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Dynamics of Decentralising South Africa

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Dynamics of Decentralising South Africa¹

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“[...] *Developmental local government is local government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives* [...].” (White Paper on Local Government 1998)².

1. Introduction

The quote touches upon two aspects that are essential for the line of argumentation developed in this paper. The South African government’s vision of participatory democracy focuses, firstly on measures of delegating power from national and provincial spheres of government to municipalities by enhancing local government. Secondly this should be achieved through decentralisation by direct involvement of citizens and community activists in matters pertaining to post-apartheid local government including development planning and delivery of basic services. It is equally important to note here that the *White Paper of Local Government* quoted above constructs decentralisation through citizens’ participation by emphasising women’s vulnerability and thus, the need to empower women. Within this political arena two prominent actors are negotiating modes of decentralisation, naming the elected ward councillors as representatives of local government and representatives active in the different development sectors such as health, sports, safety and security etc..

Although the South African government intended, over the past decade, to reform society and strengthen democracy by means of decentralisation and empowerment at the local level, these processes have not been as successful as expected³. This paper will stress the conflict-laden structuration processes of development pursued by state and non-state actors in Cape Town.

Following the first democratic elections in 1994, South African society has been re-structured by the adoption of new laws. A broad range of non-state, state and international actors started to operate within the framework of national policy making. These legal concepts have been

¹ The paper is based on a presentation held at the conference „Challenging Development. Concepts, Visions, Perspectives”, in: Bielefeld, April 16-18, 2009.

²The state’s blueprint of decentralisation and development was primarily conceptualised in the “mini-constitution” of the *White Paper on Local Government* (1998) “which will affect all South Africans”, p.1.

³ One of the first important reforms was introduced immediately after the first democratic election in 1994 – the *Reconstruction Development Programme* (RDP). This programme supported urban development in order to integrate the marginalised urban areas in the administration and in the jurisdiction. According to the government the RDP ministry was closed because of lack of efficiency and instead the neo-liberal strategy of Growth, Employment and Redistribution was introduced (Meyns 2000; Osmanovic 2003).

appropriated within local arenas by people belonging to what in South Africa are known as black African, white and coloured population groups. In South African society the sense of belonging with a particular social group is still informed by what the apartheid political system had hierarchically categorised as whites, coloureds and black Africans. These categories are still salient and functioning as racialised markers to maintain and reproduce historically rooted societal boundaries. At the same time these boundaries incorporate significant imbalances in relations of power across the spatial order of South African society. The townships are dominated by what is either known as black African or coloured population groups. Their relatively homogenous composition is a relict of apartheid's policy of racial segregation and of forced removals, as non-whites were removed from urban centres and relocated to the racially segregated urban periphery in the 1960's (Western 1996). Cape Province was in 1954 declared a 'coloured preference area' by the apartheid government and thus severely restricted the in-migration of black African workers (Terreblanche 2002). Hence, the persistent conflict in South Africa between non-white and white population groups has some distinctive dynamics in this area since, unlike in the rest of the country, so-called coloureds rather than Black Africans are in the majority here.

Originally the concept of *rainbow nation*, coined by the well-known anti-apartheid figure of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was used as a metaphor to integrate equally the multicultural diversity in society and to achieve the social cohesion of a diverse population. The paper analyses Desmond Tutu's concept as a strategic political intervention at a particular point in time. Looking at the current situation through 1 ½ years of field work in the marginalised Townships of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province (2005-2007) I argue, that the concept of *rainbow nation* rather obscures the persistence of multiple power structures and racialised divides that continue to shape and influence democratisation at a local level. Based on my study I think I can clearly show in this paper how under the slogan of the *rainbow nation* the South African state's modes of decentralisation, plasters over historically situated unequal power relations and conflicts existing in the society.

