

# Localised Protests in South Africa: A Rebellion or a Fight for a Relationship with the Government?

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## Abstract

Localised protests are a key feature of South African townships. Protests have been considered insurrectionary, prompting scholars to consider the protests as a rebellion of the poor. However, the question is: Do these protests ensue from revolutionary politics? Based on the findings of this study, I argue that although these protests are sometimes dramatic and militant, some of these protests may be regarded as a struggle for a relationship with the government.

**Keywords:** protest; service delivery; rebellion; relationship; government

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## Introduction

Some scholars tend to view South Africa's localised protest as the "rebellion of the poor" (Alexander 2010). However, for Sinwell (2011), radical tactics of protest movements do not necessarily ensue from revolutionary politics. I take this further and argue that protesters in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha fight for a relationship with the government. Although the protests are sometimes dramatic and militant, they do not seek to challenge the status quo. Radical tactics are merely meant to pressure the government to deliver more and better services. Successful protests are not merely viewed as ones which engender tangible development but ones where there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the community after the protests.

## Contextualising South Africa's Protests

South Africa continues to show signs of a dual economy marked by one of the highest rates of inequality in the world (World Bank 2021). The City of Cape Town, where my case study areas are located, has stark inequalities characterised by world class infrastructure and services in some areas, and poor infrastructure and limited access to basic services in the peripheral areas. The Western Cape government considers Cape Town to be a "world city" due in part to the City's outward-focused service economy, tightly networked business hubs connected to other world cities by high tech telecommunication and transportation systems, and the development of world-class facilities to cater to a transnational elite (McDonald 2008; Wainwright 2014). Cape Town has state-of-the-art infrastructure owing to massive infrastructure upgrading. However, upgrading has not reduced socio-economic inequality in world cities (Sassen 2002; Tyner 2006). While transnational elites enjoy state-of-the-art services, poor people often endure inadequate and substandard services. Unsurprisingly, Cape Town is "one of the most—if not the most—unequal cities in the world" (McDonald 2008, 42).

Post-1994, the privatisation of water and refuse collection has worsened socio-economic and spatial inequities. Exorbitant rentals in the city centres have pushed unemployed families and the working class to peripheral areas, leading to a new form of geographically peripheralised ghettoisation, where poor households occupy Cape Town's periphery townships (Smith, Caris, and Wyly 2001; Wainwright 2014). That said, there were not many working-class communities in Cape Town's city centre owing to the apartheid policies that forcibly removed people of colour from District Six, which is smack bang in the city centre, and dumped them in the periphery. Put together, three centuries of colonialism, four decades of apartheid and Cape Town's neoliberal stance have created unparalleled forms of inequality (McDonald 2008). Given these realities, Cape Town needs urban development because the urban poor who are concentrated in the peripheral areas experience poor, inadequate or non-existent services.

Inequality is not unique to Cape Town. Around the world, inequality has remained a persistent problem in urban areas; and inequality can fuel social unrest (UN Habitat

2020). In South Africa, poor, peripheral communities like Gugulethu and Khayelitsha have staged numerous dramatic service delivery protests (SDPs) to fight for urban development. These protests should be understood within their contexts. Sections of these communities are characterised by poor and inadequate housing, water and electricity disconnections, leaking sewage pipes, and air filled with a stench from rubbish dumped in open spaces due to inconsistent or non-existent refuse removal. In response, activists have employed several dramatic tactics from their bag of repertoires in the struggle for better services. Some scholars have regarded these protests as the rebellion of the poor. In this paper, I question this characterisation using the case of Gugulethu and Khayelitsha.

South Africa's community protests have been affected by patronage and clientelism. Patron-client relations involve reciprocal trading of public goods, services and employment with political support between politicians and voters (Dawson 2014; Lodge 2014; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). Certain groups benefit from such exchanges, while others are excluded from particular benefits. Staniland (2008) captured this exclusion in his article on Gugulethu, titled "'They Know me, I Will not Get any Job': Public Participation, Patronage, and the Sedation of Civil Society in a Capetonian Township." Social contracts are not new to South Africa. Paret (2018, 341) writes about a "national liberation social contract" described as "a tacit understanding, forged through the democratic transition, that the post-apartheid state would lift the Black majority out of poverty." People vote or decide not to vote officials into office based on the promises and or lack of delivery. This was best captured in Abahlali baseMjondolo's slogan "No Land, No House, No Vote" where they boycotted the March 2006 local government elections (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006).

