



GLOBALISATION, MARGINALISATION & NEW SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

A joint project between the Centre for Civil Society and the
School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal

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**Continuity in Contradiction?
The Prospects for a National Civic Movement in a Democratic
State: SANCO and the ANC in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

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September 2004

This study was commissioned as part of a broader research project entitled *Globalisation, Marginalisation & New Social Movements in post-Apartheid South Africa*, a joint project between the Centre for Civil Society and the School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal. The project was funded primarily by the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. For more information, visit: <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/> and click on 'social movements' under 'research'.



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It is an imperative, now to confront what may inevitably be a suicidal political era for civil society in general, and Sanco in particular. (Mlungisi Hlongwane, President of Sanco, Sanco 2nd National Conference, Johannesburg, 1997, quoted in *Umrabulo* 7, 1999)

1994 marked a bold and dramatic shift in South African politics. Formal apartheid ended and a new era of democracy was introduced. While much attention at the time was understandably focused on the state, this political transformation clearly promised to have a significant impact upon organization and mobilization in civil society as well. Civil society¹ and social movement² theories offered two general predictions for South Africa. First, civil society organisations were expected to shift their focus from a largely conflictual, if not outright hostile, relationship with the state, to now play a more supportive role (Bratton 1994; Foley and Edwards 1996; Linz and Stepan 1996; Putnam 1993). In the South African context, this was often presented as a transition 'from protest to development'. Second, as part of this shift, broad-based social movements were expected to disband to make way for more institutionalised actors, most importantly political parties but also formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), leading to a decline in popular mobilisation (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Schmitter 1995; Tarrow 1994). These arguments suggest that many organisations and movements which had been founded during the apartheid era would fold or dramatically transform themselves to best adapt to, or give way to, a new era of institutional rather than extra-institutional politics.

As a broad, mass-based organisation which demonstrated its greatest strength through popular mobilisation against the apartheid state, the South African National Civic Organization (Sanco) faced a dramatic challenge. Since 1994, numerous political analysts, academics, political actors, journalists, and even some members and leaders of Sanco itself, have argued that Sanco is in serious danger of collapse, that it will fold or should fold, or that it has become 'moribund' (Hlongwane 1997; *Mail and Guardian*, 4 February 2003; Makura 1999; Seekings 1996). Despite these many dire predictions, significant and repeated internal crises, shifting relations with external actors, and various hotly contested debates concerning its role in a democratic South Africa, Sanco maintains a significant though weak presence as a national body with local branches. This does not imply that Sanco has lived up to its aim to organise and

¹ Civil society is understood here as including voluntary, self-constituted organisations which are largely autonomous from but interacting with the state and bound by a shared set of rules.

² Charles Tilly argues: 'The proper analogy to a social movement is neither a party nor a union but a political campaign. What we call a social movement actually consists in a series of demands or challenges to power-holders in the name of a social category that lacks an established political position.' (1985: 735-6).

mobilise South Africans in defense of ‘people-centered, people-driven’ development, but Sanco’s persistence as an organisational form challenges observers to look beyond a static understanding of the formal political opportunities and constraints presented by a new democracy to the dynamic and evolving relationships between state and civil society actors (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). A shift away from the politics of broad, mass-based movements to institutionalised party politics is often falsely understood to imply that the newly democratic system will be able to accommodate popular demands, but as this study will demonstrate, a state’s inability to do so produces new and often competing opportunities for civil society actors.

Sanco’s difficult but continued existence begs a number of questions: why and how has an organization which so many believed had outlived its usefulness, survived? In what form has it survived? These questions are not as easy to address as they might at first appear. As a national body which claims 4300 branches in fifty-six regions and a potential membership of 6.3 million³ (Interview, Hlongwane, 9 June 2004), but does not have the resources to support these broadly contested claims, there is no single portrait of Sanco which can fully represent the diversity, multiplicity and contradictions of the larger organisation and its local branches. On one hand, some analysts have argued that Sanco represents a body of horizontal local associations, the ideal of civil society, thriving in local communities where residents come to Sanco leaders to act as their advocates vis-à-vis local government, parastatals or private actors (Heller and Ntlokonkulu 2001). This is a picture of vibrant grassroots democracy within local branches. On the other hand, others have described a vertical, hierarchical organisation in which institutional structures constrain the aspirations of lower level community actors (Zuern 2001). This is a national organisation in crisis, bankrupt, riven by scandal, and weakened by its alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC). From this perspective, Sanco’s national structure serves to undermine true participatory processes. Both of these interpretations offer important insights into the functioning and challenges faced by Sanco. Added to this is a third view, offered by some Sanco leaders, that Sanco is a potentially vibrant and massive social movement but also a ‘sleeping giant’ (Interview, Mngomezulu, 14 January 2004).

The difficulty in assessing Sanco as an organisational whole navigating South Africa’s new democracy therefore begins with the questions: what is Sanco? Sanco where? Sanco when? Depending upon the time period, the community and the level of the organizational structure which one investigates, it is possible to find support for each of the first two positions, and possibly, though to a significantly more limited extent, for the third. Sanco as a national civic organisation, bases its organisational model not on any explicit occupational, educational, income, gender or other identity, but upon residential proximity. While Sanco defines itself as representing the poor, it is not a narrowly defined class-based movement; its supporters straddle formal and informal housing, from those desperately struggling to survive to those who seek to protect their limited assets. Women and men both participate, but women form the core of civic structures at the most local levels, while above the branch level, men overwhelmingly dominate the organisation. Sanco’s leaders claim a presence in rural to urban poor communities across all nine provinces. Local branches, where they exist, generally work quietly in their local communities, and often experience extended periods of dormancy.

³ ANC conference delegates were reportedly ‘stunned’ by Mlungisi Hlongwane’s announcement to the 2002 conference that Sanco had six million members (*Sunday Times*, 22 December 2002: ‘What more could any president want?’).

Sanco's 'strength', whether defined by members, branches, meetings or other criteria, is not, however, the most significant aspect of the organisation for an understanding of South Africa's democracy today. It is Sanco's organisational model, and the ways in which local and national leaders have innovated within that model, that provide the most interesting insights into the opportunities and constraints offered by the new system. Sanco's model is exceptionally broad. It defines itself as a tiered, unitary civic organisation, comprised of national, provincial, regional and local branches. Though this seems to be a model better suited to a political party than a grassroots association, Sanco leaders have historically supported this structure in an effort to enable Sanco to speak with a single voice at the national level. Sanco's national leadership is closely allied with the ANC and currently two of its six office bearers also hold ANC positions in national government.⁴ At the local level, many Sanco leaders are also ward councillors, and the majority hold some position working in or with local government, ranging from elected representatives to community liaisons. Though the nature of the relationship between the ANC and Sanco has changed over time, Sanco's self-definition has, since its founding, been closely tied to the question of its relationship with the ANC. Sanco's successes and failures, similarly have been closely tied to its ability to position itself vis-à-vis the ruling party.

Sanco has been variously defined as a 'social movement', a 'civil society actor', and an 'institution in a state of decay'. These competing definitions are significant, because the choice of definition represents not just a position in an academic and political debate, but also sharply contrasting models for popular activism and organisation. This study poses the question as to where Sanco falls on the broad continuum from a vibrant, participatory social movement to stifling institution. It considers whether Sanco is best described as a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic actor, whether or not it empowers the poor, and whether it supports the ideals of participation and democracy that it rhetorically champions.

South Africa's new democracy has challenged all potential movement organisations. The ANC no longer encourages popular protest, but sharply criticises, even demonises, those who champion such actions. The government understandably calls for active support for state institutions and demands law-abiding citizens. Sanco's model of mobilised popular advocacy coupled with support for the ANC, leads to a wide range of contradictions suggesting that the model itself would perhaps be unsustainable. It is only by bringing together the different understandings of Sanco at the local and national level and its alliance with the ANC, that the complexity of the dynamic political opportunities become fully visible and Sanco's continued existence can best be understood.

This study investigates Sanco as a national civic organisation since its founding in 1992 and its attempts to build upon the earlier successes of independent civics. In order to present a number of faces of Sanco, it includes national frameworks and policy, as well as local actions, innovations and responses. It addresses both those actors who remain firmly committed to Sanco and those who have defected from its ranks. As a whole, this study focuses on the changing self-definition of Sanco and its relationship to the ANC, and develops a model of the contradictions of Sanco's organisational identity in order to explain its persistence through its changing ability to navigate these contradictions. The conclusions of this study are drawn from research conducted in 2003-2004 but also build upon earlier work (Zuern 2000, 2001, 2002).

⁴ Ruth Bhengu is the Deputy President of Sanco and the ANC Provincial and Local Government Committee Chair. Susan Shabangu is the Treasurer of Sanco and the Deputy Minister of Minerals and Energy.

