Society & Solidarity

Covid-19 (South Africa) – Cape Town Together: organizing in a city of islands

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An emerging movement of self-organized, decentralized community action networks responds to the local realities of COVID-19 in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Cape Town is a city of stark inequality, with a dark and thorny history of colonial- and apartheid-era oppression, bleeding into rampant post-apartheid neoliberalism. As South Africa's poster child for global cosmopolitanism, tourism and natural beauty, the photogenic city has sharply honed its strategy for sweeping ugliness under the carpet and outwards to its peripheries. Unchanged apartheid-era spatial planning has reinforced the development of Cape Town as a city of islands [1], cutting some parts of the city off from others and intensifying social, cultural and economic divisions.

This has long undermined city-wide collective organizing and solidarity. While there are strong pockets of community organizers and social justice movements with long histories of working tirelessly against inequality in the city, they tend to be forced into silos, their activities screened off from those privileged enough to live closer to Table Mountain and its leafy suburbs.

In 2018, when Cape Town residents were hit with the worst water crisis ever experienced [2], the response was defined by fragmentation, shaming and the continued exclusion of informal settlement and backyard dwellers. Some have pointed out how emblematic this is of a city scarred by its own social, political and spatial history. Two years after the water crisis ostensibly ended, the city's most water-insecure residents — who had already been struggling for access to water and other basic services for decades before the city was plunged into drought — continue to live without easy access to clean water. The bottom line: city-wide organizing and solidarity are not well-established phenomena in Cape Town.

It is against this backdrop that COVID-19 entered the stage, bringing with it the upending chaos that it has wrought across the globe. A national state of disaster was declared, and a nationwide lockdown was set for March 26, 2020. This became one of the most severe lockdowns in the world. Schools, borders, public transport, bars and restaurants were shuttered; alcohol, cigarettes and other "non-essential" commodities and services banned. The already heavy-handed police and military were given a lethal boost in their powers to patrol and enforce, and, as with most things in South Africa, the implementation of all of this was marked by the starkly contrasting realities of the

haves and the have-nots.

Within days it became clear that complying with the lockdown would be impossible for the millions of South Africans living in densely crowded settings, often sharing a one-bedroomed dwelling with multiple families. Equally clear is the absurdity of asking people to wash their hands with soap and water when 7.5 million people across the country share communal taps with sometimes hundreds of neighbors. School feeding schemes were closed down along with the schools [3], leaving many children without their “one meal a day”; and women, children and vulnerable people were forced into lockdown with their abusers in a country with one of the highest rates of domestic and gender-based violence in the world.

And, although a moratorium on evictions was announced for the duration of the lockdown, the infamous “anti-land invasion units” of many metropolitan governments continued their campaigns well into lockdown. In Cape Town this resulted in the violent and inhumane demolition of people’s homes in Empolweni, Khayelitsha, the night before the first winter storm of the season. As law enforcement drove away from the area that night, they were overheard telling people who had just lost their homes to “go inside” because they were breaking lockdown regulations.

With all of this rapidly unfolding, the state’s disaster management machinery slowly lumbered into something that could be called action. A R4 billion/US $174 million highly centralized Solidarity Fund was set up to fund this, kickstarted by donations from some of the country’s leading capitalists — the Oppenheimer family (mining), Naspers Limited (e-commerce and digital media, and a major shareholder in Tencent) and Patrice Motsepe (mining, and also the president’s brother-in-law).

There is a lot of red tape and many bureaucratic processes that limit access to this money. When it comes to feeding the hungry, these initiatives have barely scratched the surface. Apart from the public sector health response — which has included a commendable scale up in screening, testing and contact tracing, as well as the appropriation of some private sector resources such as beds and ventilators, the state response has followed its usual command and control approach with little to show for it.

COVID-19 has exposed the gaping holes in South Africa’s social safety net, brought on by the rise of hegemonic neoliberalism over the last 25-30 years. Up until recently, the inequality has bubbled away below the facade of the “rainbow nation,” which has tried to placate and pacify the anger of millions of South Africans who have no access to even the most basic needs such as food, healthcare, education, infrastructure and land.

But if pivotal moments such as the Marikana Massacre and Fees Must Fall laid important groundwork for dismantling the myth of the rainbow nation across significant segments of public opinion, they have struggled to dent the grip of neoliberalism, which continues to define the underlying approach towards many social support sectors — including health care. South Africa’s for-profit healthcare sector is one of the largest in the world, comparable only to the US.

When social solidarity spreads faster than COVID-19

Back in Cape Town — the city of islands — an unprecedented city-wide response to COVID-19, based on principles of self-organizing, mutual aid and social solidarity, has been stirring. In early March 2020, just as South Africa was waking up to the spectacle of COVID-19 within its borders, a group of community organizers, activists, public health folk and artists came together and kick-started a community-led response to the pandemic. This became known as Cape Town Together, a growing network of neighborhood-level Community Action Networks (CANs) spread across the city.

The idea is simple, and one that has caught on globally since the start of the pandemic. Neighborhoods organize themselves into localized community action groups, usually starting with a few people on a WhatsApp or Telegram group and growing from there in order to support the specific needs of neighbors and community members through the pandemic.

