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Political Opportunity Structures of the Urban social Movements in South Africa

Research paper for the Kennedy School of Government's project on urban social movements

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Introduction

The purpose of this brief discussion note is to provide an introduction to the political environment that frames the practices of urban social movements in South Africa. There are numerous layers to this discussion and it is helpful to peel these apart before one gets into a more contingent analysis about the fluidity and dynamisms of urban political processes as illustrated through a few examples. The first layer we will consider is the formal legislative framework that shapes the democratic space for the activities of autonomous civil society organisations, including progressive social movements. A second layer is the recent historical patterning of urban social mobilisation and associated organisational and institutional dynamics. This discussion blends into the third layer, which involves a (rather crude) categorisation of various types of civil society organisations, including social movements. Within this layer it becomes crucial to make connections with the historical patterning of social mobilisation and how formal political parties and their cultural practices influence the agenda and practices of 'autonomous' urban social movements. It is in this fluid, and difficult to read, terrain that profound questions arise about the emerging nature of progressive social movements in South Africa. These three layers unfold in an interrelated manner through discussion of the meso and micro scales of urban politics in this note.

Before discussing these three layers of analysis, it is appropriate to reveal the conceptual biases with which we approach the issues at hand. First, we accept as a starting point the emphasis in the work of numerous scholars (Heller 2001; Tendler 1997; Sandercock 1998) that a degree of 'synergy' between the state and civil society is good for deepening democracy and creating more favourable conditions for ensuring that state and civil society resources are deployed in a developmental manner so that poverty and inequality are addressed in an environmentally benign and politically empowering manner. Second, we believe that it is crucial to attend simultaneously and dialectically to the democratisation of both the state and civil society and to consider the agendas and practices of social movements in this light. Third, in analysis and practice, it is crucial to link the political agendas of democratisation and citizen empowerment (individually and associationally) with a goal of equitable and durable economic development that is culturally conscious and reflexive. This third, and last, conceptual basis influences how we assess the roles and content of social movement agendas in relation to the lived reality of poor citizens and their lifeworlds (Long 2001). This grounding is crucial in the South African context, as we argue later, because of a long and stubborn tradition of instrumentalist social mobilisation rooted in hierarchical imaginaries about social organisation and mobilisation. Enough on where we come from; let's turn to the 'empirical context'.

Formal political opportunity structure & its limits

The South African constitution and associated legislation that pertain to local government is conceptually rich and pregnant with political potential (Parnell et al. 2002). It is worthwhile restating the objects of developmental local government as set out in the South African Constitution:

- to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities;
- to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner;
- to promote social and economic development;
- to promote a safe and healthy environment; and
- to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government (Section 152(1)).

These objects were used as the basis for an extensive policy process to craft a White Paper on Local Government (WPLG). This policy sets clear parameters for the nature of democratic systems and structures at local government level, which are meant to give effect to the Constitutional provisions. In the wake of the WPLG, an extensive suite of legislation was prepared to flesh out the mechanics of the new system that came into full effect on the 5 December 2000 when the last municipal elections were held. At the heart of the new policy architecture for participatory local governance is a dynamic planning system—the integrated development plan (IDP)—that is meant to link municipal plans with budgets, performance indicators and democratic oversight measures. Crucially, the IDPs are also meant to shift municipal management onto a more strategic and forward-looking footing by introducing medium-term budgeting and expenditure planning that reflects development priorities determined in a highly participative and democratic manner. In this new framework there is extensive scope for civil society organisations to get involved and to be potentially influential in shaping the priorities and budgets of municipal councils. Significantly, in addition to this legislative requirement to institutionalise participatory planning through a cyclical system, many municipalities have embraced the development rhetoric of 'participatory development' and complement the IDP process with other processes that allow for community participation. For example, in the Johannesburg metropolitan area, the Unicity deployed a range of strategies to solicit the views of citizens and interest groups through, inter alia, focus groups, surveys, ward committee meetings, public meetings and corporatist forums (Parnell 2002). Similarly, in the Cape Town metropolitan area a plurality of mechanisms have been designed and (partially) implemented to complement formal procedural representative democratic measures (Pieterse 2002a).

