

Translocal Social Movement Learning in the Face of COVID-19: Building Online Solidarity During Lockdowns

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Abstract

Social movements are at the forefront of fighting for another world as conceptualised through Arundhati Roy's portal. COVID-19 and state measures imposed to contend with it have severely impacted not only the activism of movements, but also their capacity to learn. Translocal social movement learning offers one way in which such learning can continue. This article shares reflections from participants involved in a translocal learning engagement between movement members and activist-scholars from Ghana, South Africa and Canada. It provides an important example of the kind of non-hierarchical social movement learning that can happen at a distance, when movements share, learn and support one another.

Keywords: social movement learning; translocal assemblages; COVID-19; lockdowns; Ghana; Canada; South Africa

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Introduction

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

Imagining another world and fighting for it is and has been the work of social movements the world over. Images of tens of thousands, if not millions, taking to the streets in the defence of causes or pushing for change were a common visual trope until the COVID-19 pandemic arrived with its lockdowns and social distancing. Despite the June to August 2021 resurgence of large-scale Black Lives Matter mobilisations erupting into the streets after the murder of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor by police, one can say without much risk of controversy that the social protest world has been turned upside down by the pandemic, especially in the early days of government responses. To put it in terms of Arundhati Roy's (2020) now famous phrase, if the pandemic is a portal, then it is a portal guarded by lockdowns, surveillance and the fear of the virus itself, and these measures prevent the very social formations through which so many of us have fought for the possibility of another world on the other side of the proverbial portal.

And yet, as this article will attest, social movements, and the activists who make up their members, are nothing if not innovative and resilient. As Venturini (2020) describes in his account of Italy's lockdown, finding new ways to connect during this pandemic has been a deep source of learning and succour for many members of social movements facing harsh new forms of state repression. This study focuses specifically on the early stages of lockdowns, and reflections by activists on them, and does not look at later stages of state responses to the pandemic, nor the movements that erupted during this time. In the account below, movements in Ghana, South Africa and Canada came together to learn translocally from one another in the first few months of the pandemic, when lockdowns were most pronounced. In this sense, this article shares a picture of mutual social movement learning in the early phase of the pandemic. Through the months of May and June 2020, they shared their experience of COVID-19, what states were doing to fight the pandemic, and how these measures were impacting their movement organising and learning. Reflections on what was learned from these sessions by two movements in Ghana in particular are shared. These reflections demonstrate the impact the pandemic and its associated social repercussions are having on social movements, and what they are learning as a result.

Sharing, Translocally

When we had the translocal conference, no one had to be quiet. Any time you are quiet, thoughts are destroyed. (Participant of Ada Songor Salt Women's Association, also known as the Yihi Katseme ["Brave Women"])

In the early days of pandemic lockdowns happening around the world, a conversation started among a translocal assemblage of movements, movement activists (such as the Yihi Katseme member quoted above), and activist-scholars based in Ghana, Canada and South Africa. This assemblage predated the pandemic, with movement members having met through online learning and sharing spaces called translocal learning engagements (TLEs) over the previous three years.¹ These movements and activist-scholars focus on a variety of issues, ranging from environmental and climate justice to indigenous sovereignty, the rights of the urban poor, the rights of communities impacted by mining, and gender equity in activist spaces. When the pandemic struck all these movement contexts, the assemblage began to ask, “How would this virus, and the government plans to contain it, impact our movements, our activism?” This was quickly followed by the question, “How will we organise and adjust in this new emerging reality?” The assemblage organised a series of online meetings, running from the beginning of May to the beginning of June 2020, to share what was happening regarding the virus in the different movements’ locations, and what governments were doing to contend with it as well as the negative implications of these government actions.² In other words, the assemblage constituted a collective learning space to reflect and help assemblage members to contend with this new reality.

The first meeting occurred on 4 May 2020 and focused on answering the above questions. The assemblage members who took part were from: the Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers) movement in South Africa; the Ada Songor Salt Women’s Association (also known as Yihi Katseme or “Brave Women” in Dangme) and their community radio ally, Radio Ada, in Ada, Ghana; the Indigenous Mi’kmaq Water Protectors and Grassroots Grandmothers in Mi’kma’ki/Canada’s Maritimes; and the Coalition of Social Movements on Mining and their ally organisation, Venceremos Development, in Ghana’s Upper East Region. Activist scholars from South Africa and Canada also participated, including the author who helped convene the first meeting. The first meeting was a general sharing of COVID-19 state actions and their impact on the movements. The two meetings that followed on 19 May and 2 June gave the respective movements involved a chance to make individual presentations of their experience and what they were doing to contend with their changing situations, and to ask questions of one another.

