

Review

David A McDonald and Greg Ruiters (eds) (2005) *The Age of Commodity: water privatization in southern Africa*. London and Sterling VA: Earthscan.

Marie Huchzermeyer (2004) *Unlawful Occupation: informal settlements and urban policy in South Africa and Brazil*. Trenton NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press.

Bill Freund

The ANC has pinned its justification for consideration as the friend of the poor in South Africa on 'delivery' – the diffusion to the whole nation of services once overwhelmingly confined to white households. But for many this is its Achilles' heel. The so-called social movements, generally focussed on particular settlements and townships or small town municipalities, are in essence protest manifestations triggered off by struggles over evictions or water supply or local corruption blocking delivery – what Ebrahim Harvey calls 'low intensity conflicts' (in McDonald and Ruiters 2005:124) but another contribution on Cape Town sees as making urban areas at times ungovernable, borrowing a term from the 1980s struggle years. Radical activists have written numerous papers denouncing the GEAR-driven ANC as a tool of the World Bank and allied institutions with failures over delivery as the proof of the pudding. Battles have raged over the statistics of what has been delivered, by whom and when, how many cut-offs have occurred and what the poor have been forced to pay for services.

The two books reviewed here shed considerable light rather than just heat on the subject through much more sustained analytical treatment. Their very

considerable value has unfortunately to be counterbalanced with their scarcity; both, astonishingly, are only published outside South Africa.

Huchzermeyer, an academic in the Wits Housing Programme, gives us an entire book devoted to the housing question. She gets to the heart of the state housing initiative by characterising it as being based on the ‘project linked subsidy’ – greenfields development focussed on land planning, building of identical small properties to scale and the availability of subsidies to new owners who then take freehold title. The core of this, which fits what Huchzermeyer considers a neo-liberal approach, was modelled by the business orientated Urban Foundation and then the Independent Development Trust before 1994 and then extended on a massive scale by the Ministry of Housing, but it also represents continuity with the late apartheid orderly urbanisation philosophy. The failure to get significant bank involvement has meant that the quality of housing has often been minimal and the quality of land dependent on what was available for a small price. Community initiatives have been pushed aside; they tend to be considered as ‘exploitative, corrupt and self-seeking obstacles to government delivery’ (Huchzermeyer 2004:153).

Huchzermeyer sees this programme as essentially a failure; she contrasts it with the situation in Brazil where equivalent practices were abandoned in favour of upgrade programmes that called on community organisation to provide a social context and alternatives. In Brazil, radical state and municipal governments began to grasp that informal settlements were social entities and housing interventions needed to respond to that. The Brazilians focus on what they call the urbanisation of the *favela* or slum settlement, in which needed improvements are gradually and co-operatively introduced. In South Africa, the aim is to bulldoze such settlements and resettle people, perhaps at a long distance, in state-organised if private sector-built housing. Based on various examples given, Huchzermeyer believes that the Brazilians are much more likely to be constructing viable neighbourhoods that can help mould a better life generally for their inhabitants. She would like to see the continued growth of contacts between dwellers of informal settlements internationally as a process of learning and pressurising for grassroots derived needs. Numerous examples of potential and past initiatives in South Africa, which have held promise in improving the lives of those in informal settlements but were generally stifled, are presented.

This thought-provoking critique has much to be said for it. It certainly

demonstrates how much can be learnt if South Africans try to develop some serious comparative knowledge of social conditions. In particular it highlights the way delivery happens in bureaucratic forms that ignore realities on the ground and can go badly wrong. This reader wonders, though, if all is really as well in Brazilian cities as the author claims. And there has to be a political will that accepts and works with upgrades which is often lacking in South Africa. Are community based organisations always there in developed form to provide the political base which Huchzermeyer effectively requires? Isn't the most basic problem one of offering people houses rather than jobs (or livelihoods)?

The McDonald and Ruiters collection has attracted some excellent research to the subject of water reticulation services and their application for populations of poor people. They rightly begin by stressing that the issue here is not, as is sometimes thought, privatisation alone. International practice has shown that privatisation, however basic to contemporary ideology about development, unmodified does not work in poor countries and for poor populations; original costings made in South Africa and elsewhere, for example Latin America, have proven unrealistic. Moreover, there is an argument for the inclusion of the private sector based on what it can bring in terms of state-of-the-art technology and the application of efficient systems in various aspects of the water purification and delivery process. More than a decade ago, the French in particular went rather for promoting *public-private partnerships* which ensure profits to the private investor, continue to engage the state and usually involve major outsourcing operations. In South Africa, operations are typically 'corporatized'. Effectively this means that water providers are defined as corporate entities and expected to operate according to business models and in the aim of providing a profit. They often engage in partnerships with international businesses. This tends to lend authority to those who emphasise technocratic power – and continuity – in decision-making. Although the collection writers do not say so, this is equally a preferable model where business policies are strongly directed towards the BEE marriage of political agents and so-called emerging businessmen. It may well lead to service charges as high as any private operation would bring to bear.

Of all services, water is surely the most basic, one that was historically provided free of charge in many localities. It is not just a question of the so-called culture of entitlement cheekily taken up as a result of township resistance to apartheid standing in the way of profitable water provision enterprise; there is now a constitutional obligation to provide a clean

water supply to everyone and the implications for the citizenry generally if this is not done are very negative in terms of health and sanitation. Straightforward water charges have been borne with great difficulty by the poor and have been largely replaced by the provision of meters, which allow the provision of small quantities of free water, as well as flow restrictors, described in a Durban case study. Apart from their success in conveying the essence of the problem, the case studies highlight the foibles of the meter provision, why rates are still far too high for a great many poor people and why water availability, despite constitutional provision, continues to fall short of what it ought to be. It may be that a less miserly approach to help for the indigent would solve much of the problem. However, Stephen Greenberg, focussing on rural delivery, also demonstrates the quality problems in trying to provide good service to the scattered poor in the countryside particularly. One of the few contributors willing to make a comprehensive judgment, he sees rural water provision in post-apartheid South Africa as having improved, but only modestly rather than substantially. The core argument lies in the conflict between the insistent use of business models aimed at profitability – ‘best practice’ models promoted from many powerful international sources – versus models, far less conspicuous or systematic (and thin on the ground) aimed primarily at human needs.

This is a book highly recommended for those who can stagger through a surprisingly high number of closely argued examples. It is fair-minded, looks carefully at the broader international pressures at bottom emanating from multi-national companies, takes up a host of bigger issues and largely avoids the impossible quarrels over delivery numbers that plague some accounts. There are several studies of neighbouring southern African countries, with more emphasis on privatisation per se and the bigger questions of water delivery (eg dam construction). For instance, Rekopantswe Mate’s study of Harare admirably brings in the political dimension which is usually so difficult to track in this area of enquiry. If there is a criticism to be made, it is the lack of attention to environmental issues, which scarcely appear. The increasingly recognised need for water conservation is legitimate, especially in our dry sub-continent, and it is difficult to see how that can be done without commodifying water use. How to do this and provide the basic water needs for the home consumption of the majority remains the issue. ‘Technical solutions do not solve the political problems of poverty’ (in McDonald and Ruiters 2005:145), as one of the contributions most sensitive to the PPP model stresses.