More Questions than Answers: Emergent Agency in a Time of Covid[1]

BACKGROUND

This note summarizes the initial conversations and reading of the Emerging Agency (EA) in a Time of Covid-19 project, ahead of its 12th November launch webinar. It sets out the questions we will be seeking to answer over the course of the next year. It is a living document – additional ideas/thoughts are welcome and will be acknowledged. It is offered as an input to the launch event.

By 'agency', we mean the capacity of an individual or group to actively and independently choose and to affect change. Agency can be progressive or negative (e.g. scapegoating minorities). It can be in the direct interest of the agent, or proxy agency seeking to help others. It can both propose and resist change. That definition is intentionally broad, because we are keen to look beyond formal politics, aid and civil society organizations to a wider spectrum of grassroots action, by both individuals and informal groups. The potential range of study is vast, and we may well seek to narrow the focus as the project develops.

The paper is divided into three sections: the broad shape of EA; a more in-depth discussion of the subjects and repertoires of EA, and questions for the longer term.

Under each heading, we summarize what we *think* we are seeing in terms of patterns (please feel free to challenge, improve etc), some illustrative examples (where we have them) and the questions these raise for where the world might be headed and what responses are possible. We have put the examples separately, so that you can click through to those on topics you are interested in, but can otherwise skim a short (three page) document.

SECTION 1: THE BROAD SHAPE OF EA

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

What we are seeing: The shape of EA often reflects both longer-term historical context, and what was happening as the pandemic broke. History does not stop with C-19, of course, and already it is interacting with and shaping new movements and processes on everything from Black Lives Matter, to the EndSARS protests against police brutality in Nigeria, to demands for political reform in Thailand.

Click here to see examples of how history and context affect EA

Questions: If EA differs from one country, or continent, to the next, how much can activists / practitioners really learn from reading about what their peers elsewhere are doing? Where is EA actually emergent – and where just a pivot of 'normal' agency?

POLITICS

What we are seeing: C-19 has greatly influenced the social contract between citizens[2] and state, but in contradictory ways. In some places, the state has used the pandemic to further centralize control and close down civic space (with growing protest against state responses in some locations, including anti-lockdown protests stemming from mistrust of political and scientific elites).

In other settings, citizen's movements have sought to push the state to respond quicker, or better (e.g. by highlighting the impact on particularly affected groups) or to carve out/defend space both for mutual aid, and for more overtly political activity, such as challenging government abuses.

Click here to see examples of EA in Politics

Questions: Which tendencies predominate in what combinations, and where? What determines how the pandemic drives changes to the social contract?

GEOGRAPHY

What we are seeing: EA exhibits contrasting tendencies of hyper-localization (eg mutual aid volunteer groups springing up at the street or block level) and 'death of distance' via the rise of online organizing. There are multiple examples of combinations of online networks activated for hyperlocal implementation.

Questions: How do these two tendencies interact?

What we are seeing: Within the aid and humanitarian sector, C-19 has boosted efforts towards localization of responses, which had previously been frustrated by the incentives and habits of the existing institutions, governance and rules.

Click here to see EA examples of Geography

Questions: What will determine whether localization remains as one of the legacies of C-19, or returns to the *status quo ante*?

---

[2] Situation for non-citizen residents, notably IDPs or refugees needs to be looked at specifically.

DYNAMICS OF ORGANIZATION AND PROTEST

What we are seeing: As with all spikes in social movement activity, we are already seeing some forms of response, e.g. around mutual aid, subside.

Click here to see EA examples of Dynamics of organization and protest

Questions: Which new initiatives, whether outside or within existing social organization structures, are proving more enduring, acquiring lasting identities or structures, and why might that be?

What we are seeing: The focus of some volunteer groups has evolved rapidly since the early days of the pandemic, for example moving from food and medicine to mental health and loneliness, or shifting into multiple areas of support (food/political/income).

Questions: Under which circumstances are new forms of organization and agency emerging v existing organizations moving to respond to C-19? How are new/spontaneous responses interacting with those of established civil society organizations, political parties etc (e.g. are they combining, or staying separate)? Are dynamics significantly different between the first and second/third waves of infection? What else are people seeing in terms of how the space for popular agency is changing?

