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A civic movement, or a movement of civics?:

The South African National Civic Organisation
(SANCO) in the post-apartheid period

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Disaggregating civil society

Civil society today is a much overburdened concept. Having recognised that formal democratic institutions and practices represent only a first step in realising the full emancipatory potential of a democratic society, democratic theorists have now invested civil society with the historical mission of finishing the task. And in that capacity, civil society has much to do. Civil society, it is argued, injects new ideas and opinions into public debates, creates new channels and modes of participation and demand-making, amplifies and diversifies sources of government accountability, and nurtures citizens' democratic capacities. But rather than testing these propositions empirically, there has been a tendency in the democratic transition literature to define civil society in tautological fashion, that is by what it is destined to do (to fill in for the limitations of formal democracy), rather than by what it actually is or how it does it. In this manner, civil society has become *by definition* good for democracy, and by extension, good for development. But much as in the heyday of developmentalism, when the state was tasked with the challenge of development only to discover that there are many different kinds of states, some developmental and some patently not, it is now high time we unpack the idea of civil society, and interrogate what dynamics and which groups in civil society actually contribute to strengthening public life.

Civil society is conventionally defined as all voluntary forms of association – formal or informal – that are not part of the state or kinship systems. As such it is little more than a residual category that provides little analytical leverage. If we are concerned with the question of how civil society, and more specifically how certain expressions of civic life, contribute to democratic deepening, we have to begin by exploring the relationship between associational life and the practice of democracy. There is a basic line of reasoning that frames this debate. First, by definitional fiat there can be no democracy without the right to freely associate.¹ Second, a liberal, democratic constitutional order promotes associational life. Third, and more problematically, all forms of associational life are good for democracy. Much about this statement is beyond dispute. The right to freely associate and speak is the most important bulwark against tyranny and usurpations of power. An open associational life promotes diversity and pluralism, which are not only key expressions of democratic life, but also inject vitality into the democratic process. In sum, the quality of participation is 'an independent desiderata of democratic politics'.²

¹ This, it should be pointed out, is not absolutely true. In its early incarnations, British liberal democracy explicitly prohibited certain forms of combination (such as unions) as an infringement of the individual liberty to associate. Today we recognise the right of collective bargaining as a right of association, although other forms of combination, such as forms of collusion associated with anti-competitive practices in the marketplace, are restricted. In other words, voluntary forms of association that are deemed to have a pronounced adverse effect on the public interest are proscribed even in the most liberal of democracies. There is also, as Marxists often point out, a basic conflict between rights of association and rights of property. Current debates in South Africa about land invasions are a case in point.

² Archon Fung and Erik Wright, *Deepening democracy: innovations in empowered participatory democracy*, *Politics and Society* 29(1), 2001.

The problem begins when we consider the *effects* of different forms of association on democracy. First, as is often noted, the *right* to associate must be disentangled from the *capacity* to associate. To associate effectively in the pursuit of interests (be they narrow or collective) requires overcoming collective action problems and successfully engaging the state or the market. Obviously, not all citizens are equally empowered or resourced to do this. The problem is not, moreover, simply that some groups shout louder than others, but that some forms of associational life can crowd out other forms, and even discourage citizens from engaging in public life. Many forms of association – such as some professions – achieve their interests through strategies of ‘opportunity hoarding’ that effectively raise the costs of participation for non-members. Many forms are governed by hierarchical relations of dependency that can adversely impact the associational capacity of members. And finally, associational life can take the form of rent-seeking activities which by definition come at the expense of the public good.

Because this research project is about exploring the role that civil society organisations (CSOs) can play in deepening democracy, we need to take as a point of departure that different forms of association have different implications for democratic life. It bears emphasis that the problem is not in the fact of association itself, but in how particular forms of organising interests impact on the associational playing field (by restricting or expanding other associational opportunities) and on the state’s ability to manage public affairs. Below, we use the term ‘democracy deepening’ to refer to associations that have the effect of expanding the scope and depth of citizen participation in public decision-making. Expanding the depth means incorporating previously marginalised or disadvantaged groups into public politics. Expanding the scope means bringing a wider range of social and economic issues into the authoritative domain of democratic politics. This terminology should not be taken to imply that other forms of association do not play an important part in democratic life.

There are two sets of variables against which the democratic character of a CSO must be judged. The internal variable can be addressed by distinguishing vertical from horizontal forms of association.³ Vertical forms of association are characterised by relationships that are either governed by material forms of dependency (patron–client systems) or traditional forms of authority (patriarchy, *amakhosi*). Because the conditions of association in such organisations are pre-determined by existing inequities and as such presume subjects, not citizens, they cannot be said to promote democracy.⁴ In associations structured by horizontal relations members are fully constituted citizens. Such organisations can be hierarchical – in which case authority must be distributed in accordance with formal democratic practices – or they can be completely flat and consensus-based (rather than majoritarian) structures (stokvels, book clubs, etc). Differentiating vertical from horizontal ties empirically is difficult, but two key

³ Robert Putnam, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁴ Putnam’s description of the uncivic regions of Southern Italy, dominated by the Catholic church (traditional authority) and the Mafia (traditional authority + clientelism) captures this dynamic nicely: ‘Public life in these regions is organised hierarchically, rather than horizontally. The very concept of ‘citizen’ here is stunted. From the point of view of the individual inhabitant, public affairs is the business of somebody else – *I notabili* – ‘the bosses’, ‘the politicians’ – but not me ... Political participation is triggered by personal dependency or private greed, not by collective purpose.’ *Ibid*, p 115.

tests can be used: do members enjoy a non-punitive exit option, and is leadership delegated (rather than given) and revokable?

The external measure of the democracy-deepening character of CSOs is threefold. First, does the CSO help level the associational and representative playing field? Given that the distribution of resources (including social, human and physical capital) in society is skewed in favour of elite groups (not only in pursuing interests in the formal democratic arena, but also in associational life), a CSO that deepens democracy is one that in effect helps level the playing field by providing a space or a voice for disadvantaged or marginalised social categories.⁵ In terms of expanding the scope of public politics, this can mean one of two things. Social groupings that were not previously represented in the polity can find a voice. Good examples would be the civil rights movement, the women's movement and the gay rights movement. In this sense civil society (and more specifically the social movements that arise out of civil society) can effectively expand the scope and inclusiveness of citizenship. It can also give an independent and more effective voice to those concerned with issues that were formerly subsumed or lost in the aggregative logic of party politics or crowded out by single-issue politics.

Second, is the goal of the CSO to secure the public or a private good? Public goods are defined by economists as having the quality of being indivisible. No one can be excluded from benefiting from these goods, for example clear air, good public research, universal protection and enforcement of human rights (in this respect the contribution of CSOs such as the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) and the Black Sash – assuming that they are effective – is clear). It is when dealing with divisible goods – the enjoyment of which is selective – that the effects on democratic life are more problematic. As Cohen and Rogers argue, groups that pursue narrow interests – factions – ‘can deploy their powers in ways that infirm the conditions of a well-ordered democracy’.⁶ The pursuit of private interests is of course perfectly compatible with democratic politics. But, all too often, the power and influence that can be mobilised by certain interest groups is such that it vacates democratic decision-making procedures or subverts an electoral mandate. This is especially the case when more encompassing interests are poorly represented. There are thus many nominally democratic decision-making arenas (and even entire democracies) in which actual authority resides in oligarchical cliques, patrimonial networks or distributional coalitions. To the extent moreover that many interest groups are actively engaged in rent-seeking, their impact on the substantive output of a democracy can be crippling. In their path-breaking comparative analysis of the extraordinary range of developmental outcomes that different Indian states have achieved, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen thus comment: ‘As far as the influence of public action on governmental decision-making is concerned, attention has to be paid not only to the positive influences that may be exerted on the process of development, but also to the negative impacts that particular types of public action might have. Active pressure groups, which too are (in a broad sense)

⁵ This does not necessarily mean that the organisation must be constituted of the underprivileged or the subaltern in order to have democracy-enhancing effects. An obvious example is a child-welfare NGO. Note also that environmental NGOs that are committed to preserving natural resources are in effect protecting and representing the citizenship rights of *future* citizens.

⁶ Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, Secondary associations and democratic governance, *Politics and Society*, 20 (4), 1992, p 393

part of the public, can make economic policy severely constrained by extracting concessions for sectarian interests that may divert resources from broad development objectives to narrow the pursuit of sectional advantages.⁷

Third, is the CSO effective in either shaping public policy or monitoring the implementation and effects of public policy?⁸ The analytics of this issue are addressed at length elsewhere (see concept paper). Two points however need to be underscored. First, the question of effectiveness cannot be limited to exploring the capacities and actions of the CSO alone. The effectiveness of CSOs is to a great extent a function of the political opportunity structure. This itself is determined by a wide range of factors, including the institutional character of the state, party competition dynamics, and party/movement relationships. Second, policy effectiveness can be a double-edged sword. In securing access to government, CSOs and social movements run the risk of compromising their autonomy, and in doing so weakening their ability to contribute to the other democracy-enhancing possibilities of civil society.

Why study SANCO?

We have introduced these concepts because they provide a particularly useful analytical frame for the study of the South African National Civic Movement (SANCO). This is a peak organisation formed in 1992 to provide unitary representation for affiliated local civics. Evaluating the role of SANCO as a CSO is critical to any understanding of civil society in the post-apartheid period for a number of reasons. Though many civics in South Africa are not affiliated to SANCO, SANCO is certainly the most important national organisation of its kind, claiming to represent over 4 000 local branches.⁹ Contrary to the widely held view that the civics movement is moribund, the key finding of our research is that while SANCO as a national organisation is indeed ineffective and virtually invisible, at the branch level civics continue to play an important role in community life.¹⁰ In the three provinces where we conducted research – Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape – most townships and informal settlements have active SANCO branches. The extent to which local civics continue to

⁷ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: economic development and social opportunity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁸ This, it should be noted, is not an absolute condition of being a democracy-deepening form of association. Some csos, including many social movements, are either not geared to impacting on public policy, or are simply ineffective in doing so, and still have a democratic effect. Many csos provide new opportunities for participation, and new assertions of identity, which can significantly contribute to individual democratic capacities. They can also simply, but powerfully, raise overall public awareness or consciousness, and have profound effects on citizen behaviour.

⁹ SANCO, Presidential address, 2001. Given the disarray in SANCO's national office, this figure is impossible to verify.

¹⁰ Cherry et al arrive at a similar conclusion. On the strength of surveys conducted in an Eastern Cape and Western Cape township, they conclude that though the level of mass mobilisation has predictably declined, 'there continue to be high levels of popular engagement with self-governing civic structures at the local level.' See Janet Cherry, Kris Jones and Jeremy Seekings, *Democratisation and urban politics in South African townships*, Paper presented at the Urban Futures Conference, Johannesburg, July 2000, p 1. Working in a Soweto community, Beall also finds high levels of support for the civic. See Jo Beall, *Where the dust settles: limits to participation and pro-poor urban governance in post-apartheid Meadowlands*, Johannesburg, unpublished manuscript, 2000.

enjoy a high degree of legitimacy was most saliently revealed in four focus groups that we conducted with township and informal settlement residents. All four groups unambiguously identified ‘the civic’ as the ‘organisation that does the most for the community’.¹¹ In this respect, SANCO, for all its organisational weaknesses, remains the most important community-based organisation (CBO) in South Africa. Moreover, because the civics movement of the 1980s was in many respects the most prominent and high-profile community-based component of black civil society, SANCO’s fortunes provide important insights into the evolution of civil society in the post-apartheid period. Finally, to the extent that civics give voice to the poor and historically marginalised, they play a potentially critical role in deepening democracy. By the same token, moreover, if SANCO is little more than an instrument of the hegemonic aspirations of the African National Congress (ANC), or SANCO branches act as gatekeepers and monopolise control over developmental resources, SANCO might very well be undermining the vitality and autonomy of civil society. Either way, the study of SANCO promises to shed light on a critical component of civil society.

A note on research methods

Although SANCO is by any definition a CSO, we quickly discovered that it is no ordinary one. In evaluating its status as a peak organisation, one is reminded of Gertrude Stein’s icy response when asked what she thought of the city of Oakland, California: ‘There is no there, there.’ Indeed when we first began our investigation of SANCO, more than one observer joked about ‘a guy and a fax machine’. As it turns out, there is something there, but it is much more a *movement*, and specifically a set of loosely co-ordinated community-based associations, than an *organisation*.

Organisations are bounded, hierarchical instruments for co-ordinating and structuring purposive human action in the pursuit of a discretely defined goal. Evaluating what an organisation does, how it does it, and how successful it is in pursuing its goal is thus a fairly straightforward proposition. Social movements, on the other hand, are loosely structured aggregations of collective actors bound together by a shared sense of identity and a set of common grievances. If organisations can be said to work the system (they are after all engaging other organisations, and most notably the state) and as such operate according to well established practices (most centrally the rational-legal instrumentalities of bureaucracy), social movements are by definition less scripted and less prescribed by set rules and procedures. If social movements are first and foremost about mobilising actors, they cannot rely, as organisations and interest groups do, on selective incentives (status or material rewards). Indeed, this is precisely what makes movements unambiguously part of civil society. Bringing ‘people together in co-ordinated collective action at strategic moments of history against powerful targets requires a social solution...’ writes Sidney Tarrow. ‘[Movements] need to solve the social transaction costs of collective action. This involves mounting collective challenges, drawing on common purposes, building solidarity and sustaining collective action – the basic properties of social movements.’¹²

¹¹ See next section for a description of focus groups.

¹² Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 3.

If what defines a social movement then is very different from what defines an organisation, the same can be said of measuring its effectiveness. As we have already noted in the introduction, the effectiveness of a social movement – unlike an interest group – cannot be assessed simply in terms of how it impacts on the state. Social movements often have their most lasting effects in civil society. They can create new identities and new solidarities, they can raise new issues, they can bring new actors into public life. They can, in other words, help constitute and politicise democratic citizens and create new spaces for participation. In sum, to understand how a social movement mobilises actors and how this in turn can positively impact on democratisation calls for research methods that are quite different from those used in the study of formal organisations.

Because we are concerned with understanding why SANCO as an organisation has largely failed, this report examines SANCO's financial resources, its organisational structure and its co-ordination capacities. We also examine in detail how it has engaged the state, and the role that donors have played in funding SANCO. In doing so, we have conducted interviews with national and provincial level SANCO officials, government officials who have interacted with SANCO, and international donors. We have also examined a wide range of organisation documents, including policy papers, organisational reports, speeches, and internal memos.

The real focus of our research – once it became clear that SANCO's most important potential contribution to strengthening democracy continues to be on the ground – has been an effort to excavate and examine the micro dynamics of civic activity. We accordingly selected four civics in the Gauteng area for intensive study, and conducted interviews with civic officials from six other Gauteng branches, as well as three in Durban and three in the Eastern Cape. In addition, we conducted interviews with local government officials in five different municipalities. In order to get a better understanding of how SANCO functions as a movement, that is how it solves the social transaction costs of collective action and how it engages local government, we relied on extensive participant observation. This involved attending SANCO meetings at every level of the organisation – provincial, regional, and branch – including executive meetings and public meetings, as well as a number of mass events, including protests, and meetings between SANCO and other organisations, including the ANC, local government and ESKOM. Since SANCO does not by any means represent all local civics, we also interviewed officials from rival organisations, including the Tembisa Residents' Association and the National Association of Residents and Civic Organisations (NARCO).

Finally, because we were centrally concerned with the question of how local civics are perceived and evaluated by local residents, we also conducted four focus groups. Each group consisted of nine to 12 same-sex participants, ages 25 to 40, and all met in November 2000. All participants were Johannesburg residents (predominantly from Soweto) and were selected on two criteria: 1) they knew of a SANCO branch in their community and 2) they were *not* SANCO members. Two of the focus groups were drawn from informal settlements (shack dwellers) and two from townships (house dwellers).

Critically assessing SANCO

SANCO's democracy-deepening potential as a CSO can be conceptualised along four different dimensions. First, local civics provide a space in which ordinary residents of townships and

informal settlements can associate and deliberate on community issues. In this manner, not only can common issues and needs be identified, but solidarities can be nurtured. Second, local civics can provide the resources and the framework for collective action, whether this involves self-help activities, various forms of social protection and development, or engaging the state. Both of these roles have the potential for helping to close the institutional and political gap that exists between the state and society and creating modes and channels of participation outside formal political society. Third, as a national and a local organisation, SANCO can act as a ‘watchdog’ by monitoring the actions of the state and holding public authorities accountable. Fourth, SANCO can proactively shape and influence policy as an organised interest group.

If the role of the civics movement during the anti-apartheid struggle has generally been celebrated, its post-transition role and form has been the subject of controversy and criticism. The critics of SANCO have focused on three legitimacy problems. As a peak organisation, SANCO was created in order to scale-up the civics movement. In doing so it exposed itself to the classical dilemma faced by a maturing social movement: the need to manage the trade-offs between the two institutional goals of operational autonomy and political engagement.¹³ On this score, critics have been quite vociferous. Many local level SANCO activists and leaders of breakaway civic movements argue that SANCO, as a national organisation, has become so hierarchical and bureaucratised that internal democracy has become a sham and branches have lost their autonomy. SANCO has moreover been compromised by its close association with the ANC. In the words of former SANCO stalwart, and president of a rival national civic organisation, Mzwanele Mayekiso, the problem with SANCO has been ‘the introduction of a corporate culture into the civic movement, meaning both the imposition of top down instructions instead of the bottom up approach associated with the participatory democratic culture of the civic movement, as well as the introduction of business as an integral part of the organisation, namely SANCO Investment Holdings (SIH) with its projects that have commodified civic membership’.¹⁴

A second critique concerns SANCO’s representivity and, in particular, it claims to speak for the ‘community’. Given that SANCO branch members represent only a small percentage of the community, and that the communities for which it claims to speak are highly differentiated, with varied and often contradictory interests, SANCO’s claims of representivity are specious at best, and represent a usurpation of power at worst. The danger to civil society and democracy is significant. The claim to monopoly representation crowds out other interests and forms of representation, a threat made all the more serious by SANCO’s close relationship with the party in power. In this role SANCO becomes little more than an instrument for the hegemonic colonisation of civil society by the ANC.¹⁵

A third critique, and the one that has received the most media attention, sees SANCO as little more than a vehicle for local strongmen and their clients. Acting as the gatekeeper be-

¹³ Foweraker, as cited in Kimberly Lanegran, *South Africa’s civic association movement: ANC’s ally or society’s ‘watchdog’? Shifting social movement-political party relations*, 1996.

¹⁴ Personal communication, 24 October 2000.

¹⁵ Steven Friedman, *Bonaparte at the barricades: the colonisation of civil society*, *Theoria*, University of Natal, 1992, p 79.

tween the state and the community, SANCO becomes little more than a platform for opportunistic actors to build local power bases and to position themselves for future political or government careers.

In evaluating these criticisms, the first observation that must be made is that SANCO is not a civic movement, but a *movement of civics*. As we shall see in some detail later, the organisational coherence and uniformity of structures that the creation of a unitary, peak, national organisation was intended to promote has never materialised. The character of local civics – that is, branches – has little to do with the formal unitary structures and the chain of command laid down in SANCO's constitution. Mzwanele Mayekiso's assertion that the movement has become overly bureaucratised is accurate, but only with respect to the strategic intent of the higher leadership. In practice, all the branches we investigated operate quite independently of higher structures and in many cases have been able to nurture significant levels of community participation. In many cases, SANCO is simply the title taken by existing and very rooted civics (mostly in townships), and in other instances has served as a useful framing logic and structure for constituting a new local civic (especially true in informal settlements). Higher level officials openly acknowledge that they have little knowledge of or capacity to control branch activities. Similarly, because SANCO is in fact much more loosely structured in practice than the term *organisation* suggests, the existence or formation of a branch is, more than anything, determined by local interests and realignments.