Interviews were conducted from 1997 to 2004⁵ by the author, largely in Gauteng, as well as the Eastern Cape. Interviewees included: Sanco leaders, ordinary Sanco members, local government officials and non-Sanco community organisers and activists. Local and regional areas were selected because of their significant impact upon the direction and model of Sanco as an organisational whole. Press reports from 1979 to 2004⁶ and primary documents from Sanco and the civics which were to join Sanco, also serve as crucial resources. To highlight the challenges and victories of Sanco in 2004, the case study of a particularly vibrant region of Sanco, Tshwane, is also investigated. This ideal case is not intended to suggest that Sanco branches and regions around the country have had as great an impact as Tshwane arguably has, but it instead provides insight into Sanco's model at its best in practice.

The history of Sanco civics

Sanco's leaders repeatedly stress Sanco's grassroots base as the organisation's greatest strength. In so doing, they underline the ways in which Sanco has built upon the rich history of pre-Sanco civic organising in South Africa. In order to understand Sanco's strengths and weaknesses, and importantly the opportunities and challenges it faces today, it is necessary to briefly consider the past. This past illuminates the different models of civic organisation and activism which have strong parallels to present day options of engagement, and it also importantly demonstrates the independence of early civic actors.

The first civic associations upon which Sanco would later directly build were formed in 1979. Contrary to popularly repeated myths, these organisations were not formed by the ANC. Though the ANC, in its Strategic Review of 1978-79, called for the greater encouragement of legal, semi-legal and underground domestic political bodies, including civic structures (Barrell 1992), the Black Consciousness Movement played a far greater role in the formation of the first civic structures. In Soweto, the local branch of the Black People's Convention led the formation of the Soweto Committee of Ten (Lodge 1983: 353) which, in turn, launched the Soweto Civic Association in 1979, building upon and expanding the success of more localised groups such as the Diepkloof Civic Association. Shortly after the formation of the Soweto Civic Association, a similar organisation was launched in Port Elizabeth, the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO).⁷

The SCA was led by an older, more conservative group of middle class leaders; its chairman, Dr. Motlana, was a medical doctor. PEBCO, in contrast, was led by a young, charismatic, working class leader, Thomazile Botha, a trainee foreman at the local Ford plant. The competing models developed by the two organisations followed from their leadership. PEBCO's militant approach led first to its meteoric rise, attracting many workers and students among other township residents, and then to its decline as a result of the state's actions in banning and detaining its leadership. The SCA, in contrast, adopted a more conservative approach of confrontation with the state, and was far less successful in broadly engaging the masses. Today, the SCA claims its title as the first township-wide umbrella civic structure, but PEBCO stands as the first civic which inspired thousands to mobilise for better living conditions

⁵ Interviews are cited in the text with the name of the interviewee and the full date of the interview. In cases where informants wished to remain anonymous, the area and year of the interview are given.

⁶ News articles are cited by source, date and page number where a hardcopy was available. Any citations for print news sources accessed online include: source, date and author or title of the article.

⁷ The organization's very name, which was not changed to PEPCO (Port Elizabeth People's Civic Organization) until the late 1980s, demonstrates its affiliation with Black Consciousness philosophy.

against the apartheid regime. The early PEBCO, much more than the early SCA, provided the model for the ideal civic movement that would incorporate community residents into a future national democratic revolution. The SCA provided the template for a strong organisational structure. Together, the SCA and PEBCO represent the mobilisational and organisational potential of the civics which civic activists worked to bring together into a national structure.

In early 1991, the immediate precursor to Sanco, the National Interim Civics Committee (NICC), was launched. At this time, the civics were the only large grouping within the United Democratic Front (UDF) which lacked a national organisation; students, youth, unionised workers and women all had some form of national body. The civics, defined as representatives of entire geographic areas, however, made up a much wider constituency than any one of these more narrowly defined groups. As such, the creation of a national civic body presented an uncomfortable challenge to the newly legalised ANC. When leading UDF activists and civic leaders met in Bloemfontein in May 1991 to discuss the formation of a national civic, rumors spread that the creation of this civic structure, which promised to be independent of the ANC, would effectively take masses of UDF supporters away from the ANC into a rival organisation (*The Star* 11 May 1991: 1; 18 May 1991: 6; 18 May 1991: 12; *Work in Progress* June 1991: 11-12). These tensions importantly demonstrate the great challenge that such a national civic body could pose to the dominant political forces in the country.

At its launch as a national, unitary body in March 1992, Sanco was the subject of great debate.⁸ The organisation at this time was popularly referred to as a 'non-partisan' structure which, in the words of Dan Sandi, would play the role of a 'watchdog over local government and development' (quoted in *Mayibuye* May 1992: 36). In their attempt to define a new role for the civic structures, Sanco leaders encouraged local civics to actively champion issues of development in the townships. Sanco's Gauteng leader explained in 1997:

Sanco's focus is no longer the direction of agitating against the government, as was the case in the past; we tend to focus more on community development as our main objective, and in this regard we are primarily looking at housing, standard of housing, ...local government... to assist our people, to guide them, to try and educate them to understand the functions of local government, ...(and) public safety issues. (Interview, Tleane, 8 July 1997)

Though this developmental role offered a frame for Sanco to move away from the previous sharply adversarial relationship between civics and the state, it did not lay out exactly how the civic structure as a whole, and individual civic branches in particular, would relate to the ANC and the new government.

Pat Lephunya, a Soweto civic leader at the time, described three options available to the civics (Zuern 2001). The first option was simply for local civics to fold or to become ANC branches or ANC residents' associations.⁹ Second, local civics

⁸ The unitary structure of Sanco was clearly laid out in its constitution and represented in its name (The South African National Civic Organization) which used the term 'Civic' in the singular, instead of 'Civics' in the plural as a number of earlier regional civic structures had done.

⁹ This argument was made most strongly by two ANC Midlands leaders: Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana (who was also a local civic leader) (1991, 1992a) and was received with strong disagreement from civic leaders (Nkosi 1991; Mayekiso 1992) prompting the two ANC leaders to defend their arguments once again (Nzimande and Sikhosana 1992b, 1992c).

could enter local government by effectively taking over the administration of their communities. Third, the civics could define themselves as an autonomous, non-party-political movement in civil society (Collinge 1991: 8). This conception of civil society was sharply distinguished from political society as the sphere of political party competition. This third formulation, in contrast to the first two, presented the civics as quite clearly independent of, but not directly challenging, the ANC or seeking entry into government offices. With time, a general though never fully uniform consensus developed, that the civics would follow this third option, playing a 'watchdog' role over local and national government; civics were thus to address 'bread and butter' issues regardless of which party was in government. This approach was generally most consistent with the past practices of the civics. While civics had clearly supported the ANC during the struggle against apartheid, they also consistently pressed for community reform from outside of government and outside of the established political parties.

Nonetheless, considerable suspicion concerning the role of civics remained, as it became increasingly clear that an academic understanding of civil society as outside of political society would be impossible to follow in practice. On one hand, the ANC supported this clear separation by stating in a political education discussion paper: 'We believe that civics have their own specific character and identity which is different to that of the ANC. Their independence must be jealously protected' (ANC, 1991: 6). On the other hand, the same ANC document betrays a clear suspicion of such a model of a fully independent and critical civil society in a newly liberated South Africa:

It is the task of the ANC to aid the civics in drawing these links between bread and butter issues and national political issues. Through ideological debate, the actions of its members, joint strategising and campaigning, the ANC must win its leadership role in relationship to the civics. ... (T)here is no conflict of interests between the ANC and civic organisation, but a community of interests. ... It is the duty of the ANC to re-enforce the hand of civics. (ANC 1991: 5, 10)

The civics, for their part, attempted to navigate the difficult terrain of the transition by remaining closely allied to and supportive of the ANC, but also working to assert their independence.

The democratic challenge

In the newly democratic South Africa, civic leaders hoped that a continued close relationship with the ANC would give the national civic structure a privileged position to voice its concerns directly to government. For the first decade of its existence, Sanco was engaged in an informal alliance with the ANC¹⁰ which was to be on a case-by-case basis. Sanco repeatedly argued that it would not work with the governing party if, in the words of Sanco's first president, Moses Mayekiso, 'its policies go against the interests of the community' (Interview, Mayekiso, 19 August 1997). At the same time, Sanco vowed to follow a policy of constructive engagement with the government. Sanco's third and current president, Mlungisi Hlongwane argued in 1996: 'If you want to be an instant revolutionary these days and be involved in boycotts, Sanco is no longer a home for you'. He added: 'Although Sanco was an organisation that mastered the art of boycotts, it has made a complete break with the

¹⁰ Until 2002, Sanco was commonly referred to as the 'plus one' of the Tripartite Alliance (ANC, SACP, Cosatu), a term which many civic leaders felt indicated a lack of respect for Sanco.

past. Sanco will never be the same again'. (quoted in *Saturday Star*, 28 December 1996: 8). As an example of this changing approach, the civics which had championed service payment boycotts against the apartheid regime, now, as Sanco, urged members to support the new government's Masakhane plan calling upon residents to pay for services.