Once voted into office, demonstrators often seek to remove local officials who are perceived as having failed to deliver on their electoral promises; battles for patronage occur within the ANC and not against the party (Dawson 2014). This is what Dawson (2014, 524) has called a "network breakdown" to refer to a situation "whereby protests emerge as a response to a disruption and malfunction of patron-client arrangements, such as differential access to public goods." In this case, patronage politics creates access and relations with the state, which create "spaces of hope" (Rubin 2011). Along with elections, protests have become a new form of engagement with the government (Booyesen 2007; Oldfield 2002). Are these protests a rebellion of the poor or a fight for a better relationship that is mutually beneficial?

## Government and Social Movements

Globally, social movements play a significant role in pressuring the government to deliver services (Bebbington 2007; Mitlin 2006; Perreault 2006). Interestingly, social movements relate with the state differently, depending on the need, as aptly captured in an article titled, "Together with the State, despite the State, against the State: Social Movements as 'Critical Planning' Agents" (De Souza 2006). This means social movements sometimes: i) co-operate with the state; ii) at other times they carry out their

activities without the blessing of the state; and iii) sometimes they act against the state in its activities and endeavours. Similarly, SDPs in South Africa relate with the state in the three different ways described above.

Social movements' diverse relationship with the government is premised on movement views that the state is the source and solution of exclusion, poverty and inequality (Bebbington 2007). I analyse the ways in which activists in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha have worked with the state, despite the state and against the state, to bring about better service delivery. The varied relationships that protesters and the government forge in the processes "before," "during," and "after" protests, illuminate activists' demands, the diverse repertoires they deploy and the level of organisation or lack thereof in SDPs.

The findings from this study can help shape the government's view of protests and protesters. At times, government officials have argued that the high levels of protests in South Africa are concocted by the "Third Force," which seeks to undermine the democracy of South Africa. Pre-1994, ANC leaders used the term "Third Force" to refer to a group of undercover apartheid forces who were allegedly behind a spate of violence in townships. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) later confirmed the group as a loose network of right-wing groups and security operatives (TRC 1998). Post-1994, the ANC redeployed the term to attribute protests to the interference by foreign intelligence agencies working in cahoots with White intellectuals and opposition parties (Butler 2013; Pithouse 2013; Wa Azania 2014). It is reported that the SDPs of 2005 were scrutinised by the intelligence services (Nleya 2011, 7). Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), an organised movement which fights for shack dwellers, has turned the original meaning of the "Third Force" on its head and appropriated the term to give it a new meaning. AbM has defined the "Third Force" as struggles by the organised poor (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006). S'bu Zikode, the chairperson of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers) movement, has defined the "Third Force" as the poor people's pain and suffering; the "Second Force" as the poor people's betrayers, and the "First Force" as the anti-apartheid struggle. He adds that the "Third Force" will end when the "Fourth Force," described as "land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education and work," comes (Zikode 2006, np). If protests are for urban development (land, housing, water, and electricity) and not acts by hooligans or influences by the "Third Force," then this could lead to more negotiations and trust between government and communities. Based on a chiefly qualitative study in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, I consider whether protests are a rebellion or a struggle for a relationship which will engender better service delivery in these localities.

## Profile of Service Delivery Protesters

A brief analysis of the activists and their histories helps unlock the internal workings of Gugulethu and Khayelitsha protests that I will discuss in the rest of the paper. To understand the changes that social movements bring about, there is a need to consider the inner workings of a movement (Tilly 1999). Flowing from this, I argue that in order to comprehend the internal workings of Gugulethu's and Khayelitsha's service delivery

protests, we have to first understand who the activists/protesters are. The activists' background helps us to better appreciate their service delivery realities and what motivates their protests; moreover, understanding protesters' backgrounds provides deeper insights into their choice of repertoires and the level of organisation behind the protests.

In the study that directed this article, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha activists invariably defined themselves as poor, Black and neglected. Respondents in this study ranged from 18 years to above 51 years. Most of the respondents were between 21 years and 30 years, followed by the 31 to 40 years cohort. Approximately 8% of the respondents were 51 years and older. Given that one of the criteria for participating in the study was having engaged in SDPs, the findings show that activists of different ages participate in SDPs. Older protesters, particularly those who had anti-apartheid struggle experience, lamented what they called the "youth of today" for lacking political consciousness, stating that the youth did not participate enough in the community meetings they held. Notwithstanding, the youth are often more engaged during the protests and mount dramatic protests.

In Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, activists are ethnically, socially, economically, and politically networked to engage in protests. Some of the protesters, particularly in Gugulethu, had participated in the anti-apartheid struggle. Indeed, movements are built on both formal and informal networks; some of these networks develop along racial, ethnic, class, gender, and religious lines, and others go beyond these (Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006). Such networks, which build collective identity, are crucial in mobilisations (Oldfield 2002).

The activists interviewed in this study came from diverse backgrounds; many in Khayelitsha hailed from the Eastern Cape. In Gugulethu, the older protesters stated that they were Cape Town "borners" (born in Cape Town) and some of these were displaced by the Group Areas Act policy during the apartheid era (Western 1996). People who were born in Cape Town felt that they should be given services before others who came to the city. That said, this was not the position of all Gugulethu residents. This is consistent with Staniland's (2008, 52) finding that Gugulethu residents verbally abused and at other times attacked recent immigrants from the Eastern Cape who benefited from a housing scheme; Gugulethu residents felt that the recent immigrants "had no right to housing before Gugulethu residents, some who had been on the housing list since the late 1980s." Similarly, in Mitchells Plain, activists who were removed from District Six in 1980 felt that they should be prioritised before others (Oldfield and Stokke 2004). Elsewhere in South Africa, Paret (2018) found that protesters from Motsoaledi informal settlement in Soweto felt betrayed because they believed that other communities that were established after theirs were treated better than their community.

## Urban Land Occupations

My findings show that land occupations were more prevalent in Khayelitsha than in Gugulethu. Khayelitsha, as a newer location compared to Gugulethu, still has empty land which people can occupy. In fact, so scarce is land in Gugulethu that participants in a focus group remembered a time when people wanted to occupy a gravesite to build houses. Backyarders have targeted both council-owned land and private land to build houses. Mayoral Committee member for human settlement, Benedicta van Minnen, acknowledged the housing crisis in the city, with approximately 80 000 people living in backyard dwellings in Cape Town:

There are approximately 45 000 backyard dwellers residing on council property and approximately 35 000 backyard dwellers residing on private property. In general, it is a prevalent type of accommodation across the metro, but especially in areas such as the metro south east and also in areas where there are good transport facilities, economic and educational opportunities and basic service delivery. (Khoisan 2016, np)

The conflation of issues comes into play in the fight for land. The fight for land to build houses is meant to achieve not only houses, but gain access to basic services such as water, electricity, proper toilets and sanitation that most South Africans take for granted. These struggles for urban development highlight how grassroots mobilisation for basic services is ever present in the everyday lives of many on the periphery of Cape Town and, indeed, of South African cities.

The rise of land occupations in Khayelitsha should be seen in the light of the broader political environment where there is a call for land expropriation without compensation. This is not a new grievance, but the land expropriation without compensation discourse that was championed by Julius Malema of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, and then embraced by the African National Congress (ANC), has created a new space or political opening where this repertoire can be employed with a greater degree of legitimacy. The land expropriation without compensation rhetoric can thus be seen “as a political condition that exists outside of the social movement forces and affects the process of social movement mobilisation” (Choe and Kim 2012, 56). Using the “structuralist discussions of political opportunity,” I argue that mobilisation is more likely in the prevailing context of the aforementioned discourse (Ballard et al. 2006, 4). These political openings play a role in the broader structure, and these broader structures affect how actors respond, for instance, to the rampant land invasion in Khayelitsha and around Cape Town. Indeed, as Della Porta (2008) opines, social movements emerge and succeed not necessarily because they seek to address new grievances, but because changes in the broader political environment allow already existing grievances to be heard.

Land occupations in Khayelitsha and Gugulethu can be seen as a resource acquisition strategy. The direct action (land occupation) acts as an alternative to protest because the very process of the struggle addresses the needs of members (Bourdreau 1996). While

land occupation is a form of protest, it is different in that activists forcefully take the object of their struggle (land) and not merely pressure the government to deliver the service as they usually do in normal service delivery protests. Many respondents in Khayelitsha and Gugulethu indicated that they needed the land to build houses. Similarly, organised movements like the Landless People's Movement of South Africa (LPM) have occupied land as a self-activity method of redistributing land to the landless (Greenberg 2004). In Gauteng, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and Anti-Privatisation Forum employed tactics such as illegally reconnecting electricity and water and disconnecting pre-paid meters (Mottiar 2013). A distinction is made between “greed” and “grievances”; here insurgencies are propelled by either political demands or economic aspirations (Collier and Hoeffler 2001; Korf 2005). Widespread land occupation, particularly in Khayelitsha, shows that land is addressing the needs of the occupiers. Elsewhere, Karriem and Benjamin (2016) note that the Brazilian Landless Movement's grassroots struggles led to land acquisition and improvement of livelihood for poor people. In fact, although land inequality remains high in Brazil, sustained and concerted land occupations have reduced inequality in some areas of Brazil (Karriem 2016; 2009a; 2009b). Thus, as Bourdreau (1996) notes, more confrontational repertoires are sometimes a more reasonable way of satisfying needs and creating resources.