A second observation is that in evaluating the effectiveness of SANCO as a unitary, national organisation, we need to keep two qualifications in mind. First, social movements are, almost by definition, cyclical in nature. Their strength waxes and wanes both in terms of their capacity to mobilise resources (internal and external) and with respect to the political opportunity structure.¹⁶ Though the civics movement was by definition a grass-roots movement, the unifying political frame of the anti-apartheid struggle and the organisational efforts of the United Democratic Front (UDF) facilitated a rapid and successful scaling up of the movement. As a movement – defined in the sense of contesting state power – the civics reached their height in 1986 with the people's power campaign. The effectiveness of the movement was manifested in the degree to which repertoires of contention – rent boycotts, consumer boycotts, and stayaways – spread from community to community. As a CSO, the influence of the civics movement reached its height during the transition negotiations when it was a key player in local government negotiations and in the formulation of the reconstruction and development programme (RDP). A wide range of factors has since contributed to the marginalisation and partial de-mobilisation of SANCO. The most critical among these factors is the transformed political opportunity structure, and most notably the dominant party status of the ANC.

The second qualification concerns an analytical bias in the civil society literature that affects the way CSO efficiency is conceptualised and assessed. Most observers of civil society emphasise the CSOs' contribution to better governance, and specifically the extent to which they can shape state policy and assist state intervention. This, most notably, is the view held

¹⁶ Sidney Tarrow defines the political opportunity structure as the 'consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure'. Tarrow, *Power in movement*, p 85.

by the ANC (especially the governing faction) and international donors, a view reflected in the current enthusiasm for promoting civil society – government ‘partnerships’. There are however two other democratising effects of civil society that require attention. The first is the role of opinion-making and contestation outside of parliamentary institutions. Here associations engage the public domain by either developing and lobbying for alternative views and policies, or by directly challenging government positions through advocacy and protest actions. The weakness of party opposition in South Africa and the lack of open debate with the ruling party only heightens the importance to democratic life of a contestatory civil society. The second is the role that civil society can play in democratising society. This refers both to the ability of CSOs to promote democratic practices through their own actions, and the extent to which they can mobilise new actors. Independently of whether or not such efforts are successfully scaled-up (that is their impact on the state), they have the valuable cumulative effect of challenging various forms of social domination (racism, patriarchy, clientelism, traditional authority), enhancing citizens’ capacities and cultivating (or recultivating) solidarities.¹⁷ As we shall see, while SANCO has had only limited success in engaging the state, the local civics we investigated play an important role in strengthening citizenship.

The rise, decline, and reconfiguration of SANCO

SANCO was formed in 1992 in order to provide a national structure for the existing local level civics movement. More than 2 000 civics were represented at its founding conference. The circumstances of its formation were highly contested, as many local civics were concerned that subscribing and subordinating themselves to a national organisation and a single constitution would compromise their autonomy and local identity. Some civics, especially those with long histories and strong bases of support, were concerned that SANCO’s ties to the ANC would compromise the civic and specifically non-partisan character of the movement.¹⁸ Many civics in Durban, for example, while expressing their support for the ANC, chose not to affiliate with SANCO. In Gauteng, tensions between civic autonomy and support for the ANC resurfaced in 1997 and resulted in the formation of breakaway civic structures, most notably in Tembisa, Soweto, and Alexandra. The entire Transkei region also broke loose. This, by all accounts, marked the low point from which SANCO has been slowly recovering.

There have been two peak moments for civics. During the mid-1980s the civics reached their height as a *movement*. They could mobilise and contest state authority and they could do so across hundreds of communities with the thinnest of organisational infrastructure. It was a movement in the classic sense of the term: mobilisational, contestatory, loosely and horizontally organised. Civics initially coalesced out of local networks of community activists and in direct response to local grievances, functioning primarily as self-help organisations. They initially had little political direction. As one Soweto civics leader explains, ‘We did not initially see civics as political structures – the majority of members were not ANC members, al-

¹⁷ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil society and political theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

¹⁸ The powerful Southern Transvaal association in fact moved that SANCO should be a federal structure and that individual civics be allowed to keep their own constitutions and raise their own funds. Tom Lodge, *South African politics since 1994*, Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1999, p 83.

though many of the activists were. Organising was primarily around bread and butter issues like leaky roofs, water bills and rent.¹⁹ But as the struggle against apartheid intensified, and in particular with the formation of the UDF, civics were rapidly politicised, developing direct ties to the ANC and more often than not enforcing political loyalty. As part of the ANC's strategy of making townships ungovernable, the civics became instruments of revolt targeted against the illegitimacy of black local authorities.²⁰ Under the organisational impetus of the UDF, civics began to mushroom across the country and regional civic structures emerged to provide critical co-ordination functions. Direct, issue-based local protest actions were ratcheted up into more political actions that secured the dominant position of the ANC in townships. In this respect, the civics movement had effectively scaled-up, transforming local, immediate and largely inchoate moments of protest and resistance into a cohesive, self-sustaining structure that produced its own distinct modes of contention (the boycotts) and its own ideology and vision of transformation. This movement capacity provided clear dividends when the civics played an active role in negotiating local government transformation.²¹ Indeed, it has been remarked that the strength of the civics was such that South Africa stands out as the only case of democratic transition in which local government negotiations played a critical role.²² Though, as we shall see, civics and other CSOs were soon to be marginalised from the transformation process, the overall strength of civil society '... created a particularly propitious conjuncture in which the mobilisation skills and affinity for egalitarian grass-roots politics of the activists would be combined with policy knowledge to produce a unique and potentially workable approach to governing the post-apartheid city'.²³

This moment marked the second, but qualitatively different high point of the civics movement. This was a period in which new actors were staking their claims to power. The opening in the political opportunity structure marked by the unbanning of resistance organisations shifted the power equation from mobilisation to negotiation. The civics responded by creating SANCO, a unitary structure designed to centralise the civics movement into a corporatist interest group. The immediate payoff was significant. SANCO was given the lead role in shaping the Local Government Transition Act. It was granted representation in the peak corporatist chamber, the National Economic Development and Labour Council, and was a key player on the National Housing Forum. Through PLANACT, SANCO had a role in shaping the

¹⁹ Interview with Amos Masondo.

²⁰ The strength of the civics movement is most dramatically reflected in the wide-based support for rent and service boycotts. In Soweto, for example, 80 per cent. of formal rent-paying households withheld payments for four years. Mark Swilling and Laurence Boya, Local governance in transition, in Patrick Fitzgerald, Anne McLennan and Barry Munslow (eds), *Managing sustainable development in South Africa*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1997, p 181.

²¹ Thus Heymans (1993) could write that it was 'well-nigh impossible to discuss, plan or implement development in South Africa without engaging with, or at least having to take into account, civic associations'. Quoted in Jeremy Seekings, Sanco: strategic dilemmas in a democratic South Africa, *Transformation*, 34, 1997, p 10.

²² Swilling and Boya, Local governance in transition.

²³ Steven Friedman, A quest for control: high modernism and its discontents in Johannesburg, South Africa, unpublished manuscript, Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg, 2000, p 8.

RDP chapter on housing. And the RDP as a whole assigned a direct and critical role for the civics in the transformation process.²⁴

But SANCO's corporatist moment was short-lived. Two factors conspired to undermine SANCO's efforts to institutionalise its influence. First, SANCO never had the organisational capacity to translate a conjunctural opportunity into a sustainable presence. An overstretched national leadership struggled to maintain an effective presence in national fora, and a threadbare communications structure resulted in many local civics complaining bitterly that they were not being properly consulted.²⁵ Second, in the absence of a formal membership base SANCO could neither deliver nor withdraw support for government policy in a credible fashion. This problem was compounded by the rapid absorption of SANCO's leadership into ANC and government structures, blurring SANCO's identity and emasculating its independence.²⁶ SANCO's corporatist stature and its ability to influence government policy were rapidly eviscerated, a turn of events most dramatically illustrated in SANCO's complete failure to stem the government's abandonment of the RDP's housing programme in favour of a more market and bank friendly policy in 1995.²⁷ To make matters worse, the endemic violence of the transition period in which civic leaders and structures were often directly targeted saw many civic structures lapse into inactivity.

SANCO's decline, after its brief taste of state power, was precipitous. As an organisation with corporatist pretensions, it had no bite. As a movement, its mobilisational momentum and capacity were vacated by the ANC's rise to power. With the demise of apartheid, the civics movement lost its oppositional logic, and with it the powerful motive frames and sources of solidarity through which mass mobilisations had been orchestrated. A transformed political environment only compounded the problem. In the euphoric aftermath of South Africa's first democratic elections – quickly followed up by local government elections – the extraordinary mass legitimacy enjoyed by the new representative government all but eclipsed the more direct and participatory forms of democracy championed by the civics. In its efforts to secure its position in the alliance, SANCO all but ruled out protest actions, depriving the movement of a key mobilisational tool and source of strategic leverage.²⁸ This movement crisis was exacerbated by an organisational one. After the ANC's unbanning, the civics were called upon to

²⁴ The RDP promised that 'Social Movements and Community-Based Organisations are a major asset in the effort to democratise and develop our society. Attention must be given to enhancing the capacity of such formations to adapt to partially changed roles. Attention must also be given to extending social-movement and CBO structures into areas and sectors where they are weak or non-existent.' Quoted in Patrick Bond, *Elite transition: from apartheid to neoliberalism in South Africa*, London: Pluto Press, 2000, p 95.

²⁵ The Soweto Civic Association even declared that it was not part of the Local Government Negotiating Forum. Elke Zuern, *Democracy from the grass roots? Civic participation and the decline of participatory democracy in South Africa's transformation process, 1979-1999*, Ph D dissertation, department of political science, Columbia University, 2000, p 170.

²⁶ By one estimate, SANCO lost 70 per cent. of its leadership to parliament and regional governments. Lodge, *South African politics since 1994*, p 83.

²⁷ For a detailed account, see Bond, *Elite transition*, chapter 4..

²⁸ In 1996, for example, a threat of mass action against the eviction of bond defaulters was suddenly called off, with SANCO president Mlungisi Hlongwane declaring that 'if you want to be an instant revolutionary these days and be involved in boycotts, SANCO is no longer a home for you.' Cited in Lodge, *South African politics since 1994*, p 85.

play a leading role in building ANC branches. Grass-roots organisational activism was thus shifted from building community structures to building party structures. Large numbers of SANCO activists were deployed to government, as well as to ANC structures. The 1995 local government elections dealt local structures a particularly harsh blow. Civic leaders competed fiercely to get ANC nominations, reducing in the process many local structures to personal launchpads for political careers. When many civic leaders were elected to council, not only did this virtually deplete the civics' regional leadership, but by creating what were presumed to be robust and direct links between communities and local government²⁹ it all but obviated the need to sustain independent civic structures outside of political society.

We emphasise this phase of the civics movement because the creation of SANCO was in effect an attempt to capture this moment in time and institutionalise the civics movement as a national movement. If that effort has largely failed, it is because the organisational structure that was introduced was modelled after a political party, rather than a movement. At its height, the civics movement consisted of strong, community-based structures, rooted in interpersonal ties, loosely but effectively connected as a national movement by higher coordinating structures, activist networks, and the overriding imperative of the national liberation struggle. Networks, political solidarities and the strategic imperative of nationally coordinated actions were the organisational glue. But as the networks lost their saliency with deployment into other structures, as the political solidarities were transferred to the ANC (the gatekeeper of the national democratic movement) and protest actions gave way to routine democratic politics, the glue that had sustained the national civics movement faded away. SANCO was an attempt to preserve the national character of the movement through organisational fiat, that is the creation of a unitary and disciplined national structure. The model was, for all intents and purposes, the ANC. But it was the wrong model. Disciplined, centralised and unitary structures work for political parties because rank-and-file loyalty can be sustained by the promise of power and patronage. Similar organisational structures do not work for movements, because what holds movements together are not the selective incentives of interest groups, but shared norms and commitments that are difficult to institutionalise and must instead be constantly mobilised through collective action.

In light of this, that SANCO has survived at all raises some interesting issues that will be addressed at length below. Suffice here to note that since roughly 1998, there has been a revival of local civic structures, especially in Gauteng. SANCO regional structures have in the past two to three years successfully revived moribund branches and launched new ones. The case of the Pretoria region is probably the most dramatic. As recently as 1995 most branches in the Pretoria region had ceased operating, and the only surviving and vibrant branch – Mamelodi – had taken over the region's functions. But by the end of 2000 the Pretoria region had 18 branches, including an inner city branch (where SANCO has traditionally had no presence), and a paid-up membership of 10 000. The Pretoria region has even successfully launched a number of branches in the Northern Province. In the East Rand, a number of new branches have been launched and the membership in one branch – Wattville – has grown to

²⁹ SANCO Gauteng provincial chairperson Richard Mdakane estimates that 75 per cent. of elected ANC councillors in 1995 had civic backgrounds (interview). In her exhaustive study, Zuern puts the figure at 80 per cent (Zuern, *Democracy from the grass roots?*)

over 10 000 in the last year alone. Johannesburg – the largest of the regions – currently has 28 active branches, and has most notably experienced a growth of branches in informal settlements.

Organisational structure

SANCO's organisational structure is a unitary and constitutional one. Following a pattern that mimics the ANC organogram, SANCO has isomorphic structures at the national, provincial, regional and branch levels. Each level has a 15-member elected working committee with a president general, deputy president, national chairperson, secretary general, deputy secretary general, treasurer general, and national organising secretary, as well as nine heads of department, and an executive committee which includes the working committee and the chairperson and secretary of the constitutive substructures (provinces for the national, regions for the provinces, branches for the regions). The national conference is the 'supreme ruling and controlling body' of SANCO, and elects the national executive committee (NEC) and determines the policy, programme and constitution of SANCO. Conferences at the lower levels play the same role.

If the organisational structure of SANCO is unitary and isomorphic, the actual functioning and effectiveness of SANCO varies dramatically at the different levels. The national level structures play a limited role. Because of SANCO's dire financial situation, NECs are held only when sponsors can be found to foot the bill. As peak organisations, the NEC and national working committee (NWC) have failed miserably.³⁰ The national has little if any capacity to co-ordinate action between subnational structures. Of the many campaigns that SANCO has endorsed or launched, none has received significant support from the national office. Focus groups revealed that while respondents had a rich knowledge of local civics, they were wholly ignorant of the activities and positions of the national office, and not a single respondent was able to name the current president. The most glaring failure however has been the inability to develop and advance independent policy positions. By all accounts, SANCO has had little or no influence on government policy-making since 1994. The little lobbying that SANCO has engaged in has taken place through personal networks of influence. Its participation in national forums has been reduced to little more than a symbolic presence. SANCO's applications to be represented on the Municipal Demarcation Board and the National Development Agency were both rejected. On the critical issue of housing, SANCO has yet to develop a comprehensive position or strategy, despite the significant role that SANCO substructures have played in negotiating housing policy and implementation at the local level. Though SANCO did launch a research centre in 1996 – SANCO Research and Development Institute (SRDI) – political differences with its director (Mzwanele Mayekiso) led to the institute's dismantling and the director's expulsion. With little or no national direction, SANCO provinces and regions have had to develop their own policy positions, and in the absence of professional policy input and capacity, have found it difficult to influence policy-making.

³⁰ SANCO president Mlungisi Hlongwane described the NWC as 'crippled', and rebuked many of its members for rarely attending meetings. SANCO, Presidential address to the SANCO 3rd national conference, p 6.

The national structures do, however, appear to play a significant political role. This is especially true with regard to SANCO's relationship to the ANC. At the 1997 national conference it was a bloc of NEC members, acting against the position held by most branches and the most powerful province, Gauteng, that reversed existing policy that prohibited dual positions in SANCO and government. The NEC sets the tone and the direction of SANCO's relation to the ANC and government by issuing press statements, circulating memoranda to lower structures and negotiating with the ANC. Despite the fact that key NEC members, including the current president, have called for taking more independent positions, the National office has been very circumspect in its criticism of the government and continuously reaffirms its support for the ANC. The fact that six NWC members, including its president and general secretary, became ANC MPs at the time of the last election raises questions as to whom the NWC actually answers to.³¹ These structural ties, and the role the NWC has played in holding the ANC line, in fact suggest that its function is little more than disciplining a movement that has obvious centrifugal tendencies. This is especially clear when it comes to local government elections. In the run-up to the December 2000 elections, the national office issued clear directives that all SANCO structures were to support the ANC's election efforts, despite the fact that the national conference (SANCO's highest decision-making body) had yet to be convened. Some regional SANCO officials suggested that the NEC had deliberately delayed the conference (which was meant to take place in April 2000) in order to pre-empt an anticipated grass-roots revolt against the ANC before the elections. The NEC moreover issued statements that any SANCO official or branch that sponsored independent candidates or opposed the ANC would be expelled. This position was openly and angrily contested by many branches and entire regions.³²

SANCO's provincial structures are arguably its most uneven and its most ambiguous. Uneven in that some provincial structures exist only on paper (even when branch structures are active), whereas others are quite active (as in the case of Gauteng), and ambiguous because they have neither the political responsibilities of the national, nor the organising responsibilities of the regions. The provincial leadership does however have significant political clout. For example, the chairperson of the Gauteng province, Richard Mdakane, is also the ANC whip of the Gauteng legislature. The province also appears to play an important role of last resort in dealing with regional conflicts. Thus in both the Vaal and West Rand regions, the provincial executive committees dissolved regional executive committees that were fraught with internal conflict, and successfully relaunched regional structures by appointing coordinators.

It is at the regional level that SANCO structures begin to have a perceptible effect. After interviews with all six regional chairs and a number of other regional officials in Gauteng, as well as three regional officials in the Eastern Cape, it is clear that all the regions are active,

³¹ Mlungisi Hlongwane did however resign within three weeks, on the grounds that it was impossible to effectively represent SANCO and submit to parliamentary party discipline at the same time.

³² 'SANCO will be supporting the ANC actively by participating in all processes towards the elections. Under no circumstances shall SANCO cadres be allowed to stand as independents or oppose as a structure the ANC at all levels ie ward, local and region. Memo from the office of the general secretary to all substructures, 27 January 2000.

and that they have had some success in providing assistance to existing branches and launching new ones. Regional working committees meet regularly. The chairs we have interviewed are committed, knowledgeable, and articulate, and hold fairly clear and independent positions on the key questions that confront SANCO. Some of the regions have even been able to play a role in shaping policy positions. Indeed, the policy documents generated by the East Rand region are far more substantial than what the national has produced. The most important role of the regions, however, is organisational expansion and the provision of assistance and co-ordination to branches. The responsibility of launching new branches falls entirely on the region, and many SANCO activities, including negotiating social compacts in housing, calling councillors to answer, and organising campaigns (whether initiated from above or below) are critically facilitated by the region. In East London, it was the region that successfully orchestrated a campaign to oppose a city council project to authorise the building of a casino on a beach frequented primarily by township residents.

If SANCO can still be described as a social movement, it is largely because of the activities of its branches. This is in large part an historical legacy: civics emerged from communities, and it is at the level of the branch that the legitimating discourses of the organisation – people-led development and participatory democracy – find their most practical and immediate expression. This is also a structural truism: it is only at the branch level that SANCO deals directly with ordinary members of the community and addresses bread and butter issues. The branch is more or less coterminous with the geographical (if not the sociological) boundaries of distinct ‘communities’, ie townships and informal settlements. Branch structures are also more reflective of community-based dynamics than of the political-organisational logics. That is branch structures for the most part emerge out of concrete local struggles and initiatives, in contrast to higher structures that owe their existence to organisational imperatives and political brokerage. It is also at the branch level that the basic associational practices that define a civic take place.

The sharp structural distinction that can be drawn between branches and higher structures underscores the fact that any assessment of the effectiveness of SANCO must be conducted at two very different levels, and that the strength of these levels is not necessarily co-determined (i.e. weak aggregated organisational structures might coexist with vibrant local structures). This structural distinction is amply reflected in the relative autonomy that branches enjoy. Though the formation of a branch can only be sanctioned by a region, and elections and other formal branch level procedures are constitutionally bound and in theory subject to the oversight of higher structures, in their day-to-day existence branches are largely self-governed.³³ Constitutional provisions for exerting control over branches are in fact limited, and higher structures are so organisationally weak and financially constrained as to have little material leverage over branches. Weaker branches tend to be dependent on the region for advice and co-ordination, but the stronger branches in effect operate independently. Most notably, the autonomy of branches is reflected in the fact that they often take positions, and even organise protests, that are contrary to provincial and national positions.³⁴

³³ Not a single branch-level official we interviewed complained of interference from higher structures.

