

RESILIENT REALITIES

How youth civil society is experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

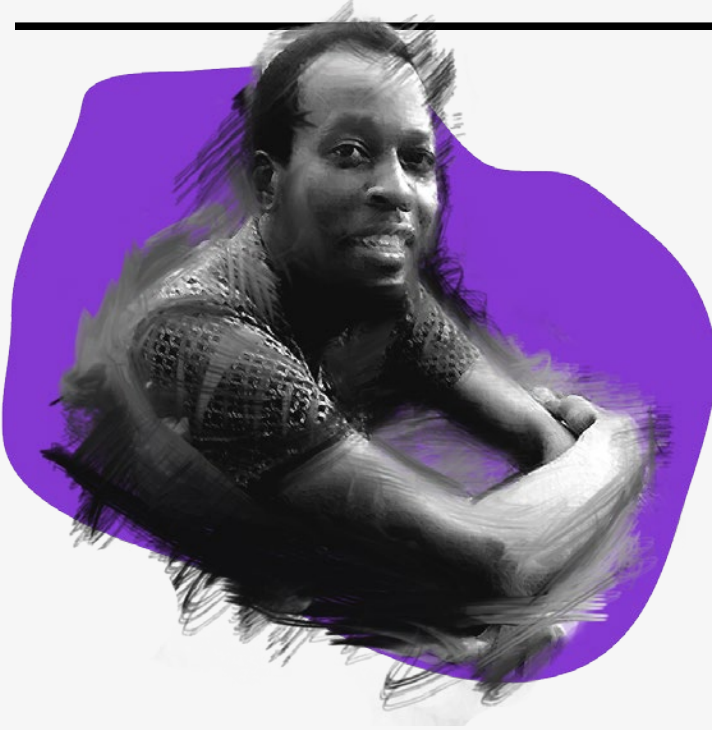


Africa Spotlight: Grassroots Resilience



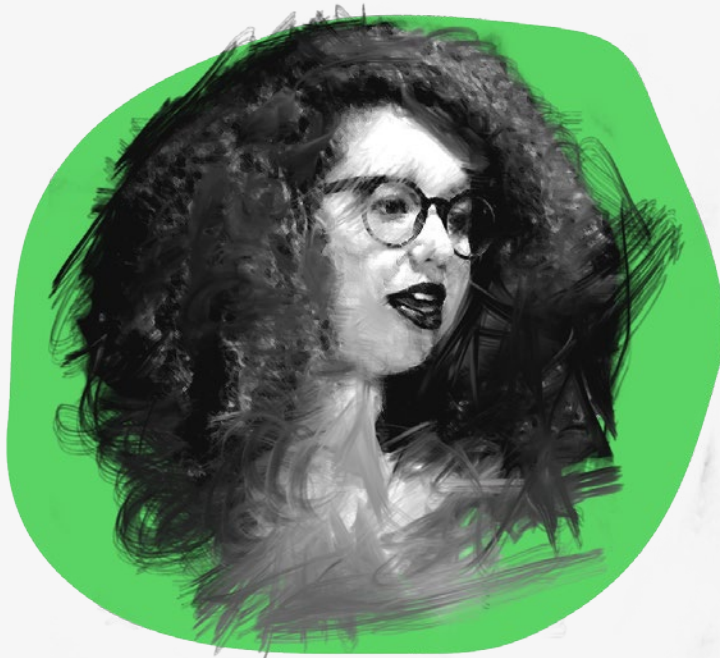
Participatory research coordinated in partnership between **Restless Development, Recrear, & the Development Alternative**

Asia Co-Researchers



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I am a community development practitioner and an activist from Zimbabwe. I am active in youth movements building and development of advocacy strategies for addressing issues affecting African youth. I founded Community Climate Action Trust as a way of mobilising and supporting grassroots communities in tackling impacts of climate change. I also founded Africa's Youth Anti-Corruption Movement - AYAC. My academic background is in Agricultural Science.



