



Transformative left-wing parties' and grassroots organizations: Unpacking the politics of “top-down” and “bottom-up” development

Luke Sinwell*

University of Johannesburg, South African Research Chair for Social Change, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Academic analyses of the potential for agents to transform development processes have been dominated by social movement theorists who focus on the prospects for creating an alternative to development that challenges the status quo. This has downplayed the role of political parties in the transformation process. This article takes the South African Communist Party (SACP) as a unit of analysis by drawing from a case study in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, where the local SACP has assisted with mobilizing a community-based organization in an informal settlement called S'swetla where the ruling African National Congress (ANC) purportedly imposed development onto residents. The local SACP viewed its intervention as pro-poor and bottom-up. It appeared initially to offer a transformative alternative to the official approach taken by the Alexandra Development Forum (ADF), an invited participatory space adopted by the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) – a flagship project of the ANC. This paper uses this example to problematize the simplistic dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up development in the context of a political party that claims to be committed to pro-poor and people-driven development. In doing so, it argues that theorists must pay closer empirical attention to the politics of both invited and invented participatory spaces in order to understand the implications that this has for transforming development.

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1. Introduction

The literature which provides insight into the prospect for citizens to offer alternative approaches to development has tended to be dominated by social movement theorists thereby eclipsing progressive political parties from this debate. Placing hope in the idea that “Another World is Possible”, academics have focused on social movements' responses to what has been called the logic of the market or neoliberal globalization (see [Houtart and Polet, 2001](#); [George, 2004](#)). By the early 2000s, the World Social Forum epitomized the hope that was placed in social movements and it was suggested that they provided the only genuine possibility for citizens to claim power on their own terms and thereby challenge dominant development models (see [Starr, 2005](#)).

The relationship between political parties and community-based mobilization has tended to be ignored in the literature or, in other cases, discredited on the basis that political parties are corrupt or merely serve financial, personal or political interests ([Low, 2007](#)). However, from Brazil, to India, to Chile and beyond, political parties have arguably been at the forefront of providing alternatives to development. The Workers Party (PT) in Brazil, for example, is most

often associated with its application of participatory budgeting which has redistributed wealth and “set up a decision-making process and investment plan deliberately responsive to the needs of the poor” ([Wainwright, 2003](#), p. 61). Additionally, the CPI in India has not only created the conditions in which the most marginalized sections of the population has benefitted substantially in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), but also of creating a “generative politics” ([Williams, 2008](#)) that enables ordinary people to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.

This study employs [Cornwall's \(2004\)](#) concept of space to understand the political dynamics of participatory processes in relation to political parties and development. Participatory spaces are social arenas in which the community has the potential to impact policies, discourses and practices of development. Rather than describe a geographical space that is considered to be an empty area, this concept refers to “a dynamic, humanely constructed means of control and hence of domination, of power” ([Lefebvre, 1974](#), p. 24). [Cornwall \(2004\)](#) suggests that analyzing spaces is a useful way to understand how power might be used to enhance or undermine citizen participation. According to this framework, one participatory space cannot be adequately understood outside of the context of others. As different agents use particular tactics to put forth their interests, power relations may change, thus providing new opportunities for participation. While these spaces can take many forms and overlap with each other, this paper will focus on two kinds of spaces: invited and invented. Invited spaces have

* Present and permanent address: Humanities Research Village, House 3, PO Box 524, Auckland Park 2003, JHB, South Africa. Tel.: +27 011 559 4273, mobile: +27 079 144 4323; fax: +27 011 559 1439.

E-mail address: pdf2.csr@uj.ac.za

been mainly defined and formed by the government while invented are often more sporadic and arise out of people's own experiences of exclusion.

Referring to Narayan (2000), Cornwall insists that “the primary emphasis of institutions like the World Bank seems to be on *relocating* the poor within the prevailing order: bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, *inviting them to participate* (Cornwall, 2004, p. 78; emphasis in the original)”. Opportunities to participate outside of the prescribed boundaries of the spaces that have been induced by international organizations or governments may be limited. Those participating in invited spaces may have to do so within the parameters of those who have done the inviting. Invited participatory spaces have often been criticized by authors for being part of a global hegemonic neoliberal agenda (Cornwall, 2004; Mirafteb, 2006; Sinwell, 2010). These authors tend to assume that invented spaces are necessarily more transformative since they arise from the grassroots. This article indicates, however, that far more depends on the politics of those who do the inviting as well as their relationship to grassroots formations.

