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Nationalism and Global Citizenship in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Addressing Inequality and Fostering «Glo-Ubuntu» Citizenship

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Abstract: This article focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, which simultaneously served as a stark reminder of our interconnectedness and shared vulnerability, while also exposing inequalities between people in their risk to the disease. However, the paper argues that the global response to the pandemic, particularly in vaccine distribution, has also revealed deep-rooted structural inequalities among nations, thus undermining the promise and theory of global citizenship. This article therefore critically assesses the significance of global citizenship as well as vaccine nationalism by reviewing existing literature in three countries in the context of the pandemic, and suggests that the concept of *glocal citizenship* is more appropriate as a means to tackle present and future global challenges, while acknowledging the limitations of the concept. By exploring the potential of *glocal citizenship*, this article seeks to address global health inequality and foster a more inclusive and equitable response to global crises.

Keywords: global citizenship; health inequality; nationalism; structural inequalities; vaccine distribution

1. Introduction: COVID-19, Inequality, Nationalism and the Global Citizenship Concept

The COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe and wreaked havoc on states throughout the world, including nearly seven million deaths and over 777,000000 reported cases as of February 2, 2025 (WHO, 2025). In addition to the loss of life, the pandemic caused severe disruptions in the global supply chain, curtailed mobility, and a deepening economic crisis at the local, national, regional and global levels ([Author]; Naseer et al. 2023). The pandemic has had a profound and differing effect across the world, although the extent of the impact has varied from place to place and among different groups of people ([Authors]; Ullah, Nawaz, & Chattoraj, 2021). Many governments implemented restrictive and deglobalization measures such as closing borders and imposing internal lockdown measures to prevent and contain the spread of the virus (Haug et al. 2020). The speed with which the virus spread, and the devastating consequences of the pandemic raised questions about the fragility of globalization and the ability of our global institutions to respond to deadly infectious diseases (Obinna, 2022). The pandemic served as a stark reminder to humanity of our interconnectedness. Thus, the pandemic has underscored the need to rethink our concepts of globalization, citizenship, and sovereignty around which our global economic and governance systems are based.

As we now know, scientists were able to develop a safe and effective vaccine in record time, which was a remarkable achievement (Tanne, 2021). Yet, in several ways, the pandemic has laid bare the preexisting structural inequalities and precarious conditions that characterize health systems at the local, national, and international levels (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2020; [Author]; Laster Pirtle, 2020). The highly unequal and nationalistic[1] approach to the distribution of vaccines worldwide is an excellent case in point in shedding light on those global inequalities (Bayati et al., 2022). Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), underscored this fact during the Special Meeting on 'A Vaccine For All' in 2021, arguing that "vaccine nationalism is not just morally indefensible; it is epidemiologically self-defeating and clinically counterproductive" (Ghebreyesus, 2021). To press home this assertion, he inferred that out of the 832 million vaccine doses administered, 82 per cent have been sent to high-or upper-middle-income countries, while only 0.2 per cent have been allocated to low-income countries. This means that in high-income countries, one in four people had been vaccinated in 2021, while in poorer countries, the ratio drops to one in 500. To respond to this inequity, the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX)[2] facility was launched in April 2020 to ensure equal access to vaccines and diagnostics for all countries. Although COVAX eventually distributed 2 billion doses in over 146 countries by the time it closed in December of 2023,[3] the slow distribution of doses in the early phases of the project was largely blamed on its approach of buying vaccines on the open market in direct competition with rich countries (Paun, 2021). The hoarding of vaccines adopted by the rich or Western countries during the height of the pandemic not only risked prolonging the pandemic but accelerated the retreat by the wealthy states away from the so-called liberal world order characterized by globalization and cooperative common institutions (Bollyky & Bown, 2020; de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems that COVID-19, along with several concomittant phenomena, brought into question the very tenets of the concept of *global citizenship*.

The concept of global citizenship emerged in the late 1990s; however, the current challenges to the globalized world have sparked a renewed scholarly interest in the international dimension of citizenship (Schattle, 2009). As individuals and communities become increasingly interconnected through technology, trade, and migration, questions about the nature of citizenship and its relationship to national identity and global responsibilities become more pressing. Researchers have explored issues such as the rights and obligations of citizens in a globalized world, the impact of transnational networks on citizenship practices, and the role of international organizations in shaping citizenship norms and policies. This growing body of literature reflects a recognition that citizenship is not just a matter of belonging to a particular nation-state but also a complex and evolving set of practices and identities shaped by global forces (Dower, 2003; Hobden, 2021). Global citizenship thus emphasizes both the increasingly complex and transnational character of citizenship as well as the moral responsibilities of individuals in a global context (Cabrera, 2008). Global citizenship requires us to think beyond our national borders and consider the impact of our choices and actions on people and the environment worldwide (Davies, 2006).

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[1] "Vaccine nationalism" is the practice of countries prioritising the procurement and distribution of vaccines and medicines for their own citizens over those of less wealthy nations. To illustrate, prior to the completion of Phase III clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccines, wealthy countries such as the United States and the European Union had already secured large quantities of the vaccines that appeared to be the most promising (Goniewicz, et al. 2020). Unfortunately, vaccine nationalism is not a new phenomenon and has been observed during previous health crises (Riaz et al. 2021). It is a malicious practice where high-income nations prioritize their own population's access to vaccines, neglecting the needs of poorer countries. This can have severe consequences, especially in the midst of a global pandemic, as it hinders the efforts to achieve global herd immunity and puts many vulnerable populations at risk.

[2] COVAX is a collaboration including the WHO, Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), UNICEF, The World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the European Commission, among others.

[3] https://www.unicef.org/supply/covax-ensuring-global-equitable-access-covid-19-vaccines.

