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The Global Is Never Far Away

Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

Michelle Williams

While the local is where many alternatives are created and lived, the local exists in a complex and varied relation to the national and global. For one, what happens at the local is often circumscribed by national and global systems. A federal system like the US where states and municipalities have a great deal of power, for instance, is a very different context than a less federal system like South Africa where the national government determines legislation and policy.

In general, economic policies in the Global South are heavily determined by powerful forces in the Global North (both by states and corporations), often with dire consequences for local struggles that very often must take on both national and global forces. The power of imperial capitalism, especially over the Global South, is clearly visible in state policy, action, and development. In South Africa, mining-affected communities (especially women) have been struggling against transnational corporations in bitter battles that see traditional leaders selling communal land to mining corporations with state consent. Thus, for local activism, the global and the interests of transnational elites are never far away. Likewise, the search for alternative futures must recognize unequal power relations that have deep histories in imperial capitalism.

Transformative politics must be rooted in local initiatives that connect up into networks of solidarity. We must keep continually searching, revising, experimenting, and rethinking our theories of transformation. In South Africa, the progressive Constitution and the moral and political mandate for transformation have at least provided the space for local struggles to envision life beyond capitalism.

But what does this mean? Among many local struggles, we find common principles of equality, social, economic and environmental justice, democratic decision-making, and collective ownership. Many local initiatives are both defensive and generative, trying to find new ways in the interstitial spaces of the dominant system to fight against injustices. My work on solidarity economies, and especially worker cooperatives, has made me realize the importance of building connections beyond the local and the national, regional, and global. At the same time, I have come to appreciate the importance of fighting with, against, and beyond the national state. What happens locally will be critical for forging a transition to a sustainable, just world.

About the Author



Michelle Williams is Professor of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She is chairperson of the Global Labour University Programme (GLU) at Wits (2010 to present), chairperson of the International GLU Steering Committee (2017-2018), and a member of the board of the Wits Development Studies program. She has published widely on democracy, development, gender, and South-South comparisons. Her publications include *The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India* and *Building Alternatives: The Story of India's Oldest Worker Owner Cooperative* (co-authored with Thomas Isaac).

About the Publication

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