In the run-up to the 1995 local government elections, the national structure of Sanco vowed to support the ANC, retracting its earlier muted threats to field candidates against the ANC (though some local Sanco branches did successfully support independent candidates). In return for its support, the ANC placed Sanco leaders on its election lists, ensuring many a position in local government. As a result, Sanco stood to lose the vast majority of its local, regional and national government leaders. This heightened an already pressing problem. Sanco's first President, Moses Mayekiso, left in 1994 to become a member of Parliament; in January 1995, its second president, Lechesa Tsenoli, joined Parliament to fill a vacancy. At this time, Sanco policy instructed that any Sanco leader joining government would have to resign from his or her position in the leadership of Sanco. Despite this fact, when over half of Sanco's leaders did enter government through local elections, many retained their Sanco leadership positions.

By the mid 1990s, the level of activity of most local civics across the country had reached a new low since their rise to prominence in the late 1970s (excepting during the successive states of emergency in the late 1980s). As individual civic leaders, and at times entire civic structures, worked to help the ANC in national and local election campaigns, little energy was spent on traditional civic programs. Volunteerism within the civics had also decreased markedly as those who could find new positions in government and business, did so. Sanco's support for the ANC in the elections only worked to sharpen the decline of popular participation in civic affairs. A local civic leader in Alexandra commented: 'It was after the elections that things became worse because we lost most of the leaders (to political office) and most of the people didn't understand how we may deign to be something else and not ANC when we were voting ANC during the elections'. (Interview, Mbalukwana, 27 June 1997).

After the great increase in interest in civic activities in 1990, the rather steep post-election decline came as a bit of a shock to some civic leaders. With the passage of time, however, attendance at civic meetings in a number of areas improved again. Community interest in civic events was, however, clearly dependent on the urgency of the matter which civic leaders hoped to address. For example, when electricity and water rate hikes were on the table, a large number of residents attended civic meetings; when local authorities threatened to switch off power, the meeting halls were overflowing. The election of new civic leaders, in contrast, consistently drew smaller numbers of participants. In areas where the civics were well established, some residents continued to visit civic leaders to consult with them on a range of issues, from disputes with neighbors to questions concerning the payment of pensions; in areas where the civic was less well established, such as Tokoza (where the civic was formed relatively late, and where violence had literally wiped out the leadership between 1990 and 1994), branch activities largely ceased and local leaders often made attempts to relaunch the structures. In some rural towns, such as Cradock and Grahamstown, which had previously had strong civic structures, migration to the cities for work devastated the civic leadership and caused the civics to largely cease operating.

In the years after the initiation of formal democracy in South Africa, civic structures struggled to redefine their roles, and encountered new difficulties in organising residents to meet many of the key challenges faced by poor township communities. A seasoned civic activist, Mzwanele Mayekiso argued rather eloquently:

Then, our common enemy was apartheid; today we face confusion about who to struggle against. Then, the political economic vision shared by most activists was socialism; now we lack clarity about our long-term goal (socialism, social democracy, or a successful form of neo-liberalism?).

Then, we saw the role of civil society as revolutionary; today, civil society is sometimes posed as a pliant partner to shrink-the-state, or merely as a watchdog for social democracy, and more rarely, as a stepping stone to socialism via community-based-struggle.

Then, the progressive hegemonic line was UDF non-racialism through mass politics; today, we suffer from top-down politics based increasingly on the politics of 'corporatism' (pacts between elites).

Then the dominant bottom-up sentiment was ungovernability and militancy; today, we find popular anger about the gravy train, alienation due to non-delivery, and activists now sometimes degenerating into 'on-the-make' activities, not progressive organising. (Mayekiso 1996: 7)

Despite these difficulties, local civic structures in many areas continued to operate, even as they were struggling.

While the national structure had rallied for a shift to development, 'development' proved to be an incredibly broad, almost all-inclusive mandate;¹¹ it was up to local structures to determine what they felt their role in 'development' should be and how they should interact with government on the issues that they chose to address. Across the country, four broad themes of civic activity attracted the greatest attention: service provision, crime, advice centers, and participation in community development projects. The first three, while posing great challenges, were clearly in line with the activities of civic associations in the 1980s and early 1990s, the last was a new addition and proved to be the most problematic for the continued existence of the local civics as grassroots, broad-based, mass-participatory organisations.

First, in contrast to apartheid era campaigns, local civic structures within the Sanco fold generally encouraged residents to pay for services under the ANC government, but they also continued to call for the improvement of those services. A

¹¹ Sanco's 1997 constitution (Sanco 1997a) which all local Sanco branches were required to adopt included a listing of Sanco's goals (this was a more succinct listing than that provided in the previous constitution (Sanco 1992).

1.3 Now therefore we commit ourselves to strive for the following:

- 1.3.1 the improvement of living conditions;
- 1.3.2 the eradication of poverty, homelessness and insecurity;
- 1.3.3 the building of an united community and country;
- 1.3.4 the promotion of social-economic and political justice for all;
- 1.3.5 the creation of empowerment structures;
- 1.3.6 job creation, wealth creation and distribution of resources;
- 1.3.7 social security and comfort for all;
- 1.3.8 the implementation of the freedoms and securities enshrined in the Constitution including freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of association and equality for all.
- 1.3.9 to actively and conscientiously promote the participation of youth and women in all its activities; and
- 1.3.10 the implementation of the reconstruction and development program (RDP).

regional civic leader in the Vaal clearly articulated Sanco's approach: 'We are no more a home of boycotters; we encourage people to pay for their services, but we also say to government that they should be sympathetic because people are unemployed' (Interview, Mazibuko, 27 May 1999). Rates of payment remained low, however, due to poverty, poor administration which led to incorrect statements, and popular frustration at the lack of service improvements. Civic leaders worked to make what little inroads they could in their local areas to improve both services and payments for services.

Second, in post-apartheid South Africa, local civic branches have addressed high rates of crime by participating in Community Policing Forums (CPFs), working to improve relations with the police, and most recently, engaging in sector policing. In the East Rand for example, civic branches worked to encourage residents not to buy stolen goods and to report any type of crime to the police, the CPF or an operator at a toll free number. Discussions in local CPF forums also addressed concerns as to how to ensure that residents were treated efficiently and compassionately when reporting violent crimes, particularly in the case of rape. Civic attempts to improve policing proved to be extremely difficult due to a lack of properly trained and paid officers, a clear and pressing lack of resources, including police stations, and in some cases, police corruption. This served as a central example to many civic activists of the limitations of a narrow understanding of civil society engagement as a 'watchdog' in which local civics only worked through existing government institutions, rather than either challenging them from outside or seeking change through active participation in political parties.

Third, most civics also continued to function as informal advice centers. This tended to be their least problematic or contested role, because here local branches essentially served an outreach function for government agencies. By the late 1990s, residents were often forced to seek out local civic leaders in their homes, or in the rare case that a local civic actually had a staffed office, in the local civic office. Given the political divisions within many township communities, some residents would not seek advice from civic leaders; given the decline in the popularity of civic structures, many would not know where to find civic leaders. Despite these realities, in many areas, residents still did come, day or night, to seek advice and help in addressing pressing local concerns ranging from evictions to pension checks.¹² In 2001, the Sanco branch in Diepkloof maintained a logbook registering the issues brought to Sanco by local residents; these ranged from a plumbing dispute with a private contractor to disputes over houses (Interview, Moedi, 25 January 2001). By 2004, many functioning local branches focused on this advice function in coordination with local government authorities, making residents aware of state programs ranging from housing programs to free lifeline services. These civic functions offered valuable services to those residents who were able to access them, and also supported government; in the words

¹² In many local areas, civic leaders stood out (and continue to stand out) in their communities as incredibly dedicated and socially conscious people. Two tragic examples which made newspaper headlines illustrate this point. In the Vaal area, Margaret Mvubelo, a local civic executive member, witnessed the sexual abuse of an 11 year old girl and promised to testify in the case. Despite death threats demanding that she withdraw from the case she refused to withdraw; on the weekend before she was to testify in court Monday morning, she was raped and strangled to death in her home (*The Sowetan*, December 4, 1996: 3). A second civic leader, Walmer (Port Elizabeth) Sanco president, Alfred Cholani, was stabbed to death after trying to stop a thief who had stolen R50 from a local shop (*Eastern Province Herald*, November 28, 1997: 1). Cholani had chaired a local anti-crime committee in the township. Some local residents were so angered that they promised to kill the suspect if he was released from custody (*Eastern Province Herald*, November 28, 1997: 2).

of one civic activist: 'Mostly, we are trying to promote the government' (Interview, Katumele, 11 June 2004).

Each of these tasks: addressing service provision and crime, and offering advice, though providing a community service, do not fall under the spectrum of development related activities which the national Sanco office initially hoped to encourage. Most often, local civic organisations simply did not have the necessary skills to actively participate in devising plans for community development. In some cases, they became involved as 'community partners' for privately funded development projects. In Evaton, for example, the civic branch helped a private developer in the marketing of his project to build new houses and then called upon residents to apply for the houses; the civic charged the developer R65 per house completed. Such projects allowed civic branches to pay for basic needs such as telephone lines and administrative work (Interview, Mazibuko, 27 May 1999). In other cases, such as in Soweto, a civic sponsored program to clean railway stations offered the civic the task of selecting the workers for the project (Interview, Tseleii, 19 May 1999).¹³ The problem, however, lay in the potentially unchecked power that such opportunities offered local civic leaders. Since the link between local civic structures and regional, provincial and national Sanco structures remained incredibly weak, there was no effective system to check any potential corruption or favoritism. Sanco President, Mlungisi Hlongwane admitted that Sanco's interactions with business donors were: 'open to manipulation' (*Mail and Guardian*, 1 September 1995: 7).

