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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.

Keywords: Agency, Participation, Slum upgrading, Urban Planning, Malawi

1.0 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 urbanisation 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

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.

of the participatory planning discourse through radical resistance (Harvey 2012, 1973; 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 institutionalised – 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.

2.0 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 Poor² (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 & Bradbury, 2001). In our project this has meant using participatory methods and discourse analysis to engage with

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.

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.

Insert Map 1 about here. Based on UN Map Malawi No. 3858 Rev. 3 January 2004

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 on-going 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 and decision makers.³ The studies were printed in English and in Chichewa, the largest local language in Malawi (the Mzuzu study was also translated into Tumbuka) and distributed orally and in writing in the settlements, to decision makers, and at a stakeholder workshop organized as part of the project.

3.0 Urban planning and slum upgrading in Malawi

Malawi is only 16% urbanized, but has some of the fastest-growing cities in sub-Saharan Africa (UNDESA, 2014; Manda, 2013). In the cities, 68,9% of the urban population is

³ Case study series: <http://www.ccodemw.org/publications-resources/case-studies>

estimated to live in areas characterized as slums or informal settlements (UN Habitat, 2012). Not all slum-like settlements in Malawi are informal in terms of their existence, but in this paper we use the wide sense of the concept meaning settlements with limited formal service delivery, land and housing regulation and registration, and planned infrastructure. The term thus covers villages incorporated into city boundaries, squatter areas, and overcrowded traditional housing areas (THAs) (Manda, 2007). Most of the informal settlements in Malawi grow without much planning and regulation, but in recent years there has been an increase in initiatives where both residents and local, national and nongovernmental organizations engage with community planning and slum upgrading (Interviews with NGO, city, and ministry representatives).

‘Slum upgrading’ may have many meanings, and is often used to describe improved access to water, sanitation, infrastructure, schooling, and health services in addition to land regularization, building of community houses and development of livelihood activities (Ferguson and Navarette, 2003). Before the 1970s, housing challenges were commonly understood to be solved with large governmental housing schemes targeting low-income groups. However, in Malawi and elsewhere, delivery was slow as governments were not ready to take on the major costs of providing housing for the poorer segment of the population. In the 1970s, ‘sites and services schemes’ therefore gained popularity, actualized in the case of Malawi as the Traditional Housing Areas (THAs). The idea was to provide a framework with relaxed regulations for recent migrants to build their own houses according to their financial standing while waiting for services to come into place. However, services were seldom provided and the areas often developed into slums (Manda, 2007), followed by attempts of slum clearance and eviction of squatters (Mwathunga, 2014). However, evictions have become a less attractive option for policymakers as community and civil society groups in urban areas have become more organized. In addition, politicians often oppose such measures to rally support for their candidacies during elections. The focus has therefore

shifted from moving people to upgrading in-situ, which means slum upgrading where people live, while people live there. Another notable development in Malawi is the discursive shift from top-down expert based planning and slum upgrading to more participatory community-based approaches. As one city official put it:

We would want to make sure most interventions are owned by the people. It is good for sustainability measures. To be inclusive in nature is a sustainability guarantee, and it also helps for replication (city official, Lilongwe, 22 March 2013).

One of the main challenges in urban Malawi has been how to finance slum upgrading. Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking 173rd out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2015). At one point land tenure regularization was seen as the solution, at least for housing. If people got land titles it was assumed that they would be able to access loans and at the same time have a stronger incentive to invest in and upgrade their homes (DeSoto 1989, 2000). A land title alone, however, does not necessarily secure someone a loan in Malawi. Most houses and properties in the informal settlements are seen as too small and not valuable enough to be used as collateral with the banks (Mwathunga 2014). Many people therefore turned to microfinance institutions for housing and home improvement loans. The problem though, was that people were commonly not able to pay them back. Many simply did not have enough money to keep up the payments when the Malawian kwacha was devalued, but the costs of construction materials rose. Others did not prioritize the repayment of loans (Manda, 2007). As a consequence, most housing organizations have stopped offering housing loans to the urban poor.

Slum upgrading generally requires large-scale resources and political will. The majority of the population in Malawi is still overwhelmingly rural and slum upgrading activities are not prioritized by the Government or donors. Many development actors consider slum upgrading as a too complex an activity and Local Governments tend to avoid working

with their informal settlements for fear of legitimizing squatting. Most recent projects in Malawi are therefore small-scale and community-based (Refstie, 2014a,b,c,d,e).

