Diaspora activism and citizenship: Algerian community responses during the global pandemic

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, this article explores the Algerian diaspora's impressive outpouring of collective solidarity in the UK and seeks to discover why and how a migrant community previously known for collective mistrust developed such forms of activism. It draws on concepts of diaspora philanthropy, activism and citizenship to understand, firstly, how diasporas might be enabled or hindered, in supporting their communities and then the wider impacts of their crisis responses on processes of social change. Drawing on participant observation, interviews and social media from charitable organisations and leading influencers from the Algerian community in the UK, it explores a wide range of remarkable initiatives to support vulnerable communities, predominantly in London during the pandemic. Motivations and facilitating factors of this solidarity included emerging trust in local elites and leaders, Islamic faith, effective engagement in online spaces and pride in a transnational Algerian identity. Seemingly apolitical towards the homeland, this activism is contributing to social transformation within this diasporic group, rebuilding fractured communities and creating new social identities, feelings of belonging and citizenship.

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\section*{Introduction}

Faced with the public health, social and economic crises resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant communities have been vulnerable to its worst effects (Beardsmore 2020). Economic downturns and overstretched health services have affected them disproportionately. Having limited space or means to respond, it has added to existing ‘layers of inequality’ (Sandhu and Stephenson 2015; Brah, Szeman, and Gedalof 2015). Despite limited resources, and dominant narratives that suggest migrants may be less mobilised, portrayed as victims (Ticktin 2011) or outsiders (Nicholls 2013), scholars in critical migration studies increasingly recognise that migrants do mobilise politically (Steinhilper 2018). In certain contexts, migrant communities have found innovative ways to mobilise...
for social ends, to channel their social networks and in-group solidarity, to offer support to the most vulnerable members of their local communities in unanticipated ways. Drawing on a case study of the significant mobilisation by the Algerian community in London, we aim to understand why and how a migrant community known for collective mistrust and dislocation from its country of origin developed an impressive outpouring of collective solidarity. Acknowledging Stephen Castles’ conceptualisation of migration as ‘an integral and essential part of social transformation processes’, and that ‘awareness of change usually starts at the local level’ (2010, 1578), we focus on the local experiences of this migrant community during the pandemic, to explore the wider implications.

The research focuses on the remarkable campaign launched in March 2020 by the Algerian community in the UK, predominantly in London. Algerian individuals and organisations came together in an unprecedented and surprisingly coordinated, effective manner. For more than a year, they provided food, shelter and counselling daily to thousands of vulnerable people in London, as well as fundraising for Algerian hospitals throughout the COVID19 crisis. This social mobilisation was all the more striking in that it followed a turbulent year of peaceful protests in the home country and in the diaspora, known as the hirak, that saw significant political change including the standing down of the Algerian president in 2019 (Guemar, Chiheb, and Northey 2019). Whilst in London political protests by Algerians in 2019 were modest, the community still grappling with divisions, the social mobilisation in 2020 exceeded that of many other larger diaspora communities such as that in France (Collyer 2006), where over half a million Algerians reside. According to the Algerian consulate, around 65,000 Algerians live in the UK, with estimates from local charities at 80,000 if undocumented Algerians are included.

In terms of methods, this research firstly draws on in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews by the authors with charity leaders, influencers and key activists from the Algerian community. We aimed for diversity in terms of age, class and gender. Two of the authors are Algerians themselves, based in London, and the other author has conducted research in Algeria over the last decade. Through our personal connections and trust, gained through previous activism alongside these organisations, we were able to ask individuals to recommend other contacts. Interviews were conducted online in autumn 2020 and early 2021. These focused on experiences of mobilising, fundraising, community solidarity and relations before and during the pandemic and any barriers. Secondly, the research draws on participant observation of online fundraising activities we ourselves were involved in and data from social media from Algerian organisations in London. Surprised by the level of organisation and the amount of funds raised by small, grassroots associations, we set out to explore how the Algerian community in the UK was organising, how they connected with each other, their motivations and the implications of their work. We engaged with Algerian activist academics, in London and around the UK, as well as grassroots organisers with far fewer resources. Though we did not interview undocumented persons, we were informed about their significant contributions by interviewees. Themes emerged gradually from interview transcripts, the online data and our own reflections and experiences. These were coded, discussed and analysed by the team, in a number of online exchanges. These themes included the facilitating factors of the host country, as well as enabling characteristics of the community such as trust, faith and spaces for engagement. Interviewees also repeatedly brought up factors preventing engagement, both structurally and psychologically. These included
the history of division and trauma from the 1990s conflict in Algeria. They informed us how in 2020 such divisions had been seriously challenged and they elaborated on their aspirations for future solidarity. The authors cannot claim to speak for the community. We recognise its diversity and our own privilege, but throughout the research, we noted increasing connections between Algerian academics in the UK, as well between and with community organisations. All interviewees, to our surprise, were positive about this research, and we committed to continuing engagement with them in future research and activism. Coventry University ethics committee provided ethical approval for the data gathering process.

