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

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ABSTRACT

The responses of many low- and middle-income households to Covid-19 in Africa were mediated by the state through various means including direct cash transfers, food distribution, and distribution of rural agricultural produce to urban areas, in response to the social reproduction crisis that the pandemic precipitated. Taking the relationship between the state and household as its focus, this article reflects on the social and political questions emerging at the conjuncture of social provisioning and economic collapse. Central to these concerns is the structure of care economies in Africa and their relationship to the capitalist state.

RÉSUMÉ

En Afrique, l'état a joué un rôle important dans la réponse à la pandémie de Covid-19 de nombreux foyers à faibles ou moyens revenus, employant diverses méthodes telles que les virements directs en espèces, la distribution de nourriture, et la distribution de produits de l'agriculture rurale dans les régions urbaines. Cette intervention de l'état avait pour but de répondre à la crise de la reproduction sociale accélérée par la pandémie. Cet article présente une analyse de la relation entre l'état et les foyers, et se penche sur les problématiques sociales et politiques qui émergent à la conjoncture du dispositif social et de l'effondrement économique. La question du fonctionnement des économies des soins en Afrique et de leur relation à l'état capitaliste est centrale dans cette discussion.

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Introduction

It has been estimated that 2.7 billion workers or around 81 per cent of the world's workforce (ILO 2020) work and earn less due to the Covid-19 recession, with those in lower middle-income developing countries losing most. Furthermore, almost 1.6 billion in the informal economy are in the hardest hit sectors or were significantly impacted by lockdown measures.¹ Governments have in response, adopted various monetary and fiscal measures aimed at reviving and sustaining economic activity, measures which include cash transfers to households, extending unemployment insurance or social security benefits, temporary deferment of tax payments, and increasing guarantees and loans to

businesses (Chowdhury and Sundaram 2020). Early “stimulus packages” assumed that the “pandemic shock” would be short-lived and easily reversible, and have largely ignored addressing the unsustainability, inequality, instability and other vulnerabilities of their economic, social and ecological systems (Chowdhury and Sundaram 2020). Furthermore, economic policy has failed to provide for greater access to natural resources such as land, which is now increasingly central for the survival of both rural and urban households in much of the continent.² Both the livelihood dimensions of beneficiaries and existing structural constraints have exposed the limitations of targeted economic policy that is not based on lived realities and capacities of the people.

Thus far, African countries have only been able to adopt stimulus packages worth on average 0.8 per cent of GDP, in comparison to an average of 8 per cent in advanced capitalist countries (Chowdhury and Sundaram 2020).³ Policy proposals by regional economic blocs such as the East African Community (EAC) have recommended prioritisation of regional value/supply chains to support local production of essential medical products and supplies, and support for agro-processing and value chains as an import substitution measure, in addition to establishing special purpose financing schemes for small and medium enterprises (EAC 2020). In the wake of a global economic collapse, the proposed strengthening of regional economic blocs marks a significant shift. Policies supporting import substitution would have far reaching multiplier effects on supply and demand, and challenge monopoly financialised capitalism in the peripheries. Significant because the African continent is still beset with the legacies of the liberalisation policy or Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) that from the 1980s and 1990s reduced African states to caretaker capacity for international finance institutions (IFI) and significantly weakened states’ capacity to implement social welfare programmes on behalf of the people. The neoliberal states that emerged from that period of austerity are fully co-opted into global financialised demand and supply chains, and retain weak capacity to act as agents of economic stimulus independent of a new cycle of IFI assistance.

Furthermore, most macroeconomic considerations have tended to conceal the structurally gendered dimensions of this crisis: that is, the political economy of survival that historically sustained the populace of neoliberalising countries, and which has again taken shape in response to the Covid-19 induced economic shock. The social substratum that meets the daily and generational needs of poor working class households in the absence of adequate provisioning by the state and market, and the social and political significance of this realm of gendered labour in relation to neoliberal state responses to Covid-19 in Africa is as such, the focus of this article. The article illustrates how failure of social provisioning at the level of the market shifts the core problem of social reproduction from the wage labour-capital nexus – that is, the insufficiency of wage provisioning under exploitative capitalist conditions – towards the fundamentally political relationship between the state and households.

