6] There is by now a great deal of theoretical and empirical evidence suggesting that being open to global markets, where societies are governed by capitalist institutions and policies, increases the demand for public goods, such as health and education and drive better outcomes.[7,8] At least one recent, careful empirical study shows quite unambiguously that higher amounts of foreign direct investment, and by extension openness to global capital, is strongly associated with higher HALE among the poorer countries, even after accounting for endogeneity.[9] If indeed such global capitalist forces as foreign direct investment and trade associate strongly with country-level inequality, and inequality reduces average health, we would not expect to see such outcomes.[10] In a footnote, Labonté acknowledges that growth can generate better outcomes for the poor, suggesting that the rich states should sacrifice their growth (degrowth) to allow higher growth for the poor. This is a rather surprising idea given that interdependence of economies is non-zero-sum. What the poor need are more markets and capital, which are linked intimately to growth among the rich. Today's global slowdown, largely due to the slowdown of Chinese growth, is a sad but true reminder that degrowth will mean austerity by design.

Labonté stresses "fairness," putting his faith in government intervention for reducing inequality. Fairness, of course, is a rather slippery concept, especially if one tries to measure it. Economists usually use income or wealth inequality to measure fairness, differentiating inequalities of outcome, which occurs for many reasons, including natural causes (genes, for example) from inequalities of opportunity (institutional, structural factors). Figure 2 shows the trend in income inequality measured as the average Gini coefficient between the rich and poor worlds based on after tax disposable income.[11]

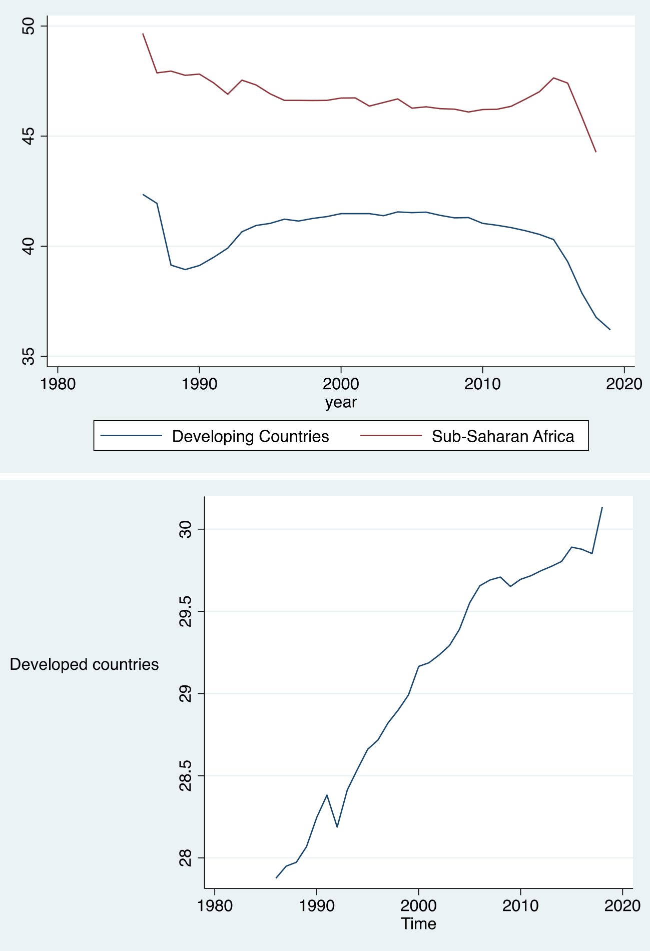

Figure 2. Regional Trends in the Gini Coefficient, 1985-2019.

As seen there, the sub-Saharan Africa and developing countries as a group show higher inequality trends over the period of globalization compared with the industrialized countries as a group. Notice, however, that the developing countries show flatter, slightly downward trending inequality levels over this period, while the industrialized countries show a clear upward trend, albeit at a lower average Gini score. Clearly, the era of globalization has affected redistribution adversely mostly in the industrial world. However, this higher inequality is a by-product of high economic growth. The West is rich and has the financial and institutional wherewithal to reduce the worst harm generated by rising inequality—the poor do not. I am certain that most poor people living in places such as Cuba and North Korea would gladly give up their "equality" for less self-imposed austerity.

Despite the upward trend in income inequality among the rich countries, it is precisely among them that the highest human and environmental health is found. Indeed, one widely recognized indicator used by global and local policy-makers, the Environmental Performance Index, suggests that being wealthy correlates best with local-level environmental outcomes, such as clean air and water and the protection of species. Clearly, the rich can afford to make the right adjustments.[12] Again, it is the level of wealth produced by economic growth that seems to achieve the better outcomes for humans and the planet, not the pursuit of equality for the sake of levelling gradients. Several specialized studies on this subject show that greater openness to global markets and capitalistic economic policies produce far better environmental outcomes, particularly when it comes to reducing emissions and more efficient use of natural resources.[13] Regardless, the world's poor are literally dying to get to that region of the world where inequality is rising, but they care about the *absolute* improvements to their lives and the greater hope offered within wealthy societies rather than the *relative* deprivation they will inevitably have to face the minute they arrive there. What would be most fair to these desperate people, thus, is better economic conditions at home, given the absolute lack of appetite for more open borders, particularly in the more egalitarian societies in the West.

Finally, I take a brief look at the data to assess if income equality and equal access to health (objective proxies of fairness) matter in terms of climate-harming emissions—climate change after all is the "mother of all problems." If higher levels of wealth improve life conditions locally, does it endanger the global commons if one is less equal? Table presents results using an appropriate methodology for assessing the association between our variables of interest and environmental outcomes measured in terms of CO_2 emissions per gross domestic product (GDP) and on a per capita basis.

The ordinary least squares estimates are based on Driscoll-Kraay standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity, first order serial correlation, and spatial dependence. As seen in columns 1-3, higher income inequality associates with lower emissions per GDP, and both equal access to education and health predict higher emissions per GDP. Consistent with arguments made by others, inequalities produce less greenhouse gases because governments that promote broad-based development (consumption) *ceteris paribus* necessarily generate higher emissions.[13,14] The Gini's negative effect is net of income level, which is also negative, suggesting that wealthier countries are environmentally efficient at producing wealth as are more unequal countries. In the next 3 columns (3-6), the inequality variables show the same effects when emissions are measured on a per capita basis, again supporting the view that societies that spread the wealth tend to generate higher emissions per head, presumably because of increased consumption. In this case, however, higher per capita incomes also produce more emissions per head, again, possibly because it captures higher consumption. The results taken across the table suggest that more egalitarian societies produce higher emissions. Arguments that suggest that "all good things go together" are too simplistic and wrongheaded, and ignoring difficult but necessary tradeoffs in policy-making should be addressed rationally rather than ideologically. Getting wealthy is good for health and wellbeing, but it may come at the cost of atmospheric pollution. Redistribution and equality of outcomes seem to unambiguously produce higher emissions possibly because of increased overall consumption—a good thing for human health, but perhaps a bad thing for planetary health. Yes, the rich should reduce consumption, and yes, the poor must catch up with increased growth, but as argued above, this is a complex problem unlikely to be solved by degrowth and by simply fixing "unfairness."