³⁴ Based on research in the Western Cape, Seekings has come to a similar conclusion: ‘SANCO is characterised by fragmentation and diversity. Its lowest tiers – branches, area and street committees – enjoy so much autonomy

Financial resources

SANCO's financial state of affairs can only be described as catastrophic. SANCO's primary source of formal financing comes from membership fees. But at R5 a member, membership fees do not represent a significant source of revenue. SANCO enjoys no other regular source of financing. A big part of the rationale for establishing a national structure was to create a focal point for raising revenues. Donors have become increasingly reluctant to fund grass roots organisations, preferring instead to funnel monies through peak organisations. But SANCO's national office has only secured the occasional grant for training or holding workshops, and has failed to attract any core funding. The national business venture – SIH – has to date provided more controversy than actual revenue. SIH failed to submit a financial report on its R80 million investment portfolio to the 2001 national conference, stating that it had lost investment records and cash flow statements after an employee 'looted' their offices.³⁵ The head of SIH, Moses Mayekiso, has been openly accused of running a rogue operation and has been in open conflict with the SANCO president. Other private sector ventures have fared no better. An agreement with American Investment International to provide burial insurance with membership in 1996 collapsed when only the elderly bought into the schemes and disputes arose as to the age limit for payouts.

The lack of financial sources has produced severe communication and co-ordination problems between structures. The holding of provincial and national conferences – the highest democratic instances of the organisation – depends entirely on sponsors. The idea that all branches would send delegates to the 2001 national conference had to be scaled down to 600 delegates when only limited funding (from Rand Water) was secured. SANCO currently has permanent staff only at the national and provincial level. Its most effective staff member at the national office resigned after not being paid for several months, and the national lost its offices in Johannesburg after failing to pay the rent. Branches and regions across the board complain that they rarely receive communications from higher structures, except when elections are concerned.

At the regional and branch level, all office holders work on a strictly voluntary basis. Only half the regions in Johannesburg have formal offices (with only the Johannesburg region enjoying a paid staff member). The situation for branches is even more dire. No branch that we know of has paid staff, and only the older and more established township-based branches (eg Vosloorus, Diepkloof and Alexandra) have office space. The cost of travel to regional meetings is borne by individuals, and many basic costs such as printing letterheads and photocopying are borne by individual members. Individual members who hold office jobs use their employers' resources liberally in producing SANCO materials. Much the same is true of individual members who hold government positions. In the case of the Pretoria region, a high-ranking council official, who is also SANCO's regional secretary, explained that 'for the past two years SANCO has been squatting in my office, using council resources, including paper

in practice that it is not clear whether these should be included in a discussion of SANCO at all.' Jeremy Seekings, *No home for revolutionaries? The structures and activities of the South African National Civic Organisation in metropolitan Cape Town, 1996-97*, *Urban Forum*, 9(1), 1998, p 16.

³⁵ *Mail & Guardian*, 20–25 April 2001.

and photocopying. We run an underground operation here.’³⁶ We found a SANCO official similarly ensconced in the East London city council.

Against this fairly bleak picture, it is however crucial to point out that many regions and many branches continue to provide important services. The resources that they are able to mobilise are quintessentially those of social movements. Human resources are entirely voluntary, with officials doing much of their work in the evening and on weekends. And material resources are raised either through donations from the community, other organisations (e.g. churches that provide office space) or surreptitiously through unknowing sponsors such as employers or government offices.

Representation and accountability

Under apartheid, state repression made it virtually impossible, outside the union movement, to build transparent democratic organisations. Accordingly, despite enjoying broad-based popular support, civics never had formal memberships, which not only posed problems of representivity, but also made formal democratic practices difficult.³⁷ As SANCO notes, ‘with the advent of democratic elections in 1994 ... it became imperative for SANCO to have an appropriate membership structure which was renewable, led to greater accountability, and was able to satisfy any person who wished to question our credentials’.³⁸

Today, SANCO is a membership-based organisation governed by a constitution and formal democratic practices of elected representation and accountability. Office holders are elected at every level of the organisation, and all elections are conducted in conformity with its constitution which lays out a fairly standard set of electoral practices and codes. All office holders are elected at general conferences. National and provincial elections are held every three years (when sponsors are found), with regions and branches meeting every year. At the branch level all SANCO members can vote, with the only condition of membership being the payment of a R5 fee.³⁹ At higher levels, delegates from the substructures vote. Elections are presided over by higher structures, and in some cases by external auditors. Regional officials take their responsibilities for holding and monitoring branch elections seriously. With respect to the actual conduct of elections, we have heard no reports of irregularities. When asked if local officials were ‘representative’, all four focus groups agreed that branch leaders are all elected, and that officials ‘who do not perform are not re-elected’. From the many branch meetings we attended, it is also clear that branch executive committee members who fail to present apologies for not attending meetings or fail to present scheduled reports are publicly rebuked, with repeat offenders being eventually removed from office by a vote of the branch executive committee.

If actual grass-roots practices are genuinely democratic, the broader political context and organisational dynamics do have the effect of diluting community participation and claims to

³⁶ Interview, Jabu Tshabalana.

³⁷ Caroline White, *Democratic societies? Voluntary association and democratic culture in a South African township*, Centre for Policy Studies, Research report no 40, 1995.

³⁸ SANCO, Organisational report, 3rd national conference, 19–22 April 2001, p 8.

³⁹ In interviews and focus groups we found no evidence of exclusion from membership. We did however hear numerous reports of residents being denied ANC membership because of their affiliation to SANCO.

representivity. Most notably, contrary to SANCO's claims to be a home to all political parties, upward mobility within SANCO is clearly partisan. As far as we have been able to ascertain, almost all elected officials above the branch level are ANC members (the few exceptions are in the Eastern Cape, the Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal). Outside of the Eastern Cape, it is doubtful that any individual not loyal to the ANC could secure a provincial position. SANCO leaders who have openly called for distancing SANCO from the ANC have found themselves marginalised and in one celebrated case, quickly expelled.⁴⁰ Though the ANC does not intervene directly, candidates for key positions are often 'tipped' or selected by ANC structures. Judging by the political biographies of those we have interviewed, a proven track record within alliance structures and within SANCO is a necessary prerequisite for higher office. This cuts both ways – while it means that all regional and provincial office holders are seasoned activists with significant organisational experience, it also means that they remain uniformly loyal to the ANC, even while expressing serious misgivings about SANCO's lack of autonomy.

Having said this, it is worth noting that SANCO remains far more internally democratic than the ANC itself. The national office exerts absolutely no power over the nomination of provincial leaders, and regions in turn remain very independent from the province. In Gauteng, the East Rand and Pretoria have been very vocal in criticising the provincial leadership, and every branch official we have interviewed in Johannesburg has been openly critical of the regional leadership. Criticisms of upper structure leadership moreover get fully aired at general council meetings.

If as an *organisation* SANCO's formal internal structures of representation conform with democratic norms, conspicuous by their absence are the conventional anti-oligarchical measures that most *movements* embrace, such as rotating leadership, term limits and the conscious and rapid promotion of the under-represented. There are for instance very few female office holders in SANCO despite the fact that women represent the overwhelming majority of rank-and-file members. Similarly, while branches retain their autonomy, SANCO's organisational structure remains a largely hierarchical one with little room for the flatter forms of co-ordination associated with movements. This often has the effect of crippling grass roots initiatives. Rather than communicating horizontally when branches have shared concerns, they instead communicate with higher structures where initiatives often fall prey to political machinations or organisational inertia.⁴¹

Nowhere are SANCO's organisational problems more obvious than in its efforts to build a formal membership. Branches enrol members by filling membership books that are distributed by the province. Of the R5 membership fee, R2 goes to the branch, and R1 goes to each of the higher structures. In practice many branches do not remit to higher structures. Some branches levy higher membership fees and keep the difference. Many branches complain that membership books are difficult to obtain, and branch officials have to travel significant distances to obtain and submit the books. Higher level structures have largely failed to system-

⁴⁰ Mzwanele Mayekiso was expelled in part for publicly criticising SANCO's decision to endorse Thabo Mbeki as president even before the ANC had officially nominated him. Zuern, *Democracy from the grass roots? ...*, p 223.

⁴¹ An initiative by a number of squatter camp branches to organise an indaba on informal settlements was, in keeping with organisational protocol, forwarded to the provincial office, where it remained buried. The organisational reflex prevailed despite the knowledge that the provincial secretary is notoriously incompetent.

atically compile and maintain membership lists. In Gauteng, branch chairs complain that after submitting their books to the provincial office they just disappear. Repeated efforts to obtain membership numbers from the province and from the national office proved fruitless. In contrast, the active branches we visited kept meticulous records of their membership, and officials were visibly proud to be able to present completed membership books.

In addition to organisational bottlenecks, SANCO's membership drive has been severely hampered by what is essentially a free rider problem. Inasmuch as SANCO can indeed secure benefits for the 'community', these benefits are by definition indivisible. Both SANCO and non-SANCO members benefit from greater transparency in local government, better and more efficient local services and the various brokerage services (described below) that SANCO offers. Membership moreover is not a condition for attending informational meetings or seeking assistance from SANCO. Thus in contrast to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), for example, SANCO membership is not a precondition for representation by the organisation and does not confer discrete advantages, such as access to pension funds or the organisation's assets.⁴² And while unions benefit from state-mandated dues check-off systems, collecting membership fees for SANCO is hard work. To remedy this problem, SANCO has attempted the classic solution of providing selective incentives, such as burial insurance premium discounts for members. But these schemes have failed.⁴³ It is fair to say that the rank and file by and large join SANCO for the same reasons that most people join social movements – the perceived legitimacy of the organisation and the issues and/or values it stands for, including most importantly a belief in the intrinsic value of participating in public life. Thus, our focus group respondents insisted that people support SANCO because it is a 'community structure' and 'welcomes people of all, or no, political persuasion'.

From attending meetings and studying focus group responses, it is quite clear that community support for civics extends well beyond members. Meetings that are held to address a particular issue – for example the distribution of plots in an informal settlement, or problems with water and electricity bills – often draw crowds that far surpass local membership. Conflict resolution meetings – which take place on a regular basis and are often organised at the sub-branch level – hear cases from anyone in the community. The responses from the focus groups we conducted were especially revealing. Though we only selected residents of townships and informal settlements who were not members of SANCO, virtually all claimed to support SANCO. Though only a small number admitted to having attended a meeting, a majority could provide examples of instances in which they had approached a SANCO official for assistance.⁴⁴ Especially revealing was the fact that respondents used the terms 'civic' and

⁴² We did come across one case in which a local government official claimed that a housing project controlled by SANCO was being used to reward members. Other such instances have been reported in the press. While SANCO is no less immune than any other organisation to 'opportunity hoarding' as a mechanism for organisation building, the fact that it only rarely controls access to resources and cannot in general exclude non-members from benefiting from its services limits the scope for patronage.

⁴³ For an extended discussion, see Zuern, *Democracy from the grass roots?*

⁴⁴ In their survey research, Cherry et al also found high levels of support for civics that does not translate into formal membership. In the Cape Town township of Guguletu only 14 per cent of residents said they were members, but twice as many had attended branch meetings recently, and 58 per cent had attended street committee meetings. Cherry et al, *Democratisation and urban politics in South African townships*.

‘SANCO’ interchangeably. Coupled with the fact that they have little knowledge of what higher structures do, and that all four focus groups were adamant that civics should not be involved in politics, this suggests that residents’ expressed support is for the local civic, rather than SANCO as such. Indeed, in contrast to SANCO’s higher leadership, none of our respondents and very few branch level officials ever explained the importance of the civic in terms of extra-local political goals.

Branch level participation

Just how democratic are local civics? To what extent do they actually promote meaningful participation? Given the degree of local operational autonomy that most civics enjoy, and given the variation of local conditions and political configurations, the picture – much as for civil society in general in South Africa – is necessarily uneven, changing, and highly differentiated. Evaluating the democratic character of any voluntary body is complicated by the fact that associational ties can be based on exclusive and clientelist exchanges rooted in unequal relations that ultimately promote narrow and parochial interests, just as much as they can be based on more horizontal forms of interaction rooted in non-hierarchical forms of communication and trust, and geared towards securing public goods. Between these book-ends there are infinite permutations.

A number of case studies have documented the elite capture of civics. The Community Agency for Social Inquiry⁴⁵ found that in the Soweto community of Tladi-Moletsane, the local civic only represents home owners. Shack dwellers have been left to depend on ‘a mysterious Mr K to act as their benefactor’. The study concluded that an observed rise in xenophobia and assertions of ethnic identity are the result of a ‘retreat of some community groupings either into organisations that represent their parochial interests or into clientelist relations with local power-brokers’.⁴⁶ Similarly, Everatt argues that civics are controlled by petty bourgeois professionals and have been used primarily to defend middle class homeowners against perceived threats of informal settlement encroachment. Some NGOs, such as PLANACT, have reduced their involvement with civics because internal fighting – such as in Alexandra – made co-operation impossible.

In some communities, SANCO branches continue to stake a monopoly claim. In the Soweto community of Diepsloot, for example, efforts by PLANACT to build a multi-stakeholder community development forum were actively and often violently resisted by the local SANCO branch which saw the forum as a threat to its control.⁴⁷ For at least one former civic activist who is now in city government, ‘SANCO still has the attitude that it is “the” voice of the community and that if you don’t go through them, they won’t co-operate.’⁴⁸ SANCO officials themselves note that in some civics the chairperson behaves ‘like a chief’ and one SANCO organisational document noted in no uncertain terms that in many branches, ‘individ-

⁴⁵ The Community Agency for Social Inquiry, 1997.

⁴⁶ Cited in Beall, *Where the dust settles*, p 34.

⁴⁷ Interview with Hassen Mohammed, 18 April 2000.

⁴⁸ Interview with Laurence Boya, 30 October 2000.

ual members form consortia with unscrupulous developers for personal rapid upward mobility and delivery [sic] substandard housing products'.⁴⁹

These sobering assessments of the civics represent an important corrective to the often romanticised assessments of the civics movement that characterised much of the literature on the liberation struggle. Not only did many commentators exaggerate the democratic character of civic structures, but also often took at face value civic leaders' claims that they represented the 'community'. Yet recent assessments also suffer from a reductionism of their own and come perilously close to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Most notably, there has been a tendency to take well documented cases of elite capture and gatekeeping and extrapolate them to the whole of the civics movement. The resulting canvas depicts a Hobbesian world in which anomie, violence, distrust, self-interest, and fragmentation predominate. It is a world of clients, not citizens, of strongmen, not democrats. It is a world in which formal institutions (the powers of the state) and informal institutions (norms and values) have all but collapsed and where survival becomes a matter of investing in exclusive, interpersonal, and often extra-legal networks of protection and patronage. That this is indeed a marked trend in urban South Africa can hardly be contested.

But it is not the only trend. The other trend is one in which civics (as well as other civil society organisations) are actively resisting the pulverisation of civil society (to borrow O'Donnell's term)⁵⁰ by reconstituting communities through democratic and participatory structures. One such example is Beall's case study⁵¹ of a successful environmental movement in Meadowlands. Drawing on field work and focus groups, she found that SANCO was the most prominent CBO in Meadowlands and that it represented the 'more marginalised members of the community'. Respondents expressed faith in SANCO as a watchdog and in its ability to 'represent their interests in relation to the local councillors and to ensure the latter delivered on their promises' ... 'SANCO was seen as both more accessible and more accountable to the community than local politicians.'⁵²

Our intensive study of four civics (and visits to four others) and our focus groups produced similar findings. Our sample is not by any means representative and allows for only the most cautious and qualified conclusions. We cannot assert that all SANCO civics are representative and democratically governed. If our sample – which to our knowledge is the largest of any recent study – tells us anything, it is that some civics have been able to carve out small but significant spaces of direct democratic participation. In all four cases, moreover, there are four common factors that have underscored the democratic character of the civic. The first has been a high level of engagement of elected officials with rank-and-file members. The second has been a strong local commitment to an inclusionary SANCO. The third has been an operational, if not an ideological, distancing from the ANC. The fourth has been a general pluralisation of civil society which has produced competition among civics (with varying affiliations), political parties, and other interest groups for community support.

⁴⁹ Gauteng SANCO, 2000, p 10.

⁵⁰ Guillermo O'Donnell, On the state, democratization and some conceptual problems: a Latin American view with glances at some postcommunist countries, *World Development*, 21 (8), 1993, pp 1355–9.

⁵¹ Beall, *Where the dust settles*.

⁵² Beall, *Where the dust settles*, pp 20-1.

Based on participant observation we have conducted by attending 15 branch meetings, including branch executive meetings (BECs), branch councils (in which substructures attend), and mass meetings (open to all community members), local level democratic culture appears to be robust. In all of our selected branches, meetings are held on a regular basis. Each branch has its own mix of executive, substructure, and open meetings, but on average BECs and substructure meetings are held weekly and councils are held fortnightly.⁵³ In some of the larger branches, heads of department from different sub-structures also meet routinely. Branch conferences – in which the leadership is elected – are held yearly. Meeting procedures are fairly uniform, with the reading of agendas, review of attendance, presentation of minutes, and the discussion of agenda items as the basic format. Weekly branch meetings are for the most part informational sessions which often result in long deliberations, but few actual votes. This is because voted resolutions are more or less reserved for general conferences. Elected officials report back on general or specific actions, which are then discussed. When substructures are present (zonal committees in shack settlements, street committees in townships), representatives report on or raise issues from their areas. At a meeting we attended in Winnie Mandela Park, for example, every zone was given an opportunity to report, and what followed was a litany of complaints, including accusations of bribe-taking by community liaison officers, broken water pipes and confusion about the allocation of toilets. Actions taken usually consist of requesting an official to investigate a problem or to make a representation to the authorities. The range of issues taken up is broad and diverse, and includes bond payments and evictions, plot allocations, the distribution of housing subsidies, pursuance of criminal cases, complaints about quality of service and billing systems, and cut-offs. Meetings thus serve both as a means of providing information to residents, including both general information about government policies, and specific feedback on SANCO activities, and as sounding boards and rallying points for popular grievances. In Hirschman's famous terms, these spaces allow for *voice* (and the possibility of collective action), as an alternative to *exit* (apathy, migration or crime) or *loyalty* (eg searching for a patron).

Because much of our research was conducted in the run-up to and the actual period of the list nomination process for the December 2000 local government elections, almost every meeting involved a discussion of relations with the ANC. It should be noted here that whereas officials and rank-and-file members are quite vociferous and animated about alliance questions, including and especially the local ANC branch and ANC councillors, and are clearly not shy about being critical, discussions, whether favourable or critical, of other parties are virtually non-existent (save the random disparaging remark, usually about the Democratic Alliance, or DA). Some of the meetings we have attended have been addressed by representatives from other parties, but most political discussions are squarely located within alliance debates.

Evaluating the participatory and deliberative quality of any forum is a difficult task. When viewed comparatively, branch meetings appear to score quite high. Though we have witnessed rather autocratic styles of leadership at higher levels, presiding officers at the branch level are very responsive to rank-and-file participation. In contrast to what one of us has experienced repeatedly in the Indian context (where democracy is 50 years old), meetings are

⁵³ The branches in which we attended meetings are Alexandra, Emdeni (Soweto), Wattville, Winnie Mandela Park, Ruth First, and Finetown.

certainly not monopolised by a single figure (eg landlord or ethnic group leader) nor dominated by small coteries. Participation from the floor is substantial, and often confrontational. Officials who monopolise or divert the discussion are often called to order. At mass meetings in the informal settlement of Ruth First, we have witnessed as many as 60 persons speak from the floor, including many who have been critical of the local SANCO leadership. The attendance register at one of these meetings revealed the presence of representatives from the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Azanian Peoples' Organisation (AZAPO), the Homeless People's Party, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

One of our more surprising observations has been the insignificance of age as a barrier to participation or deliberation. It is often said that the civics movement in the post-struggle period has largely become the preserve of elderly residents. In terms of membership numbers, this is certainly the case. But young people do represent a high percentage of meeting participants, and a surprising number of branch officials are in their twenties and thirties. This is especially true in squatter camps. It is also quite clear that ethnicity is not an important determinant of who participates and how. Discussions are conducted across the full range of African languages spoken in Gauteng, and we have not heard language or observed patterns indicative of ethnic affiliations or alliances. The membership and leadership, as far as we can tell in the absence of survey data, reflect Gauteng's African ethnic plurality. The exception here is the non-representation of non-South Africans.

