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## Urban economics in the Global South: A study of *The Economist*

Urban economic analysis receives little attention in the Global South. The COVID-19 pandemic and its highly urbanized impacts made urban economics more relevant, but how it was applied warrants investigation. One way to address this issue is to examine how African economies – the focus of much attention during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) – were discussed among economists. Did they pay attention to the urban economy in Africa? How well did they do so? Do the resulting proposed economic policies for recovery reflect urban economic realities in Africa? With no answers from any economist, this article draws on data comprising more than five hundred articles about COVID-19 published in *The Economist* and their content analysis. Three results

must be emphasized. First, most economic analyses were national or regional, with limited attention to Africa's urban economies. Second, where they considered the urban economy of Africa, *The Economist's* articles, often steeped in mainstream urban economics, were quite misleading. Third, and finally, these results raise fundamental questions about *The Economist's* proposed economic policies to drive (urban) economic recovery. This study suggests that some special features of mainstream urban economics limit its potential.

**Keywords:** cities, urban economics, *The Economist*, the Global South

## 1 The urban challenge: A grim calculus between life, death, and the economy

We live in a predominantly urban world. It “will continue to urbanize over the next three decades—from 56 percent in 2021 to 68 percent in 2050. This translates into an increase of 2.2 billion urban residents, living mostly in Africa and Asia” (UN-Habitat, 2022: xv). Urban planning poses a major urban challenge in the Global South, but the most fundamental urban question is how to analyse and manage the urban economies in the Global South (Zhang, 2015: xvi–xvii; UN-Habitat, 2022: 103–138). These urban economies not only reflect national economies, but also drive them (Njoh, 2003; Obeng-Odoom, 2010; Ahimah-Agyakwah, 2022). Much like urban economies elsewhere (UN-Habitat, 2022: 103–138), the urban economies in the Global South are not simply a subtotal of larger economies. These intermingle with urban economic structure and urban form, but urban economies must be studied on their own terms as well.

Yet, urban economic analysis in the Global South receives relatively little attention in urban economics (Glaeser & Henderson, 2017). Whether such economies can be analysed by using the same tools of mainstream urban economics is contested (see Zhang, 2015: xvi–xxii; Obeng-Odoom, 2013a, 2013b, 2016). However, the orthodoxy in urban economics has recently been promoted by both economic geographers and mainstream urban economists (Glaeser & Henderson, 2017; Randolph & Storper, 2022) as capable of illuminating and helping resolve such an urban challenge. Thus, the question is no longer whether to apply urban economic analysis to the Global South, but how well mainstream urban economics appreciates cities in the Global South.

The 2020–2023 COVID-19 pandemic provides a natural experiment to address this question. During that period, economists provided sustained and substantial analyses of “a grim calculus” or “the stark choices between life, death and the economy” around the world (*Economist*, 2020r). However, these works nearly always focused on academic economists’ studies of national or global economies (see Murray, 2020), some reflecting earlier studies (e.g., Mackenzie et al., 2007) on how economists interpret, and try to change, the world. Previous research on cities and COVID-19 (e.g., Asante & Mills, 2020; Finn & Kobayashi, 2020; Ojong, 2020; Onyishi et al., 2020) does not address questions related to urban economics.

Outside academic economics, a flurry of economic analysis can be found in the media. The corpus of news about African economies during the peak of the COVID-19 pandem-

ic illustrates the point. Yet, it is not well known how much and how well these economic analyses reflected Africa’s urban economies. Three questions demand urgent answers. First, did economists pay attention to the urban economy in Africa? Second, how well did economists analyse urban economies? Third, do the resulting proposed economic policies reflect the generalities and special features of the spatial economy in Africa (see *Economist*, 2020r, 2020t)? Media analyses in urban and regional studies abound (e.g., Molotch, 1970; Molotch & Lester, 1999; Sa, 2009; Mirrlees, 2017; Grisold & Theine, 2020; Harjuniemi, 2020; Shin & Boonjubun, 2021), but they do not address these questions.

Examining articles in *The Economist* might help address these questions. Between 2020 and 2021 alone, the newspaper published more than five hundred (504) COVID-19 articles on a wide range of issues, including the environment and the economy (*Economist*, 2020e). These were widely circulated to about 1.2 million people globally (Economist Group, 2021: 18–19). Readers paid particular attention to COVID-19 news, which received some 25% of the time spent reading the newspaper (*Economist*, 2021). No single academic economist can claim this influence.

*The Economist’s* (2020y: 48) vision is “Liberalism – the Enlightenment philosophy, not the American left”. Although *The Economist* has never wavered from this right-wing ideology of enlightenment (Starr, 2004; Zevin, 2019; *Economist*, 2020y), this ideology has not narrowed the range of issues covered in the newspaper. On the contrary, this periodical is arguably the broadest among its peers in terms of reporting on economic issues, on which it exerts considerable influence (Harjuniemi, 2020). The editors of *The Economist* are actively briefed by the UK Treasury, for instance, and the newspaper provides a key platform for leaders to address the world (Zevin, 2019; Obeng-Odoom, 2022a, 2022b). With a dedicated Middle East and Africa section as well, it is worth examining *The Economist’s* articles.

