

Does Participatory Planning Promise Too Much? Global Discourses and the Glass Ceiling of Participation in Urban Malawi

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Abstract

This article discusses how global ideas on co-production and citizenship built from below are translated into community mobilization and participatory planning practices in urban Malawi. It shows how limited national and local resources, disconnections from national and urban policies of redistribution, and a local politics shaped by both clientelism and democratic reforms create a glass ceiling for what global models of community mobilization and participation are able to achieve. It calls for a more systematic and empirically diverse research agenda to better understand how participatory discourses and practices embedded in grassroots organizing are transferred and mediated in place.

Keywords: word; Participatory Planning; Citizenship; Slum Upgrading; Malawi

Introduction

Discourses on participatory urban planning have increasingly merged with those on urban citizenship, framing participation as a key field and space through which

citizenship is to be achieved, both as a process of political inclusion and as a result of substantive urban rights (Miraftab, 2012a; Rossi & Vanolo, 2012). Examples from Brazil, India and South Africa have shaped this conversation, which commonly promotes community mobilization and co-production as key instruments that will enable marginalized groups to access housing, services and a political voice (Holston, 2008, 2011; Miraftab, 2005, 2009; Mitlin & Patel, 2014; Pieterse, 2008). This form of citizenship ‘built from below’ (Appadurai, 2001, 2004; Satterthwaite, 2001) has been successful in many cases (Boonyabancha & Kerr, 2018; d’Cruz & Satterthwaite, 2006). At the same time, scaling up interventions has proved difficult, and results have been highly uneven across contexts (Bolnick, 2016; Carolini, 2017; Horn, Mitlin, Bennett, Chitekwe-Biti & Makau, 2018). Constraints and disparities in outcomes have predominantly been debated with reference to the transformative potential of various combinations of confrontational and negotiation-based civil society practices (Butcher & Frediani, 2014; Huchzermeyer, 2011; Millstein, Oldfield & Stokke, 2003; Miraftab, 2009, 2012b; Roy, 2009b). The debates, primarily located within what has been termed the “Southern turn” in urban theorizing (Watson, 2016) move participatory planning theory and practice beyond how to include residents in formal processes, encompassing critical questions as to the role of participatory planning in realising a politics of inclusion through which active citizenship can be built and strengthened. As such, the Southern turn has not only challenged the Northern bias in urban research, but it has opened up for ‘south-south’ transfers of discourses, policies, strategies and practices, with potential to inform planning theory and practice in novel ways (de Satgé & Watson 2018). Yet, these transfers are also mediated in time and place, through which certain ideas, tools and practices may or may not achieve aims of empowering citizens and democratising urban planning from below. Existing political spaces, how dynamics of

internal capacities and external conditions shape what is possible, and the interplay between individual agency of quiet encroachment and more collective mobilization, shape this politics of citizenship from below (Bayat, 2010; Miraftab, 2012b).

With a main focus on visible expressions of grassroots organizing, we discuss in this article how global ideas on co-production and citizenship built from below are translated into community mobilization and participatory planning practices in a specific context outside of the ‘urban mainstream’, that of urban Malawi. While there are dimensions internal to community mobilization and organizing that enable or constrain how participation works (Bolnick, 2016; Mitlin & Patel, 2014), our main focus is on external factors that inform the mediated local political spaces in which they operate. Drawing on a collaborative research project with residents in informal settlements¹ and their partner organizations in Malawi, we show how factors such as limited national and local resources, disconnections from national and urban policies of redistribution, and a local politics shaped by the dynamics of both clientelism and democratic reforms, create a ceiling for how far community groups are able to get with their mobilization and co-production strategies. Based on this, we advocate for more locally grounded understandings of the potential of community mobilization and participatory planning in substantiating urban citizenship that is adapted to particular social, economic and political contexts.

In our conclusion, we reflect upon the need for a more systematic research agenda that explores multiple experiences with transfer of ‘southern’ practices, to better understand how participatory discourses and practices embedded in grassroots organising are transferred and mediated in place. The aim is not merely to explore if certain methodologies and practices work or not in a particular context. Rather, it is to open up multiple places as sites of knowledge production and for theorising the urban

(Oldfield, 2015; Robinson, 2016), and to gain a better understanding of how and under what conditions (different) participatory practices may strengthen a politics of active citizenship. This is not only about shifting urban theorising ‘South’ in response to Northern hegemonies, but also to problematize how and from where we theorize the ‘Southern city’. The article thus reinforces the message of emergent postcolonial literature about the importance of unpacking ‘the urban’ to give way to locally embedded approaches for understanding urban potentials (Chatterjee, 2012; Robinson & Roy, 2016; Roy, 2009a, 2015a, 2015b).

