In South Africa internal cleavages and stratification remain pronounced, across the divides of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability, and health status. Ebrahim Fakir explains the challenges faced by government in attempting to meet the obligations prescribed by the socio-economic rights in the Constitution, and discusses the role of the ‘new’ social movements in keeping development debates alive and attempting to counter the structures of national and global hegemony. Citizens and communities are mobilising to resist the actions of government working within the globalisation paradigm, and in the process promoting a new discourse on democracy and reinvigorating the political arena.
The nation of citizens does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties, but rather from the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights (Habermas, 1992).

Introduction

While the question of how to reconcile the complex and contradictory roles of different social and political forces and actors in a society undergoing transformation is neither new nor unique to South Africa, the objective material conditions that pertain are, however, in essence determined by the contextual particularities of its circumstantial historical legacy. This includes apartheid colonialism, manifestations of late imperialism, forms of globalisation and the consequent vigour of a relatively voluble free market, and their confluence and expression through either state authority (apartheid), particular forms of economic distribution (apartheid capitalism) or political and economic domination and subordination (apartheid capitalism and globalised neo-liberalism).

The objective conditions of the moment are further shaped by the struggle against these manifestations, evident in certain historical periods relating to protest and resistance, and more recently, efforts at transforming the nature of the South African state, South African society and its political economy. Current social and political conditions are particularly shaped by developments in the aftermath of the struggle against apartheid, and by the transition from racist authoritarianism to a largely liberal democratic trajectory with elements of radical social redistribution. Consequently, the transition of formal political power in South Africa has been typified as partly successful revolution, partly the result of shifts in international balances of power, and partly negotiated settlement. Any such characterisation of a transition, South Africa’s in particular, bears profound implications for the political space that consequently becomes available and can then potentially be contested by social forces.

In general terms, the distinguishing features of the South African transition to democracy are ultimately not that different from the temporal movement in other countries which, during the 1990s, was oriented towards democratisation, the dismantling of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the simultaneous reconceptualisation of the shifting relations between individual, society, economy, nation-state and the international system.
In South Africa internal cleavages and stratification remain pronounced, particularly across the divides of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability and more recently health status. The concentrated expression of these apparent contradictions, both the social contradictions inherited from apartheid and the continuing contradictions spawned by an evolving and dynamic transition, provide a useful background in which to locate the state, non-state, public sphere and social movements interface.

In addressing or attempting to resolve, or at least obviate, the consequences of such contradictions, different periods in South African history become discernable. This article will confine itself to the period of the 1980s and onwards.

The relationship between organised public space (or ‘civil society’, comprising non-governmental, community-based and other organisations) and the state, was relatively straightforward. Despite severe repression by the apartheid state of elements within the anti-apartheid camp, progressive social actors and social forces agitated and militated in opposition to the state, and in spite of state harassment and repression of organisations and individuals, anti-apartheid forces retained their popular legitimacy. In most instances, the constituent organisations, prefiguring in part the later emergence of the “new left” community and social movements, acted to create alternative structures of power (street committees, people’s courts and civic organisations, particularly in black townships) in an attempt to subvert the dominance of the repressive apartheid state apparatus and assert the social nature of citizenship, in which black South Africans were able to mediate their citizenship rights through self-legitimating institutions and practices. By the 1990s, the anti-apartheid camp was the dominant social element in the deracialising public sphere outside of the state. The values that underpinned the hegemonic anti-apartheid movement, however, remained rather vaguely defined beyond the commonly unifying thread that a transition to a non-racial democracy was required and that some kind of social redress would be needed. The precise shape and form of democracy and its substantive detail as well as the terms of social redress, economic redistribution and the criteria of economic and social justice and what they would entail, remained contested and came to set the scene for the competitive and sometimes combative politics that characterise South Africa after the second democratic elections, particularly at the local level.
During the transition period, crucial decisions regarding the shape of the South African political and social system, and the power of interest groups within them, had to be negotiated. To make their voices and those of their constituencies heard in the process, organs outside of the then state had to engage the incumbents of the existing state, either directly or indirectly. Much of this engagement on the “progressive” front took place through the then unbanned ANC and its allies, especially by supporting them with the resources and expertise needed in the negotiations with the state. In addition, some organisations interacted with the state directly (see Habib, 2003 for a more comprehensive discussion of the evolution of civil society in post-apartheid South Africa).

Scrutiny of the negotiation process reveals that various forums were in place, negotiating elements and aspects of the envisaged social and political reconfiguration of South African society. Forums existed and operated at all levels of governance and involved a variety of stakeholders in the debating of policy and programmes, while there was invariably also a persistent sense that past legacies of misrule would place a great burden on the incumbent government, particularly in the area of socio-economic development. It was impossible to wait until the end of the negotiations to tackle the task of reconstruction, and in that vein many NGOs had already begun the process of developmental work.

The creation of several fora in the negotiation processes represented an attempt to put into practice the theoretical concept of “the public space” as a force engaging the state, but not necessarily seeking to replace it. By giving organised structures in the public domain as well as the broader public1 such a stake in the process, the risk of their being absorbed into centralised and bureaucratic structures and modes of operation became real. The issue of the representative nature of such organisations also emerged in that context, but during the transition period they continued to play an active role in society, particularly when the negotiation process had deadlocked and political violence spiraled.

