

# Building a regional solidarity network of transnational activists

## An African case study

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### Introduction

Constructing a labour internationalism does not involve a choice between going global or remaining local; it requires that unions navigate between the local and the global. This combination of the local and the global has led to the emergence of what Sydney Tarrow calls “rooted cosmopolitans” (Tarrow, 2005, p. 42). Rooted cosmopolitans, Tarrow suggests, are activists who think globally, but are linked to very real places. In his words: “They move physically and cognitively outside their origins, but they continue to be linked to place, to the social networks that inhabit that space, and to the resources, experiences, and opportunities that place provides them with” (*Idem*, p. 42).

Through the work of the Global Labour University (GLU) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa, with trade unionists throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, a cross-border network of labour activist alumni has been formed aimed at developing regional and continent-wide platforms for common engagements and action. Similar to the concept of “Networks of Labour Activism” (or Nolas) developed by Zajak, Egels-Zanden and Piper (2017) in their study of such network formations in Asia, the GLU-based initiative brings together unionists,

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## THE SIX REGIONS OF THE AFRICAN UNION

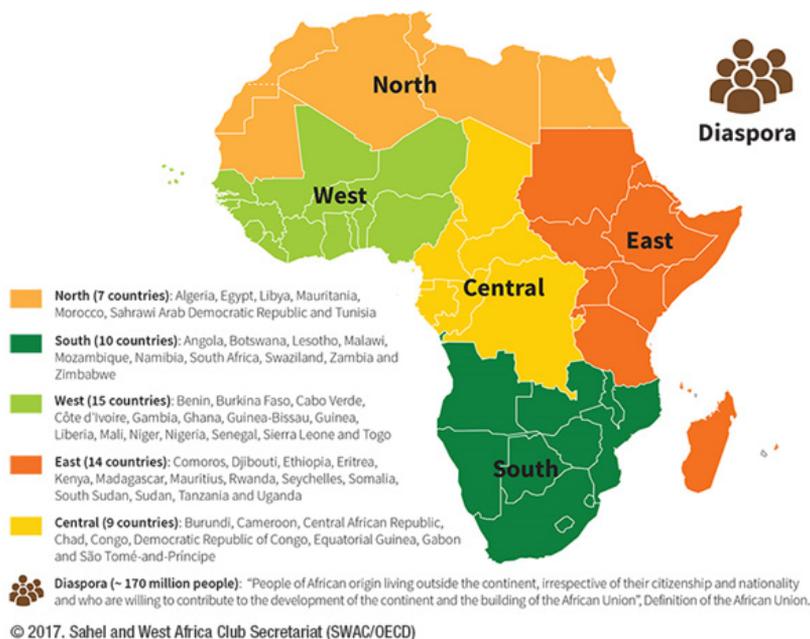


Figure 1: Map of the regions of Africa available at: <http://www.west-africa-brief.org/content/en/six-regions-african-union>

labour activists, their worker organisations and other labour-support organisations into a network of solidarity.

The network operates within relatively shared local conditions of globalised, supply-chains as webs of labour agency, but which are not necessarily only linked to the production process and advocacy coalitions. It is founded on shared and embedded experiences of learning and knowledge transfer outside of existing struggles and campaigns, but which seek to use the regional networks to develop and/or bolster support for such campaigns. These struggles are not solely focussed on “workplace issues”, as the alumni and network are embedded in other forms of activism aimed at improving working class life, such as addressing deficits of local democracy, housing, gender and ecology-based campaigns. It seeks to rediscover labour’s “social movement origins” and dispel artificial divisions between working class labour organisations and community movements (Webster *et al.*, 2008; O’Brien, 2018).

This network is unlike global union federations, who, according to Ford, Gillan and Thein (2020), operate to pursue and resolve grievances in industrial relations and attempt to standardise these. The focus of GLU and, thus, the activist network which springs from it, is to ultimately assist in strengthening worker organisations and worker power on the continent. The outlook is global by locating

specific regional integration into global value chains and its impact on the world of work. Its aim is to then identify new local sources of worker power and link these recognitions into building local campaigns and cross-border activities via skills and knowledge transfer between GLU and programme alumni and amongst alumni across organisational and geographic frontiers.

The GLU programme acknowledges the complexities of labour activism in the “Global South” and Africa in particular. As O’Brien points out in his study of the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union rights (Sigtur), “[...] southern agency and positions are varied, complicated and often contradictory. Labour groups may simultaneously be supporting the sovereign rights of southern governments against northern states and corporations while engaging in strong opposition to the policies of those governments. For example, they may support the attempt of the Brics [the nation state bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] to challenge US and European dictated trade rules while at the same time they oppose the neoliberal policies of labour deregulation and capital liberalisation implemented by Brics states. The programs [sic] for reform of the global system from southern labour and southern governments can diverge a great deal” (2018, p. 19).

The work of GLU at Wits is supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung’s (FES) Trade Union Competence Centre for Sub-Saharan Africa (Tucc). Although not the full extent of the support, the financial resources made available by the FES are crucial to the continued running of many aspects of the GLU programme. The partnership is based on organisational independence, with GLU in sole control of its academic programme and the alumni of their network and activities.

