

https://dspace.org/

The place of participation in South African local democracy. Editorial.

Benit Gbaffou, Claire

2008
Transformation
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/12153
Benit Gbaffou,Claire. 2008. The place of participation in South African local democracy. Editorial. Transformation, Special issue, 66-67.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Transformation, **Special issue, 66-67, 2008**

Editorial – The place of participation in South African local democracy

Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

The existing literature on South African local democracy and participation is extremely rich, inspiring and diverse, its development being hardly surprising in the post-apartheid context giving rise to great expectations in terms of democratic development and social transformation (Harriss et al. 2004). South African research has been mainly focusing on social movements and civil society (Ballard et al. 2006; Cherry 2001; Heller 2003; Miraftab 2006; Oldfield and Stokke 2006; Zuern 2001), on municipal institutional history and change (Cameron 1999, 2006; Tomlinson 1999; Harrison 2006; Mabin 2006), and on electoral patterns and behaviours at the national but also at the local level (Southall 2001; Lodge 2001, 2005; Cherry 2004; Mattes 2005; Friedman 2005). This collection of papers attempts to start bringing together these different approaches, relying on different methodologies and disciplines, in order to deepen our understanding of the interaction, at the local level, between social movements and the political system, understood as the power structures of local government, the electoral system and local party politics. In other terms, what are the relations between civic and social movements[1] on the one hand, and local government structures and politics on the other hand? How does the latter shape political opportunity for social movements – and how does it set up constraints and limits to their development and action? How in return do social movements shape local government practices, and possibly policies – in other words, what is not only the nature, but more importantly the political outcome of social movements' intervention in urban governance?

Most papers converge in the conclusion that institutional participatory mechanisms[2] currently in place in South African cities do not work properly in practice, and unravel the reasons for their failure. Bénit-Gbaffou focuses on local, ward councillors in Johannesburg, and analyses their limited accountability and their incapacity to bring their constituencies' demands to Council – due to both a centralised council decision-making structure, and a dominant party system which rewards loyalty to the party above all. Piper and Deacon assess the inefficiencies of ward committees in Msunduzi, which they attribute first to ignorance (by civics, residents, and even councillors themselves) of power mechanisms and institutions that are available to them; and secondly to the high politicisation of the committees that renders them either meaningless (in case of ANC-led committees) or powerless (in other cases). Wafer's account of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) confirms that ward councillors have a limited importance in municipal decision-making: they are by-passed by civics and social movements willing to make a difference – which do not even care to organise at the ward level because it is not considered a relevant scale for negotiation and decision-making. Mattes' quantitative study reveals that South African residents rank very low in terms of their use and contact with their local

[1] We schematically differentiate, following Ballard et al 2006, civic movements or civics (group of local residents organised collectively at the neighbourhood level) from social movements (broader in their scale and having more radical, if sometimes less pragmatic, political claims). Of course a civic movement can scale-up and become a social movement, or be affiliated to one; social movements rely on a collection of local branches that are civics.

[2] i.e. those organised by the state – ward committees, *ad hoc* participatory or development forums, integrated development planning processes, etc.

government compared to other African countries – a sign either of residents' lack of knowledge of relatively new democratic institutions, or (and this may explain also their lack of knowledge) of the little importance they attribute to their powerless local councillors. This however does not prevent electoral turnout levels to be high, as underlined by Fauvelle-Aymar in her quantitative study of the Johannesburg 2006 local elections. She shows that, contrarily to the classical (but also western) political model of electoral behaviour, electoral turnout amongst black voters decreases when their level of education rises. This can be understood as reflecting higher expectations from the poorest: but these expectations might be directed primarily at the ANC as a powerful dominant party, more than at local government and ward councillors.
These dysfunctional participatory institutions lead residents to frequently adopt other modes of expression to attempt to be heard. Mattes shows the importance of protests as a means for residents to participate in South Africa as compared to other African countries: a specificity than can be read both as he result of the anti-apartheid legacy and as a reflection of the contemporary most efficient mode of action for the poor. Wafer analyses the tensions within the SECC movement between different types of strategies (opposition versus engagement with the state), and different scales of mobilisation – showing the relevance of the distinction between civic and social movements strategies and objectives. Bénit-Gbaffou presents a variety of extra institutional strategies (protests, lawsuits), but also shows how local groups of residents use the incredible complexity and fragmentation of the multi-layered, multi-agencies local government system to access urban resources– allowing for different political and social networks to be mobilised by civic groups, but also leading to their competing local legitimacies, and ultimately to fragmentation, violence and inefficiency. These extra-institutional (but by no means disconnected from the state's institutions, personnel and from party politics) modes of action are mobilised in the context of failed participatory institutions, and can lead to success. But one should be careful not to over romanticise them, as reminded by Ballard; and their variety and resourcefulness do not mean that they are always efficient or easily available to all organised residents groups.