Developments during the transition process had a profound impact on the subsequent shape of South African democracy in the post-1994 period and a precedent was set where formal representative democracy negotiated by political elites was only one of the mediums through which citizens could participate in the country’s affairs.
Post-1994 – a reflexive history

The perceived anomie of the period 1990-1994 intensified in the immediate aftermath of the 1994 elections. Euphoria at the dispensing of formal apartheid and the ushering in of a democratically elected government by popular suffrage gave way to the pressing demands of initiating good governance and proceeding with the urgent task of socio-economic transformation. The new government, ostensibly an alliance of forces that struggled against apartheid, was faced with the daunting challenge of assuming the levers of government, a task that they had little previous experience of and/or exposure to. At the same time, the process of writing a new Constitution was under way. In addition, therefore, to focusing energies on creating new systems and procedures in governance, transforming or at least re-orienting old state institutions for a new public role, the challenge was to craft a lasting and meaningful contribution to a document that would not only be reflective of the values and aspirations of South African society in general, but one that would also arbitrate and diffuse political power between the local, provincial and national government, as well as effect a necessary separation of powers and functions between the legislature, executive and judiciary, and place proscriptions on the power exercised by government. In addition, there also had to be a prescription in the document for the manner in which government had to function, the rules it had to abide by, the processes it had to engage in and the procedures that it should follow. More fundamentally, the Constitution (RSA, 1996) embodied the rights and obligations that accrued to citizens and created a set of socio-economic rights that are enforceable by the courts to some extent. These include the right to have access to adequate housing, to health care services, to sufficient food and water, and to social security. The state is enjoined to “take reasonable legislative and other measures to achieve the progressive realisation” (RSA, 1996: Section 26(2) and 27 (2)) of these rights. In this sense, as one Constitutional Court judge has put it, the central purpose of the Constitution and the system of democratic, parliamentary governance that it establishes, is to “deliver a social and economic transformation” (Justice Kate O’Regan, 1998).

The response to such a complex and, in some senses, contradictory social milieu was a coalition of progressive forces that aimed to work in concert for the fundamental transformation of South African society, and the years immediately following the 1994 elections saw an unprecedented level of collaboration between social forces.
for comprehensive unity in action and purpose. Those assuming the formal levers of power in government consolidated alliances with social forces in the public space outside of government and engaged in a series of constructive partnerships that temporarily ignored the ideological and social cleavages that were later to manifest themselves in these situational alliances. Progressive social forces, the former liberation movements, progressive NGOs, community and civic structures all contributed in some way to state-building and the enterprise of constructing a new South Africa on the basis of non-racialism, non-sexism and equal citizenship that would provide equal benefits of social citizenship.

To consolidate this historic project, the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa was being guided by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which had as its goal the mobilisation of “our people and our country’s resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future” (RDP, 1994:1.1.1). True to its intent, the RDP was supported vigorously by the coalition of social forces that sought the reconstruction of South Africa. What the RDP failed to account for in its popular mobilisation of the South African community, was the opposition to the RDP from other quarters, including the international community.

Initially, the international and domestic business communities were concerned that the RDP was an inflationary social-spending programme intended to rectify years of apartheid injustices. Instead, the government put into place austere measures aimed at promoting both foreign and domestic investment. After years of near zero growth, following the first democratic elections in 1994 and the approval of the South African miracle by the international community, the economy grew at a rate of 6.4 per cent in the fourth quarter of 1994, which brought overall 1994 growth to roughly 2.3 per cent.

The government’s economic policies coupled with its successful management of the political transition to majority rule, bolstered confidence in its ability to transform South Africa from a conflict-ridden apartheid society to a prosperous democratic success story. The liberalisation of markets and strict fiscal discipline assisted in addressing development priorities in the early years of the transition, but soon reached its limitations, particularly in the areas of poverty eradication and in the distribution, availability and accessibility of public goods and services, as the social and economic
legacies of apartheid continued to affect the ability of both state and society to meet the goals of the RDP.

Yet elements of the RDP remained. The then new Government’s policy on economic redress was maintained, albeit accompanied by discursive shifts and several key policies and pieces of legislation that were informed by the rationale of the RDP enhanced the economic prospects of previously marginalised people. While diversification of ownership, land restitution and creating economic access were one way of ensuring improved access for a greater number of people in the creation of a new, radically different political economy in South Africa, methods of social, economic and development planning were also imbued with renewed vigour. Old modes of planning on the basis of modernisation approaches gave way to new and innovative practices in the field of development planning.

Yet the results were limited. The ostensible retention of the economic logic of the ‘market’, together with an interventionist state coupled with a re-orientation of the discourse or redress marked by shifts in poverty eradication programmes to poverty alleviation, from a redistributive impetus to one of empowerment and from transformation to de-racialisation, had reached its limits in what it was able to offer.

A manufactured consensus on the need for a particular type of transformation gave way to a diversity of approaches regarding the instruments to be used to achieve it. The promised increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) in lieu of South Africa’s efforts in managing the transition, disciplined fiscal restraint and economic liberalisation never really materialised. FDI remained modest with insignificant increases over time as confidence in South Africa grew, and while domestic capital investment increased to some extent, this was offset by several listed companies taking their listings to the international market, most notably London. Fiscal austerity curtailing public spending, the legacy of apartheid and the seemingly insurmountable and crippling domestic and foreign debt in addition to the challenges of governance saw the poorest of the poor continuing to lose out in the era meant to benefit them.

In response to the government’s austere fiscal policy and conservative macro-economic policy geared to satisfy demanding foreign investors and global financial institutions, social forces in South Africa began inhabiting public spaces more independently of government than they had done in the immediate post-1994 period. Partnerships
with government continued and the emotional ties and support for the African National Congress (ANC) as the ruling party in government, rather than as the government itself never waned and its legitimacy and credibility were thus never in question. Progressive social forces aimed on the one hand to assist government, while on the other formed a new and independent coalition of forces to address the skewed political economy, something the government was as yet unable to effectively do.

