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# International Solidarity at the Grassroots: A Case Study of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement

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# *International Solidarity at the Grassroots: A Case Study of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement*

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*The global campaign against apartheid South Africa has been viewed as one of the most successful examples of international solidarity activism in the 20th century. Scholars examining how anti-apartheid emerged and developed as a salient global issue have primarily focused on transnational and national considerations, particularly the role and influence of southern African exiles and expatriates, as well as the way that anti-apartheid intersected with national domestic political concerns. There has, however, been limited attention paid to the distinctly local dimensions of the international anti-apartheid movement. Using the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) as a case study, this article seeks to add to our understanding of how the politics of anti-apartheid at the grassroots level was shaped by its interactions with the local economic, political, social and cultural environment. The existing historiography on anti-apartheid in Britain has been characterised by an overwhelming focus on the London-based national AAM and a widespread perception that the movement was highly centralised. Through an exploration of the role of local activist structures, the issue of grassroots autonomy, and examples of anti-apartheid activism beyond London, the article asserts that while there was an element of centralisation linked to the national AAM, this point has been overemphasised. In adopting a grassroots analytical approach, this article will reveal the distinctive local dimensions of anti-apartheid activism in Britain and demonstrate that there was greater diversity than the existing scholarship acknowledges. It is argued that such heterogeneity within the movement was shaped by the levels of grassroots autonomy that existed, as well as the influence of divergent local conditions. Finally, a focus on local anti-apartheid activism can provide greater nuance to established historiographical narratives of the national AAM, such as tensions with the far left and engagement with domestic anti-racist struggles.*

**Keywords:** anti-apartheid; British Anti-Apartheid Movement; grassroots activism; international solidarity; social movements; South Africa

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## Introduction

On 20 January 1989, Claire Morgan, a part-time worker at a William Low supermarket in Newcastle upon Tyne, was dismissed for refusing to handle South African fruit. Morgan had acted after attending a meeting organised by the local branch of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), which was addressed by a South African trade unionist who urged workers to implement their own sanctions against the apartheid regime. The case received considerable local and national media coverage. Tyneside anti-apartheid activists formed a campaign opposing her dismissal, which involved a boycott of the William Low store, as well as petitioning the company to change its policy on stocking South African products. Following the incident, Morgan became more heavily involved with anti-apartheid activism, even speaking at a national demonstration in London.[1]

Claire Morgan's embrace of the anti-apartheid cause came at a time when the AAM, formed in 1960 to mobilise the British public and pressure the government, corporations and civil society to take action to isolate apartheid South Africa, had reached its peak. Although the movement struggled to directly influence government policy towards South Africa, the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall highlighted its success in embedding anti-apartheid into the liberal consciousness of the British population.[2] In 1988, a Gallup poll indicated that 45 per cent of those surveyed endorsed economic sanctions against South Africa, while 70 per cent supported the release of Nelson Mandela.[3] The British public had become increasingly aware of the resistance and repression in South Africa following the 1985 State of Emergency, which was covered extensively by the international media. Concurrently, an anti-Thatcher coalition emerged in the 1980s, challenging many of the Conservative government's policies, including its outright refusal to impose sanctions on the apartheid state.[4] These international and national developments drew anti-apartheid sentiment into mainstream political consciousness. In addition, Hall highlighted the role of the AAM, specifically its ability, through campaigns such as consumer and sports boycotts, to engage the 'non-political'. According to Hall, 'perfectly ordinary folk, with a variety of other commitments, felt that there was something that they could do … they had a role in sustaining a struggle, the centre of which was somewhere else … This was one of the AAM's most important achievements'.[5]

The AAM's grassroots structures and activism played an important role in engaging the 'non-political', connecting them to the liberation struggles in southern Africa, and ultimately implanting anti-apartheid sentiment among the British public. Despite this, the local dynamics of the movement have received limited scholarly attention. Where there has been some discussion, this has revolved around the relationship between the centre (national) and the periphery (local) of the movement. The existing scholarship on the AAM has predominantly concentrated on its transnational linkages, the movement's central structures, as well as core campaigns such as the consumer boycott, sanctions and disinvestment. This focus on the AAM as a national organisation has created the perception of a highly centralised movement. We argue that the dominant narrative of centralisation within AAM historiography has created an overwhelming focus on London and negated a sustained focus on the grassroots. While analysing the AAM through a national lens is important, we demonstrate that the vast majority of activism and public interactions with anti-apartheid

1 Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (hereafter BL), MSS.AAM 647, 'Tyneside, 1979–1994'.

2 S. Hall, 'The AAM and the Race-ing of Britain', in *The Anti-Apartheid Movement: A 40-Year Perspective* (London, Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee, 2000), p. 5.

3 G.L. Klein, 'The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in Britain and Support for the African National Congress (ANC), 1976–1990' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2007), pp. 251–52.

4 M.P. Llewellyn and T.C. Rider, 'Sport, Thatcher and Apartheid Politics: The Zola Budd Affair', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 4 (2018), pp. 575–92.

5 Hall, 'The AAM', p. 5.

occurred locally. Significant grassroots autonomy also existed, which engendered much greater diversity within the AAM than has previously been acknowledged. Using archives and oral interviews, this article demonstrates how the heterogeneity of the movement at a grassroots level was shaped by interactions with divergent local political, economic, social and cultural conditions. By paying greater attention to the local, new insights can be gleaned into the emergence, character and development of anti-apartheid politics across Britain.

The article begins by surveying the current scholarship on the global anti-apartheid movement, and specifically the AAM, demonstrating how utilising a grassroots analytical lens can accentuate our understanding of activism in different geographic settings. We then outline the case for examining the local component of the AAM, first discussing the vital role played by grassroots activism, before looking beyond narratives of centralisation to highlight the level of group autonomy within the movement. In the final section, we explore the different conditions which affected the development of anti-apartheid activity across various localities. While the sheer diversity of individuals and groups involved means that one cannot talk of a universal local experience of anti-apartheid, this article acts as a starting point for identifying core themes and a deeper analysis of an under-represented component in the historiography.

## Anti-Apartheid as a 'Localised' Global Issue

The global anti-apartheid movement was simultaneously a transnational, national and local movement that operated across different political, economic, social and cultural spaces. Although each dimension had its own characteristics and modes of practice, they were not divorced from one another. There were multiple points of overlap and complementary activities which served to build and reinforce a broad global anti-apartheid coalition. The historiography of the international anti-apartheid movement does not fully reflect these dynamics, with the overwhelming scholarly emphasis on the transnational and national rather than the diverse local settings. Within this broad literature, the analytical framework of global history has seen numerous studies focus on anti-apartheid activism through a transnational lens. This literature has paid close attention to themes of international solidarity, how transnational relationships and connections were forged, the roles of key individuals in building and sustaining these connections, ideological and humanitarian motivations, and the influence of advocacy networks facilitated by globalisation.[6] The result is a rich tapestry of work that addresses how anti-apartheid emerged as a salient 'globalised' issue but with divergent forms of solidarity and action in different national settings.[7]

Beyond the moral outrage generated by apartheid, scholars have highlighted how national concerns were critical in motivating people outside South Africa to actively campaign against apartheid. Saul Dubow observed that although there were very few overt supporters of apartheid internationally, numerous individuals and institutions sympathised with South Africa premised on considerations of religion, capitalism and anti-communism; he concluded that 'anti-apartheid activists in countries like the United States and Britain were, by opposing apartheid, engaged in fighting domestic political battles'.[8] For example, in the USA, a nation beset with its own racial struggles, the anti-apartheid movement emerged

6 M.E. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998); H. Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 3–4; R. Skinner, *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarians and Transnational Activists in Britain and the United States, c. 1919–64* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

7 South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 3: International Solidarity* (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2008); L. Brock, V. Gosse, and A. Lichtenstein (eds), 'Special Issue: The Global Anti-Apartheid Movement', *Radical History Review*, 119 (2014), pp. 1–250.