Drawing in part from Cowen and Shenton (1996), Hickey and Mohan (2004a) have demonstrated how an active notion of citizenship that engages with development as an underlying process of social change (immanent development), rather than only specific interventions (imminent development), is likely to be a necessary component for participatory development to realize transformative results. They have argued that participation must be aimed specifically at securing citizenship rights and participation to marginal or dispossessed groups. In this sense, citizenship is not something that is bestowed by the state onto people, but is rather something that is actively contested and defined by marginal or dispossessed groups and individuals. Indeed, if participation is to engage with immanent development, citizenship must be about increasing the ability of the poor to claim their rights by “placing an emphasis on inclusive participation as the very foundation of democratic practice” (Gaventa, 2004, p. 29). Citizenship is therefore practised rather than given (based on their own rather than someone else's framework) and citizens move from being “users and choosers to makers and shapers” (Cornwall, 2000, p. 1) of policy frameworks and discourses that affect their lives.

As suggested above, however, this is insufficient on its own if it is not connected to an engagement with immanent processes of development. While participation may appear to be positive or to offer an alternative approach to development, in reality it may not. In other words, engaging only within the fiscal restraints of a development project may merely end up reproducing the status quo by re-managing resources from one group to another. The concept of the “local trap” (Purcell, 2006) is significant in this context because it helps us to move beyond romanticized visions of the local and to reflect upon the actual implications of particular kinds of local agency which may occur in both invited and invented participatory spaces.

While imminent development has been seen as important to theorists and practitioners who seek to make development more “relevant” in directly effecting the success of specific interventions, its focus has tended to obscure broader relations of power by focusing on “methodological revisionism” (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and placing the role of the planner at the center of the development intervention (Chambers, 1997). Hickey and Mohan argue that:

To privilege the practices of imminent development risks a further type of ‘irrelevance’ by distracting from an engagement with the underlying forces of socio-economic and political change that shape people's livelihoods. The related assertion

that development can be wilfully ‘managed’ through ‘the right mixture’ of institutional responses has further ‘depoliticized’ the practice of development in poor countries (Ferguson, 1994), rendering it a technocratic process to be administered and planned for by agents of development rather than negotiated with and contested by its subjects (Hickey and Mohan, 2004, p. 10).

Responding to the central critique against the dominant practices of participation in development, Hickey and Mohan argue that participation should be part of “a project that seeks directly to challenge existing power relations rather than simply work around them for more technically efficient service delivery” (Hickey and Mohan, 2004a, p. 168).

This article employs this framework in order to provide insight into the complex relationship between invited and invented participation spaces in Alexandra, a black township 20 km to the north-east of Johannesburg. In Alexandra, a dominant political party, the African National Congress (ANC), has partnered with the Alexandra Development Forum (ADF), an invited participatory space, in order to implement development. Examining the South African Communist Party's (SACPs) relationship to an invented participatory space, which opposed the development plans of the ANC in Alexandra, highlights the contradictions of the SACP's approach to community engagement on a local and national scale thereby providing critical insight into the neglected scholarly area of political parties and community mobilization. Furthermore, it enables scholars to explore the interface between invited and invented participatory spaces and to examine what their politics might mean for engagement with immanent development.

This article is based primarily on interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, observation and document analysis in Alexandra, where the author conducted his Ph.D. fieldwork over a period of nearly 5 years.¹ The Ph.D. research on which this article is based employed an in-depth case study approach in order to provide insight into the limitations and potentials of community-based organizations to transform the development process. The case of S'swetla, an informal settlement in Alexandra where residents created a participatory space, was the most important instance in Alexandra where the SACP sought to challenge the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), a R1.3 billion² ANC project. The next section explains the SACP's national approach to participation and development. This is followed by a discussion which contextualizes participation in the ARP and the remainder of the article seeks to understand the SACP's approach to resistance in S'swetla as well as the broader implications that this has for theorizing political parties and participation in development.

2. The national SACP's approach to participatory development: transformative or rhetorical?

The SACP's rhetoric on a national level suggests that it has the ability to undertake a participatory approach to development that challenges the immanent processes of development currently being undertaken by the ANC. The SACP has argued that the neoliberal macroeconomic framework adopted by the ANC epitomized by the adoption in 1996 of the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy serves the interests of capital, primarily white business interests and a small section of black business leaders, at the expense of the majority of South Africans. The SACP purportedly seeks to “end the system of capitalist exploitation in South Africa and to establish a socialist society based on the common

¹ Permission was obtained by the author to use interviewee's full names in any academic work.

² 1 US dollar is equivalent to approximately 7 South African Rands.

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