SECTION 2: THEMES AND REPERTOIRES

What we are seeing: Clusters of issues are starting to emerge from the coverage of numerous individual examples of EA. These could be accurate representations of the spread of organization across society or, of course, reflect the interests of those reporting on the activity. Current clusters can be identified by: (1) social sector (women's organizations, including self-identified feminist organizing); youth; faith organizations; refugees/migrants, Diaspora, trades unions; social enterprises; and food systems; (2) issue focus (environmentalists, anti-police violence, refugee / migrant solidarity, anti-eviction activism, anti-racism) and (3) by their choice of particular tactics (e.g. neighbourhoods/mutual aid; online activism). Clearly, there is some overlap between these categories. New alliances for collective action are also springing up.

Click here to see examples of Clusters of EA

Questions: What areas of EA are missing from the current list? What is the balance in EA between self-agency and proxy agency (acting for others)?

What we are seeing: Clusters vary in the nature of their organization and the repertoires of activities they have developed. Typical repertoires include coalition building; online activism; symbolic events and 'happenings', unruly and violent protest, awareness raising, mutual aid, documentation e.g. of need as an advocacy tool with state providers.

Click here to see examples of Repertoires in EA

Questions: How do repertoires differ by cluster and why?

What we are seeing: Some EA exercises are already producing some 'wins' in terms of state investigations of police violence or the dropping of coercive legislative proposals

Click here to see examples of Wins in EA

Questions: What other examples/areas of 'wins' are emerging from EA?

SECTION 3: LONGER TERM QUESTIONS

This section does not fit the 'What we are seeing/Questions' format because in many cases, we are not yet seeing much. All we have are intuitions from experience and research on emergent agency in previous crises, and perhaps some 'weak signals' about the longer-term legacy of C-19.

Which of the areas described above might have the greatest long-term significance? Early candidates could include:

- a potential 'youthquake' as older generations of politicians and activists are both physically restricted by the risk of contagion, and disadvantaged compared to younger 'digital natives' by the move to online.
- a definitive shift online in the nature of association and organization, with implications for repertoires, the politics of organizing, and the social contract, among many others. Is the nature of digital activism at the grassroots similar/different to that of educated elites?
- lasting impact on gender inequality and activism, for example from heightened attention to the unpaid care economy, domestic violence, or place-based organization
- Will the crisis finally provide a tipping point for the localization of a range of activities previously dominated by international actors in humanitarian response and other areas?

ANNEX: EXAMPLES OF EMERGENT AGENCY

HISTORY AND CONTEXT – EXAMPLES
Click here to return to History and context in Section 1

'An upsurge in Mexico's feminist movement in 2019 morphed rapidly into C-19 online organization once the pandemic hit'[3]

'Delhi's response was shaped by the pre-C19 protests against the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) (CAA/NRC) legislations, which were widely perceived as a strategic intervention by the right-wing government to undermine the legal and social citizenship of Muslims within the country.'[4]

POLITICS – EXAMPLES
Click here to return to Politics in Section 1

'The ENDSARS movement was a push back on police brutality, much of which was experienced during the COVID lockdown. A huge youth led movement, at first non-violent. Now, after the Lekke massacre, things are becoming a bit more violent, with lots of looting, etc. Huge crowds, for instance, have discovered government warehouses stocked with food, masks and other COVID supplies, which were not distributed, and have now been 'liberated'.'[5]

'In the Pacific it is pretty clear that prior investment in local agency and relationships is paying off in terms of resilience built on trust. Those that adapted quickly where those that had skilled local staff who themselves had rich networks and alliances which they were able to mobilise.'[6]

---

[3] Feminist solidarity networks have multiplied since the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico
[4] From communal violence to lockdown hunger – Emergency responses by civil society networks in Delhi
[5] Example from John Gaventa
[6] Chris Roche, email October 2020

GEOGRAPHY – EXAMPLES

Click here to return to Geography in Section 1

'Regional geo-politics in the Pacific is shaping things dramatically, in particular how the perceived role of China is changing the bargaining power of Pacific states vis a vis Australia & NZ. This in turn shapes domestic civil society – state relations.'[7]

ODI is tracking examples of 'local humanitarian action and complementary partnerships' in eight countries. https://www.odi.org/covid19-tracking-local-humanitarian-action/

DYNAMICS OF ORGANIZATION AND PROTEST – EXAMPLES

Click here to return to System Dynamics of organization and protest in Section 1

'Young people in South Africa are generally experiencing an 'activation moment' through Covid, but what will happen? Who will stay organized? People are more conscious of their networks of solidarity, but fatigue and fading are setting in. Where initiatives emerged without structure, they only sustain if structures emerge or other structures come in and consolidate.'[8]

CLUSTERS AND THEMES – EXAMPLES

Women's organizations
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'In India, as early as March 18, before the entire country went into a national lockdown, about 500 women from the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) learned how to make the masks and produced half a million masks for distribution to the association's membership of over 1.7 million women workers in the informal sector.

