Article

Scale and identity in post-apartheid Soweto

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Abstract
In this paper I argue that the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) provides an illustration of the repertoires and strategies of scale that communities and individuals adopt in making sense of the places they inhabit. Like many post-apartheid social movement organisations, the SECC contains both the everyday lived experiences of its members as well as broader social and political agendas. The organisation is constituted at the scale of the local neighbourhood branch on the one hand, and at the scale of the activists and academics that make up much of its leadership on the other hand. The leadership maintains a strong national and international profile; many branch-members of the SECC join because of shared local experience. While these two scales of the organisation are not necessarily contradictory, I argue that they are separately articulated and offer very different networks and political resources in contesting state policy electricity provision. I conclude that these competing claims of scale are not simply tools in a political game, but may in fact indicate more complex social and personal identifications with place.

Because segregation in the post-apartheid context is delineated not only by race, but also by class (...) race-class identities continue to be significant political, economic and social markers. Yet, their meanings and residents’ identities prove more complex. These identities are forged through experiences in the city (and elsewhere), through interaction with the state for resources, and through participation in social movements that conform to neighbourhood boundaries, but are also broader in scale. (Pieterse and Oldfield 2002:3)

Introduction: the politics of scale
Scale is the system of categorising and ordering relationships between socio-spatial configurations. A contemporary geographic literature argues variously that scale is socially and politically constructed and reflects
variously that scale is socially and politically constructed and reflects dominant relationships of power within society (Smith 1984, Herod 1997, Herod and Wright 2002, Conway 2005). In other words, the predominant way of understanding the relationship between socio-spatial configurations reflects the dominant systems of power within a space. For example, Gibson-Graham (2002) suggests that in contemporary society the global scale is often regarded as dynamic and progressive, against the local scale which is static and conservative. Contesting such assumptions is, for Gibson-Graham, a necessary project of critical geography. In fact, the local scale can be a source of empowerment for otherwise marginalised individuals and groups (Cox 2002, Gibson-Graham 2002, Swyngedouw 2004).

Scalar orders (eg dynamic global versus static local) are often deep-seated, yet they also change in response to shifts in the power dynamics within society. New social and geographical scales rise to prominence, and others are transformed in response to changing social and political conditions. As scalar orders shift and settle, so actors within the order respond; scale itself becomes an arena for political and social struggle (Gibson-Graham 2002, Swyngedouw 2004). Different scalar orders, and the ability to claim the legitimacy of viewing the world according to a particular scalar order, offer resources to some social groups that may be denied to others. How actors in society articulate these scalar narratives, how they make claims of legitimacy based on a particular scalar order, and the resources that different scales make available to actors in contestations over social and political power, are questions that are considered in the following discussion about access to basic services in post-apartheid Soweto.

The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) is a social movement that has emerged in Soweto to protest poor access to basic services. In this article I argue that the SECC has attempted to assert (and legitimate) a counter-narrative of scale within which alternative configurations of power are proposed. Of course, groups and individuals move between scales of socio-political engagement in order to leverage resources made available at different scales; the leadership of the SECC has been very successful in claiming different scales as a specific strategy. Yet the assertion of (and movement between) scales by groups and individuals within the SECC does not always imply an exploitation of political opportunities available; individuals have everyday lives that do not sit neatly within one or other scalar order, nor indeed one or other political identity.
Scale and municipal governance in Johannesburg

Inequality in Johannesburg was manifest in the spatial logic of the apartheid city. The apartheid state favoured a policy of small-scale municipal structures partly to minimise the relative political power of a city that was the economic centre for the country (Mabin 2005). In the post-apartheid context there has been a process to rescale urban governance to include poor and wealthy communities into a single municipal structure (Beall et al 2002). The precedent for this was the urban-based anti-apartheid protests of the 1980s. The slogan of ‘one city, one tax base’ became a popular call during these protest campaigns, specifically targeting the municipal system that maintained privilege in white areas while maintaining poor conditions and ineffective service delivery in black areas (Chipkin 1997).

