

South African commoning, cooperatives and eco-socialist potentials in the context of Covid-19

By Patrick Bond and Meron Okbandrias,
University of the Western Cape School of Government, Cape Town, South Africa

Whose Commons? Appropriations, Contestations, and Perspectives

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1. Introduction

Covid-19 began to spread across South Africa starting on March 1, 2020, initiated by a group of friends (white, upper-middle-class) who returned that day, via Dubai on Emirates, from a skiing trip in northern Italy. Most of them tested positive, spreading the disease quickly in a society whose neo-apartheid-style health system threatened to buckle. Other travellers with similar race and class privileges transmitted new strains. By March 26, the government imposed one of the world's most rigorous public health interventions: a lockdown knocking out at least three quarters of economic activity. On May 4 there was a slight relaxation, and at that stage, the 'essential services' workers were joined by another quarter of the formal-sector workforce who were allowed to return to their jobs. (Together that still accounted for only a fifth of the active labour force receiving permission to be back at work, with most of the informal sector still disallowed from activity deemed by the state to be non-essential).

Three logics were suddenly thrown into diverse forms of both collaboration and contestation:

- The first logic was capital's: a simple demand that business be brought back to 'normal' as soon as possible (led by the mining industry), and that the state budget deficit – then exploding from 4.5 percent of GDP to double digits – be reigned in. Conservative commentators also demanded ongoing frugality in monetary policy, to halt the SA Reserve Bank from 'printing money' to finance the state.
- The second logic was the state's own command and control tendencies, which were amplified by police and army 'securocrats' who were quick to put down social unrest, but which also included a temporary extension of the welfare grants system.
- The third logic was that of 'Ubuntu,' South Africa's long-standing mutual-aid support mechanisms, augmented by demands for social, economic and environmental justice.

In this essay, we explore context and politics behind South Africans' reactions to these exceptionally difficult circumstances, given that prior failures in the cooperative and eco-socialist movements – and victories in concrete commons struggles – provide lessons about how the third logic might prevail. Some of our optimism is based on observations of resistance from the first period of the Covid-19 crisis, but also reflects theoretical insights into 'super-exploitation' as a barrier to capitalist expansion. Hence society has a growing awareness that the temporary relief measures discussed below should be not only made permanent, but extended. Again, we stress that prior experiences in cooperative institutional development and eco-socialist ideological argumentation have been

unsatisfactory – but that does not mean they must remain so, especially in view of the successful commoning experiences South Africans have pioneered when it comes to life-saving AIDS medicines, basic municipal services and higher education.

2. Logics of profit, of bureaucracy and of commoner interests

The three logics of Covid-19 in South Africa occasionally overlapped, especially when it came to the state's carrots and sticks. In the overlap of the first and second logics, the state carefully protected property rights; it was hard-wired to do so not only as a result of deals made during the early 1990s transition from apartheid to democracy (Bond 2014a), but also in 1996, during the drafting of the country's liberal constitution (Bond 2014b). But the state's socio-economic responsibilities – including formal rights to food and water – exist within the same document, and in an example of the second logic of state control, a widely-needed system of delivering food parcels to starving communities was mediated by neopatrimonial local leaderships. These were mainly under the control of the ruling African National Congress party but also, in the Western Cape, of the centre-right Democratic Alliance. Consistent with the second logic, such food distribution suffered numerous documented incidents of political favouritism or outright corruption.

The third logic, of mutual aid conjoined with a longer-term agenda of social and economic justice, was given expression in concerns about mass hunger that grew sharp, already in late April, hitting the poorest communities hard. This led initially to inchoate social rebelliousness in the Western Cape and the central economic hub around Johannesburg. Organised land invasions by low-income homeless people – quickly building shacks on publicly-owned, vacant land – were attempted in those cities as well as Durban, but were rapidly repressed. As more police and military troops started to test positive in May, further anarchic tendencies appeared across the country. A C19 People's Coalition (2020) of more than 300 civil society groups quickly emerged, attempting to turn the anger based on the third logic into advocacy. An even more radical network, the "Cry of the Excluded" (2020) coalition of left labour and social movements, offered powerful critiques, commentaries and demands, including the state's immediate creation of three million jobs in public works activities to meet basic needs and prepare the society for climate catastrophe.