As mentioned above, a main concern for the action research project, was the realization that slum -upgrading projects generally do not achieve their aims. In some cases the middle classes end up settling in the upgraded areas, pushing the existing inhabitants, particularly renters, further out on the margins (Manda, 2007; Mwachunga, 2014). In other cases, plans lack financing and are simply just not implemented, creating serious participation and planning fatigue in many areas (Refstie,, 2014a,b,c,d,e, 2015; Refstie and Hunga, 2015). Nevertheless, in urban Malawi, participatory planning continues to be advocated uncritically and in unison by civil society groups, local leaders, aid organizations and donors as *the* strategy for communities to address problems in their settlements.

4.0 Discourses of participation in Malawi

The ways in which the participatory planning discourse plays out in urban Malawi must be understood in light of the country's history and the intricate web of actors that operate at various levels. Malawi has a rich tradition of community participation, and even under colonial rule (1891-1963) and the subsequent repressive regime of Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1963–1994), some modes of participation were in place. However, during this period, participation was limited to the implementation of projects while the government prevented civil society actors from engaging in rights-based work (Mwalubunju, 2007). In Banda's Malawi, all forms of criticism, including any complaint against the leader or the party, were considered subversive and brutally dealt with (Chirambo, 2009).

The largest wave of participation came leading up to and following the re-establishment of the multiparty system in 1993⁴. The churches and unions had mobilized

⁴ Banda was pushed to hold a national referendum in 1993 regarding the continuation of his single-party rule. He lost the multiparty general elections in 1994.

towards this transition, and Malawi experienced a massive influx of NGOs that had previously been barred from operating in the country. National and local civil society institutions and organizations also mushroomed in this transition period, and community participation has since been an important part of the development discourse advocated by civil society (Chinsinga, 2003).

Grassroots participation in development projects and formulation of policies was formally enshrined in the 1998 Local Government Act (LGA), which established town and city assemblies as the unit of local government. However, local council elections were not organized until the Malawi Decentralization Policy came into place in 2000. A range of functions related to planning and development were delegated to the local councils, but not accompanied with resources to match the new responsibilities. At the same time, there were strong tensions at the local level between Councillors, District Commissioners, Members of Parliaments (MPs) and Chiefs. Furthermore, President Bingu wa Mutharika (2004-2012) feared, as President Muluzi (1994-2004) before him, that the local government elections would win support for the opposition (Cammack, 2012a). The assemblies were therefore dissolved in 2005 and local government elections were postponed for a decade until it was successfully organized on the initiative of President Joyce Banda (2012-2014) in 2015. In the meantime, local governments were run by technocrats who – without councils – were directly answerable to the central authority (Chasukwa and Chinsinga, 2013).

During this period, the elected representatives for people in informal settlements in Malawi were the Members of Parliament. MPs are involved in local development through their Constituency Development Funds (CDF), a central Government transfer to Local Governments, but these are typically used to buy votes and cement political backing (Cammack, 2012b). In Malawi, leaders at all levels and spheres are traditionally required to share their wealth. The intermingling of private and public funds is therefore not necessarily viewed as misconduct, and many constituents prefer to negotiate their relationships with

leaders instead of trying to challenge the neo-patrimonial system upon which the relations are built (Cammack, 2007):

‘In other words, staying locked-into the patronage system benefits those at the bottom as well as the top and helps explain why civil society in many countries remain “weak” and silent, not easily roused to civic action, or demanding of government, even after years of “strengthening”’ (Cammack, 2007: 601).

MPs are in theory held accountable through elections. The fact that only one third are re-elected testifies to this. However, instead of fostering a culture of accountability it has led to short-term thinking where politicians focus on their own gains while they are in position rather than on engaging with their constituencies (Cammack, 2011). Consequently, it is not surprising that many people in informal settlements prefer to organize their development efforts in what they term a non-political manner. ‘Non-political’ typically refers to liaising with the chiefs who are expected to operate somewhat outside of quarrelsome election games and party politics. Chiefs are numerous and play an important role in community development, even though their legal status is ambiguous, and they are, according to authorities, not supposed to operate in urban areas. Chiefs preside over funerals, oversee land transactions, hold traditional courts, and generally act as gatekeepers to the communities. Due to their history, chiefs in Malawi continue to hold more power than in many other African countries (Cammack et al., 2009). As the colonialists before him, President Hastings Banda exploited the functions of the chiefs to stay in control. Chiefs headed the local development committees and were indispensable to the state as the final link from the President to the people. After 1994, in the multiparty era, the chieftaincies were resurgent and gained further power. While their formal mandates had been reduced (they were for example no longer to be chairs of development committees), their influence in community matters increased in the

absence of alternative local government structures (Eggen, 2011). Additionally, the emphasis on ownership, community participation, and demand-driven service provision in development has made civil servants and NGO workers dependent on the approval and assistance of chiefs (Eggen, 2011; Chinsinga, 2007). Legitimacy for political candidates is also gained through chiefs, as they control which candidates are allowed to hold rallies in their areas. Still, chiefs are generally expected to stay independent as a unifying force, and in contrast to ‘disruptive party politics’ chiefly rule is perceived to be founded on local knowledge, pragmatism, consensus-seeking, conflict avoidance, and a judiciary that seeks reconciliation rather than punishment (Eggen, 2011).