The CANs act locally, while also sharing collective wisdom and various resources through the broader network of Cape Town Together. They work collaboratively, recognizing that everyone brings something to the table. Some are weavers and builders, others are storytellers, caregivers or healers. Some are disruptors or warriors whilst others are experimenters and guides.

A practice of solidarity, radical generosity and collective care is cultivated. Organizing nodes arise and fall away as they are needed. A healthy amount of "slack in the system" is maintained, in order to stay agile and responsive, and reject unnecessary bureaucracy that might stifle initiative or action. There are currently over 170 CANs in the city. Not every neighborhood has a CAN and not all the CANs are working well — but the reach is substantial, and the spread has been catalytic.

An open reflection on the work of the CANs

Cape Town Together sits alongside a number of other groups doing community-based work in response to the pandemic. This includes long-standing street committees in some neighborhoods, as well as many community-based organizations, NGOs and social justice movements advocating in a multitude of ways for a just and equitable response to COVID-19. But it is the hyper-local, decentralized and anti-hierarchical nature of the Cape Town Together network — and the fact that it is an adaptive network, and not a structured and bureaucratized organization — that enables the kinds of dynamic, bottom-up ways of working that have emerged.

For the most part it is needs like access to food, water and safe ways to self-isolate that have driven the activities of the CANs and shaped what the network looks like. Organizing with the resources that are immediately available, many of the CANs are the only source of relief for residents to turn to in their areas, while state resources lie out of reach, tangled up in bureaucracy or swallowed by the hazy web of inefficiency-cum-corruption that many South Africans have come to accept as inevitable.

Various community kitchen models have been experimented with — in some CANs people have opened up their home kitchens and started cooking for their neighbors. In others, local restaurants closed under the lockdown have reopened as free community kitchens. Not long ago, a food growers' CAN emerged from within the network, to connect small scale farmers, community gardeners and backyard food growers, to share knowledge and seeds and to contribute to a vision of food sovereignty in the city.

There is no centralized funding, but some CAN-specific fundraising is done within the network, allowing financial and other resources to be redistributed where they are needed to support these initiatives. In sticking with the network's ways of working, these relationships are built on the premise of solidarity — not charity — and ask people to engage with different forms of privilege, power dynamics and the politics of donor models and practices.

Through these activities, the meeting of basic needs is not emptied of social, cultural and political meaning, as is so often the case in standard humanitarian aid responses. When you know that it is your neighbors who have empty cupboards, it is a political act to start cooking. As we cook, food becomes a vehicle for the sharing of social and cultural practices, as well as politicizing the hunger in the first place — generating learning, consciousness and human connection.

Street-level organizing was a key element of the anti-apartheid movement. So, in South Africa, bottom-up, community-based social support is not a new idea. The memory of this kind of social organizing still exists in the hearts and minds of older generation South Africans. Many have remarked how much this feels like the old days, before community-level action was co-opted by political parties or became overly bureaucratized and "NGO-ized."

Now, in the context of a sold-out country, a failing social support structure, and wide-spread disenchantment with the rainbow-nation fairytale, a community-based response to COVID-19 is an idea whose time has come. Young or old, politically active or not — it is well within the realm of imagination for most of the general public. For many, the attraction of the CAN may lie more in its appeal to direct action, questioning of the status quo and human connection in an unprecedented crisis situation, than in its potential as a space for articulating radical leftist politics in the traditional ways.

But even if Cape Town Together does not have the same aesthetic and organizational markers as a large part of leftist movements in the country, it has generated important learning for the articulation of radical practices.

Moving at the speed of trust

The first is the power of relationships. In particular the hyper-local, interpersonal, mutual relationships that have emerged both within and across the CANs. A rejection of any bureaucracy that leads to concentration of power, hierarchy and ossification has allowed for an astonishing dynamism in the network — also articulated as "moving at the speed of trust." This means moving quickly when things feel right and slowing down, sitting with the complexity and asking "why," when they do not.

Of course, moving at the speed of trust is only possible because the network is built on interpersonal relationships. People get to know each other through organizing together, the network *is* its relationships (even if in some cases people have only ever met on Zoom calls and WhatsApp groups). Through the CANs, various actors within a neighborhood are brought together into a new configuration — one with the potential to stretch the boundaries of solidarity within that space.

While street committees and other neighborhood-level structures pre-existed COVID-19 and the CANs, in many cases these have been brought into relationship with one another and with new resident volunteers, creating space for a network of solidarity that is both wider, but possibly deeper as well. Many in the network have reflected that what makes these collaborations work, is that people from existing structures join the CAN not as a representative of an organization, but as a resident of that neighborhood.

CANs share experiences, reflections and advice regarding common challenges in virtual co-learning sessions, and a number of issue-specific CANs have emerged to tackle cross-network concerns such as homelessness and food security. Connection also happens through various decentralized clusters that emerge more spontaneously — so that the network does not just come together through centralized nodes of convergence, but also autonomously and dynamically as needed.