Most of these participatory democratic mechanisms tend to pertain to specific services (housing, health, recreation, etc) as they unfold, or fail to, at the community level. However, the novel and potentially interesting development is the recent emergence of participatory mechanisms, such as City Development Strategy (CDS) processes, that seek to enrol the input of civil society organisation at the level of the city as a whole. This turn to CDSs is an expected outcome of the creation of single-tier metropolitan authorities, called Unicities in South African parlance, in all of the large urban conurbations in South Africa. The political rationale behind the emergence of Unicities is the imperative of redistribution and comprehensive planning to undo the deep, spatially inscribed, legacies of apartheid-based social engineering. In theory, Unicities now have the capacity to use a single tax base in an equitable and strategic manner across the urban region and not exclusive in formally advantaged areas. Since these policy processes unfolded contiguously with global debates and processes of democratic decentralisation and city-based strategic planning to bolster the economic position of cities in an era of increasing (asymmetric) globalisation, they tended, however, to absorb dominant policy discourses such as the CDS approach promoted by the Cities Alliance. This tendency is clearly evident in the South African case.

Nonetheless, the prospect and increasing reality of co-governance mechanisms that seek to involve organised civil society groups and the private sector under the leadership of local government presents interesting new political spaces for progressive social actors. Specifically, it raises the prospects of linking localised struggles to broader circuits of economic and political

power. Often local struggles are hemmed in and hollowed out because they fail to effectively link locality specific demands with structural inequalities that operate at other levels. In development processes, therefore, a series of local politics have been unleashed that highlight conflicts between the local state and social movements and residents in the urban context. Although urban politics are embedded in local, regional, and national state processes, in party-political politics (ANC, DA, and NNP for instance), and in the vagaries of day-to-day governance dynamics, we focus in this narrative on the micro-politics of social movements at the intra-urban, neighbourhood scale.

Within cities, local government's engagement with urban civil society proves problematic in practice not because the local state is biased or regressive intentionally (although this has proven to be the case in some instances) or an absolute lack of resources curtails development. Rather, urban politics get wrapped in local intra-urban agendas and interests that are geographically specific and that reflect apartheid divisions such as group area segregation and the apartheid-period (conservative and liberation) networks in which local state officials and politicians and urban social movements and residents have worked. Local government-social movement politics in practice confront, therefore, local neighborhood-level dynamics that link residents into communities and movements and that tie families, movements, and neighborhoods into broader urban economic and social networks. With its differentiated the economic, political and social fabric, the South African urban environment structures the political space and actor capacity found in urban social movements.

At an urban scale, segregation persists despite its legal demise. Materially poor 'African,' 'coloured,' and 'Indian' communities to a large degree remain in areas that are badly serviced and peripheral to jobs and facilities. Post-apartheid infrastructure developments tend to blend in the buffer areas between what were previously segregated black neighbourhoods – in the Cape Town case, poor coloured communities and still poorer African communities. Post-apartheid development interventions tend to re-iterate apartheid's urban physical environment. Because segregation in the post-apartheid context is delineated not only by race, but also by class – by an increasing similarity in levels of poverty between previously segregated black neighbourhoods – race-class identities continue to be significant political, economic, and social markers. Yet, their meanings and residents' identities prove more complex. These identities are forged through experience in the city (and elsewhere), through interaction with the state for resources, and through participation in social movements that conform to neighbourhood boundaries, but are also broader in scale. The physical conditions of neighbourhoods shape urban social movements in a number of ways as well, primarily informing the types of issues around which social movements organize and the ways in which social movement structures intersect and link with local government on service delivery issues. In addition neighbourhood movements have also been shaped by the historical experiences that root contemporary social movements to communities and their particular historical experiences.