8 S. Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948–1994* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 277.

within the milieu of historic and ongoing civil rights activism.[9] Within the British context, Simon Stevens explored the question of motivation, concluding that transnational considerations only became significant through their interactions with 'the internal dynamics of the nation state'.[10] Many activists believed that their involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle would contribute to change not only in South Africa, but Britain too. William Beinart observed that the AAM must be viewed as a significant British political movement as '[a]partheid became an issue around which key relationships in Britain were debated and contested'.[11] For instance, Elizabeth Williams has highlighted how black Britons saw their involvement in anti-apartheid solidarity activism as part of an ongoing struggle against racial injustice both domestically and globally.[12]

The main exception to the focus on the transnational and national dynamics of the international anti-apartheid movement can be found in the USA. Lauren Elizabeth Moran's study of anti-apartheid activism and politics in Atlanta argued that a 'global social movement cannot be fully understood without giving proper attention to the unique political, social and economic forces that influence movement building on a local scale'.[13] Moran demonstrated how the close relationship between a liberal African American political elite and corporate interests shaped Atlanta's response to apartheid.[14] Building upon Moran's work, but adopting a broader geographical framework, Robert Larson focused on the grassroots dimensions of the US movement, arguing that the anti-apartheid message was most effective when addressed to specific audiences and fused with local concerns. For example, in the largely white liberal city of Madison, activists linked apartheid to broader concerns about US capitalism, connecting it to critiques of labour practices and anti-union legislation in the north-east, whereas in the south it was associated with the legacy of racial segregation. By making apartheid relevant to various local audiences, activists successfully built US grassroots anti-apartheid sentiment, which culminated in the 1986 Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act.[15] The greater attention paid to the local in the US scholarship reflects the fact that there was no single national anti-apartheid organisation. However, even in the British context, which was dominated by the AAM, we argue that a local analysis of anti-apartheid activism has the potential to deepen our understanding of the movement and its diversity.

The scholarship on the AAM at a national level has addressed various themes including the movement's origins, its central structures, relationships with the liberation movements, key campaigns, and the manifold challenges it experienced.[16] In turn, this has created an historiography disproportionately focused on developments in London, which reflects the

9 F.N. Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946–1994* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004).

10 S. Stevens, 'Why South Africa? The Politics of Anti-Apartheid Activism in Britain in the Long 1970s', in J. Eckel and S. Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 209.

11 W. Beinart, 'Oral Histories of the Anti-Apartheid Movement', in *The Anti-Apartheid Movement: A 40-Year Perspective* (London, Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee, 2000), p. 66.

12 E.M. Williams, *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2015).

13 L.E. Moran, 'South to Freedom? Anti-Apartheid Activism and Politics in Atlanta, 1976–1990' (PhD thesis, Georgia State University, 2014), p. 1.

14 Moran, 'South to Freedom?'.

15 R.Z. Larson, 'The Transnational and Local Dimensions of the U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement' (PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 2019).

16 R. Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain – A Study in Pressure Group Politics* (London, Merlin, 2005), p. 478; C. Gurney, 'The 1970s: The Anti-Apartheid Movement's Difficult Decade', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 471–87; G. Klein, 'The British Anti-Apartheid Movement and Political Prisoner Campaigns, 1973–1980', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 455–70; C. Bundy, 'National Liberation and International Solidarity: Anatomy of a Special Relationship', in H. Sapire and C. Saunders (eds), *Southern African Liberation Struggles: New Local, Regional and Global Perspectives* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2013), pp. 212–28.

capital's position as the epicentre of anti-apartheid activity in Britain. From the late 1950s, London was home to a uniquely large population of South African political exiles, as well as the exiled offices of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).[17] The AAM, which had emerged out of this exiled South African community, also had its national office in London. Despite holding some national meetings, including its annual general meeting (AGM), in different parts of the country from the late 1970s, the capital largely remained the centre of decision-making within the movement. It was also the location of major national events and demonstrations such as the protest against apartheid Prime Minister P.W. Botha's visit to Britain in June 1984 which attracted an estimated 50,000 people.[18] Even where scholars have analysed anti-apartheid action beyond the prism of the AAM, there has been a continued emphasis on the London experience.[19] For this reason, and while acknowledging the significant contributions of London's anti-apartheid groups, the article pays greater attention to anti-apartheid activism beyond the capital.

The local dimension of British anti-apartheid activism has been explored only in passing. Roger Fieldhouse provided a broad overview of the historical development, character and importance of the AAM's local branches, paying particular attention to the centre–periphery debate. According to Fieldhouse, this relationship was broadly supportive, but there were latent tensions on both sides. Local groups raised concerns about their ability to influence the AAM's policy, the perception that the leadership was more interested in lobbying than grassroots activism, and at times the poor quality of communication they received from the centre. Simultaneously, Fieldhouse asserts that the leadership believed that local groups were overly critical, while there were also disagreements over financial obligations to the national movement.[20] Rob Skinner has also alluded to the 'difficult' relationship between the centre and periphery of the AAM.[21] Resulting from these tensions, both Fieldhouse and Skinner described the national and local elements of the AAM as two interrelated, but essentially distinct movements.[22] Given this characterisation of the local as a distinctive strand of the movement, it is surprising that historians have devoted such little attention to this crucial dimension. This article moves the scholarly discussion beyond the centre–periphery debate by examining the 'distinct' aspects of anti-apartheid activity at the local level.

The most concerted local history of anti-apartheid activity was conducted by Kate Law, who examined the formation, politics and activism of a group known as Leeds Women Against Apartheid (LWAA). Law argued that the limited scholarly focus on local activity can in part be attributed to a broader historiographical problem whereby women's activism and political engagement are undervalued, despite their deep involvement within the AAM's grassroots.[23] Law stressed the need to move beyond a top-down approach to studying social movements, and 'that the "local" function[s] as an important category of historical

17 The South African population in Britain was approximately 91,000 by the late 1980s. Most were white, except for a few thousand 'politically important' black, coloured and Indian exiles, and the majority lived in the south-east and London: M. Israel, *South African Political Exile in the United Kingdom* (Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 2.

18 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report on Activities and Developments, 1984', pp. 11–2, available at https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b0100062, retrieved 12 June 2024.

19 G. Brown and H. Yaffe, *Youth Activism and Solidarity: The Non-Stop Picket Against Apartheid* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2018); Stevens, 'Why South Africa?', pp. 215–22.

20 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 319–20.