The stabilisation of the economy through managed public spending and the creation of an environment friendly to investors saw modest levels of economic growth. The South African government continues to grapple on the one hand with the economic imperatives of globalisation while also providing a sustainable base of social and public spending to meet the pressing socio-economic needs of the country’s people.

Social forces initially allied to government now adopted an increasingly oppositional stance, while simultaneously engaging in partnerships with government to enhance the quality of life of most South Africans. Social movements and social forces in the era after the second democratic elections defined for themselves a different ideological agenda, one that saw them inhabiting public spaces in opposition to government’s plans for the privatisation of some state assets and impending plans to liberalise the regulatory framework in which the energy, communications and transport sectors functioned. Social movements and other social agents now began engaging the government on a more independent, adversarial and critical basis, heralding the beginning of a renewed and more vigorous role for social movements.

The unravelling of the immediate post-apartheid consensus is a trajectory that emerges from the limitations of South Africa’s transition, with new and surprising social and political contours emerging – increased levels of social inequality, continuing poverty and unemployment, modest levels of economic growth with little widespread redistribution, and with an increased share of economic prosperity only for old elites and an emerging black technical and managerial occupational class.

Social Movements and Political Participation

In response to this, and in a perspective that conceptualises such a condition as the consequence of the adoption of neo-liberal policy directives, the privatisation of public goods and services and the hegemonic state-centric project of South Africa’s
dominant party, social movements advance a different discourse on democracy, political participation and the notion of citizenship.

Of importance is the engagement in interesting, yet currently ineffectual, political participation initiatives of social movements, which, while claiming to be “excluded” from the mainstream of political life have become political entities in their own right. In what context then, did they emerge?

The Constitution (RSA, 1996) offers a commitment to an open and democratic form of governance. “Democratic” in this sense has come to acquire a meaning slightly wider than the instrumental formalism that is usually associated with it. In this sense, it means active participation or at least the creation of the political space within which participation can occur. Despite limitations to political participation, there is at least the political space within which participation is made possible. While the exigencies of governance and the state’s reliance on technical experts for policy input, together with the neo-liberal impetus of globalisation, limits wide popular and mass participation in key areas of policy-making, there has been the enshrinement of fundamental political and social rights such as the freedom of association, organisation, speech, thought and assembly, amongst others, subject only to limitations thought reasonable and justifiable in a free and open society to protect and enhance the freedoms and rights of others. The Constitution (RSA, 1996) goes further and Section 57(1) provides that:

The National Assembly may (b) make rules and orders concerning its business, with due regard to representative and participatory Democracy, accountability, transparency and public involvement.

The nodal point of this vision is that people should participate in shaping their destiny, rather than restrict the extent of their participation to the episodic vote, an idea captured in the RDP:

Democracy requires that all South Africans have access to power and the right to exercise that power (RDP, 1994:120).

This right, it is suggested, does not extend simply to the right to exercise the elective option of choosing a representative, but telescopes into a right to exercise influence
over all decisions made by government. As with all constitutionally guaranteed rights, there are implied concomitant obligations flowing from this right. Having been granted this right to ‘participate’, it is assumed that it is the responsibility of the citizenry to comply, respect and uphold the legislative and executive decisions of a consultative and democratic process encompassing public input. This ensures that all people can potentially participate in the process of restructuring and governing the country with concomitantly responsive, accountable government whose decisions become more transparent and justifiable at the judgment seat of its citizenry and its people. However, the degree to which citizens have the means to access Government has not been encouraging. A finding that approximately only six per cent of citizens have had direct contact with Government or party officials, suggests a democracy that is remote from citizens. This is confirmed by research by the Centre for Policy Studies on issues ranging from housing through to energy supply and other social policy issues, and indicates a stark gap between elite assumptions and those of grassroots citizens (Friedman, 2002:22).³

Yet the Constitution (RSA, 1996) presents an interesting and exciting challenge: it declares that the new, hard-won democracy is both representative and participatory, primarily amplified by, amongst others, sections 57(1)(b) and section 59 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996)⁴.

At the level of local government, the Municipal Structures Act makes provision for the establishment of ward committees to facilitate public participation in local developmental processes at the level of government purported to be the “closest to the people”. The success of these ward committees has been uneven, and though legislated for, they fulfill less an imperative function and more an advisory or consultative one. Current legal and constitutional enablements create a right to participate in the legislative sphere, less so in the executive or policy administration sphere. Not all policy becomes law, and some policies which do not become law may have the most profound impact on ordinary citizens lives, such as in the domain of health (HIV/AIDS policy), welfare (the delivery of social grants), education (access to institutions and the supply of materials and resources), and in the access, affordability and delivery of basic services such as water. It is here that the limitations of circumscribed participation are the most insidious. It may be argued that the most profound impact of participation would be in the area where citizens are able to impact upon and participate not simply in framing policy, but also more
importantly in the processes by which public goods and services are delivered and in making them accessible to citizens.