Theoretical and analytical considerations

Existing policy responses and recommendations do not account for the reproductive structure of African households, and essential-care activities remain uncounted by GDP. While data on the social and economic cost of the pandemic on the continent is

still scant, available data highlight the grossly underestimated household reproductive needs in state provisioning. For instance, a recent survey conducted in South Africa (the ongoing National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM)) on employment, hunger and health shows that: (i) in the interval February and April 2020, between 2.5 and 3.6 million fewer people were employed, an 18 per cent decline in employment, with women, self-employed workers and informal casual workers most severely impacted; and (ii) that the welfare dynamics indicate an increase during the lockdown period of effectively hungry households in spite of direct state intervention in the form of a Child Support Grant (CSG) and Old Age Pension (OAP). The rise in hunger despite state provisioning is partly attributed to the fact that for nearly 44 per cent of grant-receiving households, wages from employment or business income was the main source of income for the household (NIDS-CRAM 2020, 4–7).

These statistics reveal two things: first, that state provisioning for poor households is a grossly inadequate substitute for the market; and second, that wage labour is an insufficient measure of the extent of the income lost due to lockdown owing to the likelihood that many households rely on cornucopia of livelihood strategies that include wage labour, petty commodity production (PCP) and peasant/subsistence agriculture in combination, the latter two in which African women's income is concentrated. Precisely because existing social welfare policies such as those in South Africa are not de-commodified (such that households can maintain livelihoods without reliance on the market), social grants function as a state subsidy to capital at the level of the households, and the minimal rates of the grants as such *presume* other sources of household income which are devalued in part through exclusion from official statistical measure. Feminist theorisations have shown this paradoxical relation to be a core basis of the devaluation of gendered labour (see Folbre 1995).

The devaluation and underestimation of (gendered) labour therefore takes a particular generalised form under neoliberal capitalism, through which it incorporates *working people* in general, not just wage labourers, in ongoing circuits of exploitation and dispossession (primitive accumulation). The concept of working people provides greater analytical clarity on labour analysis in the global south because of the shifting base of capital accumulation. Unlike the classical methods of primitive accumulation under which peasant land and resources are appropriated, under neoliberalism, primitive accumulation “assumes new forms and becomes generalised in almost all sectors of the economy, including the so-called informal sector” (Shivji 2017, 10). The resultant dis-articulated process of accumulation is one in which labour subsidises capital, as opposed to the capitalist logic of labour-power exchanging at values underlying expanded reproduction: “devaluation of peripheral labour and resources is the lynchpin in the exploitation and transfer of surplus from the periphery to the centre” (Shivji 2009, 67). This peripheral labour has further to be understood in relation to the privatisation of social goods, whereby processes in the reproduction of labour power acquire market equivalents that are unaffordable to exploited working people as a whole:

Commodification and privatization of health care, education, water, sanitation and removal of subsidies from essential foods which all formed part of the social wage goods previously means that now the poor have either to *pay for it or go without it*. All in all, the materiality which underlies producers – peasants and pastoralists, proletarians and semi-proletarians, street hawkers selling consumer goods and peddlers selling cooked food, operators and

repairers in backyard workshops – in virtually all sectors is the *minimizing of their necessary consumption and maximizing of their labour*. [This modifies the] definition of primitive accumulation under neoliberalism [as such to imply a] process of surplus extraction by capital based on expropriation of a part of necessary consumption of the producers. This is then the *material basis common to all sectors* of what [might be] called the working people. (Shivji 2017, 11, emphasis added)

For the vast majority of working people in the Third World or the agrarian south, the material basis of necessary consumption is determined by the structure of economic monopolies created by colonialism, sustained by an imperialist neocolonial order, and entrenched by neoliberal capitalism. That structure is of a semi-proletarianised labour force that retains a critical dependency on land and landed resources in the absence of a living wage. Studies show, however, that access to land does not necessarily support accumulation (due to the systematic suppression of accumulation from below), but merely offers a means to survival (Naidu and Ossome 2016). The contemporary significance of land is closely tied to the effect of capitalism's systemic crisis tendencies – at the core of which lies the question of social reproduction – on the working people's ability to survive. Yet the intellectual tendency even in the progressive left has been to deny the existence of peasant demand for land, thus failing to make the connection between legacies of the colonial capitalist structure that created an urban proletariat dependent for its reproduction on a rural (and peri-urban) peasant subsistence realm. The few exceptions that have engaged with larger historical questions have tended to overestimate "globalisation" and undermine the national question, thus minimising or altogether dismissing ongoing class struggles at a national level.