Large-scale civic education programmes implemented in the multi-party era further reinforced this culture of consensus. ‘Community sensitization’ was promoted as a key strategy for addressing development challenges, and the more conflictual links between civil and economic rights were downplayed by the authorities (Englund, 2006). The history described here may thus help to explain why Malawians – unlike the tales of protest and resistance in other cases of urban development – up until 2011, put up with poverty, hazards, and poor public service delivery in informal settlements in a relatively peaceful manner (Englund, 2002; Booth et al., 2006). Cammack et al. (2009: 30) argue that people in Malawi tend to work for themselves and their families rather than engaging in movements that span social divisions, creating a “notoriously passive citizenry that rarely drives its own reforms” (p30). However, people have recently taken to the streets to hold their Government to account. In July 2011, civic activists organized nationwide demonstrations in response to economic hardships and deepening governance problems, such as postponed local elections, stricter censorship measures, and heavy corruption (Cammack, 2012a). The demonstrations were violently shut down, and the negotiations came to a standstill until President Joyce Banda came to power after President Bingu-wa Mutharika suffered a sudden heart attack in 2012. A more common form of resistance in Malawi, though, is the covert ways in which

vendors refuse to pay market fees in protest over lack of public services (Cammack et al 2011), people settle in informal settlements and organize themselves directly with service providers (Refstie 2014a), or, as we show later, community groups organize services for themselves. When it comes to participatory urban planning processes, however, the script largely resembles the Habermasian notion of ‘communicative action’, defined as communication with the objective of reaching a common understanding (Habermas, 1984). As we will show this is problematic in several ways. Upgrading of informal settlements is a complex matter, with high human and economic costs, and it often involves demolishing houses and moving people. Deliberations in such contexts are usually directly linked to resource distribution, which is difficult to address within a consensus framework at the local level (Kapoor, 2002; Hanson, 2012). Furthermore, the communicative approach has a tendency to ignore power relations and therefore runs the risk of depoliticizing planning processes, despite those processes being dependent on addressing highly political issues (Mouffe, 1999). The result in Malawi, as we explain, is the inability to implement plans.

5.0 Political agency in spaces of participation for planning and slum upgrading in Malawi

In the development literature, it is often argued that we need to shift from participation to citizen participation in order to achieve transformation that goes beyond increasing the influence of marginalized groups in local decision-making and confronts the forces that cause social exclusion (Cornwall, 2002, 2008; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Millstein, 2007; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Our understanding of transformation is inspired by Isin (2008) and Rancière (1992, 2001, 2009, 2011) and we introduce a distinction between a general notion of agency, based in routinized practices, and what we define as ‘political agency’ in the context of urban planning in Malawi. Rancière suggests that within a hegemonic discourse people can

talk, be visible and have a voice as long as they keep within the accepted understandings and frameworks for participation. However, only limited change may come from acting within the existing script (Isin 2008). *Transformative* participation takes place when people challenge the existing discourses, a form of behaviour that will initially be interpreted as ‘noise’ by those in power (Marchart, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2014). According to Rancière, politics is the logic of equality, and ‘the political’ emerges through the embodied decision to act on inequality (Rancière, 1992; Swyngedouw, 2014). Following on from this, we do not define ‘the political’ along the axes of the formal and informal, through its nature of being conducted with a big or small p, or according to level. We rather define ‘the political’ as any activities oriented towards challenging unequal power relations and redistribution of resources at all levels, be it formal or informal, party political or civic, and any shades in-between. It is this intricate web of actors, agendas and hierarchies, coupled with blurred distinctions between the formal and the informal that characterises informal settlements in Malawi.

Political agency can be performed in many ways, both individually and collectively, through everyday practices and action or in formal fora (Bènit-Gbaffou and Oldfield, 2011; Millstein, 2013; Robbins et al. 2008). In our case, we explore agency performed as participation and the transformative potential of political agency expressed this way. We therefore embed the notion of transformation into our definition of agency. Together with Caldwell (2007: 771), we argue that the concept of ‘agency must include not only the capacity to resist or to “act otherwise”, but also the possibility of “making a difference”’. Political agency is thus – in this article – defined as *the capacity and ability to reach certain goals, particularly those related to opposing unjust and inegalitarian practices*. Transformative participation is in this context political agency expressed and achieved through participation. The key question we ask is how – and in what participatory spaces – such political agency can be actualized - where the aim is to be included, to gain recognition and to get noise accepted as voice (Purcell, 2014).

