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# Measuring economic activity in Africa

‘Time over money’ approach includes women and  
unemployed youth

*By Odile Mackett*

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*Studying how people in Africa spend their time on non-leisure activities is a better guide to policy development than relying on the traditional money measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to ODILE MACKETT. She draws on recent research on the measurement of economic activity to challenge the way economists – and all of us – decide which work is the most valuable to society.*

## **Introduction**

In capitalist societies, activities that are valued are those which are done in exchange – usually they are paid for in money. During this exchange, goods and services are allocated value and these values represent what societies think is good and fruitful. However,

these exchange-based relationships have created disparities between groups, and the capitalist value creation process has been a core driver of inequality (Obeng-Odoom, 2020).

Various schools of economic thought have argued that for these processes to work as they do, certain people and activities would need to be “invisibilised” (Ainsworth, 2002; Chen, Sebstad and Connell, 1999) or “exploited” (Skrivankova, 2010; Baglioni, 2018). Within the existing economy, we place emphasis on what people do to earn money to live on. Those who cannot earn a living for themselves are less valuable to society and consequently vulnerable – this is mainly the elderly, the sick and the young. There are also a lot of activities that, while essential, are not directly paid for – such as much housework and care for the young, the old and the sick. (Much of this work is done by women.) Amongst those who are able to work for a living, however, vulnerabilities can also be identified. These may be individuals who work in manual occupations for low wages, but more so,

those who are identified as unemployed.

Despite the uneven spread of capitalism and modernisation across Africa, many countries on the continent have adopted methodologies used by advanced economies to measure and plan economic activity (Jerven, 2015). This is regardless of the fact that these methodologies tend to be ill-suited for the types of economic activities which characterise African economies.

In this article, I argue for a different way of measuring economic activity, placing special emphasis on the work of the youth and women. In many parts of Africa, women have severe constraints on their time, due to lack of infrastructure resulting in them having to walk to fetch water and fuel, and needing to hire transport to go shopping. Consequently they tend to be worse off in terms of labour market outcomes and poverty-related indicators than men (Mbaye and Gueye, 2018; Jerome, 2011; Gottlieb, Grossman and Robinson, 2018). It has been found that between 75% and 90% of women in non-agricultural employment tend to be in low paid or informal work; work from



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which acute financial vulnerabilities emanate (Mbaku, 2017).

In addition, the youth in Africa – meaning the 15 to 24 age group – make up more than a third of the population (ILO, 2020). For the youth, official unemployment statistics have been unable to capture the full scope of vulnerabilities they experience in the labour market (Mbaye and Gueye, 2018).

This includes an overrepresentation in the informal labour market and a lack of social protection in case of a loss of labour market income. Yet, unemployment rates are shockingly high. In Southern Africa, the youth unemployment rate was 50.3% in 2019 (ILO, 2020). Furthermore, the youth make up the largest share of individuals who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). In Senegal, for instance, over 50% of youth in rural areas and 35% of youth in urban areas form part of the NEET population. For young women in Senegal, this share is 60% (Mbaye and Gueye, 2018). On the continent, this figure was collectively 21.5% in 2019 (ILO, 2020). Both the statistics on unemployment as well as the NEET population reflect the challenge of labour underutilisation on the continent. Despite the unique characteristics of the population on the continent, traditional policies and measurement of policy success have followed standard Western norms.

### **The measurement flaws**

The GDP has been called “the world’s most powerful number” (Fioramonti, 2013). The importance of the GDP has been repeatedly recognised through its inclusion in the Millennium Development and Sustainable Development Goals; the African Union’s various agendas; the extensive research which has gone into GDP growth and calculation; as well as national policy frameworks which are often designed around the need to achieve higher growth – either as an end in itself or to bolster related development indicators. When South Africa’s National Development Plan talks about “growth” this is usually shorthand for “growth of GDP”.

Reliance on GDP as the main index of economic change has continued despite many criticisms of the measure. GDP cannot reflect the development of a country – which may rest on pumping oil, rather than education, infrastructure and diverse industries. Using GDP >>

as a measure hides the fact that GDP growth can accompany high, and even increasing, poverty and inequality rates (Stilwell, 2016; Jerven, 2015). GDP is both incomplete and exclusive. It simply does not register unpaid labour in the home – housework, cooking and caring (Berik and Kongar, 2021; Robeyns, 2021). Degrowth scholars have also criticised the obsessive focus on GDP growth itself (Sekulova et al., 2013; Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier, 2012).

Feminist theorists have written about the flaws of GDP measurement and ways in which the unpaid work performed in the reproductive sphere could be included (Budlender and Brathaug, 2002; Suh and Folbre, 2016) as the value of goods remain the same whether they are procured in the market or produced and consumed privately (Budlender and Brathaug, 2002). Due to the difficulty with measuring the value of goods produced and consumed outside the market, these are often excluded from GDP calculations. Yet GDP remains the most important economic indicator, despite its undervaluation of goods and services produced in the household.