Other participants, however, viewed the land with notions of citizenship and democracy. For them, ownership of land is seen as one of the key things necessary in the post-1994 era. Ndiko, a man in Gugulethu who was conversant with developments throughout Cape Town, explained the recent wave of land occupations (responses are presented verbatim):

There I support Julius Malema. We should take the land! We Black people still do not have anything after more than 20 years of democracy. The only thing we can show that we are South African is our face. We must be able to point to a piece of land and say that is mine. So, we have to take the land back. (Respondent Ndiko)

The desire to take back or occupy land is interesting because it shows a challenge to the dominant “common sense” of private property as sacrosanct. Drawing on Malema—who has arguably offered some level of political education to the poor and marginalised youth—Ndiko's sentiments show some level of political consciousness, defiance, and challenge to the prevailing status quo. Tarrow (1988, 429) argues that “[i]f collective action is a form of politics, then as in conventional politics there must be a set of constraints and opportunities that discourage this kind of behaviour and lead it in certain forms rather than others.” Arguably, Julius Malema's utterances have created a dimension “of the political environment that provide[s] incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow 1994, 85). Further, the 20 years referred to in the extract make people feel that if they do not take land by force, they may never realise one of the important resources of South Africa. As I have shown before, access to land is key to meeting basic services such as shelter, water, electricity, toilets, and better sanitation.

Somewhat similarly, in a focus group in Gugulethu, a visibly angry Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) veteran, who fought in the anti-apartheid struggle, registered his displeasure at the deal Mandela, the ANC and the National Party negotiated. He shouted, "Mandela sold us out. They reached a compromise that favours Whites. Where is the land?" In this focus group, there were activists aligned with the uMkhonto weSizwe and APLA, the ANC's and Pan Africanist Congress's (PAC) apartheid era armed wings, respectively. The former APLA veteran stated that although all the different soldiers fought for land, the ANC failed the people of South Africa. The land issue is so central to South Africans that even the revered and highly respected Mandela is referred to as a sell-out (activists aligned to the uMkhonto weSizwe did not agree with him, though) in this extract because he did not redistribute land from the White minority to the Black majority. Arguably, such anger at the way Mandela and the ANC have dealt with the land issue makes the people ready to take it by force. Notions of "selling out" are interesting in understanding the role of experienced activists (having participated in the struggle against apartheid and now imparting knowledge and tact to the younger generation) in contesting the "common sense" of land regarding private property or public property and moving towards the "good sense" of occupying the land. Certainly, for the APLA leader and those who side with him, they are challenging the ANC's hegemony and the need for urban land redistribution.

Protesters shape political opportunity structures and improve their protests' conditions (negatively, they can improve the conditions for their opponents) via collective action. Arguably, the ANC's adoption of land expropriation without compensation stance is one of the gains of community land occupation. The government has quelled speculation that there would be a "smash-and-grab" land invasion, reminiscent of what happened in neighbouring Zimbabwe's land reform programme. The South African government has insisted that there would be an orderly land expropriation without compensation (Phakati, Kahn, and Menon 2018).

What the land invasion by poor communities suggests is that communities want to achieve a better life; sometimes they do it "with" the government, and at other times they do so "in spite of" the government, and sometimes "against" the government by defying "processes" that the government wants to follow to acquire land for building a house (De Souza 2006).

## The Use of Courts to Settle Service Delivery Challenges

Although more radical means of SDPs, like land occupations and electricity reconnections, are used along with the elite-conforming means such as approved demonstrations, activists in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha rarely use courts of law to settle service delivery disputes with the government. This has to be understood within the context of South Africa's impressive democratic institutions (the implementations of the institutions leave a lot to be desired, but it cannot be regarded as a closed political system) and the grinding poverty in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha. Protesters have often used elite-conforming protests and only employed more dramatic and elite-challenging



protests when elite-conforming methods failed to yield the desired results. While confrontational and non-institutionalised repertoires are associated with poverty in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, these repertoires are chiefly due to the failure of elite-conforming repertoires to bear fruit. Thus, this study's findings agree in part with Bourdieu's (1996) argument that a blend of democratic institutions and considerable prosperity are likely to allow elite-conforming protests, protests that obey existing institutions such as approved demonstrations, while a combination of a more closed political system and relative poverty calls for elite-challenging or more confrontational and non-institutionalised repertoires.

