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*To what extent have the poor access to urban public resource  
in post-apartheid Johannesburg?  
Redistributive policies, participatory democracy and clientelist practices*

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This communication questions the extent to which the poor residents of Johannesburg have access to urban public resource in the post-apartheid era, in particular through the lens of clientelist practices at the local level. By clientelism, we understand the exchange, between an elected representative (or a political party) and an individual (or a group), of favours or public goods with votes or political support.

Clientelism is by no means a new phenomenon in South African cities; but we argue it takes new forms and rising importance in the post-apartheid context of decentralisation, development of participatory democracy, and rising impatience towards the slow pace of delivery of urban services and redistributions of urban resources since 1994 (especially since the neo-liberal turn of 1997). In this context, clientelism is a way for Johannesburg's low-income residents to have (some) access to (some) resources –public job or contract, food parcels, public housing, etc. As spatial justice is increasingly being defined, in public and academic discourses, as a “just” process of local participation (whilst its structural, redistributive dimension is less at the centre of public attention), it seems important to question the relationships between poor residents and their elected representative, in their everyday practices.

The question I want to raise is two-fold:

First, is clientelism a necessary corollary or outcome of participatory and local democracy? Facilitating personal contacts between residents and their elected representative, enhancing territorial identities at a local level, humanising citizens' relationships with the State (councillors and administration) at the local level allowing for a better understanding and response to local and personal circumstances, ... all these shifts being positive in a sense can also legitimate personalised “favours” in opposition to more neutral “rights” of urban citizens. Beyond this shifts enclosed in the conception of decentralisation and local democracy, one needs to unravel the contextual elements that facilitate the rise of clientelism (both in terms of local expectations and socio-economic structure, and in terms of political opportunity). Some of them will be explored: the dominant party system where councillors are more accountable to their party than to their local constituency; the centralised municipal structure where councillors hold limited power but rely on their web of networks within the party structure; and the shift in urban policies towards economic growth based on an hypothetical trickle down effect, as opposed to residents' expectations (relying on the ANC's former agenda) on spatial justice in terms of delivery of urban infrastructures and restructuring of the apartheid urban form.

Secondly, and this is the follow up on the first question, is clientelism necessarily “anti-democratic”? It can be insofar it leads to the fragmentation of social movements, when allocating limited resources to individuals (thereby co-opting, corrupting or sedating local civic leaders, and diffusing legitimate collective discontent). Clientelism also replaces the notion of rights and urban citizenship, the idea of political programme and commitment, to the notion of favour, exception, personal links and political opportunism. However, clientelism can also, when taking more collective forms (such as the negotiation between a civic leader and a councillor for collective goods for the neighbourhood), become a very efficient and pragmatic way of accessing some public urban resources, and lead to much more immediate delivery than vague and repeated electoral promises. It has obvious limitations, but the fact clientelism relies, as democracy does, on the link between vote and councillors' efficiency and accountability, stresses the necessity of rethinking its place in contemporary urban democracies.