Again, it should be reiterated that there is much in Professor Labonté's editorial that one can agree with, particularly the argument that the rich countries often take advantage of the poor. The poor clearly need more growth to improve life conditions. Such growth can only come from higher growth among the rich, which has pulled roughly a billion people out

Table. Fixed Effects Regressions of Egalitarian Governance and Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 1990-2019

Dependent Variables	**(1)** CO_2**/GDP**	**(2)** CO_2**/GDP**	**(3)** CO_2**/GDP**	**(4)** CO_2**/pc**	**(5)** CO_2**/pc**	**(6)** CO_2**/pc**
Gini (disposable income) (ln)	-1.06***			-0.82***		
	(0.28)			(0.08)		
Equal access to education		0.08***			0.03***	
		(0.02)			(0.01)	
Equal access to health			0.03**			0.03***
			(0.02)			(0.01)
Income per capita (ln)	-0.49***	-0.41***	-0.41***	0.45***	0.35***	0.34***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Urban population share (ln)	1.15***	1.11***	1.16***	0.42***	0.39***	0.40***
	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Liberal democracy	0.04	0.29***	0.31***	0.13***	0.13***	0.13***
	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	3.72***	-0.93	-1.05	-1.42**	0.00	0.00
	(0.94)	(0.80)	(0.82)	(0.55)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Observations	3855	4789	4789	3812	4689	4689
Number of countries	169	171	171	168	170	170

Abbreviations: GDP, gross domestic product; pc, per capita.
Standard errors in parentheses; X variables lagged 1 year; Year fixed effects estimated.
*** $P < .01$, ** $P < .05$, * $P < .1$.

of abject poverty in the past decades, which is unprecedented. Indeed, organized interests among the rich often "fight the wrong enemy," either due to perverse interests that seek to curtail capital outflows (outsourcing), or protect their own markets and jobs from foreign imports (agricultural trade barriers, tariffs, non-tariff barriers).[15] Current calamities associated with rising autocrats are highly unlikely to be due to rising inequalities and dissatisfaction with neoliberal austerity since ordinary people are finding champions in snake-oil salesmen, such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, whose only strategies seem to be to blame globalization and make empty promises about protecting domestic jobs and shelter from progressive social and environmental policies. Well-meaning people's movements, whose banner Professor Labonté admirably carries, thus, should do well to avoid "austerity by design," embracing growth-promoting economic freedoms and joining world markets—the West invented this wheel with great success already. The poor know this, but the rich seem to have forgotten.[16]

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

Author's contribution

IdS is the single author of the paper.

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Commentary

Post-pandemic Economics and Health Equity

Comment on "Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy"

Karime Chahuán-Jiménez*

Abstract
This article aims to compare the foundations of the post-pandemic economy and its impact on health equity, according to Labonté with the economics theory. The methodology developed is based on bibliometrics analysis, the documents, and specifications for a cluster of concepts, allowing deepened exposure of Labonté, complementing with the latest publications on the post-pandemic economy. Finally, the results agreed with Labonté about to economic development for achieving an economy that allows health equity considering sustainable development and the possibility of achieving the livelihood of Green New Deal as a basis.

Keywords: Post-pandemic Economics, Health Equity, Economic Theory, Conceptual Clusters, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 health crisis declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020 generated a rumble in world economies. The markets reflected the breakdown caused by the pandemic in March 2020[1] due to border closures and quarantine warnings in different countries.

As the pandemic progressed, different support programs were developed. However, the main one was the search for an alternative in the health area, the achievement of a vaccine to counteract severe and fatal effects on people.

Once the vaccine was generated and massive vaccination processes began, countries began to move forward with openings because the economies had been strongly affected. Recovery was an inevitable challenge, Labonté[2] indicates that among the proposals requested was a rapid transition to a 'degrowth' or 'post-growth' economy in which the world would be subjected to an extreme diet of material consumption, considering that the common to all proposals was mainly linked to the existing socioeconomic inequality.

The commentary aims to compare the foundations of the post-pandemic economy and its impact from a health equity perspective, presented in Labonté's *ensuring global health equity in a post-pandemic economy*, with the economic theory in the function of conceptual clusters.

In the development of bibliometric analysis (Figure) associated with the generation of clusters with the mains concepts linked with the article: economy and post-pandemic, the clusters identified are those of climate change, economic growth, investment, politics (tax), globalization, and sustainable development, that are the topics on which this commentary was based, those clusters are also comparing with each section of Labonté's manuscript and presented in Table.

Table shows that only the topic of Labonté socio-economic inequality is not considered a conceptual cluster because the bibliometrics analysis has a global focus global more than a qualitative vision.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2

More than two years after having decreed border closures and quarantines in different countries of the world (March 2020), today, the return to normality is a reality, considered a new normal, according to Labonté. One of the main reasons the world has been able to return to this new normal is vaccines, which have been applied to the extent that countries have been able to obtain them, depending on their capacity. Globally, an average of 80% have received at least one dose in North America, Latin America, and the Asia Pacific, an average of 69% in Europe and the Middle East, 57%, and in Africa, 27%.[3] However, some consequences are inherited from SARS-CoV-2.

This reflects the above-mentioned[1] in which the growing disparities in wealth and power have undermined advances in health, also presented by Labonté, especially initially access to vaccination, since they required purchasing power for vaccines, as well as negotiating and accessing them, considering the conditions under which each of the countries is operating in a globalized world.

COVID-19 intensified many economic and social problems societies were already facing,[4] also inequality and climate change according to Labonté's explanation.

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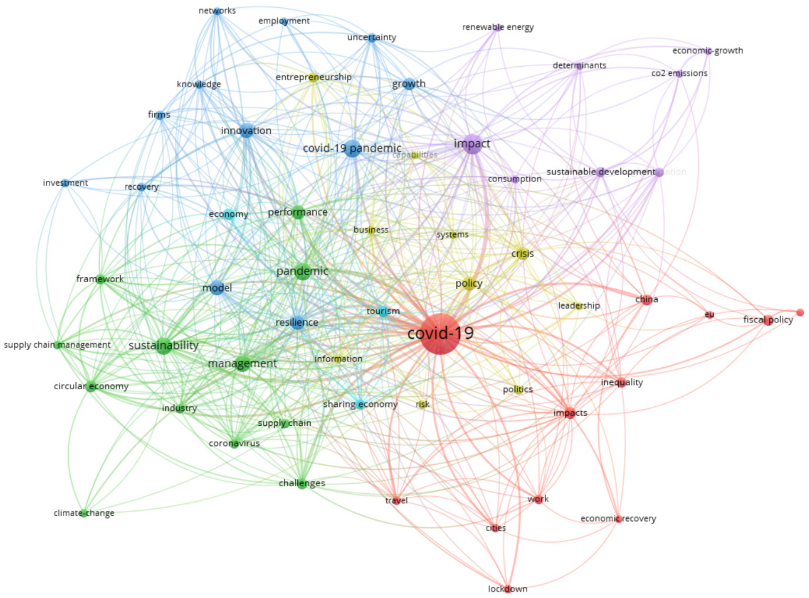
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tourism
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covid-19
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sustainability
management
information
circular economy
inequality
politics
industry
sharing economy
risk
impacts
supply chain
coronavirus
challenges
travel
work
climate-change
economic recovery
cities
lockdown

Figure. Bibliometric Analysis Based on the Post-COVID-19 Economy.

From Shareholder to Stakeholder Capitalism: More of the Same?

Growth-driven natural capitalism supports its key contradictions.[5] Its fundamental conflicts can be focused on cultural politics and political economy, which by 2008 were already defending the environment, and focusing on climate change. Labonté[2] presents the elements of neoliberalism based, trade and financial liberalization, low taxes, minimal state intervention, and substantial property rights, which gave rise to our now familiar globalized economy, which were criticized almost from the beginning because of the inequalities it was promoting. However, it is indicated that the problem lies in maximizing profits for investors from an economic point of view since capitalism involves shareholders and all interested parties. Members of civil society also exert pressure on themselves, ensuring that no individual interest prevails over other interests.[6] The Stakeholder theory cannot replace a theory of civil society developed in the 19th century.

Labonté´s proposal is relevant because it gives way to the economic explanation for a focus of attention for new capitalism is that of sustainable capitalism, that is, on maximizing profit for all interested parties involved in achieving sustainable development, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in developing business and resource generation activities. In addition, the SDGs must be included in economic development, accompanied by sustainable finance and adapting the principles of sustainable development for financial intermediaries.[7] Therefore, the model of sustainable stakeholder capitalism will collaborate in the redistribution of wealth; however, it will strengthen the role of the private sector (not selfless and growing) in global health governance.[8]

The Return of the State: Can Governments Mitigate the Inequalism Inherent in Capitalism?

