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The Role of Social Movements in Changing a City's Spatial Form: Windhoek, Namibia

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Introduction and Contextual Background

With a per capita gross national income of USD 4,250, Namibia is considered a middle-income country (World Bank, 2010). When compared to other southern African countries, Namibia's level of economic development is among the highest in the region and second only to South Africa. However, Namibia is also among the most unequal countries in the world, with a very high-income disparity between the rich and poor, as measured by a Gini Coefficient of 0.58 in 2010 (ibid). While this measure of inequality has seen some improvement from the year 2000 when it was 0.63, an analysis of Namibia's consumption patterns in 2008 show that 10% of the households with the lowest levels of expenditure account for just 1% of the total expenditure, while 10% of the households with the highest expenditure account for more than 50% of the total expenditure (Government of Namibia 2008). There is also great variation in poverty and inequality based on characteristics such as gender and race. The World Bank estimates that women head 40% of Namibian households and that these households live on the lowest-income in the country. In the same report, it is also estimated that 75% of people within the black racial group are considered poor (World Bank 2012).

Urban poverty in Namibia is characterised by limited access to employment opportunities and inadequate or insecure tenure, often resulting in living in makeshift housing with no or limited access to water or sanitation.

Summary:

In a context of considerable income poverty and continuing inequality, over 30 per cent of Namibians live in informal settlements with tenure insecurity and inadequate access to basic services. Research shows the important contribution of urban social movements to improving living conditions – but it also points to the constraints, as Windhoek remains a spatially divided city.

*The figures, tables and ideas expressed in this brief are based on Beth's PhD research at the University of Manchester. The study was conducted from 2007 to 2013.

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Photos: Diana Mitlin (2008)

Urban poor communities often also have little or no social protection, with limited access to government and policy makers (Government of Namibia, 2008). Urban poverty is on the increase, with nearly 30% of the lowest-income households depending on wage earnings or self-employment and living in informal settlements on the fringes of towns and cities (ibid). With a total population of 2,320,000, nearly 30% of Namibians live in informal settlements. These informal settlements are characterised by insecure tenure and a lack of basic services. They are located in and around the periphery of towns and cities in Namibia.

It was the problems of living in informal and overcrowded homes, squatting illegally in makeshift backyards shacks or in communal hostels that led to the establishment of collective action by residents to improve their situation. The Council of Churches in Namibia took an interest in welfare and social issues affecting the urban black population,

in the absence of any state programmes or interventions. In 1987, as part of the Council's initiatives to commemorate the UN International Year of the Homeless, they convened a meeting of the homeless. This resulted in the creation of a solidarity group of men and women living in Katutura's single quarters and backyard shacks. The emphasis was on self-help and the goal was to improve housing conditions. The process resonated with a majority of women, domestic workers who bore the brunt of inadequate housing in the city and who were renting informal shacks in Katutura. New housing groups became active and, in 1992, these groups came together and established a voluntary association, the Namibia Housing Action Group (NHAG). The NHAG's main objective was to bring together the urban landless and homeless across Namibia, building a movement that would use collective self-help methods to address their shelter and tenure needs, while also lobbying for better policies to address the needs of the urban poor.

This study investigates how informal settlement residents in the city of Windhoek negotiate the political, economic and social landscape to enhance their citizenry and establish themselves as legitimate residents and citizens. It looks at the ways in which the urban poor use their existing networks to find a home in the city, develop new networks to advance their needs and interests, and use these to enhance their voice in negotiations regarding land use, housing and services. In particular, it seeks to establish the contribution of one particular social movement, the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN), towards securing tenure and services for its membership through a variety of strategies, and assesses the nature and extent of their impact on the spatial form of the city. The research maps the impact of the movement through its influence on the city's planning processes, using a spatial analytical framework that traces the changes in the city's form over two decades, and links this to changing socio-political relations with officials and politicians.