Lwazi, a male protester who advocated for peaceful (orderly) protests in Khayelitsha, stated that they do not use courts, saying: "Maybe it's for those who are in the upper level [upper class]. Maybe they can take that road ... Ah, we never do that." Asked why they do not use courts, he responded:

Ah, which means you are telling us that we should wait for another year. Whereas we are under pressure currently, for example, the water just burst out for some time and the municipality drives here every day but they don't do anything about it. Then taking that to court would mean that I must wait for three years for that water to be fixed. No!  
(Respondent Lwazi)

One incident stood out in Khayelitsha Site C, where protesters engaged the courts to deny a suspect bail; the community claims the suspect raped, killed and dumped a lady's body in a pit. Along with court processes, community members staged protests and threatened mob-justice if the alleged perpetrator was released on bail. Participants recounted this story with admiration. It is quite telling that even in this incident, protesters felt the need to include protests in the court process. This suggests that in Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, engaging the courts for community development is rarely included in their bag of repertoires partly due to the long process involved. In Kutsong in Gauteng province, people protested for five years and included protests, election boycotts and a legal battle (Alexander 2010). Most of my interviewees stated that they used the courts to deal with civil matters, not public disputes with the government. The general idea was that if the community has a problem with the government, then deal with the government. Yet, without prompting, Samuel, a male protester in Khayelitsha, proudly stated: "It is the government which can take us to court after we have vandalised."

## Transparency

While Alexander (2010) sees protests as expressing "disappointment with the fruits of democracy," this study found that protesters in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha believe there is no real democracy in their locations. Many participants bemoaned the lack of transparency, consultation and communication. In Khayelitsha, Vuyo, a man who stays in an RDP house and is studying towards a tertiary degree, and participates in community meetings, stated:

We are striking for the transparency of the government either national, provincial or local. They are not transparent. Many people do not know the Ward Councillor. Many people don't even know the council number they are in. This is because of one thing; our government is not transparent. And I think transparency is one of things that the old politicians like Nelson Mandela have promised to the people. They promised a government that is accountable ... responsive ... [and] transparent. (Respondent Vuyo)

Similar issues were raised during the Mbeki-era and Zuma-era protests, notably “inadequate service delivery and lack of accountability by local councillors” (Alexander 2010, 37). In fact, the idea of transparency dates back to the apartheid era. The extract above shows that South Africa's history and the promises made, and the people who made such promises have a bearing on today's protests. Poor communities reflect on the promises made by old politicians and consider today's realities. Names such as Nelson Mandela bring back hope and a solution to communities and are used as a reference point. The need for accountability, responsiveness and transparency was raised in the context of an oppressive apartheid government whose sole purpose was to enrich a privileged few at the expense of the majority (Western 1996). Protesters decried the new government's failure to uphold tenets of democracy they promised pre-94—transparency, accountability and responsiveness. Buhle, a female activist who stays in a backyard shack in Khayelitsha, developed this point:

Meaning that each and every month, there will be a report coming from the government. That is, this is the state of this and that. This is how we are doing as the Ward Council, to the provincial council because we need to know from time to time what is happening. That is what we don't know. Hence, we think that maybe they are doing nothing or planning nothing because they are not communicating to us. (Respondent Buhle)

The extract above is in line with the Batho Pele principles, which require the municipality to provide accurate and up-to-date information about services, and to enhance openness and transparency about services (Department of Public Service and Administration. White Paper on the Transformation of Public Service: The *Batho Pele* White Paper 1997). This study's findings are consistent with Dawson's (2014) argument that the councillors' and residents' lack of feedback and communication, coupled with rampant corruption, has eroded residents' trust in the ANC's ability to fulfil their promises. Similarly, in her research, Mottiar (2014) noted that there was a feeling that ward committees were doing nothing. In Khayelitsha, residents stated that they sometimes feel that they are “municipal-less” to imply that they feel that they do not have a municipality which attends to their service delivery needs. Residents in Zandspruit, in Gauteng, also felt “municipal-less”: Dawson (2014, 538) notes that before the 2006 local government, residents had very little delivery of services and “experienced the government as essentially absent.” Similarly, in Motsoaledi, residents “referred to their apparent invisibility to the state by suggesting that state officials did not ‘know’ them” (Paret 2018, 351). In this context, I concur with Alexander (2010, 38), who concludes that the government “is doing too little, too late.”