A likely source of unequal participation, socio-economic background, and more specifically type of accommodation, has been difficult to assess. The existing literature on civics tends to argue that civic leaders are predominantly from better-off segments of the population.⁵⁴ Our findings paint a more complicated picture. Most of the branches we have tracked have fairly homogeneous constituencies, being predominantly either townships or informal settlements. Of the two mixed branches we have examined – Alexandra and Wattville – there is ample evidence that local civics represent a cross section of residents. In Alexandra, the SANCO branch has significant representation in squatter areas (it openly denounced the removal of squatters in February 2001) and has been actively organising hostels. Alexandra, moreover, has witnessed the multiplication of civic structures, with no fewer than four civics currently active. In Wattville, which is mostly a township but also has a significant squatter population, the leadership comes entirely from the home-owning strata. The squatter camp – Harry Gwala – does however have a SANCO sub-branch and is very active. Its leaders regularly attend the branch meetings and are extremely vocal. The branch executive has been actively engaged in trying to get the (now defunct) Benoni city council to provide property titles to shack dwellers and adamantly opposed the demarcation board's decision to locate another informal settlement under a different jurisdiction.

The most observable barrier to equal participation is, not surprisingly, gender. While it is widely accepted that women represent a majority of SANCO's membership, they are dramatically under-represented in elected positions. This does however become less true at the branch level, where women constitute roughly 30 per cent. of elected leaders. Women's par-

⁵⁴ David Everatt, *Yet another transition? Urbanisation, class formation, and the end of the national liberation struggle in South Africa, Strategy and Tactics* (research consultancy), Johannesburg, June 1999.

ticipation in branch meetings is quite high, representing at least 60 per cent. of those in attendance.

What does SANCO do?

In 1992, Jeremy Seekings, one of the most seasoned academic observers of the civics movement, raised a challenging question:

If the post-apartheid local government institutions enjoy popular legitimacy and elections are contested by a range of credible political parties, what space will there be for civics? ... There is little reason why civics will not come to resemble existing ratepayer or civic groups in white areas, playing a very limited role lobbying local government councillors.⁵⁵

Civic leaders at the time were much less confident about just how democratic local governments would be but nonetheless recognised the need to redefine and narrow their role. Many of the functions they had undertaken in the past – conflict resolution, policing, direct provision of services – were now to be provided by a democratic state. The ANC prodded civics, not always subtly, to redefine their role from vehicles of resistance and incubators of democracy to instruments of delivery. Though civil society proponents, including many SANCO-affiliated civics, remained wary of subordinating themselves to a state-led project of transformation, and insisted on retaining a watchdog role, they nonetheless accepted that civics needed to play a key role in supporting ‘development’, albeit conceptualised in the participatory language of ‘people-centred development’. SANCO’s first president, Moses Mayekiso, took the position further and argued for a partnership role: ‘Because of its grass-roots support base, SANCO is in an ideal position to harness individual and community capacities to assist the authorities and other agencies to successfully implement reconstruction and development programmes.’⁵⁶

As one assesses the activities of SANCO branches today, it becomes clear that this vision never materialised, at least not in the dynamic and synergistic sense implied in the partnership view. Branches remain active, but their involvement with communities has more to do with providing what can be called brokerage services than partnering with the state or the private sector in delivering developmental services or goods. In our interviews with officials from 16 different branches (ten in Gauteng, three in KwaZulu-Natal, and three in the Eastern Cape) we collected very few examples of civics playing a direct role in rolling out government programmes or services. When civics did provide services or assistance, it was generally in response to market or state failures. The example most commonly cited by focus group respondents, for example, was assistance in apprehending criminals or providing community patrols in communities where the police are either entirely absent or indifferent. Respondents (all from Gauteng townships and informal settlements) did provide many accounts of SANCO ‘delivering’ electricity, toilets, paved streets, community centres and trucked-in drinking water. Most of these cases were, however, more about local civic leaders having effectively lobbied

⁵⁵ Cited in Mzwanele Mayekiso, *Township politics: civic struggles for a new South Africa*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996.

⁵⁶ Moses Mayekiso, Development Report, South African National Civic Organisation, 1997, p 5.

or pressured local government officials than cases of SANCO serving as a direct conduit for delivery.

We did come across exceptions in Durban and the Eastern Cape. In KwaMashu and Claremont (Durban), two areas in which SANCO has an exceptionally strong presence, the local branches were the key community partners in successful housing projects.⁵⁷ In the Eastern Cape, SANCO officials also report involvement in a number of projects, including playing a lead role in the development of the Qaqawuli settlement in Port Elizabeth. In contrast, the pattern in Gauteng, as we shall see later, has been one of systematically excluding SANCO branches from housing projects.

The most successful SANCO-led developmental interventions that we documented in Gauteng were moreover all instances of responding to state failures. In Winnie Mandela Park and Finetown (both informal settlements), SANCO branches identified the need for a secondary school (in each case schoolchildren were travelling long distances to school and were often the victims of crime) and lobbied the Department of Education. When these appeals fell on deaf ears ('We got the duck and dive treatment'), the SANCO branches raised money and labour to construct or rent facilities, and then identified volunteer teachers and principals to staff the schools. The schools are now up and running and SANCO continues to lobby the department for support. In Finetown, SANCO also played an instrumental role in building and setting up a job training centre in co-operation with a Muslim NGO.

In sum, SANCO has clearly not fulfilled its own post-transition goal of becoming an integral element of the ANC government's transformation project. On the one hand this can no doubt be attributed to the inevitable problems that beset any voluntary civic association when it takes on quasi-governmental or business functions, especially in a context of acute competition for resources. The distribution of resources can easily become a source of rents, especially when the dispensing organisation lacks the capacity to institutionalise formal mechanisms of accountability. The media has documented countless cases in which SANCO's involvement in development projects has been plagued by corruption, and most SANCO officials we interviewed, including the president, readily acknowledge that playing a direct developmental role is a source of conflict and tension.⁵⁸

On the other hand, it is equally true that the institutional environment required for effective civil society involvement in delivery has rapidly deteriorated. The abandonment of the RDP, the increasing centralisation of authoritative decision-making (both within the ANC and government), and the turn to market forms of delivery and measures of accountability, has dramatically shrunk the space for effective community participation (more on this later). All of which, quite naturally, has led many commentators to conclude that the civics movement has failed to make the transition from protest to development, and has become either invisible or irrelevant.

Such conclusions however fail to explain why civics continue to enjoy considerable support. When our focus groups were asked what the most active organisation in their respective

⁵⁷ Interviews with Jimmy Mtomo and Mandla Zulu.

⁵⁸ Lodge provides an extensive review of reported cases of SANCO corruption. Lodge, *South African politics since 1994*, pp 85-8.

communities was, they all cited SANCO or ‘the civic’.⁵⁹ Clearly, civics continue to play an important role in helping communities assume a degree of control over their lives. They do so however not through control or delivery of development (exceptions notwithstanding), nor through large-scale mobilisations, but through far more prosaic, even mundane interventions. Most of these activities, as we shall see, can be conceived of as efforts to bridge the gap between community needs and state action. The paradox therein is that the failure of SANCO’s developmental mandate is precisely what has sustained its institutional position. Broadly speaking, SANCO’s local level activities can be grouped into three clusters: providing brokerage services, challenging local authorities, and conflict mediation.

Brokerage

Across a wide range of issues, SANCO officials and volunteers provide assistance and guidance to all residents in addressing individual and community complaints. These brokerage functions are provided either in the form of direct assistance or advice to an individual or group, or by engaging the relevant authorities on behalf of aggrieved individuals or groups.

- In many communities, SANCO provides assistance with the registration of indigents for service subsidies. In Port Elizabeth, for example, SANCO has responded to the city council’s inertia in registering indigents by conducting a door-to-door campaign.
- In every branch we examined, SANCO officials routinely investigate excessive water or electricity bills. Residents complain of the difficulties encountered in taking such complaints to ESKOM, Rand Water and the local council, and prefer as a result to go through SANCO. At both the Vosloorus and Diepkloof SANCO branches, one can witness on any given day a long line of residents waiting for help in interpreting bills. At the Diepkloof branch there were no fewer than three SANCO officials in attendance when we visited, and a meticulously kept logbook registered dozens of visitors a day. In some communities, SANCO meets regularly with ESKOM to discuss problems with billing and services. In Wattville, SANCO meets bi-weekly with ESKOM to review lists of imminent electricity cut-offs and to review contested bills. SANCO also often provides residents with assistance when their goods and property are repossessed by collection agencies hired by council. Many residents complain of having the value of their property undervalued by unscrupulous collectors, and ask SANCO to intervene.
- In every township branch, the head of department for housing is usually the busiest head of department (HoD). Homeowners threatened with eviction for failure to pay their bonds often approach SANCO for assistance. As one HoD explained, the complaint is investigated and if it is found to have merit (ie nonpayment was the result of changed economic circumstances) they will approach the bank and negotiate an alternative payment plan. The HoD of housing for Vosloorus estimates that his branch investigates as many as 90 bond payment complaints a week, and attempts to renegotiate an average of 40 a week. Similarly, SANCO also routinely renegotiates the terms of rightsizing with Servcon.

⁵⁹ For a similar finding based on survey data, see Cherry et al, *Democratisation and urban politics in South African townships*.

- Residents find dealing with the police, and in particular filing criminal cases, to be frustrating. Officers are often unwilling to hear complaints, and even when they do, there is rarely a follow-up. In most branches there is usually at least one SANCO official tasked with taking up this responsibility, and when the problem is acute (as in the case of violent crimes that are not investigated), SANCO will organise a delegation, and even take the matter directly to an area commissioner.
- In informal settlements, securing land title claims for squatters is often the most important role the civic plays. In Wattville, the SANCO branch, having discovered that the Harry Gwala settlement was located on land owned by Spoornet, has been pressuring the local council to provide title deeds.
- SANCO often negotiates with taxi associations over proposed fare increases and the need for new routes.

SANCO as challenger

If many of these brokerage functions consist in effect of simply voicing community issues, providing relevant information and creating channels of communication between residents and local authorities, the representation of community interests can also assume a more contentious character. In the absence of effective national or provincial policy positions and lobbying, these engagements rely almost entirely on the initiatives of local SANCO officials. When authorities fail to deliver, or when elected representatives fail in accountability, branches have challenged the legitimacy of these authorities. This can take the form of demanding that a councillor account to the community, exposing corrupt practices or protesting official indifference. The point here is that these forms of engagement often assume a contestatory character by in effect challenging the ruling party's hegemonic claims to representing the 'people'. This, more than anything else, is the source of acute tension that currently exists on the ground between many civics and ANC structures. Thus if government and ANC officials we interviewed applauded SANCO's brokerage functions, the more contentious engagements with government were invariably described as irresponsible, driven by personal agendas and symptomatic of SANCO's failure to make the shift from protest to development.

- In a number of branches we examined, SANCO officials have aggressively exposed incidents of corruption and fraud, including instances of the sale of fictitious title deeds, allocations of plots for bribes, manipulation of housing lists and faulty or sub-standard housing construction in RDP schemes. The actions taken include exposing the accused officials to higher level structures of the ANC (a course of action that rarely appears to have an effect), demanding investigations from provincial officials (the Gauteng MEC for housing, Paul Mashatile, has been kept especially busy), obtaining court orders to suspend a project and organising protests.
- SANCO branches are very active in negotiating terms and quality of service delivery. SANCO's official policy is that those who can pay, must pay, but that payment should be commensurate with quality of service, and those who cannot pay must be provided for. All four focus groups reported that SANCO officials communicate this position clearly and consistently. At all the branch level meetings where this issue was addressed we heard a similar message. In a number of meetings, residents (and in particular landlords)

who failed to pay bills despite having the means were openly chastised. At the same time, SANCO has consistently opposed credit control measures that do not account for economic circumstances. This is by far the most common source of protests. In some areas, SANCO has successfully engaged local authorities in negotiations that have produced co-operative arrangements. The most noteworthy case we encountered was the Pretoria region. There SANCO demanded and obtained a credit control summit, and successfully negotiated a scheme that recognised five different categories of creditors, and included significant protection for the poorest. The committee of five that has oversight functions for the scheme includes two SANCO officials. The Pretoria council CEO is reported as having claimed that repayment levels have increased significantly since the scheme was introduced.⁶⁰

- SANCO often negotiates with local authorities for services and amenities, ranging from sports facilities to the location of paypoints and the provision of trucked-in water in informal settlements. These negotiations, it should be noted, take place directly between SANCO and local councillors, rather than through established fora such as community development forums. The negotiations often involve hard horse-trading. In Emdeni, a meeting between SANCO and ANC branches agreed, after much argument and invective, that the ANC ward candidate would deliver a paypoint in the community in exchange for SANCO's support in his campaign effort.
- SANCO branches are sometimes involved in negotiating and participating in housing social compacts. This however appears to be a rapidly declining trend. In Gauteng, we found mostly instances in which SANCO was excluded from committees. In the two informal settlements we investigated, SANCO branches were formed and received significant community support in order to specifically challenge ANC control and a perceived lack of community participation over site and upgrade projects.

In addition to these brokerage and challenger functions, many SANCO branches and most of its sub-branches (street, zonal, block committees) also take on significant conflict mediation functions. These are not, it should be emphasised, the people's courts of the 1980s.⁶¹ Officials do not sit as judges – instead they simply hear disputes brought to them by complainants and limit their interventions to providing advice or referrals.⁶² The vast majority of the disputes involve domestic issues or minor conflicts between neighbours and are handled by sub-branch structures. These meetings tend to be particularly well attended and point to the fact that civic leaders continue to enjoy significant legitimacy and respect in the community.⁶³ It is notable that many of the complainants are actually referred to SANCO by the po-

⁶⁰ Interviews with Jabu Tshabalala and Lucas Qakaza.

⁶¹ As Zuern has pointed out, the people's courts of the 1980s were established by civics in response to the vigilante courts set up by gangs and kangaroo courts set up by councillors. The state tried to demonise people's courts, but all the evidence shows that violent, summary justice came from vigilantes and councillors, not from the civics. Zuern, *Democracy from the grass roots?*, p 110.

⁶² A possible exception is in Mdantsane in East London, where the SANCO branch has organised people's courts *Daily Dispatch*, 3 August 1999.

⁶³ In the Joe Modise area of Alexandra, conflict resolution meetings are held weekly and attended by 70-80 persons. Similar weekly meetings in Wattville attract 50-60 people. Most of the other branches we visited tend to hear cases during regular open SANCO meetings. Among the cases we heard was an elderly man complaining

lice. Focus group respondents repeatedly expressed a preference for ‘first trying to solve the problem as a community’ and ‘resolving disputes as neighbours’ rather than taking matters directly to the police. One mother noted that when it came to dealing with children involved in petty crimes, ‘I prefer SANCO because it disciplines in a parental manner, unlike the law.’ Another township resident explained:

SANCO ... helps us with our youth when they’ve been involved in crime. Instead of getting them arrested we take the matter to SANCO ... we meet together and the youth get a scolding.

Cherry et al also found that civics are deeply embedded and implicated in community life:

Asked what you do if a young man in your family does not obey his parents, 41 per cent. of our Guguletu respondents said that they went to the street committee. If a neighbour plays music too loud, 69 per cent. went to a street committee. ... Street committees clearly play extensive and important roles in public and even private life.⁶⁴

Brokerage and conflict resolution functions have long been the bread and butter of the civics movement. That this role has persisted – despite the ebbs and flows of the civics movement – points to the degree to which civics have gained a significant institutional presence in many communities.⁶⁵ It also points to the extent to which the post-apartheid state has, in many respects, failed to bridge the gap between communities and government that characterised its predecessor. SANCO’s brokerage role remains important to ordinary citizens because of the distance and insulation of local government, and the difficulties ordinary residents have in interfacing with local authorities. Government bureaucracies and service providers (ESKOM and Rand Water) are distant and often user-hostile, and many residents have neither the skills nor the resources to effectively engage these institutions. As one shack dweller succinctly noted, ‘They [SANCO branch officials] are our mouthpiece to government’. Another noted that ‘SANCO negotiates better for us than if we go there personally. If SANCO goes as SANCO we get quick responses.’ When we asked our focus groups why they would turn to SANCO rather than their councillors, one participant responded:

We don’t even know where he [our councillor] stays (laughter). When you go to look for him you are told he stays in the suburbs. With SANCO it is better because we live with these people in the informal settlements.

Another added:

We have a problem with councillors, we hardly know where they stay. We see them once when there’s a meeting. At the meeting they make all those promises and thereafter no

about the drug abuse of a nephew and his threatening behavior; a young married couple who were fighting over the fact that he had moved into his sister’s household; and a family of sisters who were disputing their deceased mother’s inheritance amid accusations of witchcraft.

⁶⁴ Cherry et al, *Democratisation and urban politics in South African townships*, p 4.

⁶⁵ Zuern makes a similar point. Zuern, *Democracy at the grass roots?*

follow-up is made because this person stays in Randburg. At meetings the councillor makes promises but then you'll see him again only after six months and he will tell you lots of lies. It's different with SANCO officials because they are easily accessible. Your presence applies pressure whereas councillors don't feel the pressure because we do not see them. With SANCO, if they've made a promise and don't report, you are able to call them to a meeting after a week and ask for feedback. If you've reported something to him [the SANCO official] he will see that you are desperate, he must feel the pressure because he is your next door neighbour. Every time he steps out of his door he remembers that this person has made this request.

When asked whether SANCO or government should bear responsibility for maintaining housing lists, one respondent drew an interesting contrast:

There is a lot of corruption in RDP housing. You find that you registered your name in the waiting list a long time ago but have not been allocated a house but somebody who registered last week or this week gets a house. You hear people saying if you go to Dobsonville to councillor So-and-So you just pop out R350 ... because SANCO is close to the people, they should take part as to who should get houses first and they should look at the waiting list at the local government offices. If SANCO's executive committee can be part of distributing housing, then corruption can be limited.

Engaging the state

Having examined and evaluated SANCO's presence and its activities, we can now assess its effectiveness as a CSO. There are two axes along which any CSO's effectiveness must be examined. The first concerns SANCO's relationship to civil society, and is the subject of the next section. The second, which we take up here, is the capacity of the CSO to engage the state, and to impact upon the formulation and/or the implementation of public policy. The quality of that engagement follows from both the internal capacity of the CSO, as well as the nature of the political opportunity structure. In the South African case the latter is of course inextricably tied to the ANC. The ANC's relationship to SANCO calls for separate treatment and is taken up in a later section.

With the advent of democracy, the civics movement has had to make a difficult shift from the politics of resistance to the politics of influence. Cohen and Arato define 'influence' as:

a peculiar 'medium' that is specifically suited to modern civil society whose public spheres, rights, and representative democratic institutions are, in principle at least, open to discursive processes that inform, thematise, and potentially alter social norms and political cultures. It is possible for collective actors in civil society to exercise influence on actors in political society, to make use of public speech not only to gain power or money but to restrict the role of the media of power and money in the lifeworld in order to secure

autonomy and to modernise (democratise and liberalise) the institutions and social relations of civil society.⁶⁶

This has entailed two distinct challenges, namely how to maintain autonomous support in the absence of a politically unifying project of state capture, and how to effectively exert pressure on the state. Internally, this has in turn required refocusing priorities, developing new modes of engagement, adapting organisational structures and developing an entirely new set of competencies and expertise, not to mention replacing the leadership lost to the ANC and government and the resources lost to shifting donor priorities. Orchestrating such an organisational revamping would of necessity carry costs and produce uncertainty, resulting in a predictable period of reduced visibility and activity. A convincing case however can be made that SANCO's problems have less to do with its own internal problems than with the broader political and institutional environment in which it operates. As Tilly has argued, there is invariably a lag between changes in the political opportunity structure – which can happen quite quickly – and adaptive changes in the strategic repertoire of social movements and CSOs and the ways in which they interact with the state.⁶⁷ This in turn suggests that as severe as SANCO's organisational dilemmas might appear, they are derivative of changes in the political opportunity structure and SANCO's strategic response to those changes.