Based on a content analysis of more than five hundred articles about COVID-19 published in *The Economist* from 2020 to 2021, this article shows that most economic analyses were national or regional, with limited attention to Africa’s urban economies. Where they did consider such urban economies, these articles, drawing on mainstream urban economics, offered questionable claims. Consequently, the prevailing proposals for (urban) economic recovery are contestable. To illustrate these arguments, the rest of this article is divided into three sections. The methods section contextualizes and explains how the data were collected and analysed. The results section follows, with two subsections. The first – on COVID-19, cities, and (urban) economic development – sketches

the ramifications of COVID-19 in Africa at various scales, addressing the first and second research questions. The second – on (urban) economic recovery – sets out economic strategies for addressing the noted (urban) economic development crisis, addressing the third research question. These results are followed by a discussion section that shows the fundamental limitations of the mainstream urban economics approach.

## 2 Methods

Media reports might be considered unscientific and hence have no place in scholarship. However, news and the analysis of its content are critically important in urban economic research. News has taught us about urban property prices, for example (Munro, 2018). Thus, many urban analysts (see Molotch, 1970; Munro, 2018; Shin & Boonjubun, 2021) increasingly examine news content. Such content analysis (Starr, 2004; Lammensalo, 2021; Atria et al., 2022; Obeng-Odoom, 2022b; Tarvainen, 2022) tends to focus on what has been said or written. However, a greater power of content analysis is revealing what exists, but the author chooses not to state (Munro, 2018). That which is hidden also reveals the ideological orientation of the author, the author's interests, and the author's agenda. Collecting data from both the manifest and the latent (Holsti, 1961: 12–14) in a newspaper can, therefore, provide one way of studying an urban phenomenon.

Even so, criticisms of using newspaper content persist. As summarized by Moira Munro (2018), these methods are said to merely recycle old stories; content analysis of news is detached from practice, and the method is sometimes viewed as unsystematic. These claims are not fundamental: they can be addressed by redesign. News may be recycled, but the purpose of analysing even old news is to appreciate the real world. Done well, content analysis can be both systematic and transparent, such that the stories referenced can be tracked. Thus, “[t]here is surely scope for further research using this method” (Munro, 2018: 1101).

Two methodologies are prevalent. One is deductive (the domain of much bibliographic research), and the other is inductive (the forte of many discourse analyses). The former seeks to extract meanings from word count and theory, and the latter counts words and deduces meaning from experience. Both are unsatisfactory because they are partial (Lainé, 2019: 776–779). Abductive content analysis is more holistic (Lainé, 2019: 776–779) and therefore more germane to this study. I collected and analysed data from *The Economist*, the most prominent newspaper of its kind in the world. During the data collection period, I was a subscriber to *The Economist*. I read the paper copies of the newspaper. From a total of 104 issues,

it became clear that COVID-19 stories could appear in any section of *The Economist*. I focused on collecting the stories from 2020 to 2021. This timeframe is appropriate because most of the COVID-19 stories in *The Economist* were published in 2020–2021. In the words of *The Economist* (2021c), “[i]n 2020 nearly half of articles in *The Economist* mentioned it, the highest share for a single subject since the second world war” (see also *Economist*, 2020x).

The quantity of news on COVID-19 declined sharply in 2021 (see Figure 1) but, as recent research on COVID-19 (Atria et al., 2022: 445) has shown, a discursive thread was established within only three months. Elsewhere, a total of 222 articles are suggested to be sufficient for such analyses (Munro, 2018: 1094), and so collecting this study's pool of more than five hundred news data points over a twenty-four-month period is clearly robust.

*Atlas.ti* could be used to analyse digital news, “not only text data but also video and other digital media formats” (Hwang, 2008: 525). However, the paper copies of *The Economist* that I needed to probe could not be analysed by using *Atlas.ti* software. Previous studies (e.g., Holsti, 1969: 150–194; Lainé, 2019: 776–779) that use or defend qualitative data analyses contend that, under such circumstances, other qualitative data analysis strategies could also be used effectively. Eliminating computing counting software also removes the risks of counting words without reading, and reading words without context.

So, I set out to read the news articles carefully. First, I established two main thematic categories; namely, 1) COVID-19, cities, and (urban) economic development, and 2) (urban) economic recovery. These categories framed *The Economist's* diagnoses and solutions, and hence satisfied a critical content analysis criterion: “categories should reflect the purposes of the research” (Holsti, 1969: 95). Initially, some of the stories did not easily fit into these “semantic families” (Atria et al., 2022: 446) or categories (Holsti, 1969: 94–126), but a process of iterative re-reading and reflections helped in classification, consistent with Munro's (2018: 1094) recent study. As noted by Kahneman et al. (2021: 223, 257–258, 300–311), to remove noise in data analysis, complex judgements must be structured by decomposing and documenting intermediate steps, independently assessing each step, and holistically making a judgement. Highlighting especially lucid and representative quotations also helped in the process. As Figure 1 suggests, across the board, news data for the sections studied in *The Economist* – namely, Cover, Leaders, Briefing, Middle East & Africa, Business, Finance & Economics, Science & Technology, and Specials – decreased considerably in 2021. Accordingly, I had fewer data to analyse for that year.