Across the 24 states of India a little over 65,000 rural women, part of around 15,000 self-help groups (SHG), produced over 20 million masks by April 12. And given that these groups are spread across the length and breadth of the country, this decentralised production model is going to involve less logistics and time for delivering it to local hospitals and customers.

The groups are making sure that their masks meet quality standards and while these masks may not be at a level to replace the N-95 masks, they are still filling the immediate need.'[9]

'There is stigma attached to such diseases in many countries in Africa and Asia, which makes the infected person and family even more vulnerable. Responding to this reality, our Ethiopian partner the Organisation for Women in Self Employment (WISE) swung into action as soon as the first case of COVID-19 was found and is now leading a national Task Force to raise awareness to combat and control the spread.' [10]

'In Uganda, groups such as women's Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are digitizing their services and outreach at far greater speed due to the pandemic. Besides the financial services, they are using the technology (video messaging, community radio) to spread much needed awareness on

---

[7] Chris Roche, email, October 2020
[8] Oxfam colleague in South Africa, conversation, October 2020 – check if can be attributed.
[9] Voices from the Ground: Stories of Community Resilience & Entrepreneurship in the Pandemic
[10] Voices from the Ground: Stories of Community Resilience & Entrepreneurship in the Pandemic

the outbreak and how communities need to prepare and respond. This kind of messaging from trusted sources is especially important given the stigma.' [11]

˶While we hear many stories of increase in sexual and gender-based violence across the world during Covid, what is often missed in this is women's role in creating peace. Be it providing food, taking care of children and the elderly, dealing with the police/authorities, and finding work during the lockdowns, in the stories we are hearing[12]

Youth Organizing
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'In Burkina Faso, the National Youth Council established Battalion 2020 against Covid-19, a training program on health, sanitation, and social measures for 1,500 young volunteers working in various communities across the country. In addition, young Burkinabe leader Emmanuella Toé and her colleagues are collaborating with the Femmes Riposte Covid-19 (women's response to Covid-19) program to produce informational pamphlets urging people to wear masks and respect physical distancing guidelines. Isaac Olufadewa from Nigeria is a young man running the Slum and Rural Health Initiative that has produced "Stop Covid-19" infographics in more than sixty local African languages to spread accurate information about the pandemic.

Social media influencers, musicians, poets, painters, social and political activists, and television and sports stars are using their own talents and social platforms to reach out to others, reaching millions of people. In Mozambique, the popular reggae fusion band GranMah released "Lava as tuas Mãos" (wash your hands), a video with instructions on proper handwashing techniques and alternatives to handshakes. In South Africa, the famous Ndlovu Youth Choir composed, performed, and filmed a musical rendition of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Covid-19 safety advice, featuring translations in various South African languages.

The control of digital spaces has been an ongoing battle for many young activists on and beyond the continent, with many building their own independent platforms to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. Stowelink, a youth-led digital enterprise in Kenya is gathering and disseminating up-to-date, accurate information about Covid-19 in English, Kiswahili, and Amharic. Also, in an effort to curb fake news and quell panic, two recent graduates of the University of Cape Town established the Coronapp—a tool that centralizes information flow about the pandemic.

In South Sudan, Nelson Kwaje from #DefyHateNow launched a digital community of youth from various fields who collaborate to fight misinformation and raise awareness on coronavirus prevention. Likewise, the Community Mutual Aid Crisis Response online platform created by Mbiydzenyuy Ferdy, a young Cameroonian entrepreneur, connects people in need of assistance with service providers and community volunteers. Online digital platforms are also bringing together young people and the wider population to share ideas and prevention practices. In Uganda, using the slogan "Our challenges, our solutions!," a group of young people from Zetu Africa (Our Africa) launched the campaign #SmarterThanCorona to bring people together to share information and discuss solutions to problems caused by the Covid-19 outbreak.