There is an abundance of participatory spaces in Malawi's urban areas. However, the nature of these spaces does not necessarily transform the position of urban dwellers, their access to resources, and their inclusion as full members of the city (Mwathunga, 2014; Refstie, 2014a,b,c,d,e 2015; Refstie and Hunga, 2015). Cornwall (2004) and Gaventa (2006) have made a useful distinction between 'invited' and 'claimed' spaces of participation. Invited spaces are facilitated by decision-makers, and participants are invited to join. Claimed spaces, on the other hand, are opened up and shaped by relatively powerless actors themselves. Such spaces can be created through social movements, organizations or community groups, or just be general spaces where people meet to discuss and interact outside of the formal institutional frameworks. Both spaces may be relatively institutionalized, and they tend to operate within existing participation and planning discourses. Miraftab (2005) adds a third category of space, 'invented' space. While some tend to use claimed and invented spaces as synonyms, in the case of Malawi, we find it necessary to separate between the two. Compared to claimed space, we understand invented space as more confrontational, and less institutionalized, where participants may directly oppose authorities and the status quo. The invented space is thus more agonistic than the 'claimed'.

In the following subsections, we analyse two participatory spaces that were identified as the most common type in our research in Malawi; an invited space through participatory budgeting in Blantyre and a claimed space, through a community-planning project in the informal settlement of Senti in Lilongwe. In addition, we reflect on the potential of a third, more 'inventive' space organised as a result of the collaborative analysis in the project. In our analysis, we see the claimed, invited and invented as interrelated dimensions of participation, and argue that the potential for transformation is expressed in the ways in which the spaces connect, overlap and partly constitute each other. Our proposed framework for understanding the transformative potential of participation in the context of urban planning and upgrading in Malawi is thus a 'trialectics' of participatory spaces. Inspired by Lefebvre (1974) and Soja's

(1996) reading of Lefebvre's work, we do not see these spaces as a dialectic in which one space builds upon another to create the ultimate transformative space. Rather, on the basis of our interviews and collaborative research in Malawi, we suggest a starting point where the three spaces identified are recognized, connected, and influence each other, and where one is always a transcending inclusion of the other two.

5.1 Participatory budgeting in Blantyre

According to the 2000 Malawi Decentralization Policy, constituents are to be involved in planning of their areas, and people have increasingly been invited to give their ideas on how to develop their settlements (Refstie 2015, Refstie and Hunga 2015). Budgeting represents an important component of the planning initiatives, and in 2013, the National Local Governance Finance Committee produced guidelines on participatory budgeting for local authorities (NLGFC, 2013). Blantyre, the commercial capital of Malawi was the first city initiating a 'participatory budgeting exercise' funded by German Development Cooperation to address some of the development challenges faced by the city.

The idea behind participatory budgeting is to enable citizens to present demands and priorities for their areas, and through negotiations influence the city's budget allocation (Baiocchi, 2005). However, the process in Blantyre turned out to be more like a meeting called by the city council administration at which participants were informed of the council's plans for the coming year. The plans presented were developed by the administration without consultation with the affected communities. The meeting was announced in the newspapers only, and local representatives such as chiefs, heads of Community Development Committees, church leaders and CBO leaders were not invited to represent their areas. The few participants present were mainly connected to the city council administration or had been mobilized through some of the NGOs that were operating in informal settlements. Participants

received no materials or information in advance, which made it difficult for them to engage in negotiations over budget allocations. Furthermore, even though several settlements had developed their own priorities and plans for their areas, there was no space for presenting or discussing these at the meeting. The meeting was a one-off event, and no process or measures for following up on the administration's proposals were outlined. After the meeting some of the participants went to the City Council administration to criticise the way in which the meeting had been set up and organized. The administration promised to take some of this criticism into account in the following year's participatory budgeting, but the 2014 process was organized in exactly the same way. Some civil society networks considered boycotting the meeting, but decided to participate in the hope that some of their views would still be heard. Given the absence of local councillors, the City Council administration held a meeting with Members of Parliament prior to the budgeting exercise. This meeting was closed to the public and no minutes were released. It was therefore difficult for the participants to know what had been decided by the administration, and what had been decided by the politicians.