Notwithstanding widespread concern that state securocrats better respect citizens' civil and political rights, the two-year old government of President Cyril Ramaphosa felt compelled to not only intensify police clampdowns to enforce the lockdown, but increase army deployment from 3000 to 76,000 troops in late April. Human rights abuses were legion. Along with the private sector's million-strong army of security guards, the state was partially successful in fending off unrest in the midst of utter economic and social chaos, which included unfathomable mass evictions of shack-dwellers by municipal officials, mainly using outsourced security personnel (the 'Red Ants' company).

But at the same time the second logic entailed rising repression, a pushback in support of welfarism and state re-legitimation emerged, albeit in the 'tokenistic' manner the society had come to expect (Bond 2020). Ramaphosa's neoliberal finance minister and central bank governor offered a slight amount more support to the tens of millions who were now economically depressed, dispossessed and displaced, although without much of a fiscal

burden (Isaacs 2020). Even after interest rate cuts of 2.25 percent from February-April 2020, the prevailing prime rate remained one of the world's highest, in part because outflows of capital reached \$6 billion from late February through early April (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2020). This was possible because once-rigorous exchange controls had been progressively liberalised over the prior quarter century.

While a small social relief increment (less than \$3 billion) was given to the poorest – as discussed below – in contrast, a much larger subsidy (\$10 billion) was promised to banks which were on the verge of foreclosing on bankrupt companies and households. The overall impact of these efforts on the fiscus was negligible, given savings elsewhere in the budget (Isaacs 2020). The collapse in GDP would imply austerity for years if not decades to come; Business For South Africa (B4SA) estimated in May that GDP would be 17 percent lower by year's end.

(Of course, a few companies would prosper, including the South African owner – an apartheid-era, then-pro-racism media firm, Naspers – of nearly a third of Asia's largest company, Chinese Facebook equivalent TenCent, which had skilfully removed its share to the Amsterdam stock market in September 2019. Another winner was the gold mining company Sibanye-Stillwater, given gold's January-May 2020 rise from \$1460/oz to \$1720/oz at the same time the South African currency collapsed from R14/\$ to R18.5/\$, providing the controversial firm massive windfall profits, given that most of its production costs are locally-denominated.)

The third logic, Ubuntu, included not only emergency mutual-aid reactions, ranging from citizen charities to organised Community Action Networks with pairings between wealthier and poorer suburbs. In addition, a broader-based commoning strategy was by May 2020 being expressed by Cry of the Xcluded (2020), with demands for a genuinely Just Transition. And could such a strategy also incorporate longer-term conceptions of ecological sustainability? In spite of potentially strong underlying conditions that might one day allow the development of urban and rural commons under the rubric of food sovereignty, and in spite of the wide relevance of commons stretching across sectors of society – most spectacularly, people living with HIV and those unable to pay for basic water and electricity – the progressive movement has encountered major problems. Both the potentials and pitfalls are discussed in the pages that follow.

3. Covid-19 within super-exploitative South African capitalism

We take as a given that the Covid-19 crisis has structural roots. Rob Wallace *et al* (2020) laid out the context using the Marxian approach to uneven development:

Our general theory of neoliberal disease emergence, including, yes, in China, combines:

- global circuits of capital;
- deployment of said capital destroying regional environmental complexity that keeps virulent pathogen population growth in check;
- the resulting increases in the rates and taxonomic breadth of spillover events;
- the expanding periurban commodity circuits shipping these newly spilled-over pathogens in livestock and labour from the deepest hinterland to regional cities;

- the growing global travel (and livestock trade) networks that deliver the pathogens from said cities to the rest of the world in record time;
- the ways these networks lower transmission friction, selecting for the evolution of greater pathogen deadliness in both livestock and people;
- and, among other impositions, the dearth of reproduction on-site in industrial livestock, removing natural selection as an ecosystems service that provides real-time (and nearly free) disease protection.