State and non-state actors' practices have re-structured post-apartheid society and local government. As during apartheid the township communities had formerly been excluded from the dominant local government system⁴, now with the new decentralisation measures local

⁴ For a detailed account of local government structure in the 1960s-1970s see Evans Stanley *New Management Committees in Local Government* (1969). While the rural population were administrated by their own independent political system of the so called Bantustans, the non-white urban population groups were only in the 1980s accepted as permanent residents which represented a political challenge of how to integrate them into the political system (Terreblanche 2001: 331). With the Black Local Authorities Act of 1982 the state attempted to

government is responsible for administrating these communities equally. It is in these newly emergent spaces that ward councillors, and political activists of the former underground liberation movement have been able to position themselves and shape the newly emerged societal spaces. During fieldwork I could at least identify two types of NGOs. The first type of NGOs enters into a working relationship with the state and thus comes under the control of the state to a certain extent. The second type represents NGOs which contest statecraft by promulgating alternative perspectives to state governance. Although NGOs in general need to be registered by the state and accepted as an NGO entity by the state, the latter type critically eyes state activities without being immobilised by state authority. In Cape Town these different configurations politicise decentralisation through the NGOs' ambivalent positioning in relation to the nation-state.

In this paper I will focus on the NGO *Centre for Global Activism*⁵ (CGA) active in townships in Cape Town which interestingly was formed by political activists who, after the abolition of apartheid, could act for the first time within the official public sphere. This NGO carries out research in a number of areas such as local government and municipal service delivery, transnational co-operation, gender and globalisation as well as strengthening communities and in particular social movements through capacity building. Through its work it is known amongst political activists in the whole of South Africa and other African countries "where comrades share the same struggles". CGA is financed exclusively by international donors and therefore financially independent of the state. I will show how this NGO opposes and contests the current South African state's policies. In reference to this analysis I contend that despite the participatory rhetoric of the state governed by the African National Congress (ANC), decentralisation has mainly become a tool used by the ANC to gain control over local electoral communities and the NGO sector.

solve this issue and buttress the administrative and legal networks in the rapidly growing townships. These local councils still fell under the national, white-run state administration (the "Bantu Administration Board"), which continued to control the power and resources available to the township authorities.⁴ Thus black Africans who conformed to this form of indirect rule joined the community councils (see Campbell 1998: pp.151). The state's strategy of co-optation tried to gain cooperation among black Africans and coloureds/Indians not only in the political system of local councils, but also in other domains such as the security forces and military (see Mcadam et. al. 2001: pp.151). The introduction of these allegedly autonomous local township authorities as well as the independent Bantustans, was followed in 1984 by the establishment of the Tricameral Parliament constituted of segregated chambers for Coloured, Indian and White voters (Nattrass/Seekings 2006: pp.21). The Tricameral constitution guaranteed for the first time women's suffrage for classified coloureds and Indians whereas white women had obtained the vote already in the 1930's. These three houses together would make up the national legislature.

⁵ The name of the NGO in question, persons and townships were changed to allow interviewees to remain anonymous.

Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1999; Watson 2003 and Tetzlaff 2003 have identified a lack of actor-oriented approaches that focus on development in the context of the current debate on democratisation and decentralisation in Africa. This paper explicitly aims to examine the process of democratic transformation in South Africa from an actor oriented perspective and particularly focuses on gender relations that form an important structuring dimension at the local level⁶. Yet, taking into account that the township communities are an important arena for the negotiation of development and local politics, the paper proceeds as follows: Firstly I show how democratisation is socially and politically embedded in South African townships. In the second section I continue with an analysis of different interfaces where communal politicians and NGO activists interact. I will introduce a) the state's decentralisation concept of the ward committee system as specified in legislation in order to b) analyse the interaction between the CGA and former ward committee members⁷ when negotiating this participatory institution, with respect to gendered dimension of local development. I conclude with a few remarks on the appropriation and instrumentalisation by communal politicians and community activists of concepts and visions of democratisation by means of decentralisation.

2. Localising the Rainbow Nation

Until now the majority of South Africans have been excluded from basic social rights that allow access to adequate housing, health care and education. Currently more than half of the South African population live in absolute poverty (SLE Team 2003; Rechmann 2004). Mostly affected are people living in rural areas and in marginalised urban townships that had been built as dormitory 'suburbs' for the working classes. According to political activists in townships, poverty alleviation and the delivery of basic services like shelter, childcare facilities, electricity, water, and sanitation services, security and safety is crucial for reaching the goals of local government and should be freely accessible.

In the following discussion my two research areas of Landfield and Fairlady will be briefly introduced to identify relevant social and political dimensions that structure everyday life in South African society. Furthermore these areas will be taken up in the course of this paper as spaces constituted through decentralisation practices.

Landfield and Fairlady are two adjacent townships near Cape Town in the Western Cape Province that fall under the Cape Town Metropolitan Municipal Council: the townships are

⁶ For decentralisation and civil society in West Africa see Lachenmann 2005.