Diaspora activism or mobilisation is often framed as a politicised activity that is focused predominantly on the homeland (Low 2017; Newland, Terrazas, and Munster 2010). The activism of the Algerian diaspora in the UK during the pandemic, however, focused almost entirely on London. Initially directed towards vulnerable Algerians in the city, it rapidly expanded to encompass other vulnerable communities of non-Algerians, including those who would not necessarily identify with Algerian religious beliefs or forms of social identity. This solidarity, although less focused on homeland politics, was not apolitical, and may well have a political impact as a form of grassroots activism, at the local level and within the diaspora community. The shared emotions and experience of exclusion and inequalities (Steinhilper 2018) motivated groups to respond to the crisis, and this, in turn, has implications for citizenship (Nyers and Rygiel 2012), group identity and the ways in which the group relates to the homeland. We aim to investigate how this locally-focused philanthropy and diaspora activism (Koinova 2018) might challenge certain structural barriers in the local context, such as community fragmentation (Castles 2010), and how this might have implications for the social identity and citizenship of diasporic communities (Mutambasere 2021) on a wider scale.

The article will firstly introduce the key concepts of diaspora philanthropy, activism and citizenship, to explore how these might explain this civic activism from a historically divided community during the pandemic. Secondly, it will outline the COVID-19 crisis as it affected Algerian migrants in particular, and their dynamics of mobilisation at the local level in London. The following sections will develop an understanding of how trust, faith and Algerian national identity, rather than ethnic or religious identity, as well as spaces of solidarity and leadership, all contributed to the enabling of diaspora activism. It will conclude with a reflection on whether the inclusive nature of this philanthropy might have implications for wider social processes of change and citizenship.

**Diaspora philanthropy, activism and citizenship**

Low uses the concept of ‘diaspora philanthropy’ (2017) to understand transnational political activism aimed at migrants’ home countries. Drawing on the experience of the Malaysian diaspora, she writes that ‘diaspora philanthropy is closely connected to the notions of activism, mobilization, and resistance’ (Low 2017, 153). A form of emigrant ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson 1998), political mobilisation might involve fundraising for elections or mobilising to support political parties or pro-democracy movements back home. Koinova (2018) refers to Ignatieff’s (1994) important distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism. Civic nationalism is about equal rights, shared values and common citizenship, regardless of ethnic or religious creed. Ethnic
nationalism, in contrast, is particularistic and ‘emphasises common blood as a basis for communal belonging, ethnic majority rule, and unity by ascription by an identity-based community’ (Koinova 2018, 1255). Koinova acknowledges the challenges in the European periphery to understanding the relationship between nationalism and the state, due to ongoing cleavages and legacies of colonialism. Such ethnic and civic activism or nationalism, whilst important across multiple diasporas and far from neutral development processes, has not yet been systematically theorised. Koinova encourages scholars to take the ‘little-explored paths’ to examine diasporas as ‘agents of civic and ethnic-based activism’ (Koinova 2018, 1252). To what extent is diaspora activism promoting shared values and citizenship or, inversely, promoting ethnicity or identity-based divisions?

Mutambasere also argues that diaspora transnational mobilisation is a body of literature that is ‘still somewhat fragmented’ (2021) and calls on us to understand diasporic activism in wider terms. It is neither exclusively humanitarianism nor political activism, but transnational ‘active practices of civic engagement’ and is important ‘in both host and homeland’. For Mutambasere, such activism is an essential component of ‘diasporic citizenship’, a concept which itself needs to be understood in terms beyond formal and legal structures, to more social understandings. Diasporic citizenship is about ‘belonging’, beyond campaigns for the rights of those undocumented in the host country, to include claims for citizenship in the homeland as well and includes activism which aims ‘to reshape the public spheres more broadly’ (Mutambasere 2021). In a similar vein, Collyer describes the importance of the framing of messages and territorial belonging, in his research into the Algerian Kabyle diaspora during social movement mobilisation back home (Collyer 2008).

While scholars have recognised how ‘migration also often has positive consequences for migrants and their communities of origin’, (Castles 2010, 1568) ‘transnational giving is increasingly theorized as a form of political resistance’, in the home country (Low 2017, 152). This is certainly the case, but our focus here is on diaspora activism in the host country that is proactive rather than reactive, and on consequences for the transnational community. We employ these concepts to understand how such forms of what we argue to be civic activism might impact upon community solidarity and transformation within the host country and beyond. How does diaspora activism impact on social structures, diaspora citizenship and migrant identities in the host country, when the home country is not the object of their activism? What happens when the community was in fact cut off from the homeland, as has been the case for so many Algerian communities in France (Sayad 1973) or is historically divided, particularly so in the UK context? Can such forms of activism build trust, enhance social capital, as argued by scholars such as Robert Putnam (1993), and improve governance by engaging with wider forms of injustice, such as the structures of the neoliberal order which exclude many migrants from access to basic rights? How does diaspora activism, as a response to exclusion, contend with the intersectional nature of different layers of inequality as experienced by women, LGBT, the young or any other marginalised members of the community (Brah, Szeman, and Gedalof 2015)?

Such forms of activism by vulnerable communities have multiplied around the world during the pandemic. From feminist solidarity networks in Mexico (Ventura Alfaro 2020), to West and Central African migrants in Morocco, scholars have documented the increase in such solidarity networks, often facilitated by social media. Migrants
have organised food distribution to the most vulnerable, often never having met physically. The transformative effects of social media (Dekker and Engbersen 2014) have extended to migrant led online campaigns, going beyond supporting traditional migrant networks, to supporting much wider communities. To understand these different migration phenomena, we must include ‘research on the societal context in which it takes place’ (Castles 2010, 1578). The social structures and processes of the UK impacting upon migrant communities, such as precarious labour, health and education inequalities, as well as the more enabling regulations for the creation of voluntary sector organisations, need to be taken into account. As Castles argues, migration cannot be ‘disembedded’ from social changes, though viewing it as ‘embedded’ has been the exception (2010, 1572). In our case, the impacts of this mobilisation on the host country context and the community in London are important to explore.

