

Reflection

The changing faces of urban civic organisation

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The article and the context

Looking back from the 2000s at urban politics in South Africa in previous decades, observers are struck by both the continuities and the changes. On the one hand, as Doreen Atkinson has written, ‘for a “Rip van Winkel” who had fallen asleep in 1988 and awoken in 2005, it might appear as if the “rolling mass action” of the end-of-apartheid period had simply continued into the dawn of democratic government in South Africa’ (Atkinson 2007: 53). On the other hand, the political landscape has changed completely, with the construction of democratically-elected, non-racial local government, with ensuing and dramatic changes in public policy.

My article on ‘SANCO: strategic dilemmas in a democratic South Africa’, published in *Transformation* 34 (1997a), reflected a particular moment in a long story of transition-with-continuities. The article was one of a set in which I tried to make sense of the changing character, activities and roles played by civic organisations during the early and mid-1990s, ie during and immediately after the transition to democracy. At that time the changes were especially striking. With the benefit of hindsight, some of the continuities are clearer also.

The relevant story of urban political change begins in the 1980s. Urban townships were the primary battleground in the final phase of the struggle against apartheid, and ‘civic’ organisations played a central role in this ‘township revolt’. A number of scholars examined forms of civic organisation during the township revolt in different parts of South Africa (including Evans 1980, Cooper and Ensor 1981, Challenor 1984, Borraine 1987, Cole 1987, Von Holdt 1987, Swilling 1988, Pillay 1989, Atkinson 1991, Mayekiso 1996,

Tetelman 1997, Van Kessel 1995, 1999).¹ My own doctoral thesis examined the radicalisation of civic organisations as part of the transformation of urban politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focusing on the townships on the West Rand, East Rand and Pretoria (Seekings 1990). In other papers I had extended this to consider the roles played by civics during the township revolt (especially Seekings 1989a, 1992b, 1992c), including with respect to popular justice (Seekings 1989b, 1992a), and in relation to national political organisation through the United Democratic Front (published finally as Seekings 2000a).

For anyone working with civic organisations, the early and mid-1990s were a period of extraordinary change. Initially, civic organisations and activists were drawn into local governance, especially over urban development, on a largely ad hoc basis. By mid-1996, however, South Africa's towns and cities had both the institutions of representative democracy and a plethora of corporatist and consultative fora concerned with various areas of public policy and practice. Formally, South Africa had a free and competitive party system, but in practice this was a dominant party system, dominated by the African National Congress (ANC). This was especially true at the local level, across most of the country, raising the question of who would exert any pressure on the ANC to 'deliver' the changes long-demanded by civic activists and ordinary people. A national organisation of civic organisations – the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) – was formed in 1992, and non-government organisations were very active, assisting civic activists to replan urban development and policy. The social and economic contexts were also changing rapidly. The end of apartheid meant an acceleration of processes of differentiation and stratification within the African population.² Economic opportunities were opening rapidly, drawing both civic organisations and individual activists into the world of investment as well as the world of government.

In the second half of the 1990s I wrote a series of papers considering how the transition to (representative) democracy had transformed civic organisations at local, provincial and national levels. These new papers drew on some practical engagement with civics and civic-linked NGOs (primarily the Development Action Group, DAG) in Cape Town in the early 1990s (although I was never employed by a civic or a civic-linked NGO) together with new research, comprising interviews with civic activists at local and provincial levels, primarily (but not only) in the Western Cape.

Three of these papers examined general processes of change in the 1990s (Seekings 1996, 1997b, 2000c), engaging with the concurrent work of, for example, Kimberly Lanegran (1996, 1997). Together with Janet Cherry and Kris Jones, I examined patterns of political participation in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth (Cherry, Jones and Seekings 2000), and Rebekah Lee and I examined street committees and popular justice in Cape Town (Lee and Seekings 2002). Another paper focused on the structure and activities of SANCO in Cape Town (Seekings 1997c). The paper published in *Transformation* also focused on SANCO, but on the challenges and choices facing it at the national level. The article drew some comparisons with COSATU which faced strategic dilemmas of its own (as explored by its September Commission in 1996-97). I identified four options facing SANCO:

These options differ primarily in terms of the relationship between the organisation and political parties. SANCO could ignore political parties, organising solely in civil or economic society. It could pressurise parties, as an organisation (or movement) operating in civil society. It could lobby parties, within close alliances (as SANCO has, with respect to the ANC, to date). Or it could contest party politics, either as a faction within a broader party or as a party in itself. (1997a:5)

I discussed SANCO's high turnover of leadership, its financial difficulties, its complex relationship with the ANC (and especially the so-called 'two hats' issue, ie whether activists should be allowed to wear civic and ANC or government 'hats' at the same time), and the strategy and tactics that it might play as a civil society watchdog over the ANC and state. I concluded:

SANCO is wrestling with dilemmas familiar to many movements and organisations seeking radical change: whether to operate in political or civil or economic society; and whether to ignore, work with, struggle within or compete with existing political parties. Its dilemma is deepened by the immense popularity of the ANC and the legitimacy of elected local government. In practice, SANCO's future will be determined not only by decisions taken at the national level, but also by the myriad local choices made by SANCO activists on the ground. In many areas, the power and legitimacy of local councillors will incline some activists to the latter option, just as the constraints on councillors will lead others to a renewed faith in civil society. SANCO will thus have to decide how to enforce any decision it takes, and is therefore perhaps most likely not to make any decision at all! (1997a:27)

Looking back at the article I am struck especially by the speed at which the context changed after I made my final changes to it in mid-1997. I did not anticipate the scale of the reaction of the political and intellectual left to the

so-called ‘neo-liberal’ policies adopted by ANC governments at national and municipal levels, the ensuing divisions within the left, and the rise of the so-called ‘new social movements’ in and after 2000. I referred to the criticisms made of SANCO leaders by, for example, Mzwenele Mayekiso, but in early 1997 he was still trying to contest SANCO elections. It was only during 1997 that the Johannesburg Council was enveloped in financial crisis and began to prepare what became its *iGoli2002* plan (which was adopted in 1999), and Trevor Ngwane was still an ANC councillor unknown outside Soweto. The national government had adopted the GEAR macro-economic strategy in 1996, prompting debate within the ANC and Alliance, but strong criticisms of privatisation were still for the most part limited to the municipal workers’ union SAMWU.

SANCO’s 1997 national conference had the misleading theme ‘Building a revolutionary social movement to conquer challenges of the twenty-first century!’, but it was already evident that SANCO’s close relationship with the ANC meant that SANCO could only be a ‘revolutionary social movement’ in the same sense that the ANC was a ‘revolutionary’ political party. It was the ‘new social movements’ that emerged over the following years – ie the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and so on – that had a better claim to being ‘revolutionary social movements’, articulating a more transformational ideology and employing more militant tactics (see Ballard et al 2006).

The significance of the emergence of these new social movements is evident in Elke Zuern’s study of SANCO for the Centre for Civil Society’s project on social movements, published in 2006 in Ballard, Habib and Valodia’s edited volume *Voices of Protest*. Zuern (2006:179) opens by quoting the APF’s call ‘on all organisations and movements of the poor to reject cooption . . . and to expose SANCO as a front for the ANC government’s control and containment of the emerging and ever-growing militant, anti-capitalist struggles of the poor’. Like earlier studies, she is concerned with the ‘the complex interactions between SANCO, the ruling ANC and the state’ (2006:181), but her study of these were now framed by the emergence of what appeared to be a different kind of non-state actor.

SANCO’s Strategic Direction, 1997-2002

The emergence of the ‘new social movements’, and SANCO’s relationship to them, were both shaped by strategic decisions made within SANCO itself.

Had SANCO adopted a more militant stance on privatisation and service delivery, then it is difficult to see how a second set of organisations would have achieved much traction.

The first key strategic decision taken by SANCO was its decision, at its 1997 national conference, to allow SANCO officers to wear two (or more) 'hats', ie to hold office in SANCO at the same time as holding offices in the ANC and/or government. In the early 2000s, SANCO's national deputy-president (Ruth Bhengu) and national treasurer (Susan Shabangu) were both not only ANC MPs, but the former chaired the parliamentary portfolio committee on local government and the latter was a deputy-minister (admittedly in a department with no relevance to SANCO). Bhengu was also deputy-chairperson of the Ugu District Municipality (around Port Shepstone in KZN). Richard Mdakane served as president of SANCO in Gauteng at the same time as being not only an elected ANC member of the Gauteng provincial legislature, but being the speaker of the legislature.