This paper outlines the structure and work of the GLU alumni network “web” and offers it as an example of building a progressive labour internationalism. Using active alumni bases in particular African states, we argue that it provides a foundation for local and cross-border solidarity and action that links organisations within and between countries.

The paper is divided into four parts: in part one the paper describes the core GLU programme upon which the network is founded and grows, paying specific attention to the concept and challenges of the “representational gap”. In part two the basic structure of the alumni network web and some of the key activities undertaken recently by the non-core layers are outlined. In part three we elaborate on the Transfer Project, a key component of the Engage South Africa programme. In part four we highlight certain weaknesses of organisation on the continent, but also the opportunities created by these challenges.

We conclude by arguing that the recent Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns imposed by governments on economic and social activity and movement

have had a dramatic impact on workers, workplaces, trade unions and organising. We suggest that despite these and other already-existing challenges, including relative trade union weakness, little formalisation of work and workplaces and low union density, the pandemic period offers workers' organisations opportunities to deepen this regional solidarity network of transnational activists.

#### Part one: the Global Labour University (GLU) programme<sup>1</sup>

The Global Labour University (GLU) is a network of six universities that offers Masters (MA) degree and postgraduate academic training to trade unionists, labour activists and labour scholars around the world. Formed in 2006 by key labour academics and officials in the Workers' Bureau of the International Labour Organisation, GLU programmes are located at the University of Campinas in Brazil, Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, Penn State University in the USA, the University of Kassel and the Berlin School of Economics and Law in Germany, and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa.

The emphasis of the GLU programme at Wits is to offer courses that provide students and participants a global outlook on the issues facing labour, while studying local contexts and organising initiatives. It places the informal economy as not only central to economic life on the African continent, but also a neglected site of union organising. GLU analyses gender and democracy and places these as central to worker organisational development. It sees the need for broad socio-economic change, promotes worker-centred ideas for the development of various forms of worker power and for workers to use this power to put themselves and their organisations as key drivers of this change.

Alongside the MA degree programme, GLU at Wits also offers two short courses – a one-month course called Social Theory for South African Trade Unionists and the two-month Engage South Africa course. All courses are taught by senior University academics and experienced labour activists.

The Engage South Africa course was initiated in 2013 within this general GLU context. It was developed out of the need of potential students who could not afford to spend an entire year immersed in full time study, particularly those from outside South Africa. Over time it has developed into an intensive two-month short course located at Wits University, has graduated 118 participants, and is the only one of its kind offered throughout the GLU network of universities.

1. For more information about GLU South Africa, see: [www.wits.ac.za/glu](http://www.wits.ac.za/glu).

Annually Engage brings together activists from around the world – alumni work and live in various countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and North America. The course is comprised of five seminar-based, week-long modules and one two-week active research module. The modules are an interactive combination of lectures and group work interspersed with showings of relevant documentaries and movies.

The course focuses on a “social power” approach, with worker organisations as key actors embedded centrally within wider networks of working-class activism, as opposed to more conventional approaches that seek to develop unions as actors within frameworks and institutions of “social dialogue” with ruling class actors in the state and private sector. Engage seeks to interrogate the rebuilding of worker movements through education and organising by locating different sources of worker power as central to this process. Engage locates worker power as central to any progressive redevelopment of the global order and sees cross-border linkages, both inter-personally and inter-organisationally as key features of that process.

A central focus of Engage is the recognition of the “representational gap”. According to Webster and Bischoff “[t]he process of increasing informalization of the labour market is creating a gap between trade unions and a growing number of workers who have no forms of collective representation at their places of work (2011, p. 1). The course aims to explain the creation of this gap and provide participants with ideas and methods to close it. These methods, including research-capacity development, are located in identifying and building different forms of worker power. The modules posit that the re-mobilisation of the working classes around the world rests on the idea that workers are not only “passive victims of forces beyond their control, but emphasise instead the possibility of worker agency” (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2019, p. 84). This agency rests on utilising available and developing key worker power resources, viz. structural, associational, societal and institutional (Fichter *et al.*, 2018).

Participants in the Engage course are also provided with practical examples aimed at developing worker power through organising. They are tasked with investigating these initiatives that have been developed by worker organisations at local to global levels as examples of strategies that could be adapted and utilised in their contexts.

The course concludes with a two-week long group Power Mapping research project. Research groups identify and conduct a week-long mapping research survey on unorganised workers. The information is then analysed, and groups are tasked with creating action plans. These action plans recommend activities to get the group of workers organised and are based on the collected data. These plans also identify the available power resources and organisational capabilities that would need to be mobilised to implement the plan and its organising drives.

The participants are housed on Wits University campus, side-by-side. It is important to note these details as, over time, the short, intense nature of the individual's experience alongside their fellow participant has allowed for the development of strong bonds of comradeship, their kinship as labour activists, provided ample platform for cultural exchange – in particular, organisational cultural exchange – and laid the foundation for the development and continual reinforcement of the alumni network. Our experience has shown that the strong interpersonal links forged at Wits University through learning inside and outside of the classroom have played an important role in building and maintaining the network and the development of action and forms of solidarity.

