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Social movements and democracy in South Africa: questions about internal democracy and relations with popular constituencies with special reference to the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee

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Abstract

New Social Movements are an important part of the political landscape in South Africa. In much of the discourse surrounding new social movements, in both the Global North and the Global South, the legitimacy of social movement organisations is based on their internal democratic practices and their commitments to peoples, popular or radical democracy. They are often taken to be spaces whereby marginalised people can participate meaningfully and on the basis of equality in organisations which supposedly represent their interests. Much of the discourse surrounding new social movements in South Africa refers to their democratic practices of the social movement organisations without critically examining what the organisations mean by internal democracy. The following study interrogates the claims made by both social movement organisations about internal democracy, as well as looking at how democratic practices are conceptualised in the discourse on new social movements in South Africa. It shows how new social movement theory, conceptualised in the North cannot be uncritically applied to contexts in the Global South and that New Social Movement theory itself fails to deal with the issue of internal democracy in sufficient detail. A detailed study of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee has been undertaken, examining the claims it makes to internal democracy in its key documents as well and how these claims are fulfilled in practice.