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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Modern capitalism has shaped the world, but for many scholars, its principles have disproportionately favoured the prosperity of a minority while neglecting the prospects of the majority, particularly in Southern Africa. The recent COVID-19 pandemic combined with significant inequalities of wealth has put the social policies of countries in Southern Africa to the test. It exposed the inadequacies of the current capitalist order in many countries in the global south, hindering their ability to protect their populations from the pandemic's impact. In contrast, the global north, with stronger social policies and economic flexibility, managed to cushion the severity of pandemic's economic impact on their populations in many ways, even though they suffered the most deaths. In this article, I establish how COVID-19 and neoliberal capitalism made it difficult to achieve the social developmental objectives in Southern Africa. While scholars have documented the medical and economic harms caused by the pandemic, I highlight ways that it, along with considerable inequalities of wealth, impaired social development more broadly. I conclude by establishing how the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the shortcomings of neoliberal capitalism in Southern Africa's social policies, emphasising the need for re-evaluating and re-alignment of these policies-to foster more equitable and resilient societies.

Keywords: capitalism; COVID-19; social development; social policy; Southern Africa; sovereign welfare fund

INTRODUCTION

Modern capitalism rose to prominence in the early 19th century gradually gaining traction in many countries outside Europe, including Southern Africa. Since then, the world has been marshalled around the edifice of capitalism, whose organising principles have increased the prosperity of the minority population to the detriment of the survival prospects of a large majority of the peoples of the world, many of whom are in Africa (Habib, 1995). While there has been criticism of capitalism, a substantial body of research substantiates its prevailing influence worldwide (Arnold, 2017; Senker, 2015). This world order has had a huge negative impact on the global South, but especially so on the poorer communities of Southern Africa. The world has gradually emerged from a dreadful COVID-19 pandemic that has stress-tested the social policies of all countries. It has exposed the inadequacies of the capitalist order in many countries in the global South at a time when every country needed to protect its population against the impact of the pandemic, or so I argue in this article.

Notwithstanding the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic infected the populations of the global north, they were cushioned by the depth of their social policies. Governments in the global north activated a raft of social policy measures that mitigated the severity of the impact of the pandemic on the social development trajectory of their populations (Clarida, Duygan-Bump & Scotti, 2021; International Monetary Fund, 2020). By and large, 'developed' countries have recovered (Wang, Zhang, 2021). On the contrary, in most countries in the global south, including Southern Africa, despite having a lesser number of people infected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the severity of the pandemic's effects lingers on to date (Chitiga *et al*., 2022). This has been magnified by poor social policies that lack the financial element to protect the population from the ongoing impact of the restrictions intended to curtail the spread of the disease as well as the pandemic itself.

Through a systematic literature review, I establish how COVID-19 and neoliberal capitalism made it difficult to achieve social policy objectives in Southern Africa. While scholars have documented the medical (Baker *et al*., 2021; Heitzman, 2020) and economic harms caused by the pandemic (Anyanwu & Salami, 2021; Bagchi, Chatterjee, Ghosh, & Dandapat, 2020), I highlight ways that it, given the vast inequalities of wealth, impaired social development more broadly. I focus on how COVID-19 restrictions undermined the following five pillars of a social development approach, *social investments, the rights-based approach, bridging the micro-macro divide, partnerships*, and *democracy and participation.* In the process, I establish how the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the shortcomings of neoliberal capitalism in Southern Africa's social policies, emphasising the need for re-evaluation and strengthening of social systems to foster more equitable and resilient societies.

The first section discusses the social development approach to social welfare in Southern Africa. This is followed by a discussion on the welfare system and the neoliberal policies that constrain the goals of development in the region as well as the challenges of achieving social development goals in Southern Africa under modern capitalism. In this context, I consider the sovereign wealth fund as a strategic developmental tool for various nations. This discussion is important to elucidate the subsequent sections on the challenges exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Africa and the strengthening of systems to foster equitable and resilient societies.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

This section outlines the origins and praxis of social development to establish the context for the later discussions. It is safe to say that the rise of contemporary social development can be partly ascribed to United Nations' initiatives to raise the quality of life of people internationally. Firstly, the United Nations (UN) made a commitment to this approach when the ministers responsible for social welfare held their first International Conference in 1968, when remedial, preventative and developmental initiatives were identified as functions of social welfare (United Nations, 1986). Southern Africa was represented by ministers from Lesotho and Zambia. In 1970 the UN held an International Development Strategy Conference to highlight its findings of the 1968 conference (Patel, 1991). During the 1970 conference it was noted that the final objective of development must be the realisation of sustained improvements in the wellbeing of the individual as well as the bestowing of benefits on all (Patel, 1991).