Since 2013, GLU South Africa has run six Engage courses graduating 118 participants from different “South” countries.

#### Part two: the GLU Africa Alumni Network

We envisage the Alumni Network as an “onion”, or a “solidarity web” of activities that centre on GLU South Africa programmes and activities, but which are connected by the various levels of alumni network formation and activity at country, regional and continental levels. We argue that the nature and development of the network frame a new form of labour internationalism that is based on cross-border learning, strategizing and activity and which is held together by voluntarism, consistent interaction and the use of various modes of communication and information technology. It is yet in its infancy, having been launched in 2018, but is based on pre-existing informal networks of solidarity created by alumni of the various GLU programmes during and after their participation in those programmes (these programmes are detailed below). Members, or contributors to the network are African alumni of all GLU programmes in South Africa and elsewhere across the other participant-universities.

The network can be seen as a four-tiered web of concentric circles, each interacting with each other. All four levels interact with each other at various GLU events and across forums and interact with each other through various activities and modes of communication. These include the GLU conference and meetings (as stated), emails, online meeting apps, e.g. Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp. The phone messaging app is the most popular, cost-effective and efficient means of communication utilised throughout the non-core sections of the network. Certain layers of the web are more active than others – volunteerism (of alumni) and mandate (for GLU South Africa and as set for alumni by network meetings) are at the centre of the functioning of the network, and as such, are subject to the contexts, energies, and desire of those involved. Initiatives, including relevant meetings, sharing information about union

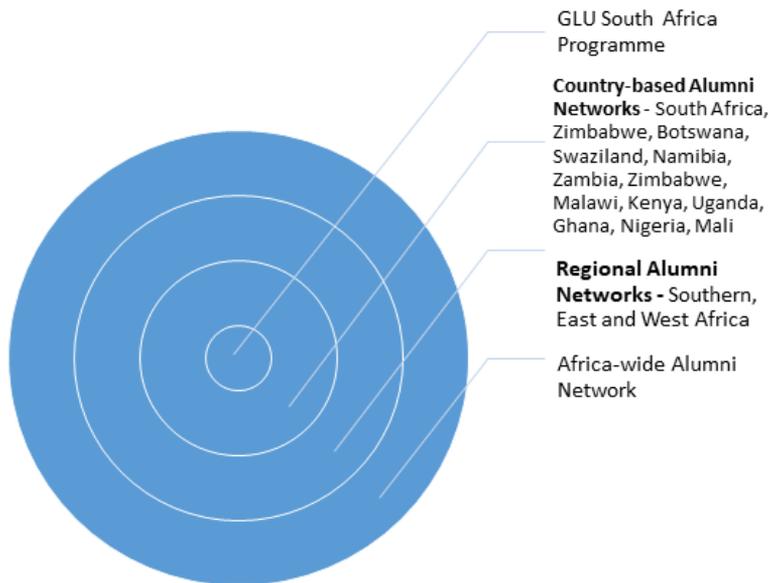


Figure 2: The GLU Africa Alumni Network (developed by authors).

and worker activity, advice and contact flow into and out of the different network circles, allowing for country and regional independence of action, but all founded on principles of collective decision-making and cross-border solidarity.

The layers are the GLU South Africa programme and Programme Coordinator (as its core), the country-based alumni network, the regional alumni network and the continental network (see diagram below). Each layer can function independently of the others, and as mandated by alumni at the annual Alumni Network Workshop (see below for more detail on GLU Conferences and Meetings). This is most appropriate at the core, as the GLU acts through its constituent academic and international committees outside of the direction of alumni, and country-based and regional network levels, as activities here are the responsibility of the constituent members of those committees. In addition, all layers are used and are responsible for sharing GLU-related information.

The activities that take place at the outer layers – at country, regional and continent level – are the responsibility of the alumni. The GLU network and its partners are available to assist where it is relevant and appropriate to do so.

### The core

At the core of the Alumni Network is GLU South Africa – its programmes, courses and events. It is at this layer that alumni meet physically (whether in-person or on-

line) and develop their relationships. It is also at this layer that GLU South Africa is able to initiate the alumni network by providing the platforms for these meetings.

At this layer GLU South Africa coordinates its three programmes, viz. the postgraduate Honours and MA degree programme, the Engage South Africa short course, the Engage Transfer Project and the Social Theory for South African Trade Unionists short course. Due to the nature of the Engage course and the Transfer project, and its higher numbers of graduates, most alumni active in the network were participants in these programmes.

The core is essentially responsible for providing the academic content for the Alumni Network and is used as a platform to bring as many alumni together as is possible to meet, network, learn and present their research work. It also disseminates information through the network about upcoming GLU activities, courses and programmes both in South Africa and elsewhere, including information about GLU Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs)<sup>2</sup>.

#### **The country-based Alumni Network**

As the name suggests, this layer brings together alumni from a particular country into network with each other. This layer is responsible for ensuring all alumni of that country are, firstly, aware of the existence of and invited to participate in the network, and, secondly, are able to participate in alumni activities. As such, country networks source local and other means of support from their unions and worker organisations and labour-supporting organisations, where appropriate to do so. The country network has often been the base for regional activities. As the diagram above shows, there are 13 active country networks across Africa.