The Constitution (RSA, 1996) furthermore uniquely creates a set of socio-economic rights, with the right of access to adequate housing, to health care services, to sufficient food and water, and to social security is entrenched in the Bill of Rights (RSA, 1996: Section 26 and 27). Moreover, the state is enjoined to “take reasonable legislative and other measures to achieve the progressive realisation” of these rights (RSA, 1996: 26(2) and 27(2)). Yet clarity with regard to the actual meaning of “progressive realisation” has remained vague and undefined. Given the historical legacy of apartheid and the constraints faced by the state in providing for all rights accruing to citizens, together with serious and growing infrastructure backlogs and the imperative of fiscal discipline, the impetus to reduce government debt and reduce budget deficits along with competing demands for the provision of health, education, welfare and other public goods and services has meant that the provision of these has been limited in each area, with the most pronounced effect on limited delivery on poor communities. The realisation of citizen rights has come to be associated with and whose limitations come to be justified within, the parameters of the resources available to the state to provide for these rights. Moreover, the term “progressive realisation” has come to mean different things in different contexts. In some contexts, it means to make provision for all citizens over a period of time. In others, it means that provision is made area by area. In others, it has meant making provision in areas of complete disadvantage and neglect first before addressing those with a relative degree of infrastructure and service, and in others a hybrid of all of the above.

Citizen entitlements are thus sanctioned in the Constitution as rights (Webster, 2002 cited in Cock, 2002:19) that are apparently accessible through the formal Constitutional dispensation, as is the right to political participation in affairs of the state, not least participating in effecting the delivery or accessibility of the rights created by the Constitution and which crystallise the notion of citizenship. Accessing rights is also made possible through the establishment of Commissions, known as “State Institutions supporting Constitutional Democracy” which support the rights of citizens and facilitates access to these rights, whether these were denied by omission or commission, either through a deliberate or neglectful act of government or a private party. Where the citizens’ right in question is of a nature whose import is granted as fundamental and inalienable so as to be enshrined in the Bill of Rights,
a judicial protector of such citizen rights is to be found through final appeal to the Constitutional Court. In ten years of democracy, the success of the Commissions has been limited to the extent that it has been successful. Appeals to the final arbiter, the Constitutional Court proved expensive and somewhat inaccessible, both because of cost and by virtue of process. The process of final appeal to the Constitutional Court is a remedy that is available only after exhaustion of the judicial process at lower courts. The costs of counsel and legal fees have proved this to be prohibitively expensive for ordinary citizens, and the process of actually obtaining a hearing in the Court is an intimidating and often confounding experience.

Yet participation in formal political life, whether for accessing rights or participation as an end in and of itself, is not the sole manner or indeed process by which political participation or the accessing of rights occurs. In an era where globalisation has spawned a myriad of both positive and negative social, economic and political practices, South Africa, consistent with international trends arising out of the rise of the worldwide anti-globalisation movement and the rapid development and convergence of telecommunications technology and new forms of media, has been influenced by the development of different forms of political organisation, participation, lobbying, and advocacy. Typically modes of political organisation and political participation find expression in the form of social movements engaged in a renewed and more vigorous political practice, yet there is no profound rupture or discontinuity in the trajectory of politics and political participation in South Africa, with distinct echoes in the continuation of the traditions of protest and resistance politics that characterised the struggle against apartheid. In recent years, the focus of South African politics has shifted in the main from the consensual decision-making that characterised the transition period to a mode of parliamentary politics and competition between interest groups for power and access to resources. Conceptualisations of political conflict in South Africa were previously based on clear dichotomies, but with things much less clear-cut in the new era, old challenges in terms of social service delivery have not necessarily changed but the context within which they occur and the terrain within which they can be challenged and contested has. This development has had implications for the viability of participatory democracy. In an environment that is formally oriented towards powerful and well-organised groups such as business and labour, with the corporatist arrangement of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (a bargaining chamber
that includes government, business and labour), with the added legacy of an inherited racial divide that persists, and with the increasing stratified cleavages within black society in general, the voices of disadvantaged people, particularly the black poor, are in danger of being neglected. Inequality and poverty “excludes and undermines the contribution of large sectors of the South African population to debates about Government policy” (Graham, 2002:92).8 While there are perhaps new articulations and new terms of engagement, there is little new in politics, simply engagement on a different terrain of a democratically elected, legitimate government (at least in the formal sense), requiring new tools of analysis, new terms of engagement and perhaps redefined strategies and tactics.

The past few years have seen a resumption of social movement politics and activism which, behind a common rejection of the ANC’s apparent conservative turn in macroeconomic policy, display important differences from mainstream organisations (especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party). These movements have, to a significant extent, originated at the level of urban localities in response to the government’s restructuring of local government and municipal service provision. Whatever the limitations of the new social movements may be in an organisational, political and strategic sense, they represent different trajectories in our evolving political discourse and political practice and thus warrant some attention. It might be worth noting as well, that the political and public space/s within which social movements operate, has been and is constitutionally enshrined, facilitated and presided over by a government that has regularised the opportunity and space for public political dissent within a codified legal and constitutional framework. However, social movement actors have claimed, with some degree of veracity, that the political space and opportunity has been circumscribed by the limitations placed on social protest and political activity, especially on activities that centered around the World Conference Against Racism and the World Summit on Sustainable Development. A stronger signal of the closing of such political and social space is the arrest, and now dismissed charges, laid by the state against a group of Landless People’s Movement activists and the arrest of anti-eviction activists in the Western Cape.9 However, there is the critical question remaining about whether the state’s limitations are justifiable in an open and free society, in order that the rights and freedoms of others be protected, or whether there is a sense that there is a deliberate attempt by the state to limit and inhibit
protests against its policies. There is a growing sense that, while the attempt may not be deliberate, there is a dangerous discourse emerging within powerful players in government and the ruling party, that dissent which does not accord with the strict letter of the law and which defies social convention, is to all intents and purposes demonised, and where necessary will be punished.

Social Movements – From whence do they arise?