Having exposed and analysed South African dysfunctional participatory institutions, some authors further argue that these very participatory institutions disempower other, non-institutional forms of residents' participation. Institutional participatory institutions and mechanisms would in their view be aimed at limiting the scope and depth of potentially controversial and radical participation. This is the point made by Ballard in his theoretical paper deconstructing the notion of participation, and arguing that 'invited' spaces of participation aim at delegitimizing 'invented' spaces of participation. He further warns against crucial decisions (like the ones on budget) being taken outside participatory platforms, where only secondary and consensual issues are put on the agenda, becoming place of "non-decision" (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). In the same line of thought, Staniland, writing on a Capetonian township, shows that the participation mechanisms organised by local government and including civics (here SANCO) in the process of allocation of public resources to local residents, tend to diffuse practices of clientelism, co-opt local leaders, and extend social control over a potentially powerful civil society that they contribute thereby to fragment and sedate. Piper and Deacon partly confirm this analysis by showing that ward committees often replace or absorb existing civil society organisations; and that some ANC officials consider such committees as ANC platforms intended for gaining influence on civil society. The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee analysed by

Wafer in a way also reflects such an assumption, adopting a radical standpoint and refusing to collude with local government's representatives, especially ward councillors.
Other papers however show the importance of such institutional participatory platforms (even if dysfunctional) in shaping civic and social movements' action and in building some form of accountability (even if limited): residents' groups may not always be as easy to manipulate and can to some extent use even dysfunctional institutions for their own benefit. Bénit-Gbaffou shows how some civic movements have precisely been built while (unsuccessfully) engaging with local government, and have learnt about its complex structure and mode of action in this conflict-ridden engagement, indirectly providing resources and skills for eventually being heard. In a different sense, Gervais-Lambony, focusing on the way ANC ward councillors in Vosloorus (Ekurhuleni) try to build local legitimacy, shows they have to resort to territorial strategies ensuring micro-local representativity within their ward committee –including each ANC sub-branch representatives so as to win their support in the next ANC ward councillor nomination. Internal party democracy, if not local elections (where competition is limited by the dominant party system), leads to forms of accountability of the councillors towards a locally diverse (ANC) constituency. Both papers converge in the understanding that the formality of participatory platforms can contribute to civil society mobilisation and empowerment, even if participation cannot be limited and contained within these platforms.

Beyond visions of a 'cynical' local government using limited participatory institutions to divide and rule a potentially unruly civil society, one might also argue that the negligible place granted to participation in local government structures and practices (as opposed to its importance in discourses) is voluntary, as participation might not be the best driver of redistribution and democratic consolidation in very divided urban societies. In this sense the question raised by this special issue on 'the place' of participation needs to be taken seriously, and literally: what is and what should be the place of participation in local democracy and urban governance in highly unequal South African cities? It is not sure, contrarily to global discourses, that participation is a panacea to empower the poor. Harriss (2007) has argued in other contexts that the 'new social movements' (as opposed to the old ones, relying on political parties and trade unions) might be relatively inefficient in terms of outcomes for pro-poor urban policies. The international celebration of Porto Alegre, generally attributed to its original participatory governance system, might as well be due to the pro-poor and redistributive policy implemented by the Labour Party dominated municipality. More broadly, Ballard reminds us in his paper that international literature starts analysing the possible disempowering effect of participation discourses and practices on the urban poor (Cook and Kothary 2001). Staniland warns about the effects of civic-led allocation of urban resources in terms of fragmentation of legitimate collective demands and collective action. Bénit-Gbaffou argues that, in South African cities, efficient participatory and accountability mechanisms would require the development of territorial committees (in conjunction with the existing thematic committees) in Council's structure. They have not been developed (as in Johannesburg) or are very weak (as in Cape Town's subcouncils), out of the fear of reproducing the apartheid city and its racialised and unequal municipalities. They are however so important, as argued by Gervais-Lambony, that some wards councillors attempt to recreate territorially-based decision-making bodies, meeting informally or within the ANC zone, at the township scale (Vosloorus).

A second, and not unrelated reason for local government and the ANC to beware local participation and restrict its importance, is their reluctance to provide opposition parties too powerful a platform; and to give urban elites (and in particular the white and predominantly DA minorities) a way to sideline representative democracy. Participation can indeed be contested because it is easily captured by an elite and used for conservative purposes, and centralisation can be legitimised at the metropolitan level by the desire to lead strong and contested redistribution policies. However, this does not seem to be the driver for local governments' neglect of participatory democracy: they are currently following quite straightforward economic growth agendas and build important local coalitions or partnerships with business interests (Ballard et al. 2007). When political and economic elites often seem to have lost touch with the majority of South Africa's urban residents, local participation, even with its dangers, could provide a useful platform for dialogue. The current contempt of local governments for residents' participation might therefore be opening doors for more social unrest to come.