#### **The regional Alumni Network**

The 2018 founding meeting of the Alumni Network established three regional networks that aim at coordinating cross-border activities between country networks, alumni and their organisations (SEE MAP OF Africa). It is this layer that provides fertile ground for this developing new labour internationalism as solidaristic action is based on already-existing relationships, GLU networks, shared learning and exchange and a commitment to cross-border action that seeks to go beyond rhetoric.

2. For more information on GLU MOOCs, go to: <https://www.global-labour-university.org/index.php?id=392>.

There are three regional alumni networks, and these link country networks of that region of the continent: Southern Africa, East Africa and West Africa. These networks act as information and resource-sharing platforms and have been used to coordinate regional network meetings, workshops, solidarity work and inter-personal and inter-organisational exchange. These layers also attempt to involve alumni from countries that have not been part of previous meetings into the network fold and also to link alumni who are the sole graduates from their particular country, e.g. Mali has one active GLU alumnus. He is involved through the West Africa network.

### **The Africa-wide Alumni Network**

This is a network that functions primarily to share GLU-related, network and worker organisational information to all alumni in the “web”. Although it does connect alumni via email, WhatsApp is the primary tool of communication. However, it has been used recently by a South African and Nigerian network user to coordinate a continent-wide zoom meeting to which all alumni were invited (see details below).

The vast geographical spread, severely limited resources and the more recent impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, continue to play an important role in translating the ideas alumni in the network have into concrete action. However, despite these challenges, participants show an ingenuity and ability to adapt to changing conditions and use the available opportunities at their disposal. Maintaining contact with each other within and across network layers is a success in itself. What follows is a brief account of activities undertaken and challenges faced by alumni utilising various layers of the network.

Kenya has the largest active country-based alumni network. It has an active WhatsApp group of 15 members, from the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers, the Kenya Union of Hotels and Allied Workers, the Kenyan Union of Post Primary Education Teachers, the Union of Kenya Civil Servants, its Banking Insurance and Finance Union and the Kenya National Union of Teachers. The group meets regularly online due to lack of resources and the impact of Covid-19 on internal movement. Kenyan alumni are usual participants in online courses, the coordinators of the East Africa network, ensuring the participation of Ugandan and Tanzanian alumni, and continue to advertise GLU programmes, playing a major role in ensuring many Kenyan applications to these programmes and courses. The GLU network and its alumni have contributed, too, to the thawing of relations between unions organising in the same sector which ensures that multiple unions are represented and work together in the Transfer projects (see below for information on these and other GLU programmes).

Alumni are regular participants on discussion forums hosted not only by regional counterparts, but, via the Africa-wide network, have participated in GLU alumni meetings held in other regions by those networks, contributing ideas and solidarity in those meetings and its coordination.

Zambian GLU alumni have developed and are at the forefront of establishing the nascent Labour Institute of Zambia. By linking Zambian graduates from the Brazilian and South African GLU programmes, alumni have sourced funding from an institution of the Danish government for its establishment. Alumni are very active in the regional and Africa-wide communication networks and were participants in the 2019 Regional Alumni Meeting held in Harare, Zimbabwe.

In Mali, the sole alumnus has been working with GLU alumni in Nigeria, not only to become active in the West Africa network, but to use that network to draft a research and solidarity action initiative which will look at the impact of Covid-19 on the mobility and transnational movement of West African workers and migrants. It is planned that the outcome of the initiative will be used by trade unions and community organisations to implement recommended cross-border action to assist those workers and migrants. Alumni were also involved in running a two-week long workshop for youth workers involving an academy of unions from the region. Many of these alumni also were part of creating a youth activist network, formed in Gaborone, Botswana. This activist network comprises representatives of African trade unions, as well as political and community-based activists.

Two alumni, one from Nigeria and South Africa respectively, in November 2020, recently collaborated and produced a continent-wide zoom online meeting. It was promoted as a GLU Africa Alumni event and was titled *Promoting Quality Public Service Delivery in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Issues, Opportunities and Way Forward*.

In Ghana, alumni have stated that the most important means of communication between alumni are various forms of social media. There is a commitment to continue interacting with and reaching out to alumni in neighbouring countries, despite their recent focus on local Ghanaian issues due to the impact of the pandemic. Alumni represent the Trade Union Congress, the Public Utility Workers Union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union and the Mineworkers Union. They continue to work together despite the tensions between their unions and the different trade union federations each are affiliated to.

Zimbabwean alumni have been very active across the layers of the network, especially prior to the pandemic. In September 2019, they organised a regional network meeting to which alumni of other regions and GLU academics were also invited and who attended. The Zimbabwe group faces very interesting challenges as most alumni no longer reside in Zimbabwe. The state of their local economy, Covid-19 pressures

and state repression on trade unions, has placed severe restrictions on recent local and regional activity. Despite these challenges, alumni have worked with the local Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) country office to source meeting space and technological support. As with many other African alumni, internet connectivity and thus the availability of data is a primary concern for modern day worker organisers. Yet, the Zimbabwean contingent continue to forge ahead, and have created a country-wide database of local alumni. Their template has been used in the development of similar databases for the regional and Africa networks and these have been used to support Zimbabwean alumni in the early stages of the development of their own labour research institute. It is not yet active and is facing challenges and lack of recognition by potential union partners and local labour centres. The GLU alumni network is using its meetings to try and assist the Zimbabweans on this matter.