**Table 1:** Articles on COVID-19 in *The Economist* relating to Africa and the rest of the world, 2020–2021.

	Year	Jan/Feb	Mar/Apr	May/June	Jul/Aug	Sept/Oct	Nov/Dec	Total
Number of issues reviewed	2020	9	8	9	9	9	9*	53
	2021	9	8	9	9	9	7	51
Cover	2020	6	7	16	9	3	6	47
	2021	6	4	8	8	5	3	34
Leaders	2020	4	19	23	8	7	6	67
	2021	6	5	4	4	3	2	24
Briefing†	2020	1	12	9	2	2	2	28
	2021	3	1	3	1	1	1	10
Middle East & Africa	2020	0	4	10	6	1	1	22
	2021	1	2	1	2	0	2	8
International	2020	6	11	10	6	4	4	41
	2021	1	1	5	3	1	1	12
Business	2020	1	10	28	14	6	4	63
	2021	3	1	2	1	0	1	8
Finance & Economics	2020	2	23	22	10	8	3	68
	2021	1	2	3	4	2	1	13
Science & Technology	2020	1	12	14	4	2	5	38
	2021	6	3	3	0	1	2	15
Specials‡	2020	0	1	2	1	1	0	5
	2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

Source: author.

Note: \*The last issue was a double issue containing *The Economist's* own analysis of the share of COVID-19 news in the newspaper (*Economist*, 2020x); †regular briefings of *The Economist*, not occasional or economic briefings; ‡includes Special Reports, By Invitation, and Technology Quarterly.

Only titles with specific references to *COVID-19*, *plague*, *pandemic*, and *post pandemic* were counted as relevant (see Table 1). For both years, 2020 and 2021, I first sorted all the issues of *The Economist* into individual months, from January to December. Next, I combined issues of *The Economist* published in two-month periods (January/February, March/April, etc.). I separated the issues into smaller bits, went through the issues to highlight relevant stories, and then tallied the number of relevant stories to improve the reliability of the data. They were all systematically recorded in Excel spreadsheets, a practice used by Michael Lainé (2019) in his study of newspapers in France.

Reading the same issues multiple times at different periods for more than two years (2020–2023), collecting data from different sections of the newspaper during the study, and presenting and discussing these data on multiple forums also improved reliability. Such steps also helped reduce what Kahneman et al. call “occasion noise” in the data analysis process, “driven by countless triggers, including mood”. In this type of research, “if you can, . . . revisit your judgements at different points in time, when the triggers of occasion noise are likely to be different” (Kahneman et al., 2021: 257–258). The multiple number of times I went through the same newspaper to collect data

from the Cover, Briefing, Middle East & Africa, International, Business, Finance & Economics, Science & Technology, and Specials helped develop a deeper appreciation of *The Economist* and its stories to address the three research questions.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 COVID-19, cities, and (urban) economic development (first and second research questions)

On 14 March 2020, *The Economist* reported the rise of “ghost towns” (2020o). These are cities where many people died and economic activities stalled (*Economist*, 2020k, 2020l). These tragedies resulted in mental health crises, grief, depression, and trauma (*Economist*, 2020f). Cities faced distinctive challenges in Africa (Asante & Mills, 2020; *Economist*, 2020d), where, according to data from the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC, 2020c: 1), 41,623 people had died from COVID-19 by 27 October 2020. This record represented a case fatality rate of only 2.4%, lower than the global case fatality rate of 2.7%. However, some African countries, including Chad (6.7%), Sudan (6.1%), Liberia (5.8%),