Yet, nationalist tendencies represent a strong counterweight to global citizenship and continue to shape political, economic, and social structures (Bieber, 2022). This was particularly evident during the pandemic. Nationalism has been employed in different ways, from promoting unity and solidarity within a nation to fueling conflicts and divisions between various groups. Despite its complexities and nuances, nationalism significantly shapes global politics and societies today (Bieber, 2018). In light of both nationalism as well as the continued primacy of the sovereign nation-state in world politics, it is not altogether surprising that governments prioritized their own citizens during the pandemic. Indeed, the social contract theory of the state is founded on the idea that governments provide safety and security to its people in exchange for obedience and order (Boucher & Kelly, 2004). Still, it is equally important to recognize the weakness of this model, especially considering challenges of global impact, and the value of global citizenship and the need for collective efforts in combating common problems, such as the pandemic. As a global community, we must work towards supporting one another and finding solutions that benefit all individuals, regardless of nationality or citizenship. While prioritizing one's population during the pandemic is understandable under a nationalist model of government, methods used to achieve it were ethically and morally reprehensible, as well as counterproductive to the mission of pandemic mitigation (Riaz et al., 2021). And yet, it is not clear whether a globalization model of governance, with the concept of global citizenship at its foundation, would have achieved better results. Therefore, this article thus questions the relevance of the *global citizenship concept* within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the dynamics of the vaccine response, particularly the nationalistic approaches adopted during a global crisis, by presenting a critical literature review of previous studies exploring three divergent approaches to vaccine distribution representing three different views of citizenship.

Following this introductory section, Section 2 provides a methodological note while Section 3 briefly traces citizenship history, the origins and development of cosmopolitanism/global citizenship within the context of globalization and the continuing appeal of nationalism/national citizenship. The following subsection explores the COVID-19 pandemic, nationalist approaches adopted during the pandemic, particularly vaccine distribution, and the consequent demise of global citizenship/cosmopolitanism. It then poses the question of whether the approach adopted is a harbinger of how humanity will handle the impending calamities, particularly the looming climate 'apocalypse'. The paper urges the so-called global South or the bottom billions to start charting their own (development) path to determine their futures while equally acknowledging the need for all to nurture *glocal citizenship* to deal with (future) global challenges. The article concludes with critical reflections on the need to nurture global citizenship to deal with (future) global challenges.

2. Brief Methodological Note

The data analyzed for this article came from a desk review of existing academic and non-academic research publications and datasets, including quantitative and qualitative statistics and administrative data at the national, regional, and supranational levels. A narrative literature review is employed to examine the data in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing global citizenship in the context of the pandemic. We chose to focus our investigation on three carefully chosen cases: the US, Germany, and China. Our case selection represents three distinct strategies around vaccine acquisition and sharing. Although governments generally focused on securing vaccines for their own citizens, in line with the social contract theory of the state, some also contributed to more solidaristic approaches, such as global distribution efforts through COVAX and other humanitarian initiatives, an expected divergence under crisis conditions (Bieber, 2022). Nevertheless, the influence of nationalist policies became evident as countries prioritized domestic vaccination over equitable global access, undermining the long-term goal of a universally immunized global population (Ledford, 2022). When aiming to examine different countries' vaccine nationalism, it is firstly important to understand the relevance of different actors and their capabilities. Inherently, the actions of larger economies with large-scale vaccine production are the most important to global vaccination efforts. Such nations during the pandemic were the US,

China, Russia, India, and Japan, as well as several powerful EU countries and the UK. (He & Chen, 2021; Oxfam, 2022). Their decision-making regarding cooperation vs. isolation was hugely influential for health outcomes everywhere, which informs the case selection taken here: Countries whose strategies were globally influential but distinct from one another in their effects and reception. The US, Germany, and China were selected here due to their global influence, economic power, and differing governance structures, which provided diverse approaches to vaccine distribution and pandemic policy. While the US adopted an initially nationalistic stance, prioritizing American access to vaccines (Beaton et al., 2021; Shao, 2024), Germany, as part of the European Union, leaned more toward a collective approach but still pursued nationalistic strategies (He und Chen, 2021; Wang, 2021). China's response blended domestic vaccine prioritization with a "vaccine diplomacy" strategy that extended its influence globally (Liu et al., 2022). Examining these three cases in a comparative framework offers important insights into how varying political, economic, and cultural priorities shaped the national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how pandemic response strategies interacted with nationalism, and the effect of this interaction on the global vaccine distribution strategy, as well as on the concepts of solidarism and global citizenship.

3. Global Citizenship, Globalization & the Continuing Appeal of Nationalism

Nationalism and citizenship have a long, complex, and intertwined history. This section provides a brief overview of this history (Bellamy, 2008). For much of modernity, citizenship and nationality was almost synonymous, but also tightly related to ethnicity through the concept of jus sanguinis (Bellamy 2008; Marshall 1950). Following this, we discuss the twentieth-century developments under globalization that gave rise to post-national ideas such as cosmopolitanism and *global* citizenship. Finally, the context of this paper's theme is introduced, namely, the recent backlash against globalization, multiculturalism, and the resurgence of nationalism in much of the ("Western") world (Akkari und Maleq, 2019; Forst 2023).

Citizenship typically denotes citizens' relation to a polity, characterized by its laws and customs governing their lives, giving them a legal status differentiated from non-citizens, and, depending on the system of governance, certain rights of participation in determining the polity's affairs. Therefore, citizenship typically contains dimensions of membership, rights, and participation (Bellamy, 2008; Falk, 2000).

The earliest accounts are found in the ancient Greek city-states, the prime example being Athens, where political participation was the key element of citizenship. Membership was quite exclusive along the lines of gender, economic status, and heritage, in that only men of Athenian origin with enough wealth to sustain themselves were given access to the "politeia" (Bellamy, 2008; Jacobson & Cinalli, 2023).

In the Roman Republic, the conception of citizenship shifted towards a focus on legal status and protection. Roman citizens, particularly those in the elite classes, held certain legal rights, distinguishing them from slaves and foreigners, such as the right to a trial. This legal equality enabled factions within Rome to balance their members' interests, which today is still the basis of democratic interaction (Bellamy, 2008; Jacobson & Cinalli, 2023). The Roman Empire expanded the idea of citizenship beyond the city-state and introduced a more inclusive approach to membership, offering citizenship to various conquered peoples to secure loyalty and manage an expanding territory. This broadened sense of citizenship laid early foundations for modern statehood, although the empire lacked a unified national identity typical of modern nation-states, as people retained regional "citizenships" relevant for partaking in local decision-making processes (Bellamy, 2008:39).