⁷ Ward committees were not re-constituted after the changes in local government of Cape Town in 2006, for more details see pp.6.

Landfield, whose residents belong overwhelmingly to the coloured population and Fairlady, where black Africans are in the majority. Both areas, Landfield and Fairlady are situated in different political and social contexts that shape local politics and development.

In the first two democratic elections the majority of coloureds voted for the *New National Party* (NNP) which had introduced apartheid through its predecessor, the National Party. The majority of the Black African population groups voted for the *African National Congress* (ANC) (Pickel 1997; Jensen 2001; Reddy 2001). Despite the fact that the NNP suffered a devastating loss in the last parliamentary election in 2004 and directly after that broke up its party structure (Schwikowski 2004), the majority of coloureds in Landfield voted in this most recent election for the NNP.

Landfield is an area built in the 1970s to reduce housing shortages in the coloured communities during the times of forced removals. Its area consists of predominantly formal housing and some small informal settlements⁸ with some backyard dwellers scattered throughout Landfield. Fairlady is the country's fastest-growing township where large informal settlements are spread throughout the area. It has the highest murder and rape rate and the highest occurrence of HIV/Aids in the Western Cape (Environmental Planning Department 2005). The majority of Fairlady's Xhosa-speaking people migrated either from the Eastern Cape or former Transkei in order to escape rural poverty and find employment in Cape Town.

Both township communities have a high rate of unemployment, with a greater proportion of women without formal employment. Under these conditions people with little or no income, are in a precarious position as far as housing is concerned, as they are regularly confronted with evictions and with having their basic services cut off.

Against this background NGOs claim such issues as women's rights, HIV, crime prevention etc. as relevant. These issues are gaining importance for democratisation and development at the local level (Wittmann 2001; Osmanovic 2003). Also in Landfield and Fairlady, it is mainly women who organise themselves in NGOs because they consider themselves to be particularly affected by crime, HIV/Aids, domestic violence, and malnutrition. These NGOs

⁸ The term *informal settlement* refers to the physical housing infrastructure but not to the social life of its inhabitants known as *squatters*. The informal settlements are characterised by the absence of municipal sanitation and sewage system which means that people still use buckets as toilets, wiretap electricity and collect water from standpipes provided by local government – what governmental reports in 1942 called unsanitary housing (see Report of the Department of Social Welfare (1942 [1943])). Women during my fieldwork especially complained about the state of pitch darkness after sundown because there were no street lights. This lack was considered to breed violence against women.

are involved with welfare delivery and awareness training and are financed by the Department of Social Services and can be thus said to extend the reach of the state.

According to my empirical data the concept of democratisation is constructed by township inhabitants as comprising access to basic services in the areas of welfare, energy and infrastructure. This vision of democratisation stands in stark contrast to the foreign aid to South Africa which has been mainly directed to democracy assistance. The main aid programs focused on the political transition, consolidation of democracy and the idea of participatory development (Hearn 2000: pp819). For example in 2000 the South African Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) developed the ward committee system with the assistance of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Australia South Africa Local Governance Partnership (ASALPG)⁹. This system was supposed to give practical meaning and substance to the political commitment that *the People shall govern*¹⁰.

3. “The People Shall Govern”: The Ward Committee System

The idea of the ward committee system as a sub-municipal structure has been to uplift historically disadvantaged communities through addressing underdevelopment, unemployment, stagnation and poverty. It was established to inform municipalities about the aspirations, potentials and problems of the people. The ward committees were based within the boundaries of clearly defined electoral districts, each of which is called a ward. Cape Town is regionally divided into 100 wards and accordingly there were established about 100 ward committees from 2004 until 2006. The ward councillor is elected on the basis of party political affiliation by the citizens of their respective wards for administrative and representative purposes. The ward committee consists of the ward councillor as its chairperson and its members who are supposed to represent a particular “interest group” such as health, religion, sports etc.. These sector representatives are intended to be from within the community and to understand the needs of the community¹¹. The members are elected by the community and the whole election procedure is supervised by the Speakers Office of the former ANC governed city council.

⁹ DPLG and GTZ (eds.) (2005) *Ward Committee Resource Book. Best practices & lessons learnt for municipal officials, councillors & local governance practitioners*, Pretoria: Communication Directorate; DPLG, GTZ and ASALPG (eds.) (2005) *Having Your Say. A Handbook for Ward Committees*, Pretoria: Communication Directorate.