Young people in many countries have also taken an active role in providing access to preventive health services and equipment. In Kenya, Victor Odhiambo, a young entrepreneur, and his team at the Garden of Hope Foundation raised money to set up several handwashing stations in Kibera. In

---

[11] Voices from the Ground: Stories of Community Resilience & Entrepreneurship in the Pandemic

[12] Yogesh Ghore, email, October 2020

Cameroon, a group of young people started the One Person One Hand Sanitizer initiative. They produce homemade hand sanitizer following WHO guidelines, and to date they have produced and dispensed over 10,000 bottles of hand sanitizer to communities in need and disinfected neighborhoods and public spaces in Douala. The initiative is now supported by the Cameroonian Ministry of Youth Affairs and the Ministry of Health. Collaboration with government institutions often facilitates the work of volunteers and bolsters their impact through the use of state resources.

Given the lack of social safety nets in most countries on the continent, young people have included support services and foodstuffs as part of their interventions. In Kenya, young leaders Wevyn Muganda and Suhayl Omar cofounded Mutual Aid Kenya, a grassroots disaster relief organization that collects mobile money donations from Kenyans to buy and distribute food packages to poor households in Nairobi and Mombasa. Additionally, in Côte d'Ivoire, Mahmood Ouedraogo, an activist for deaf youth, approached several businesses in Abidjan for food donations to support hearing-impaired people and their families.

In various countries across the continent, Scouts groups have launched community-level Covid-19 responses in active collaboration with the authorities, NGOs, and the private sector. In Ghana, Scouts of the Ashanti region teamed up with a local branch of international fast food restaurant chain KFC to provide hot meals and water to vulnerable families. In Kilifi, Kenya, Scout groups launched the "lend a helping hand" project and are distributing relief food packages to vulnerable communities. In Cape Verde, Scouts are teaming up with the Red Cross in the supply of relief items to families in need. In South Africa and Botswana, the Rover Scouts are running errands, grocery shopping, and delivering items for families unable to leave their homes. In the DRC, Scouts are providing street children with temporary shelters, food, and face masks. In Namibia, they are spreading messages of love and solidarity and encouraging people to stay home and stay safe.'[13]

'In China, youth groups spontaneously mobilised to provide emergency assistance. They responded to medical supplies and sanitary product shortages, helped increase access to online education, and much more. In some instances, youth groups were able to respond much faster or more effectively than larger organisational programmes.'[14]

'When COVID19 hit Rio de Janeiro, young people from different backgrounds became leaders by getting together in collaborative and self-organised spaces in their communities called "crisis cabinets." They helped to identify problems, create solutions, and mobilise donations and resources.

In Jacarézinho Favela, a community in Rio de Janeiro, more than 120,000 reais(about USD$24,000) were raised to buy food supplies for more than 2,000 families. In the favela Cidade de Deus, well known abroad as the *City of God*, a youth-led group organised more than 10,000 food basket donations. In Santa Cruz, young people supported more than 3,000 families with food and essential items.

These numbers suggest that youth organisations are outstripping the support and impact provided by local governments.   Young people made the decision to take action when they realised that the government was either incapable or lacking the political will to help their communities. As young black people, they understand deeply how their lives are vulnerable in this country.'[15]

---

[13] Covid-19 in Africa: How Youth are Stepping Up
[14] Informal networks key to youth-led COVID-19 response in China
[15] There can be no new realities in Rio's favelas without youth organisations centre stage.

Faith organizations

'There is a vast range of responses and forms of organization under the umbrella term 'faith organizations'. They include registered NGOs, interfaith alliances, mosque- or church-linked groups, specific parishes and temples. They include both hierarchical and non-hierarchical structures. Fund-raising forms a big part of their work, along with women's groups and youth groups.

Some important changes are emerging *within* existing faith institutions, as new groups of people get organized, or acquire a louder voice. Such emergent agency may be less obvious than new organizations and initiatives, but may be equally/more important in the long run in shaping the post-Covid political/institutional landscape.'[16]

Examples[17]:

Religious for Peace had a Multi-religious Humanitarian Fund for COVID-19 that helped inter-religious councils around the world launch new campaigns and projects (e.g. in Peru, Brazil, and Myanmar).