The developmental function is confirmed by Midgley (1995), who points out that the notion of social welfare is central to social development. Nonetheless, the emphasis had largely been on the first two functions, which were later affirmed as the residual and institutional models of social welfare (Patel, 1991). Social development is implemented as a practice within a specific social welfare system, thereby leading to the establishment of a welfare system known as the developmental social welfare system (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2015; Gray, 2006; Ncube, 2019). The following elements were identified as key drivers of developmental social welfare:

> *Enhancing the well-being of the people by raising their level of living; ensuring social justice and the equitable distribution of national wealth; strengthening the capacity of all people to reach their peaks as healthy, educated citizens, participating in and contributing to development.* (United Nations, 1986:3)

It should be noted that this approach contrasted with the earlier emphases on the remedial and rehabilitative functions of social welfare. Despite concerted efforts by the United Nations, it became apparent that there were constraints in implementing this new approach, which in turn hampered the development of the general population (Patel, 1991). Patel further indicates that these constraints included the declining rate of world economic growth and the fact that developing countries were becoming heavily indebted to the point where they could not afford to allocate resources to address the social needs of the people. Lastly, the rise of privatisation through economic structural adjustment programmes also led to the limitation of resource allocations by governments to deal with escalating mass poverty, inequality and underdevelopment (Patel, 1991). As the notion of development gained momentum, Midgley (2014:13) came to define social development as "[a] process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole within the context of a dynamic and multifaceted development process".

In line with Midgley's definition, Noyoo (2015) observes that social change is a central theme in the development debate, viewed as a never-ending process of cycles embedded in historical and social conditions. In essence, the approach is primarily concerned with promoting a process of development in people's social wellbeing (Midgley, 1995). Midgley's (1995) definition of social development resonates with an earlier characterisation by MacPherson (1982), which notes that social development represents a set of social goals that a society sets for itself. This set is comprised of ultimate objectives regarding relationships in a society and dominant values that should permeate that society. In the main, social development defines the given society's objectives as well as a process for achieving those objectives (MacPherson, 1982). In this case, while the promotion of social wellbeing is the objective, social policies are the means through which the objectives of social development can be achieved. This is in line with Noyoo's (2015) contention that public policy, which is in essence the expression of society's social goals, fosters human capabilities and substantive freedoms as well as the promotion of social development.

Seers (1972) highlights three crucial aspects of humanity implicit in the concept of 'development': poverty, unemployment and inequality. Noyoo (2015) suggests that Seers's definition stands apart from those tying economic growth directly to development. To avoid confusion, it is essential to demonstrate the connections between social policy and social development, and their links to public policy. This notion is expressed in Midgley's (2014) conception of social development as giving greater emphasis to macro practice as opposed to remedial or therapeutic approaches, focused on the individual. He then reflects on the definition of social development and notes that the approach refers to a 'dynamic process', implying that social development takes into consideration various underlying issues within a changing social, political and economic environment for the wellbeing of the population (Midgley, 2014). The definition also refers to the process being 'multifaceted', trying to bring forth all other contextual dimensions that contribute to the totality of the concerns as well as to a holistic response to these concerns. The definition also points to the social development process as 'interventionist' in the sense that a clearly conceptualised plan needs to be laid out and expressed in the form of projects, programmes, policies and plans to achieve the goal of development. Expressed in this definition is also the 'productivist' nature of the process, which is intended to contribute to economic growth and development for individuals, families, communities, and society at large (Midgley, 2014). The process should be 'universalistic' to target the entire population without necessarily side-stepping cases that may need special attention in the form of affirmative action. Although the process may involve individuals and families, it also has a macro focus intended at 'promoting people's social well-being' (Midgley, 2014). Patel (2013) argues that at the core of a social development approach are five key themes which direct its practice. These are a *rights-based approach, partnerships, social investment, bridging the micro-macro divide,* and *democracy and participation.* In his theoretical review, Noyoo (2015) talks of 'strengths' as an important element of human development and necessary for social development. These themes will be expanded on later in the discussion on the challenges presented by Covid 19.

Against this backdrop, Southern African countries have made substantial changes in their welfare systems since gaining political independence to adopt the social development approach. Greve *et al*. (2018) state that the neoliberal shift towards social development commenced for numerous

African countries during the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in May 1995. This summit's commitment to poverty eradication paved the way for the development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). *The Economist* (2019) posited that, on average, Sub-Saharan African Countries spend 1.2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on a social security net.