As a consequence, contemporary global theory has not engaged squarely with the challenges that rural movements face under imperialism, namely the concentration of agrarian capital and political power at national levels, its alliance with financial and industrial capital, the subsumption of national capital as a whole under international capital, and the perverse pattern of national development that this continues to generate (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 2). The national question (with its problem of sovereignty) furthermore poses in a renewed sense the question regarding the nature of the demands that the surplus populace being expended by capital place on the state in general terms and on the economy in more specific terms. This is a question that needs to be considered concretely in relation to the existing agrarian classes, who in most of the global south now include wage labourers, the peasantry and petty commodity producers in combination (Ossome and Naidu, *forthcoming-b*).

The article's methodological approach furthermore acknowledges feminist interventions on primitive accumulation which has highlighted the relationship between land and social reproduction. For instance, Federici's (2004) view of the structural adjustments in Africa from the 1980s as "a rationalisation of social reproduction aimed at destroying the last vestiges of communal property and community relations, and thereby impose more intense forms of labour exploitation" (2004, *preface*) suggests land as a basis of social reproduction, and seeks to extend the Marxian analysis of primitive accumulation to incorporate not only the exploitation of land but also of the (gendered) labour relations thereof. Earlier, Luxemburg (1951) had applied Marx's analysis of the process of extended reproduction of capital for the analysis of imperialism or colonialism, showing that historically, Marx's closed system where there were only wage

labourers and capitalists never existed. Her enduring insight on the contrary is that capitalism had always needed a “non-capitalist strata” for the extension of labour force, resources and above all, markets: colonialism was capitalism’s constant necessary condition, without which capital accumulation or extended reproduction of capital would come to a stop (Luxemburg 1951). This model of “progress” of advanced capitalist countries is, however, not an option for developing nations, who in the absence of external colonies have to resort to a division of the economy into a collectivised modern state and a “subsidiary” private sector – a social division almost congruent with the classical capitalist division of labour that led to an increased load of labour for women (Mies 1986, 202): women as such constitute the “last colony” (Mies 1986), an analogy that invokes the exploitation of gendered labour as a core feature of capitalist accumulation.

The exploitative regime of gendered labour is further tied to the fate of increasingly expendable labour emerging from the concomitant creation and expansion of labour reserves or what Marx called Relative Surplus Population (RSP). The growing global reserve army of labour appears to be inadequately supported by the processes of proletarianisation. The rise of petty commodity producers (Harris-White 2012) and the processes of semi-proletarianisation (Moyo, Jha, and Yeros 2013) are indicative of the inability or unwillingness of the capitalist system to provide adequately for the reproduction of the labouring classes. The full extent of the degradation of the classes may be mitigated by women’s invisible labour that participates in various productive and reproductive activities. In advanced capitalist countries, women’s responsibilities for reproductive work have tended to be in the context of care work as the welfare state socialised others aspect of reproductive labour (Ossome and Naidu, [forthcoming-b](#)). But even in these countries, state intervention in reproduction has varied by race and ethnicity (e.g. Davis 1981). But in many regions in the global south, responsibility for reproduction was never adequately assumed by capital or the state. Read from below, women’s reproductive labour in these economies then is not merely restricted to care work and also includes participation in non-capitalist forms of production (Ossome and Naidu, [forthcoming-b](#)), not to be conflated with capitalism’s “reliance” on a non-capitalist strata.

