SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING IN GHANA: 
COMMUNAL DEFENCE OF RESOURCES IN 
NEOLIBERAL TIMES 

Jonathan Langdon, Assistant Professor, St. Francis Xavier University, 
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada

INTRODUCTION

The “globalization project” (McMichael, 2008, p. 21) is inextricably intertwined with neoliberalism, and has had a dramatic effect on the people of the Global South. Neoliberal globalization has been devastating for rural populations pushed off their lands in order to make way for extractive industries, export-oriented cash crops, and/or national development plans, while encouraging a burgeoning “planet of slums” (Davis, 2006) in urban centers. Drawing upon research with a rural movement in Ada (Ghana) defending communal access to a salt-producing lagoon (with occasional and contrasting reference to an urban-based resource defence movement or the National Coalition against the Privatization of Water or NCAP-W), this chapter advances the proposition that neoliberal globalization is most vulnerable to resistance in rural contexts. The participatory study of social movement activism and learning in Ada demonstrates that the strongest movements contesting neoliberal globalization in Ghana are embedded in the defence of rural communal resources, movements whose strength rests on the material (livelihood) and the epistemic (and cultural) value of these resources to the movement communities. The research also suggests that the way movements are organized, led, and learn is critical to their regeneration, as well as towards ensuring that this regeneration remains rooted in the material/livelihood and epistemic/cultural critique of neoliberal globalization.

WHERE NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION TOUCHES THE LIVES OF GHANAIANS: 
PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Recent literature suggests that globalization has its most profound impact and generates greatest resistance in locations where globalized capital aims to extract resources (Cowen & Shenton, 1998; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; McMichael, 2006; Peet & Watts, 2004). In describing the emergence of huge urban slums throughout the Global South, Davis (2006) points to the massive influx of rural dwellers to urban centres as a result of displacement due to extractive industries, shifts to export oriented cash crop production, and/or large-scale national development projects. While being cognizant of the ways in which this displacement and rural
impoverishment are linked to these slums (slumization), it is also critical to focus on the points of origin of this displacement and the ways in which processes behind these displacements are generating resistance (McMichael, 2006). In this sense, following McMichael (2006), one can envisage a different "Agrarian question" (p. 465) that does not see rural life as anachronistic and in need of being incorporated into the global market, but rather as an ‘epistemic challenge’ to this manner of global organizing and restructuring. Kamat (2002), for instance, has suggested that much writing on protest movements in the South has tended to focus on urban-based movements and where it has focused on rural movements, there has been a tendency to categorize these movements too quickly as either identity based movements, or class based movements. Kapoor (2007) meanwhile has demonstrated how Adivasi (forest dweller) movements in the Indian context contest the penetration of capital, and state disciplining on multiple registers that include material and cultural/epistemic grounds. Peet and Watts (2004) have further elaborated on how the defence of communally owned and managed natural resources is a strong base for building local movements.

Cowen and Shenton (1998) have discussed how, in the African context, the colonial and post-colonial state has been deeply implicated in managing rural African populations to suit the needs of capital. Similarly, Ferguson and Gupta (2002) note how neoliberal globalization in the African context has constituted a new topography of power, where the streamlined neoliberal state is reconfigured as either an enabler of capital, or is by-passed by transnational capital altogether. They call this process transnational governmentality, a term which builds on the work of Foucault (1991), and that focuses on the “mentality,” or the “how” of governance (Dean, 1999, p. 2). Importantly for the Ghanaian case study or the subject of this chapter, it is the way in which this neoliberal transnational governmentality enables the emergence of new forms of capital that is the basis of the current challenges faced by the Ada movement. Likewise, and here building on Foucault’s (1980) notion of subjugated knowledges as the way in which disciplining systems such as transnational governmentality are resisted, it is argued below that it is the coupling of epistemic contestation with livelihood protection that lends rural movements, such as in Ada, their strength.

This last point echoes McMichael’s construction, but also builds on other literature that has noted this combination; for instance, Taussig’s (1980) work documenting the way in which Columbian and Bolivian peasants used local legends to develop explicit critiques of capital. More explicitly, Mignolo (2000) has connected the Foucauldian notion of subjugated knowledges to his idea of local histories that contest global designs, such as neoliberal globalization. Mignolo (2000) further links this framework to subaltern studies. Kapoor (2007) has noted the significance of subaltern studies in underlining material and epistemic challenges to corporate-state power. For instance, Partha Chatterjee (1982) describes the importance of local religion as “an ontology, an epistemology” through which “subalterns act politically”, and where “the symbolic meaning of particular acts – their significance – must be found in religious terms” (p. 31). In this sense, there is a strong emergent case for examining the ways in which capital