The process of negotiating an inclusive municipal system for Johannesburg was not unproblematic. Many white residents resisted the incorporation of former white and black municipalities, fearing both political marginality and economic redistribution (Beavon 2004). Moreover, many civic movements from the townships had a tradition of direct democracy and were inherently sceptical of centralising municipal governance (Tomlinson 1999). The ANC favoured fewer and more inclusive municipal structures, but with the reality of the assumption of national power there were concerns about the relative political power of a city posing a possible challenge to national power (Beall et al 2002). The new ANC-led provincial cabinet accepted a proposal for four transitional municipal structures, which became operational in 1995 (Tomlinson et al 2003). The apparent side-lining of local consensus and the participatory tradition of the civics (and indeed the concerns of conservative white residents) suggests perhaps the contours of the scalar politics in post-apartheid Johannesburg – the need for a redistributive municipality on the one hand, and meaningful participation on the other. At the heart of this disparity, Robinson (1997) argues, are competing discourses of what it means to be part of the city.

The post-apartheid scalar order of municipal governance in Johannesburg represented a tension between the need for a municipality with a broad redistributive agenda on the one hand, and the demand for meaningful local participation on the other. Policy around municipal governance has been dominated by service delivery rather than participation. This is expressed in the Local Government White Paper (SA Government 1998), the municipal Integrated Development Programs (IDPs) and government programs such as Project Consolidate, all of which make overtures towards participation but
are biased towards delivery. There are varying opinions on the effectiveness of such programs. Patrick Bond (2002) argues, for example, that the conceptualisation of Developmental Local Government, as outlined in the Local Government White Paper entrenches the logic of the apartheid city and effectively depoliticises local government by focusing on delivery rather than deliberation. Oldfield (2002:12) argues rather that ‘the particular spatial configuration of the post-apartheid city and the spatial and place-based constructions of race and class shape state restructuring and urban transformation, at times facilitating the state’s strategies and projects and, at other times, obstructing these processes’. Oldfield recognises a dynamic interaction between policy formulation and implementation and participative processes.

That policy formulation and implementation is a dynamic response to (changing) socio-spatial configurations does not however mean that the politics of municipal governance is participatory (at least in any meaningful way). Individuals and groups find strategies that respond to and challenge policy and implementation, whether through recognised mechanisms of participation or not. One such response is the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), one of a number of recent community-based organisations broadly defined as social movements (Ballard et al 2006). The SECC emerged in response to electricity disconnections by Eskom (the state-owned electricity utility) in the late 1990s. After a period of local governance characterised by the redistributive ethos of the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), movements such as the SECC emerged within the context of a perceived neo-liberal turn in municipal governance in the late 1990s. In Johannesburg this was manifested in iGoli 2002, a policy package premised on fiscal austerity and ‘ring-fencing’.1 This package was partly a response to the revelation in 1997 that the four transitional municipalities were in ‘fiscal crisis’ as a result of: (a) the cost of providing services to previously underserviced areas; and (b) non-payment of service fees and rates, cynically blamed on a tradition of rent boycotts among black residents during the 1980s (Tomlinson 2005). Although there existed a political ideal of free basic services, in reality many residents in Soweto (and other areas of the city) could not afford to pay for rates and services (Fiil-Flynn 2001). Beall et al (2002) have suggested that the ‘fiscal crisis’ was in fact exaggerated to justify the implementation of a broadly neo-liberal strategy.
**Scale as political resource: the case of the SECC**

The SECC emerged initially as a response to a specific process of electricity disconnections, although the current organisational arrangement of the movement is the result of a convergence of two processes, both connected to the implementation of *iGoli 2002* in Johannesburg. First, in 1999 several spontaneous protests occurred in Soweto directed against electricity disconnections that were being carried out by Eskom in individual neighbourhoods. These protests were initially localised and uncoordinated, but in September 1999 a group of activists convened a series of public workshops to discuss what they called the ‘electricity crisis’ in Soweto. Although a response to direct community experiences, organisers of the workshops presented the disconnections as a result of *iGoli 2002*: ‘the socially unacceptable (…) comprehensive privatisation plan for the city’ (interview with Trevor Ngwane, December 18, 2004). Thus from its inception the SECC encompassed both a particular community concern and a general socio-political critique. This can be seen in the membership profile of the organisation, which includes concerned community members as well as men and women who claim an explicit activist identity.²

Second, the emergence of the SECC in Soweto coincided with broader public debates among South African activists and academics about what was termed by some the ‘neo-liberal’ policy package of *iGoli 2002* and the promotion of a model of municipal governance based on cost recovery (Bond 2002). In June 2000, and coinciding with the Urban Futures conference hosted by Wits University, a series of protests were organised in the inner city of Johannesburg. At these protests the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) emerged as a political home for a group of emerging social movements and organisations across the city which were responding variously to service delivery cut-offs, evictions and perceived urban marginalisation across Gauteng province. The SECC became ‘one of the most active members of the APF’ (Interview with Trevor Ngwane, December 18, 2004). The SECC leadership is increasingly closely linked with the APF, and organisationally membership of the SECC also means automatic membership of the APF. SECC T-shirts have APF slogans on the back, and at marches and rallies in the inner-city both the APF and the SECC are represented.

