NGOs and urban movements
Richard Pithouse

To cite this article: Richard Pithouse (2013): NGOs and urban movements, City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action, 17:2, 253-257
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2012.754175

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
NGOs and urban movements
Notes from South Africa

Richard Pithouse

This article notes that in South Africa the relationship between grassroots organisations and NGOs has often been fractious – to the point that there have been a number of rebellions against NGOs on the part of grassroots organisations. It also notes that NGOs have sometimes reacted in a plainly authoritarian manner to grassroots critiques. And, more positively, it also notes that some NGOs have developed positive and valued relationships with grassroots organisations. However it cautions that an NGO’s position on economic questions i.e. whether it is broadly liberal or socialist – offers no a priori indication of its approach to praxis. The article argues that praxis, in the sense of thinking through and working out how NGOs can relate to grassroots organisations in an enabling manner, needs to be taken seriously and that constructive discussion in this regard should be encouraged rather than suppressed.

Key words: Abahlali baseMjondolo, NGOs, popular movements, praxis, South Africa

Clearly any simplistic analysis that presents popular movements as automatically emancipatory and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as automatically part of a system of containment must be resisted. There are reactionary popular movements and there can be self-interested, authoritarian, ethnic or gendered currents in generally emancipatory movements. Moreover, while NGOs, in their structure and in their practices, are very often fundamentally elitist, there are some NGOs that have thought deeply about their praxis and which do extraordinary work. However, this should not blind us to the fact that NGOs cannot substitute themselves for movements in terms of constituting an emancipatory political force because significant progressive change is seldom possible without sustained popular mobilisation. Moreover, while movements can be democratic, and sometimes are, NGOs are very seldom able to attain democratic modes of working given that they are overwhelmingly professional organisations driven by funders, boards and directors rather than members. For these reasons, amongst others, popular movements do have a political priority over NGOs.

In recent years, popular urban movements have often had fractious relations with NGOs in South Africa. One reason for this is that some NGOs use donor rather than popular support to claim or assume a representative or leadership role with regard to popular organisations or struggles. This happens amongst pro-systemic NGOs, like Shack Dweller’s International (SDI), as well as with NGOs that are critical of neoliberal
economic arrangements. In the case of SDI, the state has made considerable investment, financial and political, in a ‘partnership’ that it parades to show that it is working with shack dwellers while simultaneously subjecting independent popular shack dweller’s organisations to criminalisation and serious repression. In the case of NGOs that are critical of neoliberal economics, the tendency, common although not uniform, to try and assume, often via plainly undemocratic practices, the right to mediate the participation of movements in various forums that link popular politics to elite public spheres tends to become most acute around international events such as the World Social Forum, when it was held in Nairobi, or the various United Nations conferences that have been held in South Africa.

For many years now, and despite a number of rebellions against these practices, grassroots activists have found that in exchange for limited forms of financial support for their struggles, sometimes not extending beyond covering the basic costs of participating in certain events chosen and managed by NGOs, they are expected to participate in meetings and spaces that they have had no meaningful role in shaping and in which their participation is highly unequal and highly constrained.2 These spaces may call themselves socialist and be organised or dominated by NGOs that identify as socialist but they have often been experienced as directly oppressive by popular movements. In most instances, there has been a significant degree to which this has been racialised. However, these practices cannot be reduced to their racialised aspects. There is both a broader NGO elitism and a convergence between some left NGOs and authoritarian would-be vanguards that could continue to operate outside of a racialised context.

There have been instances where NGOs on both ends of the political spectrum have responded with real authoritarianism when their assumption of a leadership role is questioned from below. In some cases this authoritarianism has, in certain aspects, exceeded that of the state. For instance, the state has never sought to censor academic work that takes the views of its grassroots critics seriously but in recent years both pro-systemic and left NGOs have sought to do this. In one case, a left NGO made a failed but highly intimidatory attempt to bully a student into withdrawing a thesis that had been submitted, and passed, at a university in England by threatening legal action. There was also an appeal, again without success, to a notoriously authoritarian and state-aligned university management to act against an internationally renowned progressive academic and writer who had taken the grassroots critics of the NGO in question seriously. It also sought, and failed, to censor some of the statements of the movement in question. This is also a form of authoritarianism that exceeds that of the state.