¹⁰ The concept of *The people shall govern* is a well-known feature in every-day politics which was firstly adopted at the Congress of the People in Kliptown (Cape Town) on 26 June 1955 in the Freedom Charter. This charter has been the political programme of the anti-apartheid movement and post-apartheid political party of the ANC.

¹¹ Notice for members of the ward committee for Ward 82 of the city of Cape Town (2005), *Rules for the establishment and operation of ward committees in the metropolitan area for the city of Cape Town*.

In Cape Town the ward committee system only existed as a forum established from November 2004 until 2006 when the city council was governed by the ANC. Since the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party won the election for local government in 2006 no new ward committee system has been established. The DA opposes the ward committee system as an ineffective forum and “a waste of money”. In this instance it is worth noting that city councils are legally not obliged to institute this participatory system. This has led to the unusual situation in the newly DA governed Cape Town that no ward committees exist anymore. The move has sparked a public controversy. On the one hand the ward committee system’s advocates criticise the fact that the DA mayor has not introduced any alternatives to enhance decentralisation through public participation structures. On the other hand the DA argues that the institution of the ward committee was incompatible with the multicultural diversity in Cape Town: “*if you have mosques, churches, synagogues, who will be the religious representative on the committee? Every area has quite a mixture of people in it*” (DA politician quoted in an article written by Essop in Cape Times, 11th September 2006, pp.4).

The representative structure of the ward committee was supposed to be an advisory body helping the councillors and the council through subcouncils to manage service delivery and development (executive committees). The subcouncil includes all ward councillors of an area for which they elect its chairperson. The subcouncil manager is responsible for organising monthly meetings where the councillors discuss community issues. Citizens are allowed to attend but not to participate. Consequently the ward committees were considered as forming a bridge by their facilitating of proper communication between council, subcouncil and citizens. Former ward committee members have described their task to me as acting as a mouthpiece for local communities. The committees were meant to influence Integrated Development Planning (IDP)¹², municipal budgeting and municipal performance management processes¹³. In this instance the Municipal System Act specifies its understanding of community participation by saying that a municipality should establish appropriate mechanisms, processes and procedures to enable the communities to participate in the affairs of the

¹²The IDP intends to be a process through which municipalities prepare a strategic-development plan for a five-year period. “*Discussions between councillors, officials, ward committees and communities should ensure that realistic expectations are agreed on and that these expectations are met.*” (SALGA and GTZ South Africa (2006): *Handbook for Municipal Councillors*, pp.63).

¹³ *Having your Say. A Handbook for Ward Committees* (2005), Department of Provincial and Local Government, Republic of South Africa and GTZ (eds.).

municipality, and should therefore provide for public meetings and hearings held by the municipal council and other political structures.

The city council is accountable for keeping the sources of revenue and expenditures of the city budget transparent to the citizens. The city budget is more or less financed through rates and taxes, service charges and inter-governmental transfers and grants. Municipal budget hearings were considered as offering ward committees participation. Ward committees were supposed to organise budget hearings within their respective communities and give specific feedback to the council on ward submissions. In theory citizens therefore should have been empowered to influence what the budget should be spent on, for instance through identifying and initiating (development) projects which ameliorate the problems of people in the ward through this participatory institutional set up.

4. Activism at the Interface with Local Government

In the following I will discuss the negotiation between communal politicians and NGO activists within the former ward committee system. Through archive studies of the minutes of former ward committees I was able to identify its former members living within three coloured and two black African townships, including my research areas of Landfield and Fairlady. At the same time a CGA research team did research on local government and democracy. We decided to organise focus group discussions with the former members so identified about the former participatory system of ward committees.

The CGA's research team looked at legislation relating to decentralisation first and from this perspective they argued that it is legally mandated that municipalities support local communities in their participation in municipal affairs. Hence, ward councillors and officials are seen as important in fostering public participation and integrating their communities into decision making processes (Municipal System Act (2000), Section 17¹⁴). According to CGA the goal of the ward committee system to "empower" historically disadvantaged communities, women etc., for instance through influencing the city's budgetary planning had largely failed. CGA argued that it was mainly male councillors who controlled the ward committees and budget alleviation and thus concluded that the committee meetings ended up as useless "talk shops".