Wearing hats in SANCO and local government raised the possibility that SANCO officers might lead protests against municipalities in which they themselves held senior positions. Sceptics wondered how SANCO officers would distinguish between their loyalties to SANCO and their obligations to government (or the ANC). Concern that SANCO's priorities were being subordinated to the ANC's led to a series of secessions. Prominent Gauteng civic activists Mzwanele Mayekiso and Ali Tleane launched a rival, and short-lived National Association of Residents and Civic Organisations (NARCO) in 1998, and splits occurred in the Eastern and Northern Cape provinces (Zuern 2006: 185).³

By 1999 it seemed clear that SANCO needed to adopt a more militant stance of one sort or another. In a 1999 discussion document, discussed by Zuern, SANCO itself outlined five options. Three of these options broadly corresponding to three of the options I had identified (become a political party, operate as a watchdog, and serve as a development agency). A fourth option was to become a 'revolutionary social movement'. And the fifth was to continue playing a confused hodge-podge of roles. According to Zuern, two options were considered most seriously. First, local activists in strong civic organisations were sympathetic to SANCO formally contesting local elections in opposition, if necessary, to unsatisfactory ANC candidates. In the 2000 local government elections, SANCO in the Eastern Cape endorsed some independent candidates standing against the ANC. None of these SANCO-backed candidates were elected. Zuern reports that national SANCO

leaders used this to buttress ‘their pronouncements that SANCO would not and should not become a political party’ – although local leaders sought to keep their options open (Zuern 2006: 185-7).

The second option that was considered, and which the national leadership under Hlongwane seemed to endorse, was to become a ‘revolutionary social movement’, championing ‘the cause of the historically marginalised’ and willing to be ‘confrontational’. But this ‘revolutionary’ role was understood as not ‘digress[ing] from the National Democratic Revolution’ (Zuern 2006: 187). SANCO would only be revolutionary in the sense that the ANC itself was revolutionary, ie as the driver of the ‘National Democratic Revolution’.

In practice, in the 2000s, SANCO was no more revolutionary than was the ANC itself. Nor was it particularly confrontational in championing anyone’s cause, least of all the ‘historically marginalised’. When the APF was formed in 2000, SANCO flirted with it – as did COSATU. SANCO also joined in some of the COSATU-led protests against privatisation. But in the face of the deteriorating relationship between COSATU and the ANC, SANCO reiterated its loyalty to the latter, and distanced itself from the APF and allied organisations, and from the confrontational tactics they employed (Zuern 2006: 188-91). The ANC’s promise of funds to pay SANCO’s debts may have been an important factor in this decision (Gumede 2005: 278). Whilst SANCO leaders have generally claimed that the organisation is supra-partisan, in practice it was always inexorably tied to the ANC. Indeed, it considered itself part of the ‘Tripartite’ Alliance – alongside the ANC, SACP and COSATU – and (in the early 2000s) participated regularly in Alliance Summits. Zuern (2006) implies that SANCO’s loyalty to the ANC leadership was bought through the reward of a seat at the Alliance table.

Civic organisation at the local level

At the local level, many of the civic organisations that comprised SANCO’s ‘branches’ remained vibrant in the late 1990s, as Heller and Ntlokonkulu (2001) showed for Soweto, Lodge (2002: Chapter 10) reported for selected townships on the West and East Rand, and Cherry, Jones and I (2000) and Lee and I (2002) showed for Port Elizabeth and parts of Cape Town. This picture of local vibrancy continued, in some areas at least, into the 2000s. Drawing primarily on research in Tshwane (Pretoria) in 2004, Zuern suggests that SANCO’s power at the local level depended in part on getting their nominees adopted as ANC candidates, and this in turn depended on mobilising opposition to state projects so that SANCO leaders could arrive

and solve the ‘problem’ (Zuern 2006:191-4). Whilst SANCO leaders represented themselves as a revolutionary social movement, its role was more of a *broker* between poor neighbourhoods and the state (2006:195). The emergence of more confrontational movements may have even made it easier to play this role, except when local politics became so polarised that the space for brokers vanished (as in Mandela Park in Cape Town).

But these local roles sat uneasily with the organisation’s relationship with the ANC at a national level, which in Zuern’s view ‘seems to rest upon its ability to effectively contain community demands’ (2006:197). At the local level, SANCO leaders must challenge the policies adopted or implemented by ANC-led local governments, so as to allow them to broker solutions and sustain support, at the same time as SANCO’s national leaders pledge their support to and seek patronage from the ANC national leadership (2006:198).

How these tensions have played out at a local level remains unclear due to the dearth of local studies. There are no good data on civics’ membership or strength over time. Interviewed by Zuern in 2004, Hlongwane claimed, absurdly, that SANCO had 4,300 branches and a total membership of 6.3 million (Zuern 2006:182). Hlongwane had reportedly made the same claim in 2002 (2006:198, endnote 3), and he repeated it again at SANCO’s national conference in December 2006.⁴ I concluded that provincial SANCO leaders’ claim that there were between 35,000 and 40,000 members in the Western Cape in the mid-1990s was plausible, although only a small proportion of these would have been paid-up members (Seekings 1998:10). Lodge’s figures for selected Gauteng townships (2002:216) might suggest that SANCO was a little stronger there than in Cape Town, but it is difficult to believe that SANCO-aligned civics’ membership ever reached even half-a-million. Nonetheless, the fact that more than one thousand delegates attended national conferences in both 2006 (in Bloemfontein) and 2008 (in Durban) indicates a level of activism. Just how much, and around what issues and tactics, is not clear.