To be fair, the government does provide services to the people. That said, the manner in which the government provides is problematic. Communities should not be left to guess whether the government is planning to provide or if they are providing. From the extract, the people's desire to know what the government is doing suggests that it is not only a matter of delivering on the promises, but people are concerned about the processes involved in the delivery of these services. That is why social movements like AbM do not simply fight for houses or political power but seek to effect changes in how things are done. They are thus struggling "for a vision of a different kind of politics" (Gibson 2011, 171). In a sense, communities in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha seek to change how things are done in terms of more consultation, participation, increased levels of transparency and the delivery of services.

The fight for both the delivery of services and a different kind of politics can be best understood by using the Framing Processes Theory. Frames help us understand the desire to change how things are done in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha because they provide a broader interpretive definition or answer to the questions: "what is going on" or "should be going on" (Benford and Snow 2000). Top-down development assumes that the government knows what the community needs without the participation of the community itself. Democratising society from below seems plausible in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, given the protesters' view that the top-down approach from the government has failed to yield real democratic tendencies in the impoverished communities. Likewise, in Durban, Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) mounted campaigns aimed at improving the living conditions of the poor and "to democratise society from below" (Mottiar 2014, 372).

What is required is a genuine consultation and active engagement between communities and the government that should serve them. People should be involved in issues that pertain to their well-being and development; this is both empowering and makes people feel an important sense of ownership towards the product and service (Phillips and Pittman 2008). In Gugulethu, Sanele, a male protester who stays in a formal house, explained the reason for participating in protests:

We are not sure if it is the councillors that are not delivering or whether the process is stuck, but it seems to be stuck somewhere. And the only voice or the only way that our government listens to us is strikes. The only way is for us to block the roads and start something so that we can be listened [to] and our grievances can be heard. So that is why we protest. It is not because nobody has nothing better to do, but it is because we want to be heard. (Respondent Sanele)

The Framing Processes Theory shows that social movement actors identify, label and locate phenomena that affect them in order to make sense of such occurrences (Goffman 1974). Yet, in trying to make sense of occurrences in their community, Gugulethu protesters are sometimes unsure whether the councillors are responsible for not delivering or if the process hinders and stalls delivery. Although activists look at problems and identify who is to blame (Larana, Johnston, and Gusfied 1994) through a

process Schon and Rein (1994) call “naming and framing,” at times, protesters are unsure who is responsible for their problems, as shown above. Notwithstanding this lack of certainty, protesters understand what needs to be done to achieve the desired change. In this case, protesters reason that for the government to listen to them, they should protest. In the extract, the phrase “nothing better to do” serves to debunk common views about the reasons for protests—this is what Benford and Snow (2000, 613) regard as producing “counter-mobilising ideas and meanings.” Activists proffer ideas that are different from the views of people who vilify their activism to show that they forgo their normal day-to-day activities to embark on protests in order to better their service delivery.

### A Fight for a Relationship

While Alexander (2010) considers the community protests in South Africa as a rebellion of the poor, I consider these protests as not only a means to attract the state officials’ attention (Paret 2015), but as a fight for a relationship with the government, which will lead to better and improved service delivery in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha.

Asked to describe the relationship that exists between the community and the municipality, Themba, an unemployed man in Khayelitsha who uses the bush toilet, stated:

I wouldn’t say we do have a relationship with the municipality *at all*. We only hear about them when it comes for us to vote for them [during election time]. That is when they are going to say there will be no water tomorrow. They will not just call us for meetings and say come, just put your grievances forward without us going to them. They don’t engage us in that manner in whatever they are doing. Tell us that ok, we had this budget; this is how far we went. We don’t know those things until we get up and strike. So, I don’t think there is a relationship. If there is, it is minimal [emphasis added].  
(Respondent Themba)

While it is not true that municipal officials do not engage the community “at all” regarding what they are doing, the engagement seems to be limited, and it is not as robust as community members would want it. For example, activists want the municipality to proactively engage with their communities as they do during election time. Clearly, election time brings the best out of municipal officials. Similarly, in Gugulethu, protesters stated that during elections, they saw progress in the form of cleaning of streets and regular refuse collection—developments that made activists think that everything was up and running. They stated that after the election, the developments stopped. Similarly, in his study on Gugulethu, Staniland (2008, 35) found that “whilst policy claims to be promoting participation, it is ... in fact failing.” Although people praise popular participation, officials usually view such participation as a nuisance (Bénit-Gbaffou 2008). In line with the framing processes, activists identify who is to blame and what needs to be done to achieve the desired change (Larana 1994).