Community Mobilization and Citizenship ‘Built from Below’

The research for this article took place between February 2013 and May 2017, and consisted of participatory observation over 9 months, 20 group discussions, and 120 interviews with community members and other urban actors, as well as workshops, meetings and public radio debates. After an exploratory phase, the research developed into a collaborative project with the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Centre for Community Organization and Development (CCODE) and the Federation of the Urban and the Rural Poor (hereafter, ‘the Federation’), together with community representatives in four cities: Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu and Zomba.²

CCODE and the Federation are affiliates of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), one of the major global networks that have translated ‘citizenship built from below’ into practice (Appadurai, 2001; Watson, 2014). The network facilitates community-driven initiatives to upgrade informal and squatter settlements, improve tenure security, and access new development opportunities (Mitlin & Patel, 2014). They use co-production as a strategy to obtain political influence, power and transformation for grassroots

organizations (Watson, 2014). The aim is thus to shift power relations between communities, state, and market in order to reduce inequalities and expand the space for urban citizenship (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018).

SDI has been praised for their ability to both develop community-based strategies for poverty reduction and challenge conventional development thinking (Boonyabanha & Mitlin, 2012; Satterthwaite 2001; Patel, Burra & Cruz, 2001). In Uganda, local savings in citywide housing and slum upgrading funds were connected with the government's 150 million USD municipal support programme, as well as resources from the World Bank, Comic Aid, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Cities Alliance, 2012). In India, an alliance between the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan used enumerations and collection of data about themselves and their settlements to get into a dialogue with city officials. By the end of 2005, the alliance had secured land from the government and managed to self-construct homes for over 50,000 households (Chen, Jhabvala, Kanbur & Richards, 2007). Similar initiatives have taken hold in South Africa, where the South African Federation has influenced key aspects of national housing policies (Manda, Nkhoma & Mitlin, 2011; Millstein, Oldfield & Stokke, 2003; Satterthwaite, 2001).

SDI works with a shared framing and methodology that is promoted through national affiliates working closely with grassroots organizations. Their work does not represent one singular model, but rather a set of tools and relations that are used to advance the needs and interests of people living in informal settlements. The forms of organizations and methodologies therefore vary across the network. SDI does, however, advocate a particular set and sequence of practices (rituals) that can be seen as a mode of active citizenship through which residents are empowered to make claims and

critically engage the state and other actors from below (Kabeer, 2005). The rituals promoted are commonly those of savings, information gathering, enumerations, community planning and implementation of precedent setting projects. These strategies are promoted horizontally across informal settlement contexts through international, national and local community exchanges (Mitlin & Patel, 2014).

SDI thus both informs and embodies many of the ideas inherent in participatory discourses, and the network has had a major impact upon both local and global thinking on housing and slum upgrading. SDI is active within global institutions such as the Cities Alliance and UN-Habitat, and their approaches feature frequently in academic work. In Malawi, where very few actors work with urban informal settlements, the SDI affiliates have been the main influencers in shaping ideas and discussions around community mobilizing and participatory planning. Examples from their work are therefore illustrative of participatory practices in urban Malawi and relevant when discussing the potential of community mobilizing strategies in this context.

The main aim of the research collaboration with CCODE and the Federation was to follow up on some of the frustrations that interviewees had expressed in the exploratory phase of the research about why so many slum-upgrading projects in Malawi failed to be implemented. This lack of progress was explored through a number of case studies, and the findings were used to facilitate discussions on what was identified as a glass ceiling³ for what current participatory practices were able to achieve. Some of the changes sought, such as access to affordable housing, major infrastructure development, and dependable services, seemed to be out of reach. In the next two sections, we will explore some of the reasons for this lack of progress by unpacking contextual dynamics that influence the range of strategies and practices available to local groups who seek to realize their citizenship rights through

participatory planning in Malawi.

Urban Growth and Slum Upgrading⁴ in Malawi

Malawi is only 20% urbanized, but it is home to some of the fastest growing cities in sub-Saharan Africa. Almost 70% of the existing urban population lives in areas with slum-like conditions, and settlements are growing at an alarming rate (UN-Habitat, 2013). This represents a major challenge for city and national authorities, who have limited technical and political capacities to tackle increasing inequality and informality (Manda, 2013). The government of Malawi's approach to urban growth has mainly been to focus on rural development in order to stop rural-to-urban migration. Thus, preventing urbanization has been promoted over (and sometimes at the cost of) managing urban growth.⁵ Slum upgrading does not feature high up on the development agenda, and the few projects that have been initiated have had little success (Manda, 2013; Refstie & Brun, 2016). Very often, plans are not followed up by resources for implementation. Where slum upgrading *has* happened, the areas typically fall victim to 'downward raiding', where the middle classes benefit and the original renters are displaced further out at the city margins (Manda, 2013; Interview, Federation leader 12 March 2013; Interview, Commissioner for Physical Planning, Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 4 March 2013). Some of the challenges with slum upgrading have been attributed to a lack of participation by informal settlement dwellers in planning and project processes. Mirroring global shifts, recent slum-upgrading projects have therefore involved civil society more actively, promoting participatory planning as an avenue through which informal settlement members can raise and achieve socioeconomic claims (Kruse, 2005).