In modern social science, especially political science, Marshall's 1950 work "*Citizenship and Social Class* serves as the basis for understanding citizenship and its dynamic nature. He argued that citizenship emerged over time and with different aspects dominating at various stages of the UK's modern history. From the 18th to the 20th century, he observed the development first, of civil rights, then followed by political and finally social rights extended to citizens (Marshall, 1950). Marshall's model suggests that full citizenship entails an interlinked set of civil, political, and social rights, which

together provide individuals not only with legal protection and opportunity to contribute to governance but also to enjoy a quality of life supported by social institutions, which in turn equalizes the realization of the other types of rights.

This sequence of rights reflects a historical progression where each phase aimed to rectify inequalities in society, thereby creating a more inclusive notion of citizenship. As many critics pointed out, however, this logic is only narrowly applicable, as it relates to the British case and specifically to adult men, with women and children receiving "social rights" earlier and instead civil and political rights in many cases (Shashwati, 2018).

As seen in Marshall's (1950) work, by the mid-20th century, nationality and citizenship become nearly interchangeable. This process is intimately linked to the solidification of the modern nation-state, with its origins in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which established sovereignty as the basis for legitimate government over a given territory and the people within that territory. As governmental power becomes more centralized over a clearly defined area, citizenship becomes a necessary part of this system to differentiate the government and the land to which individuals belong. However, Westphalia leaves open the question as to how citizenship is acquired, and as sovereignty consolidates throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries on the European continent, various models of citizenship emerge. For example, the French conception of citizenship is linguistic and cultural, while the German conception is ethnic. Regardless, citizenship increasingly became linked to national identity and an implicit expectation of cultural and often ethnic homogeneity within these newly consolidated territories developed. To be a citizen was to belong to a nation defined by shared history, language, and cultural symbols (Tambini, 2001). This is in sharp contrast to pre-Westphalian criteria for membership in a political community; city-states and empires often absorbed any number of ethnic and linguistic groups. This identity-based citizenship structure often meant that immigrants and minority groups faced significant barriers to full membership, as national belonging was tied to ethnic or linguistic heritage (Baldi & Goodman, 2015). Ethnically exclusive models of citizenship have remained influential in certain countries, while others have since moved towards more inclusive models.

Koopmans and Statham (1998) developed a model that systematizes the varying dimensions of national citizenship across countries, offering a framework to categorize and understand the nuances of national approaches to integration and membership. They first distinguish *Ethnic-* and *Civic-Territorial Citizenship*, which examines whether access to citizenship is based on ethnic descent or territorial birth and residency, which correlates to more restricted or inclusive pathways to citizenship, respectively. Secondly, citizenship may be articulated in terms of *Cultural Monism* and *Pluralism*, which address the extent to which countries enforce cultural uniformity. Cultural monism requires conformity to a dominant national identity, while pluralism allows or encourages cultural diversity within the nation. This model highlights that citizenship is never static but shaped by the policies and cultural narratives that define a society's sense of identity and inclusion. One might argue that the respective national approach to citizenship would coincide with differing attitudes towards "post-national" conceptions of citizenship as well, especially when globalization challenges preconceived notions of the nation's role (Lütge et al., 2022).

Since the twentieth century, and increasingly in its latter half, economic and cultural globalization is changing perceptions and ideas of what citizenship means or could mean (see e.g. Sassen, 2003; Koopmans & Statham, 1998). It is in this period that the concepts of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship emerge, although it should be noted that the former, stemming from ancient Greek for "citizen of the world", is much older than even the modern idea of a nation. It originally derived from Diogenes and was elaborated upon by the stoic philosophers who aspired to transcend the traditional boundaries of the *polis* and live by egalitarian notions of wisdom and goodness defined by natural law over political law. Cosmopolitanism finds expression in a variety of political, philosophical and religious veins throughout the centuries, as various thinkers grappled with their own age of globalization as trade routes deepened, and the values of the Enlightenment conflicted

with colonization. Throughout these periods, cosmopolitan thinkers largely argue for concepts such as universal brotherhood, boundless migration, and global philanthropy (Busetto, 2017).

Modern conceptions of cosmopolitanism may be divided into several categories. *Moral cosmopolitans*, most notably represented by Thomas Pogge (2012), argue that the state cannot be the sole source of justice. *Ethical cosmopolitans*, such as Martha Nussbaum (2007), focus on the value of education in fostering young people with a sense of universal goals and a duty to the whole human community, albeit with little attention to personal, familial, cultural, or national identities.[4] A broad debate took place in response to several global crises in the early 1990s, mostly amongst European scholars, and hinges on the idea of *cosmopolitan democracy*, influenced largely by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1995). *Rooted cosmopolitans* attempt to reconcile a desire for moral obligations to those beyond our national borders while also celebrating local ties (Appiah, 2007). Bikhu Parekh (2003) also tries to reconcile this balance between the local and global by distinguishing between cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, emphasizing that while cosmopolitanism is primarily an abstract ethical stance, and risks being too devoid of political and cultural character, global (or "globally oriented") citizenship involves practical political engagement in transnational issues from originally local or even national viewpoints.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Global South perspectives in the literature often most closely align with the "rooted cosmopolitan" approach, as states in this region are seeking a form of decolonial cosmopolitanism or conviviality that enables Global South actors and people to interact and create community on their own terms and not on Eurocentric terms (Moyo & Bekithemba, 2021). Systematically marginalized, the Global South developed their own ideas of belonging beyond the nation-state, maybe best encapsulated in the concept of *Ubuntu*,

"[…] that refers to human interdependence and humanness and, as such, constitutes a philosophical approach to human interaction. […] *Ubuntu* views the world as a complex and interdependent ecosystem of humans, nature, and the planet, in which all elements are supposed to coexist in harmony" (Moyo & Bekithemba, 2021:155).

Importantly, the moral argument put forth by *Ubuntu* is not a universalizing view of humanity in the vein of moral and ethical cosmopolitanism above. Rather, it is rooted in various Bantu and other African philosophies, but also refers to a collective value of reconciliation and "humanity to others". Thus, it attempts to bridge the local with the global by "explaining collective self without rejecting self-being" (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2018, 41-44).