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected more than 214 countries worldwide, creating uncertainty and affecting all institutions and people.[9] Implementing agile projects is the key to survival in the post-pandemic situation, but emerging economies have a limited scope for implementation. Organizations recognize the need for agile projects that can offer several benefits, such as faster implementation, adaptability, and better alignment to meet customer needs.

A notable fact in governance is that the principles of new

Table. Conceptual Cluster and the Relation With Explain of Labonté (2022)

Bibliometric Analysis	Labonté (2022)
Climate change	Degrowth/post-growth: Should we build back at all? Indicating that most of the responsibility lies with citizens, governments, and corporate actors in the historically over-consuming Global North.
Economic growth	Economic development, proposals based on the use of green energy.
Investment	From shareholder to stakeholder capitalism: More of the same?
Fiscal Policy	Tax and fiscal policy space: Can we build back fairer?
Globalization	Indications presented according to the World Economic Forum, proposal to build back better from the United States and other countries, and the European Union.
Sustainable development	Indicated in from shareholder capitalism to shareholder capitalism: More of the same? Incorporating the concept of degrowth from an environmental economy.
	Socio-economic inequality.

governance, such as the value of money and the pluralization of service delivery, are being put aside when governments urgently need to stop the spread of infection.[10]

The post-pandemic recovery plans for those countries with the required fiscal capacities seemed to embody that transformative, both micro and macro-economic optimism,[11] according to Labonté. The Green New Deal still promises substantial environmental protection, a rapid change in fossil fuels, and new expansionary social spending, as in the case of the European Union. Their support corresponds to the implementation of numerous recovery plans for Member States to try to mitigate the damage caused by COVID-19. The most critical element of this program is the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, endowed with 672.5 billion euros in loans and grants. Seventy percent of Recovery and Resilience Facility grants will be distributed between 2021 and 2022, and the remaining 30% in 2023. The allocation of grants for 2021-2022 has been based on different socio-economic criteria.[12]

Fiscal and Fiscal Policy Space: Can We Rebuild More Fairly?

The pandemic brought the state back to support. Many countries responded with wage support, cash transfers, credit schemes, tax cuts and delays, support for importers and exporters, policy rate cuts, support for businesses, and subsidies or rent deferrals, that fueled speculation of a turning point in state/market dynamics, as Labonté puts it, reflecting the reality of what happened.

The mechanisms imposed by governments and the support required in different areas underpin the need to create monetary and fiscal policies that are flexible, that are coordinated and that give the government the space to maneuver while navigating these enormous environmental and social challenges.[13]

Including Labonté´s proposal, a single wealth tax could raise significant revenue and continue public support since this would not affect consumption and depend on income.

Decrease/Post-growth: Should We Rebuild at All?

The response of governments to the dramatic economic slowdown caused by the pandemic in the face of "normal" periods of recession usually involves cuts in public spending. However, the opposite has occurred in response to COVID-19, where unprecedented levels of public spending have been seen, resulting from political actions rather than economic facts.[14] It is a parallel to be studied between degrowth and post-growth, the economic contraction induced by COVID-19 was involuntary and not a deliberative plan that emerged from a simple and large-scale democratic process, so it would be unfair to say that a planned transition to degrowth would have the same effects inequitable. The transition to a post-growth economy is, ultimately, a political decision that requires concrete policy options that favor the well-being of society rather than an endless expansion of gross domestic product.[15] Moreover, one of the options for development is the option identified by Labonté, in which he indicates that a relatively new concept has entered the lexicon of environmental economics: degrowth, which captures the importance of reducing aggregate levels of global consumption to avoid the catastrophic collapse of ecosystems.

Towards a Supportive Post-growth Economy: Can We Challenge the Rise of Autocratic Regimes?

The transformation of capitalism through neoliberalism and achieving a sustainable solidarity economy requires governments willing to discipline markets for good public purposes and to initiate fiscal and tax policies that radically redistribute access to the resources people need for healthy living, confirming what Labonté states. The development of each of the countries must be seen in global markets led by the SDGs, with intermediaries who privilege the assumption of the principles of sustainable development and who assume the implementation of the Green New Deal as a duty.

Conclusion

The development of the pandemic has been a huge global event that has affected countries. Some countries were involved (developed countries) together with WHO for development, which was the proposed solution: the generation of the vaccine. Each of them has different dimensions, considering aspects of management, policies, and economic development. The measures taken by the governments to face the pandemic were presented by index; the public health index (considers 13 measures) and the index of economic measures (considers seven measures). Considering the indexes, it is possible to see that there is no direct relation between economic development, with the rigidity of the measures taken since there are countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the level of rigidity is not the same for the group of countries belonging to the OECD.[16]

The analysis developed makes it possible to identify the pandemic as a disruption in all kinds of aspects at a global level; Labonté´s focus on the global economic aspects of development and agreeing that the disruption from the health of people, disruption in markets. From every point of view, disruption in the way of governing, disruption in the economic models assumed or adopted by countries, a disruption from obtaining countries' resources with their trade union policies and disruption that should make it possible to generate growth in through sustainable developments at a global level.

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Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that she has no competing interests.

Author's contribution

KCJ is the single author of the paper.

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Commentary

“Post”-pandemic Capitalism: Reform or Transform?

Comment on “Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy”

Howard Waitzkin*

Abstract
This commentary expresses appreciation for Professor Labonté’s work, along with some hopefully constructive suggestions. Professor Labonté’s editorial shows ambivalence about reforms within capitalism. Such reforms remain contradictory and unlikely to prevail. Transformation to post-capitalist political economies is an exciting focus of moving beyond the hurtful effects of capitalism. Can “the state … mitigate capitalism’s inherent inegalitarianism”? Problematically, government resides in the capitalist state, whose main purpose is to protect the capitalist economic system. The state’s contradictory characteristics manifest in inadequate measures to protect health, as during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Social determination,” referring to illness-generating structures of power and finance, is replacing “social determinants,” referring mainly to demographic variables. Problems warranting attention include: capitalist industrial agriculture causing pandemics through destruction of protective natural habitat, structural racism, sexism and social reproduction, social class structure linked to inequality, and expropriation of nature to accumulate capital. Transformation to post-capitalism involves creative construction of new solidarity economies, while creative destructions block smooth functioning of the capitalist system.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Capitalism, Capitalist State, Reform, Revolution

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With great respect for the author, here are some hopefully constructive comments and suggestions.

Contradictions of Reform Within the Capitalist State

An underlying ambivalence runs through the editorial[1]: At times, the adverse impacts of capitalism on health seem possible to ameliorate through various reforms. At other times, the structural basis of capitalism, especially the requirement of growth to sustain the accumulation of capital, seems to make impossible the achievement of meaningful health-improving reforms. A single message would focus on the contradictions of reforming the global capitalist system, as well as the importance of imagining and acting on moving beyond capitalism for health.

For instance, the arguments about “ensuring health equity” and improving inequalities of illness and early death through reforms of capitalism generate skepticism. The paper would benefit by discarding the ambivalence and stating clearly that the health-affirming effects of reforms within capitalism remain fundamentally contradictory and unlikely to be sustained. Therefore, the key effort today involves imagining how our societies can transform concretely to post-capitalist political economic systems. Such a transformation involves revolutionary change, the nature of which has become an exciting focus of people’s struggles to move beyond capitalism and its hurtful effects worldwide.

“It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of our economic system.” This statement, attributed to Fredric Jameson,[2] conveys how simple it is to visualize scenarios leading to the end of humanity and other life forms (global warming with rising oceans and hot, uninhabitable land masses, nuclear Armageddon, and so forth). The quote also conveys a vacuum of creative thinking that continues to inhibit transcending global capitalism — a system that benefits an increasingly concentrated fragment of the world’s population (now roughly 0.5%) at the expense of the rest of us.[3] Yet, how to get from A to B, capitalism to post-capitalism, is the question that we need to answer during this critical period of history, when the destructive forces of this system threaten the survival of human beings and other species.