A general program of intervention runs in parallel far beyond a particular virus. To avoid the worst outcomes here on out, *disalienation* offers the next great human transition: abandoning settler ideologies, reintroducing humanity back into Earth's cycles of regeneration, and rediscovering our sense of individuation in multitudes beyond capital and the state.

The three-step disalienation process Wallace *et al* (2020) recommend is also what the political practice of commoning should seek, in contrast to the narrower utility- and efficiency-maximising rationales that come from Elinor Ostrom's (1990) tradition. The challenge, of course, is mixing the necessary individuation required specifically during the Covid-19 crisis (i.e., a combination of respectful personal hygienic-distancing and social solidarity) with cooperative institution-building and eco-socialist visioning.

In that broader sense, 'reintroducing humanity' in an eco-social manner would only be successful absent the arrogance of settler colonialism, and indeed, South Africa was one of the world's leading sites where citizens demanded 'reparations' from the West for its long history of settler-colonial-apartheid profiteering. Along with community-based, student and healthcare struggles described below, the political agenda that renewed the society's internationalist commoning instincts took the form of Jubilee South Africa and Khulumani Support Group campaigns starting in 1998, stretching as far as the U.S. Supreme Court in search of justice and reparations (Bond 2003).

Yet not only the failure of that specific campaigning, but the ongoing character of super-exploitative settler colonialism, must be explored and explained. South Africa remains one of the most challenging sites on earth to attempt a wider-scale commoning project, because in spite of strong traditions of social mobilisation, the objective factors associated with the first two logics noted above, typically overwhelm the third. And yet neoliberal disease emergence, and specifically Covid-19's devastating spread in South Africa, can be blamed upon weaknesses in all three logics. The capitalist logic leaves out a vast share of the population by amplifying the exclusionary class character of apartheid-era super-exploitation, as shown next. The second logic, of state control, was not sufficiently attuned to how desperate that systemic marginalisation of the precariat left the citizenry by the first half of 2020. The third logic, of eco-social resistance, was not strong enough to resist the first two.

The first logic, of profit, was exceptionally brutal. South African super-exploitation has been described as such for more than a century – dating to Rosa Luxemburg's 1913 *Accumulation of Capital* – and was updated by Harold Wolpe (1972) as capitalist and non-capitalist "articulations of modes of production." A critical factor was the gendered aspect of apartheid's social reproduction, in the course of supplying workers to capital's long-standing

migrant-labour system. As explained by Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe (1978), this entailed long-distance unpaid labour by women based in Bantustans, responsible for child-bearing and rearing, for care-giving of ill, injured and elderly family and community members, and for community organising. Under western capitalism, the proximity of women and households to the urban labour process meant that state-supplied or subsidised infrastructure was closer at hand, including childcare facilities, schools, clinics and hospitals, and retirement facilities. Not only did apartheid not supply these until late in the 20th century, the post-apartheid government allowed most to deteriorate, with schools (as one example) providing the lowest-quality mathematics and science education among 140 countries measured by the World Economic Forum (2017).

In 2019, wages earned had fallen to such low levels that nearly two thirds of the country's households consumed at a level below the "Upper Bound Poverty Line," which in mid-2019 was calculated by the official agency StatsSA as \$83.46/month (\$2.79/day). The sum covered 2100 calories of food each day as well as clothing, shelter, transportation, education and other necessities (StatsSA 2019). Josh Budlender *et al* (2015) estimated that, in contrast to StatsSA's calculation that 53 percent of South Africans survived with income under the upper bound poverty line, the actual figure was probably 10 percent higher in 2015. An NGO, Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity (2019) argued that for an expanded basket of vital consumption items, a *household* budget of \$498 is appropriate, but the national minimum wage was set at \$198/month (but for state public works employees, only \$119/month). For an average household size (3.86 people), a single earner would need \$298/month to keep her/his dependents at the poverty line. Hence with 40 percent of the workforce officially unemployed even before the Covid-19 crisis, extreme levels of super-exploitation were evident across South Africa's economy.