The handful of local studies undertaken in the 2000s suggest that civic organisations have experienced difficulties at the local level, in part because they are hamstrung by their reluctance to confront the ANC. Staniland’s research in Guguletu, Cape Town, in 2005-06, showed how ANC ward councillors used their access to state resources – including food parcels, employment on public works programmes, and even public housing – to keep potential critics in check. ‘Therefore, amicable relations with, or at the very least quiescence towards, ward councillors are crucial for both individuals

and organisations seeking to access local state resources and this limits the willingness of civil society to challenge local political figures', even when public policy supposedly welcomes such challenges (Staniland 2008:35). 'The fact that SANCO derives most of its benefits, both as an organisation and as a collection of individuals, through its relationship with local government and ward councillors has created a situation in which it is more important for civil society organisations to please their councillors than it is to represent broader community concerns' (2008:47). Grievances persist at the local level, over both the delivery of housing and services, and political representation and participation. Staniland discusses several cases in which the allocation of resources to one group of beneficiaries prompted discontent among other groups of non-beneficiaries. These cases typically give rise to local organisation, outside of SANCO, oriented not so much at changing the system of local government but rather challenging specific incumbents and securing that resources are allocated to different beneficiaries. Staniland found also that these very local struggles are difficult to unite into city-wide or even more general movements. The decentralisation of aspects of local government to the local level (including to ward committees organised around councillors) had the effect of undermining the capacity of civil society to forge city-wide links, identities, demands and visions. Events in Mandela Park, also in Cape Town, have been well documented, although by activists within the new social movements who are even less sympathetic to SANCO (Desai and Pithouse 2004). In their account, SANCO sought to mediate between the state, private enterprise and residents, over the removal (to smaller and cheaper RDP houses) of households who could no longer afford the payments to banks on houses built by private developers. But SANCO was outflanked by the more militant resistance of what became the Mandela Park Anti-Eviction Campaign, linked to the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Johannesburg-based Anti-Privatisation Forum.

It seems likely that SANCO-aligned civic organisations at the local level probably continue to provide a mechanism for communicating grievances to councillors and state officials, for brokering the relationships between them and moderately aggrieved residents, and for aspirant local politicians to acquire some experience and standing. But they probably cannot accommodate the more serious grievances that have been taken up, with enthusiasm, by the new social movements. The relationship between SANCO-aligned civics and the local state in the 2000s is reminiscent of the relationship between conservative civic groups and the state in the early 1980s (see

Seekings 1990, 1992d), in that they cannot easily reconcile the access to the state that comes with a quiescent stance with the more militant demands being made by more radical rivals.

Chronic ‘Crisis’ at the National Level

The tensions inherent in SANCO’s strategic approach have been much more evident at the national level. SANCO’s decision to allow its office-bearers to wear two (or more) ‘hats’ stemmed from the turnover of leadership that had weakened the organisation in the early 1990s. When SANCO made this decision, just five years after its launch, it already had its third president (Mlungisi Hlongwane) and its third general secretary (Mboneni Ngubeni). Not one member of the NEC elected in 1997 had been on the original NEC elected at the organisation’s launch in 1992. After 1997, SANCO had very stable leadership. Hlongwane was president from 1995 until 2008 (when he was replaced by Ruth Bhengu). Linda Mngomezulu served a long spell as general secretary.

This stability did not mean, however, that the leadership was effective. The history of SANCO at the national level since 2000 has been one of continued internal division amidst general inaction. William Gumede, who had observed SANCO closely and perceptively, described the organisation as ‘rudderless, embroiled in petty leadership tussles, routinely ensnared in allegations of corruption and shunned from the policy-making process’. SANCO, he concluded, was ‘a patient in intensive care’ (2005:273). Zuern describes SANCO as being ‘in crisis, bankrupt, riven by scandal, and weakened by its alliance with the ANC’ (Zuern 2006:182).

At the national level, and probably in most provinces also, SANCO has not been operating according to the requirements of its own constitution (as amended and adopted at the 3rd National Conference in 2001). Its constitution requires that a National Conference be held every four years, and the National Executive Committee (NEC) is supposed to meet every three months. It was, however, close to six years after SANCO’s 3rd National Conference that it held its 4th National Conference, at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein in mid-December 2006. Quorate NEC meetings seem to have been held sporadically. At the provincial level, Provincial Conferences are supposed to be held every three years, and Provincial General Councils (PGCs) every three months. It is unclear how many provincial SANCO structures have complied with these requirements.