Small level examples of spontaneous mobilisation of faith groups to provide immediate relief in Mumbai, and Bangalore, India; and Loreto region in Peru where "Reverend Miguel Fuertes, administrator of the vicariate, announced on social media a fundraising drive for an oxygen plant for the hospital. By the next day, the campaign had raised about $500,000, enough for two oxygen plants for Iquitos and one for the nearby city of Nauta, as well as oxygen tanks, medicine, and portable oxygen concentrators to be delivered to health centres in towns along the Marañón River and its tributaries, where the virus had already spread into remote villages." Other spontaneous action from the YMCA Birisiri Bangladesh, where the community is helping raising awareness on the risk of the pandemic and on prevention./

Trades unions

'In Brazil, FENATRAD launched a national campaign, with the same slogan as their sister organisations in Latin America affiliated to the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), called "Care for those who care for you" (in Portuguese: "cuida de quem te cuida").

POLITICAL DEMANDS: They require (1) employers provide adequate level of protection (2) demanding the right to a paid quarantine for the professional category. Congresswoman, Benedita Silva, from the Workers' Party, proposed a bill relaying domestic workers' demands.

ON THE GROUND HELP: (1) published guidelines for domestic workers, offering advice on how to protect themselves and suggesting ways of negotiating the best possible working conditions (2) informing and representing their members via phone and WhatsApp (3) helping domestic workers to claim their 3 months governmental benefit as many struggle with the website, and they offer mediation with employers to those who have a contract that is being revised (4) union leaders have been asking for donations and distributing food baskets to those who lost their job. Closing bit also reports similar action all over Latin America.'[18]

---

[16] Katherine Marshall and Olivia Wilkinson, interview, October 2020
[17] Examples from Katherine Marshall and Olivia Wilkinson.
[18] Domestic workers' struggles in times of pandemic crisis

'In Indonesia, Unions and environmental NGOs had begun mobilising [against new labour legislation] before the COVID-19 hit, but social distancing regulations eliminated space for lawful protest. The unions had cancelled a planned demonstration on 23 March because of the pandemic. But eleven days later, when the legislature made the decision to go ahead with its deliberations, they threatened to mount a large-scale but socially distanced demonstration to stop the legislature in its tracks.

The leaders of all three main confederations subsequently announced that a joint protest involving hundreds of thousands of workers would be staged on 30 April. Perhaps concerned about the social contagion effect – instructions had been issued directing police to take action against anyone who criticised officials for the way that they were handling the pandemic – [President] Jokowi responded with alacrity, summoning the confederations' leaders to the Presidential Palace on 22 April to hammer out a compromise.

Two days later, Jokowi announced that he had done a deal with the legislature to postpone discussion of the section of the draft law dealing with industrial relations. The postponement, he said, would provide an opportunity for stakeholder input. In response, the confederations called off the 30 April demonstration. They also instructed their affiliates to mark May Day not by descending on the streets, as they habitually did, but by donating medical equipment to hospitals and clinics and masks to retrenched workers and to members of the community.'[19]

Social enterprises; and food systems
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'Farmer Producer Companies in India are buying produce from local farmers to retail locally, given that the centralised wholesale markets are closed.

Innovative grassroots business models such as RUDI, a rural distribution multi-trading company owned and managed by rural women, procures grains and spices from over 45,000 farmers through its local centres. Local women are employed to process and package the products. These products are then delivered within the local and neighbouring communities through RUDI Bens, a network of last-mile saleswomen who make home deliveries. They can do all this while observing the social distancing norms and use mobile-based apps for accepting orders and inventory management.'[20]

'In South Africa, the DG Murray Trust partnered with communities, retailers and a cheque company to issue food vouchers that could be cashed through the informal trading network, rather than supermarkets like Shoprite. This stimulated another layer of the informal economy. NGO intermediaries provided verification of beneficiaries and organizers went out and verified household needs. Vouchers were distributed and redeemed by cellphone.'[21]

'Living conditions of those stranded in the refugee centers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have dramatically worsened. No Name Kitchen (NNK) has responded to reduced access for its feeding programmes by switching to 'solidarity markets': online vouchers that migrants can exchange in edible goods at local shops and bakeries, with which NNK has previously been in contact.'[22]