Similarly, Chandhoke (2016) argues that post-colonial thinkers such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah, the first respective leaders of their countries upon independence from colonial control, rightly challenged the Eurocentric concept of a "global citizen" that turns away from local affiliations and blood ties, in favor of a "global" solidarity rooted in the decolonial movement but also in the resurrection of local, precolonial, and authentic identities that are both nationalist in its quest for independence but also post-nationalist in its search for cosmopolitan justice. She anchors Pan-Africanism within the larger framework of "rooted cosmopolitanism." Similarly, Mosima (2023) locates Pan-Africanism as a particular type of radical cosmopolitanism, despite the failures and limitations this concept has faced in forging an African identity. In a contemporary reimagination of Pan-Africanism, such an identity is rooted in African communities and traditions, but also

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[4] It should be noted that while Nussbaum is often associated with cosmopolitanism, her work in 2007 makes it clear that her stance should be thought of merely as an aspect of cosmopolitanism and that her "capabilities approach" is a much more minimalistic political doctrine rather than a comprehensive ethical doctrine (Nussbaum, 2007). Furthermore, in another later work, Nussbaum (2008) explicitly rejects cosmopolitanism in favor of a "globally sensitive patriotism" in which fervently nationalist states harness their patriotic passion to pursue justice both internally as well as globally.

transcendent of it, in reaching out to the diaspora as well as other decolonial peoples and states beyond the continent. Such approaches seek to bridge the local, state, nation, and region, without having to shed these vital identities, while attempting to reconcile genuine concerns for international human rights with the reality of the racialized world order. Thus, it seems that a framework drawing on the concepts of *Ubuntu*, Pan-Africanism, and rooted cosmopolitanism may provide a positive path forward for the Global South in facing global challenges such as COVID-19.

Despite these approaches growing in popularity, there is another important dimension to consider. Nationalist backlash against globalization is on the rise, specifically as a reaction to the increasing rates of immigration into highly developed economies (Kaufmann, 2019). This has resulted in the rise of far-right parties and leaders, especially in the Global North (Bieber 2022). Parekh's (2003) critique of cosmopolitanism offers a possible explanation: nationalism, especially its more exclusionary form and not the revolutionary sort that inspired philosophies such as Pan-Africanism, is a response to the perceived threat of cultural dilution and loss of control that sovereign states are supposed to maintain within their territory. Parekh argues that individuals feel a need to belong to a stable community with shared values and traditions, and globalization threatens this desire. Additionally, others such as Forst (2023) argue that economic globalization has led to economic anxieties and inequalities, which nationalists exploit to rally support against both external influences and internal diversity.

The resurgence of nationalism reflects a broader crisis of identity, where the nation-state tries to reassert itself as a protective entity against the forces of global change and their perceived dangers (Tambini, 2001). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the policies adopted to stem the tide of the virus were actually quite convenient to latent nationalist and authoritarian sentiments, especially in the Global North, such as strict border control measures and even strict controls over internal movement (Hartman et al., 2021). Hence, the pandemic likely contributed to the legitimation of hyper-nationalism justified by the idea of caring for "one's own" at the expense of global solidarity (Goode et al., 2022; Saperstein, 2022). Examining one such phenomenon, *vaccine nationalism*, is the aim of the following section.

3.1. COVID-19 Pandemic, Vaccine Nationalism and the Demise of Global Citizenship

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an unprecedented global health crisis, prompting national governments to adopt a range of strategies to protect their populations and economies. Crisis responses varied, taking nationalist or solidaristic/globalist forms, and both occurred during COVID-19 (Bieber 2022). The focus here is on states' actions; however, nationalist attitudes within populations also played a role in the strategies adopted regarding vaccine distribution. For example, some people preferred to wait for domestically produced vaccines and resisted the opening of borders even when it would have facilitated better global vaccine distribution (Barceló et al., 2022; Goode et al., 2022; Michel et al., 2024).

Nations faced pressure to act quickly in protecting their citizens by developing and securing vaccines, but also implementing border controls and other restrictions. However, many of these policies, favoring national over global interests led to significant disparities in health outcomes worldwide and played into preexisting disparities (Oxfam, 2022). This tension gave rise to "vaccine nationalism," a term that encapsulates the competitive and often insular approaches taken by powerful nations to secure vaccines for their own populations, often at the expense of equitable global distribution (Hafner et al., 2022, Shao, 2024).

Vaccine nationalism involves countries prioritizing their own access to vaccines, often through early purchasing agreements or export controls, rather than supporting a globally coordinated response (Hafner et al., 2022). This approach results in unequal vaccine distribution, with wealthier nations accessing more than sufficient supplies while many low-income countries struggle to vaccinate vulnerable populations (Beaton et al. 2021). The impact of vaccine nationalism is far-reaching, exacerbating global health inequities, prolonging the pandemic, and fostering conditions for new COVID-19 variants to emerge (Ledford, 2022).

Wealthy nations' monopolization of vaccine supplies hindered the efficacy of international mechanisms like the COVAX initiative, a WHO-led program designed to distribute vaccines equitably started in 2020. While immensely important in combatting the pandemic in the Global South, the program fell short of promises made and meeting needs, which Oxfam credits to corporate greed and irrational nationalist state behavior (Oxfam, 2022). Furthermore, vaccine nationalism contributed to strained diplomatic relations, with some countries leveraging vaccines as political tools. For example, the EU accused the UK of hoarding millions of doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, leading the Union to briefly consider invoking Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol in an extension of post-Brexit tension and leading to a temporary diplomatic crisis threatening the open border policy at the core of the Good Friday Agreement (Glencross, 2021). However, the bulk of these accusations were mainly targeted at non-western vaccine producers such as China, as will be seen (He und Chen, 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

Governments initially invested billions in research and development for COVID-19 vaccines, often partnering with or subsidizing private companies to ensure rapid availability for their populations (Hafner et al. 2022). These investments were mainly taken by financially powerful Global North nations, as others were unable to. This heavy financial investment was used as a justification for the later hoarding of the vaccine and the prioritization of domestic populations over global distribution, particularly in the US (Kim et al., 2021). We now explore the countries documented earlier, the US, Germany and China, within the context of diverse approaches to vaccine distribution and pandemic policy.