Despite the paucity of political and policy debate on the Left of the ANC alliance that prefigured the year 2000 and the historical roots of the emergence of the “new social movements” being traced to earlier political trajectories, recent social protests in South Africa, at least since 200010, against state policies or against global neo-liberalism did not emerge in a vacuum. There are two distinct, yet interrelated and interdependent threads that underlie this phenomenon. The first is the state’s adoption of certain policies and the effect that these have had on communities. The second related issue is the negative effects of corporate globalisation and the linkages between social actors and activists and those in other countries confronting similar challenges that are facilitated by the consequences and effects of globalisation – the internet, e-mail and the broader convergences in the telecommunications, media and technology sectors. The challenges and social contradictions confronted in the domestic setting have been the prime subjective conditions giving rise to the new social movements. For the most part, the adoption of particular policies at the municipal level, where the state has not played an interventionist role in the allocation or redistribution of resources to the poor and marginal, has seen increasing levels of inequality and poverty. The preference for deracialising the economy rather than thoroughly transforming it, and altering the discourse of poverty eradication to poverty alleviation has seen

...the inability or unwillingness [of the state] to be a provider of public services and the guarantor of the conditions of collective consumption. This provided the spark for a plethora of community or ‘new social movements’ mobilising around diverse demands like land titles, water, electricity, sanitation, access to housing and health facilities. The general nature of the neo-liberal emergency concentrates and aims these demands toward the state (Desai, 2003)11.
Privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation

The transition to democracy led by the ANC was trumped by the transition to neo-liberalism. The ongoing transition has wrought significant changes. The African middle and professional classes have grown considerably, while a small economic elite is consolidating. There is a recognisable and discernable trajectory in certain social development sectors, of the government’s adoption of neo-liberal policy. The effects of neo-liberalism – the liberalisation of financial and trade markets, the deregulation of certain key sectors in the economy, the privatisation of state assets, the commodification of basic services like water and sanitation – have been largely negative.

Even on its own terms, the Government’s macro-economic policies codified in the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme have not done very well. The net achievement of this programme has been the realisation of the state’s deficit targets, all at the cost of employment, poverty and inequality. Massive job losses have occurred in almost all sectors of the economy and tighter fiscal constraints have compromised the state’s poverty alleviation and development programmes (Habib, 2003:10).  

While state officials claim modest credit for the delivery of public goods like water, electricity, sanitation and telephony, the most comprehensive and authoritative independent study in this regard shows otherwise.

Approximately ten million cut-offs in the water and electricity sectors have occurred because people have been unable to pay their bills. About two million people have been victims of rates and rent-related evictions from their houses for the non-payment of rents and rates [because of an inability to do so] (McDonald & Pape, 2003 cited in Habib, 2003:16).

According to recently published national data (May 2002), more than 20 000 households per month have their electricity and water cut. Research from the Municipal Services Project shows that 30% of Johannesburg’s 3.2 million residents living in informal settlements experience the difficulties of inadequate hygiene
facilities. Many households are not receiving free blocks of water and electricity because they are in payment arrears, and there are widespread reports of continuing cut-offs of water and electricity despite the free services policy. The Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG 2002, 30-1) reports that more than 296 000 disconnections of electricity and 133 000 disconnections of water took place in the last quarter of 2001, most of which would have been low-income households (McDonald, 2002). This is a direct consequence of the strategy of privatising the water and sanitation sectors in some areas and is underpinned by the logic of cost recovery, especially in areas where there is large-scale poverty and the consequent inability to pay for services.

Additionally, notions of participation and the ability of elected political representatives to craft policy and engage in policy debate was seriously constrained and compromised. Note the claims made by Trevor Ngwane, at the time an elected Councillor, and now a leading figure in the new social movements:

The mood changed within the ruling ANC caucus: robust debates became muted; decisions were taken away from councillors and we were discouraged from participating in local community forums. There were issues we couldn’t discuss. The crunch came when they announced a big financial crisis for Johannesburg; they had ‘just realized’ the city was in the red. This was in 1997, a year after the national currency crisis, when the ANC effectively ditched the RDP for gear, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme – a thorough-going privatization-deregulation strategy, involving savage public sector cutbacks, loosened exchange controls and a regressive sales-tax policy. All the Johannesburg ANC councillors were called to an emergency caucus meeting - you could see it was a co-ordinated effort – for a long presentation, followed by three minutes of questions. All the ‘people’s budgets’ had to be frozen. I argued, ‘But comrades, when there’s less money, all the more reason to be democratic’. But they didn’t want to hear that. The next budget was put together by experts, special whiz-kids. Again, the plan was unveiled with PowerPoint and we joked about
how ‘the words fall from the sky like rain’; one hour’s presentation and a couple of questions. After that they started to target people more systematically, or co-opt them for well-paid committee jobs. In 1999, just after the second general election confirmed Mbeki in power, the council introduced their comprehensive privatization plan for the city, Igoli 2002. I called it E. coli 2002. At this time, Mbeki was using the phrase, ‘The people have spoken’, to imply that if people had voted for the ANC they must support its neo-liberal policies and shouldn’t now oppose them. I wrote a piece for the newspaper called ‘The People Have Not Spoken’, a debate between the city manager, the trade union SAMWU, the municipal workers’ union which had come out against the plan, and myself, putting the views of my constituents. The piece was by invitation, though I didn’t write it without discussing it with my comrades. I decided it had to be done. Within three days, the ANC suspended me from all my positions, including those in the Council. I faced a disciplinary hearing for bringing the Party into disrepute. They then tried to make a deal, saying, ‘...if you publicly recant your statements, we’ll reduce the two years’ suspension to nine months’.14