Most of us find that it is difficult to imagine a viable path from capitalism to post-capitalism (the ‘TINA’ perspective, that is, “There Is No Alternative”). Because it is hard to imagine a viable path from capitalism to post-capitalism, most people addressing our world’s challenges assume that capitalism will continue to exist. Therefore, we engage in peculiar ways of struggling to improve our most important problems without confronting capitalism, even though we recognize that capitalism generates these problems and continues to make them worse.[4] Constructing innovative knowledge about a transformation that actually can move beyond capitalism is one purpose of this commentary, as well as many efforts that colleagues and I are pursuing during this dangerous yet hopeful period of world history, as discussed further below.

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Professor Lebonté considers the ways that "the state" can "mitigate capitalism's inherent inegalitarianism." A major problem, however, arises from the character of the state in which government resides. The state in which government resides is the capitalist state; it is not a neutral state, let alone a state that aims to benefit people other than the small group of those at the top of the pyramid of wealth and power who control the state. Time and again, political economic realities have confirmed Marx and Engels's claim that the main role of the capitalist state is to protect the capitalist economic system, or, to use their metaphor, the state is the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie."[5] The capitalist state secures the conditions for perpetual capital accumulation. Accordingly, despite their seemingly benevolent impact, the welfare state's functions pertinent to health, as well as public education, housing, transportation, livable wages, and adequate food supplies, are inherently subject to several political economic contradictions.

First, the welfare components of the capitalist state remain vulnerable to cutbacks, privatization, and elimination during economic crises, as recently exemplified by the extension of austerity policies to the national health programs of most European countries.[6] Important public programs of the welfare state predictably constrict or disappear as the capitalist state gears up to address the recurrent crises of capitalism.[7]

These contradictory characteristics of the capitalist state also have manifested in the introduction of measures that undermine public health systems. As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the ability of public health agencies to implement policies seeking to prevent spread of the infection was compromised by pressures from capital to reopen and resume economic activities that would increase community risk. Simultaneously, these public health agencies often could not overcome barriers to equitable provision of vaccines and medications due to the institutionalized monopoly power of pharmaceutical corporations that protected patent restrictions and profitability (p. 244).[8]

Second, these welfare functions of the capitalist state contribute to false consciousness and hegemonic beliefs about the state's beneficent potential to ameliorate the excesses of the system. This ideological impact has been termed the state's "legitimation function" (p. 244).[8,9] By providing helpful services including healthcare through a national health program, the state legitimates the continuing inequalities and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system. Some national health programs, such as those in England, Scandinavia, and Canada, have tried to reduce inequalities and exploitation, and the successes of these programs have brought legitimacy as parts of strong welfare states. Yet eventually, with the recurrent crises of capitalism in those countries, cutbacks and privatization have generated wide discontent and reduced the perceived legitimacy of the capitalist system.

Social Determinants Versus Social Determination

Increasingly, the concept of "social determination," referring to the social structures of power and finance that generate ill health and early death, is replacing the concept of "social determinants," referring to "disparities" in mostly demographic characteristics linked to adverse health outcomes (Table). The paper would benefit by referring to this important conceptual distinction, developed most fruitfully so far in Latin American social medicine (p. 177-198),[8,10] which holds great importance in envisioning and constructing a "post-COVID-19 economy for health." Professor Labonté's own work, for instance on trade agreements and international financial institutions, shows how unlikely it is that reforms in the global capitalist system will happen to the extent that social determination will improve substantially.[11] More concrete examples from that work could help concretize the analysis.

To reach a "post-COVID-19 economy for health" implies resolution of recurrent pandemics, so the paper would benefit from some analysis of the origins of such pandemics in capitalist food production and distribution. The author could address structural sources of zoonotic infections causing

Table. Differences Between Social Determinants and Social Determination

Social Determinants	Social Determination
Society as sum of individuals.	Society as a totality.
Health–illness as dichotomous states.	Health–illness as a dialectic process.
Change achieves equilibrium; functionalist perspective.	Change results from social contradictions that lead to mass movements and social conflicts.
Variables at individual level of analysis, viewed as risk factors: income, education, job, social cohesion.	Hierarchies of determination, production, and reproduction at a societal level.
Social position generates different exposures and vulnerabilities.	Power relations, accumulation of capital, and discrimination (classism, racism, sexism) create inequality, exploitation, and chronic stress, which lead to illness and early death.
Reforms achieved through "political will" can change SDOH as risk factors. Such changes can occur within the global capitalist system.	Meaningful, lasting improvements in social determination will happen only through societal transformation, including moving beyond the characteristics of global capitalism that generate illness, early death, and fundamental threats to the future of humanity and other forms of life on planet earth.
Example: Individual-level poverty is associated with increasing obesity and diabetes. Interventions focus on changing the eating and exercise habits of poor people.	Example: Obesity and diabetes increase when low-income communities lose their ability to grow and to consume healthy foods through collaborative activities that involve physical labor and mutual aid. Unhealthy foods containing high sugar content are promoted by the capitalist food industry, and healthy foods are more expensive or unavailable due to "food deserts" linked to corporate decisions about profitable investments. Interventions focus on self-sufficiency in collaborative food production, distribution, and consumption at the community level, which reduce profiteering and food insecurity.

Abbreviation: SDOH, social determinants of health.

pandemics in capitalist industrial agriculture, especially destruction of natural habitat and production of meat.[12] This fundamental cause of all zoonotic epidemics during recent decades receives much less attention than it should.

Structural racism is intrinsic to racial capitalism, whose successes from the beginning have depended on slavery, genocide, and more recent approaches to racialization that inherently exploit poor and marginalized peoples — those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth."[13] The editorial does not refer to racism and, in my view, should. There is no scientific basis to argue that genetically determined race exists, certainly not as an important "variable" in the determination of bad health outcomes. But without doubt racism, through its embodiment among oppressed peoples, does help determine illness and early death. Important recent work on racial capitalism, racialization, and critical race theory calls into question the feasibility of health-affirming reforms within the framework of the capitalist economy.[8]

Sexism and women's work in social reproduction is an inherent structural condition that creates and reinforces the exploitation of women within racial capitalism and itself figures importantly in the social determination of health outcomes.[8] Professor Labonté mentions gender equity in the editorial, but this brief reference could be expanded to include the relationship between social reproduction and social determination of health.

Although the author refers to inequality and briefly mentions a "billionaire class," social class does not emerge in the editorial as an important conceptual and practical category. Since Engels referred to the "social murder" of workers in the classic seminal source of social epidemiology, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the class structure of capitalist society has emerged as arguably the most fundamental cause in the social determination of ill health and early death.[8] During the current epoch of grotesque inequality, when a tiny elite control most of the world's wealth, class structure has become even more important to analyze and change, so in my opinion the editorial should include more reference to that key dimension of capitalism and health.

The expropriation of nature as an essential requirement for the accumulation of capital has figured as a core observation in ecology, at least since Marx and Engels's analysis of how the accumulation of capital takes place under capitalism. "Robbery" of raw materials, expropriation of land through enclosures and rent (destroying the prior "commons" that facilitated food production), the "metabolic rift" by which racial capitalism fundamentally shifted agricultural processes and destroyed the soil's nutrients and carbon absorbing capacity by shifting human wastes to water-borne disposal, the subsequent use of toxic fertilizers and hazardous pollution from industrial agriculture, and the role of military organizations as the principal institutional generators of atmospheric carbon dioxide all figure as parts of capitalism's destructive expropriation of nature.[14] As one focus of this editorial, green new deals within the framework of a reformed racial capitalism, especially those that depend on new capitalist technologies, warrant at least some analysis from the standpoint of capitalism's inherent structural tendencies to destroy nature, with profound effects on health and well-being.