Lastly, unlike in the historical context that understood the three predominant categories of labour (wage labour, PCP, peasant) as autonomous labour processes articulated in the labour-capital relation, under the current conditions of capitalism all three are linked primarily by the characteristic of gendered labour that is central to their functioning. Gendered labour lends itself to a contemporary agrarian question because of its centrality in the stabilisation of all three classes of workers – that is, it is a condition of the reproduction of these working people – and also because of the unequal and exploitative relations on which it crucially depends. As such the preceding conceptualisation of working people foregrounds the conjuncture between neoliberal capitalist dispossession, its attendant decimation of labour, and declining production due to the Covid-19 pandemic as one in which processes of production and consumption now link the household directly to the state in the absence stable wages. The state in advanced capitalist countries has rolled out fiscal measures, and even in Third World countries, emerges in its quintessential form as both the guarantor of rights (through social provisioning), and mediator of capital (through its control of consumption). The resulting social and political dynamics, of violence, militarisation, hunger, and forced productivity of “essential”

labour are illustrative of the contradictory relationship between the care economy that underlies capitalist accumulation and dispossession by the neoliberal state.

The care economy and the state

The manifestations in Africa of the Covid-19 pandemic as such highlight the gendered effects of systemic and structural inequalities that long preceded the pandemic. A striking factor highlighted by the emerging empirical data is the extent to which violence has characterised state responses, suggesting a discordance between social demands and their provisioning; and also suggesting the politicisation of social responses to the pandemic. As such it is necessary to pose the question regarding who and what resources have been sustaining working class and peasant households prior to and amidst the corona shock. The historical relationship between economic shocks and politics suggests that widespread revolt would characterise such periods. We have, however, seen states respond with disproportionate force through its militarisation of responses on the one hand,⁴ and a spike in the levels of violence in the domestic sphere on the other.⁵ This prompts the question whether there is a correlation between the reproduction functions being performed in the family/household amidst the economic distress, and states' repressive responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A recent survey of the Horn of Africa countries highlights the ways in which existing gender inequalities have become articulated to Covid-19 responses at the level of state and society (World Bank 2020). Beginning in March 2020, quarantine restrictions, mandatory curfews, and bans on public gathering bans were implemented in order to stem the spread of Covid-19. These measures required that only industries categorised by the government as "essential" were allowed to continue operation outside of the home. Notable in cross-country responses is the ways in which what was considered essential was mainly care labour broadly defined. Lockdown protocols in Uganda, for instance, exempted the informal economy, and specifically food sellers, who were allowed to continue trading inside markets under quarantine conditions: the conditions under which the mainly women food sellers were allowed to trade was that they could not move outside of the market locations and were required to sleep there. The staple food sector is the only one that operated throughout the lockdown period when the Ugandan economy shut down, and food distribution between rural and urban areas was sustained through the transportation network. The centrality of the rural-urban food supply chain was illustrated in Kenya too, where public transport vehicles were converted for courier service to transport food from rural to urban families on a daily and weekly basis.⁶

The militarisation of state response in the control of movement of people and goods has direct impact on people that *have* to be outside, that have to provide. The politics of Covid-19 and the curfew/lockdown regimes ushered in a state of emergency (e.g. in Ethiopia) under which the state could use disproportionate force justified on the basis of national security. Ethiopian women reported increased state surveillance during this period as well as police brutality, and in countries such as Sudan which are transitioning from a military Islamist regime that had systemically entrenched gender discrimination, there was no immediate recourse for those experiencing violence. Informal sector workers there, of whom women constitute a majority, were the most affected by

ongoing curfew restriction as they sought to balance livelihood necessities and citizenship (SIHA 2020). The observed increase in the control of gendered labour (and accompanying gendered violence)⁷ during the pandemic period is indicative of the significance of women's structural position in care economies, and violence as such suggests the collapse of that structure and state intervention on behalf of capital.

The role of the state in social reproduction has been understood in the literature primarily in relation to its interventionist role. Classical political economy recognised the reproduction of the working classes as a precondition of capitalist production which constitutes the “faux frais” of capitalist production (Marx 1986, 603). Wages in turn constitute the first form of proletarian subsistence, but its adequacy in the processes of “self-managed reproduction” depends on workers' access to employment and decent wages (Dickinson and Russell 1985). To manage the contradictions associated with a reproduction crisis, the state may intervene to prevent or mitigate cost-shifting by capitalists through appropriate legislations, or may seek to underwrite some or most of reproductive costs. The actual articulation and effective implementation of these interventions, however, are historical and dependent on the social structure and the growth process (Dickinson and Russell 1985). Decades of neoliberal restructuring of African and post-colonial economies have, in relation to this last point, significantly weakened the capacity of state intervention in social reproduction. It is therefore, significant to note the reconstitution of neoliberal African state in the wake of the reproductive crisis ushered by Covid-19.

