



Neoliberal Agendas and Global Health Policy: A Political Perspective

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Abstract

Health is intertwined with politics, as it operates within the sphere of a larger economic, social, and political context. The politics of healthcare encompasses a range of issues, including institutional structures, financial systems, and the interactions among influential stakeholders. Healthcare systems not only reflect the dynamics of society but also promote public health and address health disparities. The impact of neo-liberal policies on health services varies across countries, influenced by the complex interplay between market forces, access to care, and the overall quality of healthcare systems. This study aims to explore the multifaceted effects of neoliberalism on healthcare systems and public health outcomes. By examining the intersection of neoliberal policies, fiscal austerity, privatization, and increased competition within the healthcare sector, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these economic and political ideologies have shaped access to healthcare, the quality of care, health disparities, and the overall well-being of populations.

Keywords: Global Health, Neoliberalism, Healthcare

1. Introduction

Health is intertwined with politics as it operates within the sphere of a larger economic, social, and political context. The politics surrounding healthcare encompasses issues related to institutions, systems, financial aspects, and interactions among influential individuals (Clare Bamba, 2005). Since healthcare systems form the foundational structure of any community, networks of hospitals, clinics, healthcare professionals, and policies play a pivotal role in public health. Therefore, healthcare systems not only reflect dynamics of societies but also promotes overall health and addresses health disparities. Historically, endeavors to enhance health have typically relied on the healthcare system as the primary force behind health and its consequences. Nevertheless, there is now a growing acknowledgment that advancing health and attaining health equality necessitate more comprehensive strategies that tackle the social, economic, and environmental elements influencing health (Samantha Artiga, 2018).

The study aims to investigate the multifaceted effects of neoliberalism on healthcare systems and public health outcomes. By examining the intersection of neoliberal policies, fiscal austerity, privatization, and increased competition within the healthcare sector, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these economic and political ideologies have influenced access to healthcare, quality of care, health disparities, and the overall well-being of populations. However, this research

assesses the adverse consequences of neoliberal approaches on health, examining the actions of profit-oriented corporations and the lack of governmental oversight stemming from privatization, which have led to elevated unemployment rates, unhealthy urbanization, diminished food quality and security, as well as increased air and environmental pollution.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs a qualitative research design rooted in critical analysis. A multi-level approach is adopted to examine macroeconomic trends, institutional transformations, and their implications for public health. This methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of the socio-economic, political, and environmental dimensions of health disparities, while a critical perspective is maintained to assess the broader implications of neoliberal ideologies on health equity and well-being.

2. Historical Evolution of Neoliberal Policies on Health

The historical evolution of the healthcare system underscores the ever-increasing importance placed on workers' health throughout the ages. As societies progressed, the recognition of the critical link between a healthy workforce and economic prosperity became increasingly evident. From the industrial revolution, where poor working conditions led to widespread health concerns, to the post-World War II era, which saw the development of comprehensive healthcare systems to support both economic recovery and the well-being of citizens, the trajectory of healthcare has been closely intertwined with the health of the workforce (Hopkins, 1982).

The significance of healthy workers became strikingly distinct in the wake of the two World Wars. These devastating conflicts exposed the direct correlation between the health and well-being of a nation's workforce and its overall resilience and productivity. As countries struggled to rebuild and recover, it became clear that a robust and healthy labor force was essential not only for economic growth but also for national security and stability. The physical and psychological toll of the wars underscored the importance of investing in healthcare, preventive measures, and occupational safety to ensure that workers could contribute effectively to post-war reconstruction. This newfound awareness led to the development of comprehensive labor laws, workplace safety regulations, and healthcare systems that aimed to protect and promote the health of workers. Thus, the lessons learned from the World Wars laid the foundation for a global understanding of the critical role that healthy workers play in building and sustaining prosperous societies (White, 2009).

The aftermath of the two World Wars marked a significant turning point in the evolution of social security systems worldwide. These devastating conflicts exposed the vulnerabilities of individuals and families in times of crisis and underscored the need for comprehensive social safety nets. In response, many nations, particularly in Europe, embarked on a transformative journey to establish robust social security programs. The welfare state concept gained prominence, emphasizing the government's role in ensuring citizens' well-being, healthcare, unemployment benefits, and retirement pensions. Pioneering social security measures like the Beveridge Report in the United Kingdom and the establishment of welfare states in Western Europe were instrumental in reshaping the post-war social landscape. These developments not only provided a vital safety net for citizens but also contributed to economic stability and social cohesion, ultimately laying the foundation for modern social security systems that endure to this day. The evolution of social security in the wake of World War I and II serves as a testament to humanity's capacity to learn from tragedy and collectively strive for a more secure and equitable future.