Another key tenet of the network is the rejection of party politics, coupled with a recognition that all of this work is inherently political. As one CAN member stated, "every loaf of bread is political." The CANs speak out loudly against injustices perpetrated by the state and political parties, but also work with local officials when there is mutual trust, and when they decide that doing so is the best way to resolve an issue. In many cases, relationships in the network span boundaries between communities

and institutional spaces, including government.

There are CAN members who are also public sector doctors, or paramedics, or government officials or their spouses. When CAN members were arrested for trying to prevent an illegal eviction, they were assisted by public servants who recognized this injustice, and through long standing relationships could negotiate release with a fine. Trusted relationships with local law enforcement officials have enabled some CANs to continue food distribution efforts under lockdown and other CANs have asked for, and received, protection from local police when delivering food parcels in unsafe parts of their neighborhood.

In part, this is possible because of the decentralized structure of the network. Cape Town Together is built on the premise that hyper local strategies, community-level intelligence and autonomous forms of decision-making are fundamental for an effective response to COVID-19. This means that if CANs want to collaborate with their local police station to deliver food parcels safely or register as a voluntary organization or NPO in order to access permits for moving around, they are entitled to do so. These are autonomous decisions and strategies chosen by CANs in response to their localized realities and no one in the network can tell them otherwise — nor should they.

But decentralization is a neutral tool for organizing, rather than an intrinsically good thing. Coupled with the shifting power of collective and informal networks such as the CANs, it can raise complex tensions and contradictions that are difficult to navigate. While CANs are able to act upon their own intelligence and initiative without asking permission, this also means that some CANs make decisions that feel out-of-step with the foundational principles of the network. For example, a number of CANs have instituted bureaucratic accountability structures for dealing with cash donations. While this may be counter to the principle of trust-based organizing, it also might be an entirely appropriate and necessary response to local complexities.

Lastly, across the network there is an embrace of humility, inclusivity and doubt. Part of working at the speed of trust means pausing to reflect when someone raises a feeling of discomfort. Because the social, economic and political challenges of this work are so complex, it is not always clear how best to take action.

In such cases, the first steps are recognizing what is unknown, opening up to differing perspectives and taking time to find connection or coherence. This requires moving with humility, valuing all contributions and rejecting inequalities of power and their infringement on decision-making processes. This work demands post-heroic leadership, or — in the words of adrienne maree brown — working from a place of “care and love rather than burnout and competition.”

It is not surprising nor insignificant then, that this network is led largely by women, who have stepped forwards to get their hands dirty in the spaces opened up by flattened hierarchies and post-heroic leadership. This opening up of politics is fundamental — as it is through a politics of doing, sharing and storytelling, that we start to plant the seeds of possibility, and together, find ways to build back better.

There have been many challenges. Two months into its existence, the network has grappled with the complexity of holding multiple spaces that stay true to its decentralized, radically open and non-hierarchical character, but also converge around certain fundamental collective politics of organizing.

There is constant work needed to call people in, articulate and deepen political stances and confront the tendency to default towards centralization, power hierarchies and top-down control even within the CANs. The lack of imagination and the deep sense of mistrust that is perpetuated through the

media and through the maneuverings of established political parties is another serious challenge. As more people learn to organize themselves as non-partisan community members first, political parties and those with a vested interest in the status quo are taking note and, in some cases, moving to quell the magic.

In the months to come, and especially as the immediate crisis of COVID-19 begins to settle, the CANs will have to respond to the shift towards building back in a post-COVID-19 world. Many have asked "how will this be sustainable" or have suggested that the only way to continue is to "formalize as an organization." Others have said that people will get "donor fatigue" and will stop contributing. But the truth is, that these cautions lack the imagination of what is possible.

If we are to build a new world, we need to start on our own streets and in our own neighborhoods. The CANs have galvanized a significant number of people from across the city around a shared experience. Many are seeing the inequality exposed by COVID-19 in a new light and will remain galvanized beyond the immediate crisis.

We need to use this as an opportunity to connect up the city of islands, re-shape and radicalize our public service and secure a more just and equitable future. Nobody has all the answers or can do this work alone but sharing and learning new forms of collective action can move us in the right direction, always "asking while walking."

This piece was contributed to and written by Manya van Ryneveld (Kenilworth CAN), Eleanor Whyle, Leanne Brady (Salt River CAN), Kentse Radebe (Durbanville CAN), Axolile Notywala (Khayelitsha CAN), Ricochet Van Rensburg (Ocean View CAN), Nadia Mayman de Gras (Bonteheuwel CAN) and Shaheem De Vries.

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P.S.

• ROAR. June 5, 2020:
https://roarmag.org/essays/cape-town-together-organizing-in-a-city-of-islands/

• The Writers' CAN is an open and fluid space for collective writing and sensemaking on the work of Cape Town Together.

Footnotes

[1] https://blackmanrossouw.co.za/fragments-of-activism/

[2] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-30-covid-19-and-the-virulence-of-global-capitalism-the-poor-are-on-the-frontline/

[3] https://www.newframe.com/hunger-could-be-as-big-a-threat-as-covid-19/