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Livelihoods and the transformative potential of the city of Rustenburg

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2016-04-05
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20171

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Abstract

Cities are characterised by a contradictory dynamic of opportunities for and the suppression of the livelihoods of the poor. At the turn of the twentieth century, well into the first half of that century, Rustenburg was defined by a broad-based participation in the local economy. Although black people's involvement in that economy was marked by the relation of dependency to the dominant, white social formations, they both managed their relationship with the city and contributed to its vibrancy. Today, the same is true for livelihood activities in this city. However, from the mid-1990s (as it was the case from the 1940s until the official end of apartheid) various forces are delivering Rustenburg into an elite space of formal cultural practices. With that said, such exercises of power are not generalisable to the whole city. Thus, the way various sites of the city are constituted and valorised affect whether or not ordinary people can build livelihoods and pursue other goals in and through such sites. Overall, the redevelopment practices in Rustenburg bring into focus the tensions of city life – urban residents and the city space are agents of social reproduction on the one hand and are resources for creating emancipatory spaces on the other. In this sense, living and making a living in the city involves mediating such tensions – although the new spaces produced by the body and the dream often cohere into real material landscape that shapes everyday practices and social identities, the sensual, rationality, history, and the landscape provide resources for continual exploration and reproduction of new spaces of emancipation from poverty and domination.