Usually, protests fall during election time as people concentrate on the electoral process. Electioneering creates a new political environment that can either encourage or discourage activism, which Tarrow (1998) refers to as windows of opportunity. Protesters use elections as a political opportunity structure to mobilise for better services in their communities. In 2005, there was an initial peak of protests in South Africa, followed by a marked fall in 2006, the year of local government elections. Commenting on this lull in protests, Alexander (2010, 28) argues that “for a period, activists put their energies into the elections and/or that broader populations placed some hope in the possibility of electoral politics addressing their concerns.” Not only do people put their energies and hopes in the electoral processes during election times, but there tends to be an increased level of engagement between the state and the community and better responsiveness from the state.

Frustrated with the lack of water, Gugulethu protesters once took a White contractor (who was installing water meters) hostage until the City of Cape Town addressed the protesters and stopped the installation. Although this incident, which is widely celebrated in Gugulethu, was militant, I argue that such protests cannot be regarded as a rebellion of the poor. While the protests are by the poor, evidence from the two case studies shows that protesters seek a “relationship” with the government.

The older protesters in Gugulethu, who had been involved in anti-apartheid protests, invariably referred to the current government as “our government”—even some who belonged to the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) made such comments, suggesting that what is happening here is not really a rebellion. Some people, even those from other parties, regarded their protests as a cry for attention, as John, an area leader in Gugulethu with a wealth of anti-apartheid protests, asked: “Why should we apply [seek permission to protest] to cry [protest]?” suggesting that protests are not a rebellion but a means of getting the state’s attention. After all, there is evidence that suggests that municipalities usually deny residents permission to protest or set preconditions which discourage activism (Duncan 2014).

Indeed, Mottiar (2014, 382) is right in arguing that although Cato Manor protesters desire to “create chaos ... they continue to make their demands well within the system and within a loyalty to the ruling party.” She continues, indicating that such evidence dilutes the rebellion stance. Similarly, Sinwell (2011) found that protesters’ demands are not against the ANC’s national policies but rather the local government’s failure to implement the policies. Bond, Desai, and Ngwane (2012, 7) best described South Africa’s protest movement as “extraordinarily militant in its actions and profoundly moderate in its politics.”

A number of leaders in Gugulethu bemoaned the lack of progression that exists when a councillor leaves office. They saw the need to change the system to allow agreed upon developments to be completed, even by a new councillor from a different party.

Chiwarawara (2014, 92) underlined this flaw in the structures of the ward council, quoting a protest leader, Andile, who explained:

Before this councillor, there was a councillor lady. You know we had [a] big gathering in this [community] hall. All the wards, all the areas ... [came] ... we thought we were in the bottleneck of this, [we thought] we were about to achieve what we were fighting for. But her term ended and there was a new councillor who said no, I did not know about it [the planned programmes], I was not part of that. So, there is no progress, you know, but hope is still there, but it's a pipeline hope now. (Respondent Andile cited in Chiwarawara 2014, 92)

Understandably, older residents who had participated in anti-apartheid protests understand that some problems go beyond individual councillors to the system within which officials operate. That said, as Paret (2018, 351) found in his study in and around Johannesburg, “[f]or many activists ... protests were crucial for correcting the actions of public officials and getting the state to ‘work’ as it should.” In other words, unlike social movements that push for systematic change, local protesters often work like social service organisations, which seek to address individual problems within the system (Karriem and Benjamin 2016). I argue that their organisation and contestation do not amount to a rebellion of the poor.

I contend that that while, generally, the protesters harbour feelings of anger, betrayal, and a general belief that the state does not really care for the poor, South Africans’ protests are not a rebellion but a contestation for the government to hear, listen and act. In any case (and arguably), there is not yet an alternative political party that the Black majority would want to align with: Julius Malema’s Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has gained some traction in impoverished townships, particularly with its “land redistribution (and occupation) without compensation” rhetoric, but it does not yet have the numbers to turn the political landscape. To highlight that what is at work in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha is not a rebellion, this study’s findings show that protesters consider a successful protest as one which ultimately leads to a solid relationship between residents and the government.

