

## **Title: ICTs and political voice: Lessons from South Africa**

### **Introduction**

Since the 1950s a number of developing countries have launched policies (sometimes tellingly referred to as crusades) to clear cities of slums (Brum, 2013; Davis, 2006; Huchzermeyer, 2004). For decades, residents of informal settlements, known as shack dwellers, have suffered from forceful evictions, and their consequences. Shack dwellers are poor and often marginalised citizens lacking a political voice and do not participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Chambers, 2005; DFID, 2000; Sanderson, 2012).

Low levels of political voice by the marginalised are common. Gender, age, income, religion, ethnicity, race, culture as well as more complex power relations – e.g. traditional structures of authority – influences the ability to express political voice (Cleaver, 2001; Devas and Grant, 2003; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Furthermore, issues such as lack of time; access to information on rights; or inaccessible jargon of official documents may represent barriers to express political voice (Schlozman *et al.*, 2012; UN-HABITAT, 2006).

Some authors focused on how certain characteristics – such as the ones listed above – might affect the ability and desire to speak up (Cornwall, 2004; Freire, 1985; Gaventa, 2002). For instance, Cornwall (Cornwall, 2002, 2004) states that different levels of expertise and power relationships, as well as low self-esteem, may be detrimental to participation. Marginalised individuals – often suffering from internalized oppression (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2006b) – frequently lack the ability and means to express their minds and wills (Mitlin and Bebbington, 2006; Prilleltensky and Gonick, 1996; Reinharz, 1994). Individuals might fail to express their views, or disagree with proposals that do not meet their needs; feel forced to accept poor quality services or what is decided on their behalf (Gaventa, 2006a).

Over the past 20 years, the subject of political voice of marginalised people and communities has gained momentum among academics, government institutions, and civil society organisations. The increasing availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as internet and mobile phones, have been hailed as a solution to marginalisation by allowing access to political and discursive democratic processes. Despite potential benefits, ICTs are not leading to greater participation and political voice by marginalised individuals (Leighninger, 2014). Previous research has shown that political voice channelled through ICTs often mirrors existing non-virtual traditional power dynamics (Brodock, 2010; Schlozman *et al.*, 2012). This means that although marginalised groups and individuals, such as the shack dwellers, have been adopting certain ICT tools, there is little evidence of their meaningful use for political voice.

This paper addresses two issues. First, it describes some of the factors influencing shack dwellers to develop a political voice. In order to overcome their lack of political voice, marginalised individuals often engage in collective action – or collective processes (Craig and Mayo, 2004; Diani, 2000; Freire, 1970 1992; 1983 1992; Milan, 2013; Serrano-García, 1994; Slater and Tacchi, 2004; Summers-Effler, 2002; Watts and Serrano-García, 2003). For many shack dwellers around the world, engaging in collective processes means participating

in a grassroots social movement or organisation. Through grassroots social movements and organisations, shack dwellers are able to self-organise and mobilise, and set their own agenda. Engagement in grassroots social movements enables, fosters, and catalyses the development of political voice.

The second issue relates to how ICTs can be meaningfully used for political voice by shack dwellers. To understand the role of ICTs in the development of political voice, an appreciation is required of the complex processes involved by which some marginalised shack dwellers become politically active. Moreover, an acknowledgement of the social and individual contexts is necessary to identify the role played by technology at various points in the process of developing a political voice (Brodock, 2010; Selwyn, 2004; van Dijk, 2005). Communication processes which occur as a result of engagement in grassroots social movements, might offer important clues to understand the meaningful use of ICTs for political voice.

### **Case Study: Abahlali baseMjondolo**

A qualitative case study of a shack dweller grassroots social movement in South Africa (Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)) is used to explore the circumstances under which members of AbM are able to develop individual and collective forms of political expression, and the role that the use of ICTs play in this development. The case study of AbM was accessed through the individual narratives collected from in-depth semi structured interviews of 35 members; participant observation (e.g. of meetings, marches, events and exchanges with external supporters and government officials); published materials (e.g. media, academic articles and reports); AbM's website, mailing list, and personal communication.

