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Social Differentiation and Urban Governance in Greater Soweto: A case study of post-apartheid reconstruction

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This chapter explores the historical and contemporary terrain of local level struggles in post-apartheid Meadowlands, a township in Greater Soweto. It looks at the implications for urban governance of increasing social differentiation and suggests that social polarisation mitigates against sustained levels of public action.

Present realities in areas like Meadowlands can best be understood through an awareness of South Africa's recent past. Current trends in urban policy in Johannesburg and responses to them intersect with the deeply ingrained legacies of apartheid planning and social relations. Thus our field research is grounded in an examination of contemporary and historical documentary evidence, which in turn informed the framework within which we elicited the perceptions and experiences of a cross-section of people living and working in Meadowlands. Triangulation of these varied sources provides a fascinating insight into the factors underpinning recent achievements and challenges confronting local governance, factors that are inextricably linked to processes of social differentiation.¹

When Meadowlands was first established during the 1950s, the population was fairly homogeneous. As a result of the sustained economic upswing during the 1960s, a number, but not all, township residents experienced upward occupational mobility. Social differentiation increased even further over the 1980s and early 1990s. Some residents benefited from the drive towards encouraging home ownership, while many others simply fell foul of persistent structural poverty and rising unemployment levels in the city. Social differentiation looks to continue with some Meadowlands' residents benefiting from the deracialisation processes accompanying the end of apartheid. Many others, by contrast, constitute the 'new poor', victims to economic reform measures and adverse changes in labour market opportunities. As an established working class area, though, Meadowlands is not among the poorest residential settlements in Greater Johannesburg. Nevertheless, it is still host to large numbers of people in poverty. According to the 1996 Census, 70 per cent of Meadowlands' population over 15 years of age earn either nothing at all or under R500 a month; 12% have incomes of more than R3 500 per month. While a small number of professionals are service workers (such as teachers, nurses, social workers or employees of the South African Police Services) only 24 per cent of the population are classified as employed with 49% of the economically active holding a job. Of these employed (see Table 1), the largest number is in crafts and trades and elementary occupations.

¹ The field level research was conducted during 1999 and 2000 and data derive from a mix of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participatory research techniques. Semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions (with each group having between five and ten members) were held with five categories of people. For both the focus groups and key informant interviews, a checklist of issues was used. For the focus groups, free-flowing discussions were encouraged towards consensus so that the findings reported here constitute group consent in terms of information and attitudes.

Social differentiation in Meadowlands, as in Greater Soweto more generally, is characterised not only by the differential access of individuals to employment and income but also by differential access to housing and basic services, such as water supply and sanitation, refuse removal and electricity. In this chapter we trace social differentiation along the axis of different housing-types: homeowners, tenants in backyard shacks and hostel dwellers. Social relations based on income (the proxy for which is housing type) are an important part of our analysis and along with ethnic and political conflict in the past constitute a crucial dimension of urban governance in Meadowlands today. Equally critical is to understand social relations based on gender and generation.

Table 1: Occupations of employed residents, Meadowlands

(Source: 1996 Population Census)

	Number	Percent
Legislators, senior officials and managers	682	2
Professionals	1,960	7
Technicians and associate professionals	1,788	6
Clerks	3,340	12
Service workers, shop and market sales workers	4,114	15
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	129	0
Craft and related trades workers	5,576	20
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	3,683	13
Elementary occupations	6,348	23
Total	27,620	100

The Making of Meadowlands

The social origins of Meadowlands are fairly typical of African townships within Greater Johannesburg. Meadowlands was built during the 1950s, a period during which most of the existing housing stock in Johannesburg's African townships was constructed². Consequently, all formal family housing there takes the form of the well-known 'matchbox' house. Meadowlands also has a hostel for rural migrants, another typical feature of African townships built during this period.³ Moreover, along with other areas of Greater Soweto, in the early 1970s Meadowlands saw a proliferation of backyard dwellings built in the face of government restrictions on the supply of family housing provision in urban areas and a growing urban population.

The social origins of Meadowlands are somewhat unusual in at least one respect. Whereas many of Greater Soweto's original residents were squatters who had invaded land in southwestern Johannesburg,⁴ the original residents of Meadowlands were those families that were forcibly removed from within central Johannesburg itself, from areas such as

² S. Parnell & D. Hart, 'Self-help housing as a flexible instrument of state control in twentieth century South Africa', *Housing Studies*, 14 (1999), pp.367-386.

³ Meadowlands hostel was built in 1957 and housed some 4,500 residents (P. Morris, *Soweto: A review of existing conditions and some guidelines for change*, Johannesburg: Urban Foundation, 1980, p.147).

⁴ In Albertsville, Nancefield, Pimville, Orlando East, Orlando West and Dube.

Sophiatown and Western Native Township.⁵ Meadowlands was established when, in accordance with the Native Resettlement Act of 1952, the apartheid government forced the Johannesburg authorities to remove Africans tenants and sub-tenants from the ‘multi-racial’ neighbourhoods as part of the Western Areas slum clearance schemes.⁶

Orchestrated by the newly established Urban Resettlement Board, the forced removals to Meadowlands began on 10th February 1955.⁷ Residents did not want to leave their vibrant, cohesive and settled communities, such as Sophiatown, with their own brand of urban culture deeply inscribed by township jazz, protest politics and established social networks.⁸ Fierce resistance resulted in their homes being demolished and their property being destroyed by the police. Within ten years Sophiatown ceased to exist and was replaced by a white residential area, tactlessly and cruelly named Triomf. People were resettled according to their ethnic group, a decision that was to mark the character and development of the area for years to come.⁹ Ethnic separation can be identified through street names in the different zones and the fact that a range of languages constituted the vernacular in schools across different zones. Today most of the population of Meadowlands speaks IsiZulu (33.5%) and Setswana (27%) with the younger generation opting for the lingua franca of the townships, sometimes known as *tsotsi taal*.¹⁰

The area that today comprises Meadowlands has a long history of urban settlement, predating even the creation of Meadowlands itself. However, almost half (46 per cent) of all residents not born in Meadowlands moved to their present home in the late 1950s and early 1960s when most of the township was built. Another 39 per cent moved to their present home from 1966 to 1980. Of all residents, estimated at 127,568 people, 55 per cent were born in the house they currently occupy.¹¹ These findings reveal a striking lack of mobility that was probably brought about by a combination of influx control laws that prevented Africans with urban rights from moving about within urban areas and a shortage of housing. This is significant; security of tenure and housing type are important indicators not only of social mobility but also of social polarisation.

Low-cost Housing and Shack Accommodation

Social differentiation in Greater Soweto can be traced through its housing. The present day landscape of Meadowlands reveals housing of varied colours, styles, alterations, additions and accoutrements, although there remains ample evidence of the 1950s housing stock. The

⁵ It was mainly the backyard shack residents and tenants who were destined for Meadowlands. People resettled from Martindale, Albertsville, Western Native Township, New Clare, Vrededorp, Alexandra Township, George Goch and the neighbouring white suburbs later joined them.