The response to the government and to the conditions just outlined eventually saw - at the time of the World Summit on Sustainable Development - South Africa’s most militantly anti-government march since the election of the first democratic government, with 20 000 people protesting and condemning global elites and the South African Government for “unending neo-liberalism” 15

In all of South Africa’s cities, social movements arose to confront what were perceived as active attacks on the poor. The issues in Johannesburg centered on water and electricity cut-offs, giving rise to movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). Issues in Cape Town closely resembled those in Durban, where housing evictions for the non-payment of rents and rates were common. In 2002, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (WCAEC) was formed, an umbrella body which united the new civic formations.
Supported by a number of city-based NGOs and NGO workers, trade unionists and left activists, the Anti Eviction Campaign (AEC) is nevertheless rooted firmly in township communities and constituencies in Tafelsig, Delft and Bonteheuwel, where evictions of ‘coloured’ residents took place. Towards the end of 2001, the Western Cape Provincial Government and the Cape Town City Council focussed its attention on water cut-offs and evictions in the African township of Khayeltisha.\footnote{16}

There has been some discernable, if modest success (see Presidency, 2003) in addressing the challenges facing the country, but despite these successes, if there is no real intervention by the state to ensure adequate provision and protection for the poor, there will be little ability for the state or society to advance and consolidate citizen rights and reverse apartheid trends, where black South Africans continue to live in conditions characterised by chronic hardship and poverty. In addition, the ability of the state to substantively transform both itself and the nature of South African society will remain constrained at the macro level.

There is a persistent faith in ‘economic growth’ as the panacea for the redress of social inequality and social cleavage, but without a corresponding focus on the broader distribution mechanisms of the benefits of ‘growth’ this will inevitably allow for an increase in levels of inequality and poverty. The inability to reverse apartheid trends and the failure to harness the transformative potential imbed in a state that is willing to confront social contradictions, along with the unwillingness to challenge the historical legacy of apartheid and the onset of globalisation, has led one prominent academic and analyst to comment that in the current South Africa

\begin{quote}
Apartheid capitalism has given way to post-apartheid capitalism...ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy, the repressive apparatus of the state...the army, police and judiciary, the civil service ...tertiary education and strategic research and development have remained substantially in the same hands as during the heyday of apartheid (Alexander, 2002:64).\footnote{17}
\end{quote}

With respect to most social movements, the negative effects of the current trajectory are largely and solely the effects of both privatisation and globalisation. Resistance to this is located in two frames, firstly in a resistance to globalisation and its effect
on the local state, and secondly in organisational forms of protest and resistance politics that draw on South Africa’s rich history of resistance and protest.

The Politics of Social Movements

Implicit in the contention that the last few years have seen a resumption of social movement politics, is that this resumption must have precedents. The precedents in this case are reflexive, not only of the social movement unionism that characterised COSATU during the 1980s but also reflexive of the broader anti-apartheid struggle that was conducted outside the domain of formal and institutional politics. “It is a new wave, but it uses the traditions, the fire, the experience of the old days. The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) is becoming more like a civic”. Furthermore, several of what may have been conceived of as earlier social movements (pre-1990) such as COSATU, the UDF and the SACP were instrumental in establishing some of the new social movements.

At the heart of social movements and the international solidarities that they engage in

... lies the unity in action of those that stand opposed to neo-liberalism: the global ideology of the primacy of markets. But its form is fluid, its shape indeterminate. It is a “movement of many movements, coalitions of coalitions. Thousands of groups working against forces whose common thread is what might broadly be described as the privatisation of every aspect of life (Klein, 2001:81-82).

Alongside the development of community movements and the tactic of direct action has also been the onset of ‘quiet encroachment’ which refers to

... the silent, protracted and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on those who are propertied and powerful in a quest for survival and improvement of their lives. It is characterized by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action, and open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization (Bayet, 2000:24).
As Ashwin Desai explains: "There is an attempt to rebuild community structures (as was the case with street committees, people’s courts, learning and teaching campaigns during the years of apartheid) but these are not to have the familiar leftist designs imprinted on them:

... bread and butter” struggles have mutated and assumed real constitutive force in the place of some or other world-ideological take on history. More importantly, the “bread and butter issues” have been treated in such a way by those involved in them that they are capable of generating meaningful and sustained moments of counter-power. This will to a dignified life produces a struggle that involves very basic things: love, respect, consideration, freedom to move around your neighborhood. These are seemingly very minor events – manifest over a communal cooking pot for example – but they are infused with a lot of politics, a lot of feeling.\(^23\)

The new politics is driven by families participating as households. The community movements that are forming in some parts of South Africa are not made up of those working in factories. “Rather we have the ‘lumpen’, the rabble, the single mother, the proto-gangster, the young children and the aunties - the unorganizable, and nobody is out of the loop”.\(^24\) As a strategy people became part of the movement to boycott paying for services:

They would be very docile in the workplace toward the boss as they wanted that 500 Rand. But they would be militant in the community by not paying for water and electricity and “they are topping off their salary, insinuating a social wage through their actions, saying, ‘This state wants to allow people to pay us R500, but they want us to pay R800 in rent, so we are going to take that R300 from the state by not paying. The psychology is very different among the poors. While the poors do not have sophisticated organizational structures of the unions, they have the need to fight to hang onto their shelters and so there is no reluctance to engage in illegality and there is a great deal of
innovation. This is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organisation. It is about creating new forms of organisation. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organisation are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately... it aspires to reinvent daily life as a whole. Even in an extra-parliamentary sense, it does not seek to solicit hegemony as a part of civil-society from amongst other ‘constituencies’ with issues.25