Since attention to urban issues is fairly recent in Malawi, few groups and organizations work with informal settlements. The largest group is the Federation, which mobilizes informal settlement groups to participate in community planning and policymaking processes, with 100,000 members covering 26 districts in Malawi. The Federation is organized through settlement, regional and national representatives, and they meet on a regular basis. The network is supported by the nongovernmental organization CCODE, which provides technical assistance, works with local settlement leaderships, and facilitates learning through exchange visits locally, nationally and internationally.

Through its affiliation to SDI, the Federation works with many of the tools used by SDI affiliates in other countries. This means mobilizing through savings groups; profiling, mapping and enumerations of settlements; and horizontal learning exchanges (McFarlane, 2004). The Federation and CCODE have made strides with these methods (see e.g. Hunga, 2016; Mitlin, 2014; Refstie, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), yet, at the time of this study, there was a growing sense of frustration within CCODE, the Federation and community groups over the lack of tangible results, particularly in relation to the implementation of slum-upgrading plans. For many, it seemed as though they had reached a glass ceiling in terms of what they were able to achieve within the existing frameworks. This again created a motivational gap that threatened long-term mobilization.

Community Mobilization and Participatory planning

A number of factors make cities in Malawi suitable for community mobilization. While there are clear differences between informal settlements in the commercial city of Blantyre and in the capital, Lilongwe, slum areas in Malawi are typically less congested

and crowded than in many other countries. Many settlements have grown on village land, and rural governance structures such as chiefdoms are still active. Traditional chiefs⁶ are important drivers in community mobilizing, as they are expected to remain independent and to refrain from engaging in what are often perceived as disruptive party politics and competitive electoral games (Cammack, 2011). They also sign land and house ownership documents, which gives people relative security of tenure. Malawian authorities have in some cases resorted to slum clearance and eviction of squatters (Mwathunga, 2014). However, evictions from customary managed land are rare (Kruse, 2005). The participatory turn in global development discourses and a more organized civil society have resulted in less legitimacy for evictions. Politicians also often oppose such measures as a strategic move to rally support for their candidacies during elections (Cammack, Kanyongolo & O'Neill, 2009). Together with the unresolved status of chiefs as custodians of customary land, this means that the local and national government have adopted a *laissez faire* policy towards areas that have been zoned for high-density housing (Kruse, 2005). Thus, a majority of informal settlements in Malawi resemble what Yiftachel (2009, pp. 88–89) describes as grey spaces, “those positioned between the ‘whiteness’ of legality/approval/safety, and the ‘blackness’ of eviction/destruction/death”. As we will see later, this means that local governments engage very little with informal settlements in terms of development, but it also gives organized community groups space to form their own initiatives and implement community projects. The relative security of tenure experienced by community members might also explain why participants in the research project tended to focus on material changes they wanted to see in their areas in terms of infrastructure and service delivery rather than the more emancipatory politics of inclusion that have characterized community mobilization in many other countries (see e.g. Lines & Makau, 2018). This

does not mean, however, that people did not struggle with issues such as access to housing. Rent costs and fluctuations were listed as a main challenge amongst the renters interviewed, and renters make up the majority of the settlements.⁷ Buying or building a house therefore featured high on their agenda. However, except for the additional need for affordable housing, the priorities emphasized by the interviewees who were renting mirrored the homeowners.

The Federation and CCODE have achieved a number of things in Malawi. In some settlements, community groups collect money from households to organize waste management, community police and minor infrastructure projects such as footbridges, roads and renovations of community buildings (Refstie, 2013, 2014a,b,d). In other settlements, community representatives have formed committees to negotiate for services directly with service providers such as the parastatal water boards and electricity company (Refstie, 2014c). Community groups also engage actively in participatory planning exercises that gather information, prioritize topics for intervention and design projects (Refstie, 2014 a,b,d; Refstie & Hunga, 2015). In addition, the Federation has been successful with savings activities oriented towards small-scale business investments and funeral funds, and with collective savings through which loans are made for building water taps and ecosan toilets (Hunga, 2016).

The examples described above illustrate that communities are able to do quite a bit – either on their own or in collaboration with NGOs and other partners. However, the strategies employed by the Federation in Malawi have been unable to address housing, larger-scale infrastructure or sufficient service provision in the informal settlements. Informal settlement groups also typically fail to achieve complete security of tenure, and they continue to have little influence on how

resources are distributed in the city. This is a common situation for informal settlement groups in a number of contexts, but as we will see, the specific dynamics in Malawi render the limitations of current models of community mobilization and participatory planning particularly visible.