This research set out to investigate how urban social movements in the city of Windhoek create agency and change patterns of urban development within the city. The research analyses the influence in terms of two parameters: the nature of the relationships between the city and social movements of the urban poor, and emerging spatial and policy consequences of this relationship. The research develops an understanding of how the different actors within the city perceive their impact on the city's spatial form. Research activities examine how these actors view their relationship with each other, and whether they see this as hindering or impeding their objectives. More specifically, the research process was designed to investigate how such relations aided or prevented certain outcomes. By analysing social movement interaction with the city over time, it was possible to categorise the outcomes of such interaction on the basis of a conceptual framework that maps such relations as existing within a complex interplay between co-optation, collaboration and contestation.

How can organized citizens secure asset redistribution?

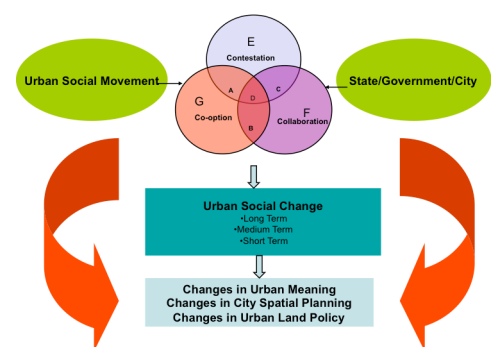


Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework mapping State/Social Movement Relationships

Assigning clear-cut confines of the interaction between the state and social movements is not possible as such interaction is in a continuous state of flux. As was demonstrated in the case of the SDFN, a social movement may strategically choose to collaborate on certain issues while contesting others. The conceptual space it would occupy would

therefore likely be a variation between space E, C and F in Diagram 1 above. On the other hand, a movement operating largely in the space G is likely to be perceived to be weak vis-à-vis the state, but this might also be a strategy aimed at achieving specific objectives and then, to preserve is autonomy revert back to a preferred position.

Drawing on a longitudinal perspective of Windhoek's development over three decades, it is evident the Federation has created agency through developing an autonomous, strong and self-aware movement of the urban poor within the city.

SDFN has been successful at mobilising social capital, in the form of networks of saving schemes, which provide psychosocial support to its membership, and are a means of addressing everyday challenges. The movement has developed a significant capacity to organise the urban poor in the city, and has taken a lead role in mobilising other communities across the country and being an integral part of an international network within southern Africa (Shack Dwellers International). In the context of this regional network and by using its relationships with the city, the SDFN has made an important contribution towards enabling social movements to learn from its successes and influence their own city governments. It has collected tangible resources in the form of monetary savings, land, housing and services, as well as developed capacities in managing loan portfolios for a variety of needs, including land purchase, housing, services and employment generation.

From its first major community-led and managed residential development at People's Square in 1992, the Federation has argued for in-situ upgrading. Initially, this was seen as experimental but it has since become a widely accepted strategy that is an integral part of the city's informal settlements upgrading strategy. Following sustained pressure and international exchanges for exposure and learning, the city instituted a policy, which enabled low-income residents to access tenure security with basic communal services and permitted shack dwellings.

The SDFN's methods have become institutionalised within the city, and recognition for these innovations includes SDFN's leadership receiving the UN Habitat Scroll of Honour in 2011, as well other local accolades. Such findings suggest that the movement has shaped the way that low-income, informal settlement residents, are seen by outsiders as well as how they see themselves. By December 2011, the SDFN had a membership of nearly 20,000 families having successfully secured tenure for over 4500 households¹

However, even with these successes, the impact on the city's form has been limited to the neighbourhood level without major impact at the scale of the city, and without challenging the discourse within which planning decisions are made and rationalised. To date, SDFN has had little effect in shifting the structural fundamentals that determine the shape and form of the city, and which limit the urban poor's agency. A spatial analysis of the city's land use and zoning over the last 20 years shows that the general pattern of land use has remained unchanged over this period. The city's political and professional elite still engage with the movement largely on their own terms, while the SDFN still struggles to access a political space within which to influence the decisions made by the city.