City-scale political forums, therefore, also compel local organisations to relativise their claims in relation to other local communities that may have more or less urgent imperatives, as the participatory budgeting experience in Porto Alegre illustrates (Abers 2000). This raises interesting new dynamics about how to configure alliances across neighbourhoods, that by definition in the South African case means organising across race and class identity boundaries. It also raises the prospect of social formations taking shape outside of the parameters set by the (former) liberation movements who would think of themselves as the obvious repository of inter-community social mobilisations. As we explain and illustrate below, this tends to fuel conflicts given the deep legacy of ANC-led community organisation. Lastly, for now, this scale and form of politics also takes one to the problematic of elite capture and concomitant social demobilisation. Almost by definition, these kinds of political

mechanisms tend to be corporatist to be manageable. The recent history of corporatist mechanisms tends to induce social demobilisation at grassroots levels.

In summary we suggest that the formal political opportunity structure holds many real opportunities for civil society organisations to engage with local government and exercise accountability and responsiveness.[1] Yet, civil society organisations have been slow to sieze upon these opportunities and exploit them.[2] Why is this the case? Below we explore some of the dynamics at the micro scale that reveal part of the answer. This discussion must be considered in conjunction with some factors that pertain at the meso level—the scale of the urban region.

Historical patterning & the 'real' space for social movements at city level

The obvious observation is that most social movements and grassroots organisations are locally based and tend to mobilise around issues at a neighbourhood scale, e.g. evictions, service cut-off's, and a lack of safety, etc. Responsiveness to local needs keeps organisations vibrant and responsive to the interests of their members. However, since the late 1980s, a practice of organising over-arching forums, called community development forums (CDFs) has predominated in South African cities. CDFs are designed ostensibly to cut across party political lines and address generic development issues. CDFs in turn are entrusted to engage on behalf of the community with outside actors about issues affecting the broader community, whether it be attracting inward investment or engaging with rolling-out infrastructure programmes of the municipality. Typically, a wide ranging number of grassroots organisations such as churches, sports clubs, informal traders associations, savings clubs, cultural organisations, and so forth make up such forums. Significantly, in working class and informal black areas these forums are usually overdetermined by the Congress aligned political forces such the ANC, COSATU and/or SANCO. In fact an explicit strategy of the ANC is to ensure political capture of these forums as a means of exercising hegemony at a grassroots level and to focus the work of the various ANC branches in a given area. One of the important consequences of the capture of these forums is that the underlying logic that informs thinking about the mode of organisation and functioning of these structures tend to be profoundly hierarchical (and reminiscent of earlier discussions about democratic centralism). The organisational imaginary of a forum has also been adopted at sectoral levels to deal with issues such as to health, water, and safety and security, amongst others.

CDFs, Social Movements, and Sector-Specific Organising: Crime and Housing

Problems in the constitution and implementation of CDFs such as Community Policing and Reconstruction and Development Forums characterise these structures. In practice, Community Policing Forums, for instance, have different relationships between the police and

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[1] It is worthwhile noting that various other pieces of legislation (e.g. the NPO Act of 1998, the the NDA Act of 1998) and development organizations actively seek to promote the role of civil society organizations in poverty reduction and development more broadly. For a discussion on these aspects, see Terence Smith (2001).

[2] However, notwithstanding these policy innovations and mainstreaming of participatory mechanisms, there is very little evidence available that civil society organisations of the poor have become more influential in shaping the governmental practices of municipalities or their high-level strategies in the case of metropolitan areas. Fascinatingly, the one example of dramatic civil society influence over a very powerful metropolitan government, is in fact a ratepayers organisations of an upper-middle class area in Johannesburg called Sandton, which embarked on a crippling rates boycott because they opposed redistribution policies of the municipality. This example raises a host of vexing questions about the diversity of civil society and who has the capacity to organise, mobilise and shape the practices of the (local) state. The surprising trend, at least in South Africa, that wealthy citizens have greater political clout when they deploy classic mobilisation tactics than representative organisations of the poor takes one into the territory of the nature of the local state and the relative strength of organisations of the poor.