An important SDI strategy is to engage in co-production activities as a way for informal settlement groups to consolidate their base politically and extract gains from the state or the market (Bolnick, 2016; Mitlin, 2008). In Malawi, this has proved difficult, and below we explore three influencing factors as to why: limited national and local resources, a local politics shaped by the dynamics of both clientelism and democratic reforms, and disconnections from national and urban policies of redistribution.

Limited National and Local Resources

Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking 171st out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). It is landlocked, with a high population density, and has few natural resources such as oil and minerals. Malawi is also dependent upon foreign aid, which has constituted up to 37% of its national budget (Government of Malawi, 2012).⁸ While not strictly a fragile state, Malawi has struggled with climate-related shocks and poor performing governance institutions. This has contributed to economic stagnation and a low pace of poverty reduction. Currently, 69.6 % of the population live below the international poverty line (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2017). Since urban development and slum upgrading is not prioritized by the government or donors, there are limited resources available for development initiatives in informal settlements.

As described earlier, the Federation and CCODE have successfully worked with community groups to develop community plans, both as individual processes and in connection with larger slum-upgrading projects run by the government or international agencies. However, accessing finances for implementing plans has proved to be a significant challenge in both cases. In projects at the national or city level, it is typically assumed that funds would be raised during the project or that the approach itself ‘would spread’ and later be scaled up. Sometimes it is also believed that financing will be secured via abstract notions of public–private partnerships that rarely materialize (Refstie & Hunga, 2015; Refstie, 2015). In other cases, budgeting is simply unrealistic (Refstie, 2014d). As stated by the United Nations Habitat (UN-Habitat) programme manager on the financing of the Malawi Participatory Slum Upgrading Project:

In retrospect, we realize that 1 million euros cannot do much in improving people’s lives.⁹ It would have to focus on software as capacity building rather than physical work as water, sanitation and drains (Interview, UN-Habitat programme manager, 28 April 2014).

One important fundraising tool used by informal settlement networks globally has been the pooling of community funds through ‘saving groups’. Saving groups function better than microfinance loans in low-resource settings since the amounts are smaller, people are able to save daily or weekly, and there are no middle-level institutions to be paid (Bolnick, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2001). Saving groups can also be used both as a basis for organization and as a platform for mobilizing larger pools of funds for slum upgrading (Watson, 2014). In Uganda, South Africa, India, Vietnam and the Philippines, among other countries, informal settlement groups have managed to develop citywide funds for housing or wider slum upgrading. They also leverage additional resources from international organizations and national governments into the funds, expanding their

resource base (Chen et al., 2007; Manda et al., 2011; Mitlin, 2013). In Malawi, citywide saving funds have not been very successful owing to low repayment rates. The Federation's Mchenga urban poor fund, a revolving loan fund for housing, was put on hold at the time of the study because of loan defaults (Manda et al., 2011; Interview, CCODE fund manager, 20 March 2013). Habitat for Humanity has also struggled with their housing loans in Malawi, and had at the time of the study therefore started to target the lower-middle class:

Our mandate is the economically active poor, but those cannot pay. So we go up the pyramid. It is a dilemma really. Some vulnerable groups need grants and fully subsidized houses. Sometimes the families contribute with unskilled labour if they can afford, but this type of housing is heavily dependent on donors (Interview, Operations Manager, Habitat for Humanity, 27 May 2013).

In addition to housing funds, it has also been difficult to establish saving schemes for services and infrastructure upgrading in Malawi. Savings organized through the Federation rather focus on smaller business loans, minor home improvements or family related events such as weddings or funerals:¹⁰

It is difficult to get people to save for public goods. Nobody owns it, so why should I do it they say – this is why we have the government. Saving towards public goods is a challenge, as it does not target households (Interview, CCODE fund manager, 20 March 2013).

Since saving activities fail to reach their full potential and government or donors do not prioritize informal settlements, there are few ways in which neighbourhood or citywide funds for slum upgrading can be established. This limits the options for co-producing basic services, which again would enable networks of residents' groups to negotiate for continuing reforms and redistribution (Mitlin & Patel, 2014). In other words, while the

current participatory processes and practices in Malawi might be key to engaging residents and constructing active citizens, there are structural limitations as to what is achieved in terms of material gains (Miraftab, 2012b). The failure to establish working neighbourhood, city or national savings funds can therefore not be attributed solely to a lack of process “maturity” (Bolnick, 2016), as it responds to actual financial limitations. As we shall see below, local political dynamics also inform citizens’ strategies and practices, with implications for how community mobilization and participatory planning plays out in the Malawian context.