The Alumni network and communication groups continue to grow year-on-year. Due to this growth, there has been a recent drive to more meetings which have proposed more regional activities and networking. Alumni have suggested that this has allowed for greater spread of available resources – personal capacity, financial and technological – to areas that are in need. The recent GLU Africa Alumni Network meeting held online in November 2020, having noted these ideas, also resolved to develop new country-based research projects. This idea was inspired by the recent involvement of alumni from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia, Turkey and Brazil in a research project investigating categories of “excluded labour” – country reports on those who work, but who are not categorised locally as “employed” and as “workers” and are thus outside of formal representation and organisation, recognition and coverage by local labour policy. Alumni, thus, resolved to conduct more network meetings and new research aimed at identifying challenges facing workers, impacted on, especially by the recent pandemic.

### Part three: the engage transfer project

As has been stated above, Engage South Africa has been designed to provide experienced trade unionists from around the world (and, in particular Africa) access to high level academic, theoretical and research training. The programme is aimed at providing participants with opportunities to tackle the impact of neoliberal globalisation on work. It focuses, inter alia, on the growing informalisation of work and the need to close the above-mentioned representation gap (Webster & Bischoff, 2011).

A crucial part of Engage is to ensure the transfer of the skills developed by the participants to their union in their country of origin. The skill introduced to “close the representation gap” is that of mapping, both vertical and horizontal, and, as

has been stated above, participants are tasked with identifying the available power resources to develop an organising strategy or action plan.

Once alumni have returned home from their participation in the course at Wits University, the Programme Coordinator at Wits initiates the Transfer project. Alumni from various Africa countries who have volunteered to participate, form research teams comprised of local officials from their organisation. The Programme Coordinator subsequently visits each country to conduct a two-day Transfer Workshop at which the groups are officially formed (with the support of the worker organisation/s represented in the group) and where he introduces the parameters of the project – the research subject (unorganised, vulnerable workers), timelines and nature of the presentation of the project's key findings. Over an established period of months, these groups conduct Power Mapping research projects, as alumni had done in South Africa, on the identified sample of unorganised vulnerable workers their organisations may have had an interest in organising. Representatives of the research groups later travel back to Wits University to present their projects and key findings at the annual Engage South Africa Transfer Conference (which takes place the following year). This conference is attended by the new cohort of Engage participants, members of the GLU South Africa Committee, GLU associate contributors and professors, officials of GLU South Africa partner organisations, invited academics and representatives of workers' and labour-service organisations.

Since 2014, Engage South Africa has coordinated 15 such projects over five years in 11 different African countries. These are: Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In 2021, Engage South Africa intends to conduct six more projects, one each in South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The locations and outcomes of the Transfer projects each year are dependent on the willingness of the alumni to participate and the support of their worker organisations. The Programme Coordinator also acts as a supervisor of the various projects throughout the project timeline, assisting the various teams at the various stages of their project – data collection, data analysis, developing the action plan and the creation of the presentation.

Some interesting findings have been made by Transfer groups. In a 2017 study by the Namibian group on unorganised retail workers of a major South African transnational supermarket chain, research detailed an action/organising plan that centred on a union campaign around transportation to and from work to mobilise local support. It also highlighted available, but poorly implemented legislation denied to workers due to little knowledge of it. It also sought the assistance of a South African retail union sympathetic to its cause as well as the UNI Global Union Retail Shopstewards' Network to mobilise cross-border advice and solidarity. The

project, through the Namibian Engage alumni, brought together three unions (rallying around their sister retail union), their federation and the local labour research organisation in joint collaboration at all stages of the project.

In Kenya, the 2019 study on Community Healthcare Volunteers (CHVs), saw the medical professionals' and general workers unions (KMPDU and KUDHEIHA respectively) join efforts. This group of workers were of interest and allowed for cooperation between the two unions involved in the project. The research was conducted in four counties in Kenya, viz. Baringo, Nandi, Uasin Gishu and Nairobi.

The project showcased a superb application of the research methodologies, a project in which 214 respondents were surveyed. Based on their findings the group identified that although CHVs had little associational power and institutional power, their close proximity to local communities and the necessity of the work they do gave them tremendous potential societal and structural power respectively.

#### **A note on Mapping**

Mapping, in this context, is used as a tool to facilitate the organisation of vulnerable workers. Our focus is the key arena of vulnerable work, and these workers are a large and growing pool of unorganised workers, and thus a new constituency for organised labour. Vulnerable workers are identified as precarious workers in formal waged work relationship and informal workers outside of standard employment contractual relations.

There are two ways of conducting mapping: horizontal (HM) and vertical (VM). HM refers to the method used to document and identify the characteristics of the worker, their location and industry sector, by contacting individuals in their homes or communities. HM focuses on gathering data on demographic characteristics of workers, their home situation, their work processes, their employment relationships, payment amounts and processes, problems and issues that they face. In contrast, vertical mapping (VM) refers to a process that identifies the chain of production linking home-workers, subcontractors, intermediaries, buyers and brand owners (Burchielli, Buttigieg & Delaney, 2008, p. 169).