One reason for the chaos within SANCO was the intrusion of party

politics into the organisation. SANCO became caught up in first the bitter factional divisions within the ANC, first over the deepening struggles over privatisation, then between the Mbeki and Zuma camps, and finally around the secession of an Mbeki-aligned group to form COPE. The first round of division occurred in the early 2000s, over SANCO's stance on the SAMWU and then COSATU-led protests against privatisation and other 'neoliberal' reforms, especially in the local state. SANCO initially supported protests against 'neoliberal' municipal policies, but withdrew its support for the 2002 general strike at the last minute and later endorsed the ANC's municipal policies including cost recovery (Zuern 2006: 188-9). Whilst SANCO's close ties to the ANC belied its claim to be super-partisan, it did bring tangible rewards such as being given the credit when the Johannesburg Council wrote off R1.4 billion in arrears in May 2003 (2006: 190-1).

Divisions within SANCO over the depth of loyalty to the ANC national leadership dragged the organisation into the mire. In his presidential speech to the 2006 National Conference, Hlongwane acknowledged that

The past five-and-half years has been one of the most trying times even for SANCO. Matters have not been assisted by some of the most extreme ill-discipline and opportunism. Early in our term of office, the NEC was forced to relieve some comrades of their duties in the organisation. Some of our comrades have tried to use the organisation to take up battles against individuals in the ANC. ... Simultaneously, in our Provinces, we have become used to a tit-for-tat scenario, wherein if one group of persons are suspended then that group organises a meeting and suspends those who have suspended them.

It had become 'increasingly difficult' to 'arrest this situation', Hlongwane told the conference.⁵ Earlier that year, divisions within SANCO had got into the press when *Business Day* reported that Hlongwane himself, together with the deputy general secretary, Master Mahlobogoane, had been suspended at a national SANCO meeting in Polokwane after they had endorsed Mbeki for a third term as ANC president. Their suspension was announced by SANCO's Gauteng provincial secretary, Toenka Matile, and the national general secretary, Linda Mngomezulu. But NEC member Donovan Williams, reportedly speaking on behalf of Susan Shabangu (the national treasurer), quickly corrected the first report, explaining that only a quorate NEC could suspend executive officers, and the meeting in Polokwane had not been quorate (SAPA 19 June 2006; IOL News online, 20 June 2006).⁶ At the Bloemfontein conference itself, rival delegations sought accreditations,

and a fist-fight reportedly broke out. ‘This is very embarrassing for us’, said the general secretary, Linda Mngomezulu. The conference was abandoned without new elections being held, so Hlongwane continued as president for the time being.

Divisions soon gave rise to parallel structures and a legal case in the High Court. One faction seems to have been headed by Hlongwane, the other by Gauteng and Limpopo leaders including Mngomezulu and Richard Mdakane. In January, ‘SANCO’ announced that the powerful Gauteng and Limpopo PECs had been disbanded, and various members suspended (including Matila, Mngomezulu and Dumisani Mthlane).⁷ The ANC was compelled to intervene, to establish a new interim leadership core. This comprised seven representatives (in total) of the ANC, COSATU and SACP, together with six nominees from SANCO.⁸ The victory of the pro-Zuma coalition at the ANC’s National Conference in Polokwane in late 2007 led to Mbeki’s resignation as President of South Africa and the subsequent formation of a new party, the Congress of the People (COPE), in late 2008. The formation of COPE caused further turmoil inside SANCO. Hlongwane, who was still SANCO’s president, defected, as did an unknown number of activists at local and regional levels.

Hlongwane was formally expelled from SANCO as soon as he resigned formally from the ANC. SANCO sought to reorganise its national leadership at a two-day national conference at UKZN in Durban in December 2008, just days before COPE formally launched itself in Bloemfontein. Bhengu, the existing deputy-president, defeated Mdakane by 792 votes to 510 (SABC News Online, 17 Dec 2008; *Cape Times*, 19 Dec 2008). Bhengu’s election reconfirmed the close links to the ANC. She was a long-standing ANC MP, chairperson of the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Provincial and Local Government (from 2003 or 2004), and deputy-mayor of UGU municipality (from 2006). She had been elected to the NEC at Polokwane, despite being compromised in the ‘Travelgate’ scandal over parliamentary expenses. After the 2009 election she became chairperson of the parliamentary Transport Portfolio Committee.

