Urban Africa Under Stress: Rethinking Economic Pressure in Cities

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Research on economic pressure in Africa has been approached from diverse vantage points. While economists frame ‘pressure’ as a consequence of market failures, or as a by-product of macro-economic measures such as structural adjustment reforms or technological and political change, anthropologists who zoom in on the economic pressures individuals face in their everyday lives, i.e. the lived experiences of those who are ‘under pressure’ have focused more on topics such as uncertainty and precarity. Alternatively, economic psychologists tend to naturalise pressure as an individual response to an adverse financial situation, eclipsing the varied ways pressure is intertwined with and shaped by broader societal transformations, power structures, social relations and obligations, and webs of exchange. There are currently no studies we are aware of that focus on the multi-faceted societal constitution of economic pressure in capitalist Africa, or that compare how pressure is experienced across gender, generation or socioeconomic groups.

How do we study pressure?

Our review of existing literature on economic pressure has identified two main gaps. On the one hand, most ethnographic studies focus on a particular group/community (e.g. female gig workers, urban poor, farmers, security guards, an extended family or even a few individuals). How the experiences and drivers of pressure differ across groups according to class, income, gender, geography, profession etc., is largely absent from the literature. On the other hand, studies tend to frame pressure in the context of one specific driver (e.g. agrarian change, consumer credit, financial inclusion, changes in the structure of work, unemployment, supply chain dynamics, etc.), often in a broader context of neoliberalism, commercialisation, and globalisation.

Our blog series aims to address these gaps by exploring economic pressure in a more situational and practice-oriented way, in which pressure is understood as an affect produced in and through specific geographies, temporalities, and social and economic relations. This allows us to apprehend how specific geographies such as neighbourhoods, estates, markets or cities are pressure inducing or "under pressure". We frame economic pressure as a multi-causal and highly localized phenomenon shaped by broader geographic, social, cultural, economic and political environments, while, at the same time, acknowledging the value of a comparative approach that captures the experience of pressure across social and economic classes.

Correspondingly, our intervention – in this blog series and beyond – aims to critically engage with and counter two main positions in the literature and policy debates. First, we argue that as a social experience, economic pressure and stress are not confined to the urban poor. By widening the categories of actors (e.g. ultra-poor, poor, middle-class, rich and super rich), our analysis and debate expands the portrayal of pressure as an experience that solely affects the poor; whether it be the "hustler" striving to make ends meet on the streets of Nairobi or families using food banks in Johannesburg. Understanding the cross-class characteristics of pressure is key to understanding how it has become an ubiquitous phenomenon constitutive of capitalist society and everyday life.

Second, we question the assumptions regarding the power of individual action and choice prevalent among psychologists, behavioural economists and other social scientists working on the productive potential of hope, aspirations and self-efficacy (e.g. the work of behavioural economists such as Johannes Haushofer as well as anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai). Instead, we take the position that economic pressure is produced through the intersection of overarching ideologies, economic structures, social webs of exchange, and the dynamics of capitalism that shape the lives of all classes in the urban population. Based on our review of existing literature and preliminary qualitative interviews conducted in Nairobi, we suggest that economic pressure is an emotional state engendered by a cognitive assessment of a real/imagined disbalance between real/imagined economic demands and the real/imagined ability to fulfil them. Crucially, the existence of economic pressure does not necessarily entail an actual disparity between demands and abilities; rather, it is a (inter)subjective experience produced by changes in an actor's social and material environment that suggests to him or her that such a disbalance exists and is relevant, significant and urgent. Hence, we do not conceptualise economic pressure as a quantitatively measurable individual feeling, but as an affect whose constitution, magnitude and presence are a function of atmospheric changes in one's environment. Economic pressure is thus better grasped by local idioms such as piny pek (Dholuo, "the world weighs heavy") or ngori (Sheng, "trouble") than through a set of objective criteria.

Where do we study pressure?

Our focus is the capitalist and especially neoliberal city. The effects of neoliberal restructuring and regimes of accumulation have been particularly inimical in African cities, which face ever deepening informalisation, inequality, insecurity, economic uncertainty and attendant excessive policing, yet continue to pulsate with the promise of possibilities. African cities are particularly fertile sites in which to examine pressure as they are agglomerations of rapid and often turbulent social, cultural and economic change triggered by late capitalism, and are home to a range of interconnected actors who experience and manage, as well as co-produce and co-intensify, pressure across class and other divides. City dwellers also experience a constellation of conditions that are distinct from their rural counterparts: they have more business opportunities and risks; face a range of infrastructural constraints, from rising housing and transport expenses to a shortage of affordable housing, water and sanitation; experience high levels of poverty, widespread under-/un-employment, and intense competition for jobs with concomitant downward pressure on wages in the context of increasing rural urban migration; are more vulnerable to urban criminals or state agents (police etc.) that rob them of their earnings or assets, and their financial demands are not fixed, but ever-changing, often with an accelerated speed, and abetted by mobile technology, the self-help industry, and loan apps that encourage financial action. In addition, urban residents are more plugged into the circuits of global capitalist culture (technological connections, media, music, wealth, digital work, etc.) and the latter's imaginaries of prosperity contribute to the trend of restless and calculative agency.