The story of SANCO's engagement with the state is a complex, continuously changing and uneven one. As we saw earlier, from the moment of its formation in 1992 SANCO invested itself, organisationally and politically, in a *politics of incorporation* that basically sought to capitalise on SANCO's ties to the ANC. When it became clear that SANCO in fact had little leverage as a corporatist actor, the politics of incorporation was reduced almost entirely to nurturing interpersonal ties to the ANC, a form of elite pact-making. Thus, when SANCO's national conference decided in 1997 to allow its officials to simultaneously hold positions in government, it was banking on the advantages of being an insider. It assumed that its deployees could be held accountable to SANCO. Instead the lure of the ANC's internal labour market has proven far more powerful, and a growing faction within the movement is calling for the so-called 'two hats' practice to be ended.

As many scholars of social movements have shown, a movement can engage the state – even to the point of incorporation – without compromising its autonomy. The Greens in Germany are a classic example. But to do so successfully requires that the movement maintain a credible exit option – the operational capacity to disengage from the state when incorporation is no longer meeting movement objectives. This in turn requires sustaining an independent support base, and an independent set of goals and commitments.

On the first count, though SANCO continues to enjoy significant popular support, that support remains firmly embedded in local structures and practices and expresses itself more in a commitment to civic action than in loyalty to an organisation. That support cannot, in other words, be readily wielded at the national level where bargaining over institutional reform and policy takes place. On the second count, SANCO as an organisation has never successfully staked out its own social movement politics. As SANCO's president recently noted, '... SANCO

⁶⁶ Cohen and Arato, *Civil society and political theory*, p 504.

⁶⁷ See Zuern, *Democracy at the grass roots?*, p131.

calls itself the custodian of communities, a watchdog of government, the grass roots of the Alliance, and then proceeds to never tackle the ANC on any other issues other than the lack of SANCO comrades on the ANC's election list'.⁶⁸ The politics of mobilisation and of building community power coexist uneasily with the politics of representation. As a *movement*, civics are committed to direct and participatory democracy. As an *organisation* that is closely tied to the party in power, and is thus afforded access through direct ties to government, it has a stake in government and in a more delegative form of democracy. In the balance, participation has been subordinated to incorporation. This is reflected in the fact that the single most important source of conflict between SANCO and the ANC has been the list nomination process, that is struggles for control over representative structures. It is also reflected in the peculiar way SANCO's watchdog function is often located within political, rather than civil society. As an Eastern Cape provincial SANCO official put it:

Civic problems can only be addressed if the civic organisation is affiliated to the party. There is no point in just making noise. We have to inject ideas into the political party. The watchdog role of the civic is to be inside the political party ... the civic formation should account to the political party.⁶⁹

SANCO's watchdog function 'helps the ANC understand the people's real needs' and provides correctives to government action, but does not allow for the possibility of supporting alternatives to state policy, and hence developing independent policy positions. Nor, since the lines of communication are located within the alliance, does it allow for contestation. As one local official put it, SANCO has become 'the watchdog that barks but can't bite'. (This view, it should be noted, is now being vocally challenged at the grass roots and even amongst higher level officials.) In sum, SANCO's definition of its role as a watchdog is more in keeping with an emphasis on political society (the politics of incorporation) than on civil society (the politics of autonomy).

The overall result of the politics of incorporation is that on issues that directly impact on the urban poor, rather than mobilising support through public actions, SANCO has opted instead to work through its 'channels of influence', that is discreetly and without embarrassing the government. Not only has this strategy proved futile, but it has pre-empted efforts to do what successful national social movements are supposed to do – provide conduits for aggregating and framing local grievances and collective action repertoires.⁷⁰ Thus if at the local level the problems of bond and rate payments and the non-performance of local government remain (along with crime) the most important sources of popular outrage, their political articulation remains inchoate. On housing SANCO has carved out a role in negotiating social compacts, renegotiating bond payments locally and nationally, and participating in housing

⁶⁸ SANCO, Presidential address to the SANCO 3rd national conference, p 3.

⁶⁹ Interview with Mike Nzotoyi.

⁷⁰ In her study of national social movements in the US, Minkoff concludes that they 'play a critical role in civil society and in the production of social capital by providing an infrastructure for collective action, facilitating the development of mediated collective identities that link otherwise marginalised members of society, and shaping public discourse and debate'. Debra Minkoff, Producing social capital: national social movements and civil society, *American Behavioral Scientist* 40(5), 1997, p 615.

development consortiums, but it has not had any independent effect on the government's overall housing delivery programme. With respect to service payments, local branches have been active in providing destitute residents some protection against the government's cost-recovery logic of service provision, but overall SANCO has failed to defend the basic rights approach to service provision enshrined in the RDP. At the branch level, SANCO is engaged, as one branch chair put it, in a firefighting action. Extraordinary energy and commitment is put into defending households threatened with evictions or cutoffs, but there is little strategic or programmatic engagement of the issues. Likewise, while branch level activists despair the lack of access to and accountability of councillors and bemoan the disappearance of local development forums, with rare exceptions none of the leaders we interviewed expressed strong opinions on local government transformation.⁷¹

This is not just a policy failure, it is also a dramatic political failure. By lending what has been almost unequivocal support to the ANC's transformation agenda, SANCO has endorsed not only the *substance* of transformation (where there is much common ground) but the *modalities* of transformation. And as many commentators have noted, those modalities have increasingly been marked by an emphasis on neo-liberal and neo-managerial criteria of delivery, including a heavy reliance on technocratic forms of decision-making.⁷² The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) process which was meant to be a key instrument of community participation has been dominated by consultants, and various multi-stakeholder vehicles such as community development forums and project steering committees have either been dismantled or tightly controlled by the ANC. Such a top-down approach to development has left little room for participation or contention and has in fact weakened the capacity of civics and other grass-roots organisations to effectively engage the state.⁷³

Civics and civil society

As a peak organisation, SANCO has become entangled in a politics of incorporation that has visibly weakened its capacity as a national movement. Most obviously it has failed to exert independent influence over the state, but just as significantly it has been party to a process that has seen the institutional terrain of engagement between state and civil society shrink rapidly. But because SANCO is a *movement of civics*, and because, as we have seen, most branches remain fairly autonomous from the national organisation, it is important to provide a separate analysis of the relationship between civics and civil society.

⁷¹ SANCO did make a submission to a parliamentary committee on the Municipal System Bill that challenged key provisions of the ministry's draft, calling among other things for institutionalising a popular budgeting system. But a SANCO NEC member who is an MP intercepted the submission and re-drafted it to support the government's position (interview with Mlungisi Hlongwane).

⁷² Friedman, A quest for control; Patrick Heller, Degrees of democracy: some comparative lessons from India, *World Politics*, 52 (July), 2000; Firoz Khan, A commentary on dark roast, Occasional paper no 1: Developmental local government: the second wave of post-apartheid urban reconstruction, Cape Town: Isandla Institute, 1998.

⁷³ Virtually all the civic activists we questioned complained about their exclusion from the IDP process. A number of officials we interviewed also readily acknowledged that CBOS have not been meaningfully integrated into local planning exercises.

Jurgen Habermas has argued that the greatest challenge posed to the deepening of democracy is the relentless expansion of the state and the market (and their respective media of power and money) at the expense of civil society. In the South African context this can be described in very familiar terms. The ANC's embrace of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy has seen the bottom-line logic of the market expand rapidly. This is manifest not only in the sharp turn towards privatisation and deregulation, but also in the encroachment of market principles into arenas that not so long ago were held to be governed by principles of justice and social citizenship. This is most notably the case with respect to the government policies of cost recovery in the provision of services, the reliance on the private sector for housing delivery and the sanctity of private property in land and agricultural policies. This in turn has been accompanied in the state sphere by political and administrative centralisation, the dissolution of local participatory spaces and the increasing reliance on technocratic instruments and visions of transformation. The ascendancy of the state as the unquestioned (and increasingly insulated) agent of development, many have argued, is inextricably tied to the ANC's hegemonic politics of penetrating and controlling civil society. The threat from the expansion of these two subsystems (the state and the market) to democracy lies in the subjugation of the communicative, deliberative, pluralistic and self-reflective values of modern civil society to the totalising logic and legitimating principles of the market (competition and profits) and the state (hierarchy and expertise). For Habermas, who describes this dynamic as the *colonisation of the life world* (roughly civil society plus culture), the process is so inexorable (as much of the globalisation literature also argues) that civil society is condemned to fighting a rearguard action.

Many social movement scholars have, however, contested this interpretation. Instead, they argue, movements that may appear to be reactive and politically ineffective may in fact be prefigurative in the sense of constituting new actors and spaces of engagement. As Szasz points out, social movements have important cumulative effects, not least of which is the role they play in 'foster[ing] direct democratic action, increased participation and increased politicisation of heretofore apolitical citizens'.⁷⁴ As such it would be a mistake to assess the success of social movements simply in terms of their capacity to effectively engage political society. Social movements have their most lasting impact in how they change public discourses (in particular by challenging hegemonic ideologies), create new political actors by generating new forms and frames of collective action, and forge participatory and deliberative spaces outside the reach of the state and the market. In sum, social movements 'constitute the dynamic element in processes that might realise the positive potentials of modern civil societies'.⁷⁵

With these concepts in mind, it now becomes possible, against the backdrop of SANCO's failure *as an organisation* to transform the state, to recover a role and a place for civics *as a movement*. In keeping with Habermas's model, it can be argued that many civics in South Africa represent an important countervailing force to the colonisation of civil society. Specifically, civics have actively resisted the commodification of life chances by defending the

⁷⁴ Andrew Szasz, Progress through mischief: the social movement alternative to secondary associations, in Erik O Wright (ed), *Association and democracy*, London: Verso, 1995, p 149.

⁷⁵ Cohen and Arato, *Civil society and political theory*, p 492.

principle of a public moral economy, and they have resisted the extension of political power by nurturing democratic spaces outside formal political society. The version of this argument is a weak rather than a strong one. A strong version would imply a consistent and strategic role, and would be predicated on an unambiguous identity and autonomy as a movement. SANCO does not meet this standard. But in an embryonic form the activities of many civics do indeed represent an attempt to reclaim the idea of a solidaristic and civic community standing against the atomisation of the market and the clientelisation of the political.

The first test of this claim lies in demonstrating that SANCO civics are indeed part of civil society rather than wedded to a political project to ‘establish ideological and organisational leadership of the institutions of civil society’.⁷⁶ In the early 1990s there is little doubt that liberation politics were animated by a hegemonic impulse: ‘The central problem was that the unity of the “people” tended to be conceived in terms of an abstract and monolithic “general will” ... embodied in a single movement ... there was a tendency for “unity” to be imposed from above ...’⁷⁷. In 1990, for example, some civic activists insisted ‘that there was no need for local elections because civics already constituted a democratic form of local government’.⁷⁸ This hegemonic impulse posed two intertwined threats to civil society. On the one hand political elites claimed for themselves the right to interpret community needs and on the other hand they elevated the strategic and organisational imperatives of resisting the state above the principle of nurturing associational life. The politics of hegemony, in other words, demanded that the communicative rationality of civil society (deliberation and pluralism) be subordinated to the instrumental rationality of capturing state power. There was, of course, a very real context to all of this. In the absence of basic civic and political rights, definitions of the community and ‘the civic’ were necessarily forged in oppositional terms. If the ‘people’ the civics claimed were certainly sociologically differentiated, they were also all equally and uniformly disenfranchised and marginalised. While the strategic conflation of the civic with ‘the community’ rode roughshod over the ideals of democratic pluralism, circumstances were hardly propitious for less politicised definitions. As Shubane has argued, there ‘are characteristics inherent to liberation movements that militate against the emergence of civil society. This arises fundamentally from the structural limitations imposed by colonial domination and the exclusion of the dominated from the state.’⁷⁹

More problematic for our purposes is the fact that this ideological and strategic reflex has carried over into the post-apartheid period. As early as 1992 Friedman could detect the emergence of a ‘new hegemony’ in which a civics movement aligned to the ANC would act as ‘a hegemonic power annexing civil society on behalf of the movement, not as a guarantee of its independence’.⁸⁰ The ANC itself has never been apologetic about its determination to control the civics movement. In a 1991 discussion paper, for example, the ANC demanded that civics

⁷⁶ K von Holdt, quoted in Friedman, Bonaparte at the barricades.

⁷⁷ R Fine, quoted in Steven Friedman and Maxine Reitzes, *Democratic selections?: State and civil society in post-settlement South Africa*, Midrand: Development Bank of South Africa, 1995, p 6.

⁷⁸ Friedman and Reitzes, *Democratic selections?*

⁷⁹ Khehla Shubane, *Civil society in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa*, *Theoria*, University of Natal, 79, 1992, p 37.

⁸⁰ Friedman, Bonaparte at the barricades, p 88.

recognise its role as the leader of the liberation movement, asserted its primacy in all matters of political concern and argued that civics 'in a democratic South Africa need not remain as "watchdog" members of civil society'.⁸¹ The formation of SANCO itself in 1992 can be interpreted as an effort to rein in the centrifugal tendencies of independent civics.⁸²

Such a rapid loss of movement autonomy and subordination to political power is hardly unique to the South African case. In her comparative analysis of democratic transitions in Spain and Chile, Hipsher⁸³ has shown that strong party systems, coupled with prolonged transition negotiations in which the politics of protest are strategically reined-in, has invariably resulted in the rapid demobilisation of once strong urban movements. But party-social movement dynamics tend to evolve 'through stages in which the movement's dual goals of autonomy and formal political engagement alternate in dominance'.⁸⁴ In the case of SANCO, while there has been a recent trend towards greater assertiveness and autonomy, the stages are hardly clear-cut, and are moreover marked by a constant tension between SANCO officials' allegiance to the ANC as the inheritor of the liberation movement and their expressed commitment to strengthening the role of SANCO as an independent social movement.

The contradictory positions this engenders are illustrated for example in the views of an informal settlement branch chair who founded a local SANCO branch when he became convinced that the local ANC branch executive – of which he was a member – was not interested in addressing the communities' concerns. He speaks passionately of how the ANC has betrayed the Freedom Charter and of the need to revitalise community structures. But he also proudly and unselfconsciously boasts that SANCO remains crucial to the ANC because 'they [the ANC] don't realise that people come to SANCO and then without even really knowing it end up supporting the ANC'.⁸⁵

In the Pretoria region – the only region in Gauteng where SANCO actively campaigned for the ANC in the December 2000 local government elections – an official argues that SANCO is in effect an instrument of community mobilisation for the ANC: 'The ANC cannot be the mouth of the people because it has constraints in government. When things fail inside the boardroom, then it must come to SANCO to mobilise the community.'⁸⁶ Yet, in the very same region, another official argues that SANCO contributes to democracy 'by maintaining its autonomy as an organ of civil society and taking issues head on and making sure that everybody is taking part in all aspects of government – transport forums, community policing forums, clinic committees. If we don't have SANCO and organisations of civil society, we are

⁸¹ As interpreted by Lanegran, *South Africa's civil association movement*, p 114.

⁸² Most notably, SANCO supported the ANC's call that local government negotiations take place within the process of national transformation. Ninety civics nonetheless defied the directive and engaged in direct negotiations with white municipalities. *Ibid*, pp 110-1.

⁸³ Patricia Hipsher, *Democratic transitions as protest cycles: social movement dynamics in democratizing Latin America*, pp 152-172, in Sidney Tarrow and David Meyer (eds), *The Social Movement Society*, New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 1998.

⁸⁴ Lanegran, *South Africa's civic association movement*.

⁸⁵ Interview with Albert Mosiye.

⁸⁶ Interview with Lucas Qakaza.

going to end up like Zimbabwe or Angola where there is a clear line of national loyalty and everything is politicised.⁸⁷

An even more explicit argument that political power in and of itself has become the problem, and that SANCO must act as a countervailing force to the ANC's oligarchical tendencies (albeit *within* the framework of the national democratic revolution, or NDR), is made by SANCO's president: 'The ANC can't pressure itself. It has become too centralised. There are conferences, but it is the ANC NEC that is making all the decisions between conferences. Anyone who strays from the NEC line is immediately disciplined, and there have been hundreds of cases. This is where SANCO can play a role. We need SANCO now more than ever.'

At a very minimum, cracks in the ideological hegemony that marked liberation politics have opened up the debate and allowed for an increasingly vigorous discussion about SANCO's role. Even more striking, however, are developments on the ground, two of which bear emphasis. The first has been the pluralisation of civil society itself. The weakening of the ANC's ideological hegemony coupled with accelerated socio-economic differentiation has given rise to new interests, identities and demands and spawned the creation of a range of new associations, including special interest groups, concerned residents' associations and non-SANCO civics. SANCO's once facile claim to represent 'the community' is now hotly contested.

As an organisation, SANCO remains predictably hostile to competing civics and residents' associations that it derisively refers to as 'popcorn civics'. SANCO officials argue that these are fly-by-night operations run by opportunistic actors only too happy to exploit hot-button issues for their own personal gain. (In some cases this is probably an accurate description.) And – as noted earlier – there are well documented cases of SANCO civics claiming monopoly representation. In the branches we examined, however, we found such attitudes to be rare. The hegemonic discourses of liberation politics were in fact conspicuous by their absence. Though activists do see SANCO as representing the community, not a single respondent ever claimed that SANCO should have exclusive representation in development fora or exclusive bargaining powers for the community. Most in fact readily endorsed the principle of multiple-stakeholder representation and we were provided with multiple examples of SANCO's branches working closely with other local associations.⁸⁸ Even at higher levels of the organisation, officials are now much more receptive to the idea of an independent and plural civil society. SANCO's president now aggressively calls for greater co-operation with NGOs, and argues that SANCO's unwillingness to work with the South African NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) was a crucial mistake.⁸⁹ He recently berated the organisation by observing that: 'We seem to forget a simple fact, community (sic) do not need SANCO to form a community organisation.'⁹⁰ A regional official was even more blunt: 'Popcorn civics are right to criticise SANCO

⁸⁷ Interview with Jabu Tshabala.

⁸⁸ To cite one example, in Port Elizabeth SANCO has been active since 1997 in the Port Elizabeth civil society forum. The forum's chair and SANCO official Monde Mntanga praises the forum (which has 71 affiliates) for the role that it has played in improving the relationship between civil society and the municipality.

⁸⁹ Interviews with Mlungisi Hlongwane.

⁹⁰ From a speech given to the East Rand AGM, 30 January 2000.

for its lack of autonomy ... In the East Rand having opposition is healthy. It has kept SANCO on its toes.’

The second development on the ground has been an increasing rift between the ANC and SANCO at the branch level. In some cases the rift has been occasioned by little more than power struggles, with local faction leaders using SANCO branches to leverage their position with the ANC. These are clearly cases in which communities are pawns in a struggle for political power. Predictably, this trend accelerated during the run-up to the local government elections. In most cases however the tension arises from the frustration that has resulted from the state’s disengagement and the ANC’s failure to take up local grievances.