While the overwhelming majority of local civic branches was never involved in serious allegations of accepting bribes or stealing funds from projects, a common complaint by some township residents as well as NGOs, was that many local civics attempted to act as local gatekeepers. This was part of a tendency within many civic organisations to define their role as representing 'the community' as a whole. A local civic leader argued that, though less prevalent today, these problems still exist: 'In some cases you have representatives of Sanco, because they want to benefit from projects in those wards, they come to the councillors and they behave like deputy councillors in some senses to an extent that even some other members of the community cannot access the council.' (Interview, Tshabalala, 17 January 2004). Overall, the development initiatives of local Sanco branches were some of the least successful and most criticised of their projects. Branches that focused on issues of service provision, crime and advice were better able to exploit civic strengths and maintain a positive reputation within their communities. The success of local branches in maintaining support within their communities did not, however, necessarily translate into good working relations with local ANC leaders and government officials or Sanco national; increasingly the success of local branches in encouraging participation and representing community interests became disconnected from Sanco's national policies, programs and alliances.

Sanco in crisis

By 1997, just five years after its launch, Sanco was in a state of crisis. Sanco's President, Mlungisi Hlongwane, admitted the organisation's difficulties at the National Conference: 'Let us at the forefront admit that the sweeping political changes were too revolutionary in their pace that we were caught with our pens down. We have not come to grips with post-liberation politics' (Hlongwane 1997: 2). While the national

¹³ Unfortunately for the workers recruited by the civic, once the rather dilapidated station was cleaned up, a new tendering process was initiated to provide cleaning services. The lowest tender (which employed the least number of workers) won, and those hired by the civic lost their jobs.

leadership of Sanco initially described its difficulties as a product of insufficient resources, as time progressed, it increasingly also pointed to the uncertain and difficult role that Sanco sought to play in the new democracy, and tried to find ways to address these challenges. Sanco's lack of resources posed incredible restrictions upon its options, but the organisation's consistent attempt to remain close to, yet independent of, the ANC, lay at the core of this crisis and its potential solution (Zuern 2002).

Since 1994, Sanco had lost many of its best leaders to government. This led the National General Council to reverse its earlier policy and to allow individuals to remain in their leadership positions in Sanco while also accepting government roles. Mlungisi Hlongwane¹⁴ argued that the decision to allow Sanco leaders to hold public office was one of practical considerations rather than abstract, theoretical, academic debates (*The New Nation*, 20 March 1997: 20). Sanco simply could not afford to lose these leaders in the short term. The problem, however, would be the longer term impact that the 'wearing of two hats' by much of Sanco's leadership would have on the organisation. A regional Sanco leader commented: 'How will a Sanco leader, who also holds the position of councillor, conduct himself if he is called on to lead a march of residents against the local authority? Who will he lead the march against – himself?' (*New Nation*, 28 February 1997: 33). Another regional leader admitted: 'As a former leader of Sanco, now an ANC leader in government, you don't account to Sanco; you account to ANC and report to Sanco. You report to Sanco what is happening, but cannot be held responsible for actions by Sanco' (Interview, Sandi, 5 August 1997). Sanco leaders who accepted positions in the ANC, whether or not they maintained their positions in Sanco, could not effectively represent Sanco's interests when and if they went against those of the ANC or the government.

Leaders at all levels of the Sanco structures also complained that ANC leaders often attempted to give them instructions, and that ANC officials felt they had the right to veto Sanco programs. Conflicts between Sanco and ANC member were, however, most common at the level of local government. When civic branches criticised the work of local government in general or ANC councillors in particular, local ANC leaders often responded defensively and even aggressively. A February 1997 summit between Sanco and the ANC noted the 'widespread tensions between structures of the ANC and Sanco, especially at a local level' and the negative impact this had upon the 'delivery and development' of infrastructural and economic upliftment projects (Sanco, 1997b: Annexure C: 16). Concerns in many townships about the level of support that civics gave to the ANC also led to tensions. This was ironic, since the overwhelming majority of civic leaders vowed to vote for the ANC and also campaign for the ANC despite their periodic criticism of the party and some of its members. Some local civic leaders and ANC members also claimed that they were discriminated against within the local ANC structures. A final popular complaint among civic leaders in numerous townships was that they felt that they did a good deal of local work for which the ANC would later take credit.

Adding to its difficulties, Sanco was desperately short of resources. While many local civic structures had received donor funding prior to the 1994 elections, after 1994, such funding quickly dried up. By 1996, Sanco national had also lost its last significant external donor support, leading the national office to cut its remaining two administrative staff members after six others had left earlier in the year (*Mail and Guardian*, 20 December 1996: 'Business Brain Quits Sanco'). Sanco's attempts to

¹⁴ Sanco asked its third President to give up his position as a local government leader in the Vaal to return to Sanco full time; he did (*New Nation*, February 28, 1997: 33).

represent the interests of the poor in South Africa were significantly eroded by a simple inability to maintain offices and staff, to pay officers and assistants so that they might work for Sanco full-time and attend relevant community and government meetings, and participate in development and other stakeholder forums. In order to attempt to address this crisis of funds, two major initiatives were established: a national investment arm, Sanco Investment Holdings (SIH) launched in 1995 under the umbrella of the Sanco Development Trust, and a national membership campaign launched in 1996 that also offered members additional benefits. While both still exist today, neither brought the financial rewards that Sanco supporters had expected. The difficulties which both experienced also led to a number of scandals and significant negative publicity for the ailing Sanco structures.¹⁵

The launch of Sanco's national membership program marked a significant shift of authority to the national structure, as membership fees and programs that had previously been determined by local level structures (Sanco 1992: 7) were now, according to the new constitution, the responsibility of Sanco national (Sanco 1997a: 6.2). The idea was to offer a product, at a cheap price, as part of the membership deal to encourage literally millions to join. In order to do this, Sanco entered into a joint venture with the American International Group (AIG), to offer South Africans burial insurance. The R30 membership fee would be distributed between AIG and the national structure of Sanco which promised to give only R2 back to the local civic organisations.¹⁶ This was a high cost membership in comparison to the R5 membership generally charged by local civics, and it offered a particularly low return to local civics. As a result of a lack of consultation in developing the new membership scheme, local branches were often uncertain of the benefits and many township residents asked why they should sign up for burial insurance if they were already enrolled in programs elsewhere.

The response to the membership drive was extremely erratic and weak. In the vast majority of local civics, even the executive members of the civic did not sign up. At the Sanco National Conference in April, the President of Sanco scolded the delegates: 'It is because of this self-centeredness that four months after the launch of our membership drive the General Council still had to compel all Congress delegates to be paid up members of Sanco' (Hlongwane 1997: 12). Even with the forced recruitment leading up to the National Conference, only 5000 people had joined nationwide by the end of April (Sanco 1997b: 7). By late August 1997, after a series of serious difficulties, ranging from long delays in producing membership cards to disputes with AIG over the payment of burial insurance and a number of allegations of fraud, the program was cancelled. Though a new program was quickly established in its place, it too soon failed. A third program offering a R5 membership and a higher priced membership with insurance was suspended on June 1, 1999 after Sanco realised there was no insurance coverage (Interview, Williams, 31 May, 1999). Sanco's

¹⁵ In early 2001, SIH's first managing director, Moses Mayekiso, announced that investment records for an astonishing R80 million had been 'looted' by a former employee (*Mail and Guardian*, 11 April 2001: 'Sanco's Missing Millions'). After a hotly contested battle for the leadership of Sanco, Mayekiso resigned in July. Just one year later, the next chair of SIH, Godfrey Jack also left Sanco and SIH under a cloud of counter-accusations concerning an internal audit of SIH funds (*Sunday Times*, 21 July 2002: 'Corruption Row Taints Civic Body'; *The Star*, 22 July 2002: 2; *Mail and Guardian*, 26 July 2002: 'National Civics Organization Torn by Byzantine Wrangle'). Today, SIH does not have an independent chairman but is overseen by the senior leadership of Sanco.

¹⁶ The breakdown of the membership fee was the following: R13.42 to AIG for the funeral insurance scheme, R 3.16 for administrative costs (paid to the national office), R3.42 to the Post office, R2.00 for the recruiter, R2.00 for each level of Sanco (national, provincial, regional, branch) (Sanco 1997b: 8).

membership programs, originally launched to demonstrate the great strength of the civic structures and their support across South Africa, only worked to demonstrate Sanco's greatest weaknesses: poor communication, inexperienced staff, top-down programs and inefficient structures. In 2001, at the third National Conference, the membership fee was raised to R10, and though some areas have actively signed up members, no national membership statistics are available.