Revolutionary Transformation

What is the path toward revolutionary transformation of racial capitalism and its pernicious effects in the social determination of health? Millions of people in local communities around the world actually are changing their lives to move beyond capitalism. The characteristics of this transformation involve actions and inactions that are different from what some of us and traditional teachings have viewed as violent conflict. Key features of the transformation include the implementation of solidarity economies, an expansion of local and regional mutual aid, a transcendence of the "leviathan" that comprises the capitalist state with the construction of communal governance structures, and other creative innovations whose reality has become more feasible as people's (and especially young people's) options for survival have become much more limited under late capitalism.[8,15]

These emerging economic transformations hold important implications for health and wellbeing, as exemplified for instance by the prioritization of "buen vivir" (living well) as a core health policy in some countries and localities of Latin America. Such transformations usually involve grassroots, bottom-up activism, rather than top-down policies initiated by political and economic elites. Communal, democratic decision-making processes specifically seek to avoid the top-down tendencies toward coercive political power that occurred in some versions of "actually existing socialism" such as the Soviet Union under Stalin. In post-capitalist society, the "leviathan state" that protects and legitimates a political economic system based on private accumulation of capital gives way to a new political economic system based on protecting planet earth and the beings that live here.[8,15,16] This transformative scenario deserves more recognition and serious appraisal in any efforts to construct a "post-COVID-19 economy for health."

A transition to post-capitalism is already occurring throughout the world in the creative construction of communal organizations that govern themselves and that act to assure the survival and well-being of their participants. Many examples of such efforts already have emerged.[8,15] Such widespread efforts contrast with the more publicized turn to right-wing authoritarianism in some localities, as well as militarism such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The resulting solidarity political economies, first, find ways to create cheap, small-scale, cooperative, pleasant, comfortable, and health-promoting housing units that require very little money, with collaborative solutions to exploitative rent, debt, taxes, and insurance. Second, communal organizations solve the food problem through local production and distribution of healthy food, achieving independence from capitalist agriculture, and local sovereignty in food production and distribution. To facilitate these actions, local and regional solidarity economies can issue their own currencies with work-time equivalents (such as mutual exchange of work units), offering opportunities similar to those proposed by modern monetary theory within the context of capitalism (as mentioned by Professor Lebonté).[8,15] The implementation of post-capitalist healthcare and public health occurs mainly within the locally organized solidarity political economies.

In addition to creative constructions, creative destructions aim to slow down or stop the smooth functioning of the capitalist political economy, as already manifested through many examples.[8,15] Creative destructions do not take place by obtaining police permits for demonstrations, even large ones, but rather by direct actions that actually slow down or stop the key processes of capitalism. Other creative destructions involve diverting our investments and tax payments into post-capitalist solidarity political economies, with awareness of the predictably favorable impacts on health and healthcare. Through such actions, we can realize the joy of stopping our consent to, and unwitting support for, a system that we know damages our health, well-being, and happiness, and that stifles our ability to give and receive humane, high-quality, and accessible healthcare.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Commentary

Frustrations of a Longtime Global Issues Activist

Comment on “Ensuring Global Health Equity in a Post-pandemic Economy”

Claudio Schuftan[*]

Abstract
Labonté’s first commentary[1] concluded with what I wholeheartedly agree, namely that “we need an activist public health movement to ensure there is sufficient political will to adopt them.” In their follow-up commentary, Moers and colleagues[2] looked at things from a slightly different angle saying that to achieve equity will need radical changes in economic thinking and policies; they added that advocates needed to be strategic about framing and use hope-based communication and develop attractive and convincing narratives: “By doing so, hopefully we can bring these messages across to larger groups of people.” Well, I think that, together with many others, I have been strategic and radical, but only to accumulate a large bag of disappointments and broken hopes in trying to ‘bring the message across.’ But I come back to memories of so many defeats that I, with others, have lived through. Here, I describe my frustrations but explain why I do not give up hope.

Keywords: Flawed Global Governance, Cooptation of UN Bodies, Defending Multilateralism, Resisting Multistakeholderism, Needed Engagements

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Can We Work Towards Building a People’s Governance Grounded in Multilateralism and Human Rights?

> *It just takes courage to stand up for the things we do at this moment of history.*

Frustrations can cause us to brood, but they also make us rethink. It is perhaps pertinent here to recall a few of the negotiations I was involved in that justify my frustration: negotiation of Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO’s) Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food and those on Food Systems, reforming FAO’s Committee on Food Security, the introduction of a coordinated COVID-19 and current food crisis action agenda at the same Committee on Food Security, the COVID-19 waiver at the World Trade Organization allowing the transfer of vaccine technology, the United Nations’ (UN’s) Food Systems Summit that ended up being a showcase of corporate capture and conflicts of interest, the Binding Treaty on Transnational Corporations and Human Rights being painfully negotiated for nine+ years at the Human Rights Council, World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors and other WHO resolutions, the Scaling Up Nutrition Initiative, UN Nutrition rising from the demise of the UN’s Standing Committee on Nutrition, WHO’s COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Initiative (COVAX), 26 Conferences of the Parties on Climate Change since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992… And the list could go on… The common denominator here is that the unambiguous position of public interest organizations, literally representing millions, did not fare too well in all of these thus the frustration I here ventilate.

In this commentary I want to zero-in on the challenges social movements actors have chronically faced in relation to having so unsuccessfully tackled and continue to tackle global governance issues. Am I and these actors fooling ourselves that ‘things are going to eventually be alright?’ or Does everybody involved need to work in a totally different way given that the private sector and countries rendered rich have pushed our backs totally against the wall on these issues and fora? My hope is that smart young people pick up the challenges I depict below.

Bringing the Relevant Issues to Mind (Needed Elements for a Cool-Headed Analysis)

Public interest civil society organizations (PICSOs) and social and indigenous movements forever seek meaningful participation in global fora in an effort to influence and strengthen — beyond voice — the decisions that can lead to lasting, legally binding changes. Unfortunately, too many times their pleas are ultimately ignored. But, they keep trying despite all odds: …“*I participate. You participate. He/she participates. We participate; but… They decide*” (chalkboard in La Paz, Bolivia).

Risking being brief to the point of offering only a caricature, I here distill my experience on the most relevant issues: (I have written in more detail explaining and backing up each of these bullet points. If interested, go to https://claudioschuftan.

People’s Health Movement, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

com/133-frustrations-of-a-lifelong-global-issues-activist/)

- The UN system is fatally flawed as the basis for multilateral/sectoral agreements and needs wholesale reform; but this reform can and will only 'come from below.'
- As said, PICSOs have insufficient power to influence UN-related negotiations yet are often better informed/resourced than lower- and middle-income country delegations who vote for relevant resolutions.
- Opportunities are given to PICSOs simply to give the illusion of genuine consultation/inclusivity.
- Final decisions that PICSOs try to influence too often clash with the call for consensus-arrived resolutions by UN bodies and member states. It remains to be proven though that such a consensus is reached by genuine choice or by pressure reflecting an international system captured by the powerful influence of countries rendered rich.
- Michael Fakhri, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food reminded us that "PICSOs coming to the table to discuss better, global solutions' is not as simple as it sounds, especially if the table is already set, the seating plan non-negotiable and the menu highly limited. …And what if the real conversation is actually happening at a different table?"[3]
- Consensus using softened language is usually hammered out at the wee-wee hours of the night before the deadline a resolution must be passed — only to make PICSOs bitterly complain.
- Business interest non-governmental organizations are significantly more powerful in UN-related negotiations both directly and indirectly as members of multistakeholder platforms and public-private partnerships that lobby at country level and at international UN agencies (To little avail, civil society actors incessantly and forcefully denounce and dispute this).
- The global political economy continues to concentrate resources in the hands of private actors so that the international rules-based system of global governance currently enables, rather than resists their influence.
- The drivers of global governance have access to enormous and growing resources so that those rendered rich will find more and more ways to resist regulations that hamper their interests.
- A global conscience raising effort is needed to frame and push for effective reform of the UN system and global governance more generally — PICSOs may be well or better placed to do this since through political engagement, activists can indeed make some scenarios more likely — and other undesirable ones less likely and ultimately make more resolutions binding to member states.
- The risk of inaction in this realm is for new UN resolutions to only tinker with pat solutions so that, by the end of the Sustainable Development Goals (2030), we will be again discussing these same issues.