Simultaneously, the liberal economic model that had dominated prior to the wars began to lose favor, as the upheaval of the Great Depression highlighted the need for greater government involvement in economic management. The economic crisis that began in 1929, known as the Great Depression, was a turning point where the principles of liberalism questioned and Keynesian policies emerged as a solution (Dobbin, 1993). Western governments, influenced by the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, embraced the idea of intervening in economic affairs to foster prosperity through the establishment of welfare states (Pauline Barnett, 2020).

The rise of Keynesian policies had a profound impact on healthcare systems, particularly in the mid-20th century. Keynesian economics emphasized the role of government in managing economic stability

and reducing unemployment through active fiscal policies. As governments assumed a more prominent role in their economies, they increasingly recognized the importance of maintaining a healthy and productive workforce. This awareness led to increased investments in healthcare infrastructure, research, and access to medical services. Public healthcare systems expanded, and the concept of universal healthcare gained traction in many countries. Keynesian policies played a crucial role in financing and expanding healthcare access, ensuring that citizens had the necessary medical care to participate fully in the workforce, which, in turn, contributed to economic growth and stability. Thus, the implementation of Keynesian principles not only reshaped economic management but also fueled the development and strengthening of modern healthcare systems.

The economic environment shifted in the 1970s with the onset of stagflation, a challenging phenomenon characterized by stagnant economic growth coupled with rising inflation and unemployment (Mancur Olson, 1982). This unique scenario significantly impacted healthcare systems worldwide. Stagflation put pressure on governments to control inflation and curb public spending, often leading to budget cuts in various sectors, including healthcare. In many cases, healthcare systems faced reduced funding, which strained their ability to provide quality care and expand services. This period also saw increased interest in healthcare cost containment and efficiency measures as governments sought to control rising healthcare expenses. These economic pressures prompted healthcare providers to explore cost-effective delivery methods and innovative solutions. Ultimately, the experience of stagflation had a lasting influence on healthcare policy, emphasizing the need for healthcare systems to balance economic considerations while providing essential services to the population (Edward D. Barkovitz, 2011).

The geopolitical landscape of the late 20th century witnessed a fascinating juxtaposition of global events, as the Soviet Union underwent a profound transformation while the United States and Britain embraced neoliberal policies under leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Freeman, 2015). The collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist model led to a significant shift in world politics, marking the end of the Cold War and the spread of democratic and capitalist ideologies. Meanwhile, in the United States and Britain, Thatcher and Reagan championed neoliberalism, advocating for reduced government intervention in the economy, deregulation, and free-market capitalism. These policies aimed to promote individualism, privatization, and economic growth (htt12). This ideological divergence between the Soviet Union's decline and the embrace of neoliberalism in the West reshaped the global political and economic order, marking a critical moment in history with far-reaching consequences for international relations and economic systems.

Neo-liberal policies, characterized by a focus on limited government intervention, fiscal austerity, and increased competition, have significantly transformed health services in many countries. The emphasis on cost-cutting measures and market-oriented reforms in healthcare has led to the privatization of services, encouraging competition among healthcare providers (Mooney, 2012). While these policies have brought some benefits, such as improved efficiency and innovation, they have also raised concerns. Fiscal austerity measures often lead to reduced public funding for healthcare, potentially limiting access to essential services for vulnerable populations (Niggle, 2003). Increased competition can drive up costs in some cases, as providers may prioritize profitable services over those with lower financial returns. As a result, the impact of neo-liberal policies on health services varies from one country to another, with a complex interplay between market forces, access to care, and the overall quality of healthcare systems.

According to Baru and Mohan, the complex processes through neoliberalism and globalization deepens health inequalities. Baru and Mohan states that the redefinition of the role of the state, the rise of philanthropic capitalism, the commercialization of healthcare services, and alliances with religious fundamentalism are structural causes of health inequalities (Rama V Baru, 2018).

Mataria and Chun in their study examining the impact of neoliberal policies, which have shaped global health governance since the 1980s, on global health systems. Using case studies from ten countries, including the United States, Chile, New Zealand, Ecuador, and China, the study evaluates the outcomes of neoliberal reforms on the performance and equity of health systems through the Sequential Heuristic Model (SHM) and comparative analysis methods. The study's key finding is that while neoliberal

policies may enhance economic efficiency, they often undermine health equity and highlight inadequacies exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (AbuElKheir-Mataria, 2024).