In the weeks afterwards, two movement contexts in particular, both in Ghana, expressed a desire to discuss and share what they took from these COVID-19 pandemic

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² Labour to initiate these translocal learning engagements as well as carry out post engagement interviews and transcriptions was borne by Boye Matuluko, Sheena Cameron and Natalie Krieger, all research assistants with the CRC in Sustainability and Social Change Leadership. The author wishes to recognise and thank all of them for their efforts, especially in the midst of these difficult times.

conversations. It is the learning and reflections of members of these two movement contexts that is shared below, as the TLEs themselves, and the particulars of movement strategies moving forward, were not deemed appropriate for broader circulation. Therefore, no specific movement strategy is shared in the discussion that follows; rather, the reflections of those who participated from both Ghanaian contexts is shared. These reflections provide an important example of translocal social movement learning that has emerged during COVID-19.

Translocal Social Movement Learning

Social movement learning is an important and rich field of critical adult education (English and Mayo 2012). In the current COVID-19 context, articles and special issues of journals have emerged documenting how movements and activists are adjusting and organising in the current context (cf. Kowalewski 2021; Pleyers 2020; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020; Venturini 2020). In the *Interface* collection, for instance, Venturini (2020) describes how movements in Italy were forced to shut down during the country's severe lockdown in April and early May 2020, and how he discovered connecting online and sharing with other movements as a crucial way he was able to remain engaged and not lose hope during this difficult period. While there have been several studies of the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing on social movement learning (e.g., Abers and Von Bülow 2021; Bronfman 2021; Kaur et al. 2021; Niesz 2021; Maton 2022; Walters 2022), there are few studies that look at movements connecting with other movements (e.g., Frei-Herrmann 2022; Hader 2021), and these do not focus on learning. This current example of translocal movement learning helps address this gap.

Translocal social movement learning, where movements in different localities can connect with one another to share experience and build mutual solidarity, extends from Ferguson and Gupta's (2002) critical analysis of transnational governmentality. In this analysis, the spatial dominance of the transnational, that is, international and multilateral entities (think transnational corporations, but also the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), is revealed as a form of governmentality that is attempting to contain and control the local through claims of greater perspective. Ferguson (2006) in particular has suggested the counter to this attempt at spatial dominance is not transnational movements, which tend to replicate the subordination of the local, but rather local movements connecting with one another translocally. This is where movements engage in change struggles within their localities, even as they develop solidarity connections and understanding with other struggles based elsewhere. When one looks at the climate crisis, a clear example of transnational governmentality emerges, where actors at the international level claim authority to respond to the crisis, and yet they have been largely incapable of making significant change (cf. McKeon 2017). In contrast to this, local movements the world over are actively resisting pipelines, large-scale mining and deforestation, offshore drilling, water table draining, and waterbody pollution (cf. Feola 2016). It is these local movements that have slowed

the ongoing impact of climate damaging industries (cf. McGregor and Crowther 2018). These movements, by being rooted in local struggle, understand best how to push for change; transnational movements, in contrast, reveal a similar appeal to the spatial dominance of perspective, minimising local knowledge (cf. Langdon 2010). The Extinction Rebellion's track record in Canada is a case in point (Cecco 2020). Choudry (2007) similarly critiques transnational movements such as the Globalization from Below movement for subordinating indigenous voices and concerns.

A key dimension of translocal social movement learning is non-hierarchical knowledge sharing, where local movements teach and learn from other local movements as peers, avoiding claims of greater perspective. Gopal (2019) has shown historically how this type of non-hierarchical knowledge sharing was crucial to the success of the anti-colonial movements of the post-war period. Harris et al. (2012) and Wang and Soule (2012) have provided contemporary examples of how translocal movement networks have contributed to mutual movement learning and solidarity without compromising local knowledge autonomy. Meanwhile, Kapoor (2011) has tempered these positive examples by revealing the pitfalls of translocal activism if movements are too closely linked geographically. McFarlane (2009) has provided an important lexicon for exploring the potential of translocal connection between movements and activists, using the term "assemblages" to convey the fluidity of both ideas and of activist formations and identities. Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2019), for instance, have illustrated the importance of translocal assemblages with members learning from one another in putting forward a sustainable foods agenda in the United Kingdom. The emerging connection between South African and Ghanaian movements below speaks to the usefulness of attending to this fluidity, where people, relations, and ideas flow between geolocations. Jocson and Carpenter (2019) underscore how dissemination of the knowledge produced by translocal assemblages through different forms of media further democratizes this knowledge and proliferates its pedagogic potential. Previous research by the author has shown the important role community radio can play in democratizing such knowledge and learning (Langdon and Larweh 2014).