Moreover, all the signing of letters of complaint and the writing of declarations and petitions, as well as the three-minutes-reading-of-statements at UN meetings PICSOs are allowed to make may make us feel better, but how much do they help? Do we follow-up on them?

Finally here, I want to emphasize that nothing is going to come from the 'member states or this or that UN agency or the international community *should*' parlance in recommendations. World Bank Reports are full of these 'shoulds'(!) and look where that has taken us. Assessing claim holders' capacity and space to de-facto demand is thus part of the broader challenge. In short, any call must be coupled with human rights learning at the bases so as to help claim holders empower themselves to start demanding the needed changes. Otherwise, our calls will become yet more wish letters to Santa Claus that only bring us toys …'batteries not included.' Worldwide coordination among all social movements that support the human rights-based framework is thus the crucial challenge: forget relying on the ill-defined 'international community!'

What I Think Needs, Among Other, to Be Done

[Actions suggested here to address the deplorable current situation in global governance are, again, brief and not exhaustive; they are presented in no particular order of priority and I am not as pretentious as to think I have the package-of-actions-to-follow to propose to you — they are rather terribly prescriptive and normative; they complement Labonté and colleagues' and Meurs and colleagues' views].

The main challenges I suggest be addressed can be gathered under two rubrics:

Need for Collective Action

A strong advocacy work at UN agencies is needed in several fronts: First, I would say is to keep demanding resolutions do not require being passed by consensus, ie, allowing for member states voting for them thus eventually allowing minority reports. Second, is to be careful not to compromise when, so often — in a mockery of opening up to democratic decision-making — PICSOs are asked to comment on and/or endorse 'zero' or advanced drafts of official UN documents. This goes together with not accepting more promises in these documents if they do not go with concrete measures that can be legally enforced and monitored. This, I strongly feel is why so many resolutions end up with what only appears-to-be well hammered-out recommendations; in the end, the latter are only aspirations; without a commensurate call for matching policies based on legally enforceable measures, these resolutions are of no relevance to the fulfilment of "We The People of the United Nations" rights. Add to this the deceiving, poorly defined language used in these resolutions: no more stakeholders, no more loosely defined partnerships among unequal allies, no more non-state actors, no more evidence-based, no more international community, no more mutual accountability…

To make progress on the above, the PICSOs communications capacity has to significantly increase and become more punching; since the traditional media are controlled by the forces of the status-quo, social media are the best option they have (I note that Twitter storms have achieved some victories, if limited).

As a take-home message here for actions needed, consider: As much as more political analyses are needed, so are more political actions. I would therefore posit that to make sense of current world problems, we too often fall back on a 'shish-kebab mentality.' This much easier and convenient approach looks at the various problems affecting the world as if they were all separate events skewed together by tragedy or destiny. So, we set out to tackle each individual morsel …when the problem is in the skewer, ie, in the structural determinants or, if you wish, the common systemic drivers of the problems behind each morsel. These are linked to the prevailing neoliberal system that is at the very core-of and affecting each of the morsels. The point thus is: The focus has to be on changing the skewer as a means to more radically change the morsels. So, the morsels have to come together as a collective rather than letting themselves be pinched up individually on the skewer.

Closer Zeroing in on Structural Determinants[1]

PICSOs alone will hardly achieve the needed structural changes; this means they have to actively work with sympathetic UN member states willing to speak up in international fora partnering with PICSOs — since civil society representatives are not given the floor to openly demand the changes their respective constituencies call for. As important, is for them to connect and exchange analyses and tactics with like-minded social movements constituencies and other civil society platforms in an effort to broaden the mobilization around the structural determinants depicted in the shish-kebab above, from local to global levels. The rationale is that the broader the base of organized claim holders that can be reached to exercise counter-power, the more sustainable the outcome will be, noting that, for this to happen, claim holders must progressively get inside spaces where they have been traditionally uninvited and/or excluded. Some political parties and 'sympathetic champions' inside UN agencies and other international agencies ought not to be off-limits in this effort either since such persons do exist and are key assets and need to be nurtured and encouraged to speak out [A caveat here is to watch out for Business interest non-governmental organizations that pretend to be on the public interest's side, but are hiding who their financial sponsors are. The tactic has been called 'astroturfing'[4]].

As a take-home message here for zeroing in on what is urgent, consider: Many small struggles are to coalesce; among other, this means additionally engaging with academics, trade unions and with youth and women's and indigenous peoples grassroots organizations — emulating the climate movement and their effective denunciation, eg, the Fridays For Future movement and Greta's Blah! Blah! Blah! Denunciation. This broadening of alliances is to include engagement with the different UN mandate holders (including UN special rapporteurs), as well as with the progressive organizations advocating for the struggle of PICSOs' struggle in Geneva (the South Center, the Third World Network, the Europe-Third World Centre, Centre Europe-Tier Monde…), in the Netherlands Transnational Institute, Transnational Institute and in so many other places that I feel guilty not to mention.

Last but not least, if PICSOs are to achieve much of the above, their internal organization must be strengthened so they can redouble their efforts to get involved, as well as to mentor more able spokespersons, especially young activists, to speak out.

Bottom Line

I started asking: Can we work towards building a people's governance grounded in multilateralism and human rights? The answer may be to adopt new, more drastic and far-reaching ways of engagement. If this fails, PICSOs and people's movements may as well ponder the alternative to leave working with UN bodies coopted by powerful interests and moving their demands to encourage action at grassroots organizations with a greater potential to influence governance decisions that break away from the neoliberal chokehold. I recognize we are not there yet. The example of the People's Health Movement's 'WHO Watch' active in the World Health Assembly and its Executive Board meetings every year adds an important action point suggestion here.[5]

PICSOs and social movements are not giving priority to this grassroots mobilization yet. They are giving priority to continue staying in UN spaces to be watchdogs and to continue demanding conditions and procedures they want to see in place. In that sense, it is about resisting, but hardly about being radically forward-looking.

An Afterthought

In grieving for the alleged failures of our progressive struggles of the past, do weigh what may have happened if as PICSOs and social movements, we would not have engaged in those struggles!

On a More Facetious Note

En un café de Madrid escuché esta conversación, que mostraba un gran pesimismo, pero ningún dramatismo:

Uno de los contertulios le decía a otro:

-A mi, lo que más me gusta es perder a las barajas.
-¿Pero es que no te gusta ganar?
-¡Coño! ¿se puede? (you can deepl.com translate this).

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Disclaimers

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author and do not constitute a position of the People's Health Movement. The commentary is primarily, but not only, for reflection by colleagues and fellow travelers who, with me and for many years, have been quixotically fighting the windmills of global development governance.

Endnotes

[1] here I focus on challenges PICSOs ought to be picking up on.

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Transforming Capitalism, From Top Down to Bottom Up; A Response to the Recent Commentaries

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With ever-larger swathes of the world aflame (both literally and socio-politically) the need for a now official "post-pandemic" economic transformation is glaringly apparent. I hoped my article outlining what COVID-19 had placed on offer[1] would stimulate debate and apparently it did, although sometimes coming from different starting assumptions. I begin my response with de Soysa[2] and close with Waitzkin,[3] the two commentaries representing the most robust and near polar opposites. Several of the other commentaries offer complementary insights.