The United States was covered and criticized extensively in both the scholarly literature as well as the non-academic media for its heavy focus on national protection over foreign aid. Beaton et al. (2021) describes how the US, then still under the first Trump administration, made deals with pharamceutical companies to purchase an antiviral drug against COVID-19, as well as hijacked the supply of medical equipment, going so far as to ban exports of N-95 masks even to American allies such as Canada. This is in line with the exclusive form of nationalism Bieber (Bieber 2022) observed as a general tendency in the actions of North American and European actors. Apart from the pre-vaccine actions taken by the US discussed above, once vaccination began, domestic coverage was prioritized over foreign at-risk groups, with 15.1 million over-delivered doses expiring from March to August 2021 alone (Shao 2024). He and Chen (2021) argue that the American strategy in vaccine research and development was nationalistic as well as motivated by geopolitical considerations such as positioning itself in opposition to other major players such as China. The US administration discredited Chinese developments and refused to participate in jointly funded research projects with the EU or headed by the WHO (Bahi, 2021).

What the US did do, especially once their domestic population's vaccination distribution was underway, was pledging and delivering large numbers of doses to COVAX and other schemes such as the newly revived "Quad," a strategic alliance between the US, India, Japan, and Australia aimed at countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region[5] (Sinkkonen & Ruokamo, 2022). They pledged over a billion doses between various vaccine delivery frameworks, delivering just over 40% of those until the end of 2022 (Oxfam 2022). This quota is low as compared to their EU counterparts; however, in absolute terms, the US is still the leading vaccines donor. One may see these actions as evidence of a semi-nationalist strategy that, once immediate domestic coverage was secured, could be supplemented with foreign aid in a charitable setup that still mostly kept vaccine production and

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[5] The Quad's COVID-19 strategy was aimed at distributing vaccines primarily manufactured in India with US financing, foreign assistance from Japan, and logistical support from Australia. This was largely seen as a "thinly veiled attempt to combat China's vaccine diplomacy," and thus while the initiative was able to deliver over 200 million doses in the Indo-Pacific region while also supporting a Global South economy, its primary target was playing *realpolitik* vis-à-vis China (Sinkkonnen & Ruokamo, 2022,13).

patents with US companies (Oxfam 2022). Lastly, the effect of the Biden administration taking over the US pandemic response in 2021 is perhaps relevant, as the Democratic Party may have had different incentives from their voter base as compared to the right-wing nationalist Republicans (Bieber 2022). Still, while Biden's party may be somewhat less nationalist in its ideology, many of Biden's important COVID-19 responses were still very much aimed at protecting Americans first. For example, he invoked the Defense Production Act, which incentivized the production of medical supplies and ensured equitable distribution to the US states, while at the same time, restricted the export of vaccines. Biden publicly expressed frustration with *Moderna, Inc.* for not doing more to provide its vaccines to poorer nations while also profiting off of government investment; yet Biden could have done more to force *Moderna, Inc.* to provide its vaccine to vulnerable populations both domestically and globally (Davey, 2023).

The German case differs from the US mainly in that their strategy was embedded in the EU and cannot be disentangled from the larger EU strategy. Overall German vaccine policy was slightly less nationalistic but with a strong nationalist bend as it pertained to patents. He and Chen (2021) assert that Germany had a more globalist approach in the pandemic regarding vaccine research and development than the US, as it cooperated with other EU states in research and participating in the 7.5 billion "coronavirus global response" plan as well as collective procurement. This is not necessarily indicative of German attitudes, as these actions were often led by the European Commission or other supranational actors. Similarly, vaccine donations were pledged and organized collectively in what the Oxfam report calls "Team Europe", which pledged roughly half of the doses the US did, but delivering on 67% of those, or over 330 million doses by mid-2022 (Oxfam, 2022). Given Germany's dominant position as Europe's largest economy, this strategy is somewhat representative of the German position. However, the same report also mentions that European nations, including Germany, were, alongside the US, against patent sharing through the WHO's CTAP initiative aimed at enabling independent vaccine production in the Global South. This seems to be related to economic self-interest, since German pharmaceutical companies, especially BioNTech, stood to profit enormously from their early developmental successes by retaining exclusive rights (Oxfam, 2022).

Across the EU, the phenomenon of pre-ordering and overbooking vaccines was also visible, albeit to a lesser extent than in North America. However, the EU population could still be immunized twice over with vaccines secured before their availability, and as seen in the US case, this practice led to inefficiencies in allocation and subsequently subpar vaccinations for people in need elsewhere (Shao, 2024). Lastly, Wang (2021) observed resurgent nationalist rhetoric, action, and the strengthening of far-right political actors across Europe in the wake of the early pandemic. This was particularly acute in Germany, where the far-right AfD party pushed anti-lockdown campaigns and vaccine skepticism, often invoking extreme nationalist rhetoric and conspiracy theories blaming immigrants for the pandemic. While this discourse did not immediately translate to more popular support, the AfD has enjoyed an alarming increase in influence in Germany's Bundestag since the pandemic (Bayerlein & Metten, 2022). Beyond Germany, border closures were commonplace, an especially interesting development in the EU which was founded on the principle of freedom of movement between member states. Also commonplace was the hoarding of medical supplies. To the extent that solidarity was displayed, it was shown mainly toward other EU nations and only until most domestic needs were met and vaccine donation through COVAX began. While not as fervently nationalist as the US, Germany's strategy still displays a permutation of Bieber's "exclusive nationalism" in states within the EU framework (Bieber, 2022).