South Africa is said to have the most expansive welfare system in Southern Africa, with its roots in the apartheid era (Seekings, 2019. In the wake of the advent of democracy, the country adopted a social development approach to social welfare and has more than 20 million recipients (Noyoo, Seepamore, Ncube & Sobantu, 2021). Manyeli (2007; 2023) states that Lesotho's welfare system has been gradually developing since its independence to where it currently has fully adopted the social development approach and spends over 6% of its GDP on social security. Similarly, Botswana has established a significant welfare programme in the region, offering a wide array of programmes with extensive coverage (Seekings, 2019). Devereux (2007) also acknowledges that compared to other African countries, Botswana implements a remarkably comprehensive set of social welfare programmes for its poor and vulnerable citizens. On the other hand, although the Zimbabwean government has yet to provide a clear framework for implementation, it has in principle adopted a social development approach to its social welfare services. The intention is to bolster its existing social protection services, which date back to pre-independence (Kurevakwesu *et al.,* 2021; Mupedziswa & Mushunje, 2021). These are a few examples of the state of social welfare in Southern Africa. The biggest challenge confronting a full realisation of the ideals of social development , among other things, has been these countries' economic frameworks, which have created developmental chasms over time.

THE WELFARE SYSTEM AND NEOLIBERAL POLICIES

The term welfare refers to all systems of programmes, activities, services and benefits that facilitate people's economic, social, educational and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society (Greve, 2018; Zastrow, 2014). The term "welfare state" was coined whose original meaning reflected that the foundational objective of the state was to champion the welfare of its people and that any other objective should seek to contribute positively towards this ideal (Despres, 1960). It is important to revisit this old conceptualisation of the term to appreciate the changes that led to contemporary understandings of the term "welfare state." Despres (1960) posits that the term is originally Western, and its original conceptualisation served its purpose as seen in Britain in the period immediately after the Second World War, when state welfare was given prominence to guarantee what they referred to as 'fair shares for all' (Whiteside, 1996). This was a good strategy as a way of providing social security to its people while (re)building a robust economy. There was a raft of measures included under this definition of the "welfare state" that were put in place by certain Western countries, including Britain, North America, France, Australia and New Zealand, among others. These measures sought to

> *...reduce economic insecurity; mitigate economic inequalities; provide subsidised services in housing, education, and health care. They also included social insurance plans, the use of fiscal and credit controls to maintain general economic stability and facilitate high employment, subsidised agricultural produce, and minimum wage laws.* (Despres, 1960:3)

It could be argued that this form of support to the population, although it resulted from the contestation between political parties and labour unions, was facilitated by cumulative economic development and productivity. This culminated in the abundance of resources which were necessary for such welfare programmes. Peet (2003) argues that welfarism also facilitated economic productivity and growth, because if it had jeopardised this advancement it would not have been adopted. It was only later as the Western nations became more stable, wealthier, urbanised and industrialised that the state moved gradually from welfarism to liberal policies, whereby the economy is governed by market forces. At this time, the public was geared to actively participate in the market economy with minimal intervention from the state. This neoliberal agenda changed the trajectory of the Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization) regarding their global financial, development and trade management roles (Peet, 2003). It could be deduced that this was the next stage in the evolution of Western societies, after having satisfied the needs of their initial post-World War II recovery stage. The institutions then sought to detect monetary policies and the trajectory of developing nations of the world, what Peet (2003) referred to as the policing of the global economy characterised by widening extremes of the rich and poor nations and people, as well as recurrent instability and a failure to solve the problems of the developing countries.

At this point, the term "welfare state" began to be seen as referring to modifying the impact of the market by providing at least a minimum guarantee of mitigation of poverty, covering a range of social risks for security purposes, and providing certain services in health care, child and elder care, and education, among others (Barr, 2012).

In the absence of resources, under-developing and developing nations, most of which are in Africa, continue to struggle with the basics. This means that they lack the abundance of wealth to embark on comprehensive welfare programmes. Although a country like South Africa has such a comprehensive welfare programme, it comes at the expense of rising debt which is currently close to 70% of its gross domestic product (GDP) (Gumata, 2022; Sachs, 2021). O'Neill (2021; 2023) forecasts that this percentage will increase to over 82% in the foreseeable future, spelling a future fiscal crisis in the country. Yet with the debt at approximately three-quarters of GDP in this context, one could justifiably contend that the crisis has already set in. Moreover, there are strong prospects of high inflation and increased taxes (Roodt, 2023). A confluence of these elements creates a negative environment for social welfare programmes and their intended goals. Conversely, there seems to be an absence of a connection between South Africa's extensive welfare programme and the national development objectives of economic growth and social development, as may be found in the development trajectory observed in global Northern societies, as mentioned before.