3. Impacts of Neo-Liberal Policies on Health

The advent of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market-driven economic policies and limited government intervention, has ushered in a new era of economic restructuring across the globe. While neoliberalism has been lauded for its potential to promote economic growth and efficiency, it has also had profound and often detrimental effects on various aspects of society, particularly healthcare (Daniel E. Dawes, 2022). One of the most conspicuous consequences of neoliberalism in healthcare is the erosion of accessibility. As neoliberal policies often prioritize cost reduction and the privatization of healthcare services, access to quality care has become increasingly unequal (Navarro, 1998). Privatization can lead to the exclusion of marginalized populations who cannot afford private health services, creating a two-tiered system where the wealthy receive superior care while the less fortunate struggle to access even basic medical services. The dismantling of publicly funded healthcare systems or the introduction of user fees can further limit access to healthcare, leaving vulnerable populations without adequate care.

Neoliberal restructuring has also contributed to skyrocketing healthcare costs. The market-oriented approach encourages competition among healthcare providers and the pharmaceutical industry, but this competition can lead to inflated prices, particularly for life-saving medications and medical procedures (Mooney, 2012). Additionally, privatization often introduces profit motives into healthcare systems, diverting resources toward administrative costs and shareholder profits, which can inflate the overall cost of care. As a result, individuals and families are burdened with the financial strain of healthcare expenses, even in countries with relatively high incomes.

Neoliberal policies have exacerbated health inequalities within and between nations. The erosion of social safety nets, such as unemployment benefits and housing assistance, has left vulnerable populations at greater risk of poor health outcomes (Gillian Macnaughton, 2023). Income inequality, a hallmark of neoliberal economies, has been linked to disparities in access to healthcare, health behaviors, and health outcomes. The lack of equitable access to healthcare services can perpetuate these inequalities, creating a vicious cycle of disadvantage for marginalized communities (Braveman, *Health Disparities and Health Equity: Concepts and Measurement*, 2006).

Another negative consequence of neoliberal restructuring is the commodification of healthcare services. In market-driven healthcare systems, medical care is often treated as a commodity to be bought and sold, rather than a fundamental human right. This commodification can lead to the prioritization of profit over patient well-being, with healthcare providers making decisions based on financial considerations rather than medical necessity. The focus on profit margins can undermine the integrity and ethics of healthcare, jeopardizing the trust between patients and healthcare professionals (Christiansen, 2017).

While neoliberalism has brought about economic changes that some argue promote efficiency and growth, its impact on healthcare has been decidedly negative. The erosion of accessibility, rising healthcare costs, increased health inequalities, and the commodification of healthcare services have all had detrimental effects on public health (Schrecker, 2016). As nations grapple with the consequences of neoliberal restructuring, it is imperative to strike a balance between economic policies and the provision of accessible, equitable, and high-quality healthcare for all. Recognizing the negative impacts of neoliberalism on health is a crucial step towards advocating for policies that prioritize the well-being of individuals and communities over profit margins.

In line with this, a study investigating the effects of neoliberal beliefs on the health and well-being of individuals living in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a complex relationship between neoliberal ideologies and individual health outcomes. While the belief in personal self-sufficiency is associated with positive health and well-being outcomes, the study also finds that opposition to government intervention negatively impacts life satisfaction and social trust. This suggests that despite

the adverse effects of neoliberalism on collective well-being, certain aspects may have positive implications for some individuals (Kiffer G Card, 2022).

4. Other Consequences of Neoliberal Policies on Health

Under neoliberal policies, achieving full employment is no longer a priority for states. As a result, unemployment has risen, and work has become more precarious and unregulated, leading to a decline in real wages. This shift has far-reaching consequences, with one of the most critical being the rise in poverty. In turn, poverty significantly impacts public health, driving up rates of illness and premature death. Unemployment also affects relative deprivation, social isolation and the loss of self-confidence (Macnaughton G, 2018). Under the pressure of global competition fueled by neoliberal policies, workers face heightened risks to their health and safety. Exposure to toxic chemicals, excessive noise, and repetitive tasks has become increasingly common. Additionally, long hours of working overtime take a toll on well-being, contributing to issues like sleep disturbances, chronic fatigue, anxiety, and depression. These conditions are also linked to more serious outcomes, including cardiovascular problems, miscarriages, and premature births (Laaksonen et. al., 2006).

Today, corporations hold significant power in the global economy, with many affluent individuals capable of influencing or even controlling nation-states. Despite the limited role of government intervention, much of this wealth is built on exploiting workers through low wages and inadequate compensation for workplace injuries (LaDou, 2020). In an increasingly globalized world, corporations and other non-state actors wield considerable influence, often undermining global and occupational health. Their actions frequently align with the commercial interests of neoliberal, market-driven policies within the health sector (Koivusalu, 2010). Consequently, health services have been commodified, deepening inequalities between individuals and nations and threatens economic and social rights.