21 R. Skinner, 'The Anti-Apartheid Movement: Pressure Group Politics, International Solidarity and Transnational Activism', in N. Crowson, M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 129–46.

22 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, p. 310; Skinner, 'Pressure Group Politics', p. 137.

23 K. Law, 'Women's Activism in the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1986-1994', *The Historical Journal*, 66, 1 (2023), pp. 258–79.

analysis'.[24] Skinner briefly discussed the idea that local conditions could shape the form that anti-apartheid activism took in his analysis of the consumer boycott. He argued that this was particularly successful in Bristol and Brixton due to the salience of race as a local political issue.[25] Similarly, Christopher Fevre hinted that anti-apartheid activism in Scotland must be considered in its own right due to the influence of national political and cultural factors in shaping the nature and development of the campaign.[26] In addition to this academic work, witness seminars, oral histories and public history projects in cities such as Bristol, Dundee and Nottingham have also begun to capture the nuances of the movement and activists' varied experiences.[27]

Building upon these observations, we argue that the perception that anti-apartheid activism in Britain, and the AAM specifically, was a highly centralised movement is another critical factor in understanding the dearth of scholarship on local activism. For example, Larson described the US anti-apartheid movement as 'highly decentralised' in comparison to its British counterpart.[28] Moreover, Fieldhouse asserted that the AAM failed to become a mass movement because of its 'strong tendency towards centralisation and control-freakery' which curtailed 'local innovative and divergent action'.[29] Although centralisation was evident within the AAM, particularly at a national level, the focus on this issue has created the impression that the grassroots and local dynamics of the movement has little to add to our understanding of British anti-apartheid activism. We assert that it is misleading to suggest that there was no initiative or divergence in local activism, which stemmed from the autonomy of group structures and the influence of disparate local conditions.

The bulk of the research for this article was conducted at the Bodleian Library, which is the core depository for the AAM's historical record. This collection holds numerous files pertaining to the administration of grassroots structures, as well as communications between the national AAM and over 100 individual groups. The movement's newspaper, *Anti-Apartheid News*, also regularly published reports of local activity which provide an important snapshot of grassroots activism. Although such records are vital to our understanding of the diversity of local anti-apartheid activity, they naturally tend to amplify the voices of groups which were in frequent contact with the AAM nationally. To supplement this source material, scholars should look more closely at the disparate anti-apartheid collections located in universities and city archives across Britain which have the potential to provide alternative readings on local activism that is not refracted through the national movement.[30] In this article, we have utilised the Scottish Committee of the AAM's (hereafter Scottish Committee) collection held at the Glasgow Caledonian University Archives, particularly its material on local activity.

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24 Law, 'Women's Activism', p. 279.

25 R. Skinner, '"Every Bite Buys a Bullet": Sanctions, Boycotts and Solidarity in Transnational Anti-Apartheid Activism', *Moving the Social: Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements*, 57 (2017), pp. 97–114.

26 C. Fevre, '"Scottish Exceptionalism?" Trade Unions and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1976–1994', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* 45, 3 (2019), pp. 525–42.

27 Map Your Bristol, 'Map Your Bristol: Anti-Apartheid', available at https://www.mapyourbristol.org.uk/community/anti-apartheid, retrieved 20 February 2023; Historypin, 'Anti-Apartheid Protest in Nottinghamshire', available at https://www.historypin.org/en/mapping-anti-apartheid-protest-in-notts/geo/53.070625,-1.180398,8/bounds/51.663726,-2.85032,54.433018,0.489524/paging/1 retrieved 20 February 2023; Fevre29, 'A History of Anti-Apartheid Activism in Dundee', directed by A. Heather, YouTube, 17 October 2022, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wu7_RtBUiIo, retrieved 23 March 2023.

28 Larson, 'U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement', p. 130.

29 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, p. 478.

30 Such as the Glasgow Caledonian University Archives (hereafter GCU Archives), AAM Scottish Committee records, and the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, Papers of Margaret Stanton on the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Southern Africa.

The recollections of grassroots activists are a further crucial component in unearthing the local dimensions of the AAM. There exists a widely accessible online series of interviews with former activists carried out by the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee.[31] We conducted 50 new interviews over Zoom between 2020 and 2022 with 39 former activists from all layers of the AAM. We spoke to activists who had been active in locations such as Bathgate, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Dundee, Edinburgh, Falkirk, Glasgow, Greater London, Newcastle and Sheffield.[32] Many of the participants had joined or were active during the 1980s and, as one former activist put it, were part of the 'last generation' of young supporters, which meant that their recollections often focused on this decade.[33] Moreover, through the interview process, we were occasionally granted access to activists' personal archives, which provided a unique insight into aspects of local anti-apartheid activity which are not documented in formal archives.

## 'The basis and heart of the movement'

Throughout its lifespan, the AAM recognised the need to establish a network of local activists and structures to build grassroots support for the anti-apartheid message across Britain. In December 1959, the Boycott Movement, forebear to the AAM, stressed the urgent need for the 'geographical decentralisation' of activity to establish a broader coalition of action beyond London.[34] By February 1960, around 35 boycott committees had formed in major cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Edinburgh.[35] The AAM believed that local groups were important in advancing national campaigns within their localities; for example, in 1963 they wrote to an activist in Lincoln, asserting that 'we feel there must be a great deal of potential support which is not reached by our national campaign and can best be reached through local activities'.[36] Groups were also expected to establish links with sympathetic organisations; educate the public about apartheid; expose British collaboration with South Africa at a regional and local level; fundraise for the national AAM and southern African liberation movements; and mobilise support through activities such as demonstrations, pickets, boycotts and cultural events. Their importance to the AAM's mission was repeatedly stressed in its annual reports, where local groups were described as 'the basis and heart of the movement'.[37] Establishing a nationwide structure was challenging, hindered by a range of different factors.[38] The AAM's groups were organisationally fragile and often reliant on key individuals to mobilise and sustain local activism, which meant that a change in personal circumstances could result in inactivity. Members were also frequently involved in other political or social campaigning which could occupy their limited time. The number of local groups peaked at 187 in the wake of the Nelson Mandela 'Freedom at 70' campaign in 1988, which was the first time the movement could claim national coverage.[39]

31 AAM Archives Committee, 'Forward to Freedom', available at https://www.aamarchives.org/archive/interviews.html, retrieved 16 June 2023.

32 The transcripts will be deposited with AAM 'Forward to Freedom' archives and GCU Archives.

33 Sophie Tranchell interview, 20 September 2022.

34 BL, MSS.AAM 2, 'Boycott Movement Minutes, 1959–1960', 29 December 1959, p. 2.

35 BL, MSS.AAM 2, 'Boycott Movement Minutes, 1959–1960', 3 February 1960, p. 1; MMS.AAM 3, 'Boycott Movement Press Releases, 1959–1960, Press Statement'.

36 BL, MSS.AAM 571, 'Letter from AAM to Mr. Waddingham', 29 October 1963.

37 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report on Activities and Developments, 1977/78', p. 22, available at https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b0100056, retrieved 12 June 2024.; Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report on Activities and Developments, 1982/83', p. 17, available at https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b0100061, retrieved 12 June 2024.

38 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 313–4.

39 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report on Activities and Developments, 1987/88', p. 33, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b0100066, retrieved 12 June 2024.

