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Stream 5

Article nº 5-021

**THROUGH THE LENS OF THE EVERYDAY:
PARTICIPATION AND CONFLICT
A CASE STUDY OF WALMER TOWNSHIP, PORT
ELIZABETH, SOUTH AFRICA**

STEFANIE PROBST

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE EVERYDAY: PARTICIPATION AND CONFLICT

A case study of Walmer Township, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nexus of public participation and conflict, and the potential for conflict transformation through forms of participation and deliberation, in the context of post-1994 South Africa. The urban research setting to investigate this relationship is Walmer Township in the city of Port Elizabeth drawing on the writing Henri Lefebvre, among others. It further discusses forms of resistance such as protests and vandalism and how these have brought about new participatory spaces for a selected group of township residents to engage with the state and it draws attention to the obstacles to the transformational potential of these collaborations. It concludes that there exist different structures of community based organisations and many initiatives of mutual self-help in Walmer Township, but that these initiatives are not directed at radical transformations like those proposed most prominently by the Abahali baseMjondolo shack-dweller movement in the South African context. This paper argues that Walmer Township residents rather aim for empowerment in close relation to established structures and the existing system and do not significantly challenge these. To help facilitate conflict transformation, this paper argues, Walmer residents would have to develop more extensive and radical alternatives to the existing system.

KEY WORDS: Public participation, resistance, conflict/ conflict transformation, Walmer Township, post-apartheid South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the nexus of public participation and conflict, and the potential for conflict transformation through forms of public participation, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. This approach is grounded in the numerous contradictions emanating from the debate and research regarding the link between conflict and public participation. Coelho and Favareto (2011: 642), discussing problematic aspects of participation, have stressed the difficulty in predicting whether participation is leading to more cooperation or is contributing to deepen distributive conflicts. Another perspective is that of Mbuyisa (2013) who points towards the potential of public participation as participatory conflict resolution. A central feature of participation is the view that it will direct the attention to the needs of the poor and marginalized, and through this process lead to the formulation of policies that are transformative regarding present inequality and injustice (Gaventa and Barrett 2012; Coelho and Favareto 2011; Lieres and Coelho 2010; Cornwall 2004). Bradshaw and Haines (2014) understand the situation in South Africa as a 'protracted social conflict' and view it as important to build "need-satisfying institutional arrangements throughout the society, enabling government to be more sensitive to the needs of the people".

The urban research setting to investigate the relationship of participation and conflict / conflict transformation is Walmer Township in the city of Port Elizabeth. Different forms of participation are discussed and, in reference to the framework of James Scott (1985), this paper argues that often participation in Walmer Township can be understood as a form of resistance to forms of domination and violence, e.g. protest action to address service delivery problems or vandalism of buildings that are never put to use years after 'almost-completion'. In this context, it will be explored what the 'right to the city' means in the specific setting of Walmer Township and how forms of resistance have had an influence on the creation of new participatory spaces and local government decision-making regarding urban planning initiatives.

This paper thus aims to shed light on forms of conflict transformation/ radical urban transformation that originate from forms of residents/ citizen participation. In the context of Walmer Township transformations are explored with regard to the creation of participatory spaces as well as shifts of geographical spaces, processes that are, as this paper argues, very much interlinked in the discussed case. The paper discusses that forms of resistance such as protests have brought about new collaborations between citizens and the state and explores if these new participatory spaces have brought about new urban policies and politics that are creative and more transformative to bring change that significantly goes beyond pre-1994 patterns of domination and structural violence. It further draws attention to the obstacles to the transformational potential of these collaborations.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CONFLICT/CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: POWER AND VIOLENCE

Public participation in this research is understood as „citizens (or residents) participating in individual, interest group, social movements or community contexts, in relation to affairs that are of public interest“ (Booyesen 2009: 2) or more directly affect the participants' own lives. A social conflict is according to Friedrich Glasl (1999) considered as "an interaction that is involving at least two parties (individuals, groups, states), with at least one party experiencing differences (distinctions, contradictions, incompatibilities, etc.), in perception, thinking, imagination, interpretation, feeling (sympathy – aversion, trust – mistrust) and desires (needs, objectives, purposes, goals) to the other party, in such a way as

to make them feel that the potential for the realization of their ideas is affected". An important distinction is also between destructive and constructive conflicts (Deutsch 1949, 1973). A third important definition for this research is that of conflict transformation. Diamond (1994: 3) defines conflict transformation – and thereby goes beyond conflict resolution approaches – as endeavors that "seek to change the conditions that give rise to the underlying root causes of the conflict". Conflict transformation is therefore directed at a very deep level of the social, economic and political system, directed at structural change and improving relationships of conflict parties. It is not understood as an approach that is aiming to understand how to silence the voices of disadvantaged citizen groups in order to control and manage these voices, but as an approach that is interested in how active participation of grassroots movements and various community groups can be enabled.