Both the membership campaigns and the establishment of SIH sought unsuccessfully to improve Sanco's finances and thereby to offer it greater independence. Sanco national's lack of financial viability and its close relationship to the ANC, led many local branches which continued to operate, to become increasingly critical of the national structure and its top-down approach (Zuern 2002). First, local civic leaders in many areas across the country complained that the higher levels of Sanco did not know what was occurring on the ground. One offered an analogy: 'If a person is standing on a platform above the crowd, when the crowd pushes, the person on the platform won't feel the pressure' (Interview, Menu 1 August, 1997). Clearly, communication was made considerably more difficult by Sanco's lack of resources which meant that most branches, some regions and a number of provinces had no offices, no phones, and no fax lines.¹⁷

Second, local civics often felt that when SANCO leaders did communicate with them, it was in the form of an instruction or a correction rather than a conversation. A local civic leader in Soweto neatly summed up his experiences within the civic after the SCA became Sanco Soweto:

Nothing has changed. But of course we have lost our independence. ...Now, if we take a decision here, someone questions you at the other levels, saying: 'How can you give us a decision, this is not the policy of the organisation'. So whatever we do now, we have to look over our shoulders and say: 'Are we doing the right thing?' (Interview, Tseleii, 11 July 1997)

The unitary structure of Sanco clearly fueled tensions between the various levels by effectively making each level of Sanco responsible to the next higher level rather than the one below. The constitutional clauses granting decision-making powers to national bodies were top among the 'frustrating' aspects of the new constitution for local civic leaders. National, provincial, regional and local Sanco leaders were also, as a result of a lack of regular meetings, not asked to stand in elections as frequently as the constitution required, forcing the President of Sanco to admit that thousands of Sanco leaders were well on their way to becoming traditional leaders (Hlongwane 1997: 13).

It is possible that local civics would have acceded to this power structure with considerably less complaint if they felt that they received something in return, but given the dire financial state of the national office, local civics gained few resources from their affiliation to Sanco. Sanco's lack of capacity also prevented its national structures from addressing national issues relevant to the civic. In the case of the development of South Africa's new constitution, a process which was carefully devised to allow significant feedback from civil society actors, Sanco was unable to participate due to its own admitted 'lack of internal capacity' (Sanco, 1997b Annexure C: 3). In the area of housing, clearly a central concern to most of Sanco's potential members and a relatively well run department within Sanco, a clear perception within the government housing ministry of Sanco's lack of skill, understanding, and training

¹⁷ By 2004, Sanco national no longer had a functioning office.

adversely affected any chance of meaningful policy discussions with the ministry (Sanco 1997b: Annexure D).

Given these difficulties, local structures within Sanco often found much to complain about. Those that complained the loudest tended to be some of the strongest structures prior to the formation of Sanco and those who had the fewest of their former leaders represented at the highest levels of the Sanco structures; these were primarily the civics in South Africa's commercial heartland, Gauteng. It was here, in 1997, that a combination of suspensions and resignations of a number of popular leaders severely fractured the civic. The debates within Sanco's ranks concerning each of these long-time civic leaders were both public and vicious. Local and national newspapers reported on the battles, and were increasingly critical of Sanco's approach and questioned its organisational strength. Sanco's response to the defections from its ranks did not help its public image. Its leaders frequently characterised the moves made by individual leaders away from Sanco as moves away from the ANC. Such accusations only increased the public perception of Sanco as not only an ANC ally, but also an ANC lackey. In 1998, the Gauteng Sanco dissidents Mzwanele Mayekiso, Ali Tleane and Maynard Menu among others launched a new federal civic structure, the National Association of Residents and Civic Organisations (Narco).

Sanco's difficulties were not, however, limited to Gauteng. In late 1997, the leadership of the Transkei region of Sanco broke away from the national body, citing Sanco's ties to the ANC as a major concern (Lodge 1999: 90). In early 1998, the Northern Cape region also considered breaking away from Sanco (Gumede 1998). In 1999, a number of Sanco regions in the Eastern Cape passed a vote of no-confidence in their Provincial Executive Committee; the regions also agreed to oust all Sanco executives who simultaneously held political posts (*Daily Dispatch*, 18 May 1999: 'Sanco Move to Oust Mamse'). These events, similar to those in the Gauteng province which led to the formation of Narco, were quite dramatic. In less dramatic fashion, a number of local civic structures increasingly distanced themselves from Sanco and returned to the earlier strength of the civics, their localised nature and the autonomous development of responses to local issues.

Reassessing Sanco's role

In response to this crisis, Sanco began to reassess its earlier self-definition as an independent watchdog. The theme of Sanco's 1997 conference: 'Building a Revolutionary Social Movement to Conquer Challenges of the 21st Century', signaled a shift in rhetoric which was to crystallise in the following years. At the 1997 National Congress, Sanco's president asked the assembled delegates if Sanco really was 'an independent and autonomous organ of civil society', and whether or not it in fact needed to be independent. He later added that Sanco's independence must be defined within 'the context of the current stage of our revolution' (Hlongwane 1997: 1, 7). In a clear attempt to tap into what they observed as a growing restlessness and frustration within many townships, Sanco leaders argued that they would not work through negotiations alone. In 1998, Sanco's president asserted: 'It (Sanco) will not discard its tactics of protest and mass action which it used in the '80s to effectively combat apartheid' (*The Sowetan*, 20 April 1998: 11). Such arguments clearly contradicted Sanco's earlier rhetoric that a new era in South African politics meant a departure from revolutionary and mass action tactics.

While in 1996, Sanco's president had claimed that Sanco would help the police evict defaulters but would still protect the poor, in late 1997, after the cutting of electricity in Gauteng and the popular anger in response, President Hlongwane argued

that Sanco opposed such clampdowns and its previous policy had been wrong. Sanco was clearly concerned that if it did not support the many who opposed the government's actions in townships such as Tsakane, angry residents would form new organisations which would. In a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding negotiated within NEDLAC, Sanco supported the government in its demand that residents who receive services should pay for them, but underlined its lack of support for any forceful actions such as the cutting of electricity cables in areas where payment rates were very low.

In a 1999 Sanco discussion document which was subsequently excerpted in the ANC's publication, *Umrabulo*, Sanco's leaders once again tabled a number of options for Sanco's future. The five options reflected longstanding debates: become a political party, remain a watchdog, maintain its current confused state, transition to a development agency or become a revolutionary social movement.¹⁸ Of these, the second and third options respectively represented Sanco's intentions at its launch and described its current state. The authors described the option of Sanco as 'watchdog' as 'the classic illustration or caricature of the Western definition or idea of civil society', adding the critical warning that if Sanco pursued this option, it 'shall no more serve the constituency that formed it' (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999). The third option was dismissed with scathing language:

Sanco operates in a confusing and haphazard manner, by fooling everybody on its role (including itself). It operates independently, but is comprehensively dependent on the material circumstances or powers that be. Its programme and agendas are thoroughly influenced by the material circumstance and situation. ... We resolved to be outside of formal structures of the Alliance, and complain when we are not invited to Alliance meetings. We pronounce proudly that we are independent, yet we insist on placing Sanco leaders on the ANC list as Sanco nominees. (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999)

The authors concluded: 'There are no real positives from this scenario, other than Sanco existing in name, and for the sake of historical polemic in future debates' (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999). This third option, which effectively pinpointed Sanco's greatest failures, also offered the strongest internal critique of Sanco released to the broader public.

The remaining three alternatives led to the greatest debates within Sanco. The first suggested that Sanco should formally leave the sphere of civil society to enter political society and contest local government elections. Drawing upon the successes of Sanco leaders who ran as ward councillors in 1995, the authors of the document argued that Sanco would be quite successful if it pursued this track, and suggested that the 2000 local government elections would be a clear opportunity to test this approach. The authors also warned, however, 'Sanco shall no longer exist as a social movement, and must be willing to pay that price' (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999). At the time, this option was most strongly supported by local Sanco activists who were frustrated with their ANC councillors. It was also the one recommendation which gained the greatest

¹⁸ A final option, not mentioned in the Sanco discussion document but in the article following it in *Umrabulo* 7, offered an ANC position that Sanco had failed as a membership based national civic organization and should fold into a new type of ANC branch (Makura 1999). This suggestion angered many Sanco supporters and was not considered as a valid option within Sanco.

press attention. Shortly after the release of *Umrabulo*, the *Sunday Independent* ran a headline ‘Sanco Considers Becoming a Political Party’ (30 January 2000: 1).

While this proposal was not endorsed by Sanco at its national conference, and Sanco national again pledged its support for the ANC in the 2000 local government elections, the Eastern Cape region of Sanco defied this directive and vowed to only endorse individual candidates (Sanco Pedu 2000). The President of Sanco, clearly rattled, threatened that an intervention from the national office might become necessary if there was no change in approach, but the regional leaders were undaunted, arguing that they could not let Sanco’s affiliation to the ANC undermine their local responsibilities (Interview, Tofile, 22 January 2001). Penrose Ntlonti, a regional Sanco executive member, argued that Sanco would support independent candidates because it needed to be accountable to its constituents (quoted in *Daily Dispatch*, 8 July 2000: ‘Sanco to Get Tough with Anti-ANC Dissidents’); he later admitted that Sanco was also frustrated that some of its candidates had been dropped from local election lists (*Financial Mail*, 29 September 2000: 39). One Eastern Cape civic leader, who was quite concerned as to the possible repercussions of their challenge to the ANC, argued that unquestioning support for the ANC significantly threatened the civic’s continued existence. ‘We find in Sanco that the more we stick within the alliance, the more we became dictatorial to our people’ (Interview, Anonymous 1, Port Elizabeth, 2001).