Although existing scholarship has principally focused on the AAM's national activities, the majority of anti-apartheid activism occurred locally. This can be illustrated by looking at the nature of the AAM's membership. The movement's structure enabled individuals to either join a local group only, become solely a national member, or become members of both. The latter two options were preferred by the national AAM as they received an affiliation fee. There are no exact data on the number of people who belonged to each affiliation category, although the AAM persistently bemoaned the low proportion of local members who affiliated nationally.[40] For example, an Edinburgh Anti-Apartheid (AA) meeting in 1971 reported that 'the national Movement is very concerned at the small proportion of members of local branches who … actually join the full AAM'.[41] This situation can partially be attributed to financial considerations. A later National Committee meeting in 1988 noted that 'many members could actually not afford … to pay £10 for national membership, but did in fact join the local group'.[42] Furthermore, the expense of joining the AAM at every level was reiterated by many of the activists we interviewed.[43]

The discrepancy between local and national membership was neatly illustrated in the case of Sheffield AA. The group's 1988/89 Annual Report stated that following a 'very encouraging' response to a national appeal to convert local activists into national members, the group now had 349 nationally affiliated members out of a total membership of 608.[44] Significantly, and despite the concerted effort to increase membership conversions in Sheffield, this was still only just over half. The AAM's membership peaked in March 1989 at 19,410 after the 'Freedom at 70' campaign, but this figure did not include local members. Mike Terry, AAM Executive Secretary, estimated in July 1989 that total membership, including local members, was around 25,000 to 30,000.[45] A sizable proportion of the AAM's membership therefore engaged with activism only at a grassroots level, meaning that their experiences and motivations are largely absent from the existing nationally focused narrative.

A prominent theme to emerge from the interviews with former activists was the centrality of the 'local' to their involvement in anti-apartheid. Dave Spurgeon (Bristol AAM) noted that, although all members were part of the AAM, 'some people only felt an affinity to Bristol anti-apartheid and not to the national movement'.[46] Moreover, Margaret Ling (Haringey AAM) believed that a strong local identity was more prevalent among groups outside London who found it harder to participate in national activities.[47] The community and social aspects of grassroots activism were also emphasised during the interviews, with a strong sense of friendship and camaraderie forged through shared purpose and regular activities.[48] This aspect drove many people's long-standing commitment to their local group. Crucially, grassroots activists frequently prioritised their local group because this was where anti-apartheid existed for them. Christine Worrall (Richmond AAM) recalled that 'the local group was the important group to me, and this is where things happened'.[49] Furthermore, a

40 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report on Activities and Developments, 1981/82', p. 28, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b0100060, retrieved 12 June 2024.
41 GCU Archives, AAM Scottish Committee, Local Groups, 1965–1991, Box 2: Edinburgh. Edinburgh Branch, 21 Nov 1971.
42 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'Minutes of the AAM National Committee', 7 May 1988, available at https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b1300166, retrieved 12 June 2024.
43 Paul Blomfield interview, 1 September 2022; Nad Pillay interview, 9 August 2022; Trish Mensah interview, 30 September 2022.
44 BL, MSS.AAM 412, 'Sheffield AAM Annual Report 1988/89'.
45 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'Minutes of the AAM National Committee', 8 July 1989, available at https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.aamp2b1300171, retrieved 12 June 2024.
46 Dave Spurgeon interview, 22 September 2022.
47 Margaret Ling interview, 19 August 2022.
48 Mark Guthrie interview, 24 August 2022; Pauline Brelsford interview, 11 August 2022.
49 Christine Worrall, Gill Conway and Judith Sawyer interview, 12 August 2022.

Fife AA letter to the Scottish Committee notified them that nobody from the group could attend its next meeting because they were launching a new campaign against Paterson's Fruit Merchants and they needed local members to leaflet stores.[50] For many activists, therefore, the local group was their institutional home, through which the everyday politics of anti-apartheid played out via regular activities such as pickets, leafleting and fundraising.

Not only did the majority of anti-apartheid activism take place locally, it was also where the British public interacted with the movement and its policies. The ongoing actions by local groups and sympathetic organisations made the issue of apartheid difficult to ignore. As Ling recalled, 'for many people the local group would have been the first contact they'd had with the anti-apartheid movement. And in putting southern Africa on the map for them locally'.[51] This sentiment speaks to the vital role that grassroots activists played in keeping the issue of apartheid alive as a national concern, particularly during downturns in internal resistance to white-minority rule and periods of comparatively little media attention on southern Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. Activists such as Nad Pillay (Haringey AAM/ANC) believed that grassroots structures were vital in giving greater visibility to the anti-apartheid cause and keeping the issue in people's minds.[52] Local activities did not always elicit the desired response, although they laid the foundations for the expansion of activity during the 1980s. Social movements like the AAM are rarely in control of their political environment and are frequently dependent on domestic and external factors to stimulate interest. As Pillay further noted, 'the key to organisations is to be ready for when those peaks happen … and if you're not ready or don't have a certain amount of infrastructure, then the wave could have gone'.[53]

In addition to maintaining visibility, local groups created opportunities for individuals to contribute to the anti-apartheid cause at varying levels. ANC veteran Pallo Jordan observed that they 'offered the citizen numerous points of intervention' which encouraged individual agency and contributed to the collective cause in small but meaningful ways.[54] Grassroots activists placed considerable emphasis on demonstrating to the public how they could directly contribute to the fight against apartheid. The theme of individual agency, especially around boycotts, was prevalent in local messaging, because goods or institutions in a specific locality could be directly linked to apartheid. A lot of anti-apartheid publicity contained sections entitled 'what you can do', which were designed to encourage small yet tangible acts of protest. For example, in 1986, Central Scotland AA produced a leaflet which read:

> As ordinary citizens you may feel the same distaste for what is happening in South Africa, if so, remember *you are not powerless*. If you go into a shop and see South Africa[n] goods – *You* have a choice. *It may be just an orange or a grapefruit. Just a few pennies* [but] *by refusing to give South Africa those few pennies you will help to hasten the end of apartheid.* (Original emphasis)[55]

This example illustrates how local groups sought to nurture anti-apartheid sentiment by encouraging 'ordinary' people to take an active interest in an international cause. The result

50 GCU Archives, AAM Scottish Committee, Local Groups, Box 3: Falkirk to Glasgow. Fife Correspondence. Letter, 6 October 1987.

51 Ling interview, 19 August 2022.

52 Pillay interview, 9 August 2022.

53 *Ibid.*

54 P. Jordan, 'Foreword', in R. Kasrils (ed.), *International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War That Liberated South Africa* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2021), p. 11.