In order to understand the implications of these developments in migrant communities’ responses to the pandemic, we argue, like Stephen Castles, that it is important to conceptualise migration as an integral and essential part of social transformation processes. For Castles, social transformation ‘goes beyond the continual processes of incremental social change that are always at work’ to a wider questioning of existing social patterns (2010, 1576). The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a shift in all social patterns, as well as a questioning of the dominant economic and political structures of the neoliberal order. Significant transformations have occurred in expectations around public sector support, the role of the government and the nationalisation of public services. In the UK, the payment of furlough salaries was unprecedented support to those who lost jobs and has renewed debates around radical solutions such as universal basic income (Prabhakar 2020). Those excluded from new state funded support, as many migrants were, also mobilised to a surprising extent, creating parallel, localised systems of support. Diasporic groups have been at the forefront of such initiatives, encouraging reflection on the nature of social solidarity in contexts of increasing inequalities. Castles calls on us ‘to analyse the local effects of global economic and political forces’ (2010, 1578). Through our research with grassroots organisations and online influencers, we seek to understand the local effects of the COVID-19 crisis. We explore migrant community responses, and how these might inform us about the role of activism in transforming diaspora communities themselves. We will first explore the impact of the pandemic on the Algerian community and then analyse the different themes from the research.

**COVID-19: impacts and responses of the Algerian community in London**

The negative impact of COVID-19 on all migrant communities has been significant, increasing inequalities associated with migration, such as material insecurity, tightened border restrictions and political exclusion (Crawley 2021). While everyone can contract the virus, COVID-19 has affected migrants and ethnic minorities in developed countries disproportionately. In the UK, according to the Government Race Disparity Unit, in summer 2020, 36% of those critically ill with COVID-19 in the hospital were from an ethnic minority group, despite these groups representing only 13% of the population (Beardsmore 2020).

For Algerians in the UK, as well as losing insecure jobs, many lost their lives, leaving families grieving, in many cases not able to bury their loved ones. Religious funeral rituals
have been prevented as well as body repatriations to Algeria, with a significant impact on mental health (interview 01, charity leader NAC, male). Often living in over-crowded accommodation, they had less ability to work remotely when employers imposed this. Many undocumented Algerians, failed asylum seekers or those with non-recourse to public funds, and their families, found themselves on the streets. One activist described how,

I saw a number of posts on social media by *harraga* (undocumented migrants) and those with no recourse to public funds, who were struggling. They lost their jobs, couldn’t pay rent and were asking for legal advice, as well as money. They received no support from the government. *Harraga* especially because of their legal situation were afraid to ask. They could only trust other Algerians. (interview 02, charity activist, Solidarity Britannia, female)

Due to the closing of borders, many Algerian students, who are predominantly women, and other visitors, could not return home and had to survive with very limited resources (interview 08, charity coordinator, student network female).

Existing diasporic groups responded quickly to support their compatriots (Galam 2020) as was the case of the Algerian community. In London, Algerian community organisations as such as Al Fath Trust, Feltham Hira Association, National Algerian Centre, Forum of Algerians in Britain and North African Trust initially worked together to serve more than 6,000 meals a day during the first lockdown. Other individuals quickly united to set up informal community groups to respond to the crisis. One such group, Solidarity Britannia, alone served around 400 meals a day. Many vulnerable or undocumented community members, who had lost their jobs, delivered food parcels to drop off points across London and Algerian students ran a phone line support service for those in need. DZ Charity, an online Facebook group, connected hundreds of Algerian postgraduate students in the UK to fundraise thousands of pounds for initiatives throughout the year, coordinating with those on the ground in London. Social media influencer Chakhir Dahmani raised significant amounts of money to help support the families of the deceased and cover funeral costs. All these organisations worked together, sharing information and means, often never physically meeting. They provided advice to those who had lost their incomes, set up distribution points for food, ran shops in hospitals and free local markets. As well as foodbanks, they funded the funeral costs and support for the families of those who died and took on the organisation of funerals, respecting Islamic traditions, as requested by families back home in Algeria. Throughout the pandemic, within days and sometimes hours, using social media, the charities, groups and influencers could raise thousands of pounds to support actions in London.

This response is even more significant if we consider the difficult migration history of many Algerians. The violence between Islamist insurgents and the military in 1990s Algeria, which caused so many to flee, made trust and community building difficult to achieve (Guemar 2017). This was exacerbated by surveillance and infiltration, from Algerian authorities in the 1990s and British authorities after 9/11, of any civic mobilisation on the ground. Yet, despite these challenges, and divisions, Algerians have been increasingly organised over the past decade. Currently, the most active organisations appear to be Al Fath Trust in East London and Feltham Hira in West London. These two charities are Islamic faith based, set to serve their local communities. Both already
provided food banks and meals during Ramadan, supported local communities with children’s koranic and Arabic education and supported families with parental issues. They also organised fundraising for Islamic funeral services, including body repatriations to Algeria. This increased during the pandemic, with both organisations receiving significant donations for multiple fundraising initiatives, and their networks grew widely to engage with a diverse set of partners across the country.