Another important vaccine developer, producer and distributor was China, but they tackled the pandemic quite differently. They developed their own vaccines, cooperated with other countries in research and later also provided many doses to Global South countries, employing so-called "vaccine diplomacy" (Liu et al., 2022). Vaccine diplomacy can be defined as "a nation's vaccine efforts that aim to build mutually beneficial relationships with other nations", and it should be noted that according to this definition, this form of diplomacy is as old as the vaccine itself (Su et al., 2021, 5–6). While

"vaccine natioanlism" implies the prioritization of domestic populations over global populations, "vaccine diplomacy" implies the prioritzation of relationship-building with other nations in balance with prioritizing domestic populations. Still, "vaccine diplomacy" should not be immediately conflated with altruism or the lack of foreign policy objectives (Su et al. (2021) call this "vaccine empathy"). Indeed, China's strategy was part of its larger foreign policy framework that seeks to engage with the Global South through the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as its domestic "biosecurity" goals (Lie et al., 2022). And yet, at the same time, using vaccine distribution as part of a larger foreign policy framework is not necessarily ill-intentioned. While many criticized China's vaccine diplomacy, especially in the US, several researchers have found that China's strategy was not especially influenced by Beijing's trade interests and were rather more motivated by cultivating preexisting friendly relations (de Soysa & Vadlamannati, 2024). Su et al. (2022) also found that, in contrast with the mass media, a majority of the scholarly literature discovered that the net benefit of vaccine diplomacy is positive, even if the practice also achieves other "soft power" aims (see also Chipaike et al., 2023).

China developed vaccines domestically that were criticized regarding efficacy but still enabled their own population's immunization earlier than in other non-western countries. They also engaged in foreign aid, especially with African and Central Asian nations as part of their vaccine diplomacy efforts (states with which China had good preexisting diplomatic and economic ties). However, they also sent aid to particularly hard-hit Western states such as Italy early during the height of the pandemic, but only after prioritizing domestic resources (He and Chen, 2021). Once vaccines were available, China followed its strategy of vaccine diplomacy, which can be interpreted as both globally-oriented, but also nationalist in sentiment. This is because, on the one hand, China committed to delivering vaccines to countries underserved by Western nations as well as states that were unable to provide for their own populations. This in itself promotes positive effects because, as discussed, broad access to vaccination enables better protection of vulnerable groups and slows the spread and development of new strains of the virus (Ledford, 2022). The nationalist impetus behind vaccine diplomacy is twofold: Firstly, acknowledging the long-term benefits of a world that is immunized faster might have swayed China to promote it, as their economy and public health was of course not shielded from the pandemic. (Beaton et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Secondly, which was also the prominent criticism leveraged against China, targeting countries in need of help but insufficiently provided for by Western-led international aid, can be seen as an effort to garner their support and loyalty in future economic and geo-political endeavours (Liu et al., 2022). Another angle from which to assess China's strategy as nationalist would also be that their provision of vaccines to other countries was by and large marketized and thus potentially directly profitable to the Chinese economy, with them signing a deal over the sale of 550 million doses with the Vacccine Alliance Gavi in 2021 while only pledging 10 million doses to COVAX, the main donation-based channel of vaccine provision used by Western actors (Liu et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic saw influential countries prioritizing immediate national interests in vaccine distribution, often at the expense of global solidarity. Nations like the US, Germany, and China each adopted strategies that reflected a degree of vaccine nationalism, whether through prioritizing domestic supply (Beaton et al. 2021; Shao 2024), refusing to share patents (Oxfam, 2022), or utilizing vaccines to expand diplomatic influence (Liu et al., 2022). These approaches hindered initiatives like COVAX, which relied on cooperation and equitable distribution to achieve global immunization. However, vaccine nationalism did perhaps speed up development and production in the early phases of the pandemic, and the examined countries were responsible for a large if insufficient part of vaccine supply later on in regions without their own capacities (Hafner et al., 2022). The heart of the problem seems to lie in the unresolved conflict embedded in the Westphalian system as it confronts the era of globalization: sovereignty, along with nationalism, provides for an effective and centralized system of internal government but leaves little in the form of solutions to global problems that care little for sovereignty borders. The lasting impact of these strategies shows that nationalistic responses to global crises can undermine the collective good, prolong pandemics,

and complicate diplomatic relationships. Where reflection and planning for future global health crises are concerned, the COVID-19 experience demonstrates the need for stronger frameworks that balance national priorities with international solidarity to ensure faster, more equitable, and ultimately more effective responses. The next section explores such a framework.

4. Pandemic Inequities: A Call for Global South Agency

As we have seen, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep inequities in global health infrastructure, particularly regarding vaccine distribution. While wealthier nations swiftly secured vaccines for their populations, many developing countries—especially in the Global South—faced significant hurdles in accessing and utilizing vaccine supplies. These challenges include having to rely on global initiatives such as COVAX for vaccines, being at the behest of wealthy states for vaccine development and efficacy, a lack of other supplies such as personal protection equipment (PPE), dealing with nearly expired vaccines once they finally arrived, and in some cases an already weak and stressed public health system (Martin et al., 2024). The pandemic response, along with several post-pandemic developments such as the US withdrawal from the WHO and the rise of a far-right party as the second most popular party in Germany (a party that utilized COVID-19 conspiracy theories to bolster its popular support in the 2021 elections), should make it clear that the world is currently on an anti-globalisation trajectory (Rensmann & Zee, 2022). Leaving aside the question as to what extent Global South nations have benefitted from globalization, these developments have led to increasing calls for the Global South to chart a new course for their own development, health, security, and beyond. This section discusses the possibilities for these new paths forward, drawing on the previous framework which brings together the concepts of rooted cosmopolitanism, Pan-Africanism, and *Ubuntu.*

First, it is prudent to consider the underlying reasons that countries in development are uniquely affected by global pandemics and the aftermath of said crises. While COVID-related mortality rates were significantly higher in the Global North than the Global South, the so-called "bottom billions" experienced more diffuse socioeconomic effects both during and after the worst of the pandemic (Pablos-Méndez et al., 2022). Large concentrations of poverty pose significant barriers to complying with policies like social distancing, handwashing, masking, and stay-at-home orders. Many countries in development, especially those in Africa, rely heavily on low-skilled labour and the informal economy, which are incompatible with work-from-home orders. Poverty-stricken areas without ready access to technology and the Internet suffered from a lack of information as well as the inability for children to continue to go to school, leading to a generational lapse in education with far-reaching implications. Global South economies were especially vulnerable to commodity price volatility, supply-chain disruptions, and debt overhang (Ujunwa et al., 2021). Additionally, as Global South economies are particularly dependent on international remittances, international organizations predicted that this crucial source of finance would decline dramatically, though research showed that they surprisingly remained stable or even grew in some countries during the pandemic.[6] Similarly, foreign direct investment declined and has remained down. Farm produce was left unattended without the ability to transport the goods to more urban areas due to lockdown orders, leading to food shortages, increased prices, and challenges regarding food waste management. Global South economies are the least resilient to this kind of sudden contraction, and will likely feel the impact for a much longer period of time than the Global North (Olayide, 2020).