Social programmes do not come close to lowering this line, given that the main grant (to care for children under 18 years old) was in 2020 worth just \$24/month. The Covid-19 relief package amounted to a small monthly increment of another \$24 promised from May-October 2020 as a palliative to ten million caregivers (looking after 14 million children). The old age grant to three million over age 60 is \$96/month, and the Covid-19 package temporarily increased it by \$13/month. In addition, a new (also temporary) \$19/month Social Relief Grant was introduced for informal-sector workers who had lost their livelihoods due to the crisis. Critics argue for increases, because in a recent measurement of state commitment to social spending, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2017) ranked South Africa's ratio of social spending to GDP the fifth least generous among the world's fifty main economies (at just 8 percent), in spite of having by far the worst inequality.

Extremely high corporate profits were another indicator of super-exploitation, with the International Monetary Fund's (2018) annual Article IV Consultations regularly rating the South African operations of both local and international firms at among the five highest in the world. Yet the limits and contradictions of super-exploitation were witnessed in regular 'overaccumulation' crises of capital in which too much surplus capital piled up in highly-concentrated capitalist circuits (especially those under the control of the Oppenheimer and Rupert families), leading to periodic declines in the profit rates and more extreme reflections of social misery and inequality (Malikane 2017). On the one hand, the 1980s

profitability and financial crises led white, English-speaking businesses to break away from the apartheid regime (Bond 2014a). But on the other hand, the crisis led to an era in which non-racial, constitutional democracy hollowed out the economic options. The economy briefly boomed as windfall profits were taken by big capital during the 2002-14 commodity super-cycle. But a renewed overaccumulation of capital – and ongoing ‘capital strike’ – reflected the overproduction of raw materials for the world market. The period 2015-19 was therefore punctuated by recessions and massive capital flight.

Against the terrible degradation in daily life associated with these broader-based conditions of super-exploitation, super-profits and excess capacity, various attempts at resistance emerged. Although a broad-based eco-socialist ideology has not yet taken form (Bond 2016), notwithstanding various potential components, there are various mutual aid systems and commoning strategies worth discussing, some of which succeeded and some of which failed. The first example we consider in detail, because it reveals many of the limitations of institutional attempts at commoning, is mutual aid in the form of cooperatives.

4. Cooperatives’ potentials and limits

Cooperatives and mutual aid systems are built upon a membership of workers, consumers, and producers. They link individuals, bond their individual interests, and tie their lives to goods and interests larger than themselves. This takes place in the bonding between cooperative work partners as they share values, hopes, and productive efforts in a common goal. The organic formation of cooperatives is rooted in community need and cohesion, hence the general problem of ‘scale politics’ arises in which a formal commons institution can work for communities of no more than 15,000 people (Ostrom 1990). Cooperatives are formed with individuals who share common backgrounds, as a result of culture, locality and economic circumstances.

In a context of South Africa’s profound inequality and structured economic exploitation, cooperatives have long existed in part as survival mechanisms (Okbandrias and Okem 2016; Thaba and Mbohwa 2015). Dating to the 19th century, for example, savings clubs known as ‘stockvels’ and ‘burial societies’ were mutual-aid mechanisms especially for women in the Bantustan rural areas, i.e. sites from which able-bodied men were recruited away to mines, fields and factories through migrant labour systems. In these early forms of financial cooperatives, which still thrive today, individuals or families come together to collect money typically on a weekly or monthly basis, and share it in bulk so that economies of scale are realised. This allows the funds to accumulate to the point they can be used for large purchases, health emergencies, or weddings, funerals and other family- and community-based occasions.

This is not unique to South Africa, and similar savings clubs are well known across Southern Africa and in West and Central Africa, especially as early colonial relationships through extractive industries introduced cash and commodity sales, but were super-exploitative. In Western countries, such practices are less common in the case of informal savings and credit systems, although community banking has long been a feature of the ‘social economy’ in Canada and older U.S. cities.