⁶ The fact that Meadowlands residents were removed under anti-slum legislation and not, as is often erroneously reported, under the Group Areas Act of 1950 means that they have no rights under the post-apartheid land restitution acts to reclaim Sophiatown properties. It may also explain their obvious commitment to Meadowlands.

⁷ P. Morris, *A History of Black Housing in South Africa*, Johannesburg: South Africa Foundation, 1981, pp.56 & 60.

⁸ D. Hart, & G. Pirie, ‘The sight and soul of Sophiatown’, *Geographical Review*, 74 (1984), pp.38-47.

⁹ G. H. Pirie, ‘Letter, words, worlds: the naming of Soweto’, *African Studies*, 16 (1984), pp.43-51. The Sotho group comprised Tswana, North Sotho and South Sotho people, while the Nguni group consisted of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Venda and Tsonga.

¹⁰ Other languages spoken are Sesotho (10%), Xitsonga (10%), Sepedi (7%), Tshivenda (5.5%) and IsiXhosa (4.5%) (Population Census, 1996). *Tsotsi taal* can be translate as ‘gangster speak’.

¹¹ M. Marks, *Organisation, Identity and Violence Amongst Activist Diepsloot Youth, 1984-1993*, MA Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993, p. 99.

original 'matchbox' houses were built in three slightly different designs.¹² The most common type, measuring 40m² is the '51/6',¹³ comprises two bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room. A later design, the '51/9' incorporates a small bathroom (with basin, bath and lavatory) and is slightly larger at 44m². The 51/6 design was often built as a semi-detached unit. These were built to rudimentary standards with only earthen or ash floors and without internal doors and ceilings. Water was piped to a tap outside the kitchen door and an outside toilet was connected to a waterborne sewerage system. Most stands in Soweto are 260m² in size. Soweto houses were not electrified until the late 1970s but by 1988, all formal houses were supplied with electricity.¹⁴

Along with other townships in Greater Soweto, the development of Meadowlands entailed a steady movement away from the provision of standardised low-cost family housing. In the 1950s, the vast bulk of Sowetans had no choice but to accept the standard 'matchbox' house. By the 1990s, state reforms that privatised the provision of housing meant that Sowetans lived under increasingly differentiated housing conditions. Reforms that introduced homeownership offered the wealthy few an opportunity to purchase housing of a relatively high standard. The withdrawal of the state from low cost housing provision, though, led to overcrowding of formal houses and the proliferation of shacks in backyards.¹⁵

Towards the end of the 1960s, the apartheid government began to channel funds for housing from townships such as Meadowlands to townships in the so-called 'homelands'. This meant an effective freeze on family housing provision. Consequently, as a result of urban immigration and the natural growth of the urban population, a chronic shortage of housing developed. As early as the late-1970s, this shortage of housing manifested itself as residents were forced to overcrowd their standardised four-roomed houses and to build temporary shacks in their backyards to accommodate their adult offspring. By 1979, the official waiting list for housing in Soweto was about 14,000 persons. Since this list excluded those who did not have rights to live permanently in Soweto, it is an underestimate of the real extent of homelessness, which was calculated at about 173,000 people. Estimates of the shortage of houses in 1979 ranged from 25,000 to 32,000 units.¹⁶

A survey of Soweto households was conducted in early 1978. By then, seven per cent of houses in Soweto had sub-tenants, most of whom occupied a room in the main house.¹⁷ In addition, in 49 per cent of houses, residents used either the living room or the kitchen for sleeping.¹⁸ The low rate of backyard sub-tenants, which was only about one per cent, was probably because it was illegal and closely policed by the authorities. However, after the state lost control of the townships during the political rebellions of the 1980s, the housing shortage produced a rise in the number of backyard shacks and the proliferation of squatter settlements

¹² Morris (1980), pp.142-143.

¹³ So named after the date (1951) and the number (6) assigned to the prototype (D. Calderwood, *Native Housing in South Africa*, PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1953).

¹⁴ H. Mashabela, *Townships of the PWV*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1988, p.149.

¹⁵ A. Gilbert, O. Crankshaw, & A. Morris, 'Backyard Soweto', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24 (2000), pp.842-857.

¹⁶ Morris (1980), p.149.

¹⁷ C. Swart, *Swartbehuising Deel I: Gesinsbehuising in Soweto*, Johannesburg: Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1979, p.89.

¹⁸ Swart (1979), p.90; see also the case study of the Alice Makuma, whose two sons slept in the living room of their 51/6 house in Naledi (R. Ginsberg, 'Now I Stay in a House: Renovating the matchbox in apartheid-era Soweto', *African Studies* 55:2, (1996), p.130).

by homeless residents who built their own shacks.¹⁹ By 1987, 40 per cent of all formal houses in Johannesburg's African townships had at least one backyard shack and 23 per cent had a formally built 'garage' that was inhabited by sub-tenants. Five per cent of houses had sub-tenants occupying a portion of the house.²⁰

By 1997, the number of backyard shacks (about 121,000) in Greater Soweto almost exceeded the number of formal houses, providing homes for about 20 per cent of the population. There were approximately 18,000 shacks in 27 squatter settlements and they housed about six per cent of the population.²¹ Although Meadowlands has its fair share of backyard shacks, no large squatter settlements exist within the township or on its immediate boundaries. The nearest squatter settlement is Mshenguville, some distance to the south on the far boundary of Mofolo Township. The latest Population Census which estimates that 22 per cent of households in Meadowlands live in backyard accommodation, half of which are formal rooms and half of which are shacks.²² By contrast, only two per cent of residents live in shacks outside of backyards.

The provision of services and the quality of accommodation available to the residents of backyards are significantly better than those available in the squatter camps. While almost half of all backyard structures in Greater Soweto are crudely built wood and corrugated iron shacks, a majority (54%) are formal structures made from bricks and cement. What varies rather little is the number of rooms. Virtually all backyard accommodation, whether a formal structure (89%) or a shack (93%), has only one room. Only six per cent of all backyard structures have two rooms, three per cent have three rooms and none has more than three rooms. Some rooms are as small as 6m² while some may be as large as 28m². The quality of the shacks also varies: some are built with old and rusty corrugated iron sheets (with many holes from previous constructions) whereas others are built with new sheets. Some shacks lack windows, whereas others have them. What they all lack is any form of insulation because it is considered a fire hazard and ants soon make nests in the gap between the outer wall and the insulation. Although very few backyard households have a legal connection to an electricity meter (5%), almost all backyard households (92%) have some access to electricity. Most get their electricity through an illegal extension cable from the main house (86%). Similarly, because backyard taps were originally fixed to the outside wall of all council houses next to the kitchen, almost every backyard household (99%) has access to water. With few exceptions, neither residents of the main structure nor backyard tenants have water in the house unless they have had it piped in at their own expense. In addition, because almost all council stands were provided with outside toilets, all backyard tenants have access to a flush toilet.