community in white, coloured, Indian and African communities, and in wealthy and poor areas within these racial categories. These relationships also build on past practice. In former white areas, a conciliatory and amicable relationship between community and police was characteristic. In these neighborhoods, policing traditionally was focused on crime prevention and law enforcement rather than on physical and social control as in African and coloured areas (Mistry, 1995). Resources for policing have also mirrored these divisions in cities, with former white areas accounting for 80% of police resources (Seldman, 1997). In addition, CPFs operate differently in white, African, coloured and Indian communities. CPFs often are also problematic in terms of representation, particularly because they are voluntarily constituted. In many instances, political parties dominate police forums 'as a vehicle to push their agendas more forcefully at the local level' (Mistry, 1995: 4). Thus, the assumption that CPFs change the ways in which the police and communities interact has not proved evident. Although CPFs have been legally institutionalized, they do not guarantee a productive police-neighbourhood relationship or a change in local police or local community attitudes towards crime prevention and safety and security. Rather, these relationships have been rebuilt on an *ad hoc* basis that reflects the vagaries of individuals and community leaders and the police at the local level. Often forums and consensus-building models have generated a process of co-option of social movement, 'grassroots' interests into state-dominated structures. In particular, they suggest that the uneven power, capacity, and access to resources on the social movement side automatically disadvantage movements in the process. Debates on the efficacy of forum structures as the interface between the state and neighbourhoods ignore the fact that many urban social movements are located outside formal participatory political spaces and opportunities generated through state-restructuring processes. Such disconnections with formal political processes may be examined in many neighbourhood-based social movements that organize for access to basic infrastructure such as housing and services to fight against crime.

Housing: On paper, the state has housing policies that are non-racial and equitable. In practice, community-based social movements have challenged local government and the housing delivery process through obstruction, confrontation and non-cooperation. In some instances, the implementation of the process has been corrupt, so much so that movements have circumvented the state's housing allocation system and taken houses for themselves (see Oldfield, 2000b, on the 'Door Kickers'). In other instances, the developer-driven and state-driven top-down character of the process has frustrated neighbourhood level social movements, causing community contestation and conflict. And, in many instances, especially in the case of state-owned rental housing, community organizations, movements, and residents have confronted the state through non-compliance and a failure to pay rents due to poverty and unemployment. The process of state-building of houses and management of rental stock and their politics reveal particular sets of linkages between different state tiers and their various roles in housing and residents and social movements in impoverished areas of South African cities. At the same time, localized problems reflect relationships between residents and their leaders, politicians and their wards, and between politicians and state officials. Social movement organizing at the neighbourhood level, therefore, has been shaped by the internal organization of communities, by their links and external connections, and by their political character.

Crime prevention: Whereas local government has been the key player in housing delivery, in matters such as crime prevention community-specific responses are important. In wealthier parts of South African cities, individuals contract out private security companies to protect their properties and families. In middle-income and poorer areas, participation in social movements and community organizations regulate social order at the neighborhood scale. The informal and formal civil and not-so-civil structures that constitute this regulation mediate

the ways in which the state intervenes in safety and security.   In former 'African' group areas, civics continue to operate street committees that mediate small, non-violent disputes such as robberies and household conflicts.   A product of the state's neglect and antagonistic relations with these parts of the city in the past, these structures now compensate for the state's inability (and, at times, unwillingness) to provide policing at the household and neighbourhood level other than for violent crimes such as rape and murder.   Gangs often dominate the regulation of poor, former 'coloured' group areas.   Residents might not go to the police for help in such cases because they don't trust the police, and in some instances, because they fear retaliation by gangsters.   Anecdotal evidence suggests that instances of organized and spontaneous vigilantism against suspected criminals have increased. Social movement responses to social order and regulation at this scale reflect locality needs and organize in ways that mirror the social construction of neighbourhoods, reflecting their agency and creativity.   Community-generated mechanisms for crime-prevention do not follow predictable paths that the state (local government or the police, for instance) may respond to easily, but they do attempt to provide governance mechanisms to make neighbourhoods liveable.   In these cases as well, social movement capacity to organize is situated in the ways communities regulate themselves and their social order and how they link with and generate resources through outside sources. Social movements reflect the differentiated character of these internal and external connections and the economic, social and political networks in which communities participate.