The notion of conflict transformation represents a constructive view on conflict and, quoted from Mbuyisa (2014) who investigates public participation as participatory conflict resolution in the context of South Africa, is informed by "the belief that conflict can be a catalyst for deep-rooted, enduring positive change in individuals, relationships, and the structures of the human community" (Kraybill et al. 2005, 5).

Regarding the participation-conflict link, a key assumption of this study is that the emergence of open conflicts through processes of public participation, if exercised in a manner that challenges existing unequal structures and being aimed at social transformation, is not so much a contradiction as it appears (Coelho and Favareto 2011). From a conflict resolution perspective, and in a context of structural inequalities and various latent conflicts as is the case of post-apartheid South Africa, such processes can be understood as necessity to long-term transformation towards a more socially just and equal society. Within the relationship of public participation and conflict/ conflict transformation, the paper further argues that violence and power play a crucial role. Firstly, the paper introduces a profound distinction between power and violence by Hannah Arendt. This distinction is used in order to set apart participatory practices that are contributing to conflict transformation from practices that are reproducing patterns of violence and inequality. "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. When we say of somebody that (she or) he is "in power" we actually refer to his (or her) being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. (Arendt 1970: 44). Violence is understood as a form of domination that is instrumental in character. Arendt further argues that "violence can always destroy power. Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it [violence] is power."

3. THE CASE OF WALMER TOWNSHIP — EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF DOMINATION AND VIOLENCE

According to conflict transformation approaches, forms of violence include direct violence (the use of physical force, verbal violence and the threat to use force), cultural violence (prevailing attitudes and beliefs that have been taught since childhood and that surround us in daily life about the necessity of violence) and structural violence (inequality in terms of access to goods, resources and opportunities with respect to some groups, classes, genders, nationalities, etc.) (Galtung 1969: 171). Interviews with Walmer Township community activists and residents give insights to the spectrum of violence and domination people are confronted with in everyday life: Moki Cekisani, who was a friend of Steve Biko and who is a black consciousness and environmental activist in Walmer puts it as follows: "People are trapped here. They can't get out, even if they want. We are trapped in poverty, in a landless area. A lot of people drop out (of school). They are unemployed. They are unemployable,

because they don't have skills. And they (white people) are still maintaining their own order through economics. They are underpaying black people. They are indirectly confining black people to those areas.”

Mthuthuzeli Hombile, who is the founder of the Walmer Youth Development Forum and is an activist in Walmer township finds words that serve as an expression of the situation of structural violence residents in Walmer find themselves in: “There is not enough health personal in the clinic and people are turned away after lunch, if it is not an emergency. People are sick all the time in the township. There are no ambulances to take people to the clinic in case of an emergency. We take people dying with AIDS to the clinic in a shopping trolley“. Residents in Walmer township, in particular those that are unemployed and trying to sustain themselves and their families based on day-to-day informal jobs often become targets of direct violence, because for example they connect their house illegally to electricity: “The police are shouting us. We are not safe. I am stealing Isinyoka. You know Isinyoka. I steal electricity. That is how I am playing my radio. I don't have work and now I am 60 years old. I am a painter. I just keep quiet when the police is kicking me. I am not giving them the information of the black people here.”

With regard to forms of public participation, the system of apartheid in South Africa systematically excluded a broad section of its citizens from the public sphere. Since 1994 the state has undertaken major reforms in order to overcome this exclusion and enable more transparent and inclusive processes. Extensive participatory spaces were created in democratic South Africa. State-created spaces of participation are however characterized by two kinds of fundamental problems that, as argued in this paper, are contributing to a reproduction of the above mentioned violence: Firstly, participation is racially bound (e.g. ward committees), because the socio-spatial order is that different ‘races’ still being very much ‘disintegrated spatially’. Also spatial planning continues along apartheid concepts, practices and imaginary constructs (Williams 2009), with only marginal efforts to shift former boundaries. This also relates to the unequal distribution of resources and land in particular. Secondly, there is a lot of distrust, as interviewees express it, between the institutions of representative democracy and the people.

People are often passively involved in participatory structures and processes and therefore violence and social injustice is reproduced instead of power created in these participatory spaces. Research has pointed to the failure of ‘invited spaces’ of public participation such as Ward committees. In such context the mal-functioning of state-created platforms often leads to frustration on the side of the citizens which are seeking other ways of expressing their interests, assumingly leading to an increase in actions of civil disobedience and protest as described by Mottiar and Bond (2012), for instance.