The advance of formal sector cooperatives in South Africa can be divided in two epochs. The first began in the mid-19th century with financial cooperatives established by working-class trade unions with British influences. These mutual societies and 'friendly societies' provided home mortgage loans (through Building Societies) and long-term insurance policies. From the 1930s-70s, the state gave support to agricultural cooperatives that had emerged from the 1930s' "Economic Movement" of national Afrikaners (dti 2009, Satgar 2007, Satgar 2014). Those that received the most generous subsidisation (including low interest rates on bank loans) were in the agricultural sector, reflecting the strong rural white (and Afrikaner-ethnic) influence in politics. The strongest for many years was the Koöperatiewe Wijnbouwers Vereniging (KWV), founded in 1918 to promote Western Cape grape vineyards, and soon given its own legislation and regulatory powers.

But from the late 1980s, once neoliberal economic policies were adopted (e.g. the phasing out of interest rate subsidies and lower fiscal support), just as democracy dawned, the white cooperatives privatised themselves, especially the KWV. At the same time, the country's white-dominated mutual financial associations faded out, starting with the building societies which were merged into commercial banks during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then the two main insurance companies (Old Mutual and Sanlam) which were turned into ordinary companies on the stock market in the late 1990s, thus transferring vast historic capital reserves to the then shareholders. The mutual wealth and cooperative spirit that had worked for a select few during most of the 20th century was, in effect, allowed to evaporate – instead of being extended to the black population.

The second epoch arose with the 1994 election of the country's first democratic government, one that endeavored to redress the partiality of previous cooperative policies by providing support on emerging cooperatives, with specific focus on black-owned cooperatives (dti, 2004). One immediate positive effect of the new policy environment after 1994 and especially during the Thabo Mbeki era from 1999-2008, was state financial and non-financial support for cooperatives, thus creating an upsurge of newly established institutions. Since 2005, the Department of Trade and Industry (dti) and more recently, the Department of Small Business Development's Vukuzenzele programme have provided seed and development funding. The dti in cooperation with sector-specific government departments actively provided education, training, and linkages to financial institutions – and in some cases assisted with export marketing and investment (dti, 2012). The Vukuzenzele programme provides up to \$1 million in loan funding for primary cooperatives.

Rhetorically at least, state support for cooperatives occurs in the belief that they enhance integration of poor and vulnerable members of society into the formal economy (dti, 2009), and fosters the 'Ubuntu' philosophy in which 'we are whom we are through others.' But although the number of newly registered cooperatives increased, the sustainability of the cooperative sector has remained weak (Wessels 2016). According to dti (2010, 9) the country's cooperative sector suffers an 88 percent failure rate, and achieves negligible employment creation and income generation (dti, 2009).

Aside from primary agricultural cooperatives, there is the sector has minimal participation in the economy. Their absence in financial services also confirms that small emerging cooperatives are unable to access credit, as financial institutions have no special

programmes to assist at the scale needed. Without a dedicated state agency to champion cooperatives' needs, dti (2012, 10) acknowledges the sector suffers poor mentorship, minimal investment, and a sense of neglect among all spheres of government and their respective enterprise development agencies.

There are exceptions. The National Community Development Worker Programme and the Department of Social Development's Community Practitioner Programme adopted the objective of creating a cooperative every month (Westoby 2014). Consequently, the top-down character of the resulting cooperatives reflect the the political and administrative imperative, rather than the desire of people in communities to voluntarily pursue specific social or commercial objectives. Nor do the dti and other funding agencies have effective screening mechanism for emerging cooperative funding, including plans to operate effectively.

