Mediation and the Contradictions of Representing the Urban Poor in South Africa: The Case of SANCO Leaders in Imizamo Yethu in Cape Town, South Africa

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Introduction

The formal system of local governance in South Africa has the ‘ward’ as its lowest and smallest electoral level – a spatial unit consisting of between 5,000 and 15,000 voters. The ward is equivalent to the ‘constituency’ in much of the rest of the world. Notably, the history of South Africa means that the vast majority of people live in ‘communities’ or neighbourhoods that are far smaller in scale than the ward, and most of these are the site of multiple claims of informal leadership by a variety of local organisations and their leaders. For example, the Cape Town ward, in which our case study is located, includes at least five different communities, distinguished in racial and class terms.

Existing ‘below’ and ‘within’ the formal area of the ward, popular practices of representation are manifested through a variety of community-based organisations, more or less formalised, regulated and recognised. Some of these community-based organisations are neighbourhood specific, while some of them are federated into broader, national structures including the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO). SANCO is a national organisation that has relatively independent and heterogeneous branches at the ward level and structures at the metropolitan, provincial and national levels. Notably, at the local level SANCO is typically structured in terms of committees in every street and sometimes at a higher level called the blocks that meet
regularly to deal with issues at the most local of levels. This is a tradition of organising that extends back decades in ‘black African’ areas and gives the organisation a tremendous potential reach into communities, although not all street committees necessarily see themselves as under SANCO’s authority.

Although not formally recognised in the political system of the country, SANCO is an important player in community-level politics because of its significant size and its identification with the ANC alliance comprising the ruling party, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party. This relationship between SANCO and the ANC (Zuern 2006; Staniland 2008; Piper 2014), and also the ANC’s own strategy of grounding the party in civil society through its branches at the ward level (Bénit-Gbaffou 2012), contributes towards the dominance of the ruling party over civil society in South Africa and helps us understand the dynamics around leadership at the lowest level.

In exploring the nature of local leadership, especially in respect of SANCO in our site, we want to focus on the notion of mediation, as the concept invokes the idea of some kind of ‘third-party’ representation of the politically marginalised. Further, in South Africa, like many of the southern contexts (Chatterjee 2004; Yiftachel 2009; Piper and von Lieres 2011; Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2011), there is a strong case that the (black) urban poor struggle to access the state. Indeed, the need ‘to remedy the inequality […] in access to the state’ is, we argue, particularly important in South African low-income neighbourhoods for at least three reasons. The first is the fragmentation and complexity of the state apparatus and operations, partly linked to its system of three ‘spheres’ (not ‘tiers’) of government (national, provincial and local) where overlapping responsibilities are not clearly attributed and hierarchised. This fragmentation of the state has been increased after the implementation of New Public Management principles in local government in the 2000s that have further blurred the roles, functions and responsibilities of multiple parastatal agencies, corporations and organisations in charge of public service delivery and management.

The second is the dysfunctional and disappointing institutional participatory structures and channels set up at the local government level (Transformation 66/67 2008), often leading to civil society groups ‘inventing’ other means of getting heard by the state. These include mass protests, which can turn violent (Alexander 2010; Von Holdt et al. 2011), and using party connections to replace failing and fragmented local government channels (Bénit-Gbaffou 2012). Third are the high levels of popular expectation towards a South African state that has adopted