Pro-COPE activists contested this palace coup by ANC loyalists. In the Western and Eastern Cape, where numbers of SANCO activists and even branches joined COPE, conflict arose over which was the ‘true’ and which the ‘fake’ SANCO. In February 2009, at the height of the election campaign, the pro-ANC, and legally-recognised SANCO leadership rushed to Plettenberg Bay when they heard that the pro-COPE dissidents were holding a rally in SANCO’s name. Mcebisi Msizi, secretary general in the pro-ANC

SANCO, insisted that SANCO's ideology is non-party political, but the organisation had always supported the Tripartite Alliance. The Western Cape chairman of the pro-COPE dissidents, Mzanywa Ndibongo, countered that SANCO was 'not the ANC's baby'.

In 1992 we had the same principles and values as the ANC, but now it's not like that. (Jacob) Zuma has criminal charges against him and there is a lack of discipline in the ANC. Youth league leader Julius Malema says whatever he wants. We can't support that.

Even though he said that SANCO was not a political organisation, Ndibongo said the dissident structures would mobilise support for COPE. The saga turned into farce when, in March 2009, Hlongwane defected back to the ANC.

In the Western Cape, the pro-ANC SANCO intervened to dissolve COPE-supporting branches (including one in Dunoos) and suspend members of the provincial executive (including Thobile Sikani) who endorsed COPE (*West Cape News* online, 21 April 2009). In May, dissident civic leaders reconstituted themselves as the South African Independent Civics Organisation (SAICO). According to organiser Gugulethu Busakwe in KwaNokuthula, SAICO would be 'an independent civics organisation not ruled by any political party', although it would affiliate itself with COPE. The chaos within COPE in 2009 (continuing into 2010) is surely part of the reason why nothing more has been heard of 'SAICO'.

SANCO's binding ties to the ANC at the national level have clear implications for its structures at the local level. SANCO branches are unlikely to provide a home to civic activists supporting either the 'new social movements' or competing political parties such as COPE. Both categories are important. The 'new social movement' activists have been at the forefront of many protests, although their support base appears conditional and limited. COPE, at least in early 2009, recruited many civic activists and won the votes of substantial minorities of the electorate in a number of towns and cities in the Western, Northern and Eastern Cape. Some SANCO-aligned civics might accommodate non-ANC civic activists, but these civics are unlikely to remain a meaningful part of the national organisation.

One possibly telling aspect of SANCO's activities has been documented, by Nathan Geffen (of the Treatment Action Campaign, TAC) in his book on TAC's struggle against AIDS denialists and quacks peddling supposedly alternative treatments for HIV and AIDS. Geffen pays a lot of attention to Khayelitsha, in Cape Town, which was the site of the clinic, operated by *Médécines sans Frontières* (MSF) together with local and provincial

government, that pioneered the roll-out of anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). Khayelitsha was therefore also a TAC stronghold. Geffen documents how, in 2005, a German AIDS denialist and producer of multivitamins, Matthias Rath, began to market aggressively in Khayelitsha his pills as an alternative AIDS treatment. SANCO teamed up with Rath, co-sponsoring advertising in the media, distributing his pamphlets, staffing his clinics, and recruiting patients. Support for Rath extended all the way to SANCO national president Hlongwane himself (Geffen 2010: 142-3). Hlongwane's deputy, Ruth Bhengu, was also compromised in the AIDS saga. In 2001, she had courageously disclosed in Parliament that her daughter Nozipho was HIV-positive. This was at a time when the ANC – and the new African elite generally – observed a near-total silence about HIV status. Geffen suggests that this helped to demystify the disease and roll back stigma. But Nozipho Bhengu stopped taking ARVs, and instead used the nutritional treatment advocated by the denialist health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, with the backing of President Mbeki. In May 2006, Nozipho Bhengu died, at the age of 32. At her funeral, a series of speakers lambasted TAC and ARVs, and endorsed conspiratorial explanations of HIV (Geffen 2010: 101-5). In his speech to the SANCO national conference later that year, Hlongwane did retreat to an apparently neutral position, calling on SANCO to work with TAC and endorsing regular testing and ARVs. But he also endorsed the pro-Mbeki organisation NAPWA and the Rath Foundation, calling for attention to nutrition as well as medication.

Geffen presents no evidence of the geographical extent of SANCO's active work with Rath, the financial relationship between Rath and SANCO, or the motivations of its leaders at national or local levels. But it seems likely that this is an example of SANCO's national leaders being swayed by the views of the ANC's leadership (including Mbeki himself), whilst local SANCO leaders were probably motivated in part at least by the prospect of financial support for the organisation from Rath. It is likely that local and national leaders were persuaded by Rath (and Mbeki) because they were, to some extent, wary of 'western' medicines and doctors, but, even if true, this alone would not explain SANCO's strong stance on this issue. In short, this seems to be evidence that SANCO's stance on policy has been compromised by its relationship with the ANC.