---

[19] Fighting the good fight: Labour activism during COVID-19 in Indonesia
[20] Voices from the Ground: Stories of Community Resilience & Entrepreneurship in the Pandemic
[21] Oxfam colleague in South Africa, conversation, October 2020 – check if can be attributed.
[22] Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route: new challenges and a change of strategy in times of COVID-19

Neighbourhood associations/mutual aid
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'In the UK, mutual aid groups have created a hyperlocal infrastructure of care that includes diverse digital platforms and applications, as well as physical media such as leaflets and posters. Members of these groups have also developed common organising practices and social norms. The interpersonal relationships fostered between neighbours who need and receive help can go across generational, racial, gender and political divides, depending of course on the diversity of each locality.

The functions of these groups are evolving as the UK moves to a different phase of the coronavirus pandemic. In our Shacklewell group, possibly also because of the launch of the NHS scheme, the number of requests for help has fallen in the past few weeks. So the group has branched out to other activities, such as supporting our local foodbanks. A key question here is whether, with time, the groups will shift from tending to the immediate needs raised by self-isolation to the more enduring projects of community resilience around COVID-19.

As the coronavirus crisis is becoming politicised, these groups may also get more involved in political campaigns that address the broader impact of the pandemic. The economic fallout of this crisis is expected to generate a wide range of campaigns on unemployment, homelessness or housing. It also highlights class, gender and race inequalities, as COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting minority ethnic groups and those living in deprived areas.'[23]

'In Mexico, in the face of the government's inactivity, small feminist collectives have come together through social media to create support networks for victims of domestic violence. They keep close contact with victims, often calling them on a daily basis. For example, Las del aquelarre feminista, a Mexico City-based feminist collective have opened their own emotional support phone line for victims of domestic violence. Professional therapists have volunteered to be part of this network pro bono. Many feminist collectives have put forward "secret codes" that can be used by victims of domestic violence if they are unable to contact 911 directly.

In Toluca, as far back as the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, the feminist collective Mujeres Trans Famosas began providing meals to trans sex workers whose income and livelihoods were affected by measures such as the closure of hotels. The collective has now expanded its reach and, during the COVID-19 outbreak, supplies over 70 meals a day to those citizens who are often forgotten but most affected by the pandemic: sex workers, illegal or informal workers, homeless people, drug addicts.

Another popular activity was suggested by the feminist collective Brujas Feministas - barter-trading, or as they call it "feminist trading", via social media platforms. Through the platform, women can exchange services and products they wish to supply. For instance, therapists can swap consultations for clothes, food or crafts. The focus of this trade is on building community and sorority, helping those most vulnerable in the face of the pandemic, as opposed to making profit. The collective is based in Mexico City but the operation is taking place country-wide.'[24]

REPERTOIRES - EXAMPLES

Online activism
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

---

[23] Creating a hyperlocal infrastructure of care: COVID-19 Mutual Aid Groups
[24] Feminist solidarity networks have multiplied since the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico

'In Mexico, women's collectives and civil societies have adapted their fight to the virtual world. Online workshops, reading groups, and seminars are hosted weekly by different organisations to continue the ongoing discussions around violence, sexual harassment, job conditions, gender stereotypes, reproductive rights, and many other issues that affect women in their everyday lives. Feminist collectives, such as the hacktivist group Luchadoras, coordinate discussions and debates on how the measures implemented to control the pandemic simultaneously reflect and aggravate socio-economic, political, geographic and gender inequalities.

Notwithstanding social distancing, emotional bonds are re-created by sharing life stories, testimonies of violence, emotions, and feelings about the quarantine, building community in the shape of new collective digital memory. The collectives also use the net as an organisational tool, using social media platforms during the pandemic to help provide basic rights to vulnerable women by tackling two main aspects of the social crisis: domestic violence and economic insecurity.'[25]

'In Wuhan, China, the lockdowns triggered and exacerbated domestic violence against women. To address the issue, some feminist activists in China connected with each other and formed support groups for women online. One such group was led by Guo Jing, a 29-year-old feminist activist and social worker based in Wuhan. They launched an activist campaign called 'Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine' to raise public awareness.