Given the limited size of backyard accommodation there is a great deal of overcrowding in Greater Soweto. Although most (55%) backyard structures house either one or two people, 22% have three occupants and 23% four or more. There are no significant differences between the occupancy rates of backyard shacks and formal rooms; severe overcrowding is

¹⁹ H. Mashabela, *Mekhuku: Urban African cities of the future*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1990.

²⁰ P. Frankel, *Urbanisation and Informal Settlement in the PWV Complex*, Vol. 2, Johannesburg: Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988, Appendix 6.

²¹ Gilbert *et al.* (2000); A. Morris (ed.), B. Bozzoli, J. Cock, O. Crankshaw, L. Gilbert, L. Lehutso-Phooko, D. Posel, Z. Tshandu, Z & E. van Huysteen, *Change and Continuity: A survey of Soweto in the late 1990s*, Johannesburg: Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, 1999, pp.5 and 70.

²² The Population Census' estimate of the percentage of households in backyard shacks is probably an underestimate.

common in both shacks and formal structures. If the houses are frequently overcrowded, there are also many people living on the stand. The average number of occupants on council house stands is 7.4 and almost one in five council house stands contains more than ten people. Where backyard accommodation exists, the stand accommodates an average of four backyard residents. Meadowlands itself has a significant population of backyard tenants.

Although one should not exaggerate the differences between backyard tenants and their owner-occupier landlords in the 'matchbox', some significant social differences exist between these two groups with respect to urbanisation, age, tenure, class and social status.²³ The most important difference between backyard tenants and landlords relate to the fact that backyard tenants are more recent arrivals to Greater Soweto. Approximately two-thirds of backyard household heads arrived in Soweto after 1975, whereas two-thirds of landlords in 'matchbox' housing arrived between 1946 and 1965. Second, backyard tenants are significantly younger than their landlords are. Whereas the average age of the heads of backyard tenant households is 36 years, the average age of the heads of landlord households is 56 years. This age difference has a number of direct demographic consequences. Compared with the heads of backyard tenant households, landlords are five times more likely to have children who have left school and five times less likely to have a child who is not yet attending school. Landlords are ten times more likely to be retired than the respondent in the backyard and are twice as likely to be married. Finally, backyard tenants are more likely to be foreign immigrants than are their landlords. About 16 per cent of backyard tenants who were not born in Johannesburg are foreign immigrants. This is substantially higher than the overall rate (5%) for the whole of Greater Soweto.

These social differences between backyard tenants and landlords translate into important differences in the extent of the political involvement of these two groups. Everatt's study of social divisions in Soweto's townships of Tladi and Moletsane has shown that backyard tenants are reluctant to participate in local politics for fear of reprisal from their landlords. Curiously, this fear is not because landlords and backyard tenants support different political parties. They both support the African National Congress. Instead, within the context of Congress politics, landlords dominate the structures and processes of local governance in order to ensure that their interests take precedence over those of their tenants and squatters.²⁴

Home-ownership

When Soweto was built, home-ownership was a concession limited to only the wealthy few and took the form of a 30-year leasehold of the land, on which privately owned homes were built. These homes were usually larger than the standard 'matchbox' house and were often of individual design. However, they were very few and located only in one part of Dube, another neighbourhood of Greater Soweto.²⁵ In 1968, the right to 30-year leasehold of residential property was withdrawn. Eight years later, under pressure from large business interests and in an attempt to defuse the political tensions surrounding the 1976 Soweto uprising, the government re-introduced home-ownership in African townships. This took the

²³ This paragraph is drawn from Gilbert *et al.* (2000).

²⁴ D. Everett, 'Yet Another Transition? Urbanisation, class formation and the end of national liberation struggle in South Africa', *Comparative Urban Studies, Occasional Paper Series, No.24*, Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 1999, pp.18-20.

²⁵ S. Parnell, 'The Ideology of African Home-Ownership: The establishment of Dube, Soweto, 1946-1955', *South African Geographical Journal* 73 (1991), pp.69-76.

form of a 99-year leasehold, which could be purchased by tenants.²⁶ Quite justifiably, Sowetans were very mistrustful of this new form of tenure, since they had no assurance that such leasehold rights would not be removed again. As a consequence, only a small proportion of houses were sold to tenants under this system.²⁷

In 1986, this reform was extended to allow freehold ownership of land within African townships.²⁸ Furthermore, the government introduced a once-off discount scheme that effectively allowed council tenants to take ownership of the houses they occupied without any cost.²⁹ Thus, by 1996 most Sowetans owned their homes. In Meadowlands, 92 per cent of formal houses were owned.³⁰ The reforms that re-introduced homeownership allowed wealthier residents either to renovate their state-built homes or to raise the capital to buy new homes in suburban developments in other parts of Greater Soweto. In both cases, the new homes were a great improvement on the standardised, low-cost units that were built in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, housing standards in Soweto became increasingly differentiated according to the social class and income of the residents. By 1997, there were some 20,000 new houses built by the private sector for homeowners in greenfield developments.³¹

These new developments did not take place within Meadowlands. The nearest developments were in the neighbouring areas of Diepkloof Extension to the east and Dobsonville to the west. Instead, Meadowlands is characterised by renovations to the existing state-built housing stock. In many cases, these alterations are extensive; the original 'matchbox' house no longer recognisable beneath new rooflines, additional rooms and perimeter walls. Nevertheless, by 1996 the population census recorded that only 16 per cent of all formal houses in Meadowlands had more than the original four rooms,³² suggesting that although much more differentiated than in the past, Meadowlands is probably less differentiated than some other Soweto townships. The reason is that renovated and extended houses are usually scattered among the original 'matchbox' houses and have not given rise to separate middle-class areas. Further explanation lies in the lack of private sector housing developments and the fact that Meadowlands' residents have prevented the establishment of squatter settlements within its boundaries.

Hostel accommodation

Hostels in Johannesburg were not only for miners. From before World War I, the City housed its unskilled workers in downtown hostels. Private companies also used the accessible multi-ethnic, single-sex institutions to accommodate male migrant workers. At the height of the apartheid period, the government wished to racially segregate the inner city and sought to relocate hostels from within 'white' Johannesburg to the townships. The government hoped that for migrants hostels would become an increasingly important component of housing in African townships. In fact, the government actually tried to turn the township of Alexandra,

²⁶ *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1978*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1979, p.329.

²⁷ G. Hardie & T. Hart, 'Politics, Culture and the Built Form: User reaction to the privatization of state housing in South Africa', in S. Low and E. Chambers (eds.), *Housing, Culture and Design: A comparative perspective*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, pp.31-41. See also E. Emdon, 'Privatisation of State Housing: With special focus on the Greater Soweto area', *Urban Forum* 4:2 (1993), p.6.

²⁸ *Race Relations Survey 1986: Part 1*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1987, p.349.

²⁹ Emdon (1993), p.70.

³⁰ 1996 Population Census.

³¹ Morris *et al.* (1999), p.73.

³² These figures are questionable because the Census reports that 29 per cent of formal houses had only 3 rooms.

to the north of Johannesburg, into a township solely for the accommodation of migrant workers, with family housing being demolished and replaced with hostels throughout the 1960s and 1970s.³³ As part of the apartheid ‘total segregation’ plan a large hostel was built in Meadowlands. Ironically the location of the hostel in the midst of family housing made the Meadowlands Hostel an important site in the township uprisings that underpinned the demise of apartheid, albeit with an unusual twist.