Abahlali baseMjondolo is a grassroots organisation founded in 2005, in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) – which means “people who live in shacks” in the isiZulu language – following a protest in the Kennedy Road Informal settlement (“Kennedy” hereafter), in Durban. Since the Kennedy road blockade, AbM went from demanding services and rights to more actively engaging in political processes by speaking out against corruption, opposing public policies which negatively affect their lives, and demanding the right to co-determine their future (Pithouse, 2006b). AbM has defied political parties and government officials, by officially maintaining an election boycott position (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2009; Chance, 2011). AbM has challenged, for example: illegal evictions, removal to transit camps, and plans that undermine shack dwellers' rights.

Since 2005, AbM has grown to several thousands of members, across more than 30 informal settlements. AbM has gathered the support of a number of individuals and organisations, in South Africa and abroad. AbM has shared experiences, information, tactics, coordinated protests and campaigns, received funds, has received and provided support or joined other causes by making speeches or publishing material; and achieved national and international media coverage (Chance, 2011; Cooper-Knock, 2008).

AbM has clear guidelines regarding its democratic formal structure. The concept of leadership within AbM is often described as unique and representative of a bottom-up democracy (Bryant, 2005; Gibson, 2007; Patel, 2008; Pithouse, 2006a). The AbM model of leadership includes twenty or thirty committed leader-activists who “work hard to preserve the consultative culture of the community and of the movement” (Bryant, 2005). This is very

different from the existing traditional organizations inside South African informal settlements, often dominated by clientelism and patronage relations.

AbM's main democratic structures are maintained through community meetings, camps, and AbM general meetings. Meetings are opportunities for sharing information, knowledge, opinions, and support, and discuss issues and strategies; information is passed to members about what is happening in other informal settlements; members discuss decisions that were made at the organisational level; make local decisions; have discussions on actions and activities. Some meetings are dedicated to discuss issues such as democracy, identity, or general discussions about "their struggle".

### **Realising their marginalization**

Data collected for this study on the background of AbM members suggests some of the reasons for an individuals' lack of voice (Freire, 1970; Watts, unpublished; Watts and Guessous, 2006), and factors potentially influencing the development of members' political voice. Some factors inhibiting political voice, which have been previously identified in the literature about South African marginalised groups, were also identified in AbM, including ethnic divisions, conflict in rural areas, and poverty. The majority of members described not having engaged with political activities before AbM.

Among the reasons which led some members to engage with political activity (mobilization) is discontent with the situation in informal settlements, and lack of responsiveness of public institutions and political parties. Frustration with the government, party politics, and the lack of tangible results from engagement with political parties, appeared to be the driving reason for some members' activism.

### **Social context**

AbM was created and established in a contentious context. The social and economic divisions of informal settlements (Bremner, 1994; Crankshaw, 1996; Morris and Hindson, 1992; Patel, 2012; Smit, 2006), are reproduced in AbM's structures. Similar to other shack dweller communities in South Africa, relationships between AbM members are bound to issues of language, race, and ethnicity.

Possibly as a result of high visibility yet ultimately unfulfilled promised by politicians, and extreme prejudice, shack dwellers tend to be distrustful of outsiders. Yet, through frequent face-to-face interactions and the support received from external collaborators, AbM shack dwellers described being able to develop long term relationships of trust. Similar to what was observed in other social movements, face-to-face interaction provides a basis for the development of trust, social bonds and identity among participants (Diani, 2000; Milan, 2013; Summers-Effler, 2002).

A vital element of AbM's structure are the opportunities for face-to-face interaction. It is through opportunities to meet face-to-face that members have learned about one another, and their shared suffering. This was particularly important because before AbM, these members reported to have lacked bonds and had limited relationships with residents of the same informal settlement. By engaging in face-to-face meetings, sharing their stories and

grievances, helped these members getting to know other members and residents, and fostered a sense of collective identity.

Beyond sharing and learning, face-to-face meetings are an opportunity to support and encourage self-determination (Phillips, 2003). Some AbM members have also used face-to-face opportunities to talk about rights, instigate discussions, and encourage individual autonomy, self-confidence, and self-determination.

An important aspect of AbM's face-to-face meetings is singing and praying. Religion plays an important part in the lives of shack dwellers in South Africa. For AbM members, singing and praying together helped to de-stress, and raise the general morale. As often described in the literature, spirituality can incite solidarity, zeal, inspiration, and courage within social movements (Brookings, 1999 cited in Watts et al, 1999}.