RIM MENIA

I am a pan-Africanist, feminist and cultural activist from Algeria. I study architecture and urban planning at Ecole Polytechnique d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme of Algiers, with focus on cultural heritage and earth architecture. I work on the intersectionalities of feminism, culture and identity in North Africa, with a focus on the Amazigh identity.

Introduction

Framing our research in the context of the African continent, we had to keep in mind that youth-led initiatives might not have the same visibility because of low access to digital tools. As of 2017, only 40.3 % of the African youth age 15-24 was using the internet, while 95.7 % of European youth were online¹. For this reason, we wanted to pay attention to those groups working at the grassroots level whose efforts risk being invisible in the pandemic.

Our regional question asked:

What have youth organisations and groups been doing to support communities to be resilient at the grassroots level? What does it teach us about building resilient local communities in Africa?

To answer this question:

Rim: I interviewed 7 individuals from the 6 regions of Africa. Interviewees represented both activists based in the continent and in the diaspora. They shared experiences from 12 organisations and collectives and 9 countries namely: Tunisia and Algeria (North Africa); Mali and The Gambia (West Africa); Cameroon (Central Africa); Kenya (East Africa); Zimbabwe (Southern Africa); and Italy and Austria (Diaspora). Inspired by these interviews, I have written a piece discussing youth organisations and groups amidst the COVID-19 pandemic from the grassroots perspective. I also worked on the translation of the African Feminist

Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement and explored issue from a feminist gender-sensitive perspective.

Eric: I interviewed 10 groups and organised a focus group over Whatsapp bringing together eighteen youth leaders from the following countries; Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Algeria, and Zimbabwe. In my piece below, I share the reflections that emerged in my data about youth challenges and grassroots responses to the pandemic. Below is an example of one of the reflective activities I developed and led with youth leaders:

Reflective Activity

1. *In 5 words; what are "resilient realities" for you?*
2. *In 5 words: what are "resilient realities" for your Community?*

1 Consult facts and figures about digital access in Africa here: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf>

What We Learned About Our Research Question:

What have youth organisations and groups been doing to support communities to be resilient at the grassroots level? What does it teach us about building resilient local communities in Africa?



Youth and youth organisations are doing significant work to build resilience at the grassroots level, but there is need for further support and coordination to make this work more impactful: young people need to be in decision-making positions as actors, not as observers. This will also require an enabling digital, socioeconomic and political environment. African governments need to take drastic measures to address challenges faced by young people during this pandemic.



There is a need for Africa-centred, people-led solutions. If resilience of African grassroots communities is to be achieved, local approaches need to be coupled with a feminist and intersectional lens permitting the empowerment of women, especially young women, who play a major role in community livelihoods sustenance. To achieve this we need to be more aware of the layers of the inequalities built into our patriarchal societies, which have also been further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Dismantling patriarchy is a must in order to achieve economic recovery.



There is a need for an elaborated 'bottom-up' approach. This will enhance the role of the grassroots and the local communities as the custodians of traditions and the guardians of biodiversity. It might also lead to reconfiguring models of resilience-building to respond to issues such as pandemics. This bottom-up approach will be the opportunity of a true transformation in Africa.



Challenges and Responses of Youth Civil Society in Africa

By Eric Morgen Moyo

To navigate the route to a meaningful life, many African youth have to grapple with rampant poverty, severe economic distress, high unemployment, repressive political environments, famine, localised disease outbreaks, and many other socioeconomic ills gripping the continent. For this research, I wanted to engage in a dialogue with youth civil society leaders across the continent to analyse the challenges and solutions to the pandemic. Since internet connection

across the continent is often unstable (and expensive), instead of connecting via online calls, I decided to invite youth leaders in a WhatsApp group to experiment organising a diffused focus group.

For a week I shared a question a day and invited participants to engage using voice notes, text or photos. The group was joined by eighteen youth leaders from ten African countries. In this piece I put together the reflections that emerged in this space.