Comparing SANCO, COSATU and the 'new social movements'

SANCO as a national organisation might seem to warrant little discussion. Its leadership, organisation and finances, at national and provincial levels,

have been a mess.⁹ It participates in Alliance Summits and NEDLAC, but there is little evidence that its contributions to either are significant in terms of substantive policy-making. Rather, it would seem to be little more than yet another vehicle for the ANC to exercise political patronage. Nationally, SANCO has become more lapdog than watchdog. As a national organisation, it took a decade to be established (see Seekings 2010), was briefly active in the early 1990s, but failed to find a new and significant role after the transition to democracy. The few local studies that exist suggest that some civic organisations probably play similar active roles to their counterparts in richer neighbourhoods: mediating between residents and elected councillors and local state officials, monitoring what councillors and officials do (and do not do), and occasionally mobilising residents around local issues, although generally without much in the way of direct action. They have probably been outflanked by the new social movements with respect to more serious grievances, over evictions, removals and access to municipal services, and the quality of representation by elected ANC councillors.

Probably the best reason to consider the SANCO experience is that, through comparison with the experiences of other organisations or movements such as trade unions and new social movements, it might illuminate aspects of the more general landscape of post-apartheid politics. In terms of ideology, support base, resources, and tactics, SANCO (including its local branches, ie civic organisations), lacks the coherence of either the trade union movement or the 'new social movements'.

Unions, especially the COSATU unions, get their direction not so much from any clear ideology but from the interests of their members, relayed through both an organisational structure that retains strong democratic characteristics and the threat of secession (displayed through both wildcat strikes and the employment of tactics that are not sanctioned by the leadership). COSATU leaders might employ anti-capitalist rhetoric, but their goal remains primarily raising the wages, improving the conditions of employment, and reducing job insecurity, for their members, a majority of whom are now employed by government or parastatals rather than private employers. COSATU may rely too much on its political links within the ANC, and invest insufficient effort in building its organisation from the bottom up, as Buhlungu (2010) argues, but it retains an organised mass membership with a clear, common purpose.

The new social movements, on the other hand, are defined (as movements) by their anti-capitalist ideology and militant tactics. Prominent activist

Trevor Ngwane is explicit about his intent: 'social movements ... have to fight the state, destroy it and replace it with a workers' state' (quoted in Ballard et al 2006: 401). He was at the centre of a group that contested some local elections in 2006, under the name of the Operation Khanyisa Movement (OKM, named after the SECC's campaign to reconnect illegally residents to municipal services after the municipality had disconnected them for non-payment). 'The objective of OKM is not reforms', he told Ndletyana in an interview, 'but revolution' (Ndletyana 2007:103).

The strength and character of the new social movements' support bases remain unclear, however. As Habib and Valodia (2006:xiii) ask, did the burgeoning protests over services represent 'the true voice of poor and marginalized South Africans' or 'the irresponsible actions of a few activists who do not understand the complexities of post-apartheid reconstruction'? Activist-scholars within the new social movements tend to assert the unity of clear-sighted, anti-capitalist activists and poor supporters (eg Desai 2002, Desai and Pithouse 2004, McKinley 2006). More critical scholars suggest that middle-class intellectuals, working-class activists and the poor might be bound not so much by a common ideology as by consensus on the immediate issues of service delivery. Dawson (2010: 282) describes how, 'inspired and assisted by the APF, thousands of residents of poor communities in Johannesburg have enabled the water to flow by removing and destroying pre-paid meters and reconnecting residents to the water supply'. The reasons for removing or destroying pre-paid meters vary: for some, they are the embodiment of 'neo-liberalism', and removing them forms part of the struggle for a socialist alternative. For others, they are the technology that restricts access to water, and removing them means that people can consume more water more cheaply. Egan and Wafer (2006) also distinguish between the more ideological leadership of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and its 'survivalist' support base. The latter comprises a core of perhaps one thousand active members, mostly middle-aged or elderly. Egan and Wafer conclude that 'there is little evidence that SECC members at the branch level see themselves as part of a general resistance to the neo-liberalism or the vanguard of a populist new left alternative to the ANC' (2006:57). This does not mean that there is no ideological or normative dimension to the struggle for electricity. Egan and Wafer suggest that the SECC's supporters think that pensioners (and their many dependents) *should* receive affordable electricity: 'In this respect, electricity is symbolic of what it means to have dispensed with apartheid' (2006:57). But 'neo-

liberalism' remains an abstract concept with limited relevance. Insofar as there is an ideology at the grassroots, it is one of Christianity.