Decoupling Growth From Consumption

De Soysa's commentary, "Austerity by Design," has a punchy ring to it, one that he uses to cite a number of "stylized facts" to challenge many of the similarly stylized (if different) facts presented in my article. He apparently agrees with my "larger claim that many global economic and policy processes are unfair to the poor"; just as I agree with him that "increasing average wealth and health standards of the population at large is the surest path to achieving health equity" (p. 1-2). Where we part company is where he describes "degrowth" as little more than "self-imposed austerity" (p. 1). A fairly novel term, degrowth has accumulated a fair amount of critique from conventional economists and developing country activists alike, suggesting caution and careful explication in its use. Contrary to de Soysa I did not simplistically argue "degrowth as a solution to questions of poverty, health, and fairness" (p. 1), although I did question the environmental viability of capitalism's underpinning consumption-led growth model. De Soysa appears to agree with at least some of my argument, to the point of noting that "yes, the rich should reduce consumption, and, yes, the poor must catch up with increased growth" (p. 3). But he also argues that growth for the poor "can only come from higher growth among the rich" (p. 3), thereby providing the poor with "more markets and capital" (p. 2). We still end up with an ever-expanding and environmentally unsustainable spiral of consumption, which degrowth economists argue is the real issue.

If growth was decoupled from consumption and reflected, instead, more of the "prosperity" and "caring" measures that post-growth economists are urging, and which Meurs and colleagues describe in their commentary,[4] there would be little to quibble about. But what de Soysa espouses is a continuation of capitalist status quo growth. He does not ignore the negative environmental externalities that can accompany growth but glosses over them with comments such as "being wealthy correlates best with local-level environmental outcomes" (p. 2). This stylized fact may be true, but it is also an outcome of colonial legacies upon which much of that wealth accumulation rested (and by some accounts, still does), and the grossly distorted global environmental footprints of the world's richest 10% whose consumption accounts for half of CO2 emissions,[5] five times more than the emissions produced by the world's bottom 3.1 billion. It is this disequalizing aspect of our current growth economy that challenges any continuation of the status quo.

Marketing Fair Growth

The contribution from Meurs, Koutsoumpa, and Huisman, "…Words Count!," like other commentators, found the concept of "degrowth" problematic, not so much for what it implies than how its use as a policy frame is unlikely to create the needed public health activist pressure needed for change. The authors, all affiliated with the Dutch development non-governmental organization, Wemos, argue that the term risks inducing the opposite. Despite referencing this concept in my article I share similar misgivings about marketing the term and agree with the Wemos commentators that, as a mobilizing strategy, it could alienate rather than inspire people. Their plea for hope-based messaging is a reminder that most people "relate growth to something positive, like improvements in health and well-being" (p. 2); and that degrowth can create an unhelpful cognitive dissonance, something I have encountered in reactions to the concept from political and social movement leaders in the "Global South." As I suggested in a footnote to my article, "fair growth" may be a more marketable concept; although it is only when the meaning of these terms is made more explicit that they may become useful advocacy frames.

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Their cautionary commentary is particularly relevant in light of our rapidly worsening climate crises and the increased climate anxiety it creates. In a recent *Vox* article, Ritchie, the lead researcher for Oxford's "Our World in Data" group chided climate pessimists, not so much for being wrong, but for repetitively voicing a nihilistic future in the expectation of scaring people into action.[6] It does not work because it generates more resignation (hopelessness) than activism (hopefulness). Neither does what she calls "complacent optimism," the belief that progress is inevitable if we just stick to the path we are already on, as de Soysa suggests. Changeable optimism, in which we "hold on to an edge of dissatisfaction," is "the road to progress," although here Ritchie relies primarily upon technological innovation and is silent on the unequal power relations that typify our dominant political economy. As a recent study that questioned the pessimistic assumptions of "decoupling" carbon emissions from gross domestic product growth noted, high rates of decoupling might be technically possible but not without transforming the structure of market economies.[7]

A Residue of Discontent

Jensen's commentary, "Things That Become Visible, for a While, Can Leave a Residue," finds hopefulness in many of the points raised in my article but accurately laments that "not for the first time, the doomsday machine," a reference to Indian writer Arundhati Roy's description of our pathological political economy, "appears more like an unstoppable juggernaut" (p. 1).[8] She first draws attention to how the social inequities made stark by COVID-19's sudden appearance quickly conflated to "a question of the unequal distribution of biomedical products." While not unimportant, "efforts to address health inequities need to go far beyond ensuring equitable access to healthcare technologies" (p. 2). One aspect of contemporary capitalism she usefully highlights is the rise of "rentier capitalism" that enriches owners of income-generating assets ("rents"), distinct from the profits generated through the manufacture of goods. Others subsume rentier capitalism under the financialization of the global economy enabled by neoliberal deregulation, liberalized capital markets, and digital technologies.[9] Given that the wealthy world is already consuming manufactured goods at environmentally unsustainable levels, making money from money rather than from making and selling more stuff may not be such a bad thing, except for three caveats. Jensen identifies the first (it perpetuates inequalities). Secondly, many in the developing world still need more stuff to achieve reasonable life expectancies. Thirdly, the mass accumulation of financial capital inevitably finds its way to the "real economy" of production and consumption. Jensen finds some optimism in a "spreading discontent and an increasing…awareness of the inequalities and injustices at the heart of our dominant economic system" (p. 3): the "residue" of what was made visible by the pandemic and remains very much with us.

Giving Voice to the Residue of Discontent

Bodini, in her commentary,[10] suggests that this residue is most evident in the progressive role of social movements in opposing unjust political economies, and in "growing and nurturing alternative approaches to structuring society and improving health and well-being" (p. 2). While she acknowledges that the pandemic was "increasingly marked by violence against human rights defenders and representatives of social movements," she echoes a "changeable optimism" in an increase in activist engagement at local and global levels, in which "building convergence across different social movements" (p. 3) is key to building the power needed for radical change. Schuftan[11] makes a similar argument, although only after first recounting a list of progressive social movement failures in the sense of activists being heard but rarely being listened to. This participatory tokenism with which most activists are overly familiar is most recently evident in the inability of health activists, despite enormous efforts, to win a meaningful waiver to the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, an example of what Schuftan considers "a fatally flawed" United Nations (UN) system in need of "wholesale reform [that] can and only will come from below" (p. 2). Emphasizing their role as human rights "claims bearers" he suggests that in any future engagement with the flawed institutions of global governance such mobilized "PICSOs" (his acronym for "public interest civil society organizations") must support only those "concrete measures that can be legally enforced and measured." Given evidence suggesting that intergovernmental binding agreements (treaties) that lack enforcement measures rarely demonstrate substantive change in the issues they address (to say little of the multiplying array of non-binding UN declarations),[12] this is a formidable challenge to which the World Health Organization's (WHO's) negotiating text for a pandemic treaty, despite "PICSO" calls for strong (binding) and enforceable language, has yet (as of November 2023) to rise.

Whose Caring Economy?

Cohen, in her supportive commentary on "The Values of a Care Economy," makes an important point: that our current capitalist system that I suggest a "caring economy" could offset or replace already embeds care within its economics.[13] However, it is care that exploits the social reproductive labour of women and, secondarily, racialized populations. In both instances the growth imperative of capitalism is always seeking to minimize the costs of labour "for example by clustering marginalized populations into a smaller set of gendered and racialized jobs" (p. 2). We saw that manifest in the pandemic in many ways: the disproportionate risks faced by women health care workers (comparatively underpaid to their male counterparts), personal care providers in seniors' residences (often émigré women), and the continuing double burden of family and household care unequally borne primarily by women. As she succinctly summarizes, "The care economy is…integral to socioeconomic inequality and inequities in the capitalist political economy" and its transformation "hinges on changes to the perceived value, status, and material rewards of caring work" (p. 2). Take-home message: we need a caring rather than accumulative economy, but not one borne of capitalism's exploitative necessities.

Capitalism: Reform, Transform, or Overthrow?