One explanation for the cooperatives' failure is insufficient state subsidisation given the weak market conditions: extremely high levels of market concentration, and low incomes in what is the world's most unequal society. Hence to break through these barriers, government support in terms of policy, programmes and funding are inadequate. In spite of high crime rates (including gender-based violence), the prevalence of civil society organisations and the high degree of social protests in poor and working-class communities confirm that South Africa has a very high relative degree of 'social capital' and community trust (Alexander *et al* 2019; Ngwane *et al* 2017).

But in the context of extreme inequality not only in the economy, but in civil society's own resource base, differing interpretations exist over how South Africa's poorer communities can generate sustained social movements. The last nationally-organised movements in these areas were in the early 1990s, taking the form of 'civic associations' typically associated with the African National Congress as it prepared to contest the first democratic election. But cooptation proved surprisingly easy, as civic leaders entered government and notwithstanding alliances with other working-class leaders in parliament, failed to either shift state policy or to sustain the community movements (Mayekiso 1996, Bond 2000).

A new wave of community movements took place in the early 2000s in the main cities (the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg, Anti-Evictions Campaign in Cape Town and Concerned Citizens Forum in Durban), but failed to broaden internally and link up disaffected communities across the country, or with successful social movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign (Mbali 2013). With the major exception of the Cooperative Policy and Alternative Centre which began in 2000 and continued to link several dozen small cooperatives with a progressive ideology (Satgar 2017), there was very little institutional strengthening during the early 21st-century's wave of new social movements.

As a result, contemporary grievances that often flare in townships and informal settlements sometimes appear to occur on the spur of the moment, are hastily organised, and shortlived, and do not have lasting influence and momentum. These 'popcorn protests' rely upon issues that bring communities together locally and indeed nationally. Protests take place by the thousands each year, an indication that many poor South Africans seek active participation against the present institutional arrangements of 'representative democracy'

which operate against their social and material interests (Alexander *et al* 2019, Ngwane *et al*, 2017).

But without organisational support and a coherent ideology linking these disparate movements, they have failed to mobilise significantly across communities, and often succumb to state repression. In this context of mass poverty and the betrayal of poor people's political interests, the society's strong underlying social cohesion, as witnessed during protests, does not transcend the weak, patronage-based structures. Without sustained community advocacy and a sufficient subsidy pool, cooperatives have difficulty thriving.

5. Commoning state services to resist the threat of commodification

In the face of the institutional difficulties of establishing a cooperative strategy to promote mutual aid, was there nevertheless some inspiration from what Drucilla Cornell (2012) termed a South African "people's commons"? The challenge identified by Cornell (2012, 193) drew upon what Luxemburg (2003) in 1913 considered the three core strategies that capital deployed against society and ecology in sites of super-exploitation: "1) to coerce... unfree black labour in South Africa during the entire period of colonisation; 2) to gain control over all natural resources; and 3) to introduce a commodity economy."

The persistence of unfree black labour lasted until the early 1990s, when formal racial apartheid ended, specifically the Pass Laws and Group Areas Act which had regulated transit and residential aspects of migrancy, culminating in the 1994 democratic election. However the socio-economic cost of corporate liberalisation associated with this transition was high: the official unemployment rate soared from 16 to 29 percent (and 40 percent if we include those who live in ex-Bantustan areas and who had given up looking for non-existent jobs) (Bond 2014a).

South African capitalism therefore retained a reliance upon both undercompensated migrant workers and a vast reserve army of labour, which together keep wages lower than they would otherwise be. The people's commons that emerged in this context was trade unionism, but although the World Economic Forum (2017) rated South Africa's working class as the most confrontational on earth from 2012-17 (among 140 countries surveyed), the labour federations turned 'corporatist.' Their willingness to mimic the ANC deals of the 1990s generated a sense of 'class snuggle' instead of class struggle. The largest federation played a major role in ending the governments of Mbeki (1999-2008) and Jacob Zuma (2009-18), compelling the men they had once supported to leave their presidencies nine and fifteen months early, respectively.

