



Community resistance to megaprojects: The case of the N2 Gateway project in Joe Slovo informal settlement, Cape Town



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ABSTRACT

Interactions between megaproject interventions and local communities represents critical subjects of investigation as national and metropolitan governments are using large-scale investments in urban landscapes as pillars of their growth strategies. This article analyses community resistance to the large-scale housing project N2 Gateway in the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa township, Cape Town. Since 2004, the inhabitants of Joe Slovo have experienced evictions and relocation, but also the materialisation of new housing opportunities for many community members. Their response to the project has evolved from an initial show of resistance, via a legal process, to a more engagement-oriented strategy during the allocation phase. I argue that the mobilisation of informal settlement dwellers facing megaproject implementation has created disempowerment, social division and a reconfiguration of power relations. It is also proposed that community resistance to megaprojects is best understood when traced over time as a dynamic response to a constantly unfolding project-related intervention.

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Introduction

The interactions between megaprojects and settlement dynamics are becoming increasingly critical as a subject of investigation as national and metropolitan governments are using large-scale investments in urban landscapes as pillars of their growth strategies. Urban development in South African cities is no exception in this regard, but the types of interventions differ according to each city's social and economic base. Cape Town is a city that attracts a huge number of tourists each year, and attempts to brand itself as a place for tourism, knowledge and creative industries. At the same time, Cape Town experiences a huge pressure from inward migration, socio-spatial segregation and poverty – manifested by hundreds of dense informal settlements along the main portal into the city, the N2 highway. As a part of the process of 'dressing up for the world', the National Department of Housing and the City of Cape Town chose in 2004 to locate a major housing flagship project along this highway. At this point, the ANC government had just unveiled their new housing policy, and South African cities had just begun preparations for hosting the FIFA 2010 World Cup. The N2 Gateway project aimed to address the huge housing backlog and the sprawl of informal housing along the highway. One of the most ambitious projects of its kind, it has also

generated complex political dynamics between shack dwellers, civil society networks, private contractors and three tiers of government.

In this article, I will analyse the actors involved in the N2 Gateway project in the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa township, Cape Town. I will particularly focus on the political tensions and the community mobilisation which stemmed from this large-scale housing project. The article is based on qualitative data collected during several fieldwork trips in 2010–2012, including interviews with community leaders, residents, political representatives, NGO representatives and activists.¹ The text is organised in the following way. First, I discuss the megaproject qualities of the N2 Gateway in Joe Slovo with reference to the literature. I also present the main actors involved in the case. Secondly, I list and discuss the issues that have generated the most conflict since 2004. Thirdly, I trace popular mobilisation in the Joe Slovo settlement through different phases, and examine how they have transformed social relations in civil society. Finally, I will conclude by asking how this case of transformed popular resistance in Cape Town can inform our understanding of the politics of

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¹ Research has been done with assistance from independent researchers Athini Melane and Pamela Tsolekile de Wet, and with fellow team members of the Chance2Sustain project Prof. Dianne Scott at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Berit Aasen, senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR).

megaprojects. I will try to demonstrate the divisive effects that accompany social infrastructure megaprojects and how the limited and strategic use of participation have affected different local interests and groups in the community differently – and triggered these groups to adjust their strategies correspondingly.

The N2 Gateway: a megaproject in the post-apartheid city

To what extent does it make sense to understand the N2 Gateway as a megaproject? While not perhaps fitting the stereotypical idea of a megaproject, it can be argued with support from the ‘megaproject literature’ that housing and social infrastructure projects are representative of a new generation of megaprojects. Kennedy et al. (2011) draw on Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter (2003) to argue that new urban infrastructure is increasingly being built as megaprojects. Lehrer and Laidley (2008) compare new forms of megaprojects to old ones and discern a more flexible type of megaproject where mixed-use and diversity are values explicitly embraced. While public participation even in these new megaprojects is limited, Lehrer and Laidley (2008: 800) argue they face less resistance than the old monolithic state-run megaprojects, as “the guise of a much broader and more responsive socioeconomic framework” seem to absorb criticism.

