Briefing Paper No.11

Social Differentiation and Urban Governance

This paper 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. It traces social differentiation along the axis of different housing-types: homeowners, tenants in backyard shacks and hostel dwellers. Social relations, 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.

- **Social differentiation can be traced through housing**

State reforms that privatised the provision of housing have 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 led to overcrowding of formal houses and the proliferation of backyard shacks. As a result of urban in-migration and the natural growth of the urban population, a chronic shortage of housing developed. The housing shortage produced a rise in the number of backyard shacks and the proliferation of squatter settlements by homeless residents who built their own shacks. Although 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, given the limited size of backyard accommodation there is a great deal of overcrowding.

- **Important socio-political differences between backyard tenants and owner-occupier landlords**

Although the differences between the two should not be exaggerated, some significant social differences exist. Backyard tenants are more recent arrivals to the city, are significantly younger than their landlords, and are more likely to be foreign immigrants than their landlords. These differences translate into important differences in the extent of political involvement of the two groups. Backyard tenants are reluctant to participate in local politics for fear of reprisal from their landlord, who dominate the structures and processes of local governance in order to ensure that their interests take precedence over those of their tenants and squatters.

- **Community fissure between hostel and house dwellers**

In a neighbourhood born in upheaval, social unrest and violence, the primary fissure has been between those living in houses and those living in hostels. Before 1976, migrants of various ethnic backgrounds inhabited the hostels, which were a strictly guarded male-only institution, although the migrant workers generally lived harmoniously with their more settled neighbours. Relations soured after the 1976 student uprisings, when hostel residents did not adhere to strike and boycott call. From the early 1990s, hostel residents were used foment conflict. That they shared a language, culture and often a sense of alienation presented an ideal opportunity for rapid mobilisation. The stigma faced by hostel dwellers was keenly felt, and they resented the interpretation of their adherence to rural customs as a lack of commitment to life in the city.

- **Rapid urbanisation increases violence**

Rapid urbanisation played its part in the violence, with migrancy increasing dramatically because of declining opportunities in the rural areas, and with short-lived, expanded urban work opportunities. This led to unemployment becoming a contributory factor, with increasing competition for jobs and affordable and proximate accommodation.

- **Social difference leading to inadequacy of local government initiatives**

Although improvements in service delivery have been responsive to community priorities, 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, improved services have served to raise rents and other charges by landlords. As a result, there is no guarantee that local government initiatives will unite the community. As they largely privilege homeowners, the issues found to be pressing among the tenants and poorest residents are more difficult for local government to address on its own. They either lie closer to the ground (relating, for example, to landlord-tenant tensions), to issues around competing grassroots organisations and constituencies, or fall into the terrain of provincial and national government.

- **Social networks and connections have long been important in community cohesion**

Small-scale interest or identity-based social networks have long existed, having assumed deep significance for people over decades of political exclusion by former governments, intractable social disadvantage, and pernicious fear and mistrust. Seen to bind people were rates and services meetings, religious gatherings, funerals, burial societies, social gatherings, sports events, and awareness-raising campaigns.

- **Greater social differentiation brings potential for new tensions**

Relations between the youth and their elders have become very tense, and often violent. Youth vacillate between respect for those in authority and a loss of respect for their elders. Older people see youths 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 accentuated through communication problems, with young people speaking their own form of township lingo. Although younger people are better educated than their parents, they are less likely to find jobs of any sort. They are frustrated and bored, and live in claustrophobic micro-worlds that can be dangerous and exposing. Youth clubs tend to attract youth already in school or who have strong social networks; they are less accessible to those who are already excluded from mainstream community life. Gender relations are also neither equitable, nor harmonious, and intersect with inter-generational tensions. Of particular importance is the prevalence of domestic violence, and although there has been some organisation in opposition to this, the distinction continues to be drawn between public and private spaces.

- **Increasing lack of engagement with local politics**

There is an emerging malaise in respect of local politics, resulting from burnout after the long years of anti-apartheid activism and a sense of disappointment, and deepening resentment, with post-apartheid delivery by local government, and its perceived inefficiency and lack of accountability. The same political disillusionment does not appear to have attached to higher levels of government quite so rapidly. Nevertheless, respect was shown to those in local politics who had a history of struggle, and the ANC continues to enjoy significant support, although their political dominance strengthens the social dominance of older home-owning activists. Partly as a result, a large, disaffected group of alienated and unemployed youth eschew civic engagement or public action of any sort. This has worrying implications for local democracy in the longer run.