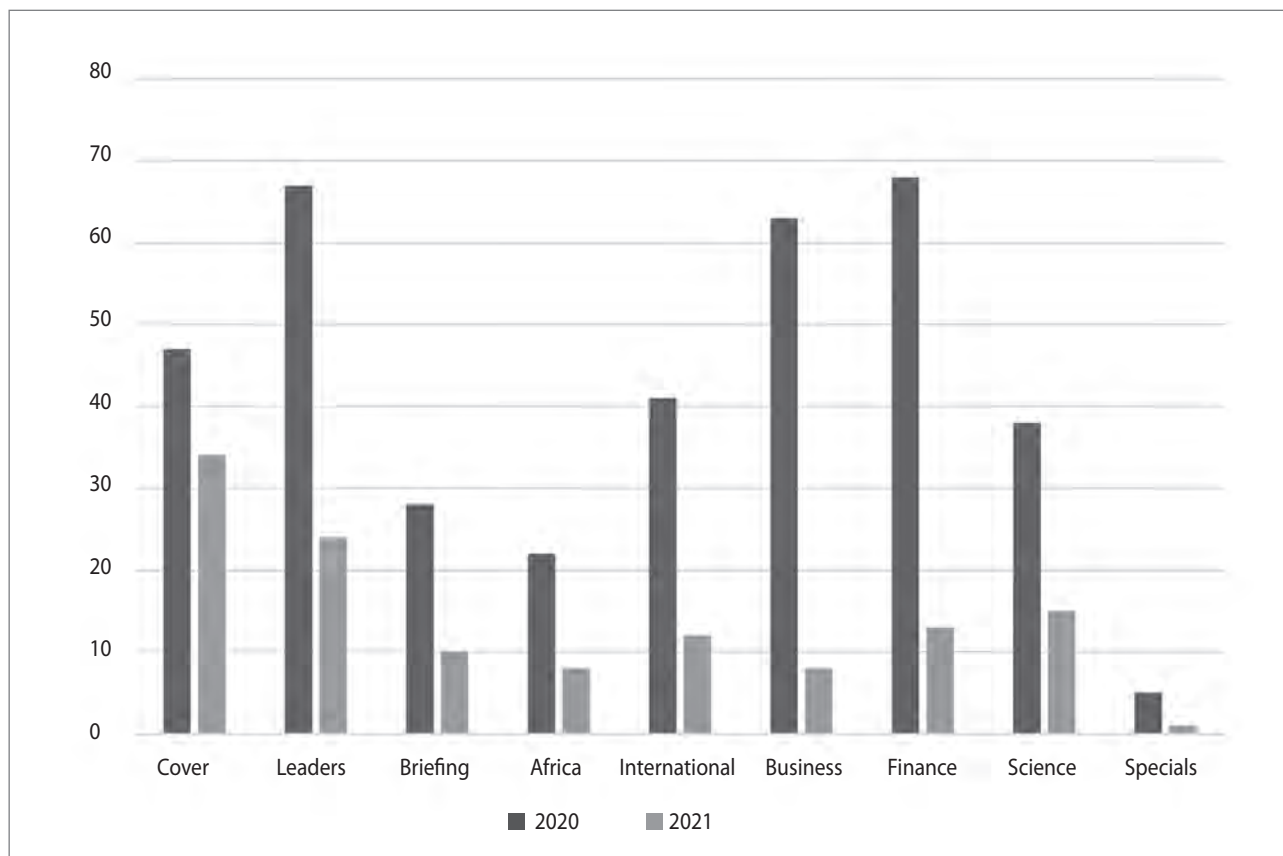


Figure 1: Declining reporting of COVID-19 news in *The Economist*, 2020–2021 (illustration: author).

and Egypt (5.8%), reported much higher case fatality rates around that time.

These data were only indicative, but the widespread economic impacts of the pandemic were indisputable. The real GDP growth rate for most countries in Africa plummeted. Both consumer prices and current account deficits spiked. Africa's 2020 funding gap of \$100 billion was expected to double by 2021 (*Economist*, 2020c). For countries such as South Africa, the budget deficit more than doubled in 2020/21 (*Economist*, 2020g).

*The Economist's* account of COVID-19 in Africa was interspersed with its wider global analysis. As Table 1 shows, COVID-19 news pervaded the newspaper. All sections published COVID-19 stories. Figure 1 shows that the number of COVID-19 news stories decreased sharply in 2021.

However, as Figure 1 shows, from January to December 2021 *The Economist* continued to publish articles on COVID-19, including specials on Africa (see Figure 1). Even if this treasure trove of news in 2021 represented only about 33% of the volume of news about COVID-19 in 2020, *The Economist* clearly covered COVID-19 quite extensively. Even in the wider media space, *The Economist* is particularly well suited for

analysis because it surpassed other leading newspapers in terms of its coverage of the pandemic. *The Economist* (2021c) itself analysed these issues in the story “The biggest story ever?” in which it stressed that “The share of *Economist* stories referring to ‘war’ reached 53% in 1915 and 54% in 1941. For the *New York Times*, it peaked at 39% in 1918 and 37% in 1942. . . . If newspapers around the world hewed closer to 35% than 55% in their reporting of the wars, then covid-19 has probably set a new record.” Thus, the economic analysis of COVID-19 in this newspaper is clearly notable.

News articles that prioritized Africa were found in the Middle East & Africa section. About thirty COVID-19 articles were published on Africa between 2020 and 2021. COVID-19 stories that were published elsewhere in the newspaper also included relevant content on Africa. Table 2 provides a sample of COVID-19 Africa-centred articles in *The Economist*. Compared to the more than five hundred stories in *The Economist*, the number of news articles on Africa might look small, but *The Economist* produced a sufficient number of articles to indicate how the newspaper analysed Africa's urban economy.