The consequence of extensive welfare programmes should, in the course of time, be positively reflected in the social functioning of the society to such a degree that families manage to take care of themselves with minimal state intervention. Eventually, welfarism should culminate in fewer people dependent on the state's assistance. In other words, welfare programmes should facilitate economic growth as opposed to hindering it. However, this is not the case in South Africa and most Southern African countries as alluded to earlier. To use South Africa as an example, cash transfers in the form of social grants increased incrementally since the advent of democracy and by 2003 they amounted to more than three percent of the GDP (Sout African Social Security Agency, 2008). Furthermore, the percentage of households that receive at least one form of social grant in South Africa increased from 30,8% in 2003 to 52% in 2020. Similarly, the percentage of individual recipients of social grants increased from 12.8% in 2003 to over 34% in 2020. The sharp rise recorded in 2020 was due to the disbursement of social relief of distress grants (SRD) in response to the constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Stats SA, 2020). Nonetheless, this paints a picture of a continuously expanding welfare programme which is not matched by any significant increase in social development. Kutor (2014) reflects that under-developing nations are characterised by widening gaps of inequality, as well as by poverty and crime, which lead to the disillusionment of the population. This is where most Southern African countries find themselves at present. Cases in point are countries like South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe, among others, which are faced with an exodus of their citizens in search of a better life in foreign territories.

While the post-war Western nations were supported by the Bretton Woods institutions in their reconstruction and development agenda, the same approach cannot be a solution for Southern African countries with these institutions in their current state. Had the role of these institutions remained as it was in their formative years to assist nations to develop their economies, they would have remained relevant even in Africa to this day. However, their adoption of neoliberal policies at the beginning of the 1980s, as argued by Peet (2003), only sought to continue serving the changing interests of the Western nations that had already graduated from the level at which Africa still finds itself. Despite the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) implementation of novel fiscal mechanisms tailored to the circumstances of economically disadvantaged nations, the concomitant imposition of stringent fiscal policies remains the source of harmful repercussions for African countries. This predicament is further exacerbated by a combination of exogenous global economic circumstances and suboptimal governance paradigms (Camdessus, 2012).

To date, Sub-Saharan countries are mired in extreme and entrenched poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment despite numerous interventions by the IMF. This is largely because the terms and conditions of these loans are not meant to facilitate development at the level at which these countries find themselves. Oxfam International (2021) posits that all the austerity measures that come with IMF loans are like adding fuel to the fire. Cases in point include Côte d'Ivoire, which received the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF), Equatorial Guinea, Kingdom of Eswatini, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and South Africa among many others that received the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI). The Bretton Woods institutions are yet to record a success story in Africa, let alone in Southern Africa despite numerous loans and adjusted lending instruments as indicated above. This should be a continuous cause for concern for African leaders regarding the institutions, which need re-evaluation and a change of approach in their aspirations to advance social development. The contention in this case is that advancing social development as an approach is not necessarily a problem, but its application is what needs re-evaluation.

SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUND AS AN INSTRUMENT OF DEVELOPMENT

The next strategic move for the Western nations on the basis of their economic and social advancement after the Second World War was the establishment of sovereign wealth funds (SWF). It is difficult to provide an inclusive scholarly definition of a sovereign wealth fund, hence the multiple definitions by various scholars. In its economic form,

> *the SWF can be understood as a state-controlled investment vehicle. It is a state fund that represents sovereign investing, in that it is a medium whereby the state may participate in international and foreign markets*. (Basaran, 2020:449)

> *SWF is a vehicle that belongs to the sovereign authority of a state, manages a portfolio of non-official foreign exchange reserves of the country, and is involved in foreign investment*. (Cieślik, 2014:106)

Thus, SWF is a way for sovereign nation-states to participate in the private sector. This happens within the confines of the Santiago Principles for fairness and transparency, which provide something of a legal framework. Through sovereign wealth funds, nation-states can generate finances for reserve purposes (International Working Group of Sovereign Wealth Funds, 2008). Countries with well-established sovereign wealth funds, most of which are in Europe and North America, managed to mitigate the economic shocks caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms and fires, as well as pandemics and global economic downturns, including depressions (Cieślik, 2014). In other words, the funds are meant for mitigating crises. There are also African countries with sovereign wealth funds, some of whose efforts are undermined by political unrest and poor governance. These include Morocco, Nigeria, Gabon, Rwanda and Senegal, among others. Cieślik (2014) posits that gathering data on African sovereign wealth funds is challenging because of a lack of transparency. She further states that since there is a lack of coordination and approach in these funds, they are individually too small to have any meaningful impact on global economics. This is despite the abundance of natural resources on the continent, which is usually the basis on which SWFs are established. Unless they are coordinated and strategically positioned for regional integration, they are bound to remain incapable of stimulating the economic development of the continent (Cieślik, 2014). Strategically positioning African SWFs would entail having to expand their stabilisation goals and to move gradually towards adopting instruments intended for achieving economic development, intergenerational transfers of resources, financial sector stabilisation, and promotion of regional integration (Cieślik, 2014). Furthermore, Southern African governments should leverage the ownership of their bourses to promote economic growth, development, and stability of their economies.