The translocal assemblage at the heart of this research formed first in 2013 in Ghana between two movements at either ends of the country—the one focused on the Ada salt-yielding Songor Lagoon on Ghana's coast and the other focused on gold mining in the Upper East Region near the Ghana–Burkina Faso border. Through a participatory action research project on social movement learning that the author helped initiate, these two movement contexts shared their ongoing experience and learning in struggle (Foley 1999) with each other (Langdon et al. 2021). In 2015, these movements also began sharing their learning with activists in Canada, in Guatemala, and in South Africa. It was out of these processes—both online and in person—that the translocal assemblage began to emerge. Prior to COVID-19, this assemblage had held seven online translocal learning engagements (3- to 4-hour online video conferences between 2 or more movement contexts) and three in-person learning exchanges (where movement representatives visited other movement contexts in person). In this sense, the ties

between these movement contexts were strong before COVID-19 lockdowns hit. The presence of this assemblage provided an important means of connecting, supporting, and learning during the early days of the pandemic as a result. In the reflections of those who participated in the post-TLE interviews, three themes of learning emerged.

Three Themes of Translocal Learning During the Early Phase of COVID-19 Lockdowns

When all the members of the assemblage involved in the COVID-19 TLEs were contacted by the author about sharing reflections on learning from the translocal learning engagements (TLEs), two movement contexts stepped forward to share: the Ada context and the Upper East Region context in Ghana. Two interviews and a focus group were conducted with members of these contexts: an interview with a member of Radio Ada, an interview with a member of the Ada Yihi Katseme women's salt movement, and a focus group with three people from Venceremos working with the Coalition of Social Movements on Mining in Ghana's Upper East Region. Three major themes emerged in their various reflections on learning in the COVID-19 TLEs: a deepened understanding of the impact of government responses to COVID-19 on their own context; learning and sharing new potential directions for their context from and with others; and, developing a deeper sense of solidarity with each other and the challenges each movement faces.

The Impact of Initial Government Responses to COVID-19 on Each Movement Context

As the COVID-19 global pandemic emerged, new challenges were facing both the movement context in Ada and the one in the Upper East Region. In Ada, a new investor was working to take over the state-run Ada Songor Salt Project, a move that recalled for many in the movement the trauma of the 1980s when the lagoon was controlled by companies (ASAF 2016; Langdon 2020). The Yihi Katseme and Radio Ada were organising to counter this new threat through community mobilisation, but unfortunately had come to a standstill as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. A Radio Ada member described how this benefited the takeover:

If Covid-19 is keep your distance, stay at home, all that, it is as if, suddenly, those in power, who are perpetrating the takeover of our resources have got a god-given ally to cheat our people.

Suddenly, the ability to organise at the community level, to take the information the movement had gathered about this threat to the doorsteps of people, was taken away. In a similar fashion, the coalition of movements in Ghana's Upper East Region organised demonstrations after the underground blasting of a large-scale mining operation near Gbane led to the collapse of a local small-scale mine, killing one and injuring another, who later died of his injuries (Starr FM Online 2019). A demonstration in response to these and other deaths that resulted from the mining operation was organised for early

in 2020, but was actively frustrated by police refusing a march permit. The coalition was just preparing to take to the streets regardless of the permit when the lockdown occurred. One of the people working with the coalition described how they had to use virtual platforms to re-strategise as a result:

Well, the coalition activities ... have had to re-strategise and use a virtual platform ... because of the limitation and the challenges of COVID. That is why we have to adopt the virtual platforms in order to continue to do the work plans that we have set out to do but couldn't do physically.

One of the virtual activities that occurred in this time was the series of COVID-19 translocal learning engagements (TLEs). A Yihi Katseme member described how the COVID-19 focused TLEs helped her group rethink the limitations imposed on them by government:

One influence is that, you know when COVID came? We thought nothing could return. But at the meeting we had the conversation that life still goes on. We can keep social distancing, we can put the mask on, but we can still meet. Executives have met, the radio station has met with us. We have meeting with other groups we are partnering with. We have had a press conference and a radio interview next week. We are on board. Nothing can stop us.

This unlocking of the possibilities of organising during the pandemic is just one of the learnings and senses of sharing that emerged in this series of virtual TLE meetings. The next section shares more.