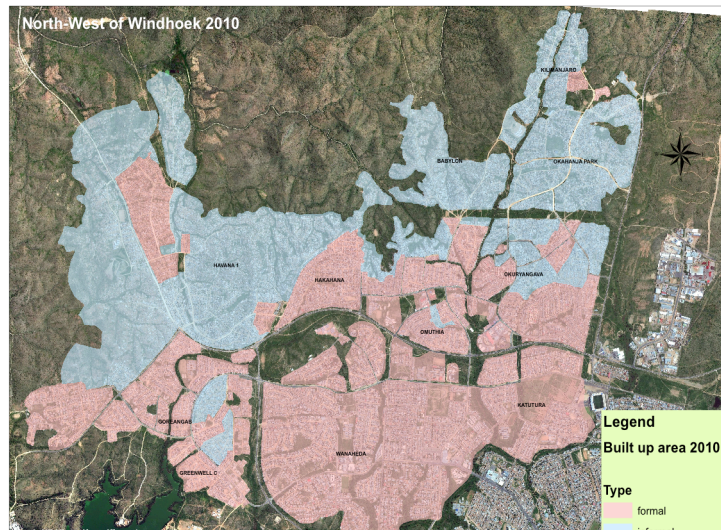
This finding raises more questions about what it takes for movements to effect change at the structural level. It also raises a question about whether or not this level is an important priority for the urban poor or if they believe that their interests are better addressed through incremental changes rather than seeking radical, whole-scale reform. The research finds that the movement, in deciding what to contest and what to collaborate on with the city, goes through a complex process aimed at minimising maximum losses. The research also found that while planners do reform the state, their situated position limits the extent of such reforms; they draw on what they know already (in terms of professional and other social relations), which in itself may result in them making planning choices and decisions based on their own subjective realities

Implications for Policy

A number of possible policy reforms emerged in the course of this research. In some cases, more information is needed in order to come to a conclusion; however, in each of these areas a number of distinct policy considerations are revealed.

One issue is that there is a need for a better understanding of income dynamics, the livelihood choices the urban poor make and the level of income security that is needed. An unanswered question that remains for the SDFN, and others in Windhoek, is what to do with households that are unable to afford even the basic development level, in a context where the city requires full cost recovery from those to whom it allocates land. City officials have argued that, without a direct subsidy from central government, they are unable to extend services to those families that require a subsidy. The evidence presented by this thesis is that groups are increasingly becoming indebted to the city for land and service. The extent to which this is a problem was not quantified, but it is clear that this is an issue that concerns not only the city, but also the SDFN. A better understanding of the capacity of the urban poor to pay would be useful in developing a more targeted policy on land and services pricing.

The issue of affordability also has implications on how land is made available. This issue needs to be considered both in terms of the capacity to pay for a certain level of services, and in respect of more indirect costs that come from a continuation of the present spatial divisions. These costs include the costs of exclusion, the economic costs of under-employment due to distance from jobs, lack of access to social amenities such as schools and clinics, plus the costs of transportation to and from work. I have argued that the city remains divided and that there is need for more integration. This has implications for the land that is made available and the uses to which it is allocated. The continued suburbanisation of residential space within a defined quadrant of the city perpetuates compartmentalisation and differentiated spaces. To integrate a divided city requires political will, as it challenges existing norms about who lives where.



Source: Areal Photograph from Survey General Namibia with author conceptualisation

It also challenges the existing pattern of urban development. The southern African city has been built on an assumption of an infinite availability of land. Without a shortage of land constraining the state, it is unlikely that innovations that increase city densities will be encouraged. This is a considerable challenge in Namibia, in a context in which the Minister of Regional Local Government and Housing has been calling for even bigger plots than the current minimum average, which ranges between 150 and 200 m²; he argues that Namibia has plenty of land. There is need for a conversation on densities, in view of the speed with which the city of Windhoek has spread out in only 20 years.

A third policy implication for the research relates to support for community processes and the city's current provisions. The SDFN invests significant resources into mobilising and supporting its membership to fulfil the development objectives of the city. They do not receive any financial support from the city for this 'soft' capital, even though the city has established a whole division staffed to support community processes. There is therefore an argument for a fiscal allocation, or at least an offset of cost from the city to SDFN in view of their contribution. A related implication of the research is that the city can enable community groups to work more collaboratively rather than in competition. While this might be more a process rather than policy concern, there certainly is an argument for the city to rethink its current policies and processes, and develop a new policy together with all the groups, which would enable resources to be used to great effect.

References

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