Challenges faced by African youth amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa:

- **Lack of infrastructure and corruption:** many countries in Africa lack the resources that can create resilience during pandemics and natural disasters, making them vulnerable to sudden and unpredictable adverse changes. Meanwhile, poor governance and political instability in several African countries is making the management of vital resources needed for resilience almost impossible.
- **Youth civil society active in the area of defending civil & human rights expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown has been used as a tool to crush dissent and citizen demands:** many youth civil society operating in the area of governance and accountability, view the COVID-19 lockdowns as being utilised as a means for corruption to take place unchecked. In Zimbabwe for example, a corruption scandal surrounding the misuse of COVID-19 funds was recently uncovered, involving the Health Minister.

"It is quite unfortunate that this COVID19 pandemic is a gift to authoritarian regimes and a breeding ground for further repression. Governments are now hiding behind [COVID-19] to deprive people of their fundamental rights like freedom of assembly, and they are

brutally clamping down on any form of dissent, all in the guise of managing the pandemic."

- Nkosi Aka 'Rebel', a Human Rights Activist from Zimbabwe.

- **Increasing rates of unemployment:** the pandemic has led to an increase in the levels of youth unemployment. Africa's youth are bearing the brunt of the economic and social woes plaguing the continent. Many youth in small businesses and the informal business sector have had to close their operations and go through periods of uncertainty while losing their sources of livelihoods. At the same time, no meaningful action has been taken to cushion them.

"As a Civil Society leader in the field of Arts and as an events manager, the coming of COVID-19 has been a blow to me because the festivals we had planned and our supporters were all hit by the unexpected financial crisis."

- Herbert, founder of an Arts Civil Society Organisation in Zimbabwe.

"Because of the high level of unemployment, many young people in my country make a living through the informal sector. This COVID-19 and lockdown has meant that we have lost our only source of income for livelihoods, and we have nowhere to get assistance."

- Malawian informal trader.

As a way of navigating these challenges, some innovative young entrepreneurs have tried to utilise online platforms as a way of marketing products and engaging customers, but for many this has been a challenge due to connectivity issues and high internet data costs.

- **Gender issues, and Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR):** For youth civil society focusing on gender issues, and sexual & reproductive health rights (SRHR), navigating the COVID-19 pandemic has also meant campaigning against Gender Based Violence (GBV) which has seen cases rise during lockdown period. In more marginalised grassroots communities, like rural areas, where clinics are the only available health centres, young people have found it hard to access contraceptives amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a cause for great concern as young people are left exposed to sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

"I would say that one of the biggest challenges in our community is that as schools are closed due to the lockdown, a number of youth are now going to have babies when young. Girls and young women are facing significant barriers in accessing essential sexual and reproductive health services & information, and contraceptives, during the COVID-19 crisis. With the lockdown leading to a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence – and rates of child marriage, teenage pregnancy and female genital mutilation (FGM) predicted to increase exponentially – information and services that protect and promote girls' and young women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are more vital than ever."

– Isiiko, Uganda

Examples of Youth-led Responses:

In the face of these structural challenges, many grassroots youth led organisations around the continent have been responding to immediate needs of their communities. The research we led found that youth led organisations have been:

- **Providing information:** Misinformation on COVID-19 is high and widespread across Africa: youth civil society has been at the forefront of raising awareness and sensitising grassroots communities on accessing right information and proper channels. One good example of this has been in a local community in Plumtree, Zimbabwe, where COVID-19 mobile roadshows were conducted at a crowded community gathering to sensitise people about social distancing and masks.
- **Distributing food:** An initiative called "One Race" in Uganda has set up makeshift kitchens to provide meals for children as a way of curbing imminent malnutrition. Through the initiative, food and basic groceries are delivered to vulnerable households. In Zimbabwe a similar initiative led by a disability rights activist and youth empowerment advocate is taking place, where groceries and other essential items are being collected and then donated to vulnerable households including those of people with disabilities.



"I am delivering vital meals to orphans in our communities as they continue to negotiate an incredible lack of options and lack of assistance during the Covid-19 government-imposed lockdown. Quite simply put, they're unable to fend for themselves and hence they're unable to eat. Our teams in both the city and the village are doing an incredible job to deliver food."