Drawing on trade unionists from countries in the various regions of Africa, Engage research groups have developed the skills for a new type of union organiser, one who understands the global context, but is rooted in their local community. There are five ways in which this is being achieved.

Firstly, the participants are able to identify through, horizontal mapping, new constituencies of precarious workers, such as truck drivers in Malawi, domestic workers in Lesotho, private security guards in Swaziland, cleaners in Zambia and

hospitality, retail and street vendors in South Africa, to name but a few of the research subjects in recent years. Importantly, the research group participants are identifying what Jennifer Chun calls the “new political subjects of labour... women, immigrants, people of colour, low-paid service workers, precarious workers... Groups that have been historically excluded from the moral and material boundaries of union membership” (Chun, 2012, p. 40). Secondly, it forces union organisers to interact with vulnerable workers face-to-face and become aware directly of their work and living conditions. Thirdly, vertical mapping is especially useful in plotting supply chains and discovering the way globalisation functions in the various African regions. Fourthly, through responding to the survey questionnaire, those interviewed have begun to develop an identity as workers. Fifthly, it has helped workers to frame their grievances and sense of injustice in ways that enable them to organise collectively.

In engagements with alumni, particularly in alumni conferences and meetings, certain challenges have been noted. Internal democracy is a key challenge facing many African unions and certain key union leadership positions. Certain alumni returning home, imbued with greater knowledge and more radical and democratic ideals, have mentioned that they have been viewed as threats to power by some of these leaders. Acting in their own interest, these leaders have, at times, attempted to block the influence and progression of alumni in the organisations leading to certain instances of internal organisational conflict.

In order to deepen our understanding of the challenges facing transnational activists we examine in Part Four the distinctive nature of the African labour market.

#### Part Four: The Africa labour market and the challenge of Covid-19

In Africa the industrial working class is very much a minority of wage earners. The labour market is best understood as divided into “classes of labour” (Bernstein, 2007). In other words, there are men and women who need to sell their labour power in some kind of a market – either directly on a wage labour market or indirectly through some form of product market – in order to reproduce themselves and their families. Categories like worker, peasant, employed and self-employed are fluid. Working people alternate between “earning a living” through wage labour and “making a living” through a variety of livelihood strategies.

“In practise”, veteran Africanist Henry Bernstein suggests that:

[...] what you have in African cities is a large group who simultaneously and ambiguously combine employment and self-employment...In the shantytowns are large numbers of in-

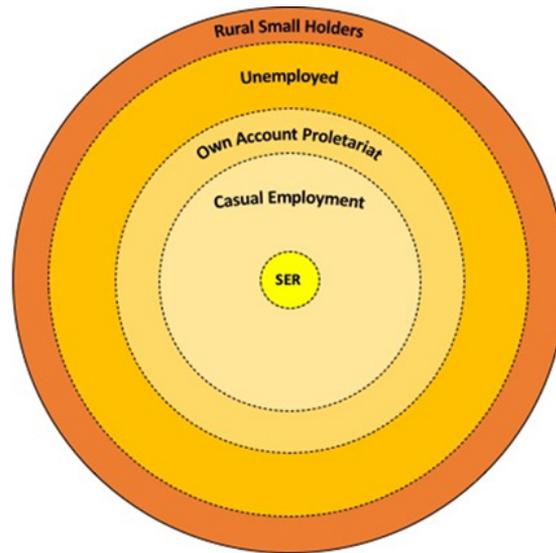


Figure 3: Fluid Classes of Labour (developed by authors).

dividuals who are sometimes unemployed and work intermittently in wage labour in small workshops or performing services. In short, there is no “homogeneous proletarian condition” within the “South”, other than that essential condition... the need to secure reproduction needs (survival) through the (direct and indirect) sale of labour power. (Bernstein, 2007, p. 5).

It is possible to identify five broad “classes of labour” in Africa, as illustrated in Figure 3.

- With the exception of South Africa, a minority of workers are in formal wage employment – the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) – usually in the public sector. These jobs involve a degree of security through an employment contract, a regular wage, social protection in the form of benefits, and some form of workplace representation. It is what the ILO has come to call decent work (Webster, Budlender & Orkin, 2015).
- There is a majority in the cities involved in casual paid wage work, either temporary or part-time, sometimes paid in kind, and often employed by a third party such as an employment agency or labour broker. This includes dependent contractors – usually people like Uber workers and other gig economy workers. This is not traditional wage employment but has some characteristics of wage employment because those in this category are dependent on the owners of, say, Uber. Wage labour, it has been persuasively argued, is the dominant employment status in the informal economy (Rizzo, Kilama & Wuyts, 2015).

