# Voicing noise: Political agency and the trialectics of participation in urban Malawi

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## ABSTRACT

Participation is promoted as the main engine for transformation in urban planning and slum upgrading in Malawi, despite the fact that most projects never get beyond the planning stage. Serious participation fatigue has been identified in many areas, but little is done to change the dominant script. This article comes out of an action research project with groups of urban poor and their organizations in Malawi. It analyses existing spaces in which participatory planning and slum upgrading take place, and reflects on what combinations of participatory spaces that might serve to enable change. The authors define political agency and locate potential transformation in agonistic spaces that open up for rupture and for people's interest to be accepted as voice rather than noise. At the same time, participants in urban Malawi often wish to be included *into* existing frameworks rather than challenging them. The article therefore explores a third way between a programme of insurgent radical action and the more pragmatic consensus-based participation model practised in Malawi today. Here, the potential for transformation is to be found not within one group or one type of space, but in the ways in which different spaces of participation connect, overlap and partly constitute each other. To better understand the transformative potential of participation in the context of urban planning in Malawi, we thus propose a 'trialectics' of participatory spaces where 'claimed', 'invited' and 'invented' dimensions of participation connect, overlap, and open up for ways in which actors can meet.

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## 1. Introduction: repoliticizing participatory planning processes

Rather than fulfilling its transformative potential, the participatory turn has over the last two decades largely reduced political planning spaces to a consensual mode of governance that allows for a myriad of opinions *as long as these do not effectively question the current order* (Korf, 2010; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2014). Still, participation in its various forms continues to be the dominant script in development practice and policy, and is understood to hold the potential to connect political agency with collective struggle (Cornwall, 2008; Kesby, 2005; Stokke and Törnquist, 2013).

In this article, we draw on a collaborative action research project with informal settlement groups in Malawi to examine the transformative potential of participatory urban planning. In doing this, we add to existing scholarship on urbanization with a somewhat different story than the narratives of insurgent citizenship in urban planning in South Africa and parts of Latin-America (Holston, 2009; Miraftab, 2005; Pieterse, 2008).

The project's main aim has been to understand why so few slum upgrading initiatives in Malawi are deemed successful.[1] This article contributes towards this aim by analysing some examples that were understood in the project as representative of the prevailing participatory approaches in Malawi. In addition we discuss how realizations from the project helped identify and initiate what was considered a missing link in the existing processes – a more agonistic and confrontational participatory space.

When looking at how political agency was actualized in particular spaces, we discovered that participatory processes in Malawi tend to avoid engaging with 'noisy' issues such as exclusion and resource redistribution. At the same time we found that these were issues that needed to be addressed if the slum upgrading plans developed were to be implemented. As researchers, our first inclination was therefore to argue for a repoliticization of the participa-

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[1] In this article, slum upgrading refers to an integrated approach, small or large, that aims to improve conditions in a given area. These conditions relate to the legal (e.g. land tenure), the physical (e.g. infrastructure, housing), the social (e.g. crime or education) or the economic.

tory planning discourse through radical resistance (Harvey, 1973, 2012; Holston, 1995) However, participants expressed more interest in being included into existing frameworks and having a voice *within* the system rather than in engaging in insurgency. In the project, we therefore explored an alternative that sought to bridge Harvey's (1973) call for a programme of radical action and the more consensus-based participation model currently practised in Malawi (Pieterse, 2008). In the collaborative project we discuss here, participation was regarded as transformative when its outcome was that participants were included, gained recognition and got their noise accepted as voice (Purcell, 2014). 'Noise' refers to when people raise their voices to challenge existing discourses and the status quo. It is a form of behaviour interpreted as 'noise' by those in power since it tends to be loud, unpleasant, and causing disturbance (Marchart, 2007; Oxford Dictionaries, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2014).

Participation can take place in different spaces and settings. In the case of slum upgrading in Malawi, we show that the potential for transformation is not limited to one particular type of space, but is expressed in the ways in which different spaces of participation connect, overlap and partly constitute each other. To better understand the transformative potential of participation in the context of urban planning in Malawi, we thus propose to engage with a 'trialectics' of participatory spaces (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996) which helps to explain the relationships between institutionalized – consensus-based – forms of spaces for participation and – and other, more agonistic spaces of participation.