55 GCU Archives, AAM Scottish Committee, Local Groups, 1985–89, Box 1: Aberdeen-East Kilbride. Central Region Leaflet, 'Anti-Apartheid Central Region: What You Can Do', 1986.

was that one-third of the British population reportedly boycotted South African goods by the mid 1980s.[56]

Local groups were important in establishing links with other sympathetic grassroots organisations. Although this article is focused on the AAM, it was part of a much wider anti-apartheid coalition by the 1980s. This involved trade unions, local authorities, political parties, churches and other anti-apartheid organisations such as End Loans to Southern Africa, Southern Africa the Imprisoned Society, and the Namibia Support Committee. It is important to emphasise that the AAM did not always take a leadership position; for instance, Southampton AA supported the local Community Relations Council's campaign against Hampshire Police sending cadets to South Africa for training in the late 1970s.[57] Moreover, coverage of local activity in *Anti-Apartheid News* focused on more than just the movement's groups. There were articles encompassing the formation of the Sussex University Southern Africa Appeal Committee to support the ZAPU–ANC alliance in 1969, and the activities of the Asian community group, South Africa Concerns You, in Scotland in the mid 1980s.[58] Brian Filling (Scottish Committee) argued that the AAM was much more than its local groups. However, he recognised their crucial role in developing a broad anti-apartheid consensus among civil society organisations.[59] Through public meetings, film screenings and visiting speakers, local groups cultivated and utilised relationships with civil society actors to educate, persuade and inform them on how they might take action. The emergence of a broad-based anti-apartheid coalition was one of the movement's foremost achievements and critical to its mainstream influence during the 1980s. This involved a lot of publicly unseen work by relatively few activists. Olive Smiles (Falkirk AAM) recalled the importance of behind-the-scenes activity in changing the policies of local trade unions, councils and co-operative societies towards South Africa.[60] Although this had a negligible effect on the South African regime, it made apartheid an issue locally and helped embed anti-apartheid concerns into the national public consciousness.

## Grassroots Autonomy within the AAM

A key dimension of AAM historiography has been its characterisation of the movement as highly centralised. The national AAM sought to co-ordinate group actions where possible to maintain consistency of ideology, messaging and action across the network, as well as encouraging activist involvement in national and local campaigns. This was facilitated through regular National Committee meetings, the AGM, *Anti-Apartheid News*, and monthly local group mailings. Such mailings provided an important channel of communication between the centre and its grassroots, and included information about forthcoming campaigns, suggestions for local activity, and updates on developments in southern Africa.[61] The AAM also launched numerous national periods of action that were intended to direct activities around specific campaigns, such as the May week of action against Shell in 1987.[62] Activists such as Mick Antoniw (Wales AAM) reflected critically that the AAM was 'quite London centric … quite centralised in terms of an organisation, and quite …

56 AAM Archives, 'Boycott South African Goods', available at http://www.aamarchives.org/campaigns/boycott.html, retrieved 23 February 2023.
57 *Anti-Apartheid News*, March 1979, p. 2.
58 'The Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU)', *Anti-Apartheid News,* February 1969, p. 2; *Anti-Apartheid News*, January–February 1987, p. 2.
59 Brian Filling interview, 18 August 2022.
60 Alan Smiles and Olive Smiles interview, 23 August 2022.
61 BL, MSS.AAM 457-463, 'Local group mailings', 1964–1994.
62 *Anti-Apartheid News*, May 1987, p. 2.

bureaucratic'.[63] Others also acknowledged these centralising tendencies, but framed them as necessary to ensure a politically disciplined movement designed to support the ANC and prevent perceived threats of infiltration from the radical left.[64]

There was undoubtedly an element of centralisation within the upper echelons of the national movement, but such a narrative is complicated when examining the AAM's grassroots. Although there were efforts at 'control' from the centre, there were limitations to the AAM's ability and its willingness to micromanage the movement. A key impediment was its persistent lack of resources. The AAM spent much of its existence on a financial precipice, which in turn meant, except for the late 1980s, it employed a skeleton staff to oversee all aspects of its operations. Moreover, the frequent criticisms from local groups about the extent and quality of the service they received was indicative of a movement unable to fulfil all its central obligations. It was therefore difficult for the centre to take an assertive role over its grassroots, even if it had wanted to. Nationally devised campaigns such as the consumer boycott were not and could not be micromanaged, nor did they have, or want, direct control or influence over local structures. As a result, there was a significant degree of autonomy for the AAM's grassroots which ensured that activism did not emerge and develop in a homogeneous manner.

The consensus from former activists was that although groups operated within a national framework, which broadly involved support for the AAM's central campaigns and political positions, solidarity with the ANC and South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), and opposition to direct action, they had significant autonomy within that. David Kenvyn (Redbridge AAM) summarised this position neatly: 'I think that we had a lot of autonomy. Obviously, we acted within the national campaigns … But how it actually got implemented on the ground? That was entirely up to us'.[65] David Hillman (Hammersmith and Fulham AAM) offered a similar assessment, stating that groups had the freedom to implement the campaign programme, but 'it was within a menu that came nationally'.[66] Activists selected the national campaigns which they considered the most appropriate locally and decided how to implement them. In addition to the long-standing boycott, sanctions and disinvestment campaigns, new initiatives were established yearly by the AAM in response to the rapidly evolving situation in southern Africa, particularly from the mid 1980s. It would, however, have been impossible for local groups to carry out all the AAM's campaigns due to the sheer number of them. Roger Harris (Wandsworth AAM) even commented that there were too many national campaigns, which made it hard to prioritise.[67] Consequently, the spread and development of anti-apartheid actions was not congruent across Britain as groups chose and instigated national activities that best suited the situation on the ground.

Under the national umbrella, local activists interpreted these campaigns and directives in innovative ways, in part due to the autonomy groups had. A good example was the consumer boycott. Skinner noted the varying emphasis placed on the consumer boycott by the national AAM, particularly as it focused on sanctions and disinvestment in the 1970s; however, it remained a consistent feature of local activism.[68] The targets of local consumer boycott action varied depending on the regional presence of a particular company; for example, the Scottish Committee undertook a long-running campaign against William Low's supermarket.[69] Picketing and leafleting supermarkets selling South African goods

63 Mick Antoniw interview, 30 September 2022.
64 Roger Harris interview, 19 August 2022; Amin Mawani interview, 1 September 2020.
65 David Kenvyn interview, 10 August 2022.
66 David Hillman interview, 8 September 2022.
67 Harris interview, 19 August 2022.
68 Skinner, 'Every Bite', p. 108.
69 John Nelson interview, 24 August 2022.

was a staple of local activity, which Edinburgh AA described as the 'nuts-and-bolts' of the movement.[70] However, local activists developed and adopted a variety of strategies and tactics around the consumer boycott. Although the national AAM was reluctant to endorse direct action, local groups utilised this tactic on various occasions. Some staged stunts at supermarket checkouts by refusing to pay for South African goods to draw attention to the issue of apartheid.[71] Other initiatives included Exeter AA, which produced an apartheid-free shopping guide, an idea later adopted by the national AAM and other local groups.[72] This is an interesting example of how ideas could flow up from the grassroots rather than simply coming down from the national AAM. Lastly, and although the AAM's general policy was for a boycott of goods rather than specific stores, certain groups such as Sheffield and Merseyside held 'stayaways' from the mid 1980s.[73] These examples highlight how even national campaigns could have a significant local context, accentuating the diversity of activism across Britain.