Both the authors of the Sanco discussion document and the Eastern Cape supporters of independent candidates overestimated local support for Sanco candidates who challenged the ANC. None of the Port Elizabeth candidates won local office. This failure at the polls demonstrated the continued overwhelming electoral support for the ANC, despite considerable discontent with local government performance and the failings of numerous ANC councillors (Zuern 2002). A local Sanco supporter in the Port Elizabeth region voiced his frustration at the results: ‘People still see the ANC as the only agent to change their lives; they don’t see that their lives are in their hands’ (Interview, Anonymous 2, Port Elizabeth, 2001). National leaders of Sanco employed this lack of success at the polls to underline their pronouncements that Sanco would not and should not become a political party. Despite these arguments, concern, particularly within the ANC, that Sanco might reconsider, clearly remain. In Hlongwane’s address to the ANC at its 2002 national conference, he stressed once again that Sanco would not become a political party, noting: ‘Sanco would have no relevance if its intention is to compete with the ANC’¹⁹ (SAPA, 18 December 2002). While the national leadership of Sanco remains committed to this promise, local Sanco leaders continue to stress the need to keep their options open, depending upon local government performance in the run up to the 2005 local elections.

The next seemingly viable option, for Sanco to operate as a ‘self-sustaining, commercially-focused and mass-based development agency’ (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999), was presented as a more realistic but still not optimal choice. The discussion document authors argued that this would leave Sanco ‘without any genuine political agenda’ and that this option made sense only if ‘we believe that we no longer have political space because of the democratic dispensation’ (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999). This alternative was broadly represented by Moses Mayekiso as the managing director of SIH and a candidate for the presidency of Sanco at the 2001 national conference. After a rather bitter contest, Mayekiso was defeated by the standing president, and

¹⁹ In a further attempt to calm any ANC concerns, Hlongwane also pledged that Sanco would not accept any expelled ANC members into its ranks. ‘Sanco also has a warning to all opportunists. Sanco has closed its door to all people who were expelled from the ANC and who have jumped to Sanco.’ (SAPA, 18 December 2002).

resigned to form a new national civic structure: the Congress for South African non-Racial Civic Organisations Movement (Cosancom). While Mayekiso championed an alternative to Hlongwane's vision for Sanco which would be a more independent and a federal rather than unitary structure (Interview, Mayekiso, 13 January 2004), his new model was remarkably similar to Sanco. Mayekiso did not seek to launch a development agency, but rather a national, broad-based civic structure. His new structure was in many respects similar to Narco, led by the Gauteng dissidents, who also emphasised the necessity for political independence and a federal structure. Importantly, neither group of dissidents sought to radically change the Sanco model, only to revise it, but both new organisations failed to develop an effective national structure.

The existing Sanco model demonstrated remarkable resilience, and therefore seemed to require less dramatic changes which would allow it to more fully capitalise on its earlier strengths. This was best represented in the final option presented in the Sanco discussion document: Sanco as a revolutionary social movement. This option was clearly favored by a number of Sanco leaders, including its president, and reflected the theme of the 1997 conference.

Sanco is an independent and autonomous organ of civil society, implementing its resolutions, guided by its mass base and informed by its historical mandate. It is confrontational and champions the cause of the historically marginalised. It does not digress from the National Democratic Revolution. (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999)

Interestingly, this option concluded by challenging the two-hats policy in place since 1997. '(T)his scenario does not allow the leadership to serve two masters, by being both in government and a Sanco leader, since the question of independence becomes central.' (quoted in *Umrabulo* 7 1999).

Mlungisi Hlongwane's victory in the presidential contest at Sanco's third national conference and the eventual collapse of the alternative models, seemed to suggest that Sanco would follow the final option and transform itself into a truly revolutionary social movement. The conference's resolutions and Hlongwane's statements, however, already demonstrated that Sanco would not fully pursue the distinct path laid out in the discussion document. This option placed considerable emphasis upon Sanco's independence from the ANC and the need for an end to the 'two-hats' policy. The conference did not, however, change Sanco's policy allowing dual leadership roles in Sanco and government. Hlongwane, in his addresses to the conference, noted the need for Sanco to strengthen its relationship with the ANC, but now as an equal partner in the alliance. President Mbeki, who also addressed the conference, underlined the civic's role as a partner to government, arguing that 'Sanco should help the local government in delivering services' (SAPA, 21 April 2001; 22 April 2001).

The notion of a revolutionary social movement suggested a break from Sanco's recent past toward greater independence from the ANC. But while Sanco at first seemed to be considering this option, it soon moved in the opposite direction. In 2000 and 2001, Sanco engaged in a number of actions which directly challenged the core principles of the government's macroeconomic policy. In May 2000, for example, Sanco, along with Cosatu and other organisations, protested Johannesburg's Igoli 2002 plan (SAPA, 18 May 2000). In 2001, Sanco joined Cosatu's two-day stayaway to

protest privatisation (SAPA, 31 August 2001). The ANC was clearly frustrated by Sanco's support for the growing anti-privatisation movement championed, not just by Cosatu, but also by new bodies such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum, which ANC leaders had collectively branded as 'ultra-left'. This led to rumors that the ANC's national executive committee would support Moses Mayekiso's new civic Cosancom, which was still receiving considerable attention at this time (*Mail and Guardian*, 28 September 2001: 'Sanco an Albatross Around ANC's Neck').

Between the 2001 and 2002 Cosatu anti-privatisation strikes, Sanco's national leaders reconsidered their support for Cosatu's actions. Sanco leaders underlined that their first priority was in helping poor communities and that this concern importantly included the efficient delivery of basic services. Second, they were concerned by what they saw as the conflictual relationship between Cosatu and the ANC which Sanco leaders defined as increasingly unproductive (Interview, Williams, 4 June 2004). It is quite clear that, given this situation, Sanco's leaders felt pressed to choose a side in the polarising debate. When Cosatu launched its next anti-privatisation strike in 2002, Sanco pulled out at the last minute. Though the circumstances of this pull-out have been hotly debated, Sanco leaders have offered a clear rationale for their actions. Mlungisi Hlongwane argued:

The tone had changed... because we started realising that the issues that Cosatu were (sic) advancing were beginning to be much more broader than just fighting against privatisation, but it was beginning to question the leadership of the African National Congress in the alliance. It was also beginning to send wrong political messages to the masses on the ground about our confidence in an ANC government. ... In our view, it was departing completely from what we understood as the glue that held the alliance together, the fundamental pillars of the alliance which included our shared vision of a society crafted along the principles of the Freedom Charter. (Interview, Hlongwane, 9 June 2004)

Sanco national had both strategic and substantive reasons for withdrawing its support. In direct contrast to new movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), which directly challenged not only forceful state-supported or state-led actions such as service cuts and home evictions but also the very policies of the state, Sanco leaders endorsed the state's cost recovery model of development. Sanco also strategically supported the ANC's call for unity to further the national democratic revolution. Sanco leaders, as demonstrated in the quote above, argued that the best way to bring greater benefits and services to the people would be to support government programs rather than to engage in what they believed were ideologically motivated debates.

Sanco's strategic decision, while creating some confusion and provoking sporadic resistance in local areas, did pay off in terms of the national structure's formal relationship with the ANC. While some local Sanco leaders defied Sanco's call, which they first heard on 702 Radio, to withdraw their support for the anti-privatisation strike,²⁰ ANC leaders were clearly pleased by Sanco's support. In November, Sanco

²⁰ One local Sanco leader was pressed to the head of his local march: 'The President announced, of Sanco, to say no one must take part in these demonstrations of anti-privatization. You remember? Now, being a member of the ... Union... and affiliated to Cosatu, I went to a march of Cosatu. When I arrived there, a lot of comrades were saying: "Yeah, come, come, come." You know, I was wearing a Cosatu cap and knowing that I am the (leader) of Sanco and the President announced that we should not take

strengthened its ties to the ANC by electing two senior ANC members to Sanco's senior leadership. The Minister of Public Enterprises, Jeff Radebe²¹ (recently ousted from the Communist Party's central committee), joined the national executive committee, and Susan Shabangu, the Deputy Minister of Minerals and Energy, became Sanco's treasurer (*Mail and Guardian*, 29 November 2002: 'News in Brief'). At the ANC's national conference in December, Mbeki importantly called upon the ANC to expand the tripartite alliance to a quad alliance which would include Sanco as a full member (*Financial Mail*, 20 December 2002: 'Cosatu, Capitalist Allies'). As the ANC sought to revive its branches and its connection to township residents in the wake of growing discontent and the rise of new social movements challenging the government, it was clearly reaching out to Sanco for help. In the run-up to the next elections, the ANC sought Sanco's support for door-to-door community campaigns in return for greater acknowledgement of Sanco's role as an alliance partner.

