

Executive summary of public forum on political participation

June 30, 2009, Southern Sun –Elangeni Hotel / Durban, 18h00 – 20h00

Presenters:

Steven Robins, Professor of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch

Orlean Naidoo, Centre for Civil Society

The purpose of the seminar was to explore the political practices of grassroots movements in post-apartheid South Africa and how they weigh up with contrasting conceptions of politics. The discussion was well attended by members of both political parties and civil society organisations.

Professor Steven Robins presented a synopsis of his recently published book *From Revolution to Rights in South Africa: Social movements, NGOs and Popular politics after Apartheid*. The main argument of the book is that post-apartheid social movements have departed from the pre-1994 militant style of doing politics and are adopting more pragmatic participatory strategies. They are forming partnerships with NGOs, like the TAC-MSF¹ partnership on HIV/AIDS and other questions of health, that combine right-based claims and collective mobilisation by simultaneously using the streets, courts and other formal participatory channels. According to Robins, the TAC-MSF partnership has politicised health, expanding it from being a narrow technical policy issue to a matter of rights and citizenship to be claimed. It has also resulted in the empowerment of individual TAC members, who acquired scientific knowledge of HIV and AIDS and as a consequence could take up job opportunities either in government or other organisations. Agency has thus become a political resource to fulfil both altruistic and personal desires, Robins intimated.

Orlean Naidoo presented illuminating insights into the social struggles of the Chatsworth and Crossmoor flat-and-shack-dwellers based on her 11 years of political activism in those communities. She mentioned that the Chatsworth flat-dwellers organisation was formed in 1997 to resist the commodification of social services by the ANC government, which is predicated on the market rationality of neo-liberalism. She indicated that during this time the ANC government reduced the (Indian) share of the child support grant by 3% to give to the (Black) poor as part of the ruling party's RDP strategy. And so effectively took from the poor to give the poor, whilst increasing the rental and electricity tariffs, which the already impoverished community, comprising mostly of female-headed households, could hardly afford.

¹ "Medecins Sans Frontieres" more commonly known as "Doctors Without Borders"

Thus, in August 1998, the community faced mass disconnections and evictions. And in response 3000 flat dwellers marched to the Durban City Centre to declare that they will not pay the hiked up tariffs because they cannot afford it. Their resistance strategy included non-payment, reconnection and litigation. In 2000, they succeeded in getting an interdict against the City of Durban to prevent the City from proceeding with the eviction of the Westcliffe flat-dwellers in Chatsworth. The case was eventually adjourned indefinitely because of conflicting reasons proffered for the evictions by the Deputy Mayor and the Housing Manager. However, as the community's resistance continued, the City became increasingly frustrated and so invested huge sums of money in security to squash their social struggles. And it was only after a survey was conducted in 2004, which found that the reconnections were carried out by mainly women because they genuinely could not afford to pay, that the City decided to temporarily suspend its eviction plans.

Similarly, in Crossmoor, backyard dwellers were forced into the shackland of that area as they could no longer afford to pay the City of Durban's high rental tariffs. Meanwhile, like the Westcliffe flat-dwellers, the Crossmoor shack-dweller community has been using protests, the courts and at times engagements to resist the City's eviction plans, Orlean mentioned. In 2008, they succeeded in getting the court to withdraw an eviction order, although the case against the City was not won.

The two presentations elicited some searing responses. Roothren Moodley charged that the City of Durban is using the law as a stratagem for attenuating the social struggle of the Early Morning Market traders by drawing a technical distinction between "legal" and "illegal" traders in order to criminalise the resistance of a significant proportion of Market traders against the City's plan to build a Mall for private accumulation. Trevor Ngwane argued that for most municipal officials participation is merely a formal routine. They invite communities or social groups to participatory processes with preordained agendas and go through the motions to simply comply with the prescriptions of the law. Bongani Dlamini opined that activists frequently straddle social and political struggles, but should keep politics out of social issues. Thabo Africa asserted that we need to acknowledge the limitations of the liberal variant of democracy, as it doesn't matter which political party is in power, it cannot produce a substantive experience of democracy for poor and working people.