Clashes between hostel and township residents became a common feature of the unrest of the 1980s. As a consequence of a violent clash between the migrant residents of Meadowlands hostel and township youth, the hostel was temporarily vacated in late 1976. Then, in early 1977, following the severe flooding of the Klipspruit River valley, some 1,200 homeless families were temporarily accommodated there. Since no alternative accommodation subsequently became available, they have occupied one section of the hostel ever since. Later, other homeless families from Soweto joined them.³⁴ This section of the hostel became known as ‘Mzimhlope,’³⁵ Transit Camp’. It housed about 1,000 men, 1,120 women and 3,500 children in very overcrowded conditions in what the Diepmeadow Housing Director called “Soweto’s No.1 slum”.³⁶ Perhaps as a consequence of the *de facto* presence of women and children, it was targeted for upgrading into family housing as early as 1980. Today, substantial upgrading into family accommodation has taken place. Nevertheless, many of its residents remain socially disadvantaged and excluded.

Even though the Meadowlands’ hostel population has a unique family component, the usual social divisions between urbanites in family housing and rural migrants in hostels still obtain. Moreover, social fissures were widened by the violence that characterised Greater Soweto in the decades immediately prior to the democratic elections of 1994. The hostels, although linguistically mixed, had become the locus of residence for many Zulu-speaking migrants from rural KwaZulu-Natal. They were sympathetic to Buthelezi’s ethnically mobilised Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)³⁷ and during the 1980s and early 1990s the IFP waged an aggressive campaign to expand its support among hostel residents in Gauteng. Although Meadowlands is often characterised as having been “backwards in coming forwards” in terms of the national liberation struggle, it has had its fair share of violence, serving to politicise existing social fractures and deeply implicating both sides in the conflict between IFP and African National Congress (ANC) supporters.³⁸

Local Government and Service Delivery.

³³ M. Sarakinsky, *Alexandra: From ‘freehold’ to ‘model’ township*, Johannesburg: Development Studies Group, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984, pp.50-51.

³⁴ D. Grinker, *Inside Soweto: The inside story of the background to the unrest*, Johannesburg: Eastern Enterprises, 1986, p.45.

³⁵ ‘Mzimhlope’ is the popular name for Meadowlands hostel, being named after the nearest railway station.

³⁶ Grinker (1986), p.45; Morris (1980), p.148.

³⁷ Inkatha was formerly a tribal organisation formed in 1975 with an exclusively Zulu membership. It subsequently transformed itself into a national political party, the Inkatha Freedom Party at a launch, which significantly took place in Sebokeng in present day Gauteng rather than in its earlier base in KwaZulu-Natal.

³⁸ P. Garson, ‘The Killing Fields’, *Africa Report* 35:5 (1990), pp.46-49; A. Ki, & A. Minnaar, ‘Figuring out the Problem: Overview of the PWV Conflict from 1990-1993’, *Indicator South Africa* 11:2, *Conflict Supplement* 1, 1994, pp.25-28; M. Mdledle, ‘Inkatha Goes on the Rampage’, *Work in Progress* 78 (1991) p.10; R. Rafel, ‘Hostel War: Searching for an alternative to hell’, *Work in Progress*, 70:1 (1990), pp.23-26; G. Ruiters & R. Taylor, ‘Hostel War: Organise or die’, *Work in Progress*, 70:1 (1990), pp.20-22; J. Seekings, ‘Township Wars on the Reef’, *Indicator SA*, 8:3 (1991), pp.11-15; R. Taylor, ‘The Myth of Ethnic Division: Township conflict on the Reef’, *Race and Class*, 33:2 (1991), pp.1-14.

Hostilities in Meadowlands were not confined to those between township and hostel residents. Conflict also characterised the relationship between residents and local authorities. Although part of Greater Soweto, the administrative separateness and differences in Meadowlands history have meant that the political scene there, while similar in many ways, was also idiosyncratic. Following the upheaval of resettlement in the 1950s, Meadowlands was politically quiescent during the 1960s and 1970s.³⁹ Even during the Soweto student uprisings of 1976 Meadowlands was on the periphery of events. Marks⁴⁰ sees it as a signifier of a tradition of political action evident in the early days of Sophiatown that was more closely linked to civic action such as boycotts rather than mass political mobilisation. In the 1980s, like their counterparts in other areas throughout Greater Soweto,⁴¹ Meadowlands residents participated in the 'rent boycotts' whereby they refused to pay council rent and service charges. They argued that the services provided were far from satisfactory, the local authorities were corrupt, and the local government structure was illegitimate. The act of non-payment was also viewed as a symbolic protest against the apartheid system. The rent boycott together with the changing political situation led the Transvaal Provincial Administration to enter into negotiations with the Soweto Civic Association. This culminated in the signing of the Greater Soweto Accord in September 1990, which made provision for the writing off of rent and service arrears and laid the foundations for the creation of a democratic metropolitan authority for the city.⁴²

Pangas⁴³ and Politics: Challenging Community Consolidation

Born in upheaval and pain, Meadowlands has witnessed several episodes of social unrest and violence in its relatively short history. During the transition from apartheid, the primary fissure was between those living in houses and those living in hostels. In the pre-1976 period migrants of various ethnic backgrounds inhabited the hostels. It was a strictly guarded male-only institution, known as *ezimpohlweni* or 'bachelors' paradise' and one that provided ready custom for informal township traders active around its perimeters as well as the *shebeens* within Meadowlands itself. By and large, these migrant workers lived harmoniously with their more settled neighbours.⁴⁴

Relations soured after the 1976 student uprisings in Soweto schools. Hostel residents continued to go daily to their jobs and did not adhere to the call by students to boycott certain shops and to stay away from work. In Soweto the students "writ was virtually law in the series of campaigns that they organised in the second half of 1976".⁴⁵ In Meadowlands, the heart of the conflict was relatively short-lived (two weeks) but during this time any Zulu-speaking hostel dweller, easily identified by their accents if not their traditional pierced ears

³⁹ A fact Steve Lebelo ascribes this to the fact that the population were sub-tenants who had much to gain from their removal from Sophiatown backyards to their own housing in Meadowlands.

⁴⁰ Marks (1993), p.113.

⁴¹ 'Soweto Rent Boycott', *Indicator South Africa*, 5:50 (1997).

⁴² M. Swilling and K. Shubane, 'Negotiating urban transition: The Soweto Experience' in R. Lee and L. Schlemmer (eds) *Transition to Democracy: Policy Perspectives*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp 223-258.

⁴³ A machete and 'traditional weapon' of isiZulu speakers supporting Inkatha Freedom Party.

⁴⁴ Babylon Xeketwane, *The Relationship between Hostels and the Political Violence on the Reef from July 1990 to December, 1993: A Case Study of Merafe and Meadowlands Hostels in Soweto*, M.A. Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1995, p. 98.