Group autonomy was rarely problematic for the national AAM. For one, local groups had chosen to affiliate, and by extension had willingly aligned themselves to the overarching aims and objectives of the movement. As the Exeter and District group wrote in 1979, '[w]e are completely autonomous but in fact adopt the principles and objectives of the Anti-Apartheid Movement'.[74] Accordingly, it was rare for a group to act in a way that contradicted the overall approach of the national AAM. The one notable exception was the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group (City Group). This group challenged mainstream AAM thinking through its support for direct action, advocating for liberation movements other than the ANC, and an ideological approach informed by the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG).[75] The City Group was perceived to have stepped too far from the approved national framework, prompting the AAM to withdraw its recognition in 1985. The AAM argued that City Group had broken rules about operating and recruiting beyond its geographic boundary and distributing non-AAM literature at demonstrations. However, the underlying reason that the City Group was expelled was, as Fieldhouse notes, the 'AAM's almost pathological fear of militancy and direct action advocated by the far left'.[76] The spectre of the City Group overshadowed the national movement throughout the 1980s. As a result, there was a lingering suspicion and paranoia about far-left infiltration and a takeover of the movement, which in turn shaped national decision-making and communication.

Significantly, when examining the City Group issue through the prism of the grassroots, particularly outside London, it becomes clear that the effect of these ideological tensions nationally did not necessarily filter down to the same extent locally. For example, several groups were sympathetic to City Group's militant posture and protested against the national organisation's decision to exclude them.[77] Gavin Brown has challenged Fieldhouse's assertion that the radical left sought to take over local anti-apartheid groups, arguing that even in places which had strong RCG branches, he overestimated their strength and

70 GCU Archives, AAM Scottish Committee, Local Groups, 1965–1991, Box 2: Edinburgh. 'Edinburgh Anti-Apartheid Letter', 28 April 1989, p. 3.
71 Simon Korner interview, 5 September 2022.
72 BL, MSS.AAM 532, 'Exeter and District Anti-Apartheid Group: Press Release', December 1987.
73 BL, MSS.AAM 625, 'Sheffield Anti-Apartheid News', November/December 1989, p. 1; BL, MSS.AAM 583, 'Merseyside Anti-Apartheid Newsletter', February 1989, Number 5.
74 BL, MSS.AAM 532, 'Memorandum of the Exeter and District Anti-Apartheid Committee', 1979.
75 Brown and Yaffe, *Youth Activism*; Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 219–26.
76 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid,* p. 226.
77 BL, MSS.AAM 518, 'Letter from Alan Norrie to Mike Terry', 18 March 1985; Brian Hurwitz interview, 11 August 2022.

underestimated the appeal of City Group's politics.[78] The example of Dundee complicates Fieldhouse's argument further because the RCG played an instrumental role in establishing the city's anti-apartheid group.[79] Additionally, one former activist recalled that smaller groups such as Dundee were more adept at managing ideological divisions because they could not afford to alienate active members over doctrinal disputes.[80] This may have been a rose-tinted view of events designed to generate a post hoc impression of a united movement, because tensions certainly existed between Dundee and the Scottish Committee. Yet other activists, including those in London, also recalled that the City Group fallout had relatively little significance in their localities.[81] The AAM's strength was its broad-church membership, and while there were national fears of far-left entryism, which sometimes had an effect locally, these divisions were not universal. Therefore, by looking beyond the national lens, it becomes clear that the narrative of division which has dominated AAM–City Group historiography is more complex than has previously been indicated.

A core criticism levelled at the national AAM was its reluctance to engage with issues of domestic racism.[82] The AAM had been proactively engaged in anti-racist activities during the 1970s, particularly at a local level. The 1977/78 Annual Report acknowledged that '[l]ocal AA groups have succeeded in making a major impact at anti-racist marches, rallies and other events, with AA groups often being members of or having close liaison with local organisations'.[83] Moreover, many individual anti-apartheid activists were involved in anti-racist organisations themselves.[84] However, during the following decade, the AAM retreated from domestic anti-racist campaigning. In part, this was a strategic decision by the national AAM to remain a single-issue movement, although one which became intertwined with the City Group conflict, as the City Group criticised the reluctance to recognise the interconnected nature of the struggle against apartheid and racism in Britain.[85] The national AAM sought to engage and develop greater support among ethnic minority communities, but its stance meant it was perceived to be 'disinterested and uninvolved in, and even unsympathetic to the anti-racist struggles here in Britain'.[86]

Yet, there is some evidence to suggest that the AAM's national retreat from anti-racist activism was not necessarily reflected at the local level. Groups such as Sheffield, which were not linked to the far left, continued to actively highlight the connections between racism in South Africa and Britain, and the need to tackle both. Sheffield AA's Annual Report for 1986/87 explicitly stated that 'we continue to recognise our place within the broad anti-racist movement'.[87] Similarly, in Wales, Anne Delaney believed that a willingness to forge and maintain links with local anti-racist groups was a 'major feature' of the Welsh movement.[88] In both instances, specific local conditions shaped responses to the interlinked questions of apartheid and domestic racism. Prominent Sheffield activists such as Paul Blomfield and Steve Howell asserted that the group's roots in the local trade union

78 G. Brown, 'Anti-Apartheid Solidarity in the Perspectives and Practices of the British Far Left in the 1970s and 1980s', in E. Smith and M. Worley (eds), *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 80.

79 Ron Tuck's Personal Archive, 'Dundee Anti-Apartheid Movement Bulletin No.1', undated, p. 11.

80 Interviewee anonymised, 17 December 2021.

81 Kenvyn interview, 10 August 2022; Antoniw interview, 30 September 2022; Blomfield interview, 1 September 2022.

82 Williams, *Politics of Race*, p. 134.

83 Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, 'AAM Annual Report, 1977/78', p. 24.

84 Christabel Gurney interview, 16 August 2022.

85 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, p. 347.

86 National Library of Wales, GB0210 WAAM, AD3/1, 'Report of the Working Party on the Black and Ethnic Minority Communities', 1987.

87 BL, MSS.AAM 412, 'Sheffield AAM Annual Report, 1986/87'.

88 Anne Delaney interview, 27 September 2022.

movement, which had a strong history of anti-racist activism through the Sheffield Campaign Against Racism from the late 1970s, strongly influenced its position.[89] In Cardiff, activists recalled that many of the Wales AAM's founding members, including Hanef Bhamjee and Gulam Mayet, were heavily involved with anti-racist groups in Butetown.[90] These connections were integral to sustaining the closer relationship between the AAM and the wider anti-racism movement in these localities. Further research into local groups is required to establish whether there was a material difference between national and local engagement with anti-racism in the AAM. However, these examples highlight how a grassroots analysis has the potential to nuance our understanding of various aspects of the AAM's multifaceted history.

## A Heterogeneous Movement

London was the key city of the transnational anti-apartheid struggle and the epicentre of the movement in Britain. However, specific local dynamics existed that differed markedly from other localities and created conditions conducive to activism. A critical difference was the proximity that London and south-east activists had to the AAM's headquarters. Consequently, these activists could interact and engage closely with the national structures in a more sustained fashion than their counterparts further afield. London-based activists were frequently relied upon to volunteer in the cash-strapped AAM office. Ling recalled, 'the London anti-apartheid groups were in a different position because we were so close to the office … and we constituted the cadres, we were the ones who did the voluntary work in the office and helped keep it going'.[91] Incidentally, this often involved helping the AAM to communicate with its grassroots by sending copies of *Anti-Apartheid News* and the monthly group mailing to local committees. Many groups complained about the AAM's poor service and communication, yet this was less problematic for London activists who recalled regularly visiting the AAM's office to make enquiries and collect campaign materials.[92] Furthermore, the AAM's national events were held in London, placing a special responsibility on activists in the capital to provide the basis of support for marches and rallies, as well as stewarding.[93] Groups outside London attended national demonstrations, often in considerable numbers, but this varied over the AAM's lifespan and depended on the strength of local organisations.