A Local Politics Shaped by the Dynamics of Both Clientelism and Democratic Reforms

In 1998, the Local Government Act established town and city assemblies as the unit of local government in urban Malawi. Local council elections, however, 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 the resources provided failed to match the new responsibilities. There were also strong tensions at the local level between councillors, district commissioners, members of parliament and traditional chiefs. Sitting presidents also feared local opposition. As a result, the local government assemblies were dissolved in 2005 and new elections were postponed for almost a decade. At the time of this research, local governments were therefore run by technocrats without councils, as a result, not merely of neoliberal depoliticization, even though initial state reforms were informed by global good governance agendas, but also as a result of the politics of centralization in postcolonial Malawi. This meant that informal settlement groups had no elective representatives within city planning processes, the closest political representatives being their members of parliament (Chasukwa & Chinsinga, 2013).

Politicians in Malawi are in theory held accountable through elections, and the fact that only one-third are re-elected testifies to this. However, since few politicians are able to live up to their grandiose election promises, politicians tend to think short term while they are in office, focusing more on their own gains than on engaging with their constituencies (Cammack, 2007, 2011):

For example, we had political campaigns last year and various leaders promised us [informal settlement dwellers] that when we empower them they should assist us accordingly. However, when we take them to task they are full of scapegoats and say they are not able to develop our areas because we are not within the laws, and yet during their campaign the same people did not warn us of this. (Community member from the informal settlement Mtandire in Lilongwe at radio debate, 10 May 2015).

Malawi's local authorities are responsible for providing infrastructure and services to all areas of the country's cities, including informal settlements. They are to provide policy and technical guidance on planning, enforce bylaws, and source funding for urban and community development programmes (Chinsinga, 2015). However, informal settlement groups such as those mobilized through the Federation often struggle with creating constructive partnerships with city authorities:

In Ndirande and Ntopwa [informal settlements in Blantyre], local government representatives even came to meetings. They appreciated that there were problems, but nothing happened. In Ntopwa, the chief is very hard working; she got people to collect waste and bring to areas, but the city council never showed up to collect it. We also have the example of Chiwembe [another informal settlement in Blantyre]. They even told the city council that they have a place for waste dumping, so it was just for the city council to go there, but it did not happen (Group discussion, national, regional and district Federation leaders, 28 March 2014).

As in most other countries, city authorities in Malawi prioritize settlements that are well off (Mwathunga, 2014; Refstie & Brun, 2016). At the same time, there is also a serious

lack of both capacity and funds at the local government level (Chinsinga, 2015; Manda, 2013; Kruse, 2005).

There are not enough resources at the city councils. There was a time when we were holding a meeting with the Lilongwe City Council. We asked why there was uncontrolled garbage in markets and townships. They said they did an assessment: on average, each person in Lilongwe produced 0.5 kg litter per day. With its 700,000 residents, that is 350,000 kg litter per day. They say they simply do not have the capacity to collect and dispose of this, which I think is true (Interview, Member of Parliament, 28 May 2013).

Along with the relative centralization of resources, the gap in political representation has made it difficult for organized community groups to get their views heard and their plans included into city budgets. Following the tripartite election of 2014, local councils were re-established, giving people more decentralized political representation.

However, the reintroduction of elected local governments has created a serious leadership challenge at the community level in urban areas, and tensions have been reported between councillors, chiefs, block leaders and community development committee members over jurisdictions and mandates related to community planning and development (Chinsinga, 2015). The ways in which informal settlement groups can influence resource distribution through the representative elective system therefore remain limited, as processes get stuck in political and mandate conflicts.

Disconnections From National and Urban Policies of Redistribution

According to Weimer (2012) there are three main measures that can increase municipal investments in services and infrastructure: collective bargaining between municipalities for a better share of central government transfers, direct donor support to local governments, and more efficient collection and use of a municipality's own revenues

(Weimer, 2012, p. 8). In Malawi, neither of these are currently achievable to the degree that they can respond to the changes called for by informal settlement groups. As noted earlier, income levels are generally low in Malawi. Gross National Income (GNI) per capita remains one of the lowest in the world. There is less potential for redistributing wealth and power towards the poor than in many other contexts. Furthermore, in line with the global push for neoliberal policies, in the 1980s and 1990s the Malawian government implemented a series of reforms to remove subsidies and privatize services (Mwathunga, 2014). This reduced the distributive funding pot for housing and services targeting the urban poor and pushing costs over to the citizens themselves.

Inequality in income and wealth is, however, relatively high in Malawi (IMF, 2017). While the sums available may be far from addressing the challenges informal settlements face, resources can be better distributed. However, this has not been part of the participatory planning debate in Malawi. The attention has rather been on local project implementation and cosmetic participatory budget exercises (Refstie & Brun, 2016), activities that may contribute to:

...the illusion of democratic reform at the surface, while remaining insufficient as a transformative reform that heals the deeper gouge of undemocratic decision making governing the larger percentage of the public purse, which instead serves elite purposes (p. 131).

as argued by Carolini (2017) in the Mozambiquan context.

