

Moving Targets as a Coping Strategy: Re-thinking emergent patterns and relations of organized urban poor groups

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The paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of the dynamic relational web inherent to federation groups aligned to Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and the impact on local (urban) governance systems. The network of federation groups is characterized by a combination and a continuum of engagement practices, constantly shifting roles and functions and moving in- and outside formal governance arrangements. These provisional and dynamic connections raise questions around legitimacy and accountability. However, they also constitute a coping strategy to navigate in multiple and transforming spaces of opportunity. The dynamics of the movement, the flexibility of its organisational form as “moving targets” therefore becomes a strategic innovation.

1. Introduction

The spread of federations aligned to SDI and the question if these emerging new civil society arrangements represent new options for responsive governance, attract notice to both policy-makers² and researchers³. There has been much discussion on SDI's multiscalar activities and combination of practices as an alternative development strategy.

What both supporters and opponents have not taken into consideration sufficiently, I will argue, is the dynamics of the organisational form. During my field study⁴ I was wondering how the local groups affiliated to the federation could accomplish their aims despite the high mobility of actors within the network, or whether there is a correlation between outcome and mobility? What if, I asked myself, these “moving targets” are not just an adaptation to a changing political space, or possibly an innovative strategy for political and social change?

2. Governance in the African urban reality

Global urbanization and its unprecedented dynamics affect the social reality in cities. Between the year 2000 and 2030 an additional 2.1 billion people will live in cities (UN, 2006). Half of them will be confined to live in slums⁵. This urbanization trend is linked to processes of globalisation which have led to a rescaling of production in a “transnational geography” (Sassen, 2001) and to a “perforated sovereignty” (Mayer, 1994) of government. The tendencies foreshadow potential social and political tensions. Swilling gives an account how the rise of competing cities is also impeding on African Cities today, whilst the urban majority is confronted with increasing inadequacies in service provision (Swilling, 2006a:4).

African cities experience a job-less urban growth (Rakodi, 1997). They primarily function through an extended and diverse informal sector, as there is little access to the formal housing and job market. AlSayad and Roy (2004) argue that this informality is presently an organizing urban logic.

While informal practices can be argued to be just a form of everyday survivalist practice, many African scholars increasingly postulate that this “urban social resourcefulness” (Swilling, 2006a: 5) needs to be put back on the map as an African urbanity. Consequently, it is argued, “knowing how cities are lived” (Simone, 2002) means taking informal practices, institutions and networks or

¹ The essay submitted is the work of only the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.

² SDI has agreements with the City Alliance, various national government ministries as well as partnerships with a number of municipalities such as Durban, Mumbai and Blantyre.

³ See for example UN-Habitat (2006), Huchzermeyer (2006); Baumann et al (2001) Mitlin (1999), Mitlin (2004), Appadurai (2001), Wilson (2003), Millstein et al (2003), Khan and Pieterse (2006).

⁴ The paper withdraws from empirical research on the relational webs between civil society groups and local government in Cape Town, South Africa.

⁵ 924 million (2001) slums according to UN Statistics Division, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_worldregn.asp (02.2006). This is taking the multidimensional slum definition of physical, legal and social characteristics into consideration. See also: UN-Habitat (2003): 12f.

“relational webs” (Swilling, 2006a) as an organizing logic into account and into consideration for governance interventions.

3. Federation of the Urban Poor

One such element of an organizing logic emerges from grassroots level, as coalitions of citizens find new ways to challenge the state. In South Africa, state-civil society relations after 1994 almost had to be collaborative as the political transition implied that anti-apartheid struggles were accomplished. However, before long, post-apartheid social movements emerged which opposed a new marginalization through effects of globalisation and neo-liberal economic policies (Ballard et al, 2006).

The federation aligned to SDI was seen as a forerunner challenging the pro-growth orientation of the South African state (Ballard et al, 2006:17). Its approach was first developed by a civil society alliance in India and replicated since 1991 in South Africa with the South African Homeless People’s Federation (SAHPF). Slum dwellers are confronted with various uncertainties due to their informal status. The federation’s approach, also described as “rituals”, is a way to cope with the unstable situation. The aim of these techniques is to empower the communities by practicing daily savings, active involvement in meetings and self-enumeration. This approach is summarized under the slogan “power is knowledge and money”.