⁴⁵ J. Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, Unite Reaction*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1978, p.110. Campaigns included four strikes, a crusade against *shebeens*, a Christmas shopping boycott, and a ban on festive and sporting activities.

and facial scarring, was descended on by the youth armed with a variety of weapons. In turn a section of the migrant worker population of the hostels rampaged through the streets attacking any young person who dared venture out. The conflict left 70 people dead in Meadowlands and countless others injured.⁴⁶

Violence flared up again in the mid-1980s between the IFP and the United Democratic Front (UDF) which was allied with the ANC. This assumed more overtly political overtones. More devastating was the way in which Meadowlands became caught up in the political violence that engulfed South Africa to an unprecedented degree between 1990 and 1993. This coincided with Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the unbanning of the national liberation movements and contestation over political terrain during the twilight years of apartheid government. The violence intensified during periods of political consensus among opposition forces and declined at times when it could embarrass the government, giving weight to the view that the conflict was being fuelled by third force elements.⁴⁷ The period claimed a total of 9,325 deaths and of these, 4,756 took place in present day Gauteng and 1,106 in Greater Soweto. Of the latter, the Human Rights Commission linked 483 deaths or 44 per cent to the hostels, including the hostels in Meadowlands.⁴⁸

Before the 1990s, ethnic mobilisation had been largely confined to rural KwaZulu-Natal. From the early 1990s however, political leaders, including Buthelezi, turned their attention to the cities. Hostel residents, many of whom were Zulu-speaking migrant workers, were used to ferment conflict. That they shared a language, culture and often a sense of alienation presented an ideal opportunity for rapid mobilisation. The 1990-1993 violence was increasingly directed against gatherings of people engaged in their day-to-day routines, such as at funeral vigils, parties, *shebeens* and *stokvels* (savings clubs). As a result, trains buses and taxis came to be commonly used for peaceful social activities, religious meetings and political organising, until they too became sites of political attack.⁴⁹

Rapid urbanisation played its part in this violence, with migrancy increasing dramatically in the 1980s because of declining opportunities in the rural areas and, in the case of the Witwatersrand area, expanded work opportunities associated with the short-lived boom between 1986 and 1989.⁵⁰ Unemployment was also a contributory factor alone with increasing competition for jobs and affordable and proximate accommodation.

Older Meadowlands residents were dismissive of the migrant hostel residents who they characterised as rural interlopers and country bumpkins. The township youth, who prided themselves on their urbanity and street wisdom called them *mogoes van toeka* (stupid rural boys), being particularly dismissive of the *Mbaxanga* music listened to by Zulu migrants,⁵¹ preferring instead music more self-consciously linked to the urban traditions of Sophiatown jazz. In general, Meadowlands residents saw themselves as "*the community*", resenting what

⁴⁶ Kane-Berman (1978).

⁴⁷ Everatt (1999).

⁴⁸ Xeketwane (1995), p.17.

⁴⁹ K. Shubane, 'Soweto', in T. Lodge and B. Nasson (eds.), *Update South Africa: Time Running Out: All Here and Now: Black politics in South Africa in the 1980s*, Johannesburg: David Philip, 1991.

⁵⁰ However, it has to be said that most major cities in South Africa have experienced periods of rapid urbanisation and inward migration without descending into the endemic violence that characterised the Reef during the early 1990s.

⁵¹ Xeketwane (1995), p. 94. Mbaxanga music is indigenous amalgam of various strands of African traditional music that evolved in township shebeens and hostels. See Marks (1993), p. 111.

they saw as a lack of commitment to urban life on the part of hostel residents. As one resident was reported as saying:

Hostels are not part of the townships they are a government creation. They housed people who do not regard themselves as part of the township population. People who come to the cities only because they are looking for jobs. Theirs is to live as cheaply as possible. They are dedicated to consolidating their lives in the rural areas They have nothing to lose these people, their wives and children are left in their respective homeland. While we had to fight with our backs against the wall defending our wives, children and belongings.⁵²

The stigma faced by hostel dwellers was keenly felt - “township people have always looked down upon us ... as people who do not wash their feet and armpits”⁵³ – and they resented the interpretation of their adherence to rural customs with their lack of commitment to life in the city. According to the 1996 Census, only six per cent of Meadowlands residents, including those living in the hostels, came from or admitted to coming from KwaZulu-Natal. Indeed, just over 99 per cent gave Gauteng as their usual area of residence. This perception is confirmed by Xeketwane’s qualitative research in Meadowlands and Merafe Hostels. He found that of his interviewees, three-quarters had not visited their rural homes since coming to Soweto.⁵⁴

Building Unity in the Community: The Role of Post-apartheid Government

In late 1990s, the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC) officially united the 13 local government structures that had existed in Greater Johannesburg under apartheid.⁵⁵ Meadowlands fell under the Western Municipal Local Council (WMLC), one of the four municipal substructures that until recently remained part of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council.⁵⁶ Like other sub-structures, the WMLC must balance demands from privileged residents of previously white areas such as Roodepoort and those of the historically disadvantaged such as Meadowlands. Meadowlands contains nearly 47 per cent of the municipality’s total population though it occupies a relatively small proportion of the land area.

In the early post-apartheid years, the WMLC made a small but visible impact on Meadowlands with some of the improvements being tarred roads, the construction of two clinics, a multi-purpose hall and a comprehensive welfare centre. Partly as a result of these initiatives there has been an increase in the payment of service charges. The level of payment at the time of the research stood at between 30 and 40 per cent, a significant improvement on the very poor recovery rates that characterised the boycott in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁵⁷

The successful inroads made by the WMLC in terms of service delivery in Meadowlands have been responsive to community priorities articulated through the Land Development Objectives (LDOs). The LDO consultation process, which took place in 1996/7, asked communities to identify their priorities for local government attention. In terms of both

⁵² Xeketwane (1995), p. 92.

⁵³ Xeketwane (1995), p.129.

⁵⁴ Xeketwane (1995), p.108.

⁵⁵ See J. Beall, O. Crankshaw & S. Parnell, *Poverty. Partnerships and Governance in Johannesburg*, Phase 1 Report for ESCOR, University of Birmingham, 1999.

⁵⁶ Soweto was placed in the Southern Municipal Council.

⁵⁷ Interview Mr Michael Strike Ralegome, Chairperson Western Municipal Local Council, 3 March 2000.

housing and urban services, Meadowlands started off in a better position than many other urban settlements and although the progress made by the WMLC has been modest, it has been reasonably responsive. Many of the improvements made by local government interventions are most likely to benefit better-off homeowners who, having obtained water supply, sanitation and electricity in the past, are now focused on issues such as improved infrastructure, garbage collection and social services. For the poorest residents, for example the backyard tenants, improved services have served to raise rents and other charges by landlords.

There is no guarantee that these initiatives will unite the Meadowlands community. Furthermore, as they largely privilege homeowners, the issues found to be most pressing among the tenants and poorest residents are more difficult for local government to address on its own. They either lie more closely to the ground, relating, for example, to landlord-tenant tensions, or to issues around competing grassroots organisations and constituencies. Alternatively they fall into the terrain of provincial or national government.