In general, *The Economist's* analysis of the urban economy was both thin and misleading. Focused largely on an analysis of resource-based economies, informal economies, and the eco-

**Table 2:** Some COVID-19 news in *The Economist* directly related to Africa, 2020–2021.

Title	Date
Covid-19 in Africa: Doses of scepticism	24 Apr. 2021
Poaching: Unhappy hunting grounds	3 Apr. 2021
Vaccine manufacturing in Africa: Home brewing	8 May 2021
Democratic Immunity: Of coups and covid jabs	14 Aug. 2021
Covid-19 in Africa: Third time unlucky	3 Jul. 2021
Health care in Africa: Picking their slots	27 Nov. 2021
The Omicron variant: Omicro-aggressions	4 Dec. 2021
Poverty: Rich slum, poor slum	19 Jun. 2021
States of emergency: Stay home or be whipped	4 Apr. 2021
Covid-19 in Africa: The long game	16 May 2020
Egypt's economy: Riders wanted	23 May 2020
Food distribution: The race to feed Africa	25 Apr. 2020
Debt relief: Thanks, but no	6 Jun. 2020
Covid-19 in Africa: Testing times	20 Apr. 2020
South Africa: Measuring the poverty pandemic	18 Jul. 2020
Coronavirus in Africa: Not immune	28 Mar. 2020
Africa and covid-19: At the end of the line	6 Feb. 2021
The pandemic in Africa: One million and not counting	8 Aug. 2020
South Africa and the IMF: Fund facts	1 Aug. 2020
Africa: Leaders and misleaders	2 May 2020
Benin: Voodoo v virus	9 May 2020
Fiscal ill-health: Debt and disease	11 Apr. 2020

Source: author.

nomics of slums, *The Economist's* analysis was based on three claims. First, because the pandemic was accompanied by a fall in oil prices, a substantial number of people were being pushed into extreme poverty. In “At the end of the line” (see Table 2), *The Economist* stated categorically in 2021 that “In most African countries commodities account for at least 80% of goods exports, so lower prices hurt.” Again, *The Economist* noted that most of the urban economy is informal. In another article, “Rich slum, poor slum” (*Economist*, 2021a), *The Economist* claimed, “Most of the world’s worst-off slum-dwellers are in poor countries . . . . Those who live in them tend to have informal jobs: hawking snacks . . . . In poor countries, they get little support of any kind. In Nairobi, curfews have been imposed to slow the spread of covid-19. Those who have broken them in their efforts to make enough money to survive have been beaten up by the police.” This point was reinforced in the article “Stay home or be whipped” (*Economist*, 2020r). *The Economist* presents the two economies – formal and informal – as distinct. “Restrictions on movement and commerce will be especially harmful to workers in the informal economy – that

is, most of the African labour force. Roughly 85% of workers do not receive a regular reported wage” (*Economist*, 2020j).

As Table 2 suggests, the urban economic analysis was thin. The priority of economic analysis was national or regional, but when semblance of urban economic analysis was offered, it was based largely on the principles of scarcity and mechanism, two key features of mainstream economics (Commons, 1924: 1–10; Darity, 2023). “The main reason . . . is simple: a lack of supply”, noted *The Economist* (2021c) in “Third time unlucky”. Thus, the number of people, the quantity of healthcare facilities, and the age of Africans dominated the newspaper’s analysis. Articles like “Health care in Africa” and “The long game” (see Table 2) illustrate the point. The scarcity principle was used in a different way, too: to contend that demand is also a problem. In “Doses of scepticism”, *The Economist* makes a startling claim: “Yet supply is not the only problem. Many African countries are struggling to use their doses because of operational failings and low demand” (*Economist*, 2021b). This story referred to vaccine hesitancy, but what was at issue is the principle of scarcity, which *The Economist* used for both the supply- and demand-side analyses.

Two special issues of *The Economist* prioritized Africa (*Africa’s long Covid: The toll on growth*, 2021) and the emerging world (*The next calamity: COVID-19 in the emerging world*, 2020). Both issues included articles that contribute to the total amount of data described in Table 1. These articles are, again, thin on urban economic analysis. The 2021 issue engages in little or no urban economic analysis. One of its articles, titled “Economic analysis”, prioritizes the continental, national, and global, but not the urban. The focus on Africa is predominantly about national resource-based economies. In turn, the 2020 special issue only mentions cities briefly by analysing slums.

However, research on the urban economy of resource cities in Africa (Obeng-Odoom, 2014) offers a more nuanced experience. Windfalls from the sale of natural resources can be quite concentrated in the hands of a few people. Oil revenues are often captured by transnational oil corporations and absentee propertied classes. So, the bust in this windfall, described in *The Economist*, hurts, but so does a boom. In contrast to the suggestion by *The Economist* that “a falling tide sinks all boats”, a fall in property prices as a result of a bust tends to be propitious for those urban residents marginalized in resource cities. *The Economist* also caricatures when it assumes that informal economies are distinct from slums – that where people live and work are separate. Some slums are, but many more are not. It is settled that slums and informal economies are intertwined in Africa (e.g., Hart, 1971; Obeng-Odoom, 2011). Thus, working from home is common in many slum areas. Urban informal workers have also often earned wages in the formal economy.