However, in many other respects the form of the authoritarianism with which NGOs and their broader networks have responded to popular critique has been very similar to that of the state when confronted by popular critique. Entirely baseless public allegations of criminality, thuggery or corruption have been levelled at grassroots activists critical of NGO domination. Some individuals enmeshed in the intersection between NGO networks and authoritarian would-be vanguards have even gone so far as to offer outright support for the state’s spin on gross and violent repression against a movement that has been critical of NGO domination over popular struggles.3 It has also often been alleged that popular critique is consequent to malevolent and external white agency. These are both tropes that have a long history in South Africa extending back through apartheid and colonialism. However, they are also international tropes. The misuse of the allegation of criminality to delegitimise popular challenges reoccurs across space and time. Moreover, as Michel-Rolf Trouillot (1995) shows, the assumption that black challenges to white domination must be inspired and controlled by white...
agitators has a history that stretches back to the Haitian Revolution. A stated commitment to a more just economic order does not necessarily imply a break with the ontological assumptions that have long legitimated racialised modes of oppression.

Given these experiences it is unsurprising that, for some grassroots activists and organisations, NGOs across the political spectrum are generally seen as nodes in the same overarching structure of oppression constituted by the state and the market. However, this is not the whole story. Some popular organisations have also had very important relationships with certain kinds of NGOs. For Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban, Amnesty International in London has been invaluable in providing various forms of support when the movement has been subject to serious repression. In addition, the movement has often struggled to find lawyers who are willing to take instruction from poor people and to plan legal strategies together, but has been able to form an equally invaluable relationship with the pro bono legal NGO, the Socio-Economic Rights Institute, in Johannesburg. Moreover, for some years now it has also had a very productive relationship with the Church Land Programme (CLP) in Pietermaritzburg—an organisation that has thought deeply about praxis in a broadly Freirian framework. CLP has, always working with the movement in a non-dominating way and via open and democratic processes, created spaces for the discussion of various issues and ideas and has helped to connect the movement to progressive bishops. These three NGOs are all very different but what they have in common is that they make no attempt to lead, manipulate or represent Abahlali baseMjondolo. They all operate on the assumption that the forms of support that they offer should be negotiated rather than imposed.

If there is a broad lesson to be drawn from the recent South African experience, it is that

Figure 1  Abahlali baseMjondolo protest against evictions in Siyanda, Durban in 2009
(Photo: Kerry Chance)
when things have gone right it is when NGOs have been willing to negotiate support for movements via their formally constituted decision-making structures. When things have gone wrong it is when NGOs have assumed a right to take over, direct or represent popular movements; to co-opt individual activists to create the impression of movement support; to impose projects onto movements or to mediate movement access to elite publics, and in particular to international forums, in ways that are plainly undemocratic. This distinction does not follow a distinction between liberal and socialist or radical NGOs. There are liberal NGOs that operate in undemocratic ways, like SDI, and there are liberal NGOs that are willing to engage movements on a democratic basis, like Amnesty International. Similarly, there are socialist NGOs that have been highly authoritarian and there are radical NGOs that, like the CLP, are scrupulously democratic and principled in their engagement with popular movements.

In South Africa there are, at this point, no movements that are strong enough to endure serious repression on their own. The symbolic support of some churches has proven to be invaluable for movements confronting repression, but there are also pressing material considerations—legal costs, safe houses, etc.—and a need for independent and credible actors to be able to carefully examine and, where necessary, publicly contest state claims about movements and the repression of movements. Movements will require certain forms of NGO support for the foreseeable future. It is, therefore, urgent that lessons are drawn from both the successes and failures in terms of NGO and movement relations in recent years and that free, open and constructive discussion about praxis be seen as something that
is necessary for making progress rather than a threat to be suppressed.

Notes

2 For recent critiques in this regard, see Payn (2011) and Sacks (2011).
3 I am referring here to the armed attacks on Abahlali baseMjondolo in 2009. The state’s account of events was carefully and decisively disputed by Kerry Chance (2010), on the foundation of long-term day-to-day anthropological work in the settlement in question and well more than a hundred interviews about the specific events. Later on, and despite a huge effort, the state was not able to find a single witness that could testify to its version of events in court with any credibility. Peter Hallward (2008) notes a similar, and also racialised, phenomenon in Haiti in which a left NGO committed to a vanguardist mode of politics and alienated from actually existing popular politics supported repression against a grassroots mobilisation.
4 See, for instance, Butler (2007).

References


Richard Pithouse is at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Rhodes University. Email: R.Pithouse@ru.ac.za