As for the "control over all natural resources" exerted by capital, there was a commons philosophy to be found among both progressive conservationists (few and far between though they were among the white-dominated formal groups) and "environmental justice" activists. Their commoning philosophy included both planetary stewardship, often in an eco-feminist mode (Terreblanche 2018), and climate consciousness (Cock 2016, Satgar 2018). Earth commons political activism is pursued by anti-extractivist movements such as Mining Affected Communities United in Action, Womin and ActionAid, with a "right to say No!"

approach to mineral resource extraction most spectacularly expressed by the Amadiba Crisis Committee fighting off Australian titanium mining in the legendary Pondoland on the Indian Ocean's Wild Coast (Bennie 2017).

The third kind of people's-commoning resistance to capital has occurred against the "commodity economy," especially several essential state services: public health, water, sanitation, electricity and tertiary education. First, thanks to the 1998-2000 emergence of hundreds of "service delivery protests" (Bond 2000) just at the time French and British multinational water corporations were making major inroads into municipal water delivery (Bond 2002), coincidentally during the Cabinet service of a genuinely Communist water minister (Ronnie Kasrils), the state was compelled to offer a modicum of "Free Basic Services." These were inadequate to be sure: 25 kilolitres of water per person per day (two toilet flushes worth) and a household monthly electricity supply of 50 kiloWatt hours (which, typically for the working class, amounts to a week's worth of supply) (Bond 2002). The "tokenistic" levels and inadequate delivery resulted in further service delivery protests (Alexander *et al* 2018).

Because liberal-grounded court strategies to resolve these disputes generally failed to satisfy community plaintiffs, most tragically in three Constitutional Court judgements that revealed socio-economic rights as empty in the face of property rights (*Subramoney* on healthcare, *Grootboom* on housing and *Mazibuko* on water) (Bond 2014b), there were much more militant reflections of commoning found at grassroots level. Some of these faltered due to logistical and organising limitations (Bond and Galvin 2019). At the municipal scale of commoning, ubiquitous "land invasions" established "shack settlements" in most cities and towns (Turok 2018), and there, informal reconnections of water and electricity are not unusual. The most advanced case is the Johannesburg township of Soweto: 86 percent of power connections were illegal by the mid-2010s (le Cordeur, 2016).

In a struggle stretching from the scale of global pharmaceutical markets to the a national AIDS-denialist government down to the local health clinic, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) insisted on free, publicly-supplied medicines to help people living with AIDS combat the disease. These were initially provided through TAC's illicit importation of generic drugs from India and Thailand during activism, and were codified by an exemption to Trade Related Intellectual Property System patent rules in 2001. This represented a commoning of Intellectual Property and saved millions of lives, raising South African life expectancy from a low of 52 in 2005 (when roll-out to more than five million people began in public clinics) to 65 by 2020.

The most recent case of people's commoning from below was national: the victory over the state's excessive pricing of tertiary education. The campaign lasted from 2015-17 before intense protest led to a student victory: 90 percent of tertiary students who entered institutions after 2018, whose parents' income is less than \$20,000/year, are given grants to cover tuition and living expenses (costing the state more than \$2 billion annually).

The mostly free water and electricity, free AIDS medicines and mostly free tertiary education, together provide a sense of exceptional success in bottom-up commoning, achieved not because of top-down welfarism or court edict, but through social protest and

persistent civil-society pressure. In each case, to be sure, there are unsatisfactory aspects of implementation which have led to yet more protests. But these are, nevertheless, the genuine, effective strategies of people's commons in post-apartheid South Africa. The difficulty of carrying the protests into the Covid-19 era are obvious, but the point is that in spite of the failure of both cooperatives and eco-socialist ideology to take hold, some critical building blocks of commoning-based strategies exist for future struggles.

6. Conclusion

Returning to Wallace *et al* (2020), we can consider how South Africa's experience with Covid-19 relates to the broader set of struggles identified. For example, the need to counteract the global circuits of capital (and especially travel and livestock trade networks) and retain regional environmental complexity can be expressed through a 'degrowth' and localisation agenda (along with decommodification of trade in endangered species). This strategy would need to be specifically fit to South African economic circumstances (Bond 2019) rather than simply imposed on the Global South (as warned by Roriguez-Labajos *et al* 2019). And it would also need an international solidarity politics to prevent the kinds of nationalistic jingoism and xenophobia that the Covid-19 crisis has also unleashed, in South Africa and many other places.