In one of our case studies, the informal settlement of Finetown, SANCO has been waging a protracted struggle against the local ANC councillor whom they accuse of being corrupt, unaccountable and a gangster. The conflict has taken a violent turn with two SANCO leaders having been killed, purportedly by the councillor’s henchmen. Despite intimidation, the branch has continued to agitate and protest against the councillor, and has on two instances occupied local administrative offices (and received reprimands from the ANC). The ANC has in turn retaliated by excluding SANCO members from participating in ANC general meetings. We have found a very similar situation in Winnie Mandela Park, Ruth First and in Wattville. In Winnie Mandela Park SANCO officials have publicly denounced the local ANC branch executive members as corrupt ‘political criminals’ and in Wattville the branch has resorted to repeated protest actions to demand that a hostile ANC local council address pressing community issues. In Ruth First, SANCO has challenged the role of the ANC ward councillor in a housing project, arguing that he and a discredited community leader have colluded with the project consultant to exclude the community from participating meaningfully.

What is most striking about branches that have openly broken with the ANC is that they insist that they did so because their legitimacy and effectiveness as community organisations were at risk. The sheer centrifugal pull of local grievances, and in particular dissatisfaction with the performance of local government, has created new sources of contention and new opportunities for autonomous action. But what is the nature and effect of that autonomous action? Earlier we provided a functional description of civics as providing critical brokerage and lobbying functions that help bridge the gap between communities and government. In doing so, however, democratic civics do much more than provide a service. By facilitating citizen participation and deliberation they help constitute a *civic community* – that is a shared imaginary of the *virtuous* community constituted through horizontal forms of association and communication.⁹¹

Ideally, SANCO branches are movements, not just interest groups. The distinction is critical because it goes to the heart of how and why civics can help deepen democracy. In the pluralist view of democracy the basic rights of free association and elected representation guarantee that all interests will be aggregated and heard. But as Friedman and Reitzes note: ‘Simply leaving democracy to the marketplace of competing ideas and organisations may well ensure that the voices which most need to be heard remain silent.’⁹² Moreover, to return briefly to Habermas, interest groups are governed by the media of power and money, that is

⁹¹ Ivor Chipkin, Area-based management and the production of the public domain, unpublished manuscript, 2001.

⁹² Friedman and Reitzes, Democratic selections?, p 10.

their mode of organisation tends to mimic the state's, and their resource capacities tend to rely heavily on selective incentives. On both these points, movements are different because they have the basic effect of levelling the playing field.⁹³ First, they by definition tap into the kinds of resources in which the poor are relatively well-endowed: dense networks, solidarity, time and commitment. Second, movements nurture collective capacities by overcoming social transaction costs, that is by identifying common causes, tapping into shared identities, generating cognitive frames, and in effect building communities of action. As Tarrow notes: 'Unlike conventional forms of participation, collective action has the unusual property that it can demonstrate to others the possibilities of collective action and offer even resource-poor groups opportunities that are not predictable from their structural position.'⁹⁴

As evidence of the movement character of the civics we investigated, we can point to two key findings. First, in our research we have encountered dozens of dedicated, hard-working local activists who make sacrifices out of a sense of commitment to their communities. Most do not harbour political ambitions, and many in fact find themselves in SANCO after having become disillusioned with local ANC structures. Many of these activists commit significant personal resources, and much of their free time, to SANCO activities. It is notable that the majority of the regional level officials we interviewed have well-paid white collar jobs, yet continue to spend most of their evenings and weekends visiting communities or attending meetings.

Second, our focus groups revealed the existence, or more accurately the persistence, of a powerful civic imaginary, and specifically a manifest desire to identify and address common interests against a backdrop of increasing social disintegration and political fragmentation. Most telling was the fact that respondents spontaneously equated the 'civic' with the 'community' and indeed repeatedly noted that civics were an active force 'in uniting the community'. Of course this is reminiscent of liberation politics, but there is a key difference.⁹⁵ Whereas in the past being a member of the community automatically meant being a member of the civic (at least in the later stages of the struggle) and given the binary categories of 'us' and 'them' implied a necessary and inescapable political affiliation, there is no such conflation today. Though none of our focus group respondents were SANCO members, almost all expressed support for 'the civic' and emphasised that assistance from the civic did not require membership. The civic is valued because it is 'a home to all' and residents hold very strong opinions about insulating civic affairs from political considerations. It is worth reproducing the conversation that one focus group had when asked if SANCO should support the ANC:

No, because it will no longer serve the needs of the community. Political organisations are always fighting over people.

⁹³ There are of course movements that are anti-democratic or that have effects that are damaging to democracy (eg anti-secular and ethnic-exclusionary movements). Suffice here to emphasise that we are referring to movements that are animated by proactive projects of expanding rights of citizenship (Manuel Castells, *The power of identity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), and that are committed to playing within the rules of the democratic game (which includes non-violent contention).

⁹⁴ Tarrow, *Power in movement*, p 58.

⁹⁵ We owe this observation to Ivor Chipkin.

It should be completely apolitical because it represents the community and within the community you have different political organisations. So it cannot afford to align itself with either ANC, IFP or whatever.

Being a political party is about promises and nothing else. [But] SANCO delivers most of the time. If the community stands on its own and forms an alliance with SANCO, they can be able to deliver things by themselves.

If SANCO can get involved in politics there'll be a problem because it will no longer be transparent and no one will trust it.

I also think it should remain apolitical. Let it stay out of politics and be for the community.

Survey data consistently reveals that of the three tiers of government, it is local government that is the source of greatest dissatisfaction and distrust. As Everatt has commented: "Politics" is no longer about delivering liberation to all black South Africans; it is increasingly seen to be serving those already relatively well off.⁹⁶ In the words of a SANCO official in Alexandra: 'There is no accountability. The ANC has deviated from the Freedom Charter. They said the people shall govern, but it is the leaders who govern. People have to swallow even if it's hot. It is a totally top-down approach.' One might readily read into such attitudes, as Everatt and other commentators do, a general disillusionment with politics. But this fails to appreciate the extent to which citizens and local activists understand the respective functions of parties and civil society.

Most branch activists we interviewed see SANCO as playing a very different role from the ANC. The ANC is about politics, and SANCO is about 'development', 'community needs', and 'bread and butter issues'. Party 'politics' are about power, and specifically about hoarding opportunities. One SANCO official described the process of deploying community leaders to the ANC as 'going from the struggle to the gravy train'. These views are hardly surprising, but interestingly they neatly replicate the systems/lifeworld dichotomy, with individual behaviour in the political system governed by instrumental rationality and in civil society by communicative rationality. Residents also draw a clear distinction between a civic and a political party. If the former is a 'home to all' and a direct expression of the community, political parties are equated with power. Once you are elected, or you become a government official, 'you must answer to the system'. By and large civic officials were seen as more trustworthy, a quality attributed to the proximity and shared life circumstances of 'someone who lives in the community' as compared, in the favoured refrain, to the councillor who 'lives in the suburbs'.

To the extent that a civic enjoys a significant presence in a community (clearly, not all do), accountability (which is highly variable) is underscored by three dynamics. The first is the immediate proximity of the local leadership to the community and mechanisms of direct democracy. Because of strong reputation effects, community censure carries weight and because of the relative transparency of civic activity, performance is more easily measured. Moreover, SANCO's local officials are directly elected in open meetings to which the entry barrier is simply a R5 membership. In contrast, access to ANC AGMs is often tightly regulated

⁹⁶ Everatt, *Yet another transition?*, p 11.

(we heard many cases of SANCO members being excluded from AGMs despite being ANC members). Second, though higher SANCO structures do attempt to enforce vertical accountability and support for the ANC, weak intra-level organisational ties afford branches significant operational autonomy. In practice, most branch leaders seek and sustain their legitimacy by accounting to the community, not to the organisation. Third, the rewards for self-interested behaviour, either in the form of material or political returns, remain limited. In our sample, only the Alexandra branch actually exercises control over tangible benefits (access to rental housing) or assets, and upward mobility through SANCO ranks has never offered significant career returns (there are no salaried positions and few perks) other than access to the ANC's internal labour market which is now highly saturated.

With respect to those civics that are active and that are accountable, we can now make a strong claim: such civics provide a countervailing force to the market and state power. Much of the popular support for civics, and much of the commitment of its activists, flows from moral outrage at the wrenching effects that the market economy and state policy is having on the urban poor. As we saw earlier, the bulk of what civics do amounts to providing a modicum of protection or assistance to socially and economically vulnerable categories – pensioners, the unemployed, those without land rights – who are not only exposed to the vicissitudes of the market, but also to the predations or indifference of unscrupulous officials and politicians. Community-based mechanisms of conflict mediation and policing fill an important gap in the failure of the state to extend public legality into townships and informal settlements and represent an important countervailing force to atomisation (criminality, domestic violence) and clientelised modes of intermediation or protection (gangs, strongmen). Much the same is true of SANCO's brokerage functions, which are a direct response to state failures, and directly contribute to strengthening the collective rights of residents. Bargaining for those who can't pay, arguing for just rates and tariffs, interpreting complicated bills, resisting evictions or providing assistance to a family in crisis are all elements of defending a public moral economy.

The corollary of these activities is the reconstitution of democratic spaces. As communities have found themselves increasingly excluded from formal politics and authoritative decision-making and increasingly subject to state predations in the form of cost-recovery measures, forced displacements and rent-seeking, the locus of political activity has shifted from representative structures to direct democracy.

Recent developments in the informal settlement of Ruth First provide a graphic illustration of this point.⁹⁷ During March and April 2001, the SANCO branch held almost weekly mass meetings to take issue with a housing development project that had been initiated by Metro. The 600-700 residents (in a community with 1 700 households) who attended these meetings expressed enthusiastic support for SANCO's claim that the project was being implemented in a top down fashion without proper community involvement. Demands endorsed at these meetings included forming a new steering committee, making project-related documents public, meeting with Metro officials, and organising workshops for the community. (The assistance of the Homeless Peoples' Federation in possibly initiating a community hous-

⁹⁷ This account is based on attendance at six meetings, and more than 20 formal and informal interviews. Kenny Hlela's research assistance and observations are gratefully acknowledged.

ing project has since been sought.) Even if we set aside the merits of the accusations made by SANCO that the project has not been open to community participation (a complaint that on the strength of all the available evidence appears to be justified), what is most striking is the very palpable sense of alienation from local government and fear of the disruptive effects of imposed development experienced by the community.

On the one hand, Ruth First residents and SANCO officials have very little information about the housing project, including the criteria for beneficiaries, the overall budget, and the identity of those driving the planning process, despite the fact that surveying and subsidy applications were already being carried out. (The private sector consultants in charge of the project had failed to provide copies of the social compact and the business plan despite repeated requests). This has led, inevitably, to accusations of powerful 'vested interests' at work, including an alleged collusive arrangement between the private sector project consultant, the ward councillor (who denounced SANCO as anti-developmental at one of the meetings) and a local broker with a past history of embezzling the community.

On the other hand, residents are distraught by the idea that not all households will qualify for the subsidy, and that half of the proposed plots are to be set aside for residents from a neighbouring informal settlement. At stake, we have been told, is the integrity of the community, which residents describe as harmonious and relatively crime-free, and which has been able to initiate a number of successful initiatives, including securing donor funding for a primary school. In meetings, the example of recent forced removals in Alexandra have often been cited as what the government is preparing to do. Whatever tangible results might eventually emerge from this mobilisation, the point here is that the civic has provided residents with a space to reclaim their rights as citizens and to reassert their solidarity as a community.

As long as civics are subject to community-based accountability, do not enjoy state-sanctioned advantages in representing community claims, and do not resort to extra-democratic means in competing with other associations for support, they clearly enhance associational life. The intermediation functions of civics moreover have two critical democracy-deepening effects.

First, by mediating conflicts within the community, and serving as public spaces for the assertion of community values, civics contribute to producing a *virtuous* community.⁹⁸ Communities are reclaiming for themselves – with varying degrees of success – a vision of the good society that not only challenges the crime and conflict within their midst, but also their transformation into atomised clients and consumers.

Second, civic activity is an alternative to the clientelisation of politics. State disengagement from civil society is an important source of clientelism, since it provides powerful intermediaries opportunities for securing clients access to government or scarce resources in exchange for political loyalty.⁹⁹ Such vertically organised forms of brokerage by definition compromise associational autonomy, and as such clearly undermine civic life.¹⁰⁰ In this re-

⁹⁸ Chipkin, Area-based management and the production of the public domain.

⁹⁹ Michael Bratton, Peasant-state relations in postcolonial Africa, pp 231-254, in Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue (eds), *State power and social forces: domination and transformation in the third world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Fox, The difficult transition from clientelism to citizenship, *World Politics*, 46(2), pp 151-184, 1994.

spect, the fact that the brokerage and mediation services that democratic civics provide are available to all residents, irrespective of political affiliations, and are as such public goods, takes on new meaning. To the extent that SANCO provides these services without demanding political or organisational loyalty in exchange, it is in effect creating an alternative to clientelism and expanding the scope of associational life.

SANCO and the ANC

Though SANCO's leaders ritually incant that SANCO must be independent and that its support for the ANC is conditional, in practice SANCO has never openly challenged the ANC, at least not as a national structure. SANCO has endorsed the ANC in every election, and has not threatened a nationwide action challenging government or ANC policy since the year of its inception. Support for a ruling political party, especially one that enjoys as broad a mandate as does the ANC, does not in and of itself compromise the autonomy of a civil society organisation. But SANCO's claims to be independent ring hollow for two reasons. First, despite significant differences over key policy issues, SANCO has failed to clearly publicise and defend its policy positions. The most notable example is the government's economic policies. At the 1997 national conference, SANCO President Mlungisi Hlongwane declared that 'It must be emphasised that our support for the ANC is not without qualifications ... It is premised on the electoral manifesto whose cornerstone is the RDP, not European fiscal discipline.'¹⁰¹ SANCO leaders at all levels are unanimous in criticising the shift from the RDP to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR). If any constituency in South Africa has suffered the brunt of the ANC's economic policies, then it is surely SANCO's. The fiscal conservatism of GEAR and its accompanying principles of cost recovery have struck at the very heart of SANCO's calls for affordable and subsidised provision of basic services to historically disadvantaged communities. Yet the national leadership continues not only to endorse the ANC and to provide critical electoral support, but unlike COSATU and even the SACP, both of whom are formal alliance partners, it has never engaged in either serious criticism or protest against these policies.¹⁰²

If SANCO is ever to play a role as a national social movement, it will have to redefine its relationship to the ANC. This does not mean disengaging from political society. If social movements are to contribute to democratic deepening, they must seek to transform the institutional character of the state. The terms of engagement must however be selective and conditional, and backed by a credible threat of withdrawal. On this register, SANCO currently occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand, its current ties to the ANC, which are cemented both through network ties and ideological affinities, allow for little effective autonomy. On the other hand, the movement's base of support – civics – already enjoy a substantial degree of operational autonomy and withdrawal would not carry a very high cost (mostly because inclusion has had few concrete returns).

¹⁰¹ Presidential address, 11.

¹⁰² SANCO did participate in an SACP-organised protest against banking practices in the housing market in late 2000, but its role received no mention in the press, and its mobilisational effort appeared limited to deploying a few provincial leaders.

That SANCO has little prospect of fulfilling its own stated goal of 'building a social movement that consists of the poor and marginalised of society' within the current alliance-plus-one formula is becoming increasingly clear. On one side of the equation, the ANC's position is unambiguous. More than ever, the ANC subscribes to a hegemonic view of civil society. Governance, not democracy, is the challenge, and the role of CSOs is to provide support to the government's transformation project. Delivery, not deliberation, is the order of the day. As former Soweto civic activist and now mayor of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo, explains:

The watchdog idea is still very strong in the civic movement. But it does not work. You can criticise from the sidelines, but in the end the community will judge you on the strength of what you have delivered. Of course there is also a role for civics in promoting democracy, but what matters is what is practical.¹⁰³

Politically the ANC's hegemonising impulse is reflected in its equation of state power with people's power and its strategy of subordinating independent arenas of popular action to political control. A leading young party theorist has thus recently deplored the 'dichotomy between political and civic matters' that is implicit in the very existence of SANCO and has called for ANC branch committees to supplant SANCO by engaging directly in civic activities.¹⁰⁴ Or as one ANC official bluntly stated at a meeting between SANCO and the ANC in Port Elizabeth: 'It is the understanding of the ANC that comrades in the leadership of the SANCO are ANC members deployed in the civic movement.'¹⁰⁵

Many ANC leaders have repudiated this position, but if the list nomination process that preceded the December 2000 local government elections is any indication, vanguardism is alive and well in the party. In principle, ward councillors were to be nominated at branch level meetings. Though the distribution of delegates heavily favoured the ANC, alliance partners were given representation (10 per cent. for SANCO, SACP and COSATU each). Given that many ANC members are also SANCO members, there was a real possibility that SANCO could muster majorities. In many branches throughout Gauteng this was indeed what happened. Yet in the end, SANCO nominations were rarely accepted.¹⁰⁶ In some cases, ward conferences were hijacked by the ANC through procedural manipulation. But in most cases the decision was simply made at a higher level. Most analyses of what criteria were ultimately used range from outright nepotism and favouritism to a systematic process of selecting only councillors with the appropriate credentials and capacities.¹⁰⁷ The one point of consensus is that local

¹⁰³ Interview with Amos Masondo.

¹⁰⁴ David Makura, 'The MDM, civil society and social transformation', *Umrabulo*, no 7 (3rd quarter), 1999, p 17.

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of the joint ANC and SANCO PEC meeting, 8 August 2000.

¹⁰⁶ In Port Elizabeth, where SANCO enjoys a very significant presence, only three SANCO officials were included on the proportional representational list of 54, and only two were selected as ward nominees (out of 54).

¹⁰⁷ The ANC has defended this position on the grounds of needing to improve the calibre and performance of councillors. That it also serves as a means of exerting more centralised control over the party and shutting out challengers with independent bases of support need hardly be emphasised. When a very popular SANCO leader from an informal settlement was rejected as the ward nominee by the provincial list committee, a SANCO official explained that the ANC doesn't like populists who can stand up and challenge the leadership. They did not like this guy because he is too consultative – he takes everything back to meetings.'

popularity was not an important consideration, a point that even the ANC subsequently acknowledged and regretted.

SANCO officials at every level of the organisation are in fact quite bitter about their treatment at the hands of the ANC.¹⁰⁸ A common complaint is that the ANC consults with SANCO only when it needs to mobilise support. In interviews, SANCO's president talks about how SANCO has become a 'puppet' of the ANC. At the branch level the animosity has erupted into full-blown hostility. Many branch leaders in Gauteng were so indignant about the autocratic manner in which the ANC nominated candidates that they openly challenged the SANCO national executive committee's call for supporting ANC candidates.¹⁰⁹ The chair of the East Rand region, Aubrey Nxumalo, explained that if SANCO were to campaign for ward nominees that do 'not have the support of the community' it would lose its credibility. 'A lot of dead horses have been nominated. I am not going to campaign meetings to support dead horses.' The most determined response came in the Eastern Cape, where in open defiance of NEC resolutions a provincial consultative forum denounced the 'undemocratic' conduct and powers of the ANC in the list nomination process and resolved to support independent candidates who had community support.

The cement of SANCO's close relationship with the ANC has always been interpersonal networks. The credibility of a hegemonic front and the strategic rationale for the politics of incorporation was secured through the deployment of SANCO's leadership into ANC and government positions. In many areas there have been concrete personal and political payoffs for working closely with the ANC.¹¹⁰ Overall, though, these network ties can no longer support the contradictions of the partnership. The most obvious problem is that the internal labour market has reached a point of saturation. The reduction in the number of councillors with the demarcation process only aggravated an already precarious situation. One solution to this problem has been to sponsor independent candidates, as the Eastern Cape did in the December 2000 elections. But this strategy has little support on the ground (judging by the view expressed in focus groups that civics should not be involved in electoral politics) and as reflected by the fact that not a single SANCO-supported independent candidate was elected in the Eastern Cape.

A second response, which is much more in keeping with a politics of civil society, has been to propose that SANCO withdraw entirely from competing for political positions. This has been occasioned by the realisation that the rewards of ANC loyalty are increasingly incompatible with accountability to SANCO. The idea that SANCO deployees can effectively represent the organisation's goals within government – the 'two hats' position – is now widely disparaged: 'How can you bite the hand that feeds you?' SANCO's president and the Gauteng

¹⁰⁸ A rather biting common refrain is that the ANC uses SANCO like a condom: you use it and then you throw it away.