Although at a policy and rhetorical level, forum-type structures represent the 'voice' of civil society, in practice the efficacy of forum structures and, in recent years, the hegemony of the ANC has been weakened and in many cases actively eroded by newly politicised social formations. This shift is reflected in numerous examples of direct and at times, violent, conflicts between ANC and SANCO branches (see Heller & Ntlokonkulu 2001). Moreover, the ANC itself at the urban scale is usually riven with numerous internal factions and conflicts which tend to play into differences between ANC members who are councillors and those who are not, but may be aspirant. Being a councillor clearly comes with opportunities to exercise patronage and largesse, valuable forms of political capital in harsh economic times. These different fault lines are exacerbated by the profound macro tension between a redistributive versus a neo-liberal approach to macro economic policy and state reform that play itself out in national politics. As a consequence political conflicts along ideological lines have flared up around the swelling wave of local government clamp downs on citizens who default on service payment and workers affected by various forms of municipal privatisation, commercialisation and rationalisation.   Although organizing for infrastructure and better servicing has marked community-based social movements in the apartheid and transitional periods, in the present period (approximately) state-social movement engagement has been recast around implementation rather than restructuring debates. Debate and discourse is no longer at the level of policy formulation and consensus building, but has shifted to a politics of implementation. In this shift, marked changes in social movement organizing within cities have formed through neighbourhood-based and citywide campaigns against state policies, particularly policy connected to service payment issues in impoverished neighbourhoods. Often initiated as acts of individual or family resistance have generated a series of neighbourhood and, now, citywide movements that engage directly with local government against housing evictions and water cut-offs due to non-payment. Networks of trade union and community-based interests have emerged, combining their efforts against state-initiated commercialization and privatization of services and enforcement of cost recovery.[3]

At a national level, such local movements have been taken up as challenges to state by a variety of actors and organizations in the courts. In particular, the state has been challenged to fulfill the Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights that establishes socio-economic rights to housing (see the Grootboom case, 2000) and ongoing

The nuance of the micro, intra-urban context points to two major difficulties associated with city-scale co-governance mechanisms. One, who will represent civil society and ensure sufficient legitimacy for the process and especially decisions that emanate from it? Two, in a context of new forms of oppositional politics and associated rhetoric between the centre-left ANC and left social movements (or significant factions within established social movements), what possibilities exist to arrive at situated compromises about the medium-term and long-term priorities of cities? The discussion also raises questions about the capacity of urban social movements. If social movements are not able to shape the political arena at a micro and meso scale, in conjunction with national and global currents, they are unlikely to shift the deep power relations that undermine the livelihoods and citizenship of their members. Put differently, the effectiveness of urban social movements depends in part on their ability to recognise different domains of urban politics, which requires different types of strategic and tactical approaches. Elsewhere Pieterse (2002b) explores five such domains: (i) formal procedural democratic institutions such as Council and Ward Committees; (ii) the various corporatist forums where a plurality of interests tend to dilute political urgency around redistribution but city-wide inequality can at least be put on the agenda for confrontation; (iii) the micro politics of development practice that serve as prefigurative opportunities to construct democratic cultures linked to questions of sustaining viable livelihoods and neighbourhoods;

(iv) social mobilisation around issue-specific demands that use direct action to expose and rally against blatant injustices and erosion of human rights; and finally, (v) discursive politics focused on recasting the parameters of discourse. Critically, an effective political strategy must be consistent across these political domains.

Challenges Facing Urban Social Movements
This analysis suggests a number of challenges facing progressive social movements that seek to engage urban politics at the meso scale through council politics and potential engagement with the CDS-type forums. Firstly, how can urban social movements best link militant social mobilisation efforts around the fall-out of state restructuring processes with the livelihood imperatives of their members? Movements such as the Homeless People's Federation and the South African Self-employed Workers Union seem to demonstrate some capacity to address this challenge. Specifically, they manage to combine the sociality and solidarity of savings clubs, with the procurement of some asset to enhance the productive asset base of their members, and link these issues into very specific macro political demands to create a more favourable space for their members.