The presence of a comparatively large number of southern African political exiles and expatriates, and the location of the exiled offices of the ANC and SACTU, was another distinctive feature of the environment in London. The existing scholarship has widely acknowledged the important role of exiles and expatriates in stimulating global anti-apartheid activity.[94] This was certainly the case in London. Prominent London-based exiles such as Vella Pillay, Tennyson Makiwane and Patrick van Rensburg helped establish the AAM during the 1960s. The significant exile presence in London also enhanced activism at the local level. Haringey AA was one of the most active and largest branches in Britain, due partly to the numerous exiles living in the area – it was colloquially known as 'little Jo'burg'.[95] Both the large exiled population and the liberation movement offices ensured that London-based activists had a direct connection to the situation in southern Africa.

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89 Blomfield interview, 1 September 2022; Steve Howell interview, 11 October 2022.
90 Brelsford interview, 11 August 2022; Gulam Mayet interview, 25 September 2022.
91 Ling interview, 19 August 2022.
92 Guthrie interview, 24 August 2022; Kenvyn interview, 10 August 2022.
93 Korner interview, 5 September 2022; Kenvyn interview, 10 August 2022.
94 Thörn, *Global Civil Society*, pp. 29–47; Stevens, 'Why South Africa?'; Larson, 'U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement', pp. 45–84.
95 Kenvyn interview, 10 August 2022.

Harris believed an advantage of being active in London was that 'we got to know a lot of the ANC people … and that sort of strengthened the campaign because when they came to groups or came to pickets … it helped to inspire people'.[96] The ability of London activists to regularly interact with members of the liberation movements thus contributed to the strength of anti-apartheid in the capital.

Outside London the southern African population was considerably smaller, which affected how activists engaged with the liberation movements. There were exiles and expatriates dotted throughout Britain who played important roles in stimulating and sustaining activism in their localities, including: Suganya Chetty (Edinburgh), Hanef Bhamjee and Gulam Mayet (Cardiff), Ron Press and Mark Sweet (Bristol), and Mervyn Bennum (Exeter). Relatively small communities of exiles also briefly emerged in cities such as Birmingham and Dundee in the 1970s, centred on the student population. These communities helped to shape the focus of campaigning in these locales. Birmingham emerged as one of the main centres of opposition in Britain to the white supremacist Smith regime in Rhodesia under the guise of the Birmingham Committee for Justice in Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), which was formed by local AAM members. A core factor was the large Zimbabwean population in the city, many of whom were former political prisoners.[97] Simultaneously, there were various localities where the politics of anti-apartheid took root in which there was minimal or no sustained connection with southern African exiles or expatriates. This included Sheffield, which had one of the largest anti-apartheid groups in Britain. Such areas' connections to the liberation movements were largely limited to the national speaking tours undertaken by representatives of the ANC, SACTU and SWAPO, which were also hugely motivational for activists.[98] To understand how the politics of anti-apartheid emerged and developed in localities like Sheffield, other factors must be considered. Sheffield-based activists Paul Blomfield, Richard Caborn and Steve Howell observed that the strength of anti-apartheid in the city was largely due to the nature of the local trade union movement and its anti-racist and internationalist outlook.[99]

Fieldhouse acknowledged the considerable diversity of the AAM's local groups, although he explains this primarily through the tensions between the far left and the national movement.[100] However, this explanation does not encapsulate the various factors influencing the structure of local groups. Tyneside AA, for example, adopted an anti-hierarchical structure and abolished all formal roles, except that of treasurer. This was partly inspired by the forms of grassroots participatory democracy emerging out of South Africa in the 1980s.[101] The group was also influenced by a gendered critique of political organisation originating within the women's liberation movement.[102] Allison Barrett (Tyneside AAM) recalled that the AAM's Executive Committee meetings had 'overtones of that Labour Party, trade union male way of doing politics which wasn't our local group way of doing it'.[103] In this case, a confluence of transnational and domestic political ideas influenced the shape of local anti-apartheid activity in this setting. This adds to Law's work on LWAA and

96 Harris interview, 19 August 2022.
97 P. Bryden (personal communication, 25 October 2022).
98 Smiles and Smiles interview, 23 August 2022.
99 Blomfield interview, 1 September 2022; Richard Caborn interview, 24 August 2022; Howell interview, 11 October 2022.
100 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 311–2.
101 Allison Barrett interview, 22 September 2022; J. Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983–1991* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000).
102 S. Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 48.
103 Allison Barrett interview, 28 September 2020.

the alternate methods of organisation that were evident within some local anti-apartheid structures.[104]

Not only could groups differ organisationally, but the focus of their activism varied depending on the individuals involved and the local socio-economic environment in which they operated. For instance, in the affluent London borough of Richmond many of the group's members were involved in the church, which meant their activities primarily focused on the local churches.[105] In contrast, in industrial and heavily unionised areas such as Manchester and Merseyside, the vast majority of their campaigning centred on the local trade union movement. Manchester AA and Merseyside AA liaised closely in this work, primarily through the North-West Trade Union Liaison Committee.[106] Although the national AAM extensively encouraged and promoted trade union work by its groups, the extent to which it was a priority varied due to local demographics.[107] In Manchester, for example, the trade union focus reflected the prominent role of trade unionists within the anti-apartheid group. Frances Kelly, a leading personality in Manchester AA during the 1970s and 1980s, was also a local National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) shop steward. Moreover, the fact that the prominent South African trade unionist Archie Sibeko (pseudonym Zola Zembe), SACTU's Western Europe co-ordinator, resided in Manchester along with his wife Joyce Leeson, who herself had led the local anti-apartheid group during the early 1970s, influenced the nature of activism in the area.[108]

Similarly to their US counterparts, British activists sought to adapt the anti-apartheid message to specific local audiences and concerns. This was particularly evident in their attempts to engage trade unionists in the struggle. In the early 1970s, as the national AAM lobbied the British government against selling Westland Wasp helicopters to the apartheid government, an article in *Anti-Apartheid News* argued that to prevent companies from exporting military equipment, workers must be convinced that their interests aligned with the black South African working class.[109] It has been well documented how British workers were concerned about imposing economic sanctions due to fears over job losses.[110] To circumvent such concerns activists, particularly those in the north-west of England, asserted that the anti-apartheid message had to move beyond straightforward moral arguments. This culminated in 1979 when the North-West Trade Union Liaison Committee published 'Anti-Apartheid & the Trade Unions: A Practical Guide', which shared examples of best practice with other local groups. The guide stressed that 'to wage successful campaigns we need to bring out the direct relevance of the struggles that are taking place in southern Africa to the lives of workers in Britain'.[111] More specifically, activists emphasised how it was in workers' economic interests to fight apartheid, linking this to a wider critique of capitalism and economic globalisation. Merseyside AA argued in the mid 1980s that

> there are … practical reasons why we should support workers in [South Africa]. Tens of thousands of jobs have disappeared from Merseyside … Those firms with a multinational outlook are driven by the need … to maximise profits. What better place to choose to invest in than a country such as S. Africa.[112]

104 Law, 'Women's Activism'.
105 Worrall, Conway and Sawyer interview, 12 August 2022.
106 BL, MSS.AAM 580, 'Manchester Report', 18 August 1981.
107 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 375–412.
108 BL, MSS.AAM 580, 'Letter from Archie Sibeko (Zola Zembe) to Mike Terry', 26 June 1976.
109 *Anti-Apartheid News,* March 1971, p. 12.
110 Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, pp. 375–406; Gurney, 'The 1970s'.
111 BL, MSS.AAM 457, 'Anti-Apartheid & the Trade Unions: A Practical Guide', 1979.
112 BL, MSS.AAM 583, 'Merseyside Anti-Apartheid Group leaflet', undated.