The result of the focus group discussions however turned out to be completely different. Former members of Landfield had had different experiences of working within the

¹⁴ See also South African Local Government Association and German Technical Co-operation (2006), *Councillor Induction Programme, Handbook for Municipal Councillors*.

committees than the members of Fairlady. What all sector representatives and ward councillors of Fairlady had in common though, was, that they were aligned with the ruling party ANC with the exception of the DA ward councillors in Landfield. The latter chaired the committees occupied by sector representatives who were well known ANC members. This reflects the legal requirement that the sector members ought to have a background of community work. In the case of Landfield this legal requirement is fulfilled only by people who work in NGOs and community based organisations mainly financed by the department of social services. Thus, these organisations are linked to the ANC government and the same interrelations are true of the community based organisations and NGOs in Landfield. The community activists had been engaged in the struggle against the apartheid state as part of the liberation movement and at the time politically allied to the ANC. In the special election of the ward committees, in Landfield these community activists were nominated by members of their respective communities to represent the different “sectors” of religion, sports, health, youth, women etc.. Nonetheless in this area the NGO sector dominated by the ANC is comparatively weak considering the number of citizens who voted for the opposition parties in the local and national elections. DA councillors expected sector representatives to be elected who were allied with the DA. In my interviews the DA councillors accused the former ANC governed city council of election fraud and complained about the lack of transparency in the election procedure to choose their committee members. In turn the sector representatives criticised the tense lines of communication with their DA councillors who boycotted the committees. This meant that because of the absence of a ward councillor as chairperson they seldom had a quorum to hold the meetings. The quorum was necessary to take decisions on issues or proposals to be forwarded to subcouncil and council etc.. Moreover the members complained that they were not provided with any further training. They assumed that the official i.e. the subcouncil manager was aligned with the opposition and therefore opposed to the committee system. Among other duties the manager was supposed to prepare the agendas two weeks in advance of the monthly meetings in co-operation with the committee members. Because of his alleged party preference, the former sector members accused him of not making resources and information (phone, printer, fax etc) accessible. For instance they explained that because of their poverty they often could not afford transport to subcouncil or even just a phone call in order to put their items on the agenda. In this instance they were not supported by the subcouncil manager at all who could have made an effort to keep in touch with them.

In comparison to Landfield the committees in the Black African dominated township Fairlady were characterized by members who stressed their commitment to making the system work. According to them the organisation and preparation of their meetings was functioning well. The sector members and their subcouncil manager put the items on the agenda on time e.g. issues concerning development such as the repair of potholes, the installation of street lights, road up-grading, youth development etc.. They reported that they always had a quorum in their meetings and were able to take issues to higher levels of council. Communication lines between councillors, sector representatives and officials were described as efficient and co-operative - in stark contrast with the situation in Landfield.

The committees' sector representatives of both areas however complained of the lack of remuneration for their work because it was understood to be on a voluntary basis. They also concurred that as sector representatives they had no "real" power to influence decision making processes.

As we have seen there is a stark contrast in both depictions of the party political understanding and acceptance of the committee system itself which in Fairlady is homogenously linked to the ANC. This will become further evident in the case of a DA ward councillor of Landsfield. He viewed the committee system and moreover NGOs and community based organisations as deeply embedded in the history of racist differentiation and ethnic boundary drawing:

"[...] as a ward councillor I was excluded from that whole election process of the ward committees. The council's speaker's office controlled it with the then subcouncil manager and the election was held without any consultation, I was just told 'that is your ward committee, this is the people that you have to work with' and that's it...[laughs]} all the ward committees in the Landsfield area were ANC dominated[...]The NGOs, civil body structures and ward committees as well, are all co-opted by the ruling government because they basically control, they control all these organisations. Across the Western Cape and across this country, you will find that civil society bodies are closely linked with the government, to the ruling party. That's why SANCO and all these civic bodies, that are all aligned to the ANC[...]and all of them are somehow linked to some kind of black empowerment, forming some consortium to get the government contracts[...]Black Africans perceive coloureds as lackies of the white man, bastards basically. And the whites see us the same way. But there is always this, ahm, this suspicion of each other.