Thus, it is no surprise that the incapacity of African nations to respond to crises was exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa could have responded better had it been adequately prepared through a regime of responsive socio-economic and political policies and strategically positioned its resources. The pandemic can now be used as a measure of the continent's capacity to resile against crises, as well as provide indications of how it can prepare for future eventualities and mitigate their impact.

DISCUSSION OF THE COVID-19 CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The earlier sections have painted a picture of missed opportunities by the Southern African states to take advantage of the abundance of their resources to create socio-economic buffers for their populations. Secondly, poor governance characterised by a lack of transparency has been another major factor that undermines Southern African states from becoming the formidable unitary force that they potentially could be if they addressed these challenges. The resource-rich Southern African countries are yet to harness this potential for economic growth that would feed into the nations' social aspirations for development. Thirdly, failure to prioritise regional integration towards economic development and sustainability has consistently kept the continent at the margins of development.

In the absence of sustainable and robust economic growth on the continent, no regime of social policies could have any meaningful impact in Africa. This intersection of economic growth and social aspirations is what scholars such as Midgley (2005), Noyoo (2015), Patel (2013) and van Breda (2007) referred to as social development, a phenomenon discussed above. On the contrary, Africa as a continent is faced with a multifaceted problem of poor governance and economic underdevelopment that leads to social challenges of unemployment, inequality, poverty and crime. It is therefore incumbent upon Southern African governments to plan for and nurture the public interest (social development), which is a totality of the nation's aspirations. Lugalambi and Zawadi (2000:100) posit that public interest,

> *is represented by the minimum set of normative principles and values that a society recognises as the basis of its existence. It is a composite of the moral paradigms, political traditions, cultural conventions, and belief systems that we develop and maintain for the sake of ubuntu. The public interest, as expressed through our ideals, supersedes our legitimate differences in politics, culture, religion and economic orientation.*

Emanating from this comprehensive explanation of 'public interest' as a phenomenon in society and public governance, governments need to develop social policies for the greater good of society. It was highlighted earlier that South Africa is one Southern African country with a comprehensive regime of social welfare policies. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996), like the legal frameworks of many other countries, makes provision for the various generations of human rights in its Bill of Rights. Cornescu (2009) explains the following generations of human rights as the cornerstone of public interest: the generation of civil and political rights; the generation of socio-economic and cultural rights; solidarity rights; and rights related to genetic engineering. In this regard, the White Paper for Social Welfare (Republic of South Africa, 1997) defines the kind of social welfare envisaged in the country. It enshrines a comprehensive strategy for developmental social welfare in South Africa. Several other pieces of legislation give expression to these broad policy provisions, including the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 (Republic of South Africa, 2004b) as well as the SASSA Act 9 of 2004 (Republic of South Africa, 2004a)

Lastly, South Africa has a National Development Plan adopted in 2012 as a long-term vision and plan to eliminate poverty, inequality, and unemployment (National Planning Commission, 2012). However, since its adoption, poverty, unemployment, and inequality have increased exponentially (Stats SA, 2020). Previous General Household Surveys indicate that this has been the trend for a long time in South Africa (Stats SA, 2020. The situation has since been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an example of how the fragility of social policies within the context of the weak economies of Africa could not cushion African populations against the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Equally, like many Western nations, the federal government of the United States of America used its huge reserves to aid households, businesses, and municipalities to keep cash flowing in the economy. Clarida, Duygan-Bump and Scotti (2021:2) reflect on the magnitude of the support that the federal government provided in response to the COVID-19.