Building Unity in the Community

Just as local government had to be restructured and unified, so too did formerly volatile communities such as Meadowlands. The area has been relatively peaceful since the 1994 elections and virtually every informant and focus group discussion expressed tentative relief that the violence had abated and hostilities were over. Residents were eager to put the past behind them, with most seeking to present Meadowlands as a respectable and united community. Nevertheless, the legacies of the past remain and can be acutely observed by reference to Table 2.

Most striking is the significance accorded to the advent of democratic electoral politics in South Africa. As universally evident, however, were the scars of the violence that accompanied it. The only group not to place emphasis on past violence was the backyard tenants. This could be because they took up residence in the area after this political transition or because they were too young to have participated in or been affected directly by the conflict. However, for unemployed youth violence remains very much part of their consciousness. This pertains not only in respect of the past but the present as well, with the violence in homes, schools and the community now perpetrated by criminals and gangsters.

What People Want from Local Government. In assessing what people expected from the new dispensation, we found that the problem of unemployment was the chief concern. Informants and discussants generally believed that insufficient attention had been paid to job creation by post-apartheid governments. Pleasure was expressed over central government's promotion of business development as well as efforts by the local authority to develop commercial and shopping areas. Unemployed youth pointed out that although the development of their local shopping centre had not led to access to more formal jobs, there had been positive effects. Related to the growth of options for informal income-generating activities; e.g., the opportunity to set up a busy car washing service serving local residents as well as taxi firms operating both within Greater Soweto and between Soweto and Johannesburg.

All the respondents were concerned with housing supply. Homeowners (many of whom were also pensioners) and pensioners (many of whom were also homeowners) were concerned with increased housing provision for their extended and growing families. Women complained bitterly of the various stresses, financial and otherwise, associated with having to provide shelter for adult children and more distant relatives. They saw a direct link between

having so many family members dependant on them and their own impoverishment and vulnerability. The extent of household survival strategies employed by women was evident when a group of elderly women was approached and asked by the researchers to participate in a focus group. They were found to be returning from the *veld* where they had been gathering *morogo* (wild spinach). Although some of them were homeowners and all of them were pensioners, they had many dependants and no income and were seeking ways in which to provide food for their families that night.

Table 2: Critical Episodes of the Decade Identified by Focus Groups in Meadowlands

Unemployed Youth	Elderly Pensioners	Hostel Residents	Older Homeowners	Younger Backyard Tenants
990 political leaders released 1991 taxi & train violence 1993 murder of leader Chris Hani 1994 voter education gives jobs to youth 1995 local elections mean better services 1996 RDP houses; hostels become family units; shopping centre built; 1997 crime escalates; drug lord arrested; Masakhane Projects start; mine dump & waste protests; 1998 Minister of Health visits; HIV/AIDS campaign; Welfare Centre built; death of councillor; 1999 elections; Mafumadi opens Welfare Centre; 2 pupils shot at school; Family Violence Act	1990 Mandela released 1994 elections Madiba becomes President and old age pensions are increased 1994 Promise that rates arrears would be cancelled but the promise is broken	1993 Conflict and train and taxi violence 1996 Government decision to turn hostels into family units	1993 conflict and train and taxi violence 1994 On-going school disruption and falling pass rates among students 1994 onwards Receipt of regular services from municipality immediately Ongoing in 1990s Rising crime rate	1990 Release of Mandela and other political leaders from gaol 1994 casting a vote for the first time ever 1996 Building of houses through RDP & Masakhane Campaign

Source: Field Research, February 2000

Backyard tenants and the youth also wanted affordable accommodation independent of parents, relatives or landlords. They identified tensions between landlords and tenants as being a major source of discord and also complained of communication breakdowns between younger and older family members forced to live in close proximity as a result of persistent unemployment. Similarly, hostel dwellers were keen to have access to new housing. Apart from a small number of RDP⁵⁸ houses, post-apartheid housing delivery had been largely

⁵⁸ The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was the first to be outlined by the transitional government in 1994. Although now superseded by GEAR the low-income housing provided since 1994 is still referred to in relation to the original development programme under which it was delivered.

confined to turning the hostels into family units. Progress was slow. Consequently, a number of the hostel dwellers were anxious to be rehoused. This was particularly the case among younger hostel dwellers and among the families who had been relocated to the hostel after the Klipspruit flooding in the 1970s. The older migrants, particularly those from Kwa-Zulu Natal, preferred to be shielded by the relative privacy and safety afforded them by the hostels, in what remains a fragile and tense social climate.

Infrastructure and services were also of fairly universal concern. Revealing of their own lives and frustrations, the youth said that poor people were those without anywhere to go or anything to do and prioritised sport and recreational facilities. Lacking in education, skills and income earning opportunities they reflected that young people with time on their hands, were tempted to crime. Older people, many of whom owned their home but were income poor and could not afford to pay their service bills focused on affordability. One elderly woman showed us her bills for rates and services and for electricity bills. She owed a total of R7,833.78. All the discussants confirmed that their own arrears were in excess of R7,000, despite the fact that these women regularly paid R300 towards the electricity account and R90 towards the rates and services account each month out of a monthly pension of R520.00. The group also reported that they were regularly cut off if they failed to pay their accounts. Their arrears never seemed to be reduced and there was a high level of mistrust towards the utility companies. As one of the discussants commented:

As an old person I find it strange that I only receive R520 and my municipality bills range between R700 and R800 monthly. What is left for me to buy food with? I have never once seen any official of the municipality who comes to my house to record the water meter readings, so where do they get these figures?

Others concurred with another woman saying “we spend sleepless nights thinking how and when we are going to settle these huge bills”.

The local council acknowledged these problems and the fact that poverty is rife in Meadowlands. This it explained in terms of the changing nature of the labour market. A further explanation both for extensive poverty within a seemingly working class area and for problems associated with people meeting their utility bills was offered by the Chairperson of the WMLC. He said that “Meadowlands is primarily a community of the aged who rely on pension grants for their survival” which makes issues of affordability paramount for the residents but which also renders it difficult for the cash-strapped local authority to deliver and maintain adequate services. The WMLC has responded by implementing the Indigence Policy developed by the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC). This is intended to ensure that punitive action is not applied to people who are unable to pay rates and utility bills due to circumstances beyond their control.⁵⁹ However, the WMLC also acknowledges that the policy is ineffective.

Along with older people, backyard tenants were the group most exercised over service affordability issues. The anger of older homeowners on pension was directed at the local council and utility companies for exploitative bills and a lack of accountability in their operation and maintenance. The gripe of backyard tenants was with their landlords. The better-off homeowners who rent out backyard shacks pass on the cost of services such as

⁵⁹ Beall *et al.* (1999).

water supply, sewerage and electricity to their tenants by insisting that backyard dwellers pay their share of the bills, with considerable dispute as to what constitutes a fair share.