Learning New Approaches to Organising and Communicating with One Another

In detailing their translocal learning, the Ada and the Upper East Region contexts both first described what they had learned and shared with one another in general terms, before they shared what they had taken away from the COVID-19 TLEs. A second person working with the coalition, for instance, notes that they learned much from the ability of the “Ada Songor women [...] to navigate certain issues [such as] how they dealt with duty bearers [and] mobilize citizens around that communal resource”. The third member of those working with the coalition added, “one key thing they were able to succeed with is Radio Ada”. From their perspective, the Radio Ada member agreed: “Radio played a pivotal role. Women had access to it and have been using it constantly ... to put their issues in the public domain ... in the form of songs, radio programmes, and public forums.” The second member of the coalition went further to argue, “our learnings from how Radio Ada has been navigating around, this is something that the movements here can look into, to be able to see how they can partner with a community radio or radio station to be able to use it very well to rally people towards the fight”. The first member of those working with the coalition then pointed out the coalition is doing just that:

[Y]ou saw quite recently, the radio programme that was organised. At One radio on the emerging mining issues. ... And now, because of that radio programme, URA Radio has agreed to institutionalise every Friday as a time with the mining movements, so that we use that to educate the emerging mining citizens watch group in the Upper East Region.

In this way, the Ada movement has clearly informed a new path forward that has emerged in the Upper East Region.

At the same time, the participants from the Ada movement context saw how what they shared with the Upper East Region context helped the two movements relate to one another. The Radio Ada member noted how in both the Upper East Region and the Ada context it is men who have traditionally dominated the movement. In the Ada case, though, the Yihi Katseme have emerged to challenge this dominance. The Radio Ada member noted how “people from [Upper East Region] are learning from the Ada women [as the] Ada struggle is being led by women”. At the same time, he noted that the Ada movement is learning from the Upper East Region “movement members ... how to engage the police and other regulatory bodies”.

At the level of the translocal learning engagements, both the Ada and Upper East context participants described how they learned from the Indigenous Mi’kmaq Water Protectors fighting to protect the Shubenacadie River from the Alton Gas Project (<https://stopaltongas.wordpress.com/>). The Yihi Katseme member, for instance, described how she saw similarities between the two struggles:

We have similar concerns that we are fighting. They have to do with water, and ours is also water. In a way, the group in Alton Gas, the Water Protectors, they are doing advocacy, they are mothers protecting their land, it involves the environment. If you compare, you can see what they are fighting for has to do with gas. The gas they are mining and polluting their river. Ours also has to do with salt and mining being abused. Unfortunately, the resource is being given out to an investor and [they] are destroying the resource. During the dialogue, we realised that we are on the same level.

She felt they learned a lot from the Water Protectors: “Even though we have not gone through the struggle of sending our cases to the court, the women in Alton Gas have been able to send their issues to the court.” She added that, “we are applying now [what] we took note from the Alton Gas group We are gathering documents. Some are papers, some verbal recordings are going on.” According to her, the Ada movement has used these forms of documentation “to keep the dialogue going [through] press conferences [and] radio discussions”. The second member of those working with the coalition, who had an opportunity to visit the Stop Alton Gas movement in person in 2019, gained similar knowledge with regard to “how they used townhall meetings and other strategies like panel discussions to educate the public about climate change issues [and] mobilise them to protest against a ... company, which was threatening the ecology of a river in Nova Scotia”.

It was both the in-person visit to South Africa in 2018 and the online interactions with the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement (<https://abahlali.org/>) that informed the Radio Ada member's learning from this movement and how they "use social media to their advantage". According to this member, "we have also had to learn and then start applying it in our advocacy work". At the same time, he noted that the South Africans have been impressed with "the ways we use songs to start our meetings, to mobilise the community, to get people to be interested in what we are doing". He sees this type of sharing of knowledge as key: "There is a lot of knowledge out there that we are helping each other to understand, to acquire, and use for our advantage." In fact, it was this growing link with Abahlali baseMjondolo that created an opportunity for the Yihi Katseme to "to organise [a] press conference". "We have one coming next week", shared the Yihi Katseme member, "that will be telecasted world-wide on TV Africa which goes so far to Belgium." A member of the Abahlali team who came to visit Ghana in 2019 put the Yihi Katseme in touch with TV Africa (a major Ghanaian TV network) through their previously established relationship with the Socialist Forum of Ghana, enabling the movement to broadcast what was happening to their resource to the world. In this very concrete way, the translocal assemblage has provided not only an opportunity to learn from one another, but to deepen the impact of one another's struggle. This connects well with the final aspect of learning, solidarity building.

Building Mutual Solidarity through Mutual Understanding

One clear example of building solidarity is shown by the connections from South Africa to Ghana that have helped the Yihi Katseme in their struggle, just discussed above. For the first member of those working with the coalition, on the other hand, the solidarity that has been built is less concrete and more conceptual, and involves developing a clear class analysis:

One of the learnings I have come to realise is that class interest shall always be supreme A certain class interest in China would definitely be the same interest for a certain class in Ghanaian society, and I'm telling you of the bourgeoisie class and the elites, their interest shall always coincide.