- Isiiko, Uganda.

- **Education:** The COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on the education and schooling of children and youth. In Ghana, an initiative called 'Brekete Reads' has been ensuring that children keep reading and continue to have access to a library during the lockdown when schools and colleges are closed:

"I am a Project Coordinator at Brekete Reads Foundation, a foundation that promotes reading for children because 'a reader today is a leader tomorrow.' In this pandemic we have been setting up reading spots and libraries for families so young people can be engaged at home."

- Kofi Larbi, Ghanaian Blogger & Philanthropist.

So what can we say about resilience looking at this scenario?

It is a sad reality that the pandemic is exacerbating the problems African countries have been facing, leading to further societal destabilisation and increasing poverty levels.

The dialogue over the WhatsApp group made it evident how COVID-19 challenged the resilience of communities and yet demonstrated how youth leaders from across civil society are mobilising, despite the challenging environment, to mitigate the adverse impacts of the virus.

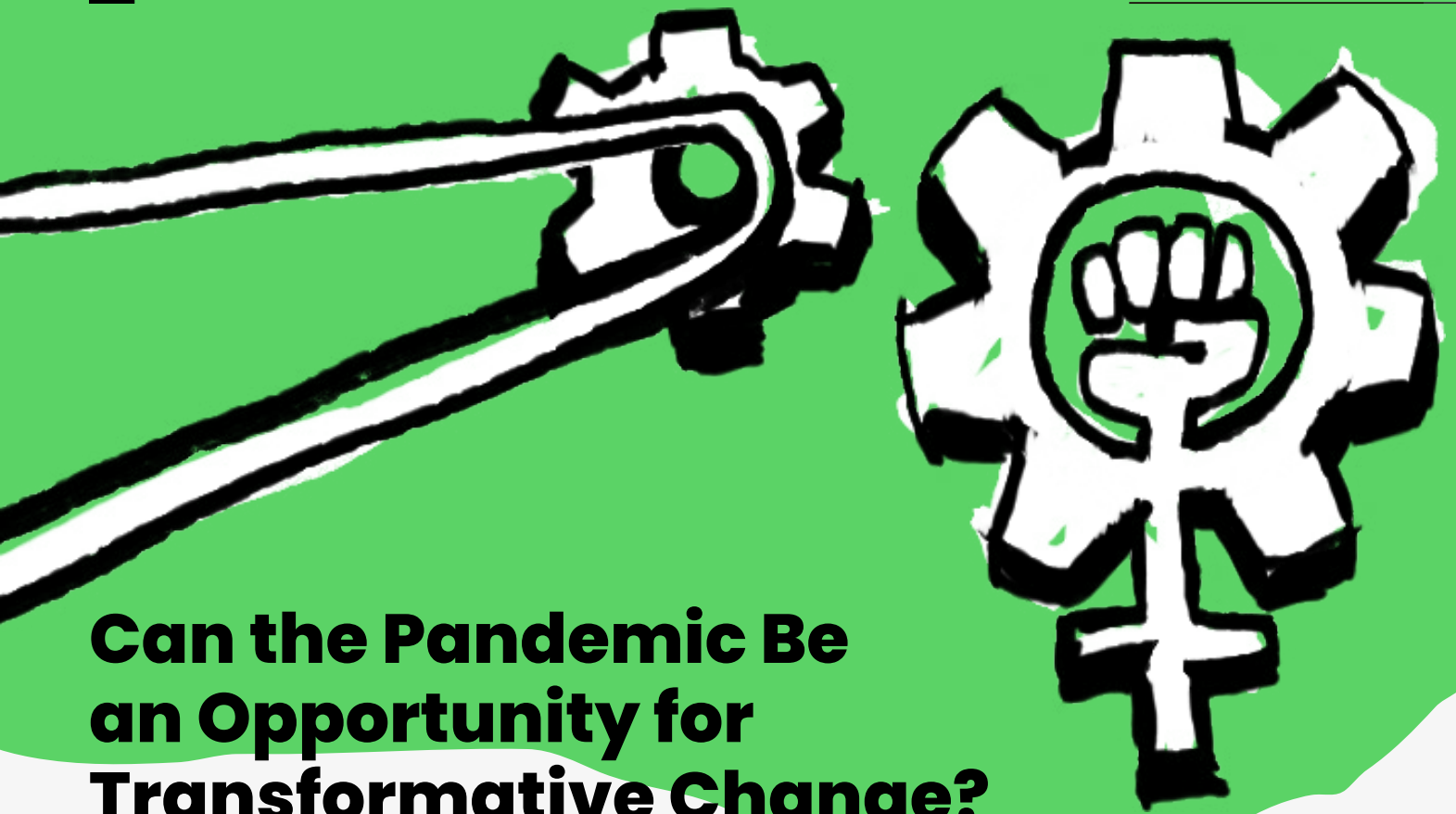
And yet it is also clear that their efforts are fragmented, unable to tackle the root of the problems without the support and leadership of governments across the region.