However, not all social movements organise themselves in such an ephemeral, non-traditional way. For example the SECC and the APF have a fairly organised structure and follow a trajectory that is slightly different form the one described, in which the contest for state power is identified as a key element of social struggle. Note Trevor Ngwane’s description of the SECC and APF and his further comments on the importance of challenging the state and its power:

The APF and SECC is organised in clusters of affiliated groups in communities. The APF Executive Committee meets fortnightly, with a representative from each affiliated organisation, and we have a Coordinating Committee that meets monthly, with five representatives from each group. We are trying to organise regional solidarity committees so that people can come out to support each other immediately they hear about an eviction or a water cut-off. We have around 22 branches in Soweto, each one with their own organising committee. We’ve had a debate about membership cards. At the moment the position is, you can join and get a card for 10 Rand a year, or you can just be a member. I don’t have a card – my position is, everyone is a member who wants to be. We have an AGM every year on March 1st, and directly elected officials: chair, secretary, treasurer. Every Tuesday there’s a committee meeting of representatives from
the branches, around sixty people, where we get reports on problems, organise speakers for meetings and so on. I think the issue of political power remains crucial. Some people attack the idea of targeting state power – the argument that globalisation undermines the role of the nation-state gets translated into an excuse for avoiding the fight with your own national bourgeoisie.\(^{26}\)

**International Linkages and the imprint of the older social movements in the international arena**

Besides the precedents in the domestic political context, the origins of local social movements are traceable to the global social movements or issues-based international organisations, such as environmental (Greenpeace), peace and prisoners rights (anti-apartheid movement, Amnesty International), nuclear (anti-armaments campaign, anti-nuclear) and poverty and development (food aid, Oxfam, child aid) sectors, that lend impetus to the way in which new social movements currently operate and the manner in which solidarities and links are developed with the international anti-corporate globalisation movement.\(^{27}\) These include, amongst others, the women’s movement, the gay liberation movement, the peace and hippy movements of the 1960s, the conservation and environmental movements that emerged in the 1970s and the anti-apartheid/anti-racism movements of the 1980s. In the context of relatively stable and democratic societies, many political movements were able to unite a wide range of people behind a single issue (war in Vietnam, nuclear disarmament, anti-apartheid or ‘Save the Whales’). The hippies, together with other cultural and youth movements, advanced the ideas and practice of alternative lifestyles and cultural mobilisation (Sachs, 2002).\(^{28}\)

In the 1990s, the grassroots movements confronted an entirely new set of terms justifying the hegemony of the newly-established post-Cold War global order. Previously, up until the end of the Cold War, a significant section of older social movements in South Africa, allied mostly to the ANC, became active in protesting against the exclusionary, elite-oriented development models that were conceived and sought to be made universally applicable through the Bretton Woods institutions. These protests were articulated largely in the context of the discourse developed by social movements in the West, where nuclear and environmental threats produced
by the Cold War were more poignantly felt. Yet discourse on development changed, where the notion of alternative models of development was analytically formulated and propagated by various global groups, clubs and commissions. Some concepts developed by the proponents of alternative development became buzzwords for activists in the social movements, with ‘appropriate technology, pedagogy of the oppressed, limits to growth’ among them. The idea of alternative development found new support in the core of western societies during the Cold War, when the spectre of nuclear holocaust loomed large, and alongside this anxiety was expressed the concern about poverty in the Third World (Economic and Political Weekly, 3 January 2004). This trend then changed again with the onset of globalisation with three key elements informing the ‘politics’ of new social movements. Globalisation is seen as the incarnation of the old idea of Development (with a capital D), but representing politically more explicitly the institutions of global hegemonic power, creating new forms of exclusion socially and intensifying further the existing economic and social inequalities within society. Globalisation, like the development establishment of old during the Cold War, works for the constituent elements of its power structure – the techno-scientific, bureaucratic, military, managerial and business elites and a small consumerist class. Secondly, the ability of globalisation to enable the poor to enter and find places in the market is restricted by the constraints placed on the state to engage in redistributive policies, which consequently undermines the rights of the poor to hold on to sources of livelihood that are still available to them. The cumulative effect of this is that those that are poor or marginal, or whose social and citizenship rights have been constrained are unable to make a suitably forceful demand in the mainstream of politics and development for their survival. As the market moves from the fringes of the polity to its centre, the democratically conceived political authority, in the view of new social movements, is giving way to new notions of economic and political ‘order’ – notions that are being derived from principles of corporate organisation, which by their very nature are not in accord with democratic principles.

In the contemporary period, social movements have established linkages not only at the level of the local and the national, but also in the international arena, most notably through forums like the World Social Forum (Cock, 2003). Desai (2003) notes:

The neo-liberal transition has squeezed and spewed out the poor but galvanized them at the same time. The ‘poors’, as they have come to
be known in the South African vernacular, have opposed the water and electricity cut-offs and evictions (consequences of the privatisation of public services), and have begun making connections between their situation and that of people, first in Soweto and Tafelsig, but then also in Bolivia, South Korea, America’s prisons, Zimbabwe and Chiapas. But they have done this without any grand ideology. They are actors on a local stage, squaring off against home-grown villains.