¹⁰⁹ Information based on attendance at Gauteng general council meeting.

¹¹⁰ In the Pretoria region, for example, a factional split within the ANC created a vacuum that has been filled by SANCO. Among other gains, this gave SANCO the power to call for and secure a credit control summit in which local government's credit control measures were significantly renegotiated. In the December 2000 local government elections, SANCO more or less took charge of the nomination process, and a large number of elected councillors are from SANCO.

leadership have openly called for prohibiting SANCO executive officials (not including heads of department) from holding government positions.

If there is increasing recognition in SANCO that the shift from RDP to GEAR belies the ANC's redistributive commitments, and that its ties to the ANC are undermining its effectiveness as a movement, this has not translated into political repositioning, in large part because the 'idea' of the ANC, that is the sheer evocative power of its name and what it stands for historically, continues to exert a powerful effect on the political imagination of the leadership and the rank and file. We have been repeatedly told, from regional executive members down to grass-roots activists, that the problem with the ANC lies with certain individuals (who have strayed from its historical mission), but not with the ANC as an organisation itself. SANCO as such has yet to develop the critique of hierarchical and vertical organisational forms (such as parties) that is the hallmark of grass-roots social movements.

There are, however, clear indications that SANCO leaders are beginning to rethink the organisation's relationship to the ANC. Taken at face value, pronouncements by many key SANCO officials leave little doubt on this point:

What has crippled us is having a relationship with the ANC. We have compromised ourselves. If you stand up and speak openly and think openly, you have to check yourself and take into consideration what damage there is going to be to the ANC ... There is a lot of pressure to toe the line. SANCO needs to be a vocal, competent organisation that keeps government on its toes by acting like a whip ... We need a structure outside of government, a structure that is not scared. But not just a watchdog. We need to be proactive in shaping policy. But we are not playing this role now because of our political marriage to the ANC ...¹¹¹

... post-1997 we have become increasingly reformist and much too close to government to the point that local SANCO and ANC branches in many cases have become indistinguishable and are now limited to dealing with bread and butter issues like conflict resolution, CPF, tariff problems, [but] doing nothing to influence government. We became over cautious about rocking the boat. We were always afraid that by criticising government we would be sounding like the [National Party or Democratic Party], and that we would be called counter-revolutionary. This is a problem of identity. Look at COSATU, they can speak up because they have an identity.¹¹²

A key policy document – Strategy Discussion Document to Radically Re-Shape the Vision and Role of SANCO – drafted by SANCO's president and endorsed by the 2001 national conference makes a number of breaks with past orthodoxy and is particularly noteworthy for marking the emergence of a dominant 'movement autonomy' faction in SANCO. Most starkly, it wholly rejects the past strategy of a politics of incorporation. The document observes that 'SANCO allowed government leaders to form a part of the backdrop of SANCO leadership (the two hats policy endorsed in 1997). Therein lay the conundrum. How do we effectively implement decisions in an independent fashion when the external pressures on the decision-

¹¹¹ Aubrey Nxumalo, chairperson of the East Rand region.

¹¹² Mlungisi Hlongwane, SANCO president.

makers undermines the independence of the organisation?’ It goes on to remark that movements should ‘not have aspirations to be in power’ and that while movements and the state can complement each other, ‘more importantly, the power of the people and the power of the state must also contradict each other, so that the balance of forces is tilted towards the people.’ (15).**

Second, the document clearly acknowledges that civil society is, and must be, a source of plurality and contestation: ‘SANCO can never actually claim a monopoly of the civic movement, nor can it also claim [that] no other organisation can form a civic’. Very concretely, the authors warn against the dangers of SANCO playing a direct role in development.¹¹³ Finally, the document cautiously, though somewhat semantically, argues that the ANC does not have a monopoly over the national democratic revolution and that social movements must have an independent political role: ‘The lack of appropriate opposition to the ANC is a clear indication that the real political opposition can be found in the grassroots mass movements of South Africa, movements like SANCO’.

But old ideological reflexes die hard. If the document champions autonomy, it does so without celebrating diversity. While the document calls for SANCO to ‘be confrontational in championing the cause of the historically marginalised’, it also goes on to caution that ‘it shall not digress from the national democratic revolution’. Endorsing the general transformative goals of the NDR** is not per se problematic. But using the NDR as a rigid litmus test of what the correct line is, and who the progressive forces are, betrays the essentialism of liberation discourses. As Edgar Pietrese has argued, when popular organisations ‘seek “unity” as a prerequisite for potential success of ... revolutionary project(s)’ there is a presumption of a discovered truth and how to get there, and ‘[I]n this single-minded commitment [popular organisations] become highly intolerant and suspicious of people, ideas, organisations, strategies, and processes which fall outside “revolutionary” parameters’.¹¹⁴

There is a second notable dilemma contained in the document. Though it stakes out an obvious rallying point for the movement autonomy faction of the SANCO leadership, it is conspicuously silent on the question of SANCO’s unitary structure. In its current organisational incarnation, SANCO’s higher structures have largely served as conduits of alliance control, and have stifled the political (if not the operational) autonomy of civics. Ironically, the history and fate of the document itself testifies to problems therein. When the Gauteng provincial commission – composed primarily of movement autonomy leaders – reviewed the document, they applauded it for being the first document ‘written by SANCO’ and not the usual documents ‘released by the alliance, which proffers (sic) to offer advice to SANCO’. But the document almost never saw the light of day. When first presented to SANCO’s NEC, the NEC decided to consult with the ANC before making the document public. Fearing that this would be as far as it would go, Hlongwane leaked it to the *Sowetan*. And though the document made quite a stir, the April 2000 national conference for which it was prepared has yet to be held.

¹¹³ This position clearly enjoys branch level support. At the 2001 national conference, Moses Mayekiso, who has championed a development role for SANCO, ran against Hlongwane and was defeated in a landslide of over five to one.

¹¹⁴ Edgar Pietrese, *Urban social movements in South Africa in a ‘globalising’ era*, *Urban Forum*, 8(1), 1997, p 9.

As a movement, SANCO is clearly caught between significant but unco-ordinated assertions of autonomy and a legacy of engagement with the ANC. Defining a more autonomous position is no simple task. It would call for a significant rupture of network ties and ideological affinities. Such a rupture would require articulating a clear and focused alternative to the politics of inclusion. This is precisely what SANCO's principal competitor, NARCO, has done. SANCO, however, remains far too entangled, politically and ideologically, with ANC structures, for such a clean break to occur.

But if we take movements seriously, the importance of such strategic shifts in direction must not be taken too seriously. As George Orwell once wrote: 'One of the analogies between Communism and Roman Catholicism is that only the educated are completely orthodox.'¹¹⁵ To Lenin's question of 'What is to be done?' the answer is that, willy-nilly, it is already being done (to borrow from Ferguson¹¹⁶). As we have seen, because of the degree to which they remain deeply embedded in communities, and in many cases have nurtured community self-representation and action, civics are already carving out autonomous political spaces. They are doing so in a manner moreover that closely conforms to the exercise of 'weak power' that Geoff Mulgan has argued is characteristic of progressive social movements (and a vibrant civil society):

decentralised, without a single leadership; [where] communication is horizontal; structures are cellular rather than pyramid-like ... The units and cell tend to regulate themselves, rather than being governed by rules and commands which flow downwards. Accountability can flow in more than one direction ... the best weak power structures thrive on fluidity, change and creative use of chaos.¹¹⁷

Donors and the civics movement

The history of donor aid to the civics movement can be easily summarised. Up until 1995 donor assistance to civics was significant. Thereafter, it completely dried up. The impact of donor aid is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate, primarily because the determinants of SANCO's fortunes have had much more to do with movement dynamics and a transformed political opportunity structure than with donor funding. Moreover, assessing the impact of donor aid on civics in the struggle period is complicated by a lack of reliable data. Civics (and other anti-apartheid organisations) were provided funding without having to provide the standard reports and accounts.¹¹⁸ It is as such virtually impossible to track how money was actually spent. However, from published sources and interviews, it is clear that under apartheid and during the transition, donor aid did provide invaluable support for the core organisa-

¹¹⁵ George Orwell, quoted in James C Scott, *Weapons of the weak: of the everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p 322.

¹¹⁶ James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: 'development,' depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

¹¹⁷ Geoff Mulgan, quoted in Pietrese, *Urban social movements in South Africa in a 'globalising' era*, p 12.

¹¹⁸ Khehla Shubane, *Local content: the politics of European and American donor intervention in South Africa under apartheid*, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 1999.

tional capacities of the civics movement. Kagiso Trust – which was responsible for funnelling European Union money to anti-apartheid groups and USAID in particular provided core funding to hundreds of civics.¹¹⁹ Both donors justified their support on the grounds that civics represented important expressions of local democracy and could play an important developmental role in a new democratic society.

Donor funding impacted on the civic movement in two different respects. First, it was critical to scaling the movement up, and sustaining extra-local organisational presence. Financial resources allowed civics not only to build their organisational presence on the ground (e.g. office space, phones, paid community activists) but also allowed civic leaders to network and organise between civics.¹²⁰ Many of the regional civic organisations such as CAST and PEBCO received direct funding. Most notably, the UDF, which received extensive funding from a variety of sources, played a critical role in co-ordinating nationwide civic activities, and integrating civic leaders into broader political structures. Second, donor funding supported capacity building in the form of direct training of civic leaders and the provision of technical assistance to CBOs. The technical service NGO PLANACT played a critical role in assisting community development initiatives, and PLANACT activists were instrumental in drafting policy documents such as SANCO's inputs into the RDP and the white paper on local government. The considerable negotiating and policy skills that civic leaders brought to the negotiating table in 1992 was in no small part a result of workshops and capacity building exercises funded by donors.¹²¹

One must however be careful not to overestimate the impact of donor funding. Civics had embedded themselves as both civic and political actors in townships well before the advent of donor funding. The determinants of the civic movement's impact during the struggle as well as the transition phase were clearly more political than organisational. The civics movement constituted, along with the labour movement, the most significant mass-based constituency of the anti-apartheid struggle and provided the ANC with much of its legitimacy. It was the civics' close and intertwined relationship with the government-to-be, as well as its demonstrated capacity for mass action (and most significantly rent and rate boycotts), that more than anything else leveraged its influence. In other words, it was the political opportunity structure of the time, rather than organisational capacity per se, that gave the movement a voice. It is also quite clear that civic influence began to decline well before the withdrawal of funding. Though civics were instrumental in initiating local government negotiations, they were sidelined when the ANC asserted the primacy of national level negotiations. The township violence that marked the transition also dealt a severe blow to the civics' local capacity for organised action. The deployment of civic leaders into party-building responsibilities only

¹¹⁹ Between 1987 and 1992, Kagiso Trust provided nearly R4 million to civics and their projects. Seekings et al, as quoted in Zuern, *Democracy at the grass roots?*

¹²⁰ In Durban, for example, SANCO was able to maintain a regional office with eight activists who were paid by USAID to do voter education. The activists provided critical support to branches and were instrumental in organising resistance to shack removals. When the funding was terminated in 1995, the regional office collapsed, as did the weaker branches. Interview with Pat Joyce.

¹²¹ In 1989-90, PLANACT was assisting at least 14 civics in the Transvaal region with local level negotiations. Zuern, *Democracy at the grass roots?*, p 159.

compounded the problem. Clearly then, the loss of funding cannot explain the rapid decline of the civics movement.

But given that donor funding had clearly played an important role in increasing the profile and effectiveness of the civics movement, it is important to ask how a continuation of donor funding might have impacted on the civics movement, and SANCO in particular. To pose this counterfactual, we have to disaggregate the question. At the level of local capacity building, a continuation of support for core operations and the provision of technical support would certainly have helped bridge the gap that has emerged between communities and local government. If IDP processes and other structures that were intended to facilitate community participation failed because of a lack of political commitment (and indeed even the emergence of political hostility) from the ANC to the principles of people-centred development, the lack of local capacity to engage officials, politicians and consultants only exacerbated the problem. Local SANCO officials openly express frustration at their lack of technical skills and their inability to engage with experts or participate meaningfully in planning exercises. Many talk wistfully about the days when NGOs such as PLANACT would work with civics, and during our research we were constantly asked if we couldn't help provide training for SANCO officials.¹²²

The impact of the withdrawal of donor funding on SANCO's national organisational capacity is a more complicated story. Though the civics movement has never in fact enjoyed a robust national organisational presence outside of political structures (ie the UDF), concerted efforts to build SANCO's national structures were doomed from the outset by what in hindsight has been a vicious circle of organisational weakness and donor trepidation. In the absence of an effective membership system at the time of its formation, SANCO had no independent source of financing. Though it did succeed in securing funding for civic education campaigns in the lead-up to the 1994 elections, it did not secure funding for organisation-building. Efforts to secure funding from businesses proved disastrous and accusations of corruption badly damaged Sanco's reputation. Donors were reluctant to invest in what was a weak organisation, and the largely correct perception that SANCO's leadership was highly politicised and subject to factionalism only further deterred donors.¹²³ Without secure funding, SANCO has thus never been able to consolidate its organisational presence. And without robust and accountable national structures, and given its complete lack of a national profile, SANCO has not been able to attract the interest of donors.¹²⁴

From this, however, it does not follow that a lack of donor interest in SANCO as a national organisation necessarily undermined its capacity as a CSO to strengthen democracy. While it

¹²² The severity of the capacity constraints faced by branches is reflected in the list of things we were often asked to help provide during field visits: flip charts for a workshop, documents on housing subsidy schemes, notebooks for keeping meeting minutes, assistance with contacting NGOs and typing up handwritten documents.

¹²³ A dispute over a one million rand grant awarded to Mzwanele Mayekiso to set up a research organisation within SANCO led to his highly publicised expulsion.

¹²⁴ To fund its conferences, SANCO has had to rely on lobbying corporations and service providers for assistance. Its 2001 national conference was funded by Rand Water. Given that SANCO civics routinely deal with, and often challenge, the quality and costs of water provision, this type of financial relationship might readily be interpreted as compromising its autonomy.

is certainly the case that scaling-up a national movement requires investing in organisational capacity, it is also true that organisation-building can often produce oligarchical tendencies, result in goal displacement, and undermine mobilisational activities. There is no necessary trade-off between organisational capacity and grass-roots activism, but given SANCO's unitary structures and its leadership's embrace of the ANC's hegemonic politics, it is quite plausible that stronger national structures would have weakened the autonomy and vibrancy of local civics.

SANCO's problem has been, and remains, its lack of independence as a CSO. This is a quintessentially political problem that goes to questions of ideology and movement structure.

Even if SANCO civics continue to play an important role in creating public spaces of participation and empowering citizens (however modestly), SANCO as an organisation will continue to be ineffective as long as it remains subservient to the ANC. Having said this, any prospects of greater autonomy and hence greater effectiveness lie in scaling up the logic and legitimacy of local civics as arenas of civic action, that is of recasting the national structures in the image of the local structures. In this respect, one might cautiously speculate that financial support for core organisational capacities (though not development projects) at the local level might contribute to strengthening the grass-roots character of the movement and ultimately improving the effectiveness of SANCO as a peak organisation. However, given the current logic, emphasis and basic philosophy of donor funding, this is a very unlikely, indeed unimaginable, scenario.

At the broadest level, the reason for this is simple. Exceptional circumstances notwithstanding, international donors have no interest in funding a social movement. Social movements are by definition contestatory and represent challenger groups to the existing political and economic elites.¹²⁵ International donors' concerns are first and foremost geo-political, that is nurturing healthy inter-governmental relations. They do not, and cannot, fund organisations that would directly challenge government authority, unless as in the case of the apartheid government, that authority is widely viewed as illegitimate. Donor support for anti-apartheid groups was significant.¹²⁶ Yet even under these rather extraordinary circumstances, donor support was motivated as much by political calculations (e.g. in the case of the EU as an alternative to sanctions) as by an appreciation of the role that movements can play in building democratic forms of association. As Shubane notes, '[t]he funding was also unique because it was meant to achieve clearly stated political objectives, and to be a temporary strategy: it sought to assist those opposed to apartheid and to help build a non-racial South Africa, and was therefore designed to last only as long as apartheid did.'¹²⁷ With the advent of a democratic government, the role that movements or oppositional forms of civic engagement can play in strengthening democracy was lost to the strategic imperative of providing support to the new government.

In the post-apartheid period, donor funding has shifted from support for political and agitational forms of civil society organisation to direct support for government (institution-building) and to funding NGOs that can assist the government in achieving its policy ob-

¹²⁵ Tarrow, *Power in movement*.

¹²⁶ Shubane, Local content.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p 7.

jectives. Of the donors we interviewed, few actually thought that funding advocacy groups was important. One donor noted that it was ‘now time for NGOs to work constructively with government’. This idea of ‘productive engagement’ has achieved the status of official donor doctrine in the current enthusiasm for promoting civil society-government *partnerships*. For example, in its most recent programmatic statement on strengthening civil society in South Africa, USAID states that it supports ‘a healthy and vibrant civil society *through strengthened civil society/government partnerships for service delivery and policy implementation*’ (emphasis mine).¹²⁸ It is important to underscore two assumptions in this view. The first is that the strengthening of civil society takes place by densifying and formalising the ties between government and civil society, and that the objective of these ties (and hence the standards by which CSO efficacy is measured) is delivery and implementation of what are in effect the government’s programmes. Of course, building productive and synergistic engagements between government and civil society organisations is indeed a critical strategy for achieving developmental goals. But building a synergistic relationship between state and civil society is not simply about designing and funding the appropriate institutional arrangements. Such relations are intrinsically political, and as the most exemplary cases illustrate, positive-sum engagements largely depend on the extent to which civil society actors retain their associational autonomy.¹²⁹ If the idea of partnerships tends to underestimate the complexities of engaging the state, it also presumes an alignment of interests and perspectives that leaves little room for the contestation of state power. It is striking that the USAID civil society programme makes no mention of advocacy groups, social movements or membership-based organisations.

If the emphasis on a partnership view of civil society/state engagement is clearly in keeping with the logic of inter-governmental relations, it also dovetails neatly with the ANC’s view of the developmental role of CSOs. At the 1997 national conference of the ANC, president Nelson Mandela delivered a speech (widely reported to have been written by then deputy president Thabo Mbeki)¹³⁰ in which he openly rebuked NGOs which assert ‘that the distinguishing feature of a genuine organisation of civil society is to be a critical “watchdog” over our movement, both inside and outside of our government.’¹³¹ Mandela called on official aid donors to shift their funding from civil society to government. In support, he quoted a 1996 report by two United States congressmen that sharply criticised USAID:

AID’s programme is not so much support for the Mandela government as support for AID’s undisclosed political activities within the South African domestic political arena involving the most difficult, controversial issues in South Africa. By funding advocacy

¹²⁸ USAID/South Africa, Democracy and governance team (SO1), Civil society strengthening program: results package, April 2000, p 4.

¹²⁹ Peter Evans, Government action, social capital and development: reviewing the evidence on synergy, *World Development*, 24(6), 1996; Jonathan Fox, How does political society thicken?: the political construction of social capital in Mexico, *World Development*, 24(6), June 1996; Patrick Heller, Social capital as product of class mobilization and state intervention: industrial workers in Kerala, India, *World Development*, 24(6), June 1996.

¹³⁰ Steven Friedman and Maxine Reitzes, Civil society and interest groups in a party dominant system, Centre for Policy Studies, undated, p 10.

¹³¹ ANC, Report by the president of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, to the 50th National Conference of the African National Conference, Mafikeng, 16 December 1997.

groups to monitor and lobby for changes in government policies and even setting up trust funds to pay for legal challenges in courts against the new government's action or inaction, AID is in some respects making President Mandela's task more difficult.¹³²

The 'Mafikeng' speech has been widely interpreted as an unambiguous call by the government for NGOs to relinquish oppositional roles, and for donors to withdraw funding from such organisations.¹³³ In interviews, a number of donors remarked on the impact the speech had, and some acknowledged that they consult with the South African government in the selection of aid beneficiaries and that the criteria are clearly – if subtly – spelled out. As one donor official puts it: 'The ANC does not come out and say they are against advocacy groups. What they say is that they don't need help with democracy, they need help with governance.'