It is this sort of commoning – of globalised people, against globalised capital – that the case studies of decommodified water and AIDS medicines present as instances in which South African social movements successfully made demands upon their state, supported by international allies such as a global network of water warriors, *Medicins sans Frontières*, ACT-UP!, Oxfam and Health Global Access Project. However, it is also critical to be aware of limitations, especially where difficulties arise in the institutionalisation of commons at local level, in the form of cooperatives.

The Covid-19 crisis initially provided, on the one hand, opportunities to fuse political advocacy and decommodified social services (partly as standard charity but partly also as mutual-aid networks that might sustain into the future), given the extreme suffering associated with eco-social degradation under conditions of lockdown and economic crisis across South Africa. The rapidly-formed C19 People's Coalition was an impressive crisis-response mechanism, but on the other hand, over time appeared to be reinforcing the gaps between society's potential strengths, and the actual outcomes. In part, this is because social distancing and community organising could be conjoined as effective strategies only for a layer of activists with good access to internet and smart-phone technology, and no constraints on data consumption.

In addition, there were prior ideological rifts within civil society. Some reflect traditions of socialism versus autonomism in movement building. Some rifts flow from NGOs' single-issue silo-orientation, leaving 'disconnected dots' and 'popcorn protests' to continue. Other barriers to institutional strategies, especially building local cooperatives and coalition building within overarching metropolitan- and national-scale left political networks have not succeeded. Nor has a new left trade union movement claiming 800,000 members transcended its own weaknesses and found sufficient common cause with other radicals, although the Cry of the Excluded coalition was launched during national budget protests in

early 2020, before Covid-19 was a factor.

Over the medium term, an eco-socialist ideological approach may have the potential to overcome these problems, because of the universal character of the overlapping, interlocking crises that present themselves, of which Covid-19 is only the latest and most concentrated example. There are, as well, traditions which provide optimism as the basis for future work in South Africa, including two main cases to date in which a commons strategy has been adopted by activists: to acquire anti-retroviral medicines (ARVs) to fight AIDS, and to expand access to basic municipal water and electricity services. Victories in these cases between 2000-05 were vital for the defense of life, especially in urban settings where public and private health are matters of common interest.

But the lack of both a coherent ideology and institutional form – such as cooperatives – within these commoning struggles, and ongoing divisions across the classical lines of race and class, have become debilitating. (One obvious failure includes society's inability to incorporate victims of xenophobia from Southern Africa who sought a commoning of black migrant populations of the region, following the 1885 Berlin 'Scramble for Africa' carving of artificial borders.)

Initial moves towards a coherent commoning ideology – e.g. the early 2000s' urban social movements, the 2010s' Democratic Left Front and United Democratic Front, and the early 2020s' C19 People's Coalition and Cry of the Xcluded – did not find sufficient traction in an era of fragmented left political initiatives, due partly to the ongoing dominance of African nationalism. For those most in need of deeper eco-socialist campaigns, who continue to be denied access to state power, the lack of such campaigns and institutions are especially detrimental to the nascent movement advocating 'climate justice.' But from the fragments and the two case studies, exceptional cadres have been forged in post-apartheid struggle.

This essay began by setting out the objective conditions, in 'super-exploitative' South Africa, a site hosting the world's worst inequality (including two of the five most unequal major cities on earth, Johannesburg and Cape Town), and explored why institutionalisation through cooperatives did not succeed. Nor did the construction of an eco-socialist ideology emerge amongst progressive movements, including labour, community and environmentalists. Instead, a commons agenda can be identified in three case studies – access to basic municipal services, to AIDS medicines and to tertiary education – that suggest both strengths and weaknesses need to be understood dialectically, so as to advance to the next level of commoning consciousness and action.

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