To varying degrees, many African countries have seemed to borrow from Keynesian interventions aimed towards assuaging the dire impacts of the economic shock on working people. In Kenya, for instance, the set of fiscal and monetary interventions tabled by the government included 100 per cent tax relief for persons earning a gross monthly income of up to Kshs. 24,000 (\$225), reduction of income tax rate (Pay As You Earn) from 30 to 25 per cent, and reduction of the Value Added Tax from 16 to 14 per cent. These measures were clearly aimed at relieving low wage and precarious earners. Its monetary policy interventions include lowering the Central Bank Rate (CBR) to 7 per cent from 8.25 per cent, and sought to stimulate consumer spending and investments by businesses (Laibon 2020). The “rescue package” proposed by the South African government of R500 billion (\$26.3bn) was primarily earmarked to fund healthcare interventions and for special increases in the monthly social grants upon which more than a third of its population relies for survival. In Ethiopia where the Covid-19 economic impact is estimated to increase the number of poor by about 26 million people in the fiscal year 2020/21, doubling the poverty rate from 22 to 48 per cent of the population (Geda 2020, 12), fiscal policy responses have included Birr 300 million (\$9 million) allocated to the health sector, Birr 15 billion injected to the private banking sector, and Birr 51.2 billion (\$1.6 billion) planned expenditure on the economic impact of the pandemic (Geda 2020, 15). Fiscal and monetary responses across African countries, however, belie economic structures that are predominantly engaged in the precarious and informal sectors, and which retain fundamental (if statistically, increasingly insignificant by GDP measure) links with the agrarian economy.

Due to this link – that is, the fact that the existing agrarian classes in most of the global south now include wage labour, the peasantry and petty commodity producers in combination, all of which in turn depend to a certain extent on access to private and common

lands – the agrarian structure of many African countries emerges as a core analytical variable in the post-Covid-19 outlook. Contrary to early predictions that global south food supply chains would be harder hit “to the extent that health services are less widely available, informal work is widespread, logistics chains are less developed and farming is more labour intensive” (OECD 2020, 2), agrarian economies seems to have been much less susceptible to stress on their food chains. Part of the explanation lies in the structure of rural production, at the centre of which gendered labour accounts for the majority of non-commercial food production. For instance, in Ethiopia where about 80 per cent of the population (86.4 million) live in rural areas (Geda 2020, 12), the role of subsistence and small holder agriculture in lieu of direct state provisioning is fundamental in understanding survival rates of an otherwise impoverished population. The scholarship showed that a policy of significantly minimising the urban to rural (and vice-versa) movement and migration in tackling the health effect would have little effect on income of the rural population (Geda 2020). The fact that state intervention appears to have an inverse relationship with rural incomes suggests a delinking between processes that support social reproduction and economic policy. This presents a particular problem for feminist economic analyses that predominantly seek to understand social reproduction in relation to the exploitation that is core to capitalist accumulation. Data such as this from Ethiopia more concretely highlights the relationship between the non-capitalist realm and survival of households in the absence of the state and market.

The failure of social provisioning at the level of the market shifts the core problem of social reproduction from the wage labour-capital nexus – that is, the insufficiency of wage provisioning under exploitative capitalist conditions – towards the fundamentally political relationship between the state and households. Available data suggests that social reproduction depends on a combination of incomes from wage work, exploitation of natural resources, petty commodity production, and in many African countries now, remittances from the diaspora. What is concealed by this cornucopia of livelihood strategies is the necessary reproductive labour that goes into converting wages into use value for individual consumption, and which is sustaining the rural labour force that includes semi-proletarianised agricultural labourers and those compelled to enter the labour force despite access to or ownership of land. Where productive investment and capital formation has mainly focused on cash crops and livestock, reproductive labour is also sustaining both rural food production *and* capitalist production (Ossome and Naidu, [forthcoming-a](#)).