- There are what are called “own account” or self-employed workers. These are usually workers involved in informal survival activities such as street traders, waste pickers or small enterprises making clothes or selling goods and services, often employing family members. These “self-employed proletarians” engage in complex sets of employment relationships. For example, the workers found at the points where the buses congregate in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, include many occupations – e.g. callers, supervisors, agents, loaders, sweepers, vendors, money-changers (often women, who have bags of small change which they sell for a fee to the conductor who needs change). There is also the “pigga setti” – a seat-warmer (the bus will not leave till it is full) and side-mirror menders.
- Then there are the unemployed with little or no unemployment benefits as there are no welfare states in Africa, not even South Africa with its extensive system of social grants. The unemployed survive through retreating into their households where they share economic resources or through various survivalist activities. (Mosoetsa, 2011). They create what can be called an informal security regime (Webster, Britwum & Bowmick, 2017).
- Finally, there are the peasants or smallholders based in agriculture, using mostly family labour and often dependent on remittances from household members who often spend their lives oscillating between town and countryside (Scully & Webster, 2019).

This ambiguity over class location raises difficult questions for union organisers. Who is a worker? Is a person who owns one minibus and drives it (as a taxi) themselves, a worker? If they own two minibuses and hire a person to drive the second one, what are they? If they own 200 minibuses, what are they? Is a street trader a worker or an entrepreneur? We turn now to the responses of working people to the ambiguous nature of work in Africa.

The GLU, its programmes and alumni networks operate in a context of relatively weak trade unions and workers’ movements. Despite growth in trade union membership in certain sectors, unions remain largely unable to direct macro-socioeconomic policy at state and global levels, with struggles waged largely defensive in nature such as for wage increases and to prevent job losses.

The picture of unions in Africa is bleak. They are weak, fragmented and largely in the formal economy. It is estimated that only 5% of African workers are unionized. Where unions do exist they are largely in the public sector, although we have seen innovative responses in a number of sectors in recent times. Often these initiatives are the result of support from global unions such as UNI-Global, the International Transport Federation (ITF) and the Building Workers International (BWI).

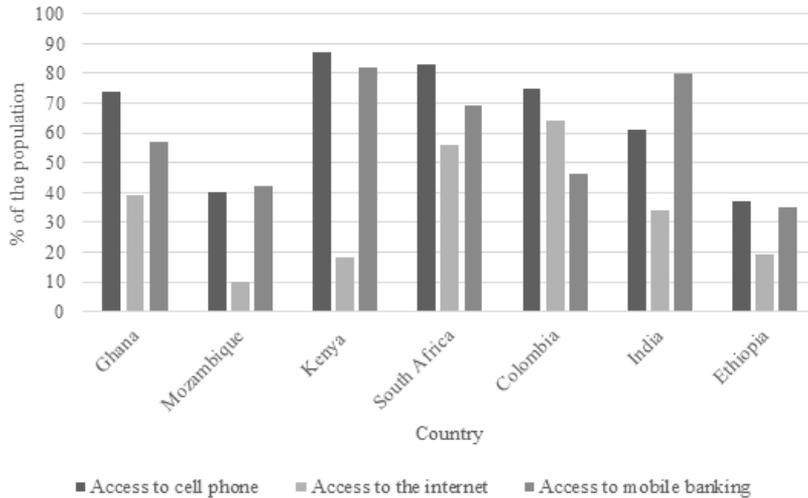


Figure 4: Access to New Technologies. Source: Castel-Branco *et al.*, 2020.

The situation worsened with the arrival of Covid-19. Clearly the impact of the pandemic has been devastating on the lives and livelihoods of working people. The high proportion of informal workers in sub-Saharan Africa – estimated at 80 % – has made the impact of Covid-19 especially harsh<sup>3</sup>. If you are, for example, a street trader and you can no longer make an income on the street, you face hunger and deepening poverty. Covid-19 has revealed the weakness – or non-existence – of an adequate social protection system in Africa.

A key question is whether the pandemic and its associated responses offer the opportunity for a revitalization of labour in Africa, or a further weakening?

Covid has brought to the fore opportunities to revitalise worker organising. We identify five.

Firstly, new technology opens up the opportunity for digital organising. This is not a substitute for face-to-face organising, but online organising can reach a much larger number of people at dramatically reduced cost. However, it is important to recognise that internet penetration is very uneven in Africa. Disparities are even larger when one looks at internet usage. In South Africa, for example, it is estimated that 56% of the population has access to the internet. However, if one looks at coverage at the household level, only 11% of households have access to the internet. Although South Africa has higher levels of internet coverage than most countries on the continent, access to the internet is concentrated in a minority of

3. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 89.2% of employment in sub-Saharan Africa is informal. It should be noted that informalisation is uneven across Africa, highest in Western Africa (92.4%) and lowest in Southern Africa (40.2%).

households. The graph below compares access to digital technologies in selected countries in the global South.

Secondly, the experience of Covid-19 has broadened the demands emerging from workers. In particular, it has highlighted the global nature of the challenges they face and the need for workers to deepen international connections.

Thirdly, it has widened the constituencies of labour. There has been a major shift in the recognition of the informal economy, particularly in areas such as food production and distribution. These “essential workers” are often in sectors dominated by women workers, such as retail, hospitality and varieties of paid and unpaid care work.

