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Hilde Refstie, 2018. *Voicing Noise — Action Research with Informal Settlement Groups in Malawi*. Doctoral thesis at NTNU, 2018: 114. Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Faculty of educational sciences, Department of Geography, Trondheim 152 pp. ISBN 978-82-326-3018-9 to the Department of Geography, Faculty of Social and Educational Science, NTNU and asked to defend it for the degree of PhD.

In this thesis, Hilde Refstie explores the space for transformative participation within participatory urban planning practices in Malawi. The more specific research questions are:

- What are different and overlapping spaces for community participation in urban planning and slum upgrading in Malawi, and how do informal settlement groups engage with them?
- What opportunities and barriers for realizing citizenship rights do informal settlement groups face in participatory spaces?
- How can we better understand the transformative potential of participatory strategies and practices available to informal settlement groups?
- How can action research be used to know, theorize and support spaces for transformative participation?

The empirical material for the thesis emerges from 7 mini case studies and inquiries with national level actors involved in policymaking, research, and NGO activities. The thesis consists of 152 pages main text, organized in two major sections: (i) 'Situating the thesis', and (ii) 'The research process and contributions'. The latter includes 4 article manuscripts in different stages of preparation towards publication, whereof one is published in *Geoforum*. The fieldwork in Malawi took place between February 2013 and May 2015, and consisted of participant observation over 9 months, 20 group discussions, and 120 interviews with community members and other urban actors. The case studies were dialogue meetings, workshops and a radio debate geared between research participants, partners and decision makers.

The first section offers a contextual presentation and two conceptual chapters; a literature review on paradigms within participatory planning and slum upgrading, the transformative potential of participatory urban citizenship, and political agency and spaces, and then a brief methodological chapter. The second section provides a rich, four-part description of the research process, followed by the four article manuscripts that form the analytical core of the thesis. All the papers are discursive and take the thesis topic forward in different albeit partly overlapping ways. Together they provide much reflection on the concepts, and theories of action-oriented research and many insights into different aspects of conducting such research.

Article 1: Is co-authored with Cathrine Brun and published by *Geoforum*. It explores the spaces in which participatory planning takes place and suggests a trialectic

approach to better understand public and local community strategies and actions in such participatory spaces.

Article 2: Is a draft paper co-authored with Marianne Milstein. It calls for a more grounded and contextualized approach to understanding contemporary urban Malawi and suggest that the dynamics of clientelism and democratic reform create a glass ceiling that limits the transformative potential of participation urban planning.

Article 3: Is under review by *Action Research*. Building upon her own experience, Refstie argues that reflection on the "space" of a research project and how it is initiated can facilitate transparency and improve the accountability of action research.

Article 4: Is in press by *ACME*. It confronts the issue of 'social weightlessness' (abstract theorizing without practical impact) in action research and explains how being challenged about this in her own project it helped facilitate dialogue among participants and partners.

Refstie's style of presentation is personal, her work is engaging and shows empathy with her research participants. Like other participatory researchers she emphasizes the importance of the process of research not just it products, however in this thesis there is perhaps an undue focus on process, the choices made in formulating the project, how it might be characterized etc. This tends to obscure the insights that might otherwise be gained from the empirical material about the lived realities of the slums, who becomes and activist and why. Consequently and notwithstanding well-rehearsed debates on positionality and the production of knowledge, it seems ironic that, even more so than in a conventional thesis, the voice we hear the most in this Participatory Action Research thesis with a focus on agency and voice, is that of the author.

The thesis argues that there is a need to explore travelling global ideas about urban development and participation from a local, contextualized and everyday life perspective. Refstie's research thereby explores the challenges faced by existing urban slum upgrading approaches in Malawi. This methodological and ethical positioning illustrates an understanding of action research beyond a pragmatic and socio-technical approach of change. The aim of the research is thus not merely to create change, but to challenge barriers to transformation in the specific context by re-theorizing concepts of political agency, participatory spaces.

A major share of the thesis is about participation as a means and as an end. Refstie challenges the idea of participation as predominantly an end because it blurs the understanding of participation as a democratic process. On that notion, the thesis could have connected the ideas and ideals of participation with understandings of democracy at different levels and forms. The research project undoubtedly produced actual benefits for the research participants so Refstie passed her own test and avoids 'social weightlessness', but it would have been good to hear more about these outcomes and their sustainability.

Refstie presents the seven case studies as a useful action output from her larger study. However, we get to know less about the empirical and analytical findings of the larger

study. What does the project say about the ability to mobilize (is it about awareness raising, or some other major change, and if so what are they)? Refstie's argument would have strengthened by more reflexivity on the degree to which her own research project was a resource for participants' agency, or was a space or layer in the complex landscape she describes. Certainly our reading is that people engaged with the "invited space" of the project in ways that helped them achieve their goals, sometimes finding 'voice' and sometimes quietly without noise. This seems to fit well with the overall analysis — and yet the space of the research project itself seems to sit outside the candidate's analysis of the landscape (and the spatial trialectic) being described.

It would have been interesting to have known more about the political and institutional conditions that pre-existed the arrival of globally travelling participatory urban planning in Malawi. For example, how were pre-colonial local institutions organized and how was planning/change enacted? An exploration of such local practices could also have revealed "spaces" for re-discovering local community institutions, as well as providing a different outset for discussing what and how participation in urban informal settlements could be furthered as a transformative force. Chiefs (who remain very important even in urban areas) are briefly discussed. They are presented as being outside party politics, as a unifying force founded on local knowledge, pragmatism, consensus-seeking, and conflict avoidance and as promoting judicial systems that seek reconciliation rather than punishment. It is surprising that more is not made of this local tradition of governance *vis-a-vis* the author's criticism that globally travelling participatory planning is insufficiently antagonistic.

A major strength of the thesis lies in the way Refstie unravels various concepts relating to action-oriented research in chapters and papers, which provide valuable insights into the complexities of doing participatory research. However, limited reflection regarding the epistemology of this research tradition is given, nor is it described how action research has developed over time, how different ramifications have answered to critique and how it has been used in urban studies. More thorough review of these issues would have added value to the thesis. While the thesis claims much in terms of its theorization, this is perhaps the most modest area of contribution.

Hilde Refstie has written a very interesting and challenging thesis, which is methodologically innovative and theoretically useful. Specific merit is given to the consistent argument throughout the thesis, the methodological approach, and the conceptual clarifications spelled out in the articles.