The pandemic requires coordinated effort across different sectors if we are to see our nations become resilient and adapt more easily. Focusing on COVID-19 while paying little attention to other issues will create more problems and undo all other efforts aimed at responding to other challenges faced by our communities: we need an integrated response.

There is though a 'silver lining' shared by the civil society leaders engaged in the Whatsapp research group: the situation is bringing all of us closer to our communities and is making us more aware of the challenges. As a youth leader from Zimbabwe reflected:

"The pandemic has taught us the importance of focusing and bonding with the communities we work in. Due to lockdown we couldn't get out of our communities so to some extent it helped us to be focused and to get to understand the daily struggles of our communities"

- Anonymous informant



Can the Pandemic Be an Opportunity for Transformative Change? A Feminist Perspective.

By Rim Menia

In June 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a constellation of African feminists gathered and addressed a statement to the Special Envoys of the African Union titled 'The Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery'¹. This document raised issues facing the continent from a gender-lens, narrating the current feminist realities and aspiring towards recovery that can reimagine the African economies.

This African feminist lens has exposed the economic realities of those women, particularly young women, facing both, the economic challenges exacerbated by the

COVID-19 pandemic, and the lasting effects of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination. They stressed that much of young women's labour is invisible, informal, sometimes unpaid and often insecure: the COVID-19 pandemic only deepens such gender inequalities. Plus, these informal forms of labour have been hijacked by the policy focus on industrial and export-oriented agriculture and development schemes that are failing to deliver their promises of food security in the continent. These policies and the COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated the food crisis present in many African countries. According to the

¹ Read the full statement here: <https://africanfeminism.com/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/>

African feminists who collaborated on the statement, the continent would be better off building resilience through localised food supply chains. They recommend that, considering that the small-holder farmers across Africa are the guardians of biodiversity, they shall be guaranteed monetary and resource support. The feminist perspective towards an economic recovery in Africa reinforces the idea of sustainable food systems, based on local micro-schemes of agriculture and agribusiness.

All around the continent, young people are organising to strengthen these local models, focusing on developing creative tools to organise more self-dependent food systems managed at the community level. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Sungu Oyoo, a young writer, activist and pan Africanist from the Kisumu region of Kenya, launched the Kajulu Peoples' Committee. In my interview with him, he reflects on the group's desire of building a self-sustaining system to grow food and build a food reserve in case of a prolonged lockdown due to the pandemic. Sungu shares that: "with many residents of the Kajulu community being unemployed – and not knowing how long this situation [the lockdown] would last – a few people started coming together in a bid to figure out how to meet community needs and coordinate efforts against the pandemic."