It is with these organisations and informal groups that we spent significant time in interviews to understand the nature of the challenges and their responses. We enquired about the challenges of mobilising, the nature of their work and how relations between the groups worked in practice. We followed all of these charities, groups and influencers on social media, and participated in coordination meetings between the charities, whilst simultaneously organising our own fundraising campaigns to support Algerian hospitals, throughout 2020. We found that our efforts paled in comparison to the ambition and capacities of the local faith based and community organisations in London. As such, we set out to investigate how they mobilised, what conditions supported their successes and what obstacles they faced. The key themes that emerged from a dozen in-depth semi-structured interviews, discussions with networks of activists and online observations were those of trust, faith and leadership, which we will now explore in the following sections.

Rebuilding trust: from the state to the community

The history of infiltration of the Algerian community, in the 1990s and after 09/11, left a legacy that makes trust more challenging. Algerians interviewed described the difficulty to achieve trust both in government and state structures and with their compatriots back home. Contrary to a politicised ‘diaspora philanthropy’ (Low 2017), Algerians stayed cautious of donating to initiatives aimed at funding medical equipment or local structures in Algeria. Initially working together to fundraise precisely for this end, we found less interest in our fundraising page, whereas local groups in London could raise up to twenty thousand pounds in a matter of days for the local population. Our respondents explained the possible reasons:

we Algerians living abroad have lost trust with Algerians over there, not only with the government but also with our compatriots. We have been betrayed, often by members of our family. So the Algerian community will think twice before donating money to be sent to Algeria. (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male)

Whereas respondents acknowledged the desire to strengthen trust and cooperation, ‘we definitely need to build trust, to get together and to learn how to work together,’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male), they also felt that working with the state might diminish the trust gained from the local community (interview 10, charity coordinator Al Fath, male). Equally challenging was the practicality of transferring funds to Algeria as one respondent explained.

The money was not a problem anymore. We had the money, but how to send it and how to use it was the problem. Even when we sent it to Algeria, people had to jump so many hurdles, to use the money in a legal way. So you try to do things legally but people don’t
help the organization, the government does not help. (Interview 08, charity coordinator, female)

Nevertheless, perhaps one of the most spectacular acts of solidarity was a fundraiser held by Algerians for a young man given days to live due to a terminal illness. Having made the wish to see his mother in Algeria before dying, the organisers, had to raise money for the flight and negotiate with the Algerian government and Consular authority to obtain permission to land in Algiers as borders were closed. The organisers explained how the authorities were reluctant, unsure how the Algerian foreign office would respond. As such, they involved the Member of Parliament for Algerians abroad. They described how ‘time was against us, Mohamed needed to arrive to his mother alive’. Despite numerous obstacles, the group succeeded in bringing the young man to Algeria, describing how ‘every single Algerian who received the information donated. It was a unique action made by Algerians abroad as far as I can remember’, (interview 09, charity leader, male, NAT). In the interview, the organiser explained the impact on the relationship between the authorities and the community in London, ‘I think we won respect from the Algerian regime. Now they know we are here and we love our country that can count on its children living in the diaspora when needed’. The arrival of Mohamed was broadcast by Algerian National television on the main evening news.

**Trust in the community, faith and communication**

Social constructionists and diaspora scholars, such as Anthias and Mehta (2008) suggest that nationality or ethnicity are not the only identity markers that support the establishing of diasporas, trust and solidarity actions between migrants. Gender, age, class and belonging to the same faith, morality or political ideology are often essential in making diasporas. Participants in this research seem to support this argument. Religiosity and national identity played a significant role in building trust during the pandemic and women and undocumented youth were particularly engaged. One activist described how,

we first called on people to come and pick up goods, but people were too scared, many of them might have been undocumented migrants, harragas, or they were too scared to get out because of the virus, so we started delivering to their places. (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male)

This was possible to do, he continued, due to Algerians’ faith and religious beliefs, ‘because sadaka is compulsory in Islam’, Algerians were obliged to be generous explained an activist of the North African Trust (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male) and those affected knew this was genuine.

Equally important to securing trust were transparency and communication. One group leader explained, ‘We showed people all the money that was collected and all the food, we would have live videos of the food collection and all deliveries. We tried to be as transparent as we can’ (interview 02, charity activist, Solidarity Britannia, female). The importance of ‘being accountable’ was emphasised. The groups knew they had to ‘show them what you are doing with that money, it is all about trust’ (interview 03, charity leader, Solidarity Britannia, female). One student leader in the north, who raised significant funding, praised the London organisations, stating ‘they really work in a transparent way, you know exactly where your money is going, you know how they work, they keep you updated, you are involved’ (interview 08, charity
coordinator, DZ Charity, female). Using social media, and live videos, helped. In docu-
menting the solidarity initiatives online, the local Algerian community ‘would trust you
more and they can give you more. They share your posts and more people know about
what you are doing and maybe someone rich can help. Its little things that lead to bigger
things’ (interview 03, charity leader, Solidarity Britannia, female). A participant from
North African Trust insisted, ‘thank God, we have videos which can prove all what I
am saying’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male).