Ben, a frequent protester in Gugulethu, who advocated the need to use disruptive tactics (e.g., barricading roads) and vandalise public buildings where necessary, explained what he regarded as a successful protest:

But I can regard as a successful protest when people have striked and the government *saw* that really these people were in need and the problem is us as a government and this is what we are going to do, and after that, the government continues to be transparent to the people and the government continues to have a solid relationship with the people. I can regard it as a successful protest [emphasis added]. (Respondent Ben)

It can be argued that the government’s realisation that people are protesting because of a genuine need—as opposed to the “Third Force” explanation—can help build a good

relationship between the government and the community. Similarly, the government's admittance that it was at fault in its actions or inactions can serve as a necessary ingredient towards peace and a good relationship with the aggrieved community. Transparency and engagement are processes which show progress in the state's dealings with impoverished communities. Protests are not meant to solely bring about services but are also meant to bring processes that characterise a democracy. In Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, these include more consultation and participatory approaches to development. Importantly, a desire for a "relationship" with the government prevents the protesters from challenging the status quo—a finding consistent with many scholars' findings (Booyesen 2007; Mottiar 2014; Paret 2018).

Results from the study show that there is a link between SDPs and urban development in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha. Findings suggest that different repertoires engender both tangible and intangible progress. A key respondent classified a successful protest as one where—after the protest—there will still be a good or better relationship between the government and the people. He stated:

A successful protest will be after we have protested, we see the results and we have a relationship with that particular person we were protesting against. For example, we are protesting against our councillor; what happens is, after the protest, the councillor will decide to give us a note, but after the protest is over, and there is no more anger now, we have been angry for six months; you can't be angry for the rest of the year. You will be angry until you are dump [sic]. So here is what is happening. After the strike, people are going to go back to their houses because they see they are wasting their time, and the government is left to clean the street and there is tension between the government and the community—I can't regard that as a successful protest. (Respondent Njinji)

One would have thought that protesters were only concerned about the results. Yet, although protesters want to see results—get what they protest for—they are also concerned about their relationship with the government. This is quite telling. It means that people are concerned about a good relationship with the government, suggesting that they do not have a hidden agenda. There is, therefore, a genuine desire to see development in their communities. Protests are not, by and large, activities by hooligans. This finding is crucial because it shows what activists want: a good relationship with the government. This relationship enables them to negotiate with the government, which suggests that activists prefer engaging with the government by using other means rather than protests and strikes. This agrees with findings from Gugulethu, where protesters stated that "protests are not for fun" but are born out of a genuine desire to see development.

Gugulethu protesters also raised the idea of a good relationship. A man in his 30s, who belongs to a gang in Gugulethu, described a successful protest as one where the community and the government "sit" down together to discuss problems. He continued:

If we reach a compromise, we can reach a compromise; you can say I cannot do this and you as well can say this is what we want we need. We meet together and say, ok, let us meet halfway, but these people are only bringing what people want because they want to protect what they have; they are not concerned about the needs of the people. I am concerned about the relationship we are going to have after the strike, not the thing that you are going to give me. Give me, yes, and let us have a solid relationship. That would be a good strike. (Respondent Siya)

My participant stressed the importance of a relationship, not just what they get from the strike. The extract above suggests that protests require a compromise where people meet half-way. Any negotiation involves some form of a sacrifice, which requires a compromise. Clearly, protesters value a solid relationship with the government.

I argue that a good relationship with the government is a form of development. This finding is crucial, given the necessary role of trust and a good relationship that necessitates development in communities. Yet, a good relationship should not be interpreted to only mean agreeing with each other, but a relationship built upon a shared common purpose—that of developing human life. SDPs can, therefore, either promote development or underdevelopment. If, after a protest, tensions between the government and communities simmer, the protest as a means and an end would have been undermined. If, however, after a protest, there is more engagement and communication between the community and the government, then that protest can be deemed successful. This should be understood within the context of poor consultation and transparency between the government and the community, as discussed earlier.

## Conclusion

Activists in South Africa generally harbour feelings of anger and betrayal, and hold a belief that the state does not really care enough for the poor. However, some service delivery protests in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha are arguably not a rebellion of the poor but poor people's contestation for the government to hear, listen and act on demands for service delivery and other grievances. Activists' desire for a relationship with the government makes protesters avoid challenging the status quo. Notwithstanding their reluctance to challenge the status quo, protesters employ several tactics from their bag of repertoires (such as land occupation and electricity and water reconnection) to fast-track the process of development in their communities. Generally, most activists in this study considered a successful protest as one which ultimately leads to a better relationship between the government and residents. This happens when the government acknowledges that the protests were for genuine service delivery demands, and when communities reach a compromise with the government through consultation and participation, which leads to improved service delivery. Understanding that protesters seek a better relationship that benefits their communities can help to rethink the view that protesters seek to change the status quo.



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