A number of grassroots consultations led to the realisation that the greatest worry for the farmers and the working class in Kajulu was that of surviving through whatever lay ahead despite their precarious financial positions

and the food insecurity. Oyoo explained, "the Committee started organising peasant farmers and other residents in Kajulu to farm in a more coordinated fashion, prioritising crops such as maize, millet, beans, lentils, cassava/ sweet potatoes and other local foods." For them, resilience in this time is a political act that is decolonial, and anti-colonial. The long-term aim of the Kajulu community is "to establish our own food reserve and become self-reliant" as Sungu Oyoo emphasised. This experience is a showcase of innovative approaches that coordinate and share know-how of both local African agriculture and agribusiness models, and ancestral co-working models that continue to exist throughout Africa.

Among these models, solidarity schemes are very important for community development, and most importantly survival. Net3awno-DZ, meaning we help each other in Algerian darija, is a collective based in Algeria born amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Net3awno-DZ is an online platform aiming at connecting donors and persons in need with various voluntary groups and organisations in the country. Khaoula Sayeh, a young Algerian activist, and one of the founding members of the platform, shares that "the collective was born in order to highlight what is being done, but also to meet the needs of families in difficulty who are not identified by the government and who are suffering during the lockdown". The Net3awno-DZ collective mobilised efforts, reinforcing the traditional solidarity scheme into a country-wide action. Khaoula explained that "when Ramadhan arrived, the traditional

solidarity basket [Koufat Ramadhan] became more than necessary.” This practice has been monopolised by the government and pro-regimes organisations and has exacerbated further the existing inequalities. Net3awno-DZ has built an alternative direct approach with a shorter chain in providing the needs of local communities, whether during the month of Ramadhan, or in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These local youth-led initiatives ensure the re-set of narrative in the political scene in our continent. By building up models of grassroots resilience, we ensure that this hectic time of the COVID-19 pandemic can bring forward economic recovery that can shift the neoliberal realities in Africa. In this sense, the pandemic can be an opportunity for transformation.

Yet, it is important to make sure that the youth-led movements and initiatives that have been pushing for change don't get stalled with the pandemic. Promoting the intersectional aspect of resilience from a feminist perspective around the continent is the mission of Sodfa Daaji who, amidst the pandemic, founded the African Legal Think Tank on Women's Rights which carries out research, and offers consultancy, capacity building, provision of technical expertise and advocacy on women's rights. They also support women's rights organisations and advocates. So far, the Think Tank has organised a series of consultations with different stakeholders to assess access to justice for women who might become victims of the preventive measures related to the pandemic.

The Think Tank also carried out an initial analysis of the post-pandemic scenarios. For example, in the Algerian case, young

women played a pivotal role during the HIRAK uprising by being the revolution front-liners and ensuring its intersectionality. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is costing them, as well as the Algerian people, a loss of momentum. The contribution of young women is at risk of being ignored in the post-pandemic scenarios, and consequently, in the post-revolution scenarios. This undermining of women and young women's contribution during the post revolution has happened already in the contexts of Tunisia, Libya or Egypt. For this reason, among other assessments, ALTOWR wants to promote a resilient feminist jurisprudence.

If we are aware of the layers of inequalities built into the patriarchy of our societies, and further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we realise that our societies need to change all the way from grassroots to the high-level decision-making spaces. Accordingly, resilience becomes a political act. It transforms the neocolonial practices implemented in Africa since the 60s and 70s towards a resilient decolonial and anti-colonial approach in the economic and political sectors which shifts the socio-cultural realities in the post-COVID-19 Africa.



We Are Left With a Few Big Questions:

1. **What are the risks confronting the models of resilience established by the grassroots civil society in Africa in the post-COVID-19?**
2. **How can we ensure that our current efforts will not be hijacked by the systems that we are fighting against?**
3. **Is the resilience that we are building as Africans bold enough and radical enough to ensure to avoid driving the continent into a cul-de-sac?**



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The background features a vibrant, abstract composition of overlapping organic shapes. A bright green field is partially covered by a large, irregular yellow shape at the top. Below the yellow is a large, central purple shape. At the bottom, a red shape overlaps the purple one. The text 'RESILIENT REALITIES' is centered within the purple area.

**RESILIENT
REALITIES**