In terms of community-level services such as tarred roads, storm water drains, solid waste management and leisure and recreational facilities, these preoccupied the better-off informants and home owning residents. For them, basic needs have already been met. They are an upwardly mobile group with a strong commitment to their neighbourhoods and a more finely honed sense of civic pride. For example, Meadowlands was recently the centre of an extraordinarily successful environmental campaign that not only took on the local authority in terms of improving refuse removal and solid waste management in Meadowlands, but also engaged in (and won) a protracted environmental campaign with the Durban Roodepoort Deep Goldmine. The struggle was described by a local newspaper as a “David-and-Goliath stand-off”⁶⁰ and concerned the company’s refusal to take responsibility for the dust emissions from a disused mine dump.

A number of social issues are also of deep concern to the community. Respondents readily raised the crucial issue of HIV/AIDS. This can be attributed in part to the fact that NGOs have been recently active in advocacy work around HIV/AIDS in Meadowlands.⁶¹ For older people, HIV/AIDS was seen as a divisive issue, leading to shame and secrecy, while younger people saw the social mobilisation associated with the issue as unifying. The youth were on the whole more open, AIDS-related deaths in the area are usually reported among the youth.⁶²

Social Networks and Connections

While there have been clear and highly commendable efforts to build a sense of community and commitment in Meadowlands, small-scale interest or identity-based social networks already exist. There is a vibrant civil society with older people being deeply networked into organisations such as church associations, burial societies and savings clubs. These organisations have assumed deep significance for people over decades of political exclusion by former governments, intractable social disadvantage, and pernicious fear and mistrust. Local-level social networks, therefore, constituted a major theme among our different respondents, as did anxieties about their erosion. For example, in discussing what they would consider the most appropriate indicators of poverty in the area, informants and discussants identified people without social support mechanisms. Poor people were seen as those who could not make ends meet and who were dependent on others for handouts for their daily survival. The rich were those who could afford the things they wanted and support those they had to, without worrying about finances. Although the importance of mutuality and altruism in their families and neighbourhoods was acknowledged our informants intensely disliked dependency relations when they were on the receiving end. Similarly, they found the demands and needs of less fortunate relatives burdensome and a drain on their limited resources.

In identifying the better off, the unemployed youth emphasised those without social connections saying that because of the competition for jobs, nepotism prevails: “jobs are reserved for friends of the employers” and “it is not know-how but know-who that counts”. Social networks and connections were also emphasised in terms of how the different groups

⁶⁰ *Mail and Guardian*, 2 August 2000, p. 18.

⁶¹ An NGO has also set up a support group for members affected by HIV/AIDS. It operated from one of the new clinics and which is organising volunteers to start home-based support groups.

⁶² Interview with Joseph Molose, 16 February 2000.

characterised better off residents in Meadowlands. The richer folk were said to be those who were able to maintain good relations with other people by being able to offer support in times of need. When pressed as to who these people were in Meadowlands, they were identified variously as the professionals, the educated people and the criminals. The youth in particular singled out criminals whose indicators of wealth and success included operating “a fleet of cars”, living in “posh houses”, having possession of “hard cash” or disposable income and engaging in diverse business ventures. One of the discussants in the youth group said, to the general agreement of his peers:

When they come to our car-washing business we greet these criminals with fancy cars with a broad smile. We even blush when talking to them...we even call them ‘bra so-and-so’ with that respecting tone of voice.⁶³

It seems that criminal gangs and syndicates operate their own brand of clientalism in the township, with their patronage having significant ‘welfare’ dimensions, particularly towards younger people. In this way they ensure for themselves tacit support from those who are often the least affluent and most impressionable members of the community and further erode trust within Meadowlands

Seen to bind people were rates and services meetings, religious gatherings, funerals, burial societies, social gatherings, sports events, awareness-raising campaigns such as around the environment and HIV/AIDS. Divisive issues were those related to living together under dense and difficult conditions, such as sharing toilet facilities, illegal consumption of water and electricity by tenants and others, rubbish disposal, alcohol abuse and unruly behaviour. Another set of issues concerned Meadowlands’ conflictual past, such as ‘politics’, ‘tribal wars’ and ‘mistrust of neighbours’. A third set of issues related to hostile relations between older and younger family members and residents and crime. As new issues are beginning to emerge in post-apartheid Meadowlands, so new lines of cleavage are evident, the most notable being generation and gender.

Relations between the youth and their elders are at very low ebb with a high incidence of domestic violence towards the young by parents. The youth vacillated between respect for those in authority and a loss of respect for their elders. For example, violence in schools was identified as a real problem. Although not as extensive as during the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s when students were the comrades and teachers were often identified with the security forces, it remains pernicious and reflective of an endemic social violence, manifesting itself in high levels of corporal punishment, bullying and gangsterism.⁶⁴

Older people, on the other hand, see the youth as having excluded themselves from community life and as being out of control in their substance abuse and increasing involvement in criminal activities. The generational divide is perpetuated through communication problems oiled by young people speaking their own form of *tsotsi taal* or township lingo. Another contributory factor is that although most of the younger people in Meadowlands are better educated than their parents, they are less likely to find jobs of any

⁶³ A common income-generating activity for unemployed youth is to set up an informal car-washing business on street corners and at traffic lights in Meadowlands. ‘Bra’, meaning brother, is a greeting emanating out of the anti-apartheid struggle and that ‘comrades’ employed with one another.

⁶⁴ Student organisations took up the issue of corporal punishment during the 1980s but it has not been eliminated and these days students sometimes take matters into their own hands, attacking culprit teachers (Marks, 1993, p. 125).

sort, let alone secure jobs. They cannot find work and few opportunities or outlets exist for them to be creative or productive. Because leaving the township is expensive, they cannot go to movies or visit friends elsewhere, so spend a lot of time at home, watching TV and listening to the radio or hanging out with local friends. They are frustrated and bored.

As a result, the youth live in claustrophobic micro-worlds that can be dangerous and exposing. Although a number of youth clubs exist and play an important role for those involved with them, they often attract youth already in school or who have strong social networks. They are less inaccessible to young people already excluded from mainstream community life.

As with inter-generational dynamics, gender relations in Meadowlands are neither equitable nor harmonious and intersect with inter-generational tensions. For example, domestic violence was raised by a number of women informants and it came up as an issue in the focus groups with homeowners, backyard tenants and the youth. Much of it is associated with substance abuse. Violence against women was discussed alongside child and elder abuse. Child abuse is not tolerated and is being successfully raised as an issue for public concern by NGOs working in the area. Elder abuse is less publicly ventilated although some of the women reported being frightened of their own children and grandchildren.

Interventions of external agencies such as Women Against Women Abuse (WAWA) have had a marked effect on attitudes towards violence against women. With respect to domestic violence, women appear to accept gender violence in the home or keep their anger largely private. There is greater collective outrage about public violence against women, although this too is sadly acknowledged as a part of Meadowlands' life. As one of the discussants in the pensioners' group said in relation to a lack of adequate street lighting:

It is so sad that every night we have to listen to the sad experiences of young girls being raped, shouting for help and no one comes to their rescue because everybody is afraid to venture out to help, it is so dark.