The purpose of taxes and revenues is commonly to contribute to a redistribution of resources, whereby the better off support the poorest and most vulnerable in the city. In Malawi, however, the discourse around taxes is more focused on direct funding

whereby services provided are supposed to mirror what is paid in taxes.¹¹

City rates do not go from one area to another. So social justice and affirmative action is not discussed (Interview, lecturer, Mzuzu University, 24 April 2014).

Therefore, while city councils in Malawi do not dismiss demands from informal settlement groups entirely, they typically argue that they have too few resources to engage with informal settlements since most inhabitants in informal areas do not pay taxes. Several planners, urban experts and community members described the informal settlement tax discussion as a ‘chicken and egg’ situation. Community members refuse to pay taxes such as city rates on the basis that the city authorities do not provide services to their settlements. The city council administrations, on the other hand, argue that they do deliver some services but are unable to provide full services because they lack sufficient funds. Since the community members do not trust the councils to manage their money, the situation remains stuck in a deadlock. The income from taxes in informal settlements would also be very small in comparison with the settlements’ huge demand for services, and the bulk of city budgets tend to go to salaries for city officials (Manda, 2013). The suggestion that income from taxes in the informal settlements would be a game-changer for the provision of services in the same settlements, was therefore seen as highly improbable.

Yet, taxation may have a broader political function in state-community relations. Paying taxes and rates may give informal settlement dwellers recognition that in turn can legitimize claims to the state, which could again work as leverage to achieve improvements they seek (Prichard, 2015). However, as we have written above, informal settlement dwellers do have some recognition through, for instance tenure security, and the municipality does not dismiss engagement. Also, informal settlement groups in Malawi are well aware of the severe resource constraints that municipalities face. When

they have little faith that more resources will be redirected towards development in their settlements, among other things due to the confined area-based approach to taxation rather than national or city-wide resource redistribution, refusing to pay taxes becomes its own enactment of political agency.

The lack of emphasis on resource redistribution as well as limited financing prospects from below, above, and outside, in the Malawian case pose some challenges for community mobilization and participatory planning. This leads us to the discussion on what community mobilizing in connection with participatory planning can actually deliver.

Do Participatory Planning Discourses Promise Too Much?

The promises of community mobilization and participatory planning discourses are typically discussed in terms of invited spaces of citizenship versus invented strategies and practices where communities can make demands and claims to rights through more insurgent practices. Miraftab (2009), for instance, provides a critique of current modes of participatory planning that link community groups closely to NGOs. She argues that such linkages reinforce the hegemonic legitimacy of neoliberalism. In contrast to such approaches, she suggests that insurgent planning promises a more transformative framing, in which counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative practices are integral to planning. Others point to the balancing act between “the complex negotiation of local clientelist linkages that render daily lives bearable” and “the generally more external, ephemeral, and oppositional politics of rights, which often discard, expose, or confront clientelist links, at the risk of losing resources, if the new mobilization network does not last or succeed” (Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2014, p. 286). Butcher and Frediani’s (2014) inclusion of both confrontational and negotiation-based practices in

the notion of insurgency thus seems to be a better way to grasp these dynamics on the ground than a notion of insurgency that works in either opposition to or beyond ‘the state’. Roy (2009a, p. 827) elaborates this further;

...this is perhaps the point, the Africanist debates about agency, subjectivity, and politics defy the easy categorizations of power and resistance. Under conditions of crisis, the subaltern subject is simultaneously strategic and self-exploitative, simultaneously a political agent and a subject of the neoliberal grand slam.

What the Malawian case shows is that, regardless of what tactics are used, there are certain contextual factors that put limits on what informal settlement communities are able to achieve. The interesting question is therefore not if informal settlement groups in Malawi use oppositional or inclusive strategies, or how well they implement those strategies. Rather, it is how contextual dynamics influence the spectre of strategies and practices available to local groups who seek to realise their citizenship rights through community mobilization and participatory planning. What is missing is a discussion of whether the frustrations identified within the informal settlement groups are in fact capable of being addressed within a broad participatory planning process given the current structural limitations.