They cannot trust each other, cannot trust each other. And then particular coloured people are extremely racist towards black people, because they aligned themselves more to the white persons than to the black persons[...]It's the way people live. Coloured people would perceive the way black people live is, how should I say it, just as an uncivilised type of way, I am honest, but that's basically what is happening. It's also that coloured people perceive themselves still to be superior to the black person. But it is also vice versa now, the blacks see themselves to be superior to the coloured person, because they are in government right now. Everything they do and say is supported by government and also because more recently the way the government brings across the whole racism thing, reverse racism. So you are going to have that suspicion, that basically people are trying to dominate each other [...].” (Interview with Mr. Beauty, DA ward councillor, Landfield 31.01.2006).

The interview sequence shows that the DA councillor interprets the ANC strategies as co-opting members of local government, NGOs and community based organisations. In turn the sector representatives felt sidelined by their councillors and officials whom they accused of propaganda and of a campaign against the ANC and the committees. The polarisation of political parties and state institutions, and the lack of confidence are paralleled by the lines of conflicted interaction between political actors of the ruling and oppositional parties. Thus these interaction processes resulted in their refusal to co-operate with or work efficiently together to the benefit of their communities. Instead they accused the other parties of exercising control over each other. Not only the interrelation between the different parties and officials was characterised by suspicions but also within the party political units, the membership lacked mutual confidence¹⁵. This demonstrates that according to the interviewee's perspective the ANC expects loyalty and to some extent even expects opportunistic behaviour from their members in relation to the ANC governed state and its departments.

In contrast to Fairlady the ward committee in Landfield was politicised. This took place through the interaction processes going on between members with different histories of political struggle, and memories of experienced inequalities and marginalisation. The DA ward councillors and their adherents perceived it as an initiative of the ANC-government, i.e. they portrayed the government as “racist” which is dominated by “black Africans”. While the

¹⁵for “democratisation, capture and confidence” in Nepal see Pfaff-Czarnecka 2008.

ANC allied NGOs in interaction with communal politicians of the opposition party tended to politicise this committee structure, the communal politicians proceeded in racialising it. In contrast to communal politicians I found during my fieldwork that it is rather NGO activists that embody the ideal of a rainbow nation. I observed that most NGO activists no matter in which organisations they are engaged in, including representatives of both types of NGOs introduced on page three, follow and foster a non racial approach in their work. Communal politicians reinforced racialised boundaries in order to consolidate their vote bank whereas NGO activists had no problem with co-operating across racial lines. Thus most representatives of NGOs and community based organisations in Landfield maintain that they belong with the coloured population but because of their affiliation to the ANC, they work closely together with black African political activists. In contrast to the cross boundary connections among political activists, the ordinary citizens and in particular the ward councillors of Landfield that I talked to, described Fairlady as a crime-ridden place where the ANC rules and a different language and culture separates the two communities. In turn, the residents of Fairlady saw Landsfield as a ‘developed’ area where housing is not a serious concern anymore which is why they claim that more development should take place in their own neighbourhood. Hence, people of both townships perceive each other as competitors when it comes to accessing socio-economic resources (housing programmes, employment etc). This rivalry also is made clear in the way councillors of the opposition parties in my interviews portrayed the ANC government’s policies as favouring black Africans to the detriment of coloureds.

Although I discussed these differences and commonalities between both areas with the NGO *Centre for Global Activism’s* research team they assigned less importance to politicised/racialised identities. This might uphold their belief in a rainbow nation maintaining multicultural diversity. This is revealed in their cross boundary activities with the various social groups all over the Cape Flats. The cross boundary activities among NGO activities can be understood in terms of the concept of blurring boundaries which aims to overcome racism as a principle of categorisation and social organisation (Wimmer 2008: pp.989). These NGO activists promote other non-racial principles such as equality in order to undermine the historically rooted legitimacy of racialised boundaries. In this instance it is also worth noting that CGA indeed does employ people identifying themselves with the various South African population groups of whites, coloureds and black Africans.

5. Same Interface: Contested Views of “Neoliberal-ism” & “Vulnerability”

The CGA’s main research emphasis focused on the limited influence of the ward committees on the ward budgetary allocation.