Respondents suggested that, ‘people had that shared identity and they had that trust
amongst each other’ as a result ‘we could easily motivate people to give’ (interview 02,
charity activist, Solidarity Britannia, female). Support came from across the UK and
Europe, one charity coordinator explained, ‘Our network is beyond London, Algerians
from everywhere donated and we also received donations from non-Algerians’ (interview
10, Al Fath, male). As we write, we continue to follow the ongoing solidarity and trust as
documented by the multiple UK-Algerian Facebook groups, providing logistical support,
food and legal advice to vulnerable people in London. During the interviews, a number of
leaders emphasised the importance of trusted individuals, but particularly of ‘zewalya’ or
‘ordinary people’ in bringing together the different organisations and encouraging the
whole community to donate and volunteer, and in sustaining this. It was important to
have ‘people who had an influence in the community, people who were trustworthy’,
but also ‘ordinary people’ on board ‘in order to be able to raise funds’ (interview 02,
charity activist, Solidarity Britannia, female).

Overall, the need to strengthen communication was flagged, whilst also feeling pride
in the formidable achievements working online, producing videos, fundraisers and
organising the logistics of multiple humanitarian operations over months. One leader
emphasised, ‘I do believe in communication. As a community we need to work on
that’ (interview 01, charity leader NAC, male). Others emphasised the importance of
communicating what had been achieved:

when donors know that you have delivered to people who are really in need, they will donate
more and spread the word about your good work, your honesty, because here trust in the
person who collects goods and money is crucial. (interview 10, charity coordinator Al
Fath, male)

As well as documenting this rebuilding of trust between the community, and to a
certain extent with the authorities, the interviewees also expressed how the experience
of solidarity is also deeply rooted in a desire to affirm this aspect of Algerian identity
and faith, as explored in the next section.

Islamic faith and Algerian identity

The past surveillance of the community was partly due to the presence of exiled members
of the Islamist political party, and this contributed to a difficult context for local faith
based groups. The Finsbury Park Mosque, where the radical Egyptian preacher Abu
Hamza had previously incited Islamist hate crimes, is also the area in London where
most Algerians resided in the 1990s. ‘As you know, that time, in the nineties, the Algerian
environment back home was skhouna el halla’ explained one of the participants (inter-
view 09, charity leader NAT, male). The expression, skhouna el halla (the verbatim
translation is a ‘hot situation’: *skhouna* means a hot or torrid hell; *halla* is a situation, time or space) is a metaphor used in the Algerian language, *Derdja*, during the Black Decade to describe how dangerous terrorism was. The same interviewee also explained how ‘we Algerians were in need of international support’. Targeted from all sides, by radical Islamists, by rising Islamophobia and by prejudice across the media, British Muslims generally found life increasingly difficult, particularly following 9/11. The limited understanding of the 1990s Algerian conflict, and the seeming inability of the UK authorities to tackle extremist propaganda, meant Algerians suffered even more. It also meant that the mosque in Finsbury Park was often the only place where support was available, despite being placed under heavy surveillance. Aside from the mosque in which Abu Hamza was preaching radical ‘Salafist jihad’ there was also an Islamic centre in the area run by a moderate Islamic group, comprising mainly Algerians:

Let me tell you my own story, I entered this country in 1996 … where did I go? I had no means to survive, I went to a place which was known as an Algerian place at the time, and they helped me and protected me from hunger and thirst, protected me from not falling into criminal hands here in London. (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male)

After hesitating, the same interviewee admitted ‘It was in Finsbury Park … why should I hide this?’ as if it were a place of ill repute. This participant explained how the Islamic Centre in Finsbury Park ‘prevented many Algerians from falling into crime by helping them to keep their Islamic faith and practices’. He explained that, following ‘some problems with Finsbury Park Mosque which I don’t know [about]’, many Algerians had been arrested and the area started to gain a bad reputation.

**Islamic cultural identity, Ramadan and traditions of solidarity**

Despite these difficulties, mosques and Islamic charities continuously provided support to Algerians who fled the 1990s violence and more recently who fell into difficulties. Indeed the increase in the Algerian population has arguably influenced charitable Islamic faith based associations in London. The desire to share the Algerian Islamic values came across in a number of interviews. Respondents wanted to ensure their work contributed to a better understanding of Islam or Algerian identity and traditions, which included ‘sharing’, ‘humility before God’ and ‘generosity’. One respondent affirmed that ‘people like to engage with charitable work in the Algerian community. They do it, if you look at the history, in the last few years they always try to do things in Ramadan’ (interview 03, charity leader, Solidarity Britannia, female). She also referred to the traditions of Algerians, who ‘are known as a nation to be really giving and helpful during 30 days of fasting’ (interview 03, charity leader, Solidarity Britannia, female) and the importance of preserving this in the diaspora.

Another respondent stressed the importance of faith, solidarity and community for Algerians in London, as integral to their culture and traditions. Again, this became especially prominent during the holy month of fasting during the pandemic, ‘it was especially during Ramadan. Ramadan is more than religious for me and for my family, it’s about solidarity, about helping people’ (interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female). She also praised the speed with which Algerians mobilised, ‘I’ve seen it, even without the COVID context. They always do initiatives helping people’ (interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female). One active member of a charity felt that the
solidarity had nevertheless amplified in 2020, that Algerians in London were increasingly active, ‘before Ramadan, during Ramadan and after Ramadan’ (interview 06, charity volunteer, female).