The SECC is constituted at (and at different times articulates) a number of different geographic scales. The focus here is on the neighbourhood branches and the township although the SECC leadership also maintains a national and international profile. Each of these scales contains a different
configuration of SECC members and offers access to a unique set of social and political resources. However, none are ever neatly constituted. In terms of the SECC constitution the organisation is controlled through the branch structures organised at the neighbourhood scale. At an annual general meeting office-bearers are chosen from among branch representatives. Yet the leadership also includes a range of organisers and volunteer activists who are not elected in this way but who nevertheless play an important role in coordinating workshops and meetings in Soweto, and occasional protest action in downtown Johannesburg.

Increasingly associated with the APF (most protest action in downtown Johannesburg is jointly coordinated with the APF) the leadership of the SECC has cultivated a public profile in Johannesburg and even internationally of coordinated defiance against municipal and national service-delivery policies. For example, the SECC sent representatives to the World Social Forum in 2007 and appeared in a documentary about the international anti-globalisation movement in 2004. Yet the daily life of most SECC members is constituted within the neighbourhoods of Soweto; the SECC remains primarily a loose movement of Soweto residents mobilised around local experiences of service disconnections.

**Soweto**

The identity of the SECC is most strongly affirmed through the affirmation of Soweto. Soweto is in many regards a non-existent place; it no longer conforms to any municipal designation, and its neighbourhoods fall within municipal administrative regions that also include areas outside of Soweto. Yet it does exist in popular culture and in the collective identities of many people who live in the former township. Soweto is a place defined primarily in relation to Johannesburg; it is outside of and separate from the city. The SECC has managed to invert this assumption, defining Johannesburg as the outside:

> Johannesburg is a different place. It is where the municipal offices are located. It is where [Mayor] Masondo is. It requires transport money to reach, which is not a reality for most people here. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004a)

This ‘othering’ of Johannesburg reflects the realities of daily life in Soweto; transport to Johannesburg is difficult and costly for many Soweto residents. Yet it also affirms this daily reality as a shared experience. Although not unique to Soweto, the SECC leadership has managed to create a link between
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experiences of electricity disconnections shared by many people living in Soweto, and the idea of a shared Soweto identity. Within the SECC this Soweto identity is particularly powerful when it is taken outside of Soweto. Marches and demonstrations in Johannesburg’s inner-city have been presented as pilgrimages to bring back the prodigal son of Soweto:

We all took a kombi to the mayor’s house in Kensington and cut off his supply, to remind him that he had to give us free water and electricity (...) we know him personally because, though he lives in the suburbs now, he comes from Moletsane [in Soweto]. In fact he left his mother there. Our movement has many pensioners so this is a humiliation for him. (Ngwane 2003:48)

Soweto as a place is constructed from the outside through its relationship to the city of Johannesburg. Yet the place that is Soweto is at the same time constructed, and given meaning, from within. For example, pensioners make up a significant portion of the SECC membership, and these pensioners are central characters in the scalar narrative of Soweto:

In Orlando, Phiri and Chiawelo electricity is important because life is hard without it. Soweto was a dark city before 1994. The promises made by the mayor for affordable services for all are forgotten (...) the grannies of Soweto have a right to affordable basic services. (Anonymous interview April 8, 2004)

Of course, the meaning and identity associated with Soweto is never singular. Soweto means different things to different groups and individuals, and the SECC does not have control over all these individual narratives. Moreover, it is not altogether clear how pervasive the particular identity that the SECC attempts to construct is across Soweto; the official membership of the organisation is a few thousand across an area of several hundred thousand residents. Yet there are common experiences and situations that at certain moments provide a coherence and unity of place in Soweto and which the SECC has actively attempted to highlight:

The suffering that I have is not just me (...) many people in Soweto are afraid to stand up and say we are like this. But when you go to SECC they open up peoples eyes. (Anonymous interview April 8, 2004)