Many activists in the SECC, APF and other organisations recognise this, seeing direct action and grassroots participation as radicalising experiences for the poor, including ideologically. According to SECC leader Trevor Ngwane:

The point is, we have to build where we are. We have had workshops on the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and we've got strong people working on those issues. We've set up structures for the Campaign Against Neoliberalism in Southern Africa. But in the end we had to get down to the most basic questions: what are the problems facing people on the ground that unite us most? In Soweto, it's electricity. In another area, it is water. We've learned that you have to actually organize – to talk to people, door to door; to connect with the masses. But you have to build with a vision. From Day One we argued that electricity cuts are the result of privatization. Privatization is the result of GEAR. GEAR reflects the demands of global capital, which the ANC are bent on pushing through. We cannot finally win this immediate struggle unless we win that greater one. But still, connecting with what touches people on a daily basis, in a direct fashion, is the way to move history forward. (2003:55-6)

The 'new social movements' are, as Patrick Bond has put it, 'both protest-oriented and utopian' (quoted in Ballard et al 2006: 401). The strategy here was exactly the one used by ANC and other civic activists in the 1980s to build civic organisation, to strengthen the struggle for democratisation (see Seekings 2000b). The difference is that the broader political project of activists in the 1980s was democratisation, whereas in the early 2000s the SECC activists' project was socialist, or at least anti-capitalist. In both cases, social movements maintain support through taking up immediate and practical issues and achieving tangible successes, typically through combining negotiations with protests and direct action. Anti-capitalist ideology is not unimportant, however. It provides much of the glue that holds the movement together, providing purpose and direction for activists.

SANCO could as easily take up issues of service delivery and representation, even if it lacks COSATU's clearly-defined support base. (Vague claims about representing the 'poorest of the poor' are no substitute for participatory membership.) But it lacks an ideology that legitimates systematic militancy and helps some people to make sense of the perceived inadequacies of elected ANC councils and councillors. Vague references to

being a 'revolutionary social movement' are no substitute for a systematic critique (however flawed) of global capitalism, complicit national elites, and state power, especially when the 'revolutionary social movement' is tied to the governing party that is responsible for the policies against which people are protesting!

The unions, new social movements and SANCO also have distinct resources. The unions derive resources from their members, both through subscriptions paid from wages and the earnings derived from control over their members' massive pension funds. They also have access to external intellectual resources through labour-friendly academics, and to state resources through corporatist institutions at national and sectoral levels. Neither the new social movements nor SANCO have access to resources on anything like this level. Their identified constituencies are the poor, not workers in the formal economy. The new social movements do, however, receive financial support from overseas and can draw on intellectual resources locally. SANCO, in contrast, relies almost entirely on patronage from the ANC, and (at the national level) has ceased to have any access to free intellectual resources.

In 1997, I did not anticipate that SANCO's leadership would embrace such close ties to the ANC, including to its patronage. Nor did I anticipate the, in part consequential, emergence of more militant and radical 'new social movements', taking up the kinds of popular grievances that the mainstream civic movement had championed hitherto. With hindsight, these developments seem unsurprising. The institutionalisation of representative democracy, with control over considerable but not unlimited resources, with a massively dominant party, provided very powerful incentives for civic activists to ally themselves with – and try to penetrate – the new local political elite. SANCO's embrace of a subordinate and largely dependent position within the ANC's 'Alliance' reflected the strength and achievements of a democratic, dominant-party system. At the same time, it opened spaces for more militant and radical critics of elected councils and councillors, operating outside of the systems of party politics and representative democratic institutions. In some cases, activists in local civic organisations (or SANCO branches) could play both games. In others, and much more conspicuously, the new social movements emerged to occupy the space of radical and militant urban politics. Both the deep changes of the early and mid-1990s, and those of the early and mid-2000s, can thus be seen as stages in the same process.

Notes

1. Subsequently, important research was completed by Cherry (2000), Von Holdt (2003) and Bozzoli (2004). I later revisited the topics of strategic thinking within and about civic organisation (Seekings 2000b) and the origins of national civic organisation in the 1980s (Seekings 2010).
2. A topic that I examined in much more detail, together with Nicoli Nattrass, in our 2005 book. For a contemporary analysis, see Crankshaw (1996) on Bekkersdal.
3. Moses Mayekiso also reportedly formed a Congress for South African Non-Racial Civic Organisations Movement (Cosancom) (Zuern 2006:188).
4. Hlongwane's speech is on www.sanco.org.za.
5. Hlongwane's speech is on www.sanco.org.za.
6. See also Gumede, revised edition 2007: 357-9.
7. See www.zoutnet.co.za, January 19, 2007.
8. See media report dated February 16, 2007 on the SANCO website, and an ANC press release dated February 16, 2007.
9. It was unable to account for its investments in a SANCO Investment Holdings in the late 1990s.

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