This collection of papers derives from a conference jointly organised by the Human Sciences Research Council: Urban Rural and Economic Development (HSRC: URED), The French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) and the Centre for the Urban and Built Environment Studies (CUBES), Wits University, on the 20-21st November 2006. The conference was entitled *The place of participation in a democratising country: decentralisation, local councillors and civil society in South African cities*[3], and was aimed at presenting and discussing with a broader range of researchers the first results of an international research programme coordinated by IFAS on "Democratic Transformation in Emerging Countries" (2006-2008) – the South African part of the programme being led by the HSRC. Moreover, the conference led to the development of a further research project, jointly led by the CUBES (wits University) and Gecko (University of Paris X – Nanterre), 2008-2010, entitled *The voice of the poor in urban governance: local participation and relations with the state in South African cities*.
We wish to thank the HSRC for its support in the edition of this special issue, and *Transformation* for hosting these debates.

References

Bachrach P., Baratz M., 1963, "Decisions and Nondecisions: an analytical framework", *The American Political Science Review*, 57(3), pp. 632-642.

Ballard, R., Bonnin, D., Robinson, J., Xaba, T., 2007, 'Development and new forms of democracy in eThekwini', *Urban Forum*, 18(4), pp. 265-287.

Ballard, R. Habib, A. & Valodia, I. (eds), 2006, *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

Cameron R., 2006, "Towards a new local government electoral system in South Africa: democratization or manipulation?", published in spanish in Emmerich, G. E. (ed), *Ellos Y Nostros Democracia Y Representacion En El Mundo Actual*. Demos, Grupo de Estudios.

Cameron R., 1999, *Democratisation of South African local government: a tale of three cities*. Pretoria: Van Shaik.

Cherry J., 2001, "Cynicism at the grassroots? Political opposition in Kwazakele Township, Port Elisabeth", *Democratization*, 8(1), pp. 237-254.

Cherry J., 2004, "Election 2004: the party lists and issues of identity", *ElectionSynopsys*, 1(3), pp. 6-9.

Cooke B., Kothary U., 2001, *Participation: the new tyranny?* London: Zed Publishers.

[3] The proceedings of this conference are accessible online: http://www.ifas.org.za/democratic_transformation.

Friedman S., 2005, “A voice for some: South Africa’s ten years of democracy”, in Pirombo J., Nijzink L. (ed.), *Electoral politics in South Africa: assessing the first democratic decade*. New York: Palmgrave McMillan, pp. 3-22.

Harrison P., 2006, “Integrated Development Plans and Third way politics”, in Pillay U., Tomlinson R., Du Toit J., *Democracy and delivery: Urban policy in South Africa*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, pp. 186-207.

Harriss, J., 2007, ‘Antinomies of empowerment: observation on civil society, politics and urban governance in India’, Economic and Political weekly 42(26), June 30: 2716-2724.

Harriss J., Stokke K., Törnquist O., 2004, *Politicising Democracy: the new local politics of democratisation*, New York: Palmgrave McMillan.

Heller P., 2003, “Reclaiming democratic space: civics and politics in post-transition Johannesburg”, in Tomlison R. et al., *Emerging Johannesburg: perspectives on the post-apartheid city*. London: Routledge, pp. 155-184.

Lodge T., 2005, “The African National Congress: there is no party like it –ayikho efana nayo”, in Pirombo J., Nijzink L. (ed.), *Electoral politics in South Africa: assessing the first democratic decade*. New York: Palmgrave McMillan, pp. 109-128.

Lodge T., 2001, “The South African local government elections of December 2000”, *Politikon*, 28(1), pp. 21-46.

Mabin A., 2006, “Local government in South African larger cities”, in Pillay U., Tomlinson R., Du Toit J., *Democracy and delivery: Urban policy in South Africa*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, pp. 135-156.

Mattes R., 2005, “Voter information, government evaluation and party images in the first democratic decade”, in Pirombo J., Nijzink L. (ed.), *Electoral politics in South Africa: assessing the first democratic decade*. New York: Palmgrave McMillan, pp. 40-63.

Miraftab, F., 2006, “Feminist Praxis, citizenship and informal politics: reflections on South Africa’s Anti-Eviction campaign”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(2), pp. 194-218.

Oldfield S., Stokke K., 2006, “Building unity in diversity: social movement activism in the Western Cape anti-eviction campaign”, in Ballard R., Habib, A. & Valodia, I. (eds), *Voices of protest*…, *op. cit*., pp. 111-132.

Southall, R. (ed.) (2001) Opposition and Democracy in South Africa. Special issue: *Democratisation* 8(1).

Tomlinson R., 1999, “Ten years in the making: a history of the evolution of metropolitan government in Johannesburg”, *Urban Forum*, 10(1), pp. 1-40.

Zuern E., 2001, “South Africa’s civic in transition: agents of change or structures of constraint?”, *Politikon*, 28(1), pp. 5-20.