In this regard the SECC has managed to mobilise support around these common everyday experiences. The SECC has recognised that in order to offer any kind of solution to the so-called ‘electricity crises’ in Soweto, residents need to have a feeling of commonality and of shared experiences. In order to speak to the experiences of marginality and feelings of injustice
that many people in Soweto have, the SECC actively constructs a narrative that situates these experiences at its centre. This narrative includes the struggle of the 1980s, the ‘broken promises’ of the 1990s and the fact that Soweto has been overlooked. Yet the leadership of the SECC also acknowledges that communities across Soweto are not the same, and that it requires effort to make people aware of their common experiences. For the most part, it is locally that people share experiences.

**SECC branches**

The official membership of the SECC is a few thousand (anonymous interview April 1, 2004a). However these figures do not define the support that the SECC enjoys. Within the 30 branches across Soweto many concerned residents become variously more or less involved, so that at any one time the number of people who call themselves SECC members is unclear. This suggests something of the relationship between branch membership and broader identification with the organisation. A key example was a series of protest actions in 2004 in the Phiri branch in response to the installation of pre-paid water meters in the neighbourhood. For the SECC leadership the protest action in Phiri was a symbolic battle for two reasons: firstly, it marked the potential of the organisation to move from a focus on electricity disconnections and to become a social movement challenging a broad range of urban issues; and, secondly, it was a pilot-site for the installation of pre-paid water meters, which needed to be challenged while still localised:

> The project [of pre-paid meters] started at Phiri last year. It is because we of the SECC started in Phiri (...) maybe they want to crush the movement. (Anonymous interview April 1, 2004a)

Yet outside of the Phiri branch few other SECC members were directly involved in supporting the Phiri protests. Commenting on a march in 2004 in Phiri, one of the volunteers at the SECC head office explained:

> It is kind of lacking from the other branches but some individuals they come. But I was there, and people from Dlamini, and some other branches. But we encourage branches to support other branches, so that what we do must have an impact. That’s why we say to our branches, ‘support other branches with our campaigns on the ground’. We encourage that. (April 1, 2004b)

Despite such encouragement there remains little interaction between branches. The nature of everyday life in Soweto is partly responsible for this; communication and transport are costly for most members of the SECC.
it also suggests possible limits to branch members’ identification with the SECC beyond their own neighbourhood. Where communication does exist between branches it usually hinges on either physical proximity of branches or personal relationships that already exist.

The branches are relatively autonomous structures, some no more than loose affiliates with the SECC, others consisting of up to 50 or 60 card-carrying SECC members. The difference between the branches attests to the local scale and grassroots nature of the organisation:

So it also depends on the people in those areas. It is a tough challenge to us as an organization, to make sure that we sustain our branches. You know, I’ll just give an example. You know Orlando West is coming, slowly, slowly, slowly. It depends on what kind of people do you get, that are willing to make sure that they build those branches. Sometimes there are internal problems. You know, they fight for positions, after the meeting they collect the money to make sure they sustain the branch. So they fight for that. Also I think SECC is a movement. We leave our branches to do their thing independently. So that’s why now we have a program so that everyone must be more strong. (Anonymous interview May 1, 2004)

In a context where there are few support structures for poor households, and where aspirations are frustrated, the branches of the SECC offer a structure of support to local communities. Branch meetings offer a space where experiences are shared, and are as important in mobilising the organisation as they are in affirming the members of the community.

There was no community meetings, community structure, there was nothing at all. The people, if there was something, maybe there was going to be a stoppage of water, the local councillor used to distribute pamphlets to selected houses, not all. Then is when other members of our community tried to form a street community, they said, no, ANC created a street community, other people can’t form a street community. We must just leave it as it is. So there were no community meetings, no nothing, until SECC come along. (Anonymous interview April 1, 2004b)

Before the SECC there were some people who tell you to cry to them. But it’s the same people (…) they want to make you cool. ‘Be cool, everything will be fine’. They cool you down. But until when (…) they don’t want people to be wild. Last year I had no power. I went to SANCO to tell my views, but I left in darkness. The SECC asked if I wanted to volunteer. I said yes, to help people. (Anonymous interview April 5, 2004)
The branch meetings serve an important function and are an important part of branch cohesion. In the Chiawelo branch SECC branch meetings are held in a local church after service on Saturdays. Many members of the SECC in Chiawelo, as in other branches, are regular churchgoers:

Most mornings I go to church. If I don’t I feel something. After church I can meet my friend, go to the meeting (...) SECC is physical; church is spiritual. In prayer, they say pray and God will help those who do practical things in hand. (Anonymous interview April 5, 2004)

The majority of SECC members construct their daily lives at the scale of the local branches. It is the experiences of these members that form the basis for the existence of the SECC. The political and legal resources that exist at the scale of the leadership are fundamental for the survival, and also the collective identity, of the SECC. While the everyday experiences at the scale of the local branches cannot be simply ‘scaled up’ as if they represent a microcosm of the struggle against electricity cut-offs, it would be wrong to assume that the branch members only find empowerment through affirming the very local scale. Matters of everyday life are what lend credibility to the branch structures in many instances, yet the affirmation of neighbourhood identity may also be about undermining the broader Soweto-wide legitimacy of the SECC leadership. For example, increasingly the APF features prominently in the ability of branches to organise for marches:

Basically what we do is we announce at our Forum that we intend to march, for reasons one, two, three, and if they are interested (...) we get our mandate from the people, we don’t tell them what to do. We get our mandate from the people. So if they say it is a good move, then we do it. We organize transport for the people. Mostly APF helps us with providing transport. That is a costly exercise. We help as branches as well, like hiring a taxi. (Anonymous interview April 4, 2004)

The prominence of the APF was illustrated in 2005 when several branches walked out of the SECC AGM, citing concern with the ‘centralizing tendencies of certain members in leadership’ (anonymous interview April 25, 2005). The group that walked out of the SECC have been keen to remain within the APF:

We have spoken to them and we have sent a letter to [APF chairperson John] Appolis. We are only waiting for him to recognise us. They have said that they cannot do this now (...) but they must because we are here. People are going away from SECC. (Anonymous interview April 25, 2005)
The APF themselves have been ambivalent about embracing this new group. Some in the APF have encouraged the group to reach a compromise with the SECC while others have opted for a more open policy regarding affiliation with the APF. This is suggestive once more of the tension between branches and leadership. The branches need institutional recognition, while the APF, in association with the leadership of the SECC, relies on its member organisations to provide the numbers at marches and protests, numbers which give credence to its claim to represent the people.

**A competing scalar order: Johannesburg Metro and local wards**

It has already been suggested that different scalar orders offer access to social and political resources that may not be available at others. As argued above, the SECC leadership has constructed a scalar narrative which places Soweto at the centre of lived experiences of electricity disconnections. At the same time, for many SECC members the branch structure organised within local neighbourhoods provides the primary source of shared experiences. This section suggests that while affirming a particular scalar order may provide access to certain resources, denying or de-legitimising other scalar orders may be equally important as a political strategy. Although the SECC is primarily directed against the policies of the Johannesburg Metro, the organisation does not affirm the Metropolitan scale; it does not make a claim to be a Johannesburg-based social movement, nor does it claim legitimacy by virtue of its commitment to a specifically city-wide set of policy revisions.

Opinion within the SECC is divided over whether or not to contest local government elections. In 2006 members of the SECC contested the local government elections and won one proportional representation seat in the Johannesburg Metro Council. But the decision to contest the election was not unanimous, and the candidates ran as independents (and not as SECC candidates). Nevertheless, the leadership of the SECC claims to be the official opposition in Soweto (Ngwane 2003). The exact number of SECC supporters is never clear and support fluctuates between several hundred card-carrying members according to various protest actions and varying definitions of membership, and several thousand active members (anonymous interview April 14, 2004b; Ngwane 2003). The SECC has more than 30 branches across Soweto which confront the local state on electricity cut-offs.

Most of them before they were supporting ANC, now many of them
they support SECC. Because there were summonses which were sent to them by a Joburg Mayor to come and sign for what-what (...) so SECC told them: ‘if you go and sign there, you are going to be evicted from your house. So you don’t go there, you just come and we are going to burn the summonses’. The SECC they don’t speak English to the old ladies because most of them they didn’t go to school, but if you explain everything in their language, they are going to understand. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004b)

The local state necessarily affirms and reiterates a scalar order that includes electoral ward areas, municipal administrative regions and the Johannesburg Metro. Soweto does not formally exist within such a scalar order. Parts of Soweto fall within two different municipal administrative regions, while the ward boundaries conform neither to imagined neighbourhood communities nor to broader township boundaries. This scalar order is perhaps understandable given the history of fragmented municipal governance in Johannesburg – the Johannesburg Metro claims legitimacy as an inclusive city beyond apparently conservative ‘community politics’. Yet in the specific case of the ‘electricity crisis’ in Soweto, this has also provided local and national government with an opportunity to de-legitimise the SECC.

