Action research in critical scholarship – Negotiating multiple imperatives

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Abstract

Critical scholars sometimes accuse action researchers of not being radical enough in their approach, while action researchers often see the work of critical scholars as elitist and not grounded in people's everyday experiences. This article draws on an action research project with residents in urban informal settlements in Malawi and their partner organizations in the period 2013-2017 to discuss how research can negotiate and achieve its multiple imperatives of being critical and rooted, explanatory and actionable. It shows how the action research approach with its collaborative elements helped the research project avoid what Louis McNay (2014:4) calls "social weightlessness" in political theorizing – "an abstract way of thinking that is so far removed from the actual practices and dynamics of everyday life that, ultimately, its own analytical relevance and normative validity are thrown into question". The article reflects on the possibilities and limitations of the integrated approach developed in the project and suggests that action research in critical scholarship is a way to avoid 'social weightlessness' in theorizing while at the same time responding to some of the critique made against action research for not engaging with structural inequality and systemic change at scale.

Keywords

Action research, critical scholarship; transformative participation; participatory urban planning; slum upgrading

Introduction

Critical scholarship spans everything from critical theory in the Frankfurt school tradition, feminist and postcolonial theory, as well as more action-oriented methodologies. Common for the approaches is the aim to explore, expose and question hegemony and traditional assumptions about power in the pursuit of social change (Blomley, 2006; Fraser, 1985; Kemmis, 2006). In action research this means engaging directly with oppressed communities and/or activists (Kindon et al. 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In critical scholarship it can mean to keep an active distance to the subject world (Bohman, 2016). Critical theory in the Frankfurt school, for example, is 'unapologetically abstract'. Normative political thought is separated from the social world it addresses to keep theory from becoming 'handmaidens' to immediate, practical or instrumental concerns (Brenner 2009: 201). Radical democratic scholarship on the other hand, claims to address the dialogic relationship between the political and the social. Its theories therefore have to be anchored in the social world. Louis McNay (2014), however, argues that radical democratic scholars, especially in the agonistic tradition increasingly fail to do this - they avoid engaging with everyday perspectives and instrumental politics and rather concern themselves with developing political principles and formulating abstract models of social organization (e.g. Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Rancière 1992, 2001, 2009, 2011). While this abstraction can be viewed as a strategic theoretical maneuver to enable the identification of an ideal development (Shapiro, 2007), it can also lead to what McNay, inspired by Bourdeu (2000) calls a 'socially weightless' mode of thought. 'Social weightlessness' represents an "abstract way of thinking about the world that is so far removed from the actual practices and dynamics of everyday life, that, ultimately, its own analytical relevance and normative validity is thrown into question" (McNay, 2014: 4). To avoid 'social weightlessness' we need to situate ideas of the political more firmly within an account of the social world in which it is contained (McNay 2014). This has been addressed in feminist research and postcolonial development studies. It is also the basis for action and activist research, which argues that theorists without significant connections to people involved in change making can end up constructing abstractions that are elegant, but with very little insight and utility (Oldfield, 2015).

> We should have learnt that our best work as social scientists … was in dialogue with ordinary people and their organizations … because the cultural formations, resistances and filters people created had profound theoretical relevance (Sitas (2004:23 in Oldfeld, 2015)

Action research provides an excellent avenue for conducting this socially situated research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). However, the approach is criticized for failing to engage with systemic change at scale and address structures of inequality beyond the community level (Greenwood, 2002; Mohan, 2006; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Action research processes typically focus on consensus and problem solving in communities with relatively small groups of participants

(Burns, 2014; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). Projects are also traditionally conducted in cycles of action, reflection and learning over relative short periods of time (Dick et al., 2009). They can therefore be ill equipped to work with larger scale structural and systemic change, or with longer-term perspectives where a full turn in the project cycle may not be achievable (Greenwood, 2002; Chatterton et al., 2007; Jordan and Kapoor, 2016). As a result, action research often deals with symptoms rather than with the processes that produce and maintain inequalities in the first place (Greenwood, 2002). This is visible in the ways in which action research is defined vis-à-vis activist research. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Geography (2015) action research is:

> A collaborative research process whereby people with a particular issue work with academics; 'it seeks to democratize knowledge production and foster opportunities for empowerment by those involved'… In comparison with activist research, action research is guided by a pragmatic, problem-solving approach, and is not necessarily underpinned by radical politics.