Ironically, while the West was better prepared pre-pandemic, it is perhaps this preparedness that led to the larger death toll. States like the US and the UK assumed that the quick spread in China was due to governmental ineptitude and lack of preparedness, leaving Western officials with a false sense of security and delaying proper pandemic management protocol. Even the UK, with a unified public health system and a social determinant approach to public health, was taken by surprise. While the Global South suffered and continues to suffer at the hands of the pandemic, these states

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[6] See https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/did-remittances-really-increase-during-pandemic

were perhaps better prepared socially and culturally due to the unfortunate preponderance of more localized health crises that afflict the developing world such as Zika, Ebola, and malaria. Thus, Khoo (2020) suggests that the epistemology of the pandemic might be reframed away from Eurocentric narratives of the West "helping" or "teaching" the Global South about pandemic preparedness, and more towards a regionally-specifically development path that recognizes the unique realities of the Global South while also situating Global South knowledge as having pluralistic value for the good of the globe.

This approach follows the philosophy of *ubuntu* and glocal citizenship. While *ubuntu* is found primarily in sub-Saharan African philosophy, it can be readily applied to global challenges especially in the face of de-globalization. *Ubuntu* is an ethic of care that was invoked explicitly in the post-apartheid constitution of South Africa as a path towards the rehumanisation of both victims and perpetrators of global injustice (Mkhwanazi, 2016). Elsewhere, *Ubuntu* has been applied to social work, psychology, and nursing (Chigangaidze, 2021a, 2021b; Sambala et al., 2020). The concept is both a moral and dynamic framework that emphasizes the coexistence of both self and the collective, which is not unlike the glocal strategy of decentering citizenship practices away from the sovereign nation-state and towards local centers of authority, using cosmopolitan appeals to international human rights law and global moral norms in doing so (Oomen, 2017). Hence, Terblanche and Waghid (2023) coin the term "glo-ubuntu."

What would a "glo-ubuntu" approach to future pandemics specifically, and development, more generally, look like? The first strategy that might be more fully developed throughout the world, but especially in the Global South, would be to better connect global guidelines to local capacities. As Wilkinson (2020) argues, informal settlements in developing states found it difficult to adhere to strict social distancing and hand-washing guidelines. However, these communities often have traditional leadership structures that are in the best position to implement global guidelines in ways that serve the local community's needs. Global guidelines should be filtered through these local leadership structures because it is these authorities that often have the most legitimacy in localities in the Global South more so than regional or national leadership.

Similarly, while recognizing local capacities, local communities should be the primary source of care for the most marginalized when faced with crises. This approach is widely practiced throughout the Global South already, as many of these communities are built around collective agency over hyper-individualism. Since the globalization agenda has been largely driven by individualistic neoliberalism and global free trade, a more glocal approach would require a paradigm shift towards more regionalised supply chains and community-driven healthcare networks. It would also require alternative ways to understanding and experiencing development. In what McCloskey (2020,40) calls the "tyranny of GDP", development in the era of globalization is primarily understood as profit-driven, even at the expense of community health and well-being.

A glocal approach to development would recognize the need for responsible and careful economic growth while also balancing non-profit-driven measures of community vitality. This would require more programs such as debt forgiveness, equitable taxation systems, social protection for the most marginalized, and radical democratization that encourages the participation of the poorest in society. Economies in the Global South must diversify away from external dependence by focusing more on regional trade agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. However, such agreements should also commit to equitable development so that the wealthiest are not the only beneficiaries. Yaya et al. (2020) suggest that this would require cost-sharing agreements, especially in the health sector, such as vaccine production and trade of other vital supplies, such as ventilators. The African Union's African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT) demonstrated how regional cooperation could improve access to vaccines, offering a model for future efforts. Indeed, local and regional vaccine development is especially crucial, but this can only be done if international patent regulations are relaxed. While some temporary waivers were granted during the initial deployment of vaccines, broader structural changes to global IP rules are needed to ensure equitable access to essential medicines in future health crises.

Finally, while a glocal path forward based on the philosophy of *ubuntu* places a special priority on local capacities and listening to local voices, it is also recognized that Global South states and communities are not yet in a position to provide for their own welfare independent of global partners. However, a glocal approach will likely require Global South states to form their own systems that are less dependent on traditional Western partners. As reviewed above, China became a lifeline for many states in development during the pandemic. There are opportunities to engage with other emerging economies such as India and Brazil. This has the potential to create ongoing networks of economic, political and above all, ethical support amongst the states and communities of the Global South.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the profound inequalities in global health systems, particularly in vaccine distribution and crisis response. While wealthier nations were able to secure vaccines swiftly, many countries in the Global South faced persistent obstacles, exacerbated by economic vulnerabilities, weak healthcare infrastructure, and external dependencies. Beyond the immediate health crisis, the pandemic has accelerated global shifts toward de-globalisation, prompting calls for the Global South to pursue self-reliant and regionally integrated development strategies. Here, a "glo-ubuntu" approach, which blends global cooperation with local agency, offers a promising framework for rethinking development and pandemic preparedness. Strengthening local governance structures, fostering regional trade and economic resilience, and prioritizing community-driven healthcare initiatives can help mitigate future crises. Additionally, reforms in intellectual property regulations, debt relief, and more equitable economic policies are necessary to ensure sustainable development in the Global South.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Nurturing "Glocal Citizenship" for Dealing with (Future) Global Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally challenged prevailing notions of global citizenship by revealing the deep-seated structural inequalities in global health governance and crisis response. The disproportionate impact of vaccine nationalism on the Global South demonstrated that, despite the rhetoric of shared responsibility, states prioritized national interests over international solidarity. This is not altogether surprising given the dependence the modern sovereign state has on nationalism to solidify the state's power internally and draw boundaries externally. Sovereignty and cosmopolitanism have at times been both at odds with one another and at other times the nation-state has been seen as the best possible vehicle for global justice and equality. COVID-19 certainly proved that we are currently in a time characterized by the former. Thus, the weaknesses of the ideal of global citizenship have become clearer than ever, and any hopes to recover in the near future seem naive in the wake of increasing nationalist tendencies and deglobalization trends.