In 2000 the SECC leadership announced the launch of ‘Operation Khanyisa’ (Switch on the Lights), a campaign of illegally reconnecting electricity to households that had been disconnected. This escalated the ‘electricity crisis’ in Soweto to a national stage because in fact the provider of electricity for most suburbs in Soweto is the state utility Eskom, and not the municipal utility City Power which provides electricity to most of the rest of Johannesburg. The SECC leadership for its part attempted to portray Operation Khanyisa as a coordinated political campaign to force government to reconsider policy:

We turned what was a criminal deed from the point of view of Eskom, into an act of defiance. (Ngwane 2003:25)

This reference to the defiance politics of the 1980s is an attempt to wrest legitimacy from the government. The National Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe became involved, condemning what he called a criminal element within the SECC:

The residents of Soweto have legitimate grievances against estimated bills and service delivery standards. They have a right to organise themselves and call for a redress of these grievances. Our collective failure to respond has allowed an opportunistic element to ‘hijack’ the
situation for its political and criminal agenda (...) the so-called Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, through its Operation Khanyisa, has become part of this criminal culture. (Radebe 2001)

In May the following year Eskom convened a meeting in Soweto where they agreed to scrap R1.4 billion of the debt owed by Soweto residents on the understanding that pre-paid meters would be installed. The SECC was excluded from the meeting. Despite their exclusion the SECC leadership regarded the involvement of national government in the electricity crisis in Soweto as a sign, firstly, as an outside intrusion, but, secondly, of their own power:

Jeff Radebe came to Orlando. At that time we were very vocal on the ground. We put so much pressure on Eskom that they said they were going to scrap those arrears. This would not have been possible if SECC did not put pressure. Now apparently, government didn’t take kindly to that. They sent Jeff Radebe from parliament to come and address the meeting in Orlando East where we were protesting (...) so we had to wait outside. Basically what he was preaching was that we were a bunch of criminals who should be arrested on sight; that we wanted to destabilize the government; that we were encouraging the culture of non-payment. This was not correct. We were merely telling people their rights. Making them aware of what was happening. When he came out of there we picketed outside. He was supposed to go visiting houses but when he saw we were picketing he got to his car and then he decided to change directions. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004b)

In response to the intrusion of the national government the SECC reverted to a defence of the neighbourhood ‘community’ scale. The leadership of the SECC attacked President Mbeki’s call for unemployed youth to become volunteers in their communities, particularly to become police reservists, claiming that their members had long been community volunteers:

The difference between Mbeki’s volunteers and the SECC volunteers is that if you volunteer for the SECC you are serving the working class community. Mbeki asks you to volunteer but he and his ministers get fat salaries each month. Tomorrow Mbeki’s volunteers will be sent to attack the community, they will arrest you if you reconnect electricity for your grannies, and they will escort the sheriff when he comes to evict you from your houses. (SECC AGM Chairpersons Report, March 3, 2004)

Yet despite this instance of national government involvement, the SECC engages most frequently with the state at a much more local scale, ie with
the ward councillors. The relationship is almost exclusively antagonistic. In Phiri, for example, Ward Councillor Kunene is antagonistic towards the SECC because, according to local SECC branch members, the councillor is threatened:

So the councillor is threatened by the SECC. Yeah, they don’t talk to us. He says we are a pig, so he can’t talk to the pig. So! They [local ANC members] are under pressure of the local councillor, Patrick Kunene. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004a)

So anyway, he doesn’t want me to go near to the office. So even if I go they say no. I say I’m coming to pay rent, they say no. You don’t want to let me in so I can’t give you money anymore. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004c)

This local scale conflict is perhaps exacerbated and personalised because of the limited resources that are available within a local community. The Ward Councillor, through his position within a scalar order that gives him access to, and control over certain local resources, maintains tight control over these resources. According to members of the Phiri branch of the SECC the councillor has prevented them from meeting in certain venues:

We distribute pamphlets, then we tell them we are going to meet at Phiri hall. Then we address the community. Then even themselves they state their views. ‘No! We don’t want this and this, this and that! Let’s get the delegates who are going to represent us to the council!’ When they go to council, council say ‘No! We can’t talk to you people (...) not you members of SECC’. Now we are not allowed to meet at Phiri Hall. That is why we are meeting at SGB. [Councillor] Kunene dictates the terms. (Anonymous interview April 4, 2004)

Ward Councillors have limited capacity to decide on Metro-wide water and electricity policy, yet have often borne the brunt, especially from the SECC, for the implementation of such policies:

Councillors they target pensioners. Most pensioners they join SECC, because SECC they fight for them. Today many of them are happy. They are relaxed now. But during 2000 they were not relaxed. It was bad. (Anonymous interview April 14, 2004a)

The ANC took the grannies to town to give them food parcels so that they agree in everything that they said to them. On Wednesday [councillor] Kunene said the police will come and people will put pre-paid, like it or not. Kunene is still a child (...) the councillor is fighting for his pocket. (Anonymous interview, April 14, 2004c)
Councillors themselves are in an awkward position. They are often unable to prevent the implementation of policies from Metro. Some ward councillors express sympathy for the SECC, but feel unable adequately to respond (anonymous interview February 11, 2007). The SECC are less sympathetic:

We don’t encourage linking with the councillors simply because they have turned their back on the people who voted for them in Soweto. Some of them are no longer living around Soweto; they are in the suburbs. We find it very difficult, a person who calls himself a leader leaving his people, going to stay in a house in Kensington. Like our mayor, Masondo. People around this area were not impressed that he was a mayor for this area and he is staying there. The same with councillors; the only time they know us is if election time is near. Then they come and call us comrades this, comrades that. We don’t encourage any relationship with such people. (Anonymous interview May 1, 2004)

In the context of local neighbourhood antagonism between ward councillors and the SECC, the SECC appear more flexible in claiming the scales of both township and neighbourhood communities. Ward councillors, while part of a scalar order that empowers the metropolitan-scale policy makers, are in the awkward position of sitting within neither the neighbourhood, the township nor the metropolitan scale; the electoral ward is in the end a scale without a compelling scalar narrative.

**Conclusion: a complex scalar order of the everyday**

Certainty comes from the means to describe oneself (...) in a way that is shared by the group and unavailable to outsiders. (Revill 1993:119)

In this article I have suggested that the SECC as a movement exists in the tension between the everyday lived experiences of electricity cut-offs, and an activist academic critique of these experiences as a product of privatisation and cost recovery policies. Within the leadership of the SECC claims are made about the representation of Soweto residents. In the light of perceived failures at local government, the SECC argues that the ward committees can no longer claim to represent the people of Soweto. At the same time the municipal government claims that the SECC has no mandate, since it is not an elected group. Neither the municipal government nor the SECC are coherent and homogeneous organisations, however, and both exist at a number of scales.

I have argued that the SECC is constituted primarily at the scale of the neighbourhood branches, although in contesting service-delivery policies
the township is most successfully invoked as a shared identity. The SECC leadership also maintains a strong national and international profile, partly because these networks offer access to resources; this broader solidarity is a powerful social resource (if not always a usable political resource). The case of the SECC illustrates the repertoires and strategies that communities and individuals adopt in making sense of the spaces in which they live. The Metro council makes many policy decisions that impact the lives of Soweto residents, yet there are few means that these people have to influence these policies. The ward seems often an empty and frustrating scale of community engagement, and communities have responded in a number of ways, sometimes retreating to the branches as a support structure, at other times embracing Soweto as a legitimate scale and space.

Notes
1. Municipal utilities such as water, electricity and refuse-removal were made into self-sufficient companies wholly owned by the city, and responsible for cost-recovery for services provided.
2. This claim is based on extensive interviews with SECC members and leadership between 2004 and 2006.

References


**Interviews conducted by the author**

Interview with Trevor Ngwane December 18, 2004
Anonymous interview April 1, 2004a
Anonymous interview April 1, 2004b
Anonymous interview April 4, 2004
Anonymous interview April 5, 2004
Anonymous interview April 8, 2004
Anonymous interview April 14, 2004a
Anonymous interview April 14, 2004b
Anonymous interview April 14, 2004c
Anonymous interview May 1, 2004
Anonymous interview April 25, 2005
Anonymous interview February 11, 2007