Of course, even within the constraints imposed by the inter-governmental logic of donor aid and direct or indirect pressure from the government, there is plenty of room for supporting civil society organisations that are more than simply instruments of the government's delivery agenda. Indeed, there are many professional advocacy groups in specialised areas such as health, children's and women's rights, and legal aid that do receive funding from foreign aid sources. But the extent of such aid constitutes a small proportion of total aid. Moreover, while no accurate figures are available, from interviews with bilateral donors it is clear that grass-roots groups are out of favour with donors. Those CBOs that do receive funding do so only indirectly through their apex organisations. None of the examples that were given included a membership-based organisation. Indeed, when we asked one donor if they would consider funding an apex body governed by an elected body (rather than appointed trustees), our question was met with consternation. At a two-day conference held at the Centre for Policy Studies in May 2001 intended to promote a dialogue between donors and CSOs (including SANCO), not a single donor was able to provide an example of direct funding to a grass-roots organisation.

Given the current aid community discourse of community building, participation, and grass-roots initiative, how does one explain the virtual absence of funding made available for local, grass-roots organisations constituted of poor and marginalised citizens? There are three reasons why donors have largely abandoned community-level structures in favour of professional NGOs and government: a limited understanding of democracy and the role of civil society, institutional bias, and information problems.

(Under)standing democracy

How donors choose to support democracy building is of course governed by their own understanding of democracy. That understanding is limited by a formalistic conception of democratic life. It is an understanding that is largely coterminous with the nation-state, which is of

¹³² Quoted in ANC, Report by the president.

¹³³ Mandela referred to these NGOs as 'certain elements, which are assumed to be part of our movement, [that] set themselves up as critics of the same movement, precisely at the moment when we would have to confront the challenge of the fundamental transformation of our country and therefore, necessarily, the determined opposition of the forces of reaction ... This has also created the possibility for some of these NGOs to act as instruments of foreign governments and institutions that fund them to promote the interests of the external forces.' Ibid, p 100.

course the key institutional interlocutor of the donor world. It assumes that democracy – when it exists at the national level – radiates out evenly and forcefully. Thus most investment in democratic governance has gone into improving the quality of national level institutions (parliamentary committees, electoral oversight bodies, training parliamentarians and councillors, information resource centres, constitutional structures). To use a much abused but useful analogy, one might say that donors have sought to strengthen democracy by investing in the hardware, but have forgotten the software.

An *effective* democracy [that is going beyond the consolidation of formal democracy] is one in which democratic practices have spread throughout society, governing not only relations between states and citizens, but also public relations between citizens. Functionally and geographically, the degree of public legality in many formal democracies remains severely constrained. In such democracies, notes O'Donnell, 'the component of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizenship, fades away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations'.¹³⁴ Public spaces disappear to be replaced by areas of privatised power. Local institutions and officials are colonised by bosses, chiefs, dons or caudillos. Patrimonialism, clientelism and coercion eat away at democratic authority. Thus we must look beyond the macro-institutional level of parliaments, constitutions, and elections and investigate the intermediate and local level institutions and consultative arenas located in the interstices of state and society where 'everyday' forms of democracy either flourish or flounder.¹³⁵

These 'everyday' forms of democracy can only flourish when citizens are actively mobilised through local democratic structures. But such active mobilisation, as in the case, for example, of civics, necessarily entails a certain degree of contestation and conflict. And this does not fit the conventional model of formal democracy with its implicit bias in favour of order and established procedure.

Institutional bias

Formal institutions have an innate tendency to project the world in their own image. Sociologists have coined the term 'organisational isomorphism' to describe the phenomenon whereby certain organisational forms tend to replicate themselves as they expand outwards, even when local conditions would call for different organisational structures. In contemporary development community parlance, this has taken the form of searching for and embracing 'best practices'. Now this implies not only importing ideas, practices, and forms from the first world (the exemplar), but also selecting local partners and resources that closely approximate the said 'best practice'. Donors, in other words, have a built-in bias towards funding organisations that look like themselves, that is that are isomorphic. Concretely, this translates into selection criteria that favour organisations that can conform to the donors' standards of accountability, transparency and professionalism. If, as sociologists argue, this is a con-

¹³⁴ O'Donnell, *On the state, democratization and some conceptual problems*, p 1361.

¹³⁵ Patrick Heller, *Degrees of democracy: some comparative lessons from India*, *World Politics*, 52, July 2000, p 488.

stant of organisational life, it appears to be all the more pervasive in the current global climate of neo-managerialism and technocratic dominance.

The point with respect to funding CBOs should be self-evident. Grass-roots associations neither have the formal organisational structures nor the cultural capital to produce the required artefacts of 'accountability' – the glossy documents, the organograms, the sophisticated accounting systems and, maybe most importantly of all, the correct discourses. The most obvious example is in the increasingly common practice of tendering. Couched in a democratic-market rhetoric of accountability through competition, successful bidders must submit complex, highly technical and time-consuming documents. Most CBOs do not have the capacity or resources to compete effectively. When USAID recently introduced clearer and more transparent tendering procedures for a range of projects specifically targeted for community group involvement, an official expressed surprise (and dismay) when only professional consultancies applied. More than anything else, this reaction vividly illustrates how ingrained and blinding these institutional biases are.

Information problems

Donors are rightly concerned that not all community structures are genuinely democratic and that many may in fact be anti-developmental. They are especially concerned with the very real problem of gatekeepers. Given that donors have limited resources and local knowledge for identifying genuine and effective local organisations, they tend to conclude that the cost of directly funding CBOs is too great. Donors try to overcome this information problem by funding apex organisations or relying on reputable and highly professional local intermediaries to identify worthy community organisations. But the solution to this information problem is itself informed by a somewhat ironic assumption. Because local communities' structures are poorly understood, they are assumed to be high risk investments. This view is only compounded by an understanding of local communities as rife with corruption and conflict and susceptible to elite capture (they are after all underdeveloped). That grass-roots structures would be any more vulnerable to oligarchical control than a formal organisational structure is a curious a priori assumption at best, and a rather undemocratic one at worst. (Interestingly it echoes the ANC preference for appointed mayors and premiers over 'populist' leaders.) When asked what the most important selection criteria for a beneficiary organisation was, one donor answered 'a prestigious board of trustees' and named a long list of ANC stalwarts as examples. The fact that a board of trustees appointed from the ranks of the political and social elite are deemed trustworthy has, one might venture to argue, more to do with the absolving of responsibility that comes when everyone invests in the same reputable institutions or individuals than with a serious assessment of accountability.

The solution to the information problem introduces problems of its own. Many intermediaries are either profit-making (as in the hundreds of development consultancies that have mushroomed in South Africa) or, in the case of non-profits, financially desperate, so that neither has a real interest in promoting the devolution of resources directly to CBOs. Indeed, they have every incentive to engage in the type of opportunity hoarding that characterises most professional groups (a form of gatekeeping in its own right).

When one surveys the range of NGOs and institutions that secure donor aid, one is struck by their fundamentally middle class character. Donor funding is a social terrain. Indeed, it represents a distinct form of social capital in Bourdieu's¹³⁶ – rather than Putnam's – sense of the term; a set of social relations, governed by shared forms of cultural capital (credentials, the ability to produce standardised reports) and extensive inter-personal networks through which particular rankings, status and access to economic opportunity is reproduced. The donor community in South Africa is certainly a tightly knit community, and the adage that what is important is not *what* you know but *whom* you know certainly rings true. Many donors like to dispel this view by arguing that they operate according to sound market and bureaucratic criteria, relying in particular on competitive tendering processes and complex reporting formulas. But behind every contract, as Emile Durkheim famously remarked, lie the non-contractual elements of the contract (or 'social ties' in contemporary sociological theory).

As is true of many markets (and complex organisations), donors are confronted with two key problems. The first are selection problems, given that information about all potential beneficiaries is limited and highly uneven, and the second are measurement problems, given that the deliverables associated with 'development' and 'strengthening civil society' are so intangible (obsessive efforts to quantify these notwithstanding). The solution, much as is the case with all markets that involve products and services that are difficult to price, takes the form of embedding exchange relations in concrete social ties.¹³⁷ Trust, in other words, fills the gap of imperfect information. This is why donors spend lots of time at cocktail parties and rely so heavily on investing in 'reputable' organisations. Donors, much like most market agents who subcontract, rely on trust and familiarity, rather than hard market signals, to select and assess 'partners'. And trust is lubricated by social interactions, which are themselves deeply embedded, that is bounded by cultural parameters and socio-economic boundaries. The problem from the point of view of promoting democratic participation should be obvious – in this form, social capital is about exclusion.¹³⁸

The problem of politics and organisational bias aside, it is clear that the information and capacity problems that donors face do not represent insurmountable obstacles. USAID, SIDA, the EU, and many other donors were very active in funding a wide range of CBOs, including civics, under apartheid and during the transition period. They did so on the strength of extremely limited information, with beneficiaries in fact often refusing to report on the grounds of security concerns. Interestingly, they bridged the social boundaries between themselves and their South African anti-apartheid counterparts through an act of political faith that allowed for the standard bureaucratic and socially embedded and bounded conventions of donor aid to be suspended. Trust in this case was lubricated by a shared revulsion for apartheid and commitment to democracy (albeit also motivated by significant political pressure in donor countries). By most accounts, directly funding civics was deemed to have been money well spent. This was obviously true in the political sense of having supported the right cause,

¹³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, The forms of capital, pp 241-258, in John Richardson (ed), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

¹³⁷ Mark Granovetter, 'Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), November 1985.

¹³⁸ Bourdieu, The forms of capital.

or more cynically, the winning cause. What is also certain is that civic leaders we have interviewed have been unanimous in emphasising the importance during that period of donor funding. Less obvious, but of even more interest for our purposes, is that politics aside, many donors feel that CBOs – and in particular civics and legal advice centres – used donor money effectively and professionally. For example, beginning in 1991, USAID started distributing small grants of less than \$30 000 to more than 150 civics and legal advice centres. Because the grants were small, and the selected organisations had limited accounting and reporting capacity, the grants came with minimal conditions attached and were basically ‘given on good faith’.¹³⁹ The money was earmarked for salaries and basic office costs. Some years later, it was decided to have an accounting firm conduct audits of a sample 15 of the beneficiaries. To everyone’s surprise, only one community organisation failed to account fully for its funds. In 1995 the programme was scaled down to support for 57 legal advice centres because of the US Congress’s insistence that USAID work with government and because of a new strategic orientation towards criminal justice. Yet the effectiveness and cost efficiency of supporting community organisations was never brought into doubt. The USAID official who was most deeply involved with the programme was adamant that it had been the most successful of all of USAID’s pro-democracy programmes. Most interestingly, when asked how it had been possible to select genuine community organisations, the answer was all the more revealing for its simplicity: ‘We know the townships. You can go to meetings, talk to community activists, and figure it out.’¹⁴⁰

There are two points that emerge from this account. The first is that information problems can be dealt with, although they require a very different methodology from the one currently in vogue. The second point is that if the selection problem is addressed, if genuinely democratic and engaged civic organisations can be identified, the return on supporting core activities is likely to be very high. The reason for this takes us back to our analysis of what civics do and how they do it. Very briefly put, civics offer crucial services to the poor that take the form of both brokerage and lobbying functions. In so doing they help close the gap between communities and government and thus capacitate citizens. Secondly, civics provide these services as *movements*. They do so by relying on residents’ sense of commitment and voluntarism – thus mobilising latent resources within communities – and in doing so create new spaces and repertoires of democratic participation. The implication – from a donor point of view – is that modest investments in civics and more generally CBOs can have very high returns because they are directly tapping into existing patterns of democratic associational activity.¹⁴¹ As such, a case can be made that while the initial costs of differentiating genuinely democratic and responsive civics from clientelist or gatekeeping structures is certainly high, these costs are more than compensated for by lower recurrent costs and by high multiplier effects. In a country where the wage ratio between unskilled and skilled workers is quite pos-

¹³⁹ Up until 1995 the EU disbursed a total of about R2 million to a large number of groups in South Africa ‘without requiring them to account for expenditure in the normal way ... word of mouth reports were sufficient’. Shubane, *Local content ...*, p 6.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Harold Motshwane.

¹⁴¹ One donor official noted: ‘Advice offices only cost 3 000 per month, and for this you get two staffers and a ton of activity. You get real bang for your buck.’ Shubane, *Local content ...*

sibly amongst the highest in the world, and where the wages of the professionals and consultants of the donor community are pegged to first world standards of living, the comparative advantage of providing support to local grass-roots organisations (capacity building, basic institutional infrastructure) should be self-evident.

Conclusion

The history and current state of the civics movement provides important insights into civil society in South Africa. The good news is that contrary to the view that confuses the demobilisation of movements with the contraction of civil society, many civics still enjoy a high degree of legitimacy, both as an incarnation of popular aspirations for a civic community, and as structures of democratic participation. What is in many respects most remarkable is that civics have survived at all. The colonising efforts of the ANC, the decompression of communities, the collapse of institutions of state-society engagement, the fragmentation and pluralisation of interests have all militated against the survival of civics. That they have survived underscores three points. First, given the unevenness of state capacity, and the considerable difficulties that ordinary citizens have in engaging democratic authorities, civics still have a critical role to play as brokers and interlocutors. Second, the existence of large numbers of hard working and committed activists is a testament to the fact that though the political context has changed dramatically, the voluntarism and sense of political engagement born of the years of struggle has certainly not dissipated. Indeed, one is reminded of Albert Hirschman's¹⁴² famous theorem that social energies may wax and wane, but never entirely disappear. Third, the fact that the very idea of the civic remains powerful in the popular imaginary is extremely revealing. It remains powerful as an expression of solidarity and self-help under trying and de-solidarising circumstances. And it remains powerful because it resonates with popular aspirations for an inclusionary and participatory democracy.

¹⁴² Albert Hirschman, *Getting ahead collectively: grassroots experiences in Latin America*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1984.

SANCO IN THE POST-APARTHEID PERIOD

List of interviewees

Mosiye, Albert	Branch chair, SANCO	Freedom Park	October 14, 2000
Masondo, Amos			October 16, 2000
Nxumalo, Aubrey	Regional Chair	East Rand	July 7 and Aug 17, 00
Sibanda, Dan	Area Chair	Joe Modise, Alex	Nov 19, 2000
Bulldog	Section 4 Chair	Alexander	Nov 19, 2000
Dudu	Executive Com	Helen Joseph	Nov 19, 2000
Godfrey Tschello	Organizing Secretary	Diepkloof	Oct 26, 2000
Vuyisile Moedi	Branch Chair	Diepkloof	Oct 26, 2000
Williams, Donovan	National		April 16, July 17,
Dube, Vusi	Branch Chairperson	Vosloorus	November 8, 2000
Mtomo, Jimmy	Branch Chair	Claremont	November 6, 2000
Mtetwa, Violet	Branch Secretary	Claremont, KZN	Nov 6, 2000
Softie Zindela	Section M Chair	Umlazi	Nov 6, 2000
Jabulani Ndlangisa	Section C Chair	Umlazi	Nov 6, 2000
Joyce, Pat	Regional Activist	Durban	Nov. 6, 2000
Zulu, Mandla	Branch Chair	KwaMashu	Nov. 6, 2000
Dudu Nxumalo	Secretary	KwaMashu	Nov. 6, 2000
Lesetja David Mapila	Delivery controller, Eskom Benoni	Nov 9, 2000	
Mandla Gumede	TRA Chair	Tembissa	Nov 17, 2000
Mohamed, Hassen	Director, Planact	Johannesburg	April 14, 2000
Hennie Botha	CEO	Benoni	November 9, 2000
Hosia Mohlabane	director?, USN	Joburg	April 19
Jabu Tshabalala	Sanco Regional Sec	Pretoria	November 8, 2000
Lawrence Boya	Strategic Executive Urban Development/Planning	Johannesburg	30 October 2000
Lazarus Mawika Nkadimeng	Branch Secretary	Winnie Mandela Park	August 11, 2000
Zachariah Leshilo	Chairperson	Khayalami	July 3, 2000
Linda Mngomezulu	Chair	Vaal Region	July 6, 2000
Lucas Qakaza	Region Chair	Pretoria	June 22, 2000
Philemon Matshitela	Branch Secretary	Alexander	June 30, 2000
Mayekiso, Mzwanele	President, NARCO		
Mkhabela, Ishmael	Executive Director Interfaith Community Development Association		March 29, 2000
Mlungisi Hlongwane	Sanco national President		October 31, 2000
Nkele Ntingane	Deputy chair, Joburg Councilor	Gauteng	July 25, 2000

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Ntsoaki Doris Radebe	Dep. Secretary,	Joburg Region	August 8, 2000
Peter Natiello	Democracy and Governance Team, US AIDPretoria	December 1, 2000	
Richard Maluleka	HOD Housing and Land Affaris	Gauteng	July 20, 2000
Richard Mdakane	Gauteng Legislature Whip, Chairperson of Gauteng Provincial Sanco,	June 14, Oct 3, 2000	
Sam ??	Organsing Secretary	Winnie Mandela	October 12, 2000
Siphiwe Thusi	Privincial Sec, Gauteng		April 4 2000
Sonny Serote	West Rand Chair		July 8, 2000
Thabile Mngomezulu	Branch Secretary	Finetown	
wellington tyabule	Branch Chair	Finetown	
Thomas Thaga	SANCO chair,	Ruth first	Nov 22, 2000
Thomas Kjellson	First Secretary (development)	SIDA	November 31, 2000
Tim Mabema	Secretary	Tembisa Sanco	August 10, 2000
Ali Tleane	General Secretary, Narco	Tembisa	June 21, 2000
Victor Khosa,	Chair	Wattville	August 2, Oct 18 2000
George Motshweneng		Wattville	August 2, Oct 18 2000
Tshrietso Tsie	HOD of health	Vosloorus	October 24, 2000
George Ratsoana	HOD of Housing	Vosloorus	October 24, 2000
Yusuf Patel	director, Decentralised Development Planning	Dept of Provincial and local Government	1 December 2000
George Wellington	Sanco Chair	Finetown	
Harold Motshwane	USAid Official	Pretoria	December 7, 2000
Remy Duiven	Swiss Development Cooperation	Pretoria	28/11/00
Gerhard Pfister	Swiss Development Cooperation	Pretoria	28/11/00
Sogan Modley	Civic Activist	Durban	12/03/01
Peter Natiello	USAid, Democracy and Governance Team	Pretoria	12/01/00
Sindisile Maclean	Buffalo City Mayoral Candidate	Bisho	23/11/2000
Desmond Halley	Deputy Mayor	East London	22/11/2000
Penrose Ntlothi	Provincial Information Secretary, Sanco	Eastern Cape	23 & 24/11/2000
Mike Tofile	Sub -regional Chair, Sanco	Port Elizabeth	27/11/2000
Mike Ndzotoyi	Dep Prov Chair Sanco -	Eastern Cape	26/11/2000
Monde Mntanga	Head of P.E. Civil Society Forum	Port Elizabeth	26/11/2000
Aubrey Mali	Sanco Chair	Langa	26/11/2000
Xolani Bele	Sanco Secretary	Port Elizabeth subregion	27/11/2000
Kiki Dyini	Sanco HOD Environment and Tourism	Kwazakhele	28/11/2000
Mandla Madwara	Former chair of Exco & outgoing member of the buget committee, Port Elizabeth	Port Elizabeth	25/11/2000

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Lulamile Nazo	Mayor East London	East London	22/11/2000
Mildred	Branch secretary, SANCO	Ruth First	multiple dates
Thami	BEC member, SANCO	Ruth First	22/03/01
Mamba	BEC member, SANCO	Ruth First	22/03/01
Raymond	BEC member, SANCO	Ruth First	22/03/01
Moffat Soyimba	Branch chairperson, ANC	Freedom Park	15/03/01
Thandi Ziqubu	Branch Secretary, ANC	Ruth First	15/03/01