MPs just do things themselves without asking the people. We came to the [participatory budgeting] meeting but we were just invited to hear what was already done. I don't think MPs can know what is going on in the villages. They only talk to people from their party. They can give us a shirt when we want trousers. The MPs cannot contribute anything, because they cannot know what needs to be done without approaching people. (interview community representative Nancholi Blantyre, 2 April 2014)

The same representatives argued it would have been better to use the area-based networks and established structures in the local communities as a basis for the participatory budgeting exercise. The City Council administration on the other hand, argued that these structures were not official, and they therefore had to go through the nearest political level which was the MPs. At the meeting, the different budget posts for community development and infrastructure projects were presented without reference to the distribution of resources in the

city as a whole. The activities were described in a technical manner, and there was little room for discussion. When the questions of more funds for slum upgrading was raised during the meeting, the city administration emphasized how they were struggling with limited resources and suggested that the citizens themselves should take more responsibility for creating orderly development in their areas. There was no mention of how the city council administration delivers services to wealthier areas, but not to the informal settlements.

Interviews with people who had attended the meeting and with non-participants revealed that they were not happy with the planning-process and their lack of influence on the actual budget. Nevertheless, instead of making noise, the representatives conformed to the format of being receivers of information in what was framed as a technical planning exercise.

In addition to the historical and cultural explanations described above, the lack of opposition can be partly attributed to how the participatory space was formed: by invitation and entirely defined by the authorities. The absence of information and the predefined agenda made it hard for the participants to expand the frame in which the budget allocations were discussed. This was further reinforced by how people became participants and what mandate they were given in relation to the people they represented. The decade-long gap in local government representation combined with the refusal to recognize chiefs and other community leaders as legitimate representatives made it difficult for the participants to make demands.

The observable decision making by officials took place in parallel with more hidden influence enacted by the agenda-setting of the City Council administration. The invisible power shaped the historical and ideological boundaries defining what actions were acceptable behaviour within the participatory space (Lukes 1974, 2005; Gaventa 2006; Veneklasen & Miller, 2002). As such, the Blantyre process is a typical example of an 'invited' space, controlled and facilitated by decision-makers, where participants - treated as one homogenous group - are invited to join. This type of space is increasingly common in urban Malawi, but so

are more ‘claimed’ spaces opened up and shaped by community groups and their support NGOs, which we will describe in the next section.

5.2 *‘Communitization’ of services in Senti, Lilongwe*

There is loss of confidence in the system. Less people look for handouts and rather say ‘What can I do myself?’ The government can do nothing for us. We can do something. (interview with representative of international organization, 11 March 2013).

People residing in informal settlements are to a large extent excluded from contributing to urban planning through formal channels, but the settlements are homes for a myriad of community and NGO networks and organizations. These networks and organizations work on everything from livelihoods activities, planning initiatives, construction, health and education, sensitization trainings, to savings and microfinance schemes. Many organisations are dormant, coming to life only when donor funding is available (Cammack et al., 2011, Chinsinga 2007), while others mobilize on a more regular basis. Common for most groups are that they tend to use area-based networks as a basis of organization, and that they work through representatives based on various leaderships. For several organizations and networks, a popular way to engage with participatory planning is to formulate community development plans. Our second case explores an example in Senti, a settlement in Lilongwe, Malawi’s capital. The settlement houses about 15,000 people (CCODE & MHPF, 2012). In 2011, with support from the Federation and CCODE, community leaders in Senti, consisting mainly of Federation members that had the support and endorsement of the chiefs in the area, decided to undertake a planning exercise. The initiative did not go through the Community Development Committee (CDC), which was accused of being ‘overtaken by party politics’.

To avoid conflictions we have the first meeting with the chiefs. The second we have with the church leaders. The third we have with different organizations. Lastly we have a meeting

together and committees are formed for people to meet like a horizontal community. We formed them from different leaderships to avoid party leaders to come and destroy. So we can go from community to municipality to government with issues from the community (interview national Federation leader, 12 March 2013).

When asked if it was problematic that parallel structures to the CDC was created, the Federation members argued that it was not, because this initiative was for ‘all the people in the settlement’, not just those engaging with the CDC. Furthermore, the head of the CDC was present in the meetings where the initiative was discussed.

The planning process consisted of information gathering, mapping, numbering of structures, and project prioritization. Most of the participants were mobilized through the chiefs and the Federation, and participants received a small sum as a lunch allowance for their participation in the process. The trainings were organized by CCODE, but the instructors were Federation members who had gone through similar exercises elsewhere. The outcome of the training were a settlement profile, identification and numbering of all built structures, a detailed map of the settlement, and a community development strategy with prioritized projects. The meetings were heavily dominated by Federation members, and the process followed a script where the main discussions evolved around which projects to prioritize in the settlement. As in the Blantyre case, little attention was given to how one could work with addressing the general marginalization and exclusion of informal settlements from planning processes.