In South Africa the federation in alliance with Non-Governmental Organizations played a significant role in mobilising and supporting the urban poor. This is accomplished by improving their conditions, negotiating policy formulation and assisting with local decision-making processes. However, some leadership conflicts emerged within the federation which led to a split in 2006. After the crisis and subsequent rebuilding process, the Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP)⁶ as a successor of SDI practice in South Africa, is again recognised by government and has leveraged both state resources and influenced policy formulation.

4. Innovation or Dubious Effects?

Assumptions that opening the sphere of political action to relations between decentralised state institutions, local business and civil society will generate “good” governance⁷ have been contrasted by critical analysis. Case studies showed that dominant elite interests mostly define city politics.⁸ Regulationist theory therefore argues, that governance arrangements are not responsive to citizens’ needs, unless a) the state is willing and capable to open political space and actively include citizens and b) empowered civil society structures are in place which will voice their demands (Mayer, 1994).

“Responsive governance”, one could argue, has been on the agenda of South African politics since its transformation to democracy. The post-apartheid local state’s relationship with civil society, however, is based on ‘selective engagement’ and therefore impedes governance (Oldfield, 2002).

Internationally the so-called “third sector” has been increasingly integrated to municipal programmes as it was seen as the rising star for empowerment and ultimately responsive governance. However, the myth of the Third Sector soon became contrasted by reality. The sector has been increasingly instrumentalized, and questioned for its accountability and transparency.⁹ Institutionalized participation has also been criticized for absorbing the reform energy of the third sector and fragmenting the sector into groups included and excluded to governance arrangements. (Mayer, 1994:74) After state and market failure it was now time for the third sector to be “Beyond the Magic Bullet” as Edwards and Hulme postulated in 1996. Instead of self-help approaches or NGO-advocacy, now the grassroots themselves entered the stage of the development discourse. Castells’ “The City and its Grassroots” was an early attempt to stress the broader values and ideals embedded in movement politics and its emancipating opportunities (Castells, 1983).

⁶ This abbreviation by the way is no coincidence as it is time and time again used when challenging government representatives with the slogan “We are FEDUP!”.

⁷ “Good” refers to the quality of governance processes and their institutions and the responsible use of power and resources to provide public goods and services.

⁸ See for example Stone (1989)

⁹ for a summary see Mitlin (1999), Davis (2006: 70ff).

The federations aligned to Slum Dwellers International have taken up the new partnership approaches to governance. In Mumbai, for instance, slum dwellers and their aligned intermediary organisations cooperate with local government in large resettlement programmes. The model for mobilisation and negotiation is based upon alternative development strategies which comprise:

- “Federating” by establishing horizontal connections in and between communities
- a multiscalar organisation building from Shack/Slum Dwellers international to local communities
- the construction of an autonomous space by savings and loans by slum dwellers, exchanges between slum dwellers and setting precedence
- the construction of a non-class identity by “rituals” which bind the members together

There have been a number of debates concerning how these practices translate into a more responsive form of governance. Promoters of the SDI model itself claim that poverty needs to be framed comprehensively integrating voicelessness and powerlessness. Empowerment, they argue, is a form of poverty reduction. The SDI model in their view has contributed to an increased organization of the urban poor. Moreover, it provides an understanding “[...] that they are part of an urban reality”. (Baumann et al, 2001:37; Bolnick et al, 2006:38) Furthermore, alternative development strategies are both more independent from external support and more proactive by setting alternatives and precedence (Mitlin, 1999). In summary there is a view that these initiatives are innovative and “[...] have sought to ensure that state policies and practices are made more favourable towards the urban poor.” (Mitlin, 1999:54)

Nevertheless, the federations’ practices have been differently interpreted: For some critiques it tends to reduce resistance and lead to cooptation; for others it is more insidious representing an auto-governmentality which eventually will lead to an exclusionary citizenship and democratic deficit.

Confrontational vs. Politics of Patience

Often the “Politics of Patience” (Appadurai, 2001) is contested as it implies a non-confrontational engagement with the state. Representatives from right-based or radical democratic approaches argue that the federation’s non-confrontational politics reduces resistance and enables co-optation of leaders (Khan and Pieterse, 2006).