This lack of nuance and complexity also misinforms elsewhere. Consider *The Economist's* emphasis on how slums spread disease. Kibera, for example, is recurrently referenced in “Rich slum, poor slum”. *The Economist* points to Soweto, Alexandra (slums in Johannesburg, South Africa), and Makoko (a slum in Lagos, Nigeria) in “Not immune” (*Economist*, 2020j; see also Table 2). Housing in cities in Africa is neither mostly decrepit, nor largely overcrowded. There are a substantial and rising number of gated housing estates in African cities, which Uduku (2010) has called “the default condition” in Lagos, Nigeria. The evidence (Grant, 2009; Obeng-Odoom, 2014, 2018; Ehwi et al., 2022) also shows that in Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, such housing is becoming increasingly common. A resilient form of compound or family housing, and many other forms of rental housing facilities, are also common (see Tipple et al., 1997; UN-Habitat, 2009). *The Economist's* focus only or mostly on slums shows a bias.

*The Economist* is more even-handed in its report that export markets linked to oil extraction also slumped. The Brent crude oil price, typically used as a benchmark of the state of the oil market, was \$40 per barrel, much lower than the \$100 or more per barrel benchmark, which indicates a bullish market. It was expected that the price of \$40 would remain in 2021, but, if it rose at all, it might hover around \$55 per barrel until 2050. Similar concerns apply to gas, for which the Henry Hub benchmark average of \$4 has declined to \$2.90 per million British thermal units (*Economist*, 2020g). The Nigerian economy, heavily dependent on oil, was expected to shrink by 3.2% in 2020 (*Economist*, 2020a). Per capita incomes were also affected. In Algeria, where the pre-COVID per capita income was \$5,600 in 2012, it fell to less than \$4,000 in post-COVID 2020 (*Economist*, 2020g). Surveys by *The Economist* (2020i) showed that about 80% of Kenyans lost income as early as April 2020.

Remittances were used to provide a buffer during past economic downturns. However, such remittances nearly dried up during the period under study (*Economist*, 2020b). One money-transfer company in the UK, for example, witnessed an 80% decline in remittances sent to East Africa, and another in Italy recorded a 90% decline in remittances sent to Africa. The Nigerian Central Bank reported that remittances, which usually made up 6% of the Nigerian GDP, shrank to 3% as early as February 2020 (*Economist*, 2020h). As the experience of Kampala showed, the decline in remittances was both international and internal because not only global but also local migrants were struggling to send remittances (*Economist*, 2020h).

These socioeconomic and health crises had uneven socio-spatial ramifications; a point made by *The Economist*. In general, economically insecure groups were hit the worst. Although

some well-off politicians also experienced health problems, the impacts of the cumulative health, economic, and social problems fell more heavily on migrants, urban residents that live hand to mouth, racial and ethnic minorities, women, beggars, and disabled people. In South Africa, 66.7% of those that lost their jobs between February and April 2020 were women, especially black women. Around the same time, blue-collar workers in South Africa were three times as likely to lose their jobs as white-collar workers (*Economist*, 2020g). These problems have wider spatial, social, and ecological ramifications. Some of those that lost their jobs during the lockdown in Accra, in southern Ghana, returned to northern Ghana. Others moved from the city to the countryside. In South Africa, at least, some five to six million did so between February and April 2020, placing new pressures on rural economies and livelihoods (*Economist*, 2020g).

Many of these claims by *The Economist*, while informative, are national or regional, not urban. Considering the urban along with the national, continental, regional, and the global is critical to develop a fuller appreciation of African economies. Regarding remittances, urban research (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a) shows that housing-related remittances ebb and flow. When building their homes, African migrants increase or decrease their remittances, for example, based on exchange rate fluctuations. Because such remittances are concentrated in some cities in particular regions, the urban and regional distribution of decline differ substantially (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a). Combined with the evidence (see Ampah, 2023) that remittances from the urban economies in Africa also support urban life in the Global North, *The Economist's* reporting again misrepresents African (urban) economies.

### 3.2 (Urban) economic recovery (third research question)

*The Economist's* approach to (urban) economic recovery is consistent with its methodology. It pays limited attention to African urban economies. Simultaneously, this methodology advocates growthism (see *Economist*, 2020h, 2020m, 2020r). Within these broad parameters, *The Economist's* recommendations ranged from monetary and fiscal policies to welfare policies, philanthropy (aid in cash, vaccines, and other donations such as corona testing kits), and obtaining low-interest loans from the IMF and the World Bank (the 2020 and 2021 special issues mentioned above).