US-based economists Günseli Berik and Ebru Kongar (2021) have argued that GDP per capita is not an accurate measure of economic activity as it “reinforces the focus on economic growth, and incorporates output that is harmful to human and environmental health.” These authors have argued that instead use should be made of the capabilities approach, which moves beyond asking what people *have*, to asking what people *can* do (the philosophy which underpins the Human Development Index). Applying this measure in developing countries also becomes a challenge, specifically in those with large informal economies where economic activity cannot be easily enumerated.

### **Why time-use surveys?**

An alternative form of data collection about work, which has gained popularity in recent decades, is time-use surveys. Initially used in business processes to determine how long workers spent on the completion of tasks (Stinson, 1999), these data have illuminated the valuable contributions which women make to the economy every day.

With time-use data, the hypothesis (developed by the conservative US economist Gary Becker [1965]) that women would decrease the amount of time spent on housework once they increased time spent in wage work has been disproved (Hartmann, 1981). These data have also made the enumeration of activities which are not based on an exchange-based relationship possible.

Time-use data have not only demonstrated how shifts in cultural perceptions of gender roles influenced women’s well-being and the time they dedicate to housework (Seymour and Floro, 2021), but they have also more accurately captured the activities of agricultural households and informal sector workers, which labour force surveys have ordinarily done fairly poorly (Seymour, Malapit and Quisumbing, 2020; Hirway and Jose, 2011).

They have additionally been used in satellite accounts, which have attempted to estimate the value of women’s unpaid work and the contribution thereof to overall GDP estimates (Esquivel et al., 2008; Neetha, 2010). The value of time-use surveys thus lies in making visible not only the work of informal sector workers, but also of unpaid labourers in the household and unemployed individuals who tend to engage in survivalist activities. This article focuses on the latter two categories.

### **The excluded**

#### **Women**

Women have tended to find themselves on the periphery of the economy in both developed and developing nations. Reasons for this have been well-ventilated in the literature and range from their preference to specialise in housework, their biological make-up which makes them better suited for tasks outside the market, and assumptions about them made by other market participants, resulting in barriers of entry to the economy (Becker, 1985; Hartmann, 1979; Bergeron, 2016).

One trend that has been consistent over the decades, even as the labour market has become more feminised, was that women continue to be the primary labourers of unpaid care work (Folbre, 2014). The relationship between the productive and reproductive economies are well studied by heterodox schools of thought. Mainstream feminist economists, radical feminists and social reproduction theorists have written most widely about these phenomena (Bhattacharya, 2017; Himmelweit and Mohun, 1977; Briskin, 1985; Vogel, 2000). In their work, they have demonstrated how vital activities within the reproductive economy are to sustain the productive economy.

However, this unpaid care work, by virtue of it being unpaid and performed in the household, has tended to be excluded from traditional economic analyses. In countries with poorly developed public infrastructure, this burden becomes even greater (Floro and Komatsu, 2011). This argument can be extended to the unpaid work women do in building their communities; the foundation of a well-functioning society (Banks, 2020).

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However, in countries around the world, increasing divorce rates, fragmented families, decreasing marriage rates, and decreased fertility has accompanied the feminisation of the labour market (Bakker, 1999; Browne & Misra, 2005; Gronau, 1977; Rosenfeld & Birkelund, 1995; Schultz, 1985; Weeks, 2011). Loss of male breadwinner income and public health crises, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, are additional factors that have pushed women into the labour market in Africa (Coulibaly, 2005; Zimmer and Das, 2014; Zimmer, 2009).

Many attempts have been made to include women’s work in the measurement of economic activity, or to determine how a woman should be compensated for work done in the household (Pyun, 1969; Suh and Folbre, 2016; England, Budig and Folbre, 2002). The focus of these studies has been on making women’s work visible through demonstrating its value and, by doing so, making women more visible and consequently less vulnerable. Failure to do so has resulted in women’s exploitation in the capitalist economy, and households (or at least the women therein) having to provide the support which the state and the market are unable to provide. In African economies, with limited infrastructure, women’s contributions become vital to the functioning of the economy. Despite



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this, women remain a vulnerable group on the continent.

### Youth

On the African continent, the “youth bulge” or demographic dividend which has been identified in a number of studies has been viewed as an asset to the continent, given the prediction that the African region will be the only region in the world with a youth cohort greater than the rest of the population (Backhaus and Loichinger, 2021; ILO, 2021; 2020). However, the inability of many African economies to absorb the youth into productive activities has fuelled discontent. This discontent has not been beneficial for their individual identities, nor has it been good for social cohesion. The youth unemployment rate has been growing on the continent in line with global trends, but the youth bulge makes the accompanying consequences of youth unemployment in Africa a more serious and urgent problem (ILO, 2021).

The activities of unemployed youth have not been viewed in a similar light to those of women. This is in part because assumptions have centred

on them eventually getting jobs, something women did not traditionally need to do, at least in the Western context (Fraser, 1994; Land, 1980). However, given the many challenges facing the traditional labour market today, and supply-side constraints, such as long-term unemployment, it is questionable whether these individuals will ever find traditional or standard employment opportunities.