One significant outcome of these neoliberal and corporate-driven policies is their impact on urban development. Urbanization began accelerating toward the end of the 20th century, leading to an unprecedented shift of the global population into cities. While urbanization is often linked to industrial progress, the rapid concentration of people in urban centers has brought numerous challenges. Public health is particularly affected, as poorly planned urban growth and inadequate infrastructure contribute to the scarcity of green spaces and recreational areas, escalating the risks of air and noise pollution (htt13). Furthermore, polluted water sources and inadequate sewage systems, common in rapidly expanding urban areas, are responsible for nearly 1.2 million deaths from diarrhea annually (htt14). For children under five, these conditions result in a higher mortality rate than AIDS and malaria combined (htt15). As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan highlighted, the "urbanization of poverty" reflects growth without equitable development, exacerbating public health vulnerabilities and deepening socioeconomic divides (htt16).

While some argue that urbanization has severe adverse effects on health, others contend that it brings infrastructure advancements that improve access to health services, sanitation, and clean water supplies (Sophie Eckert, 2014). Poorly planned slum areas in large cities often lead to unhealthy living conditions for the urban poor. These communities are frequently located in environmentally degraded zones, where overcrowding and limited access to safe drinking water expose residents to a higher risk of communicable diseases.

(htt17).

These challenges are compounded by broader economic forces that shape urban life. For instance, the need for cheap food to sustain workers on low wages has been a critical feature of capitalism since its early days. This legacy continues today, with the fast-food industry exerting considerable influence to limit the World Health Organization's regulatory efforts on the health impacts of sugar and processed foods (Sell, 2019). As a result of the uncontrolled power of food companies, obesity has turned into a growing issue in underdeveloped nations.

Once considered a challenge primarily faced by wealthy countries, obesity is now on the rise in middle- and low-income nations, particularly in urban areas (Guthman, 2011). Within the context of neoliberal policies, the privatization and commercialization of public services and regulations have further

exacerbated living conditions, contributing to increased illness and mortality among disadvantaged populations.

The detrimental effects of neoliberal policies are not limited to healthcare and food systems; they extend to environmental conditions that directly impact public health. The environment is inextricably linked to these policies, as decreased state control over critical resources such as water, agriculture, and food production undermines public welfare. Weak environmental regulations, often designed to favor unchecked industrial growth, contribute to significant increases in pollution, leading to widespread health consequences. Air pollution alone is responsible for 7 million global premature deaths each year and poses severe health risks, highlighting the far-reaching implications of neoliberal approaches on both health and the environment (htt18).

In addition to the environmental degradation caused by weakened regulations, the privatization of energy sectors further exacerbates the situation. Capitalist enterprises, driven by profit motives, often prioritize cheap coal over cleaner, but more expensive, energy alternatives. Short-term political gains take precedence in policy decisions, with politicians focusing more on the next election than on addressing long-term challenges like climate change. As a result, it is expected that fossil fuels will continue to supply approximately 82% of the world's energy needs in the coming years, perpetuating environmental harm and health risks on a global scale (htt19).

5. Conclusion

Research highlights that the impact of neoliberal policies on health goes far beyond just health systems or policies. Public services and health are deeply intertwined, influenced by aspects such as working conditions, food security, nutrition, health equity, and urbanization. Despite the world having more resources than ever before, a staggering half of the global population still struggles to access basic health services or maintain healthy living conditions. Neoliberalism, with its focus on continuous growth, has contributed to inequality, environmental challenges, and suffering, encouraging the belief that individual choices regarding health is the primary solution (Braveman, Health Disparities and Health Equity: Concepts and Measurement, 2006).

However, life expectancy and quality of life can be improved in countries that prioritize public health. It is not simply the amount of health expenditure that matters, but how these resources are allocated. Contrary to the assumption that wealthier nations are inherently healthier, it is often the most egalitarian societies that achieve superior health outcomes. This underscores the critical role of equitable access to healthcare and social solidarity in fostering better public health. In market-driven healthcare systems, medical care is frequently commodified—viewed as a product to be bought and sold rather than a fundamental human right. Such commodification can result in situations where profit motives outweigh patient well-being, with healthcare decisions driven by financial considerations rather than medical necessity. In this regard, Chapman (Chapman, 2016) advocates for the adoption of a human rights-based, people-centered approach in health policies. The right to health encompasses not only access to healthcare, but also the provision of healthy working and living conditions, adequate nutrition and food safety, access to essential medicines, and the promotion of equality.

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