To *The Economist*, this approach is a synthesis of the best evidence about how to resolve the COVID-19 crises in cities (*Economist*, 2020s). Thus, as Harjuniemi (2019: 494) has argued in a different context, *The Economist* seeks to claim that its approach is post-political, natural, and the only modern

way. In terms of breadth, at least, this claim must be taken seriously and, because *The Economist's* approach takes into account a wide range of economic and health concerns (see other sector analyses in *Economist*, 2020i, 2020m), probing how *The Economist* reported these issues matters. Starting with what *The Economist* calls “economic medicine” (*Economist*, 2020n, 2020o), centred on growth, export-led growth, and the formal economy as a “growth pole” (*Economist*, 2020c), this economic medicine is to be taken with a combination of monetary and fiscal tools.

Engaging in quantitative easing by printing money to buy up bonds to maintain confidence and price levels in the stock markets was also recommended (see *Economist*, 2020j). Formally registered businesses needed to be taxed less to reduce their transaction costs. Governments could have usefully spent more (*Economist*, 2020o; Curr, 2020: 14) in ways that would have ensured that a “pandemic government” (*Economist*, 2020j) or the “coronopticon” (*Economist*, 2020j) was only transient and exists mainly to provide a stimulus for a return to export-led growth business as usual. However, as soon as possible, austerity needed to be restored (*Economist*, 2020c, 2020q) to shift the focus of economic policy away from the political economy of Keynes to the economics of Friedman (*Economist*, 2020q). Thus, writing in his capacity as the lead writer of *The Economist*, Henry Curr considered that the right response was to restore free-market capitalism (Curr, 2020: 14).

The health policy advocated by *The Economist* was also fundamentally about restoring growth. A primary assumption was that all healthcare is delivered by the health system, whose primary role is to support free-market economic growth. Thus, according to *The Economist* (2020d), “African health systems will tend to be overwhelmed at an earlier point than those in Asia or Europe” because African health systems have scant staff and are cash-strapped.

Diagnosed that way, the solution to the health crisis in cities was quite straightforward (*Economist*, 2020n). The interest was to create a self-sustaining business in which the entrepreneurs included researchers, medical professionals, and philanthropists (*Economist*, 2020j, 2020p; Curr, 2020; see also for the case of vaccines *Economist*, 2020h, 2020j, 2020o, 2020v, 2020w).

*The Economist* invited businessman Bill Gates to reflect on the pandemic. Signalling the place of scarcity and, hence, philanthropy in mainstream economic analysis, Gates wrote, “I believe that humanity will beat this pandemic, but only when most of the population is vaccinated” (Gates, 2020: 69). *The Economist* suggests that cities can manage themselves more efficiently when it emphasises the principle of scarcity

(*Economist*, 2020m). To manage scarce resources, for example, urban land must be privatized to ensure the sustainable and wise use of landed property. According to *The Economist*, “Covid-19 highlights the harm that insecure property rights cause. Evictions and land grabs are rising”. Thus, Africa would “need growth-boosting reforms more than ever” (*Economist*, 2020u). The bigger issues here, then, are not COVID-19 or vaccination, but economic principles of scarcity and private property.

*The Economist* combined this ideological commitment to scarcity and private property with a subtle advocacy for increased welfare policies in times of pandemics. Consider the following specific examples given by *The Economist* to buttress the point. The government of Kenya rolled out an initiative to employ more than 26,000 youths on a temporary basis as a way of supporting people during the pandemic (*Economist*, 2020c). Both in Tunisia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, direct cash was transferred to the poorest by the government to boost effective demand and maintain economic growth, although the amount was quite small per capita (*Economist*, 2020c). The government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo gave \$50 million to two million people in Kinshasa and elsewhere. Each recipient had only \$25 to spend compared to an average government cash transfer of \$695 in wealthier countries (the UK, France, and US; *Economist*, 2020c). South Africa offered about 600,000 people social security payments, but the number of beneficiaries was much smaller than the fifteen million people the social security system was supposed to help (*Economist*, 2020g). The South African government also promised tax holidays for private businesses, but only if enterprises retained and paid their workers. The South African Central Bank also extended credit lines to businesses to facilitate operation (*Economist*, 2020j), but that strategy could be widened.

Seychelles offered salary guarantees to private sector employees for three months (*Economist*, 2020j), but no further. Social protection schemes in Africa were adopted, but only in South Africa and Kenya (*Economist*, 2020j). The Egyptian government offered underemployed informal workers some money, but it was for only three months and it was only one-third of their pre-COVID-19 weekly average (*Economist*, 2020i). Egypt instituted a 1% corona tax, which would be pumped into the cash-transfer scheme, but this scheme reached only 10% of the population. The Egyptian Central Bank provided soft loans to tourist businesses to the tune of \$3.2 billion, but the loans had to be paid back after two years (*Economist*, 2020i). This reportage is clearly informative, but it is neither consistently linked to the urban economy nor connected to the complexities of African urban economies or even cities generally.



## 4 Discussion: Wrong diagnosis, wrong medication

Analysing the urban economy is critically important not only in itself but also to appreciate the national, rural, regional, and global economies. The urban economy is not merely a reflection of the national economy. Pivoting from national economic analysis to making urban economic claims is a hazardous exercise. Although linked (e.g., Njoh, 2003; Obeng-Odoom, 2010; Ahimah-Agyakwah et al., 2022), African urban and national economies must be studied empirically (Obeng-Odoom, 2014), not based on projection or conjecture from the national or the regional.