When combining the poor economic conditions on the continent with the changing nature of the global economy and limited social security provided by African governments, youth unemployment presents an unsustainable situation. Nevertheless the youth, like women, also make valuable contributions to the economy every day. Many engage in unpaid reproductive labour, alongside women (particularly young women), while others engage in subsistence or survivalist activities (Webster, Joynt and Sefalafala, 2016; World Bank, 2009; Taljaard, 2012).

A sample study in Ghana (40 years ago) found that 77% of unemployed youth helped their families with >>

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“farming, wood carving, cloth weaving, tailoring, carpentry or trading” (Boakye, 1980: 31), although less so in urban settings. Similarly, in South Africa about 73% of men classified as unemployed or not economically active men and over 50% of similarly classified women are actually engaged in subsistence activities, while a proportion of not economically active and unemployed men and women also engaged in wage employment (Floro and Komatsu, 2011) according to the time-use diary. These activities were not enumerated using the employment definitions employed by labour force surveys, but were instead made visible using time-use data.

### **Towards a more inclusive approach**

A shift in thinking about what constitutes valuable economic activity is needed around the world, but more urgently in Africa. Literature cited in this article has demonstrated the limits of traditional measures of economic activity but has also established why continuing to measure economic



activity in this way is not sustainable. We need a different way of thinking about economic activity, by moving away from economic activity having a means to a money-metric end towards an act of “social provisioning,” as encouraged by Power (2004). For women and the youth, a shift in thinking is needed from defining activity as *what people do to earn a living* to considering *how people spend their time*.

This conceptual shift in thinking is not a novel proposal. What is novel is that I am arguing for this shift not only for the sake of women, but also for the sake of unemployed youth. In line with both the social provisioning framework and the capabilities approach, this would require that we think about work as more than just a means to earn a wage, but also think about our identities in our work, as the ILO (1999) has already encouraged in its Decent Work Agenda.

This shift would mean moving away from relying *solely* on the traditional measures of employment in labour force surveys to the measurement methodology used in time-use surveys. Arguments for the use of time-use

surveys have been made by various authors (Esquivel et al., 2008; Budlender, 2007; 2010; Floro, 2021). These authors have demonstrated that using time-use surveys could not only result in estimates of GDP being revised upwards (Suh and Folbre, 2016; Chadeau, 1992; Dulaney et al., 1992), but could also shift people’s thinking around how they spend their time and the contributions they make on a daily basis, given the difference in reported labour market stats and actual time-use demonstrated by Floro and Komatsu (2011).

If we look at economic activity from a time-use perspective, a number of benefits could become apparent (in addition to those already mentioned). These include identifying the types of activities the “unemployed” engage in and identifying how time constraints hamper access to participation in traditional economic markets.

For the unemployed, this means that we can enumerate what they do with their time. Many may be engaged in unpaid labour in service of their communities or households. This would be specifically pertinent where labour market status is linked to household



composition and the location where someone lives. In countries where the supply of workers outpaces the demand for formal labour (the case for many countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region), more appropriate policy responses could be devised as policy responses to poverty and inequality generally take the form of gearing individuals towards formal, paid employment.

Time-use data provide insight into the types of activities that people may already be involved in, and which may represent a barrier to paid employment. Women who, for instance, have heavy care burdens in the household may not have time to look for and remain in paid employment. Knowing how they spend their time may allow for more appropriate welfare reforms to lighten the care burden. Similarly, inequality in time-use, which has been proven to be a key driver of inequality in the labour market, could allow for labour market policies that are geared to addressing time constraints which are external to the labour market, such as mandated childcare facilities in the workplace or publicly subsidised childcare centres. Lastly, more appropriate welfare reforms could be extended to unemployed youth which do not presume that all working age individuals should have access to paid employment (such as South Africa's social grants and private pensions systems). Broad-based social security reforms could include universal income grants (as proposed in Namibia) or unemployment grants.

Although the regular administration of time-use surveys would assist in better enumeration of activities individuals engage in, it would still be necessary for governments to be able to identify those who are defined as "unemployed" in order to devise appropriate policies to support such individuals; knowing how people spend their time will not address their need to earn an income. It is indeed possible to combine traditional and time-use

measures into a single survey, and this has been done in countries like Tanzania and Benin where questions related to time-use were added to an existing survey in the form of an additional module (Budlender, 2007).

In addition, it must be noted that changing or expanding measurement techniques does not suggest that other barriers to economic prosperity will automatically be removed. These include existing problems related to economic growth, challenges related to poorly governed political institutions, and the racism, Eurocentrism and imperialism that often underpin African economies (Obeng-Odoom, 2017). Having data is also not an automatic qualifier for positive policy developments. Rather, it could provide a more *accurate* picture of what is taking place within an economy and allow for the development of more appropriate policy responses.

## Conclusion

We need to re-think how we measure economic activity, particularly in Africa where large informal economies are the norm. Time-use surveys are a powerful way of enumerating the economic activities of those who are especially economically vulnerable and tend to be ignored by traditional economic measures – women and the youth. Thinking differently about economic activity in terms of time-use, rather than as exchange-defined relationships will influence what we view as valuable to society and in turn change the parameters of public policy debates, public budgeting and decision making.

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