Knowing that access to funds through the government, donors or NGOs might not be an option, the representatives suggested that people in Senti could use their own finances to realize some of the prioritized plans. This was brought to the chief who asked each household to contribute some money (100 MK) every month. Many community members had previous experience with savings groups organized by civil society organizations, and most people already contributed some money to funeral funds and to the neighbourhood watch that

functioned as community police. The money collected for the development plans was used to hire jobless community members to work on identified priorities such as waste collection and maintenance or opening of roads. In an attempt to address larger-scale problems, the community representatives also formed committees on themes such as infrastructure, water and sanitation, health, and education. The committees were tasked with developing partnerships with other actors to seek funding and more operational support (Refstie, 2014a). Most recently, the committee on education had identified some land it wished to buy in order that it might be set aside for the construction of a school in the future. While it was able to raise enough money to buy the land, the committee continues to struggle with land politics and bureaucracy at the city level. When the representatives approached the city council administration, they were told the land belongs to the Malawi Housing Corporation. When they approached the corporation, they were sent to the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, who again sent them back to the City Council administration, where the process is now stuck. The other committees also struggled with achieving results above and beyond what was accomplished through the collection of community contributions and dealt with internally in the settlement. Larger scale projects such as construction of roads, bridges, schools and clinics that required support from authorities and external funding remained out of reach in the participatory planning process.

5.3 Dynamics of depoliticization in participatory spaces

The two examples from Blantyre and Lilongwe differ in several ways. First of all, participatory budgeting in Blantyre seems to represent an obvious case of participatory failure, while the planning in Senti offers a good example of how people can mobilize local resources and achieve improvements in their living conditions. However, we argue that both cases are examples of depoliticized planning processes that contribute to reinforcing, rather

than changing unequal power relations. The participatory budgeting process was framed as a technical exercise, ignoring the political nature of resource distribution. The participants were expected to appreciate the council's lack of resources and to come with input on already prioritized projects and allocations. They were not supposed to question why the poorest were not prioritized or the reasons for this. Such questions would have been perceived as noise. Similarly, even though claimed spaces are often regarded as inherently radical and transformative, they operated in our context within a framework legitimized by donors and government interventions and focused mainly on coping mechanisms and survival within the existing system.

An important finding from our research is thus that *both* invited and claimed spaces in Malawi tend to be area-based, technicalized, and disconnected from larger discussions on resource distribution. In this context it does not help that community groups are well organized, because they are not able to influence resource distribution at the city and national level. They struggle to find a voice, and their agency is not actualized when they follow scripts and 'participate in scenes already created' (Isin, 2008: 38). Gradual transformations in which the relationship between participants change, may take place when new actors – such as the local councillors – are introduced. The main challenge identified in the action research project, however, is the ways in which existing spaces operate in isolation and scripts are not rewritten because rupture seldom takes place and, consequently, *political* agency is seldom actualized. Missing from the participatory urban planning spaces in Malawi was thus the invented, more agonistic, dimension of participation understood as more open and less institutionalized spaces in which participants directly confront the authorities and the status quo. Insurgency and resistance to instigate change tended to be found outside of and disconnected from the participatory framework, through land invasions, squatting, ignoring planning regulations or public protests (Mwathunga, 2014). Our case study series and the discussions that followed the publications of the studies, indicated that there is a need for the

more agonistic discussions from the invented spaces to be brought into the planning processes if transformation is to take place. At the same time, ‘the political’ – defined as challenging unequal power and resource distribution – is not necessarily the prime motivation that drives people to participate in planning processes (Kapoor, 2002). In a number of Malawi’s informal settlements, participation has become professionalized and participation in meetings a routinized practice with a fixed script. For many, participation has become an ‘occupation’ in which they hold considerable expertise. The realisation that the majority is not interested in challenging the established scripts of participation may help to understand the failed participatory spaces of Blantyre and Senti discussed above. Sometimes, the lack of ‘noise’ in participatory planning might even result from strategic choice. By not drawing attention to their areas, people are able to continue a range of informal practices related to housing and planning without the government’s interference (Mwathunga, 2014). People may also prefer to place their energy into more localized participatory community processes that promise concrete and visible results rather than engaging in ‘more talk’, or in ‘disruptive politics’ as discussed above. Nevertheless, many of the benefits participants seek at both individual and community levels require political transformation, as the current participatory spaces have little impact on the status of urban dwellers, their access to resources and their inclusion as full members of the city.