Expanding political opportunities

During the first decade of democratic rule, Sanco experienced a sharp decline as a national civic structure; it suffered multiple public crises and many of its former local branches simply ceased to operate, and many of those that continued to exist were often dormant until a local crisis occurred. In this state of affairs, Sanco's claim to represent masses of community residents across the country was often greeted with strong skepticism, if not outright disbelief. Sanco's greatest success towards the end of the decade, was in its renewed ability to exploit its relationship with the ANC to maintain itself as a presence in South Africa despite its pressing weaknesses as a national structure. Sanco could not realistically claim the breadth of support that it hoped for, but it could finesse its position between the ANC and the local communities where it did still have effective and popular local leaders.

Sanco's greatest public coup concerned electricity arrears in Soweto. Since 1994, service delivery had clearly posed one of the greatest challenges to friendly but critical relations between community activists and ANC local government representatives. While local civic responses varied from community to community, Sanco's overall policy supported the logic of the credit control measures, even where this meant widespread electricity disconnections and the installation of waterflow restrictors.²² As residents became increasingly desperate and angry, groups such as the SECC, which took a more radical approach, gained in popularity. Sanco's response to this challenge was to leverage its position by threatening mass action in an attempt to upstage the SECC²³ while simultaneously presenting itself as a credible negotiating partner with Eskom. In 2002, Sanco participated in negotiations with Eskom and government representatives, which led to an agreement that residents with faulty meters would pay a flat fee of R120 per month until their meter was fixed (SAPA, 26 April 2002). In local areas such as Zola, civic leaders strategically drew attention to these agreements to convince community residents that Sanco, rather than the SECC, would find a solution to their problems (Interview, Monnagotla, 15 July 2002). Sanco

part, they insisted that I must be in the forefront. I must lead the march so that the President can see that you are violating.' (Interview, Anonymous 3, Gauteng, 2004).

²¹ After the 2004 elections, Jeff Radebe became the Minister of Transport.

²² One civic leader in the Vaal summed up Sanco's general approach: 'We need to protect (the consumer) as Sanco, but you protect a consumer who is obedient.' (Interview, Lehoko, 9 June 2004).

²³ In June 2001, for example, just days ahead of a planned SECC march, Sanco also threatened mass action (SAPA, 7 June 2001: 'Sanco Threatens Mass Action').

effectively sought to assert itself as the primary broker between township residents and state actors.

Sanco's greatest triumph, however, came in May 2003. Eskom and the Ministry of Public Enterprises (headed by Jeff Radebe, a recent member of Sanco's NEC), along with the Human Rights Commission and Sanco, came to an agreement to write off R1,39 billion in Johannesburg arrears. While this write off was clearly in response to the great impact that groups like the SECC and APF had upon government policy, Sanco, rather than the SECC or APF, was included in the negotiations as a public representative, and therefore given at least formal credit for the write-off. A supporter of the SECC and APF campaigns wrote: 'All but moribund 12 months ago, Sanco has suddenly come to life with resources and influence from political heavyweights in national government, determined, it would seem, to counter the growing influence – and anti-neoliberalism – of SECC and the AFP' (McDonald, 26 May 2003).

A Sanco leader summed up Sanco's strategy regarding the challenges it faced from groups such as the SECC, and the ways in which it employed its relationship with government:

Credit goes to Sanco ... As a civic movement we grab those people that support Trevor (Ngwane), look at their issues and actually change them. We can strategise. ... Let the credit come to Sanco, and then Sanco will take the credit back to government. It is quite a nice ballgame. ... Whilst now we confront, they deliver, the credit goes to Sanco, you take the credit back to government. You call a mass meeting, address the people, and say government has delivered. That is how you deal with it; you actually strategically try to isolate them (SECC and others). (Interview, Anonymous 4, Gauteng, 2004)

Sanco therefore presented itself to local communities as a problem solver which could employ its relationship with the government to address residents' concerns. This argument, however, deliberately ignores the role that the SECC had played. Without pressure from the SECC and massive non-payment, Eskom would never have offered such a large write-off. In contrast, in Tshwane, where Sanco leaders participated in a series of negotiations with the metropolitan government council and where no group such as the SECC had engaged in large mobilisations prior to negotiations, the council refused Sanco's request to write off outstanding arrears, arguing that effective credit control measures were already in place (SAPA, 12 May 2003).

Sanco's success on the question of electricity arrears in Tshwane was therefore limited by its relatively non-confrontational approach, but Tshwane's greater vibrancy as a local Sanco region was a result of an interesting diversity of seemingly contradictory tactics. As argued in the introduction, Tshwane serves as an interesting case study of a Sanco region, as it is both an active region and remains connected to the higher level structures of Sanco. It therefore serves as an excellent example of both the strengths and limitations of the Sanco model where it works effectively. In the region, Sanco leaders offer formal support to a number of government policies endorsed by Sanco national but bitterly contested by a many new social movements. These policies include the contentious credit control procedures from services to housing. Sanco leaders therefore supported, even endorsed, the cutting of electricity, but also argued for lifeline tariffs which would give all residents access to a minimal amount of water and all paying consumers a small amount of electricity for free (Interviews: Qhakaza, 15 January 2004; Tshabalala, 17 January 2004). Sanco branches also work with banks to try to help people to get loans, but are then asked by the banks

for a quid pro quo. One local civic leader commented: ‘The banks are honest with us, to say: “We want to help, if you can assist in those who owe us, we will also assist you in those who need loans”. It puts us in a difficult position, but you see we must sit down and see what we can come up with’ (Interview, Katumele, 11 June 2004).

When asked to point to one of their most vibrant regions, national and provincial level leaders of Sanco frequently mentioned Tshwane, and argued that one of the reasons for Tshwane’s success has been the quality of its leaders (Interviews: Matila, 15 January 2004; Mdakane, 16 January 2004; Mngomezulu, 14 January 2004). Many of Tshwane’s leaders seem to be so successful because they have become quite adept at managing the contradictions of their role as Sanco leaders in alliance with the ANC vis-à-vis their role as representatives of poor communities. Sanco’s constituents vary from area to area, however, so even within Tshwane, it is not possible to offer a simple profile of Sanco supporters. While community leaders in Mamelodi West argued that residents who had moved from informal to formal areas provided some of the greatest support to Sanco, in Soshanguve leaders argued that their greatest support came from the informal settlements (Interviews: Katumele, 11 June 2004; Makahanya, 11 June 2004; Mgidi, 11 June 2004; Qhakaza, 15 January 2004).

While functioning Sanco structures throughout Gauteng put aside their Sanco work to campaign for the ANC in the 2004 national and provincial elections, Tshwane stood out as the only Sanco region in Gauteng to openly campaign for the ANC in the 2000 local government elections (Heller and Ntlokonkulu 2001: 39). Local Sanco leaders argue that their support for the ANC at the local level was a simple product of their ability to place a rather large number of Sanco leaders and supporters on the ANC lists, but even with this potential support, Sanco leaders found that they needed to continuously demonstrate their support in order to press their concerns to local councillors.

Though Sanco as an organisation always stressed negotiations over protest, with mass protests only as a last resort, local Sanco leaders repeatedly argued that it was necessary to demonstrate their capacity for protest and even the potential to cause ‘damage’ to draw attention to their concerns.

I believed in our branches in Sanco actually creating damage so that the ANC can run to us and say ‘comrade’. The ANC will keep despising you if you are not acting. ... That’s why we go there and stop the project completely. And then the leadership would come to me or government would call me and say ‘Look your people on the ground are actually stopping the project’ and I say ‘Why? Why are they stopping the project?’ ‘No we don’t know, they are arrogant’. ... I say, ‘No, they have a reason. Arrange a meeting, and then we will come and speak formally, but by the time I come to you I will have met my (people) on the ground, and I will be coming to you with concrete reasons why they stopped the project’. ... And I know, I know, I was part of stopping that project, but I will behave innocently as if I don’t know. But I already know the reason. (Interview, Anonymous 5, Tshwane, 2004)

Sanco leaders openly acknowledged that their actions contradicted Sanco policies, but noted that this was simply the most effective way of bringing about change.

And therefore whilst we were supporting as leaders, but we will treat it very sensitively, because we know that we want to achieve certain things, but it is also wrong. And therefore, we will distance ourselves, not necessarily distance

ourselves from the leaders (in the community), but we will distance ourselves from the act. To say that we condemn that act. ... When you are a leader and you have followers, they wouldn't necessarily do things like those without informing you. They would actually want your approval. ... And you wouldn't say to them: 'Look, invade the land'. You would just say to them: 'Comrade, you are a leader. Do what has to be done. Take a decision and implement'. ... We can't just distance from you, we can distance from the act that you are doing, if it is illegal, but we won't distance ourselves from you. (Interview, Anonymous 5, Tshwane, 2004)

Sanco leaders therefore navigated a careful line of supporting popular community demands while presenting themselves as viable and reliable negotiators with local government authorities. This brokerage role allowed Sanco to exploit its local position as well as its alliance with the ANC. In this case, what was often seen as an impediment was turned into a strength by a careful shifting of the rules of the game. Here, Sanco could potentially capture the power of a locally based social movement by encouraging protest, and harness that influence by employing its politically connected national institutional structure.