This complex and shifting landscape of 'pressure in the city' demands an inter-disciplinary approach to apprehend how economic demands, obligations and constraints interweave with the social worlds and life experiences of city dwellers. This includes, on the one hand, examining the inter-relationship between available income (and saleable assets more widely) and the necessary and desired demands that actors (and their families, kin, and social networks) face. This income-demands gap (as distinguished from the income-expenditure gap) is a key catalyst of 'pressure'. On the other hand, this requires tracking pressure across noneconomic registers – financial, cultural, social, psychological – and gaining a comprehensive picture of how these registers relate. For example, while pressure is associated with a number of common somatic symptoms such as sleeplessness, ulcers, lack of energy, depression, over-activity and burn-out, it may also create the conditions that prompt an array of actions such as gender-based violence, concealing or switching phones to avoid being observed or contacted, gambling and drinking, which can induce new psychological, financial and social pressures. Attaining a full picture of pressure — its drivers, symptoms and consequences — thus necessitates an inter-disciplinary and multi-methodological approach.

"One illness away from poverty": Economic pressures and uncertainty in Nairobi

In the context of the pandemic, Nairobi continues to be a city of disparities. Against the looming local and global slow-down that the Covid-19 crisis has provoked, a recent poll shows that vast sections of the Kenyan population are now unable to pay for utilities (67%), rent, or medicine, can no longer remit money to dependants (79%), have defaulted on loans repayment (75%), and had to turn to food donations. Significantly, 81% of those surveyed are anxious and stressed, while 52% felt helpless and 33% angry. Indeed, the conditions urban residents face are stressful. With the large tracts of the promised Covid-19 stimulus package monies unaccounted for and seemingly never expended, the inconsistent food donations in poor communities tapering, and one million jobs lost in three months, daily life is now even more difficult to plan. But these pressures build on dynamics that existed before the pandemic. In February 2020, before the government implemented a lockdown, census data documented that 39% of youth (between the ages of 18-35) were unemployed. Likewise, over half of those employed in 2018 earned less than 10,000 Kenya shillings a month [less than $100], which is barely enough to cover basic necessities such as food, transport, housing and clothing. With privatization and the high cost of basic services such as rent, healthcare, water and, in many poor neighbourhoods, even sanitation facilities, meeting one's every day needs is a significant financial strain. Even the middle-class are only "one illness away from poverty" due to the inordinate cost of private health care and similar shocks.

As in other neoliberal cities, the remedies for these significant economic burdens are individualized and the political economy that scaffolds them often remains off-staged/hidden from view. Instead, predatory mobile loans, principally targeting youth, the poorest and underemployed, are offered at exorbitant interest rates, the booming church industry thrives on a prosperity gospel that promises individual riches in exchange for prayers (and often significant tithes) and the country's development is projected in a number of 'vision' documents that promote large-scale infrastructure (such as roads, railways, airports etc) rather than an improvement in basic conditions for all Kenyans.

It is against these realities, that, over the last few years, public discourse more and more features words such as "mental health" and "burnout." It is not a coincidence that this vernacular is taken up at a time when most Kenyans, surveyed across geographies, genders and classes, reported that their financial status worsened between 2016 and 2019.Interestingly, during this same three year period, we observe increasing (neoliberal) efforts directed towards "financial inclusion" habitually channelled through "fintech."

Certainly, Kenyans are finding it hard to juggle all their economic burdens, from extended families to basic necessities, let alone finance the personal and collective aspirations for home ownership, better education, cars etc. All around, across all demographics, there is personal and collective work directed towards lightening these loads, made by piny pek – a heavy world. There are bets hedged, some won and many lost; collective savings groups, gambling, debts, and other situated modes to narrativize and negotiate economic pressures. Future blog posts will detail these means of coping in more ethnographic depth, showcasing the fervent efforts people of all walks of life in Nairobi, a capitalist city, are making to ease the pressure.

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