Although it is difficult to gauge the effect of this messaging, it demonstrates the adaptability of grassroots activists in how they communicated with their local communities.

One challenge that many local activists reported was the general public's 'apathy' towards apartheid, which is a reason they sought to tailor their messaging to highlight its relevance to their communities. This was reflected in local campaigning, which could exhibit considerable regional diversity. In Sheffield, for example, a city dominated by the steel industry, a campaign was launched by the anti-apartheid group alongside the local trade union movement and City Council to end manufacturers' dependency on minerals imported from South Africa.[113] In nearby Bradford, there was a campaign against the importation of Namibian karakul wool which was used in the city's textile industry.[114] There were also protests, alongside the Namibian Support Committee, across the north-west of England regarding the use of illegal Namibian uranium in the region's nuclear power stations, while Oxford saw demonstrations against the transportation of this uranium through the city, citing the UN decree on exports from Namibia, and the danger to local residents.[115] Many of these anti-nuclear protests involved collaboration with branches of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, as well as other peace organisations. In York, there were sustained protests against Rowntree's confectionery that focused on the treatment of 500 South African workers who had been sacked by its East London subsidiary.[116] Lastly, anti-apartheid activists in Aberdeen focused on highlighting the connections between the city's oil industry and apartheid.[117] Activists argued that 'Aberdeen may be 8000 miles from South Africa, but North Sea oil and South Africa are only separated by the length of an oil tanker'.[118] The result was a patchwork of regionally specific campaigns, which reflected highly localised links to the apartheid economy.

Grassroots activity was also shaped by the political links between Britain and South Africa. In *Selling Apartheid,* Ron Nixon revealed the extensive propaganda war waged by the South African government to counteract the influence of the international anti-apartheid movement.[119] These propaganda efforts occurred at a transnational, national and, crucially, local level. Therefore, a core function of the AAM's grassroots was to attempt to thwart apartheid propaganda. This resulted in constant protests when apartheid representatives and supporters appeared publicly across Britain, such as the South African ambassador and Consul-General, recruitment officers and the Friends of the Springbok society.[120] The nature of local cultural and sporting links to South Africa also influenced grassroots activism. Blomfield recalled that sporting links were not much of a concern in Sheffield because the city had no major rugby or cricket teams. Instead, the group focused on cultural links, including a prominent campaign around Elton John's invitation to play the City Hall after he had refused to confirm whether he would return to South Africa to perform.[121] Lastly, the insidious nature of links between Britain and South Africa resulted in actions against seemingly unusual, yet no less significant, targets. For instance, there was a long-running

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113 BL, MSS.AAM 412, 'Sheffield AAM, Annual Report 1986/87'.

114 BL, MSS.AAM 412, 'Yorkshire and Humberside Anti-Apartheid Committee leaflet, "Free Namibia Independence Now"', undated.

115 *Anti-Apartheid News*, December 1980, p. 5; BL, MSS.AAM 607, 'Oxford AA Press Release', 16 November 1989.

116 *Anti-Apartheid News*, July/August 1981, p. 2.

117 GCU Archives, AAM Scottish Committee Records, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 'Apartheid Protest at Oil Firm's Offices', 14 March 1985.

118 BL, MSS.AAM 463, 'Aberdeen Anti-Apartheid Newsletter, Spring 1985'.

119 R.N. Nixon, *Selling Apartheid: South Africa's Global Propaganda War* (London, Pluto Press, 2016).

120 *Anti-Apartheid News*, December 1970/January 1971, p. 2; *Anti-Apartheid News,* March 1976, p. 11; *Anti-Apartheid News,* October 1978, p. 2.

121 Blomfield interview, 1 September 2022; BL, MSS.AAM 625, 'Sheffield AAM Members Newsletter, October/November 1985'.

campaign in the mid 1980s by Stratford AA against the annual unfurling of the South African flag and the invitation of apartheid officials to the Shakespeare birthday celebrations.[122] The Southport flower show banned exhibitors from South Africa in 1986, following four years of protests by activists.[123] These forms of mobilisation were largely symbolic, but were important in creating grassroots visibility and awareness. Teesside AA reported that their actions targeting Leo Sayer and Cliff Richard concerts had received extensive media coverage, which made 'the cultural boycott very much an issue locally'.[124] Significantly, none of these actions could have been orchestrated nationally.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that to gain a greater and more nuanced understanding of the British AAM, more attention should be paid to the local dimensions of the movement. The existing literature has overwhelmingly focused on the national AAM, which has led to the emergence of a London-centric narrative and an overemphasis on the issue of centralisation. In adopting such a perspective, significant aspects of the movement, and the experiences of activists, are omitted from the overarching narrative. This article has demonstrated that by turning to the local dimension, the rich tapestry of activism can be better understood. There is no single 'local' narrative, and the ways in which activities developed and unfolded were shaped not only by the national AAM, but also through the significant grassroots autonomy within the movement and the environment in which the groups operated. By looking at the AAM from the bottom up, we can establish a different picture of the movement and how the politics of anti-apartheid played out in various settings. What emerges is a much more heterogeneous picture, where activists and groups unified under the AAM's banner approached the struggle in subtly different ways. This article has demonstrated that the issues of ideology, movement building, messaging and campaigns were affected by the specificities of a locality, and these factors meant that activism developed and evolved in very different ways.

The article has elucidated how a focus on the local can enhance our broader understanding of the AAM, and anti-apartheid activism more widely. It has demonstrated how a local analysis has the potential to provide greater nuance to established historiographical themes such as the AAM's engagement with anti-racism in Britain and its tensions with the far left. In both these instances, there is evidence to suggest that the way these issues played out locally could differ from the national movement. There is also significant potential for future research on the distinctiveness of activism, encompassing themes such as how the broad-based anti-apartheid coalition was built within local civil society and the influence of national political cultures on the movement, as well as the interrelationship between the politics of anti-racism and anti-apartheid locally. This article offers a starting point in developing a more sustained analysis of international anti-apartheid solidarity at the micro level.

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122 *Anti-Apartheid News*, June 1985, p. 2
123 *Anti-Apartheid News*, September 1986, p. 4.
124 *Anti-Apartheid News*, October 1984, p. 10.

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