The transformative aspiration of the theories of participation stand in contrast to the continued difficulty of accessing the state by poor and marginalized sections of society in practice (Chatterjee 2004; Piper and Lieres 2011). The importance of overcoming this inequality in South Africa has been discussed by Piper and Benit-Gbaffou (2014: 2). Piper and Lieres (2014, 5) have in this context described the importance of the practice of ‘democratic mediation’. This research finds that political mediation by intermediaries in state-society engagement can play a crucial role in the process of democratic deepening. Relevant in this context is also the body of research on civil society organisations as political representatives of segments of the population (Lavallo, Houtzager and Castello 2005).

4. EVERYDAY FORMS OF PARTICIPATION / RESISTANCE: PROTESTS

In the context of the only very limited empowerment that originates from formal spaces of participation, “protests have become a part of life“ in Walmer Township as one of the workshop participants expresses it. In 2012 there was a series of protests in Walmer Township. Contrary to a rather negative view on protests that possibly has its roots in a view of democracy as cooperation and agreement (Rawls 1971; Habermas 1990), this research is based on the idea that democracy should not strive to completely remove difference, because conflict is integral to democracy (Benhabib 1996). Protests can be understood as a form of participation in the form of direct citizen action (Booyesen 2009) as well as also represents a form of resistance against domination since other participatory spaces are not enabling active involvement in processes.

In a participatory workshop that was conducted with Walmer residents, participants rated protests on the ‘Ladder of citizen participation’ by Arnstein (1969) on the highest and lowest rung at the same time. According to my findings, in Walmer Township, protests create the moment of power when the protest group acts together on an issue that is of concern for all participants, after unsuccessfully trying to bring this issue on the agenda of government planning in the context of other meetings. “It often also provides a venue for people to led out their frustration as a form of therapy”, workshop participants agreed. Protests were further seen as a means of manipulation by some community members as “at times those that don't have a clean conscious are the first to step up and run in the first row of the protest” as one of the residents puts it. This also points to the various divergent and shifting interests and conflicts between interest groups, business, politicians and individual actors that live or are engaged in the township. Protests in Walmer Township are therefore not always aimed at addressing grievances of the most poor and marginalized, but serve as a way of bringing particular interests to the attention of local government. Other informants see protests in Walmer as a venue for criminals: “During the 2012 protests many Somali shops had to be closed. Children and old people were not safe.”

Conflict transformation approaches (Lederach 2005) view non-violent oppositional activities (e.g. engaging in political democratic struggle in form of protests, boycotts, strikes etc.) in a positive light as these activities can be a means to making latent violent structures visible. In fact, these forms of action are expected to create a form of empowerment which is relevant with a focus of overcoming the “inequality of agency” (Rao and Walton 2004) regarding previously oppressed groups and, in asymmetric conflicts, with a focus to transform unjust social relationships (Lederach 1995; Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse 1991: 21). It can be argued that it is likely that also new conflicts will emerge through any form of participation as such processes provide a platform for developing a language and exploring individual and common interests of previously oppressed groups which possibly stand in contrast to the interests of other / dominant groups. The highest level of empowerment through public participation is understood as giving the participants in such processes the opportunity to make collective decisions regarding their shared concerns (Arnstein 1969; Mansbridge; Gutmann and Thompson (1996), Fishkin (1995); Fung and Wright 2003).

Research findings are that the latest protests in Walmer Township in August last year in particular have led to an initiative by the Deputy Mayor of the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality in the form of a new participatory space that was created in order to manage those conflicts that had become visible through various protests and engagement with residents in Walmer township. The Deputy Mayor has put together a ‘task team’ with officials from all three spheres of government as well as representatives from the Walmer community (the so called “Steering Committee”). The Chairman of this Steering

Committee is satisfied with the outcome of the process since the ‘task team’ started its work and says that the Municipality started many new development projects in Walmer Township since the needs of residents were discussed in this forum. He also says that the decisions taken there were binding and were communicated back to the community in monthly meetings in each of the 18 areas of Walmer Township. An important plan that relates to the ‘right to the city’ notion is for example the debate about the resettlement of township-residents due to unhealthy gas-emissions in parts of the township to nearby land. However, the Municipality is struggling to finalize the deal with the private owners of this land. The limitations to transformation of this forum are further that its main intention was to “solve the crisis” as the ANC-Chairman in Ward 4 expresses it. Despite that it falls short of conflict transformation it still led to empowerment of a group of community members.