There are many issues and local discourses circulating around the city budget planning. The CGA team’s complaint is about the limited delegation of power from state levels to citizens. The CGA team overlooks the fact that establishing communal structures in South Africa took place in three phases from 1993 to 2005¹⁶. These structuring processes have also been shaped by the (newly elected) ward councillors who first had to gain specific knowledge and get acquainted with how the new municipal system works i.e. how to influence budget planning¹⁷. Whereas the CGA research team has a rather stereotyped vision of the ward councillors’ performances as being reluctant to support the communities’ interests, the analysis of the empirical findings suggests a more differentiated view of ward councillors’ style. This style has to do with governing their wards and managing ward committees, irrespective of political affiliation and ethnic identity. There are a) ward councillors who either are engaged in improving the conditions of their areas, approve the various knowledge systems of local government, exchange information with citizens and are interested in making ward committees work and b) ward councillors who are reluctant and ignorant in their understanding of how to represent their communities, not willing to get into the debates on governance and who boycott ward committees.

The CGA research team even assumed that there is a general disconnection between ward councillors, their communities and ward committees. This is seen as due to the “neo liberal approach” of the city council which does not address the basic needs of the people.

The CGA research team is of the opinion that legislation on development, participation and ward committees (South African Constitution, The White Paper on local government and the Municipal System and Structures Act) per se enforces neo liberalism and individualism instead of communal solidarity. According to CGA under neo liberalism local government has

¹⁶ The Local Government Transition Act 209 of 1993 identified three phases in local government restructuring. In the first phase negotiating forums were introduced to appoint temporary councils to take over responsibilities of local government. The next phase began with the first local government elections in 1995/1996. The third phase had to regulate local government through new legislation (Swift 2004, http://citymayors.com/government/sa_locgov.html).

¹⁷ The newly elected ward councillors had to participate in workshops on their work of representing and managing their communities provided by the city council of Cape Town. The educational material on which the workshop was based was conceptualised by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the GTZ (therefore see SALGA and the GTZ South Africa (2006) *Councillor Induction Programme. Handbook for Municipal Councillors*).

brought about many changes both within the workplace and in communities that were justified by legislation. CGA argues that the effects on local communities have been devastating; the City council is geared more to the privatisation of services such as water and electricity. They take the position that some of these services are now in the hands of private companies that do not take into consideration the needs of the people but are profit driven. Local government also prefers to employ outsourced workers than to hire permanent staff. In this regard another CGA staff showed me newspaper articles where officials of the city administration explained that “Municipal services need to be run like a business, with clear cost centres and management held accountable for performance” (Sunday Times 1998). Electricity and water are seen as “major services that residents buy from the council” (Cape Times 2000). GSCRS staff described this budget concept as a “punitive approach” in what has become known as cost recovery. So, in the end, CGA analysed the ward committee system as a neo liberal structure of an advisory body without decision-making power, subjected to the mainly male ward councillors who alone made the decisions.

In this instance CGA’s confirmed that even though the rights of women are guaranteed in the constitution and different local government legislation, women are still perceived by communal politicians as minor partners in development¹⁸. The focus group discussions showed that although ward committee members were mostly women, the chairpersons i.e. the ward councillors were predominantly men. The women were mainly representing the interest groups involved in health, religion, sports etc.. Additionally the law required a special women’s sector to be established. But the former members of the coloured township communities stated in the focus group discussions that either the women’s sector was not staffed or its representatives were not vocal enough to contribute substantially to policies or even to put women’s issues on the agenda¹⁹. The establishment of a women’s sector was in accordance with the gender agenda of the White Paper of Local Government i.e. that particularly women, as one of the “vulnerable groups”, need to be empowered:

”[...] Socio-economic development and community empowerment is mainly directed at poverty eradication. The majority of the poor are women, and empowerment strategies which focus on women are likely to prove the most effective and inclusive. Municipalities need to develop their capacity to

¹⁸ See Minutes of Focus Group Discussion Ward 51, 87, 89 (07.03.2007), Fairlady; Minutes of Focus Group Discussion Ward 81 (13.09.06), Landfield; Minutes of Focus Group Discussion Ward 82 (4.10.2006), Landfield; Memo on first Focus Group Discussion in Ward 81 (20.09.06)

¹⁹ Transcript of the Focus Group Discussion in Bonteheuwel (08.11.06); Transcript of the Focus Group Discussion Ward 81 (13.09.06)

understand the diverse needs of women in the community, and address these needs in planning and delivery processes to enhance their impact on poverty eradication[...]” (White Paper on Local Government (1998) Section B1).