‘Centrisms’ in Urban Scholarship

Urban scholarship has experienced a ‘Northern’ centrisms in which grand theories are developed on the basis of a narrow selection of cities (Chatterjee, 2012; Robinson & Roy, 2016; Roy, 2009a, 2015a, 2015b; Sheppard, Leitner & Maringanti, 2013; Watson, 2009, 2011). What is less often discussed is how certain dominant narratives also shape Southern urban scholarship. While important contributions have been made from other contexts (on Malawi, see, for example, Chinsinga, 2015; Chome & McCall, 2005;

Manda et al., 2011; Potts, 1985), much of the literature on participatory planning and citizenship focuses on major cities in Brazil, India and South Africa (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2012; Chatterjee, 2004; Holston, 2008; Miraftab, 2005; Parnell & Oldfield, 2014; Pieterse, 2008; Roy, 2003). In many of these cities, the state has played a significant role in service provision and housing, and – although perhaps insufficient – these are contexts in which resources are available for redistribution, and where stark inequalities and a sense of injustice shape claims to rights and social justice from “the urban margins” (Holston, 2008). Even in Kenya and Namibia, which are often referred to when discussing participatory urban development in Africa, state resources far exceed those of Malawi. When practices developed in these contexts are transferred to other urban vocabularies, it is not surprising that they yield different results. One illustrative example is the function of information-gathering exercises. In India, where the methodology of information gathering as political leverage was first developed, enumerations in particular served the specific purpose of providing documentation that could be used in legal cases against evictions (McFarlane, 2004). However, as described above, a majority of informal settlements in Malawi are built on land zoned for high-density housing, and house-ownership documents signed by the chiefs give households some sense of tenure security (Silungwe, 2009). In cases where tenure is not secure, existing legal frameworks provide few options for demanding or obtaining such security. This means that documented dwelling does not hold the same value in Malawi as in many other contexts:

The land is owned by those people. What the literature focuses on is where communities do not own the land (Interview, lecturer, Mzuzu University, 24 April 2014).

Thus, enumerations as a mobilising tool and political strategy makes less sense in

Malawi than in many other contexts. When, in addition, access to housing, infrastructure, and services are rendered an individual responsibility as part of liberal reforms, lengthy enumeration exercises are not necessarily the best use of community resources - especially since the city authorities lack corresponding systems whereby the information could be translated into planning data and few resources are available for redirection (Refstie & Hunga, 2015). Such examples, together with the structural limitations discussed in this paper illustrate how strategies would benefit from basing themselves on more locally grounded understandings of the multiple formal and informal practices that underlie citizenship processes. This is not a new debate and the importance of home-grown strategies and contextual adaptation is well recognized within networks such as the SDI. However, certain city and country contexts continue to dominate discussions about participatory potentials, and the language used to describe different federation practices is still that of different stages of 'maturity' (Bolnick, 2016), which may suggest a certain conceptual linearity.

Conclusion

As we have shown in this article, several interrelated factors limit the range of strategies and practices available to local groups seeking to realize their citizenship rights through participatory planning in Malawi – challenging what strategic engagement and locally embedded mobilizing practices can achieve in terms of substantiating rights. At the same time, the spaces and networks provided through the Federation and its alliances are important resources for community groups, helping them to build some capabilities to make use of the limited spaces available for their efforts to improve their living conditions. People also use numerous strategies outside of participatory planning frameworks to engage in everyday politics (Robins, Cornwall & Von Lieres, 2008). In

Malawi, mass protest is less common, while the growth of slum areas is more akin to a process of quiet and tolerated encroachments, to some extent accepted, even if not formally legalised, by city and national authorities (Bayat, 2010; Rao, 2013). As we have noted, people also exploit bureaucratic slippages and connections and make use of a multitude of subject positions to negotiate their state or client relationships (Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2014; Millstein, 2017; Robins et al., 2008). Over time, as changing structural conditions may open up new political opportunities, such seemingly mundane strategies and practices may translate into political agency for transformational change (Beard, 2003).

The main point that needs to be addressed by networks such as the Federation is therefore – as discussed in the collaboration that made up this research project – to establish more clearly what can be achieved with participatory planning at different scales, by whom, and in what timeframes, on the basis of the local social, political, economic and cultural dynamics in Malawian settlements. This means identifying what can be done by community groups themselves through strategies of self-transformation, what can be achieved with some funds and more connections to actors such as city councils and their administrations, and what requires more systemic change at the national level and beyond in terms of prioritization, resource distribution and recognition of informal settlements. Strategies also have to take into consideration different land-ownership schemes, dynamics of local governance and resource availability in various cityscapes. The understandings listed above are important indicators for how slum upgrading can be implemented and need to be openly communicated in participatory projects and processes. In concrete terms, this would mean being realistic in terms of costings, timeframes and scope. In some cases, it also means to “plan as if there are no money” (Interview, Director of Physical Planning,

Zomba, 24 March 2014). Most importantly, it means acknowledging that the solution is not necessarily to be found within participatory planning alone, even when it transcends scale. As such, mobilizing in a low-resource context may call for a more modest link between participatory planning and the substantiation of citizenship rights.