Within the household, women complained about men's irresponsible consumption patterns even when unemployed. As well as being the ones responsible for the social and economic well-being of their families, older women were often made responsible for attending long and sometime boring community meetings on behalf of households.

Thus, despite the existence of a number of associations and a seemingly growing sense of commitment to the community, social divisions are in evidence. With greater social differentiation comes the potential for new tensions.

Towards an Engaged Local Politics in Meadowlands

The first democratic elections in 1994 were an unprecedented thrill for most residents and it was generally agreed that the local elections of 1997 further entrenched democracy. Our field research also found an emerging malaise in respect of local politics. On the one hand, there is a level of burnout after the long years of anti-apartheid activism and political violence that accompanied the transition. On the other hand, a sense of disappointment with post-apartheid delivery focuses on local government politics and its perceived inefficiency and lack of accountability. The same political disillusionment does not appear to have attached to higher levels of government. For example, a number of discussants expressed the wish to bypass local councillors in their negotiations for housing and services and to engage directly

with national or provincial level politicians. As one informant said, “Mandela is the only politician I trust”.

Despite a generalised disaffection with local politics, the ANC continues to enjoy significant support in Meadowlands. It is the only political organisation that has a branch office in the area and that has organised zonal structures. Furthermore, there was widespread respect for some members of the local level leadership, especially those who came from Meadowlands and who had a history in the struggle. On the part of the more politically literate, there was also an understanding that councillors were bound by party lines and resource constraints and, as such, were not making decisions solely on the basis of personal predilection. People expressing these views also recognised that the political problems faced by councillors related to their limited control and jurisdiction over sectors, services and budgets. Councillors themselves felt frustrated by being hamstrung in this way and by their own difficulties in balancing their obligation to conform to party (ANC) lines and address the immediate and vocal demands of their impatient ward constituents.

The dominance of the ANC can be attributed in part to the general popularity of the party as part of the liberation movement. However, it can also be attributed to the fact that most of the older members of Meadowlands society were members of the ANC in Sophiatown and were involved in the ANC’s protest politics of the 1950s. Not surprisingly, the ANC Veterans’ League is the most organised part of the ANC in Meadowlands.⁶⁵ This also explains why community organisation is firmly the terrain of the more established, respectable older working class, most of whom are now homeowners. Strongly supportive of the ANC and closely allied to both local councillors and local government officials, this group that is most deeply involved in community level collective action. For example, the backyard tenants have been systematically excluded from local political arenas and are looking elsewhere for a vehicle through which to express their grievances and engage in public action. The youth also voiced frustration at not being taken seriously by the older home-owning activists who dominate the local political agenda. A much larger disaffected group of alienated and unemployed youth, a silent majority, eschew civic public action of any sort.

The most prominent civil society organisation active around issues of service delivery is the local branch of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO). Notable among the issues raised by SANCO on behalf of their constituency in Meadowlands is the matter of jobs and affordability of services. For example, SANCO engaged the local authorities on behalf of residents on the strong-arm tactics used on the part of service payment defaulters as well as environmental issues and the repair and maintenance of services. This has won them widespread support. The organisation has been less successful in attracting engaged support from the better-off members of the community and sees its greatest appeal among the more marginalized. The youth and the backyard renters have allied themselves to SANCO, arguing that they have most faith in this organisation as a ‘watchdog’ for the community. For them SANCO is more accessible and more accountable than local politicians, even though most of the ward councillors also belong to SANCO. Although the organisation has a cordial and working relationship with the ANC and the councillors, the alliance is strained, with many SANCO members feeling that government decisions are not properly informed by consultation or adequate understanding of the real conditions faced by people. As such,

⁶⁵ Other historically black organisations like the PAC and AZAPO do have some support in the area but have failed to capture a mass following. This cannot be said of the second largest political party in Meadowlands, the IFP, which has a concentrated support base in the hostels.

SANCO is attempting to rejuvenate and redefine itself as a radical civic organisation and has a growing constituency among younger people and backyard shack dwellers. It is carving out for an increasingly significant position as an intermediary and broker, particularly in relation to the delivery of housing.

By virtue of its remit and competencies, local government is taking particular care of the older more established home owning citizens, notably around issues of service delivery. Many more issues remain to be addressed by local government that could target younger residents, notably the construction and maintenance of recreational and sporting facilities. However, many issues are beyond the competencies, scope and resources of local government. For example, the most pressing issue for informants and discussants of any age or asset base was that of crime, something about which the local authorities have done very little. At the time of the research, policing was not a local government competency but well maintained street lighting is. Such a relatively simple and low cost deterrent against crime and gender violence is an issue that concerns people across a variety of social divides and yet it has been neglected.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to understand and explain a continuing tradition of public action in Meadowlands against a background of horrific community level violence, persistent local level mistrust, increasing social differentiation and a pervasive disappointment with post-apartheid local government. Political disillusionment persists despite relatively impressive delivery since the 1994 elections and the fact that the majority of people interviewed cited Mandela's release from gaol or voting for the first time as the most critical episode in their own recent history. A deep history and tradition of anti-apartheid struggle and a context of continued and heartfelt loyalty to the ANC overrode social differentiation and tensions based on class, age and gender.

Nevertheless, increasingly evident is a growing weariness with conflictual political processes at the local level and a deepening resentment over poor housing and service delivery. This disaffection with local government is occurring at a time when the face of civil society in Meadowlands is diversifying and growing in significance. Citizen demands may become less coherent as a variety of different and sometimes competing interest groups assert their own priorities and as NGOs and other advocacy organisations help vent and direct their demands. If and when this occurs mass public action is likely to be more difficult to orchestrate and collective action will become more fragmented and potentially more conflictual.

In the case of Meadowlands, at least one reason for this can be found in the political fallout of an increasingly socially differentiated community where, despite the fact that widespread unemployment is affecting all households, a large proportion of older residents have become relatively asset rich through coming to own their council homes during the death throes of the apartheid era. In this context, mainstream civic engagement at the local level has become the preserve of a middle-aged working class, often publicly represented by older women. They are primarily concerned with improving the quality of urban services and their built environment. This in turn has been reinforced by local government policy, which has linked urban poverty reduction to the extension and improvement of urban infrastructure and services in historically disadvantaged areas, and by higher tiers of government placing similar emphasis on the single issue of housing delivery.

By contrast, the vast majority of younger people is asset poor, having no homes and relying on renting backyard shacks and paying their landlords disproportionately for services. Moreover, economic differentiation has to be understood also in relation to access to income. For National and Provincial government competencies, income streams such as pensions are as vital as housing. For local government it suggests that local economic development and job creation are as important as urban services. That they have received second-degree treatment to date in post-apartheid South Africa explains why younger city dwellers in Meadowlands are increasingly disenchanted with ANC representatives at the local level while retaining a loyalty to the Party more broadly. In understanding the multifaceted nature of social disadvantage in cities, we have to recognise that the fault line of social differentiation lies as much across gender and generation as it does across class. This has potential political fallout, particularly when public action is viewed over the long term.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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