One respondent remarked how the community had managed to maintain this tradition and expand it, despite the difficulties of the pandemic:

I am proud of Algerians, individuals and organisations … they all helped each other, we were sharing lists of people in need and I can assure you that during lockdown, not a single Algerian was without shelter or food in London. (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male)

Another female volunteer praised the fact that they had respected the ‘culture of Ramadan which is all about sharing. It is all about being together; they made that happen, but still respected social distancing. Difficult to do, but they did it’ (interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female). She continued to emphasise that this was inclusive and went beyond the Algerian community. Whilst Algerians were working together on these initiatives, ‘it’s not really just Algerian centred. It is gathering funds, making food, and giving it to anyone who needs it’. She noted, ‘you do not even have to be a Muslim or an Algerian. It is really just helping people. It is part of the Ramadan feel, that’s what you do, charity’ (interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female). Another interviewee confirmed this, stating ‘we did bring what God permitted, to anyone who was in need, we didn’t leave out people, Algerian or not Algerian’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male).

Voluntary charitable giving of sadaka
As an important principle of Islam, as well as the obligatory giving of zakat, the voluntary giving of charitable donations, sadaka, was hugely important to consider for many of the interviewees. Many felt that it was a duty to support the community and that this came directly from Islam: ‘sadaka is compulsory in Islam, God obliges us to be generous and give charity … We have to support each other; it is in the hadith of the prophet’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male). As a result, his organisation ‘received a lot of donations, which enabled us in turn to donate. Donations were so big, we received drinks, mineral water, and fresh food, all put in our basement’. Because of such significant donations, they ‘had to call other organisations to share with us, often reaching other communities. Once Ramadhan arrived, donations were multiplied by ten’ (interview 10, charity coordinator Al Fath, male). This was not new, and he mentioned how he regularly received material donations, as sadaka, from the community in London to send to Algeria. It was important that this remained anonymous, as ‘a secret for God’ and he felt great pride in the generosity of the community, who were often themselves struggling to get by.

Faith and funerals
The death toll for the Algerian community was high. Contacted by phone, the Algerian Consulate confirms five bodies were repatriated to Algeria between March and the end of 2020. However, the consulate could not give a definite figure of how many Algerians died of Covid. Working in hospitality, with zero hours contracts, being key workers, as well as the inability to work from home, or isolate, and having to using public transport, meant
that many Algerians, particularly the undocumented harragas, were most vulnerable. Far from family, and with Algerian borders closed, the pain of losing loved ones was amplified by the fear of non-respect of Islamic traditions around the burials of those who lost their lives. Respondents described the work of the organisations, Al Fath in particular, and individuals, who fundraised to ensure that Islamic burials were organised correctly. This was important for ‘their loved ones back in Algeria to know that he or she was buried in the right way. I know how much that means to Algerians, to Muslims’ (interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female). These actions, for her, were ‘very respectful. Very honourable’. During the first five weeks of 2021, the Algerian community in the UK recorded twenty deaths from COVID19. The funerals of fourteen out of the twenty have been funded via the Gofundme.com platform, organised by the Al Fath Trust and Hira, covering not only London but cities such as Manchester or Birmingham where the Algerian communities are relatively large.

Respondents described how Algerian traditions teach you to unite in difficult times, particularly when there is death or illness and how this comes from faith. One indicated that ‘Algerians are very much unified, and solidarity is strong, when there is a problem. This is to do with faith, faith can be strong’ (interview 10, charity coordinator Al Fath, male). As a result, Algerians donated huge sums of money, mainly anonymously to multiple GoFundMe pages and to the charities’ bank accounts, whenever someone died. On 10 January 2021, when a leading member of the Algerian community passed away from COVID, the community raised £5000 in less than a day to cover the funeral and support the family (Al Fath Facebook and GFM page). Again, contributions were often small, anonymous, and significant in number, mobilising all to donate. Describing this initiative as ‘spectacular’, another respondent explains that ‘ordinary Algerians, are very united when it comes to death or anything related to illness’ and how ‘our faith is strong, we support each other’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male).

Lastly, in relation to faith, a number of participants described multiple interfaith actions they carried out, working with non-Muslim organisations such as the Church of England to raise funds, implement activities and distribute support. Networks of Algerian organisations across London coordinated with non-Algerian and non-Muslim organisations. They were proud to communicate this, hoping this would contribute to an opening up of community and interfaith understanding, stating ‘language and religion should not be a barrier, rather we should recognise our common humanity’ (interview 01, charity leader NAC, male). The lack of space for collective worship, an Algerian mosque, was however lamented. Mobilising within the community to fundraise for this was suggested, to ‘increase our faith and trust in each other’, and to allow young people ‘to learn about Islam, about Algerian culture and identity’ which would help them to keep their Algerian identities (interview 10, charity coordinator Al Fath, male). The importance of such spaces of solidarity was a key theme in the interviews, as well as the need for leaders. This will be explored in the following section.

**Spaces of solidarity and leadership**

As we write, Algeria’s borders have been partly closed for over a year. Algerian nationals who hold citizenship or long-term residency of their host country are not permitted to travel. However, hundreds of Algerians holding short-term, medical or student visas
were also blocked. Finding themselves without resources, the latter group set up Face-
book pages in which they shared their pain. The following is one of these testimonies:

my mother and father both passed away from COVID and I could not see them when ill nor
attend their funerals, my wife gave birth and my son is now 7 months old. I was not able to
be there for her. (Facebook group of Algerians in the UK)

Very few repatriation flights were organised between London and Algiers. Whilst daily
flights from Paris periodically resumed, hundreds of Algerians in the UK still suffered
the border closure. ‘The Algerian community in the UK feel discriminated against and
can’t explain why’, wrote a leading member of the Algerian community in London on
social media. As a result, ‘having a place to shelter all these people becomes an emer-
gency’ explained an active member of the Forum for Algerians in Britain (interview
11, charity coordinator FAB, male). It is within these online spaces that the Algerian
community responded to these crises, and provided emotional and practical support
to those affected.