6.0 Invited, claimed and invented: Repoliticizing participatory planning spaces in Malawi

Rancière (2001, 2009, 2011) argues that in order to make change happen, existing discourses – or what counts as voice – need to be challenged. Such challenges will be perceived as noise, but to repoliticize the planning discourse means to enable that noise to take place, and for noise to be included as voice. Through our analyses in the collaborative research project, here

exemplified by the cases in Blantyre and Lilongwe, it became clear that a more confrontational space where actors could willingly come together to raise concerns and disagreements was missing. We therefore made an attempt in the research project to facilitate a space where people's concerns, understood as noise in other spaces, could be accepted as voice. This would be a participatory space with a less predictable outcome that aimed to enable participants to challenge unjust practices and the instituted order. In a collaboration between CCODE, the Federation, community leaders (chiefs, CDC members, and CBO leaders) and The Research Institute in Malawi, a radio debate with the topic 'Addressing Urban Growth in Creating a Resilient Malawi' was organized in May 2015 (for an analysis of the debate, see Refstie, forthcoming).⁵ The panel consisted of a Member of Parliament, the Commissioner for physical planning from the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, a recently elected local councillor, a leader of the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor and a representative from the research collaboration. The panel was confronted by a wide audience physically present in the studio with participants from a number of informal settlements in Lilongwe, Zomba and Blantyre, along with comments and questions sent in by SMS from listeners all over the country. In some ways, the debate may be understood as hierarchical: the discussion was chaired by a journalist, along with a panel of the more powerful actors representing different levels of the urban planning process. The discussion was moderated by the journalist who had prepared for the debate together with the organizing partners. Most of the speaking time was given to the audience, and there was little control of who could say what. The aim was not to reach agreement, but rather that those in power should be held to account and act upon the claims of the people. Accordingly, the nature of the discussion became very different from what had been observed in the other participatory spaces, even though many of the actors were the same and the space was somewhat directed.

⁵ The Facebook page of the UrbanTalks/Public Square series is available at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Urban-Talks/543646862395117>.

The programme leader, a well-known veteran journalist in Malawi, expeditiously got into the more tense issues around exclusion and unjust resource distribution. This made it difficult for the panel members to revert to their regular talk about lack of resources or policies underway. The debate quickly got into a discussion in which contentious issues were brought into the open instead of, as had been observed in other participatory spaces, being avoided. A conversation relevant to, but absent in the participatory planning process in Blantyre, was for example the discussion on the role of city rates in promoting equity. Some of the panellists claimed rather confrontationally that since people in informal settlements did not pay city rates, they could not expect to get services, and that it was therefore only natural that the city was focusing on the areas where the better-off lived. Several people in the audience protested and some highlighted the fact that people in informal settlements do pay taxes, as they are integrated into transport prices and other commodities that slum dwellers already pay for. Furthermore, many work in the better-off areas and thereby provide cheap labour. Some also pointed out that many of the wealthier people find ways of avoiding paying city rates and taxes, and that city councils should focus on these people first before putting the burden on those who already have less. Others expressed distrust in the city council's willingness and ability to provide services in return for paid city rates. The rates amount to a fairly small amount when compared to the huge demand for services in the settlements. Furthermore, most of the city's budget goes to salaries for its officials. The suggestion that income from city rates in the informal settlements would be a game-changer for planning and the provision of services was therefore regarded with considerable scepticism by the participants.

Another issue that came up – relevant for the Senti community-planning process – concerned how it is impossible for people to access land through formal arrangements. Residential areas have multiple landlords, the bureaucracy is cumbersome, and formalized land is costly. The only way for most people to settle in the cities is therefore through semi-

formal arrangements with traditional chiefs in the high-density zoned peri-urban areas surrounding the cities. At the same time, large areas of land are lying idle in the city centres, especially in Lilongwe and Zomba. People in the audience criticized how business developers and politicians were able to find ways of accessing land in a corrupt fashion, while they were prevented access.

Furthermore, in more general terms, planners and politicians often prescribe formalization of informal settlements as a development solution. During the debate, the audience confronted this view, and argued that formalization was unrealistic and resulted in poorer people getting pushed out as a reaction to higher costs (see Mwachungu, 2014).

The format of the debate made it difficult for both the politicians and the planners to resort to their regular argument of unpaid city rates or policies already underway as a justification for not engaging with informal settlements. It was a space where all parties could meet, and where the setting enabled more confrontation. Accordingly, it represented a more agonistic space than that of the more established and consensus oriented processes in Senti and Blantyre described previously. The script had changed, and there was no aim to finalize a particular plan. The skills of the journalist who chaired the discussion combined with the political agenda that had been prepared by involved organizations helped to concentrate the discussion around politically contentious themes, and people from the informal settlements were able to enjoy more speaking time than they would normally get in invited spaces. Still, there were clear limitations to how much could be achieved in the radio debate as an invented space. The space was not entirely open, and in the audience were many of the ‘usual suspects’ who regularly participate in the invited and claimed spaces described above. Furthermore, the debate was held at a hotel and in the evening, which may have prevented some people, especially from informal settlements joining. As a measure to address this accessibility challenge, transport was organized for community members and leaders from several of the settlements. However, transport was facilitated through the Federation and CCODE,

indicating that most participants from the informal settlements had a connection with these organisations. Nevertheless, the radio listeners and their SMS activity represented a widening of the space, and what would often count as noise in other spaces was accepted as voice in this context. In some ways, therefore, the space enabled ‘a political moment’ in its encounter between the instituted order and people living in informal settlements, one that resulted in a reconfigured relationship between the participants (see Dikec, 2005: 184).