5. EVERYDAY FORMS OF RESISTANCE. EXAMPLE: VANDALISM

Following the framework of James Scott (1985), resistance is understood as the pattern of acts of subordinate individuals and groups against the everyday experience of domination. The concern here is domination with regard to structural violence and in „state-created spaces“ of participation and the pattern of resistance that evolve from it.

This paper looks at one example in Walmer township that can be understood as a form of resistance: In September 2011 the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality started with the construction of two facilities, a Youth Centre and an Advice Centre for the cost of R16 million and R12 million, respectively. The projects were funded by the National Treasury through its Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant. The project was identified by the Municipality as a ‘focused urban renewal project’, aimed at rejuvenating socio-economic activities in various urban townships in the city. The reasoning of these buildings was to take the Youth away from the shabeens, crime and drugs and was directed at their skills development through positive activities.

Superficially, this initiative looks like a move forward in terms of improving the area for its residents, but it is 2016 and these buildings have never been put in use. According to an architect that was involved in the design of the buildings and who sees his role as assistant to the elected officials, public meetings were conducted by the Councilor starting in 2005: “Unfortunately, often the discussion doesn't revolve around how the building should look like, but around who can get tenders. It revolves around money.” A Youth activist who is very much involved in the development of young people in Walmer Township said that the community was not consulted on their ideas and views of how the building should look like to best serve the purpose of the community. “The ideas were presented to us shortly before the construction started”, he says.

The Youth Center was never fenced. These buildings represent in the view of this study examples what Henri Lefebvre calls an ‘abstract designed space’ that was decided on by elite decision-makers of an ‘technocratic urbanism’ style without deeply considering the social practices of people living in that space and without including them fully in the process. This is how the Center looks today on the inside (see pictures below). It has been vandalized.



Picture 1: Vandalized Youth Center in Walmer Township

This paper argues that the reasons for the vandalism are partly rooted in the frustration over the non-involvement of young people throughout the process. I propose that it can therefore be understood as a form of resistance directed towards the general structural violence young people in Walmer are faced with, as well as on top of that the non-participatory approach when it comes to urban development and planning. This building is situated at the entrance to the township and has over the years become a reminder of the top-down approach in urban planning for Walmer residents. Thus, it can be argued that vandalism in this context needs to be considered a form of political activity against the domination in everyday life and non-inclusive participation structures and processes.

6. EVERYDAY FORMS OF PARTICIPATION — GRASS-ROOT INITIATIVES

Most interesting, perhaps, for urban planning that wants to move beyond a technocratic approach is to learn about and support grass-root ideas and initiatives that relate to how residents would imagine their neighborhood to develop. In Walmer Township there are initiatives where community groups aim to develop new solutions for more sustainable development of their neighborhood. An example is an idea for an environmental project that has a broader focus based on black consciousness ideas connecting those with green consciousness ideas with the aim of creating something that is more transformative in terms of race-relations and in this context necessarily also geographically extends beyond the Walmer Township. Within the township, mutual aid initiatives like vegetable gardens, a soup kitchen that was started in 2008 and since expanded to include a crèche and a home for elderly residents, as well as social entrepreneurship for recycling bottles represent small ‘cracks in capitalism’ and forms of participation whereby groups of residents take their own decisions about how they want to live and how they want to transform their neighborhood.



Picture 2: Vegetable Garden and Recycle Project

The main limitations of the above-mentioned initiatives in the Walmer context are that these have not developed into a consistent social movement and do not aim at a radical transformation of the existing system. Community leaders are often those that are also involved in business and have formed SMMEs (Small, medium and micro-sized Enterprises). “These structures are not so much interested in the development of the whole community, they have their own agenda”, a community activist in Walmer Township says. It is possible to contrast the situation in Walmer with another example of a strong social movement in South African which is a group called Abahlali baseMjondolo, a shack dwellers movement that originated in Durban, but also operates in the Wells Estate in Port Elizabeth.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper argued that in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and the research setting of Walmer township extensive engagement of residents can have transformative power, i.e. protests leading to the creation of new participatory spaces. This is even so if government only engages people to “solve the crisis”. Development projects should not originate by architects and elites as Lefebvre views it and “leave the community with scars” as an activist from Walmer puts it, but through social change and change in ‘everyday life’ that will enable the self-transformation of the production mode of space and space itself. In practice, this would mean to support and enhance the creation of space that originate from grass-root ideas by residents which in turn can enable more extensive and sustainable urban transformation. Especially where such initiatives cross the borders of pre-1994 spaces and are directed at more radical transformations (such as the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement proposes it) can these forms of positive residents power help transform the conditions that gave rise to the underlying root causes of the colonial and post-colonial system in South Africa and help facilitate conflict transformation.

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