On space and funding
In a meeting on 25 December 2020, the Director of the Forum of Algerians in Britain
(FAB) explained to us how he would suggest to all Algerians in the UK that they
should establish a standing order of £2 a month to cover the rent of a hostel for those
made homeless during the pandemic. This was felt to be a shared responsibility for
the whole community. These would not only include Algerians obstructed from return-
ing home but also harragas, irregular migrants who lost cash in hand jobs and, as a result,
were evicted from the accommodation. Nine people, including six leaders of Algerian
community organisations in London, attended the meeting. The call for this meeting
was made only hours before it was scheduled, a link to Zoom was sent via Facebook
and WhatsApp. Three women were among the attendees, one of them a single mother
who said ‘if it was not on Zoom, it wouldn’t have been easy for me to physically
attend this meeting because of lack of childcare’. Switching meetings online during the
pandemic clearly enhanced solidarities among different Algerian community organis-
atations. Thus, despite the initial terror and calculations of hardships due to the pandemic,
out of the pressure exerted on these communities of activists, new and efficient methods
and spaces of solidarity emerged.

Attendees at this meeting were keen to remind everyone of the lack of experience,
expertise and, above all, the lack of funding required for such a big project for a homeless
hostel. How to decide on priorities, and how to end the period of stay for those in need
were reported as the main difficulties FAB would face. Other attendees expressed con-
cerns about health and safety, safeguarding and considerations related to the immigra-
tion status of beneficiaries. The meeting ended with no concrete decision. A few days
later, the Forum published videos on its Facebook page showing a fully managed
hostel, by a non-Algerian team, which it aimed at renting out. Although Facebook
friends of FAB’s page prized it as ‘a very good idea’, it seems that the Algerian community
in the UK was still reluctant as, ‘we have not received any direct payments yet’ explained
the project leader.

According to a report published by the Migration Observatory at the University of
Oxford (2011), in 2009 the British government launched the Migration Impact Fund
to help organisations addressing the needs of migrant communities. The biggest allo-
cation went to Refugee and Migrants Community Organisations (RMCOs) in London. As a result, a few Algerian community organisations received core funding for projects to deliver services such as welfare and legal advice or promoting Algerian culture. Unfortunately, due to government cuts under austerity, this Fund ceased in summer 2010, reflecting the government’s move towards a more neoliberal state policy, one which impacted migrant and BAME communities, and women, disproportionately (Brah, Szeman, and Gedalof 2015; Sandhu and Stephenson 2015). The actions and new spaces of solidarity organised by Algerian groups nevertheless continued, whether registered as charities or not, filling the gaps where the state had withdrawn. They now relied more on the generosity of their compatriots by organising fundraising, as one interviewee explained with pride ‘the more we donated, the more we received donations’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male).

However, unlike the successful spontaneous actions of solidarity Algerians have shown during lockdowns, long-term projects seem to be lacking among Algerians in the UK. As one participant pointed out, the need for leadership could be key to achieving this, ‘We don’t have guidance or funding to set up an Algerian project. In my view, and this is my opinion, guidance should come from academics, preachers and trustworthy community members such as doctors or engineers’ (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male).

Leadership, elites and social transformation

Many of our Algerian respondents expressed the need for community leaders. ‘We need a network and to stick to each other. Algerians need to leave all their other ideological and political differences outside of this, put hand in hand with each other’ asserted one participant (interview 09, charity leader NAT, male). If we can do this, he felt ‘this will be the first step towards us, ordinary Algerians, in gaining awareness. I mean, we need to trust our elites’. Confirming the importance of spaces of solidarity and leadership, he continued,

If you go to Algeria, you will find the British Council over there, but here in the UK where is the Algerian council or centre? It is about time to count us within the minority ethnic com-

munities that have needs, we need training and we need the local authorities to trust us. Algerians are not all terrorists or bad people. We know how the community is stereotyped by the police in London. This is not helping anyone. We have very good Algerian people living, working in the UK, doctors, academics and professionals.

In terms of individual leadership, the social media influencer Chakir Dahmani was particularly active in collecting large sums of money for Algerian families who lost loved ones, such as a young family who tragically lost their father in south east London. Chakir mobilised via social media to collect money quickly to cover the funerals and help many families. He also organised a charity meals campaign with his partner who owns a coffee shop in Old Kent Road. Both managed to provide the community with 400 meals daily during Ramadan 2020. The operation was organised via Gofundme.com and other social media. The emergence of local leadership in areas not yet covered by formal charities has also been very effective. Those personalities now enjoy a strong collaborative relationship with the two large charities Al Fath Trust and Feltham HIRA.
A number of the respondents felt that having an Algerian Islamic Centre would be important, as a space in which all Algerians could meet and benefit from knowledge and guidance from community elites. This would also contribute to enhancing the support the Algerian community could offer to others in need, a wish expressed throughout interviews. As much as the online spaces had proved successful, this was felt to be insufficient to create a truly united community and more lasting responses to the underlying inequalities faced by Algerians, and other migrant or disadvantaged communities in the UK. The need for social transformation, by tackling the root causes of precarity, came across in many interviews. Whereas the community’s attempts to create apprenticeships might have failed in the past, there was a desire to launch more substantial initiatives,

We need an educational hub, we need to provide apprenticeships, courses and information. We need to help people with new skills and change mentalities. Our apprenticeship initiatives did not work in the past, but maybe now in 2020 it might? If people are unemployed, they need to learn new skills. We need to overcome complexes of the foreigner. (interview 01, charity leader NAC, male)

The same charity leader also expressed the need ‘to be more positive!’ After the stigmatising of the community and the difficult conditions of the last two decades, the experience of solidarity in 2020 needed recognition. This certainly contributed to a great willingness of all respondents to participate in and contribute to this research.