> *The fiscal and monetary policy response in the United States to the COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented in its scale, scope, and speed. Legislation passed by Congress in March 2020, December 2020, and March 2021 provided a total of $5.8 trillion in fiscal support to the U.S. economy – about 28 percent of the U.S. GDP.*

This is a figure that outstrips the GDPs of multiple African countries combined. Notably, these cash transfers were largely intended to alleviate the impending collapse of the economy owing to the restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the pandemic. Although South Africa also responded with cash transfers to individuals and provided various businesses with cash loans, this endeavour was firstly affected by its inadequacy in the face of the magnitude of socio-economic challenges, and secondly, by widespread corruption in both the public and private sectors. The limited resources could not serve the purpose for which they were intended. Mlambo and Masuku (2020 posit that while the South African government was preoccupied with reducing the spread of COVID-19, officials used the opportunity for self-enrichment, a blight that compounded the country's inability to contain the spread of the pandemic. These assertions were corroborated by President Ramaphosa in his first appearance in Parliament after the start of the pandemic. In responding to questions in Parliament, he stated that the Special Investing Unit would investigate what he termed the "disgraceful COVID-19 corruption" (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Despite the prevalence of corruption in Southern Africa, the region demonstrated resilience in the face of COVID-19. Noteworthy examples include social innovation and the adaptation of educational platforms. Joel and Nel (2020) emphasise the significant role of social innovation by Southern African communities in effectively addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic. Some countries in the region also adjusted their education systems to navigate the constraints imposed by the restrictions. This involved the shift to online learning platforms and adopting other innovative approaches to limit the scope of the interruption in education for students (Faturoti, 2022).

In relation to corruption, suffice it to also note that underhandedness was not only evident in Southern Africa but was also a cause for concern in other areas hit by the pandemic. The global shortage of COVID-19 vaccines gave rise to opportunities for corruption worldwide. Instances include Peruvian and Argentinian politicians and their families receiving vaccinations ahead of official eligibility. Brazil and Venezuela faced extensive corruption scandals linked to the COVID-19 vaccine. In Spain, local mayors gained preferential access to vaccine doses before their broader availability to the public. Reports from Italy indicated that at some point vaccines were sold on the grey market (Farzanegan & Hofmann, 2021).

Table 1: **COVID-19 pandemic statistics on different continents**

Continent	Total number of cases	Total number of deaths
Africa	11,792,936	253,142
Asia	143,658,252	1,411,116
North America	97,041,271	1,448,834
South America	56,400,588	1,290,605
Europe	183,823,791	1,789,348

(Worldometer, 2022)

The figures above indicate that Europe was the hardest hit of all continents by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the headcount of infections and deaths. Although Asia had a higher headcount for infections than North America, they were almost the same in the number of deaths. Africa was the continent least affected in terms of infections and deaths, but the most affected when t came to socio-economic costs (Gondwe, 2020). It is worth noting that increased spending was not effective in curbing the mortality rate of patients with COVID-19, let alone the spread of the infection. Southern Africa had a very limited budget compared to their European and North American counterparts, yet they had a relatively fewer COVID-19 deaths. However, a considerable number of Southern African families lost their breadwinners, which had a ripple effect including the poorer psychosocial well-being emanating from destabilised family structures and lost income (Buonsenso *et al.,* 2020).

The communicability of the virus compelled governments to enforce lockdown restrictions that prohibited the movement of people and the operations of contact businesses (Gondwe, 2020). This move had an enormous impact not only on the economies but also on various other aspects of the social development of many countries. Patel (2022) further states that one of the impacts of COVID-19 was on education, where for over two years most children in poor schools in Southern Africa and the rest of the continent had limited access to education. The scale of the humanitarian and economic impact was significantly greater on the African continent with a possibility of a long-lasting crisis. On the other hand, the expectation was that GDP in Europe would be back to its pre-COVID-19 levels by mid-2022, while the estimations in Africa were that the GDP is likely to shrink even further because of an impending global recession (Gondwe, 2020). Since then, the South African economy has shown only marginal growth. By mid-2023, the country had recovered to its pre-COVID-19 GDP (Stats SA, 2022). But the war in Ukraine is also worsening the situation globally, but more so in Africa for the same reasons that COVID-19 did (Aidi, 2022). This is primarily a consequence of Africa's reliance on Europe. Any adverse socio-economic conditions in Europe directly influence Africa negatively (Taylor, 2016).

Secondly, while the pandemic put a damper on all markets globally, it acted as an accelerator of digitalisation in the European markets (de Vet *et al*., 2021). These authors further argue that because of the constraints created by the pandemic, most companies had to reassess their needs and used their technological advantage to digitalise. Unlike most of the European countries, whose economies are driven by services, Africa is a commodity-based economy, which gave the continent little room to manoeuvre in the face of COVID-19 regulations. European and some Asian markets – China, in particular – were able to quickly absorb the shock to continue with business within the scope of the COVID-19 restrictions (de Vet *et al*., 2021). Gondwe (2020) notes that this was not possible in Africa and, as a result, the pandemic created a major setback in productivity and trade both within and between countries.