In this regard CGA staff argued that “(women’s) empowerment is a catch phrase [...] It is used in many different contexts such as in the context of the ward committees. I will give my own understanding of the term. It has to do with people or communities having control over the decisions made in their lives.” It is worth noting that legislation established in developing countries within the framework of democratisation tends to construct women as a vulnerable group (see also Lachenmann 1999). The CGA research team is of the opinion that such regulations undermine the capability of women in South African society. According to CGA the “patriarchal” perspectives of local government legislation categorises women as weak, poor, marginalised, disadvantaged, powerless, in need, incapable etc. Therefore it undercuts female experience and local knowledge of poverty and how communities organise and manage themselves. Interestingly, men as a category are never mentioned in the local government legislation as sharing disadvantaged positions with women within society. The low status of the women’s sector in the coloured areas, which has been described in our focus group discussions, offers the best example of how law and regulations construct gender relations. The inherent gender order reflects female weakness and tacitly builds on male power which is re-produced and re-structured in the practical evidence of the ward committee system. Predominantly male ward councillors chair the meetings with female sector representatives²⁰. In contradiction to the former coloured committee members, the Black Africans described their women’s sector representatives as very outspoken and active. According to them the women were successful in getting food gardens funded by the council which the CGA team, however, saw as reflecting the traditional gendered division of labour.

CGA team hold the “neo liberal state” responsible for poverty, inequality and injustice – issues that are structurally entrenched in South African society. CGA had no concrete alternative to the ward committee system, on how participatory democracy should be realised or practical advice about how to survive in the job market. They blame the “neo liberal state” as being solely responsible for poverty, discrimination, racism, i.e. inequality etc. to further

²⁰ However, South Africa adopted the multimember district electoral system with party-list proportional representation. This system is considered to encourage party-list heterogeneity in ethnicity and world views as well as gender, thus also reducing the chance for political fragmentation and violence in post-apartheid South Africa (see Britton 2006). After the third election of local government in post-apartheid Cape Town in 2006, which went along with the abolition of the ward committee system, there have been more female ward councillors elected than ever before. Nonetheless in my research areas these politicians promote extremely conservative visions of gender relations rather than progressive feminism.

their own cause. It can be argued that this NGO is part of a social movement that is seeking for alternative forms of governance. It promotes important ideas and visions based on democratic principles of citizenship participation relying on social and human rights. Furthermore, following an understanding of a Western democracy model, the CGA's logic of action reflects one of a critical watchdog shaping and constituting a functioning public sphere or even "civil society".

The analysis so far broadly distinguished two types of NGOs active in Cape Town: on the one hand those which took on the functions of promoting alternative visions of citizenship participation, critical watchdogs and advocacy groups and, on the other hand, service providers allied with the ANC governed state. While organisations in the first category are largely independent of state funding, organisations of the latter category basically act as mechanisms of state extension, because for their work they depend on funding from the Department of Social Services. These two types of NGOs structure the so called intermediary sector or third sector which acts as a broker between state and society (see also Lachenmann 1997, 2005; Neubert 1997; Olivier de Sardan 2005). Even though both types of organisations are positioned as brokers between state and society, service providers allied with the ANC could be argued as providing state patronage down to the grassroots level, whereas critical NGOs take up issues arising at the local level and challenge the very notions of how the state works. However, in Cape Town the ongoing political struggles over development between opposition, ANC and NGOs critical of the state challenge South Africa's one party domination in which the majority of national, provincial and local governments are ANC driven. We can interpret the party competition as a stumbling block to decentralisation processes which are meant to enhance development through citizens' participation. Furthermore besides the prevalent opinion among South Africans that access to housing, jobs and a decent income are crucial for a well functioning democracy, the political activists' demand to participate in decision making processes of government bodies remains a challenge to politics in everyday life.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper reveals that, in South Africa, democratisation accompanies the diversification of political actors that are positioned differently within competing knowledge systems and relevant power structures. Concepts and lines of argumentation constituting the knowledge systems on the political agenda of decentralisation of different actors such as the state, local government and NGO have been explored. Yet, the different views presented in this paper

that challenge decentralisation as either a mechanism of a) enhancing development b) enforcing neo liberalism or c) controlling communities are to be analysed systematically in a next step. Therefore the advanced analysis should take the division between the ANC and the DA along party lines into consideration. This division mirrors geographical boundaries along racial lines manifest in the perceptions of the different actors. Racial markers are, moreover, consciously deployed, particularly by politicians, in order to mobilise local actors around a particular construction of political and social belonging. Henceforth the research on the dynamics of decentralising South Africa has to look further into how it relates to racialised modes and places of belonging.

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