Resistance: The various local bargaining processes are not free of conflict. Local government decision-makers fear that if they cooperate with the federation they will contribute to “queue-jumping” of the state’s waiting list for housing. Proactive land and housing developments by the federation groups outside the formal process also constantly provide conflict. The federation’s bargaining practices cannot be equated with collaborative action. De Souza Briggs suggests that by applying “civic capacity” assists in understanding that there is no evolution from confrontation to collaboration, but that there is instead an innovation of “[...] knowing when to emphasize conflict, consensus, or a bit of both at once.” (De Souza Briggs, 2006:24). Even confrontational movements withdraw from a continuum between engagement, opposition and unlawful practice, as Oldfield and Stokke have made explicit in the case of the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town (Oldfield and Stokke, 2006).

Cooptation: Swilling agrees that cooptation is a constant thread for the federation, but a “tiger that’s being ridden” (Swilling, 2006b). However, one could argue, that the changing roles, make it difficult for anybody from the outside to co-opt. “The general impression is of a fast game of ice hockey, with players constantly tumbling in and out of the most active roles in response to shifting needs and game plans.” (Appadurai, 2001:32).

Governmentality from below vs. Trojan Horse

Appadurai argues that the federations reflect the meaning of “deep democracy” as they direct their own development, engage with outside key actors and build-up a horizontal solidarity-network. Thereby, according to Appadurai, they reconstitute citizenship. Self-surveys and self-enumerations represent a “governmentality from below”.

Nevertheless, Appadurai acknowledges the thread of self-surveillance taking Foucault's auto-governmentality¹⁰ into account. Swyngedouw, without specifically referring to the federation, argues the state must necessarily respond to actors which withdraw from "governance-beyond the state" on multiscalar levels (Swyngedouw, 2005:2002f). The seemingly innovative horizontal organised arrangements might just be a "[...] Trojan Horse that diffuses and consolidates 'the market' [...]." With regards to the federation in South Africa, Khan and Pieterse (2006) specifically stress, that it enhances a neo-liberal rationality by idealising self-help approaches. They take the People's Housing Process (PHP)¹¹ as a case in point for a "colonisation of civil society" by the state. PHP has been transformed by the state since its inception in 1998. Inconsistencies within PHP emerged which contradicted the initial participatory approach. With PHP, they argue, the state has taken over an innovative participatory practice into its policies and then refolded it to its own values (Khan and Pieterse, 2006: 172).

But fact is, that the federation and its affiliates have made it clear, that the "state's PHP" has nothing to do with their idea of participatory housing. Instead they continued to embark on an own community-driven approach. In the short-term the federation might have lost a policy change, but nevertheless it has influenced policy formulation. In the long run this might influence the discourse on housing.

Furthermore, Bolnick et al, argue that the federations' approach does not take over government responsibility. They agree with right-based approaches that government has to react upon the right to housing. However, they seek to change government policies and practices by using precedents (Bolnick et al, 2006: 43). The combination of practices in and outside formal governance arrangements and singling out agents of change within government is a tactic which is specifically referred to as "playing judo" with the state.¹²

3. Conclusion

Current discussions focus on the effects of the SDI approach in South Africa and tend to refer to the organisational arrangements (horizontal, networks, multiscalar) of the Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP) and its partners. It has been shown, that to classify the effects, one dimension of organisational arrangement has not been taken into consideration sufficiently: dynamics. Instead of simple engagement (resulting in low resistance), federation practices are determined by a combination of a continuum of engagement practices. Instead of easy cooptation of static leaders, federation groups and affiliated organisations constantly shift roles and functions. Instead of reproducing the state by auto-governmentality, there is a combination of practices in and outside formal governance arrangements.

On the ground the networks of local communities are characterised by dynamic interaction and compositions. These dynamic overlaps and connections are provisional and thereby impact governance interventions as uncertainties emerge around legitimacy and accountability, both within the community as well as for other institutions like local government. Having said that, they might also constitute a coping strategy to navigate in multiple and transforming spaces of opportunity.

The dynamics of the movement, the flexibility of its organisational form as "moving targets" therefore becomes an innovation strategy.

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¹⁰ Foucault applies the term governmentality for the way governments seek to produce the citizen best suited to fulfil its policies as well as for the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed.

¹¹ PHP was inspired by federation practice and adopted in 1998 by the National Housing Policy which extended the housing subsidy scheme with an option of sweat-equity contribution by beneficiaries.

¹² "Don't confront authority head on. Instead of storming the citadel, infiltrate it... Play judo with the state – use its own weight to roll it over". Joel Bolnick, co-ordinator of Community Organizations Resource Centre, in: Khan and Pieterse, 2006:162.

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