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NGO legitimacy in supporting informal settlements communities: representation, participation and accountability explored through a South African case study

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Abstract

This thesis studies the legitimacy of NGOs in supporting communities living in informal settlements in South Africa. The key objective is to explore how development NGOs derive legitimacy by using representation, participation and accountability. This is a difficult feat considering the challenges these NGOs face working in informal settlements where tenure issues are often not easily resolved.

The thesis discusses two approaches to legitimacy, the prescriptive/normative approach and the descriptive approach, applying both in a single case study of the South African development NGO Planact and its activities at Zandspruit Private Property, an informal settlement in Johannesburg.

The case study explores normative legitimacy through representation, because development or advocacy NGOs derive legitimacy through what Pitkin in her seminal work in 1967 refers to as substantive representation of communities‟ needs and interests. The case study discusses descriptive legitimacy through the perceptions of stakeholders, namely government, the community and Planact itself.

The thesis found that representation, participation and accountability counted little in establishing the NGO‟s legitimacy. Because of unresolved tenure, Planact‟s legitimacy was not constructed through representation, participation and accountability. However, Zandspruit community, local government and Planact itself still perceived Planact to be legitimate. The thesis concludes that the prescriptive/normative framework of NGO legitimacy is limited in the context of unresolved tenure and marginalisation. Zandspruit community being marginalised and desperate for assistance, the community had no power to demand greater accountability from Planact. The performance of Planact in Zandspruit was hampered by the lack of tenure security. The thesis recommends that to improve the performance of development NGOs in relation to service delivery, governments need to limit delays in securing tenure. This, however, is a complex challenge in its own right and needs further research.