It is only by seeing this, and standing together across these distances, that this class interest can be contested. The third person working with the coalition captures the importance of gaining new insights such as this as being key to the Upper East Region context: "Sharing of ideas from countries outside Ghana will help us to learn more, such that we also will be able to develop more strategies to use to navigate some of the strategic structures that are hindering local communities or the local movement from functioning as expected."

For the Radio Ada member, solidarity is built through sharing ideas and analysis, but also through physically getting to understand one another's contexts. "Hosting" their South African colleagues, according to him, "built solidarity with our colleagues from SA". Likewise, visiting other contexts deepened their understanding of the struggles

their colleagues faced: “Some women have never travelled up north or gone beyond their traditional area but the involvement with this movement has exposed them.” “These [understandings] are things they cherish.” In this sense, they carry each other’s struggles, a fact illustrated by the work of the Abahlali baseMjondolo colleague to connect the Yihi Katseme to other activists in Ghana who could support their struggle.

In the COVID-19 context, this physical meeting is not possible, and yet, translocal learning engagements provide the opportunity to build mutual solidarity. When explaining why “no one had to be quiet” during the translocal meetings, the Yihi Katseme member argued:

The valuable learnings [have] opened our minds of concern and [the] need to rise up together for the earth. In order to sustain a resource, we need to rise together, to resist what is happening and the power to say that we are not pleased. In Upper East, South Africa is the same. The women’s group in Nova Scotia is the same. They have risen up to resist together; they have spoken out to say what is destructing the water, the land where the gold is created. They have the power. We have the power. You know when you talk and you have the power? The power belongs to us.

This sense of power together, even when fighting within their own context, is the best reflection of how solidarity can be built through translocal learning, even in the midst of a pandemic. Through this kind of mutuality, the portal at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel is being approached with voices raised about what the world must look like on the other side, for, “Any time you are quiet, thoughts are destroyed.”

Conclusion

As we join Arundhati Roy (2020) in trying to imagine what the world will look like when this pandemic ends, we should turn to the movements that have been creating visions and paths away from the destructive direction that led to this pandemic to begin with—and not yield space to those movements that emerged during the pandemic targeting health practitioners and attempting to protect the lives of the already privileged. We need to turn to social movements that are at the forefront of speaking clearly of the class and racial bias in the plans that have led us to this crisis, of the destruction of extractive industries that place profit over people and the ecology, and of urban planning that excludes the poor despite their right to sleep in safe and secure homes. Through the eyes of the movements in this translocal assemblage, different cities, different uses of the land and resources, different gender relations, and above all different values and knowledges can be seen. And through their translocal learning engagements, these movements have been learning to see the world from one another’s perspective, not to minimise their own struggle—not to silence and subordinate it—but rather to add a new inflection, a new vision to their own. Revealing how this assemblage continued to impact mutual solidarity and learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Mqapheli Bonono from Abahlali baseMjondolo shared in a conference presentation held in May 2022:

We are very keen to say without movement building, without having these networks across the [African] continent, across the worldwide, we cannot win this fight on our own. We need solidarity. We need progressive movements, progressive organizations, to be in solidarity with us because we believe if we stand together and say no to repression, no to killing activists, no to the eviction of poor people in the cities, so we can be able to say the capitalist system, it has to stop in our respective worlds. We have to create a new space where people in society can live freely. (Bonono 2022)

The reflections of the translocal participants during the initial period of intensive lockdowns because of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as Bonono's words make it clear that the key theme of solidarity and mutual support continues to be a central learning from participation in the translocal assemblage; and the space beyond this moment "where people in society can live freely" echoes Roy's aspirations that we learn from this pandemic to reach for something better.

The COVID-19 lockdowns, and the times that have followed, have made movement organising very difficult. Yet each of these movements have found new ways to continue their struggles—and some of these new ways were learned from one another. At the same time, this period of slow down gave many of those involved in this assemblage time to reflect on what has been learned in their struggle until now, what they have already learned from one another, and how this can be applied to the struggle ahead. The depth of this reflection can be felt in the conversations shared above. In this sense, the portal that is approaching is being approached with voices raised, perhaps in a song composed by the Yihi Katseme and invoking the new space Mqapheli Bonono speaks of, but where each of the movements that are part of this assemblage is adding their own inflection, their own rhythm and own rhyme to the song, going not lightly, but rather boisterously into the new world, carrying that which strengthens them: what they have learned from one another, and that they do not struggle alone.

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