At the beginning, Guo and her feminist friends felt vulnerable and helpless, as the situation in Wuhan went out of control and the infection rate and death toll rose dramatically. However, after a few days, they decided to set up a feminist activist WeChat (a Chinese-language social media) support group, talking through voice and video chat for a couple of hours every evening, encouraging and supporting each other along the way. In these chats, the group examined the lockdown from feminist perspectives, discussed ways of engaging with social issues, and explored possible strategies to 'help individuals overcome a sense of vulnerability', especially for young women like themselves.

To raise public awareness of the issue, Guo organised an online workshop and, in collaboration with the Rural Women Development Foundation Guangdong, launched an 'Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine' campaign. The group published an open letter online, calling for an end to domestic violence and encouraged people to copy or print out the letter and post it in public spaces. The response was overwhelming: 'In just a few hours, several thousand people volunteered to become "little vaccines" [meaning volunteers].' Many people came up with creative ways for public advocacy.

Social movements addressing problems such as domestic violence in the pandemic are able to garner support from people and invite wide participation in society. Although the quarantine measures have made public gatherings and physical contacts between people difficult, the Internet and social media have facilitated social mobilisation and political activism in significant ways. The collective spirit and emotional intensity generated in a time of crisis can be mobilised for activist purposes, and their impacts are likely to be greater now than in ordinary times.'[26]

'As the most active group on social media, young people were often the first to receive new updates on COVID-19. They acted as amplifiers to share critical prevention measures with their communities. What's more, this closeness to social media was an important ear to the ground. It played a critical

[25] Feminist solidarity networks have multiplied since the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico
[26] 'Anti-domestic violence little vaccine': A Wuhan-based feminist activist campaign during COVID-19

role for young people to acquire knowledge quickly about unmet needs, organise through informal networks, and share critical information with each other about operational know-how.

After gathering news on Weibo, a twitter-like Chinese social media platform, about a young girl's attempted suicide in rural China due to a lack of access to online education, Chen Kaijun was prompted to act and co-founded Project Guangyuan, or "Light Aid." She, along with three other co-founders, solicited donated electronic devices and distributed them to schools in rural China to assist students with the sudden transition to online education.

The Project Guangyuan team launched their initiative on the social media platform Wechat. They simultaneously called for device donations, volunteers, and schools with need to make contact. Within a few days they had enlisted over 400 volunteers and had forged connections with a number of private and public organisations to drive donations and provide professional advice on operations.

Similarly, Liang Yu, was compelled to do something when she realised feminine hygiene products had failed to make it onto the official list of urgent essential items, therefore, female medical workers and patients alike had trouble accessing such items during city-wide lockdowns. She launched the #Standbyher campaign, which has gained local and international acclaim, from her personal weibo profile. Her initiative quickly went from a one woman call to a 91 person strong volunteer team delivering 320,000 pairs of safety pants and 301,023 pairs of disposable underwear to 123 hospitals and medical teams in less than a month.

Not only has Liang's campaign helped alleviate the plight of female health workers and patients, but it has also started a mass discussion around gender issues in China. Liang attributed a large part of her campaign success to the momentum and leverage it was able to gain via social media.'[27]

Coalition building
Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'With very few exceptions, civil society groups are not in the habit of working together on common agendas. In South Africa:

"There have been post-apartheid attempts at coalition building. None of them has really worked. Often they fall apart because there was not something specific to work on. What is most interesting about this coalition is that almost organically, out of the program of action, it is the organic emergence of working groups around particular issues. In those working groups, some people have worked together before, but a lot of people haven't. And a lot of people haven't been compelled by a progressive vision of how this is in service of poor and working-class communities. So there is something about the time of crisis and the possibility that the coalition has afforded to have people to sit down and actually work together regardless of their differences. The kinds of relationship that have emerged out of that have been very important." (interview with Kelly Gillespie.)'[28]

'Eight NGOs and CSOs from across different areas in Fiji have come together to form the Fiji CSO Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response.'[29]

---

[27] Informal networks key to youth-led COVID-19 response in China
[28] Pandemic Solidarity, pages 110-113
[29] Fiji CSO Alliance For COVID-19 Humanitarian Response

Symbolic Events and 'happenings'

Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'In Palestine, in April 2020, feminists organised balcony protests against the surge of gender-based violence during the pandemic. Videos show Palestinians banging on pots and pans and hanging signs on their balconies to show solidarity with victims of violence.