**Conclusion**

It is evident, then, that the category of social movements comprises a diverse set of organisations. Many organise at the local level, some in non-formal, non-traditional formations, others as community-based structures which have a distinct leadership and membership. Their modes of organisation are different, with some functioning as survivalist agencies while others are more politically oriented, while most were established with the explicit aim of organising and mobilising the poor and marginalised,

... contesting and engaging the state and other social actors around the implementation of neo-liberal social policy. As a result they implicitly launch a fundamental challenge to the hegemonic political and socio-economic discourse that defines the prevailing status quo.29

The organisation of new social movements is variously described as decentralised, non-hierarchical, anti-oligarchical, open, fluid, spontaneous and participatory. In general, social movements are fragmented, in the sense that they are in some cases nationally based, or more often, locally based. They also usually deal with a single issue or with a single dimension of a problem, without attempting to articulate it into an overall alternative political project.30 They are largely spontaneous social and political ruptures which are temporary in nature, due to the transitory nature of issues that they deal with, impacting on their long-term sustainability as a political project. This has led to a characterisation of the new social movements in the words of a British theorist, Raymond Williams as ‘militant particularisms’.
As poverty and marginality increase, however, a variety of new community and social movements respond by challenging water and electricity disconnections, home evictions and the lack of effective social transformation that seeks to eradicate poverty. These movements, based in particular communities and evincing in part defensive demands from the state, are the result of poverty and marginality, a direct response to current state policy. In the dialectic of its evolution and development, they have come in part to challenge state power. These social movements keep the debate on development alive, recasting it in terms which try to counter the structures of hegemonic power, nationally and globally. They are thus formulating old issues on development in new political terms. In the process of opposition to globalisation and the neo-liberal policy directives, the privatisation of public goods and services, the lack of political participation and the inability of elected representatives to make inputs on key decisions, and the lack of political accountability, social movements have attempted to promote a new discourse on democracy and to reinvigorate political practices, expanding the arena of politics beyond episodic participation in elections and beyond representational institutions and political parties, eschewing in effect and in part the opportunities available for meaningful political and social transformation that may be effected through formal political processes and institutions. Social movements conceptualise the current political trajectory, its co-incidence with globalisation and the adoption of neo-liberal policies as forces seeking to undermine their citizenship rights, while at the same time delegitimising in the process institutions reputed to be committed to democratic governance. Yet overall a

...more demanding society has to be matched by a more sophisticated state. In some ways, [the reconstitution of civil society] can be seen as beneficial to state effectiveness since it may create not only new pressures, but new resources to deal [with the challenges], new skills to acquire and new capacities to learn. It could be argued however, that, while the globalisation of civil society does not entail the demise of the state, it demands the emergence of a new type of state. In sum, the state remains indispensable: but current thinking on civil society and on the role of the private realm (or, more accurately, that outside the
state) in achieving public goals may point us towards new ways of seeing and consolidating the state which redefine not only its role but that of those who operate independently of it – whether or not they rely on it for their ability to do so (Friedman, 2003)\(^3\)

References


Sachs, M. 2003. “We don’t want the fucking vote, Social Movements and Demagogues in South Africa’s young democracy”. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 27, 6

Sridhar, V. An Interview with Samir Amin: “For Struggles, Global and National”. At www.nu.ac.za/ccs
Endnotes

1 The public participation processes of Constitution-making and writing being a case in point.

2 The precise definition of social movements is elusive. As Michael Sachs (2003:23) has pointed out, the boundaries between a social movement and a football club, an independent religion, a vigilante group, trade union, political party or NGO remain blurred. I will attempt to focus on social movements that organise themselves and mobilise their associational networks to challenge and resist the actions of the local state, which they conceive of as limiting citizens’ access to public goods and services on a mass scale and at a reasonable cost, or no cost at all in the case of the indigent and the poor. In addition, these social movements see the local state as complicit in the implementation of neo-liberal programmes of privatisation of public utilities, precisely those that are able to deliver the public goods and services that allow for the assertion of citizenship.


4 This clause is replicated for the provinces in subsequent Constitutional clauses, notably in Chapter 5, and to similar and more profound effect in the Municipal Structures Act.

5 These rights form the core of social citizenship.


7 See the annual reports of amongst others, the Human Rights Commission and the Commission for Gender Equality.


9 For a comprehensive discussion on the limitations on social protest and on state harassment of political activists protesting water and electricity cut-offs, water disconnections and a host of other state-inspired and neo-liberal effects detrimental to citizenship and citizen rights, see “Why are we under attack from the Government and the Banks?” a pamphlet issued by the Khayelitsha Anti-Eviction Campaign at www.nu.ac.za/ccs; “The political economy of State Repression” by Salim Vally at www.nu.ac.za/ccs. Several other recently published articles make mention of this, for example, Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava in “People before Profits? A Review of Development and Social Change” in Development Update; as do Max Ntanyana and Fonky Goboza in “Anti-Eviction Activists Defiant in the face of Apartheid-style Bannings, at www.nu.ac.za/ccs. In “What went wrong in the new South Africa” Andrew Nowicki states, rather glibly: ‘that.... protests grew against unemployment and privatization of basic services....

10 This marks the beginnings of social movement activity post 1994. See Interview with Trevor Ngwane, New Left Review 22, July-August 2003, where he cites the activities of the APF beginning with workshops on privatisation.


This figure and phrase is quoted in Patrick Bond’s "Geo-Politics of Jo‘burg protests: Independent Left beats ruling party”, www.nu.ac.za/ccs.


Neville Alexander in An Ordinary Country: Issues in the transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa”.

The SECC is among the emergent new social movements, an affiliate of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), an umbrella body of different smaller social movements affiliated to it. The structure is, however, not as rigidly defined, and both the SECC and APF operate on a looser structure.


See interview with Ashwin Desai by Holly Wren Spaulding: “Between the broken and the built” at www.nu.ac.za/ccs.


Bayet in Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East, 2000.


V. Sridhar in an interview with Samir Amin, at www.nu.ac.za/ccs.