Because African economies are urbanized, the pressing questions are as follows: how much and how well did these economic analyses reflect Africa's highly urbanized economies? Did economists pay attention to the spatial economy in Africa? How well did they do so? Do the resulting proposed economic policies reflect the spatial economy in Africa? To address these questions, a content analysis of about five hundred articles in *The Economist* produced surprising results. *The Economist's* coverage is, indeed, extensive, but not exhaustive. Economic analysis is mainly limited to the national, without systematically considering the urban and the sub-national in Africa. Emphasising growth problems over the more pressing challenges of urban inequalities and social stratification is both methodological and ideological, but poorly empirical and hardly systematic.

In the few instances of urban economic engagement, methodologically, *The Economist's* analysis of cities is rooted in mainstream urban economics with certain dualistic views about the nature of urban economies in Africa, and an emphasis on growth and scarcity. *The Economist's* approach fails partly on account of "spatial separatism" (Gore, 1984/2012), partly on account of "temporal myopia" (Santos, 1979/2018: 12) because of its limited historical analysis of resource economics in Africa, and particularly on account of limited appreciation of spatio-temporal dynamics in Africa. More fundamentally, *The Economist's* misunderstanding is not simply a reflection of lack of awareness, but also an expression of ideological spatial interests. Undergirding these problems is *The Economist's* Western modernist ideological bias (Obeng-Odoom, 2022b). Three structural limitations emerge from this orientation. First, the emphasis on growth in a continent whose greater problem is mass urban social stratification and inequalities (Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2020b) signals a lack of congruence between the economic medicine and the real disease.

Second, although they are integrated into the global economy, African urban economies function in an unequal circuit both locally and globally. Locally, the dominant informal economy exists as a basement of dynamic but local organized labour groups struggle to appreciate vulnerable labourers' working conditions. The firms are a mixture of medium-scale profit-making groups and social enterprises with little or no control over the technology that they use (Grant, 2009; Murphy & Carmody, 2015, 2019; Yeboah et al., 2022). These uneven socio-spatial relations are also reflected in the relationships that connect national or federal capital cities to district and regional capitals (Dickson, 1993). Globally, African urban economies seem to serve the global cities economy, characterized by the richer but concentrated formal economy dominated by transnational corporations. Other oligopolies are much larger, more professionalized firms whose interest is to extract increasingly more value and revenues from the dominant but less powerful informal economy in Africa (Grant 2009). Thus, more export-led growth would worsen inequalities, which, in turn, inhibits poverty reduction (Fosu & Gafa, 2020).

Third, targeting formal firms on the assumption that they would be growth poles for the rest of the economy misunderstands the nature of the relationship between the formal and informal economies in Africa. Systematic research (Peil, 1972: 23–40; Santos, 1979/2018; Bryceson & Potts, 2006; Songsore, 2011; Ablo, 2015, 2020) over the years has shown that most private enterprises in the formal economies are export-oriented industries whose costs of business are subsidized by the informal economy. Formal resources or resort enterprises are mostly foreign-owned or linked, mostly profit-oriented, and mainly located in areas where there are the greatest agglomeration economies. These firms control the urban economy, perpetuate the urban economic hierarchy among domestic and foreign firms, create a labour aristocracy (Grant, 2009; Murphy & Carmody, 2015; 2019; Yeboah et al., 2022), and are mostly answerable to a class of absentee owners, as Thorstein Veblen put it (1923/1997). Many of these urban oligopolies offer weak or no contracts, workers are usually forbidden to unionize, and they work under challenging conditions. The informal economy has shrunk with the growth of the formal economy, but the new small-scale local enterprises are largely dependent on the formal economy, largely controlled by absentee owners.

## 5 Conclusion

Whether mainstream urban economics can be applied to the Global South is an important question, but, beyond academic debates, the question must be addressed empirically. The substantial coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in *The Economist* provides a useful test case. Did economists pay attention to the urban economy in Africa? How well did they do so? Do the resulting proposed economic policies reflect the generalities and special features of the spatial economy in Africa? A content analysis of *The Economist's* news shows that the newspaper's focus on urban economies in Africa is thin and that its current application of mainstream urban economics is highly problematic. These are surprising results. Liberalism does not imply a bias against urban economic analysis, a forte of mainstream urban economics. The limitations of mainstream urban economics are well known in the literature (e.g., Stilwell, 1995; Zhang, 2015; Munro, 2022), but their magnitude in *The Economist* is surprising.

Urban economies in the Global South require further analysis. In principle, urban economics is needed to illuminate the nature of these economies. However, mainstream "urban economics' preoccupation with spatial equilibrium and optimization" (Zhang, 2015: xvii), reflected in prioritising growth, scarcity, and capital accumulation, stand in the way. New approaches are needed to study urban economies and economics in the Global South.

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