Climate activists in the Netherlands collected shoes from all over the country and filled the square of the House of Representatives in the Hague with a thousand shoes as a symbolic form of protest against the climate crisis. In Singapore, young climate activists from the Fridays for Future global school strike movement held solo protests in April 2020 due to the country's restrictive laws on peaceful assembly.

In June 2020, human rights groups organised peaceful interventions to denounce the scale of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil. In Brasilia, protesters put up 1,000 crosses paying tribute to COVID-19 victims on the lawn in front of key government buildings, calling out President Jair Bolsonaro for his denials of the pandemic's gravity.'[30]

Unruly and violent protest

Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'The centralization and militarization of pandemic responses has led to violence and human rights violations. Abuses have prompted backlashes. In DRC, opportunistic police have sometimes found themselves violently expelled by largely spontaneous citizen action. The violent imposition of lockdown rules by Uganda's 'Local Defence Units', as well as the serious impact on economic survival, have also triggered widespread criticism and resistance in North-West Uganda. Other points of contention in both countries include the location of quarantine centres which quickly became sites of rumour and grievance.'[31]

'In Jos, Nigeria, crowds have stormed government warehouses where food and other Covid supplies were held and not distributed. See this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE95eYz7OfU.'[32]

Awareness raising

Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

'In Côte d'Ivoire, Ibrahima Diabaté and the Youth Peace and Security Network recorded a series of awareness-raising videos in different local languages to propagate information about the new coronavirus. All of these videos went viral on social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The use of local languages and the cultural translation of the messages in ways that make sense to the communities they target have enhanced their accessibility.'[33]

Documentation of need as an advocacy tool with state providers

Click here to return to Section 2 – Themes and Repertoires

---

[30] Civic Freedoms and The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Snapshot of Restrictions and Attacks
[31] Observing COVID-19 in Africa through a Public Authorities Lens
[32] John Gaventa, email, October 2020
[33] Covid-19 in Africa: How Youth are Stepping Up

'A coalition of 30 NGOs called Rapid Rural Community Response to Covid-19 (RCRC) is helping address this issue at scale in India. This coalition is using its outreach to over six million families across 12 states and a network of over 10,000 women self-help groups to identify and collect data about the most vulnerable, like the migrant labours, and work alongside local governments and others to provide immediate shelter, food and medical help.' [34]

'The Delhi Relief Collective – a loose association of NGOs and individual volunteers – used WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media platforms to collate and communicate information about relief work, and continuously worked to build a database of target beneficiaries on the one hand, and policy responses, changes in government rules around lockdown, and the broader on-ground context of the growing food (and migrant) crisis. They used this knowledge to build a rights-based discourse around the fallouts of the lockdown for informal and migrant worker, focus media and political attention on the situation, and advocate for targeted governance and emergency welfare measures.' [35]

WINS

'In Kenya activists and CSOs successfully challenged the use of excessive police force during the pandemic, resulting in at least a dozen officers being indicted. In March 2020, following a public uproar, human rights activists took to the streets to protest against the use of excessive force by the police, which increased significantly during the COVID-19 curfew. Investigations by the Internal Affairs Unit revealed that more than a dozen people had been killed by police while enforcing the curfew.

In Bolivia, the interim government issued a decree sanctioning those who 'disinform or cause uncertainty' to the population during the pandemic. The legislation was widely criticised by CSOs and media freedom advocates who stated that it could be used to silence those who are critical of the government's COVID-19 policies. The law was also expanded to include an additional decree on criminal sanctions. However, in a positive move, following criticisms by domestic and international CSOs, interim president Jenine Áñez revoked the two decrees.

In another win for media freedom, in Honduras, a decree instituting a state of emergency during the pandemic restricted the right to the freedom of expression without censorship, as guaranteed by the Honduran Constitution. Media associations urged the government to revoke this restriction, with 21 CSOs condemning the decree as a disproportionate measure. Following this pressure, the government re-established constitutional guarantees relating to the freedom of expression.' [36]

---

[34] Voices from the Ground: Stories of Community Resilience & Entrepreneurship in the Pandemic
[35] From communal violence to lockdown hunger – Emergency responses by civil society networks in Delhi
[36] Civic Freedoms and The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Snapshot of Restrictions and Attacks