Secondly, a prerequisite for understanding and linking with the livelihood strategies of the poor is a respect for the identity dimensions of citizenship and political action. The historical evidence illustrates that one feature of the African-nationalist agenda of the liberation movement was an erasure of questions about identity and their associated cultural systems. The prospect of a modern national identity was meant to supplant 'traditional' affiliations. Not surprisingly, this agenda proved problematic as people and movements simultaneously embody traditional, secular, religious and modern identities as they move between the multiple economic and social registers that make-up everyday lifeworlds in postcolonial South Africa. Likewise, the impulse of radical social movements has tended to homogenise by mobilising around certain 'acceptable' identities and not others. It remains unclear whether this issue is recognised, let alone addressed, by the emerging and established movements in black communities.

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juridicial debate over the right to health care (see the Treatment Action Campaign's case for the right to access anti-retroviral drugs).

Thirdly, given the influential and domineering role of the ANC at all scales of politics in South Africa, how can the movement be re-democratised in ways that legitimise political agency outside of its fold? This raises profound strategic and tactical questions for new, more militant social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) about creating a less dogmatic and more open democratic space. This issue in turn links to questions about the democratic nature and form of these new social movements, an issue that we simply do not have the empirical data to analyse at this stage.

There are obviously many other issues that we could identify that place a question mark over the emerging trends and future patterns of social movements and their effectiveness at a city-scale politics. To understand the conditions and abilities that allow social movements in South African urban civil society to promote their interests effectively requires a theoretical framework that can address structural and institutional contexts as well as individual and collective actions. Such a framework can be built around two core concepts: political space and actor capacity. The notion of political space refers to a political 'terrain' that offers unevenly distributed possibilities for different political actors and strategies. Political spaces vary with the issues at stake and are created and transformed continuously. Such spaces, to paraphrase Jessop (1990), are products, sources, and arenas for political strategies. With inspiration from Webster (2000), three core dimensions of political spaces can be identified: (1) political rights and institutions; (2) political channels for access, control, and contestation; and
(3) political discourses. First the character of political spaces is contingent on the extent and characteristics of formal economic, social and political rights and institutions upholding these rights (Heater, 1999). Second, political channels for access, control and contestation include formal and informal procedures for affecting policy formulation and implementation. While rights and institutions might provide a framework for participation, political channels may be decisive for actual access to and transformation of rights and institutions (McEwan, 2000). Third, political discourses are important in framing rights, policies and the implementation of decisions. Such discourses allow actors to claim a legitimate right to speak on behalf of 'people,' to define problems and to propose solutions.

In the last two decades a new interest among development researchers in questions of capacity and autonomy for various actors has developed (Evans, 1995; Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol, 1985). In an attempt to extend this focus from state institutions to state/society relations, Migdal, Klhli & Shue (1994) advocate a relational view of the powers of actors in both state and society, and their interaction within various arenas, in order to understand the formulation and implementation of policies. The challenge is to conceptualize the political capacity of social movements. Three main sources of movement capacity can be identified within the literature on collective action. First, a source of political capacity is found in a movement's ability to organize civil society and mobilize community support (e.g. their mobilizing structures or social capital). A second source of movement capacity originates in the political opportunity structures, eg. in the multiplicity of links between organizations and movements in society and actors and institutions in the political sphere (Oldfield, 2000a). A third source of movement capacity can be found in the ability to participate in the discursive production and struggle over meaning through interpretations of rights/institutions, issues/interests and actors (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998). These sources of movement capacities need to be addressed through concrete questions about movements' interests, strategies and relations in regard to state and non-state actors, e.g. questions regarding: (a) where in the political terrain actors choose to work; (b) what issues and interests they promote and politicize; and (c) how people are mobilized into political movements and the political sphere. This type of conceptual framework informs some of the research we are working on in the South African urban context.

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