By title alone, Benos' commentary, "…Questioning Capitalistic Dominance," declares stark disagreement with de Soysa's paean to capitalism's beneficence.[14] Like other commentators, Benos uses the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate "the need to overthrow the ruling capitalist system" (p. 2), suggesting that what the different reform positions described in my article share in common an "attempt to control the aggressive greed of capital" (p. 2). In common with Waitzkin[3] Benos contends that the pandemic's "provisional only return of the state" reveals "the unwillingness of governments" to actually do so, a point on which I have little disagreement. What remains missing, however, is a roadmap for bringing about the demise of the capitalist hegemony apart from urging a renewed working-class activism.

Waitzkin's commentary, "'Post'-pandemic Capitalism: Reform or Transform?" elaborates more fully than Benos why capitalism, if not euphemistically overthrown, must certainly be transformed and not merely reformed. He notes my own ambivalence about the possibility that some progressive reforms within capitalism could lay some foundations for, if not transforming, then at least morphing capitalism into something quite different from its present neoliberal version. He also suggests that I should have centered my arguments around a critique of capitalism, as I have done in much of my other writing.[15] In that respect, I have little to disagree with in his characterization of capitalism's classist structure and reliance upon racism, sexism, extractivism, and rapacious accumulation, extending even to the role of industrial agriculture in creating zoonotic risk. Elucidating these depredations was simply not the descriptive foreground of the article, the intent of which was to identify (and critique) some of the economic recovery ideas generated by the pandemic. In a longer piece, assessing capitalism's pathogenic past and present would definitely have been the foundational background.

Waitzkin makes one trenchant (and spot-on) criticism: My article's silence on the contradictory nature of the capitalist state. Whether pursued as stakeholder capitalism, green growth, or degrowth/post-growth, all of the models I describe assume a rational and potentially benevolent state. Waitzkin does not dispute the positive contributions to well-being to which tax-redistributive and state-funded welfare contribute but argues that the "the main role of the capitalist state is to protect the capitalist economic system" (p. 2). Such beneficence, he points out, predictably constricts or disappears whenever capitalism experiences another of its recurrent crises, much as the public bailouts to foreclose the 2008 global financial crisis were almost immediately followed by new rounds of fiscal austerity. The failure (reluctance?) of most governments to dismantle the global banking system they chose to liberalize or to tax and regulate its financialized speculation into useful public goods now sees their use of quantitative easing fuelling inflationary asset bubbles that are (once again) increasing, rather than decreasing, wealth inequalities.

What does Waitzkin's invocation of a long-standing Marxist critique of the capitalist capture of the state mean for "mission economies," a term coined by Mariana Mazzucato, an internationally influential economist, which calls on governments to be much more actively engaged in economic planning and implementation?[16] Rather than bail out capitalist market failures as states usually do (the 2008, and now the pandemic, crises), Mazzucato argues that they should use their legislative, regulatory, and taxation authority to shape such markets to produce democratically decided-upon social and environmental outcomes. Her arguments are a refreshing tonic after four decades of neoliberal obeisance to market fundamentalism and many states' apparent past (and in some cases still present) eagerness to privatize themselves. But can mission economies de-toxify capitalism's fundamental logic of accumulation (via continuing spirals of production/consumption or financialized growth, however diminished in pace)? Or does it risk extending capitalism's toxic reign by urging more participatory forms of governance and a new set of "missions" that could placate rather than transform? These are question in which, with apologies to Professor Waitzkin, I remain ambivalent in the sense of entertaining a 'both/and' possibility rather than accepting an "either/or" certitude.

Top-Down or Bottom-Up?

The WHO's recently completed Council on the Economics of Health for All (2020-2023), an all-female group comprised of many of the world's leading heterodox and feminist economists, appears similarly equivocal. The Council released its final report in May 2023,[17] calling for "a new political economy based on *Health for All*" (p. v) in which "policy makers must actively create and shape an economy that delivers on goals that are critical to human and planetary wellbeing" (p. 9). Emphasizing the role of policy makers and the need to "re-invest in the ability of governments to drive transformative change" (p. 47) represent a "top-down" approach characteristic of Mazzucato's concept of mission economies. But it still begs the questions posed above.

On the one hand, the Council supports many of the arguments made by other progressive think tanks and civil society organizations on the need for aggressive and redistributive tax reforms at global and national scales, alongside "a redesign of the international architecture of finance" (p. 27). This overhaul includes revising the economic premises and governance structures of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, reforms long called for by many developing countries and activist social movements. On the other hand, the Council's final report comes close to emulating the World Economic Forum's "stakeholder capitalism" model (p. 11) that would moderate but not transform the fundamental drivers of global markets in which small corporate monopolies or oligopolies increasingly dominate. The embrace of public-private partnerships and multistakeholder governance, even with calls for strong conditionalities to ensure equitable representation and outcomes, is correspondingly problematic.

Waitzkin doubts the transformative potential of "top-down policies initiated by political and economic elites" (p. 3). Given the present failure of many of the world's governments to act on climate change commitments, reverse stalling on the Sustainable Development Goals, or address worsening global inequalities his dubiety is well placed. He describes, instead, a "path toward revolutionary transformation of… capitalism" as lying in "bottom-up" local communities and "the implementation of solidarity economies, an expansion of local and regional mutual aid, a transcendence of the 'leviathan' that comprises the capitalist state with the construction of communal governance structures, and other creative innovations" (p. 3). In a recent book, Freudenberg similarly notes a growth in worker cooperatives and mutual aid groups following the 2008 global financial crisis, seeing in them the potential to create stronger cross-movement activism that explicitly confronts capitalism as the fundamental problem.[18] Elsewhere I have argued that "enlarging the role of worker, producer, and consumer cooperatives is one of the feasible means to erode capitalism's dominance of political economy" because it undermines "capitalism's defining ethos of private accumulation" (p. 67).[19] These are not new arguments, although the anti-capitalist tenor of them is becoming more explicit.

Bottom-Centering

The WHO Council, in its call for a well-being economy, also claims that "communities should lead in the transformation" (p. 24). Well-being economic policy is "bottom-up, decentralized, requires coordinated implementation, and leverages the interconnectedness of government agencies, the private sector, civil society and community activities" (p. 24). We might more accurately describe this as "bottom-centering" rather than bottom-up, since without some top-down supporting fiscal and regulatory policy reforms from (still largely capitalist-captured) states, the probability of enduring transformation is slight. Capitalism has long been accompanied by moments of disengaged resistance and efforts to create alternative forms of communal living. These important and necessary efforts, however, have rarely manifest sustained or far-reaching impact. But borrowing from Jensen's commentary, they nonetheless may have enduring "residue" in conveying a different ethos of "economy" (from *oikonomia*, Greek for "household"), one which, as Waitzkin points out, can be found in "the prioritization of 'buen vivir' (living well) as a core health policy in some countries and localities of Latin America" (p. 3).

For Freudenberg, using the USA's original and more ambitious Green New Deal as an exemplar, this 'bottom-centering' arises in espousing "strategic ambiguity," a notion similar to Ritchie's idea of optimism that hovers on "an edge of dissatisfaction." Strategic ambiguity, Freudenberg writes, "makes a claim that can reduce kneejerk opposition" which critics may see only as "a strategy for capitalism to save itself," but which advocates may counter is an essential transitional base for further transformation (p. 282). In that sense calls for a more activist state and the progressive tax, fiscal, regulatory, and socio-environmental policies it could use to constrain capitalism's predatory toxicity might be seen as an interregnum, one where reform from within can lead to revolutionary transformation from without.

Where most commentators on my article agree (and I with them) is that none of this will happen without continued cross-movement solidarity and advocacy, and the continued articulation of alternative systems of political economy that new social leaders from the millennial generation worldwide can invoke when capitalism's polycrisis (the concurrent and intertwined shocks of inequality, ecological collapse, and polarized politics) leaves us collectively with little other viable option.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declare that he has no competing interests.

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