These contradictions do, however, become even more difficult to navigate when Sanco leaders work for local government authorities in some capacity. While such contradictions are almost impossible to exploit when Sanco leaders are also local councillors, individuals working in other positions in local government can, at times, employ their access to press civic concerns. A local Sanco leader in this position explained his trepidation about honestly representing Sanco in a meeting with the local authority who was also his boss:

(My chairperson in Sanco) gave the introductory remarks and said: 'Now I am going to let (my deputy) speak on behalf of local issues.' The (government official) is my boss; he is my boss. ... Before I could speak, I had a sip of water, because I didn't know how I could respond. Then I started to put the positions, 'These are the things; this is what is happening. ... 'Then the (government official) responded, he said: 'You have highly, highly disappointed me'. That I don't behave like other officials. I did not even tip him to say that Sanco was coming. I didn't even tell him so that he can prepare himself. And then he pointed to some comrades who were with Sanco somewhere, he said: 'See these guys when they see anything on the ground they rush to me... So these guys are talking to me, but you don't report to me'. And I said: 'You see, (sir), you are right, I am your employee, but in Sanco I am your boss, because I am ... here to represent that organisation'.... From there I felt bad, but I was not representing myself, I was representing the organisation. (Interview, Anonymous 6, Tshwane, 2004)

This direct and critical representation of local concerns and demands as Sanco without prior warning clearly surprised the local authority. The individual who stood up to present these grievances admirably demonstrated his dedication to Sanco's ideals and risked his primary employment by doing so. Such interventions can potentially build upon and support local mobilisation to bring residents' concerns to local authorities, both on the street and in council chambers. This represents an ideal model for Sanco's role as an agent of participatory processes of democracy and development, but, as the

local official's response clearly indicates, this is clearly not the norm in Sanco-ANC relations.

Sanco today

Sanco defines itself today as a revolutionary social movement seeking to promote 'people-driven and people-centered development'. Sanco leaders argue that they have opened doors for greater participation in public debates by engaging government within established institutional structures and convincing the ANC of the importance of Sanco as an alliance partner (Interviews, Williams, 2 and 4 June 2004). In so doing, Sanco has much more closely followed the guarded and self-protecting model of the early SCA than the more aggressive and revolutionary model of PEBCO. This naturally leads to the question, asked by many, as to whether Sanco has simply been co-opted by, or sought to be co-opted by the ANC. Sanco's president replies:

Our call that we needed to be recognised as a fully fledged member of the alliance, it was purely based on ensuring that our voice is not a voice of a distant step-child screaming outside hoping to be heard when policies were being made inside the alliance, inside the African National Congress. If people call that co-option, it is fine. (Interview, Hlongwane, 9 June 2004)

Local and national Sanco leaders consistently argue that Sanco does not seek to draw attention to itself through the media and that it seeks to bring about change through negotiation. This clearly clouds the question of co-option, because Sanco leaders will argue that their interests in general correspond to those of the ANC government. It is therefore difficult to demonstrate recent instances in which Sanco as a national body has affected changes in government policy.

One Sanco officer, a well known Tshwane leader who is now the Organising Secretary for Sanco Gauteng, argued that Sanco's overall role is to ease relations between township residents and the government.

Sanco is a cushion, on both sides. ... It works both ways. It is a cushion on the government side, but it is also a cushion on the people's side. Then it actually eases tensions, because anything that happens, we do not say: 'Look, do as you wish'. We are saying: 'We are negotiating'. (Interview, Qhakaza, 9 June 2004)

Sanco clearly plays this brokerage role. It has positioned itself as an intermediary between communities and local government authorities. It has offered its support to the ANC to help the party campaign in national, provincial as well as local government elections; it has offered its position in local communities to inform people of government policies and programs. How well it plays this role and whether or not in doing so it represents the interests of the majority of local residents, completely depends upon the actions of local Sanco leaders. Tshwane's success was a result of the dedication of its leaders and their ability to work within the given context. Where local leaders can effectively manage the contradictions they face, they can potentially help both government and poor communities. Where, as is often the case, Sanco structures are weak or non-existent and local Sanco leaders are seen as too closely allied with government, or are government leaders themselves, frustrated communities have increasingly organised alternative movements to more directly challenge the state.

Sanco leaders openly admit that the national level of Sanco has become largely irrelevant to local communities across the country and that it has not effectively

responded to issues arising in local communities. They add, however, that Sanco will continue to exist, regardless of the strength, weakness, or perhaps even existence of Sanco national. Despite all its difficulties, Sanco branches continue to stand as a model of organisation, though frequently in a state of hibernation. Interviews with ward councillors in early 2001 in township communities across Gauteng, for example, demonstrated that Sanco branches continued to exist in many areas, but generally remained quite quiet. When issues arise, the branches or their leaders occasionally reappear in the news. Most recently, this was the case in Diepsloot, where local residents protested against relocation, and Sanco's local leadership (along with local ANC leaders) were chastised by the ANC for the violent protests which occurred (*Sunday Independent*, 11 July 2004: 'Diepsloot – an Anatomy of an Abusive Relationship'). Sanco therefore continues to maintain a varied local and national presence.

The last five years have been quite clearly marked by the rise of new, radical social movements, rather than the revitalisation of Sanco as a mass-based, revolutionary actor. Though Sanco national has made considerable strides in encouraging ANC leaders to publicly acknowledge and praise the role of Sanco, there is little evidence that Sanco has been able to act as a full member of the alliance, except in implementing election campaigns preceding national and provincial elections. While Sanco has succeeded in muting talk within some quarters of the ANC of turning Sanco branches into ANC branches, Sanco has failed to follow the course of the revolutionary social movement that it set out for itself. In areas such as Tshwane, local Sanco branches are quite vibrant and leaders are engaged in an impressive schedule of meetings to discuss local concerns and the most effective means of addressing them, but even here, local leaders admit significant difficulties in signing up members and relaunching branches in areas that have ceased to operate.

Continuities and contradictions

Many analysts and political actors who expected or called for Sanco's demise following South Africa's formal transition to a democratic state, argued that the changing context and its new political opportunities and constraints worked against a civil society organisation as broad as Sanco. Sanco's model, many argued, was only viable in a non-democratic state in which truly oppositional political parties were banned and government sought to repress, rather than represent, the majority of the population. In this earlier context, a broad range of civics offered local residents the opportunity, not only to meet and discuss local concerns, but also to pressure the state to address these concerns. With the legalisation of banned opposition parties and the advent of a democratic state, the institutions of the state were now meant to take over many of the roles that the civics had performed, thereby making them redundant. This static and one-dimensional understanding of political opportunity misinterpreted the developing context.

These arguments failed to recognise the severe challenges faced by the new local authorities after 1994, and the ways in which these challenges were to affect citizen-government interactions. Local and national government simply could not meet the overwhelming material needs of poor communities, from housing and services to jobs and security. Local government authorities were under-resourced and far too frequently failed to adequately represent, let alone meet, the basic concerns of their constituents. The increasing material deprivation and the dearth of popular representation that followed the formal transition of power, provided a space for local Sanco branches to continue to operate; it also provided an opportunity for a new breed

of social movement which would stand to the left of Sanco and put far greater pressure upon the state to meet popular demands than Sanco was able or willing to do. This combination of the state's lack of local capacity and the growth of these new radical movements, offered Sanco an opportunity to navigate the gap by employing the potential influence of its remaining local branches to broadly support the ANC government.

Sanco's loss of resources after 1994, both material and human, dealt the organisation a major blow from which it never fully recovered, but Sanco is not moribund. It has a presence at the national level as an ally of the ANC; it has sustained itself as an actor in numerous local communities despite its weaknesses. Local Sanco branches, Sanco leaders and even the Sanco dissidents who have formed competing civic organisations, hold on to the model of the national, broad-based civic in contrast to what they refer to as single issue campaigns, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Landless People's Movement (LPM) or Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). In this way, Sanco has roundly defeated the prophets of doom and analysts who pointed to the opportunity structure of the new democratic dispensation to argue that there was no room for such a broad structure. Clearly, the space for Sanco is limited. It is frequently caught between its challenge to and its support for the ANC government, and between its local and national interests, but what political opportunity theorists missed, were the possibilities for Sanco to build upon the discontinuities within its own structures and the wider political system.

Sanco's continued ability to navigate the local contradictions of democratic rule and a hegemonic political party do not, however, imply that it successfully empowers the poor and marginalised. While Sanco's local support rests upon its representation of community needs, its national level support (from the ANC) at times seems to rest upon its ability to effectively contain community demands. As a result, Sanco's overall impact upon redistribution and democratisation is mixed. While it may champion popular representation at the local level, the structure of the national organisation channels and co-opts such representation. In this way, Sanco clearly assists the ANC in pursuing its goals for the development of a new South Africa and to represent those who endorse its policies. Its continued existence will therefore remain closely tied to the successes and, more importantly, shortcomings, of the ANC government.

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