Fourthly, the growth of working from home during Covid-19 opens up an opportunity for worker organising. Home-workers are workers and should be recognised accordingly. This has been recognised by the ILO as long ago as 1996 in the Home-Work Convention (n. 177). Trade unions need to recruit them as members and employers need to recognise the existence of home-based workers in their value chains and ensure they get a fair income. National governments should include home-based workers in their national statistics on the labour force and give them a voice in decision making (Delhi Declaration of Home-Based Workers. New Delhi, 9th February 2015).

Fifthly, the pandemic provides an opportunity to increase worker participation and ownership of the workplace. One of South Africa’s largest unions has developed a counter strategy to retrenchment consisting of four pillars:

- The establishment of Workplace Recovery Committees that must include managers, workers, unions, staff, and non-union members.
- Work-sharing instead of retrenchment – not for more than twelve months.
- Reskilling of workers through training programmes.
- Wage concessions and debt-to-equity swap. What the company owes can be turned into shareholding through a debt equity swap through the idea of Employee Share Ownership Schemes (Esops)

## Conclusion

We have identified in this paper the emergence of a transnational network of “rooted cosmopolitans” that navigate between the local and the global. Their future is contested. On the one hand, we could see the consolidation of labour displacement, a growth in unemployment and a deepening of inequality as workers and unions turn inwards and increasingly xenophobic. On the other hand, we are presented with a situation similar to that in post-war Europe, which precipitated an egalitarian mo-

ment which led to significant advances in the de-commodification of education, health and transport through the Keynesian welfare state. The period also saw significant advances in human rights, beginning with the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and major transformations in the rights of women.

But Africa, as with much of the global South, is different in important ways from Europe and the rest of the global North, most notably due to higher levels of informality, a serious public debt issue, a deep digital divide, and a lack of capacity in the state. This has implications for the impact of the pandemic and the structure of the responses. In particular, the ability of the state to coordinate and implement redistributive projects is very different to that in the global North.

The pandemic and the associated lockdowns imposed by states restricting everyday movement, have already had a dramatic impact on union activity. The usual organisational contact meeting has been replaced by various online platforms. Participation in these meetings is determined by the individual's ability to access sufficient data, but it has also limited collective decision-making. GLU had to shift its short courses online (with the 2020 Engage course was held via the Zoom platform in March and April 2021, and the 2021 postgraduate students, too, receiving their lectures online). More pressingly, Francis, Valodia and Webster (2020) show that the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened already existing high levels of inequality in South Africa, which, to be sure, have been replicated in other countries around the world.

Despite these very real constraints, the current moment offers some important opportunities. Already, some policy responses which have been implemented on a wide scale would, until very recently, have been dismissed as utopian. For example, the South African government agreed to implement a grant to workers in the informal economy and to the unemployed – while rollout has been disappointing, the idea of such a basic income grant would not have been entertained in a pre-Covid South Africa. If we are to achieve a more equitable and egalitarian society, labour has to take advantage of this moment to introduce new ways of organising and deepen the regional solidarity network of transnational activists described in this paper.

We argue for a renewed focus on the centrality of labour to overcoming the economic, political and ecological challenges thrown up by the present order of neoliberal capitalist globalisation. We identify the necessity of cross-border solidarity as a key in the struggle against the encroaching commodification of everyday life – in turn globalising worker power against capitalist globalisation. Transnational activists, like those described in this paper, can play a vital role in traversing the political, economic and geographical divides imposed on the African working class. To flourish, these networks of activists need to be grounded in viable projects of local, on-the-ground organisational building.

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### **Abstract**

#### *Building a regional solidarity network of transnational activists: an African case study*

Drawing on a network of transnational activists, this paper argues that a new type of regional network internationalism has emerged in Sub-Saharan Africa. Initiated by the Global Labour University (GLU), through a short two-month residential course called *Engage*, it has been able over the last seven years to develop the skills for a new type of union organiser, one who understands the global context, but is rooted in their local community. This network works at forging links of solidarity across national borders and regional frontiers. Their solidarity work aims at sharing knowledge and experience between activists and worker organisations and the development of meetings and campaigns to strategize and put into action these new forms of transnational solidarity.

Keywords: Rooted cosmopolitan; Regional network internationalism; Power Resources Approach; Worker education; Covid-19.

### **Resumo**

#### *Construindo uma rede de solidariedade regional de ativistas transnacionais: um estudo de caso africano*

Baseando-se no caso de uma rede de ativistas transnacionais, o artigo sustenta que um novo tipo de internacionalismo em rede de alcance regional tem emergido na África Sub-Sahariana. Iniciada pela Global Labour University (GLU), através de um curso de imersão com duração de dois meses chamado *Engage*, ela tem sido capaz, nos últimos sete anos, de desenvolver as habilidades para

um novo tipo de militante sindical, alguém que compreende o contexto global, mas é enraizado em sua comunidade local. Tal rede trabalha forjando laços de solidariedade entre fronteiras nacionais e recortes regionais. Seu trabalho busca compartilhar conhecimento e experiência entre ativistas e organizações trabalhistas, o desenvolvimento de reuniões e campanhas, com vistas a pôr em ação estratégias de uma nova forma de solidariedade transnacional.

Palavras-chave: Cosmopolitismo enraizado; Internacionalismo de rede regional; Recursos de poder; Formação sindical; Covid-19.

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