

A rare moment for building the New: Next steps for social movements

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In this month's "Voices from the South," former Africa Coordinator for the UN Millennium Development Goals and former Anglican observer to the UN, Hellen Grace Akwii-Wangusa from Uganda, reflects on how the global COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a number of unjust holes in our current economic and political system.

She argues that social movements around the world now have a new opportunity to build a new system that is informed by the realities of the most vulnerable and marginalized, and that is based in justice and equality.



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We are now living in times of COVID-19, which has re-defined everything. The pandemic has exposed the ideological and systemic bankruptcy of the current neoliberal system. It will not be possible to go back to "business as usual," as change is already happening.

What holes in the system are we seeing? Here are just some examples:

Inequality between the rich and the poor: One thing social movements around the world have been keenly aware of is the huge divide between the rich and the poor. This has crystalized even more during COVID-19, with the rich demonstrably able to afford alternative work spaces, as well as uninterrupted communication through the social media. They have adjusted to social services like home schooling children via internet/computers. They have room for social distancing in their spacious houses, can trade online and get medical supplies and other goods from companies that have websites. The poor, on the other hand, cannot and do not have those facilities and options. Social distancing is a privilege.

This also is seen in the inequalities of our health care systems. When half the world's population depend on limited and ill-equipped public health facilities and, according to the WHO, could not access the essen-

tial healthcare they need even in normal times in developing countries – we see major global inequalities that need to be immediately addressed. The disease burden in such countries was already higher than that in rich nations. For example, 1,500 people are killed by malaria each year, most of them children. Such numbers risk rising dramatically as the pandemic competes for hospital beds and stretched healthcare resources in countries with already struggling health systems.

Precarious labor situations for people around the world: The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 25 million jobs could be lost, and that is likely to be a significant underestimate. Curfews and lockdowns are causing untold economic hardship. Workers are projected to lose as much as \$3.4 trillion in income, as countries send tens of thousands of factory and farm workers home. The pandemic has redefined work spaces and jobs. It has reconfigured the form, content/substance and approaches/methodology of any manner human pre-occupation. For many subsistence informal workers, transporters, fishmongers, market women, domestic workers, refugees, migrants and other manual laborers, there is no access to new digital technologies that allow them to keep working – making them even more vulnerable.

Women are the most engaged in informal and precarious work. They are now most likely to risk of getting out of home to look for firewood, water and food for families under lockdown.

An unjust economic system: The change in the economy is irreversible after the pandemic, and will likely only get worse on a global scale. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already projected of a world heading for a recession bigger than that caused by the global financial crisis in 2008.

Yet, the neo-liberal economic policies and economic tools can no longer claim to be the fix. For example, one cannot address growing issues like External National Debt (the portion of a country's debt that was borrowed from foreign lenders, including commercial banks, governments, or international financial institutions) with the same tools as before. There is a need for sustainable solutions for rebuilding resilient economies and social services that transcend the Corona impact.

The way ahead for social movements:

We are seeing a rare moment for social movements to begin articulating and building “the New”. As the flaws in the “old” system are being displayed openly, we are in a historic time where we can more clearly articulate the alternative world we have been trying

to build for years.

As social movements and civil society organizations, the first action has commenced with mobilizing and organizing around a definition and understanding of “The New”. An effective strategy requires us to pull together and synthesize existing or new alternatives to Trade, Aid, and multilateral institutions. It also requires us to learn from what has not worked in the current neo-liberal system. We must also advocate for support for the most vulnerable; the unemployed, informal workers and vendors, subsistence rural farmers, women traders and landless etc. A new system must be informed by the realities of the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Building the new also requires building stronger network capacities to respond to short-term and long-term basic needs of the communities we serve, and streamlining organizational overlaps to ensure structured feed-back and uptake from the grass-roots.

It needs to be noted that Corona response and analysis are already growing a crowded space. Civil society, will not be moving into a vacuum and any of their responses will be a hotly contested by the mainstream and dominant development players. If we don't pull this together quickly, the neo-liberal leaning economic players will get ahead of us. We will then only respond to, critique, and work against the models – instead of being able to define and set the pace of what the new system will look like.

This time must be treated as a rare and divine opportunity for resetting the New, for galvanizing knowledge, values, and catalyzing the fight against systemic injustice and inequity.

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Link: <https://www.karibu.no/newsletter/2020/04/a-rare-moment-for-building-the-new-next-steps-for-social-movements/>