In Malawi, CCODE and the Federation have taken measures to change their practices. In 2015, the Federation changed its name from the Malawi Homeless People's Federation to the Federation for the Rural and Urban Poor. This was to reflect how challenges facing urban communities were connected to those of the rural, as well as to include a wider segment of people. This also corresponded to the name of Federations elsewhere such as in South Africa. CCODE and the Federation have also initiated a number of activities to promote a more self-sufficient form of mobilization in terms of funding. Their work related to housing construction, brick production, economic administration and research has been separated out to a holding company owned by CCODE and the Federation. The latter company now offers these services to the wider market, while any economic surplus is channelled back into CCODE and Federation projects. This strategy reflects an emergent recognition within SDI as a network on the limits of community, state and donor funding to move towards interventions at scale (Bolnick, 2016). While it remains to be seen whether this constitutes a viable economic strategy in Malawi, and how it will influence the more horizontal community engagement, it is an attempt to create a more stable financial base that can support long-term mobilization. CCODE and the Federation have also begun to place more emphasis on community strategies, not just plans. These strategies identify what can be achieved at different levels, with what resources, in the short, medium and long terms, and combine elements of self-implementation with more targeted advocacy and the formation of relationships between community committees and service

providers. Lastly, the relationship between community planning and governance processes at the local and national level has been taken up more actively in funding applications, advocacy work and the creation of a “Public Square” radio debate format.¹² These adaptations constitute some important steps towards more locally grounded strategies to substantiate urban citizenship claims, which is maybe more in line with what participation can actually deliver.

In this article we discuss how some key factors create a ceiling for what is possible to achieve through co-production strategies in Malawi, and how this again influenced what we identified as a participation fatigue among informal settlement groups in the study. At the same time, we do see that there is space for residents and networks to ascertain their agency and to perhaps be more in tune with a politics of quiet encroachment or self-organising beyond the local state, to perform citizenship from below. The Southern conversation has opened up a new space in urban planning for thinking about how we theorise and from where (de Satgé and Watson 2018). This is an emerging conversation, through which southern-embedded discourses, methodologies and practices may be at the centre of not just changing practice, but theorising the urban political (Oldfield 2015). Structural factors such as limited resources or local clientelism may well be imbricated with participatory planning, or challenged through participatory planning, in ways that change politics and achieve change, however minor these changes may be. As noted at the start of our conclusion, residents can skilfully manoeuvre between roles and relations as citizens and clients. Finally, factors that currently constrain what participatory planning may achieve are dynamic and change over time and space. How the exact articulation of these – and other – factors inform and shape participatory practices and thus enable or constrain a project of political mobilisation, is a question that must be explored empirically in

concrete spaces and places. This, we believe, should be a key focus in a more systematic research agenda on the diversity of participatory planning discourses, methodologies and practices that are increasingly emerging from and embedded within the diverse landscape that makes up Southern cities.

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- ¹ By “informal settlements”, we mean villages incorporated into city boundaries, squatter areas and overcrowded traditional housing areas (THAs), where housing and sanitation are poor and the status of land tenure is unclear (Manda, 2013).
- ² For more on the research process and findings, see Refstie and Brun (2016) and Refstie, (2018). The case-study series developed as part of the project can be accessed at: <https://actmalawi.com/case-study-series/>
- ³ The use of the term “glass ceiling” refers to how participatory planning (especially within the discourses discussed) appears to offer a way to the blue skies above, and how this is illusionary, and thus problematic when it creates expectations that do not match the results.
- ⁴ In this article ‘slum upgrading’ refers to an integrated approach, small or large, that aims to improve conditions in a given area. These conditions may be related to legal (e.g. land tenure), physical (e.g. infrastructure, housing), social (e.g. health, crime or education) or economic issues.
- ⁵ Malawi’s attempt to ensure a regionally balanced urban development has yielded some results (Manda, 2013), but it has not prevented rapid urbanization and city growth.
- ⁶ “Chief” is here used in a general sense and covers the paramount chief, senior chief, chief, group village headman or village.
- ⁷ Enumerations exercises conducted by the Federation and CCODE indicate that as many as 60-70 % of people in informal settlements are tenants (CCODE, 2012; CCODE, 2011).
- ⁸ This has decreased in recent years as donors have withheld funds in response to various corruption scandals (Dionne & Horowitz, 2016).
- ⁹ The 1 million euros was initially planned to cover slum upgrading in the four largest cities in Malawi. In the end, the money was not released. The main funder, the European Union, refused to release more funds as the Malawian government had not paid its agreed 25% contribution (Refstie, 2014d).
- ¹⁰ As described previously in the article, there are some exceptions where community members pool money to pay for waste collection and gravelling of roads (Refstie, 2013).
- ¹¹ This is, however, a discourse of contradiction since tax evasion is rampant amongst both business owners and wealthy individuals (Chiumya, 2006).
- ¹² The Public Squares are national interactive live debates that cover a number of topics related to development in Malawi. The debates are led by a veteran journalist, with panels mostly consisting of decision-makers and community representatives. There is also a live audience, and people can send comments and questions via SMS or Facebook (see <https://www.facebook.com/Public-Square-543646862395117/>).