Furthermore, While African countries could not immediately produce the appropriate vaccines against the pandemic, America, Europe and some Asian countries hastened to launch their vaccines programmes. This was made possible by their technological muscle as well as their developed economies, neither of which were available in Africa. Below is a table of countries with companies that developed COVID-19 vaccines.

Table 2: **Countries with companies that developed COVID-19 vaccines**

Producing country	**COVID-19 vaccine**
America and Germany	Pfizer (Pfizer-BioNTech)
America	Moderna

China	Sinopharm vaccine and Sinovac-CoronaVac
Cuba	Abdala and Soberana
Czech Republic	NVX-CoV2373 (Novavax)
France	Valneva COVID-19 vaccine
India	BBV152 COVAXIN vaccine
Netherlands, Belgium, and America	Janssen Ad26.CoV2.S (Johnson-Johnson)
Russia	Sputnik V
United Kingdom (Sweden and Britain)	AstraZeneca

Despite this, their mortality rates remained higher than those of Africa. Okonji, Okonji, Mukumbang, and van Wyk (2021) contend that several factors contributed to Africa's resilience. One key factor is its comparatively younger population, which tends to withstand certain illnesses (COVID-19 in particular) better than the ageing populations of other continents. Additionally, Africa's ample access to vitamin D through sunlight exposure is noted as advantageous. Furthermore, factors such as cross-immunity from other viruses, including coronaviruses, along with lessons learnt from previous infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and ebola positioned Africa favourably compared to its counterparts.

On the other hand, the unfavourable socioeconomic predicament facing Africa is argued to be a consequence of the continent's lack of economic resilience stemming from years of colonialism, misgovernance and import-export imbalances, among other factors (Gondwe, 2020). Taylor (2016:8) argues that,

> *A model based on growth-for-growth's sake has replaced development and the agenda of industrialisation and moving Africa up the global production chain has been discarded. Instead, Africa's current 'comparative advantage' as a primary commodity exporter is celebrated and reinforced. History repeats itself.*

Africa could not develop its vaccines as a result of the divides that have already been highlighted, but as it did from the colonial to the immediate post-colonial era, it looked to the West and recently the East (China and India) for assistance. Like the Western nations, some nations from the East have developed to a point of abundance. Once again, Africa became dependent on both Western and Eastern nations, which had to donate batches of vaccines. Through the call for vaccine equity by international organisations, among others, western nations had to abandon what became known as "vaccine nationalism" (Bollyky & Bown, 2020). Bollyky and Bown (2020) posit that vaccine nationalism represented the antithesis of COVID-19 virus elimination. They contended that only the cooperation of nations would end the pandemic.

Scholars have sometimes argued that Africa is a "hopeless continent" (Taylor, 2016; Toh, 2016). In the 1990s there was a glimmer of hope when Toh (2016) reflected that the usual image of Africa as economically stagnant and heavily dependent on charity and international aid was changing. The global pandemic has shown, however, that the continent is still far from being able to deal adequately with crises in a way that has minimal impact on the population. Rodney (1973) argues that much of the hopelessness that Toh (2016) reflects on is a result of the way that Europe had underdeveloped Africa. He delves into the impact of exploiting Africa's resources and imposing disadvantageous economic systems, impeding the development of the continent (Rodney, 1973). Against the backdrop of the impact of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, Rwandan President Paul Kagame remarked that,

> *As long as Europe and America control our money, they will control our economy. We need an African common currency backed by our resources not by a dollar or by* [the] *Euro*. (African Hub, 2012)

These kinds of discussions are once more gaining traction among some African leaders, but are yet to get to the level at which the Pan-African ideology once was, leading in effect to the era of independence for many African states.

The impact of Covid-19 on the pillars of social development

The preceding section provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This section focuses on the repercussions of COVID-19 on the pillars of social development. Initially, the discussion centres on the *rights-based approach*, a theme derived by Patel (2013) from the concepts of social and distributive justice propounded by Marshall (1950 and Rawls (1971). In this context, several rights of people as enshrined in different statutes may have been violated under the COVID-19 restrictions. People could not move about freely to their places of work, schools or for religious purposes. These are necessary freedoms within the social development approach. On the other hand, the violation of these rights was viewed as being in the best interest of the broader population, despite the negative impact it had on individual people in varying degrees.