### Meaningful use of ICTs

Most AbM members owned cheap phones with basic features, similar to people in other parts of the developing world (Ling and Donner, 2009; Molony, 2008; UNDP, 2012). The use of mobile phones was constrained by high tariffs (Duncan, 2010; Smith, 2009). Interviewees described a pattern of usage similar to that described in the literature as focusing on the intimate sphere (Ling and Campbell, 2008; Miller, 2006; Sey, 2011).

Observations and interview responses about the use of computers and the internet confirms what has been observed in digital inclusion projects and ICT4D literature: before AbM, beyond the lack of access, there was an overwhelming feeling of being unable to learn, understand, or use such technology (Avgerou and Madon, 2005; Madon *et al.*, 2009; Mehra *et al.*, 2004; Postma, 2001; Selwyn, 2004).

AbM's members use of the internet played a different role from the role of mobile phones, which had already been available. Two things marked the introduction of the internet for AbM: the development of AbM's website by supporters and the computer and internet training course provided to its members by academic supporters.

Similar to what has been observed in other social movements (della Porta, 2011; Hara and Estrada, 2005; Wasserman, 2007), AbM's website has turned into an important window on its activities (i.e. mainly aimed at an external audience and projecting AbM's voice at home and abroad). At the same time, the running and maintenance of the website, and the associated increase in visibility and outreach, created the need for some AbM members to adapt and take control. The course played an important role in helping AbM members who were part of the course, to realize their individual capabilities in learning and engaging with the internet.

The use of mobile phones had a major impact on the ability to engage within AbM. Most interestingly, data collected suggests that by engaging with AbM, some members have changed how much and for what purposes they used their personal mobile phones. Because of AbM, members started redirecting airtime to AbM related activities, while before these members would have spent this resource mainly on the intimate sphere.

The role of some members within AbM meant that the mobile phones of these members became a collective resource for AbM and its members, despite being personal devices. The

affected members, whose personal devices essentially became appropriated as a common good, struggled to afford airtime.

Moreover, other aspects influenced the way they used and spent airtime for AbM related activities. For instance, traditions and reluctance have influenced the adoption of new technologies or tools by AbM members. Frequently, these factors decreased or limited the adoption of technology-mediated communication among AbM members, or prevented them reducing the cost of their airtime. Examples include the initial resistance to learn how to use computers and the internet, and a cultural stigma.

Speaking was considered by all of AbM members a more important medium of communication than writing (or, in this case: texting), precluding or slowing down the adoption of cheaper messaging services.

Finally, face-to-face and voice call communication are seen by AbM members as the only way to establish relationships of trust. The importance of establishing trust among AbM members has also been found elsewhere, for example Molony's (2006) study about business relationships of farmers in Tanzania. Similar to AbM, Molony (2006) described that face-to-face relationships are often favoured over using mobile phones, or technology is employed after a trustworthy face-to-face relationship is established.

## **Conclusion**

AbM members were able to engage in collective processes which led to the development of social bonds, trust, self-confidence, and critical reflection. These have, alongside other factors related to the engagement into collective processes, supported the development of political voice among many AbM members.

Both the internet and mobile phones were found to also play an important role in the development of political voice of some AbM members. However, interaction between the use of ICTs and the development of a political voice is complex. In many instances the technology has enabled mobilization, as well as given individuals a feeling of security. Where this has happened, the appropriation and re-purposing of ICTs to fit the needs of AbM members has come about as a result of attaching meaning to these technologies, which did not exist before AbM. ICTs can facilitate the development of political voice, in particular by facilitating collective processes (e.g. mobilization), channelling support and trust, as well as raising self-confidence. Yet, as the case of AbM demonstrates, ICTs have not operated as a political equalizer within AbM. The use of ICTs for political voice might have even created new barriers for the development of political voice of some members.

From a practical perspective, viewing all members of a grassroots organisation as equal will miss the important differences in the roles that some have, more than others, for example in organising, mobilising, and expanding an organisation. Even individuals with similar backgrounds, living in the same communities, will have different political engagement inside the same organisation. This means, for instance, that access to technology to support political engagement will not be relevant to every member. From a policy perspective, accessing and facilitating diverse options of political engagement might be more appropriate and less demanding on some members. However, organising and providing

opportunities needs to be done in a sensible and targeted manner, in order to avoid new class division within marginalised groups and grassroots organisations.

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