Newton (2009) examines the two parallel discourses constructed to justify the N2 Gateway project, namely the need to address the so-called housing backlog and the wish to beautify a main highway in time for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. In Newton’s opinion, the national Minister of Housing and other protagonists behind the N2 Gateway project have constructed a “public discourse (which) is used to enable a non-democratic urban development taking place” (Newton, 2009:105). Smit (2008) presents ample evidence documenting how politicians explicitly established a link between the project and economic growth objectives – relating to tourism, foreign investment, the World Cup mega event and local concerns for the property market and construction businesses. A briefing document released by the provincial government, states: “This project is also prioritized by the City of Cape Town and other spheres in light of its high visibility on the gateway corridor linking Cape Town International Airport with the City” (WCPG, 2004:2). On the other hand, the project has clearly provided housing opportunities for different sections of the housing market in poverty-ridden areas along the N2 highway: families who can afford a mortgage, tenants in rental units, as well as fully-subsidised homes for previous informal settlement dwellers – a total of 23,000 homes as of 2013 (HDA, 2013).

Ren and Weinstein (2012), who have studied megaprojects in Shanghai and Mumbai, argue that the degree of state authoritarianism and the coherent political control the Chinese state wields has between multiple scales of government allowed the city of Shanghai to move swifter with relocation of people and construction of megaprojects than the city of Mumbai, where political control was much more fragmented between levels of government and where inter-party conflict and political contestation managed to significantly delay the process (Ren & Weinstein, 2012; Weinstein & Ren, 2009).

The N2 Gateway project was initially a joint effort between three tiers of government: National Ministry of Housing (now Department of Human Settlements), the Western Cape Provincial Government and the City of Cape Town. ANC politicians based at all three political scales acted, at various points in time, as protagonists for the project: most importantly, Housing Minister Lindiwe Sisulu, MEC²

for Local Government and Housing Marius Fransman (later replaced by Richard Dyantyi) and then Mayor of Cape Town, Nomaindia Mfeketo. Together they formed a steering committee known as the M3. The City of Cape Town was initially tasked with being the “main implementation agency” with support from provincial and national government. This signalled a move away from the historical anchoring of housing delivery at the scale of provincial government, and an expanded developmental role for local government. However, with the political shift in the Cape Town metropolitan municipality after the March 2006 municipal elections, the role of the City of Cape Town in this ANC flagship project became deeply strained. In June 2006, the City of Cape Town was removed from the M3 and freed of their implementation role in the project with the exception of services for which “they are constitutionally responsible” (NDoH quoted in Smit, 2008:11). The contested unfolding of the N2 Gateway project in selected informal settlements occurred alongside³ efforts by the City of Cape Town, through various programmes and often in partnership with other NGOs, to upgrade informal settlements across the city (Adlard, 2008; Graham, 2006). In the 2009 general elections, the DA also won a majority in the Western Cape Province. The relationship between these three tiers of government was complicated by the rivalry of the country’s two dominant political parties, with a recent development towards normalisation or consolidation signalled by the dialogue and joint appearances of the Minister of Human Settlements Tokyo Sexwale (ANC) and WC Premier Helen Zille (DA).

Implementation of the megaproject was severely hampered by a series of additional tensions: between various target groups, between social movements and authorities and between contractors. The release of funds was also slower than anticipated (AGSA, 2008). Smit notes that the project management ran into fundamental problems, including: (i) flawed inter-governmental cooperation, (ii) significant delays, (iii) budget overruns and (iv) lack of community participation. In 2005, the national agency Thubelisha Homes was appointed as project manager and implementing agent of the N2 Gateway (de Satge, Kahanovitz, Kubukeli, & Tissington, 2009; Smit, 2008). The role of Thubelisha was intensely contested in the years that followed. The Auditor-General stated that the appointment of Thubelisha was done in spite of an insufficient costing plan, a low rank in the evaluation of the tender and a lack of formal contract. A separate contract with a company under the name of Cyberia Technologies was signed for Phase 1 of the project, although this was also fraught with problems. In 2009, the Housing Development Agency (HDA) took over the project manager role, and claimed that it had improved the competence of the management team and strengthened institutional ties and community participation in the process. HDA is a public entity under the Minister of Human Settlements, and is in charge of other housing megaprojects in eThekweni/Durban (Cornubia) and Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (Zanemvula).

In addition to numerous state and public sector actors, the project was relying on financing and other services from the private sector. The role of developer was awarded to the Sobambisana Consortium after a tender process which was concluded 14 February 2005. The consortium consisted of six companies: Asla Devco, Asla Magwebu, Citrine, Khayaletu Projects, KCBDC, and Power Developments (Mail & Guardian, 2005). In addition, Thubelisha used BKS Engineers and Management as contractors to perform the workshop process listing and selecting applicants. In Phase 2, which to a large degree consisted of bonded housing for a middle-income bracket (ZAR3500–7000 per month), government

³ And in the case of site rehabilitation for N2 Gateway Phase 1, in collaboration with CoCT’s existing Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP).

² Member of the Executive Council, Provincial Government.

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