Secondly, the *social investment pillar* of the social development approach refers to human capital development by increasing the capacities of citizens to participate in socio-economic activities. The theme reflects the importance of social capital for sustainable livelihood. In his theoretical review, Noyoo (2015) talks of social capital, which he attributes to norms and shared understandings of people. It refers to the degree of interconnectedness between people in each setting which can be exploited to benefit citizens in terms of economic opportunities and social mobility (Noyoo, 2015). In addition, Patel (2013) indicates that social networks play a crucial role in promoting sustainable livelihoods and providing social support. With reference to this theme, Noyoo (2015) also reflects on capabilities and assets. He argues that capabilities refer to citizens' abilities to meaningfully participate in economic, social and political activities, which refer to, among other things, nourishment, basic education and primary health care. Patel (2013) draws attention to Midgley's assertion that social investment in human capital development is necessary to facilitate participation in the productive economy and society for the realisation of social development. This came to a standstill for the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ripple effects are still being experienced to this day, with Southern African countries struggling to reach their pre-COVID-19 levels of economic growth and employment. It may be some time before these levels are achieved in the wake of an impending global recession and the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war (Altman, 2022; Cook & Ulriksen, 2021).

Thirdly, the *democracy and participation* pillar evokes an element of participatory democracy which Patel (2013) sees as an indispensable aspect of human development. Noyoo (2015) views this theme through the lens of empowerment. He argues that it is social action that promotes the broad participation of people. Participation often implies citizen involvement to achieve goals that will ameliorate their overall wellbeing. In essence, it is a process of mobilising people to be meaningfully active participants in their development (Larsen, Sewpaul & Hole, 2013). Although such participation was curtailed in the two years of COVID-19 in Southern Africa, normalcy has been restored, with countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa scheduled to hold their local and national election in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

Fourthly, *partnership* in social development is a state-led, multi-sectoral collaboration with various other partners including the private sector and civil society in the provision of social welfare services. It is designed to enhance the existing capabilities and assets of communities. Noyoo (2015) indicates that the term 'assets' refers to resources accumulated over time and invested specifically for social and economic development. They range from human to social or tangible assets in the form of education, home ownership and even small to medium-sized enterprises. Noyoo (2015) observes that the availability of assets is accompanied by a mind-shift in the way people view the future, while Patel (2013) indicates that the strengthening of financial and other assets contributes to human and social development. This aspect was severely affected as people lost their assets, including businesses and homes, owing to a lack of income during a pandemic-induced hiatus.

Lastly, the theme *bridging the micro and macro divide* acknowledges local and global contexts and emphasises the impact of the global context on local communities as a consequence of globalisation. Patel (2013) accordingly advocates for an integrated approach to social development as a means of bridging the gap between these two contexts. The difficulties in foreign markets, the United States of America in particular, in the wake of COVID-19 exert enormous influence on local markets with a domino effect on various aspects of people's lives.

Noyoo (2015) also talks of 'strengths' as an important element of human development. This is a lens through which people are viewed as possessing an inherent power that may be characterised as transformational. It is an important counterbalance to a preoccupation with problems, deficits and pathologies (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). In other words, people should be viewed as the initial source of their development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has delved into the social developmental ambitions of Southern Africa. This exploration has underscored the detrimental impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and neoliberal policies on the region's aspirations for social progress. By contrasting this state of affairs with the agility of Western economies, the study has illuminated the robust foundation that underpins their social policies. Moreover, the analysis of neoliberal approaches and the status of social welfare in the global north has served as a lens through which to comprehend Southern Africa's current position – a region grappling with poor socio-economic advancement and the weak fortification of its populace against substantial setbacks. Consequently, this article posits that Southern African nations are lagging in development because of their feeble economies, which in turn stem from the enduring legacies of colonialism, neo-colonialism, governance deficiencies and pervasive corruption

On the other hand, the fragility of the Southern African nations when it comes to governance and commerce has also been laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strict COVID-19 restrictions imposed in a bid to curtail the virus dampened the economic prospects of the world, and especially in Southern Africa, thereby aggravating its state of underdevelopment. Poverty, inequality and unemployment have been highlighted as characterising the nations of Southern Africa. Thus, the limited state of socio-economic development in Southern African countries necessitates a cautious approach to adopting neoliberal policies alongside comprehensive social welfare programmes. Striking this balance is crucial to avoid potential fiscal crises that could undermine their social developmental goals. While it remains imperative for all nations within the Southern African region to institute sovereign wealth funds as instrumental mechanisms for fostering development and fortifying resilience against worldwide disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, concurrent attention should be directed towards strategically orchestrating the establishment of such mechanisms to effectively bolster regional integration efforts.

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