In order to analyse participatory spaces in Malawi, we bring together literature on participatory spaces and recent debates in political and cultural geography. Through our readings of Engin Isin (2008) and Jacques Rancière (2001, 2009, 2011) and the discussions that have emerged from an engagement with Rancière's work within geography (Dikeç, 2005, 2007, 2012; Davidson and Iveson, 2014a,b; Kallio, 2012; Pieterse, 2008; Purcell, 2013, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2014), we do argue for a repoliticization of participatory planning, but in a way that is sensitive to the Malawian context, to enable possibilities for social transformation.

We begin in the next section by presenting the methodological approach for the research before we discuss the existing discourses and spaces of participation in Malawi, and conceptualize the trialectics of participation that we believe is necessary for transformation to take place. This introduces a framework that we apply in the second half of the article to analyse existing and alternative spaces of participation. In conclusion, we show how elements of agonism need to be brought into the participatory planning discourse in order to make visible the links between political transformation and the more concrete material benefits participants seek in community planning and slum upgrading processes.

## 2. Collaborative research: action research and the academic-practitioner nexus

Methodologically and empirically, the article is based on a three-year-long collaborative action research project with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) facilitated through the Malawi Federation of the Rural and the Urban Poor[2] (the Federation), the Center for Community Organization and

Development (CCODE), and The Research Institute (TRI). The role of this article within the wider project is to show how different spaces of participation were documented, what was recognized as a missing link, and how a third space for participation was identified and initiated through the project.

In its broadest sense action research can be defined as collaborative research oriented towards action and social change (Kindon et al., 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In our project this has meant using participatory methods and discourse analysis to engage with ongoing debates on slum-upgrading in Malawi. The research, that took place between February 2013 and May 2015 consisted of participatory observation over 9 months, 20 group discussions and 120 interviews with community members and other involved actors, as well as workshops, meetings and public radio debates. In the exploratory first phase of the project, from February to June 2013, the lead-researcher interviewed community members and leaders in Senti, Chinsapo, and Kauma, three slum areas in Lilongwe. The first contact with community leaders (chiefs, and Federation, Community Development Committee (CDC), church, and Community-Based Organization (CBO) leaders) was facilitated through the Federation, but interviews with community members were organized through randomized house and business visits and through snowballing. The lead-researcher also spent time at CCODE and with the Federation undertaking participatory observation in various planning and slum upgrading processes in the three settlements. Interviews with officials from the City Council, the national planning department, service providers and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were also conducted. The interviews had an open-ended design and aimed to learn about community mobilization and how people thought about and related to upgrading efforts in their areas.

A recurring theme in the interviews was that despite the many on-going community-mobilizing and planning-projects, few initiatives materialized into actual slum upgrading. Most processes were undocumented, and there were few existing case studies apart from a handful that had been developed to respond to donor-reporting requirements. In discussions with CCODE and the Federation it was therefore decided that the aim of phase two of the research, lasting from June 2013 until August 2015, would be to develop a project that documented and analysed a variety of community slum upgrading processes in the four largest cities of Malawi in order to explore why so few community plans were implemented (see Map 1).

Phase two thus consisted of interviews, meetings, and participatory observation facilitated by the lead-researcher in the slum areas of Senti, Kauma, and Chinsapo in Lilongwe, Ndirande Makata and Nancholi Chimiire in Blantyre, Chikanda in Zomba, and Salisburyline in Mzuzu. These were all areas that had ongoing community planning and slum upgrading processes. Officials from the City Council administration, service providers, CDCs, NGOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) were also interviewed. The interviews and observation notes were coded in themes and analysed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. Early findings were then discussed in focus groups, and in meetings with community members. Federation leaders and CCODE staff acted in some instances as co-researchers by going back to the communities to follow up on questions that emerged while developing the case studies. At this stage, the lead researcher also brought into the analysis the academic literature on participation and participatory spaces (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2006) which resonated well with the discussions in the project and helped to analyse the nature of existing participatory spaces.

The results from the research were presented in a case-study series that could be used as a resource for community members

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[2] The Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor is a network organized through saving groups and activities, mapping of settlements and exchange visits between people in slum areas. It focuses on community mobilization, social awareness and critical engagement with resource-wielding authorities, and is part of the larger umbrella network Slum Dwellers International (see www.sdinet.org). It constitutes a leading network on slum planning and upgrading in Malawi and CCODE is their support NGO.