7.0 The space for political agency and transformative participation

Participatory spaces are produced by representations, material conditions, spatial practices and lived experiences that help to constitute participants in these spaces in a relational dynamics (Cornwall, 2004; Miraftab, 2004; Shresta and Aranya, 2014). Much of the knowledge on urban processes and participation comes out of research in South Africa and Latin America. Urban research sensitive to contexts such as in Malawi therefore requires further attention. In the contexts studied here, elements of ‘claimedness’ might develop in invited spaces, as participants may mobilize from more claimed spaces, as for example the neighbourhood groups presented in our case studies. The inviters do not always have full control over who participates or with what agendas. Similarly, elements of ‘invitedness’ will almost always exist in claimed spaces, as they are commonly initiated by organizations, networks, and community leaders. As for the radio debate, it was partly invited while drawing on both the claimed and the invented by involving established community groups and focusing strongly on questioning unjust and inegalitarian practices. To make visible conflicting interests by bringing more contentious questions into the participatory planning debate might not solve immediate problems related to failed planning projects. However, it does provide a different departure point for addressing slum upgrading. At the radio debate, some concrete promises were made, and a partner in the action research project currently (as of May 2016) works with the Member of Parliament who participated in the debate to table a

private bill for the creation of a national urban development and human settlement committee. Establishing a committee signals some importance to the topic, but it does not necessarily mean that more will be done. During the debate, the MP emphasized that many committees existed, but most did not even meet to discuss during the year. The main impact of the radio debate was therefore rather to make visible some of the discussions that need to take place in order for slum upgrading to happen, by unsettling some of the hidden power relations and unwritten scripts that people follow in their more familiar participatory spaces.

The insights from the radio debate supports the conclusion derived from the analyses of the action research process: none of the three spaces analysed in this article are able to create transformation on their own. Instead we argue based on our examples and our theoretical framework (Isin, 2008; Rancière, 2001, 2009, 2011; Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Stokke and Törnquist, 2013) that the invited, claimed and invented spaces have to *connect and overlap* to enable political agency and thus transformative participation. For example, if planning practices in neighborhoods were able to connect with and secure resources through a participatory budgeting exercise, this could be one avenue through which actual slum upgrading could be achieved (Baiocchi, 2005). Transformative participation is conditioned by having 1) inclusive city and national level fora for people from the informal settlements to participate in; 2) strong, strategic community groups; and, 3) discussions on slum upgrading that engages 'the political' defined as addressing unjust practices of resource distribution and exclusion. In Malawi, all three components need to be strengthened, but, as identified in the collaborative research project, the third agonistic dimension is the least recognized and accepted. In order to bring elements of agonism into the participatory planning discourse, invented spaces must be recognized and the links between political transformation and the more material benefits participants seek in community planning and slum upgrading processes acknowledged.

By analysing the power dynamics in existing spaces, the action research project made visible some of the connections between the depoliticized planning discourse and the failure to implement slum upgrading projects, and through the radio debate it illustrated what a participatory space with a stronger invented dimension might look like. While this is not transformation in and of itself, the process constitutes a necessary starting point for changing the discourse and practice of participatory urban planning in Malawi.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the 'trialectics of participation' accommodates a middle way between radical democracy, redistributive justice and a more pragmatic consensus-based participation model, because the aim is here not to overturn the instituted order, but to be included, to gain recognition and to get noise accepted as voice (Purcell, 2014). Herein lies both a practical and theoretical contribution because we are not primarily concerned with transformative participation as revolution, but agree with our research participants as much as with Rancière, for an inclusion of excluded groups into an existing system.

A wider diversity of voices and discourses within the public does not alone lead to change unless it creates insights that are transferred into concrete planning and policy processes. The action research project contributed towards such insights, but it did not work to develop the firm linkages between the three types of spaces that would be necessary in order to influence policy and practice. More research is needed into this area, to explore how the different spaces we have discussed here can be connected in order to turn noise into voice and bring out the potential for transformation where participants are included, gain recognition and have their voices accepted. In a low-resource context such as Malawi, it is not always clear how much community groups can gain through inclusion and better redistribution of resources. However, it is our argument that with the massive urban growth currently taking place in Malawi, this is the moment to address the continuous production of unequal access to resources in urban areas. Only with more emphasis on such unjust practices may the society avoid spiraling costs as urbanization continues to change the urban areas.

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