Conclusion
Diaspora philanthropy (Low 2017), diaspora activism (Koinova 2018) and diaspora citizenship (Mutambasere 2021) are key concepts that enhance our understanding of transnational activism and belonging. Drawing on these concepts, we have sought to demonstrate how migrant solidarity can transform a given community and challenge wider forms of injustice, if we understand diasporas as ‘agents of civic and ethnic-based activism’ (Koinova 2018, 1252). Whilst faith and religious identity came across strongly as causal factors and motivation for activism, this was not exclusive. Algerian national identity figured prominently as a source of pride, motivation and solidarity, particularly towards those excluded from citizenship in both countries. As such we understand this solidarity as a form of civic rather than ethnic activism (Koinova 2018), and we signal the importance of Mutambasere’s suggestion that citizenship needs to be understood in social as well as legalistic terms (2021). Diasporic citizenship includes, but also goes beyond, campaigns for the rights of those undocumented in the host country. It includes claims around citizenship and attachment to the country of origin, as migrants ‘reshape the public spheres’ in both contexts (Mutambasere 2021).

The increasing inequalities arising from both the pandemic and the excesses of the neoliberal order need to be critiqued by exploring the local effects and responses from those on the front line. As Castles argues, (2010, 1578) it is important to assess the ‘local effects of global economic and political forces’. Through our online observations and interviews with Algerian organisations about their responses to COVID-19, their critique of the structural challenges facing migrant communities, as well as their vision on how to respond, lead us to suggest that such diaspora activism is contributing to wider
social transformations within the communities in the host country but also in the homeland, in the rebuilding of trust between the state and its diaspora.

Despite its difficult migration history and historical divisions, the Algerian community in the United Kingdom has demonstrated an impressive coming together of many individuals, groups and organisations in order to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Over many months, a network of organisations provided food, shelter and counselling for thousands of Algerians and often, other migrant communities. This happened across London and the rest of the country, drawing on established charities, student networks, newly formed groupings, online media and new technologies to raise funds. Strengthening trust within the community, and to a certain extent with the state, this solidarity has drawn on Algerian nationalism and values of hospitality, faith and community. It has equally drawn on effective engagement in online spaces, on pride in the local community response and in a transnational Algerian identity, producing a form of migrant activism that builds social capital, challenges securitised responses and breaks down the divide of citizen – non-citizen (Nyers and Rygiel 2012). Those denied citizenship in the UK, and who had burned their Algerian papers, were often some of the most active in delivering the food parcels across London. Women took many of the key leadership roles and all generations worked together to acknowledge and respond to the crisis and the multiple layers of inequalities it exacerbated. Both women and men interviewed pointed to the intersectional nature of the crisis, and the pre-existing exclusion and inequality, as experienced by women, youth or marginalised members of the community (Brah, Szeman, and Gedalof 2015).

Moving beyond the emergency responses, organisation leaders also investigated the underlying causes of vulnerability and made plans to tackle them – even if these plans were sometimes too ambitious to implement. Whereas initiatives emerged across the UK in almost all communities, the longevity of the actions for over one year, and the perseverance in the organisation of often small groups of Algerians, makes them stand out. Further research is certainly needed to investigate these organisations over a longer period, with the possibility of face-to-face data collection. Nevertheless, we argue that the community response to the pandemic could contribute to new reflections about the role of the diaspora in social change and solidarity and this has important implications for diaspora citizenship. In asserting their new roles as social and humanitarian actors in UK society, overcoming deep divisions to create a sense of community in the face of dire hardship, the Algerian community is contributing to new understandings of how local solidarity and organisation could work.

**Ethical approval**

Coventry University CU ethics provided ethical approval for this research with the following reference P109321.

**Interviews**

interview 01, charity leader NAC, male, 30-40, 12/10/2020.
interview 02, charity activist, Solidarity Britannia, female, 20-30, 14/10/2020.
interview 03, charity leader, Solidarity Britannia, female, 30-40, 14/10/2020.
interview 04, charity activist, London Kitchen, female, 40-50, 19/10/2020.
interview 05, charity activist, DZ Charity, female, 20-30, 03/11/2020.
interview 06, charity volunteer, female, 20-30, 18/11/2020.
interview 07, charity volunteer, female, 20-30, 09/02/2021.
interview 08, charity coordinator, student network female, 20-30, 19/02/2021.
interview 09, charity leader NAT, male, 40-50, 14/10/2020.
interview 10, charity coordinator Al Fath, male, 30-40, 14/10/2020.
interview 11, charity coordinator FAB, male, 40-50, 25/12/2020.
interview 12, fundraising coordinator, academic network, male 40-50, 03/10/2020.

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