The comparative analysis of the US, Germany, and China demonstrates three very different approaches to vaccine distribution, which is also reflective of various notions of national and international identity. While the US initially adopted a protectionist stance by prioritizing domestic vaccine distribution and limiting exports, which demonstrates an internal-facing and individualistic understanding of national identity, it later engaged in global vaccine diplomacy through donations, albeit in ways that still reinforced its geopolitical interests. This can also be interpreted as an attempt at reinforcing the US's understanding of itself as a global leader that deserves to help itself first. Embedded in the EU's collective approach, Germany exhibited solidarity and self-interest, aligning its vaccine strategy closely with broader EU policies. However, resistance to patent-sharing suggests that economic self-interest outweighed humanitarian concerns. Thus, while EU membership may temper hyper-nationalism, it could be argued that COVID-19 exposed cracks in the European identity in one of the core EU countries. China, on the other hand, pursued vaccine diplomacy as a strategic tool to expand its influence, particularly in the Global South, providing an alternative model of global health engagement but one that was still embedded in nationalistic and geopolitical motivations. China strategically used the pandemic to bolster its identity as an emerging global leader, emphasising providing an alternative support system outside the Western liberal order primarily for its Global South partners.

The failure of COVAX to equitably distribute vaccines highlights the structural limitations of global health initiatives reliant on voluntary cooperation from wealthier nations. Despite its intent to provide equitable access, COVAX struggled against the reality of national self-interest, with wealthier countries outbidding lower-income nations for vaccine supplies and often donating surplus doses close to expiration. These dynamics reinforce the need for alternative frameworks that prioritize regional self-sufficiency and localized resilience in future health crises. This experience has made it quite clear that the Global South requires new and creative paths of development that are independent of the Global North.

One major challenge the pandemic exposed was the Global South's dependency on external aid, particularly in vaccine procurement. Many developing nations lacked the financial resources and production capabilities to manufacture vaccines domestically, leading to delays in immunization efforts. Moreover, economic vulnerabilities such as reliance on commodity exports, volatile foreign direct investment, and debt overhang further weakened these countries' ability to respond effectively. Yet, at the same time, the Global North experienced its own vulnerabilities to the pandemic tied to the integration of public officials and the health system, as well as the messaging around the pandemic, resulting in more lives lost than those in the developing world. The pandemic made it clear that economic resilience and pandemic preparedness throughout the world is directly tied to public health security. But clearly, the world has not adequately invested, both literally and figuratively, in any sort of cosmopolitanism that would provide for international justice, solidarity, resilience, and preparedness.

In response to the failure of global citizenship, the concept of "glo-ubuntu" offers a compelling alternative that reconciles global solidarity with local agency. Rooted in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, emphasizing communal well-being and interconnectedness, this approach advocates for strengthening local and regional governance mechanisms to address global health challenges. Rather than relying on the traditional paradigm of global citizenship, which has largely been shaped by Eurocentric ideals, "glo-ubuntu" promotes a model of global cooperation that is decentralized, participatory, and responsive to local needs, while still recognizing the value of a universal humanness.

A "glo-ubuntu" approach to global health governance would prioritize the integration of local knowledge systems, community-based healthcare networks, and regional cooperation over dependency on Western-dominated international institutions. Strengthening regional trade agreements, such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), could reduce reliance on external actors while fostering intra-regional economic and health resilience. Additionally, local vaccine manufacturing must be scaled up to prevent future dependence on wealthier nations. A Global South vaccine and public health exchange system with some of the more capable states taking a lead, such as China, India, and Brazil, could prove fruitful.

One crucial policy area requiring reform is intellectual property law. The TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement has historically protected pharmaceutical patents, limiting the ability of developing countries to manufacture life-saving vaccines and treatments. While temporary waivers were granted during the COVID-19 crisis, these measures were insufficient to achieve equitable access. A permanent restructuring of intellectual property regulations is necessary to enable more equitable global health responses. This will require the coordination and cooperation with traditional pharmaceutical manufacturing states like Germany and the United States. While the US's willingness to engage in global cooperation is currently in serious question, the framework provided by the EU continues to be a potential source of pressure on its member states to relax patent law and work towards more equitable global health governance.

Another critical component of "glo-ubuntu" is the reinforcement and empowerment of local governance structures. As Wilkinson (2020) argues, informal settlements in developing states found it difficult to adhere to strict global guidelines, adapting these directives by utilizing traditional leadership structures might have made some of the guidelines more legitimate to local populations. Similarly, "glo-ubuntu" could also be adapted towards a concept of urban citizenship wherein

services and identity are centered around urban spaces, and global solidarity is created around the experience of living in cities (Fogelman & Cohen, 2025). Recognizing the power of grassroots governance, whether in informal settlements or in urban spaces, is key to ensuring future health crises are managed effectively at the local and global level.

Despite its potential, a "glo-ubuntu" framework faces several challenges. Many Global South nations continue to depend on international financial institutions and foreign aid, which complicates efforts to achieve true regional sufficiency. Additionally, the rise of nationalist policies globally could undermine efforts to create inclusive, multilateral solutions. Global South nations are certainly not immune to extreme nationalism, and indeed many anti-colonial independence movements were successful in part due to both the appeal of a precolonial identity as well as the creation of a postcolonial national sovereign identity (Go & Watson, 2019). Ideologies such as Pan-Africanism were intended to overcome the divisions created by these nationalist appeals in the postcolonial space, but too often this project gave way to realist state-building. This is why variations of *ubuntu* may be more promising.

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