Decades of neoliberal restructuring has resulted not only in the collapse of the (agrarian) social infrastructure that is the basis of the social contract between the state and its people, but also in a “crisis of care” (Fraser 2016) that has been precipitated under neoliberalism and starkly exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.⁸ The “social contradiction” to which it points is inherent in the deep structure of capitalist society, yet does not receive the same amount of attention being given to the economic contradictions of capitalism that at present are the major focus of the demands being directed towards the state. The preceding analysis foregrounding the agrarian structure highlights one of the ways in which capitalism’s social contradiction becomes acute when capital’s drive to expanded accumulation becomes unmoored from its social bases and turns against them. The gradual shift from agriculture as a basis for national income, towards manufacturing and industry belies the still largely agrarian structure of much of the continent, in

particular the reliance on land and landed resources for survival and livelihoods in lieu of wages and income from the formal sector. The gross inadequacy of the response of African states to Covid-19 shows precisely such a disarticulation between the agrarian economy of care and the caretaker neoliberal capitalist state, and also the enduring links between the care economy and the agrarian structure.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the ways in which Covid-19 has propelled African governments into an interventionist role that appears to be the condition for political stabilisation amidst the worst global economic crisis of the past century. The article, however, showed the failure of existing responses in accounting for capitalism's prevailing accumulation structure, which has to be considered concretely in historical relation to the existing agrarian classes that in most of the global south now include wage labour, the peasantry and petty commodity producers in combination. Rather than think of these three categories of labour distinctly, the article argued that under the current conditions of capitalism all three are linked primarily *by the characteristic of gendered labour that is central to their functioning*: that is, gendered labour is now central to the stabilisation of all three classes of workers. The cost to African states of neglecting this realm of the economy is as such likely to be a deepening of inequalities based on gender, a betrayal of the democratic project, and a continuation in the structural dispossession of more than half of the continent's population.

Notes

1. By ILO estimates, the first month of the crisis resulted in a drop of 60 per cent in the income of informal workers globally. This translates into a drop of 81 per cent in Africa and the Americas, 21.6 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and 70 per cent in Europe and Central Asia (ILO 2020).
2. A recent significant study in South Africa, for instance, highlighted the land struggles of long-term urban residents who combine proletarian and peasant forms of livelihood in the city with no intention or desire to return to the countryside (Ricardo Jacobs 2018).
3. Even in South Africa where the rescue package totaled R500 billion (10% of GDP), policy analysts show that not all of it is new spending, nor necessarily government spending at all. R200 billion comes in the form of loan guarantees, and R70 billion in the form of tax deferrals or deductions, meaning is just about R230 billion in actual spending, or 4.5% of GDP (Isaacs 2020).
4. See reports on the disproportionate violence against women in Uganda: *Daily Monitor*, "Elegu locals accuse forces of brutality", 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Elegu-locals-accuse-forces-brutality/688334-5516804-icokkaz/index.html> (accessed on 14 September 2020); HRW, "Uganda: Respect rights in Covid-19 response", available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/uganda-respect-rights-covid-19-response> (accessed on 15 September 2020). Similar reports emerged on Kenya: *The Washington Post*, "'Killing in the name of corona': Death toll soars from Kenya's curfew crackdown", 16 April 2020, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenya-coronavirus-curfew-crackdown-death-toll/2020/04/15/740a8c4e-79be-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html (accessed on 14 September 2020).

5. Khady Ndour, “Tackling the ‘Shadow Pandemic’ of Domestic Violence During COVID-19”, Akina Mama wa Africa. Available at: <https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/the-dramatic-increase-of-domestic-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/> (accessed on 13 September 2020).
6. *Nation*, “How ‘broke’ city folk get food from villages”, Sunday July 5, 2020, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/-how-broke-city-folk-get-food-from-villages--1445558> (accessed on 16 September 2020).
7. In Uganda alone, during the last two weeks of lockdown the police recorded over 400 cases of domestic violence in 14 days alone (SIHA 2020). The Addis Ababa Bureau of Women and Children report that more than 100 women and girls in Ethiopia have been raped since onset of the pandemic, and that gendered violence has also affected young boys.
8. My analysis in this paper redirects Fraser’s (2016) social infrastructure whose collapse portends a crisis of care does to the agrarian basis of social reproduction in the global south.

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