Radical politics is defined in the same dictionary as engagements with structural inequalities (ibid.), and it is here that tensions seem to arise between certain types of critical scholarship and action research (for a discussion see Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). Action research is often accused of not being 'radical enough', while critical scholarship, and sometimes also activist scholarship, is criticized for being elitist and not grounded in people's everyday experiences (Chambers, 1983; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). This does not mean that the divide has not been overcome (see for example Brun and Lund, 2010; Diprose, 2015; Kesby, 2005; Pain, 2014; Nagar, 2002, 2014), but tensions still exist in how to develop research that is at the same time critical and rooted, explanatory and actionable (hooks, 1999).

This article draws on examples from an action research project with residents in urban informal settlements in Malawi and their partner organizations in the period 2013–2017 to discuss how research can negotiate and achieve the multiple imperatives discussed above. The article shows how the action research approach with its collaborative elements helped the project avoid 'social weightlessness' by developing an integrated approach negotiated in the dialogue between the more abstract change oriented perspectives of the researchers and the everyday experiences and motivations of the partners and the participants involved. It reflects on the possibilities and limitations of this integrated approach and discusses if action research in critical scholarship is a way to avoid 'social weightlessness' in theorizing while at the same time responding to some of the critique made against action research for not engaging with structural inequality and systemic change at scale.

The partnership

Malawi is only 20 per cent urbanized, but has some of the fastest growing cities in Sub Saharan Africa (NSO, 2010). Almost 70 percent of the urban population in Malawi is estimated to live in informal settlements[1] (UN, Habitat 2012). Despite this, urbanization and urban growth has not reached high on the national development agenda. Government policies tend to focus on developments in rural areas with the aim to prevent rural-urban migration, while donors and development partners do not prioritize urban issues (Manda, 2013).

One of the major groups that do work with informal settlements in Malawi is the Federation of the Rural and the Urban Poor (Federation from now on).[2] The Federation mobilizes informal settlement groups to participate in community planning and policymaking processes and has 100,000 members engaged covering 26 districts in Malawi. The Federation is supported by the Non Governmental Organization (NGO) Centre for Community Organization and Development (CCODE) who provides technical assistance, work with local settlement leaderships, and facilitate learning through exchange visits. The Federation and CCODE are again affiliated to Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global network of community based urban poor organizations.[3]

The starting point for the study described in this article was the PhD project of the author based at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). However, the PhD project developed into a collaborative project between the university researcher(s)[4], the Federation, CCODE, their Research Institute (TRI)[5], and community groups. The project therefore ended up being a partnership in which knowledge was co-constructed. Co-construction of knowledge typically

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[1] Not all slum-like settlements in Malawi are informal in terms of their existence, but this paper uses informal settlements in the wide sense of the concept meaning settlements with limited formal service delivery, land and housing regulation and registration, and planned infrastructure. The term thus covers villages incorporated into city boundaries, squatter areas, and overcrowded traditional housing areas (Manda, 2007).

[2] Previously called the Malawi Homeless People's Federation (MHPF). The Federation started out with a pure urban focus, but changed its policy and name in 2015 to encompass both urban and rural members.

[3] For more information on SDI, see http://knowyourcity.info/

[4] The author was the main university researcher, but the supervisor also became increasingly involved as a researcher throughout the project.

[5] The Research Institute, previously called The Urban Research Institute, was established as part of a reorganization within CCODE. CCODE and the Federation wanted to become more self-reliant with regard to funding, and they therefore established a holding company owned by CCODE and the Federation. Activities such as house construction, brick production, economic administration and research were moved to this company, which now offered these services to the broader market. The economic surplus is to be channelled back to CCODE and the Federation for community projects.

represents a more grounded form of inquiry that investigates how different political and historical contexts shape people`s realities (Robins et al. 2008; Dolan et al. 2016). It involves integrating different forms of knowledge in a dialogic research process with "an intense (and perhaps endless) 'conversation' between research actors and research subjects" (Nowotny et al. 2003:187). It is this conversation that holds the potential to ground research and make research processes more relevant for the partners involved (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). It can therefore be a way to avoid 'social weightlessness' in theory and change making.

Co-construction of knowledge is a messy affair and it can be challenging to define how multiple perspectives are negotiated in different phases of a research project. In this article I will use a narrative form to describe how the research partnership that makes up the case for this article developed and evolved; how knowledge was co-produced, how different interests were negotiated in this process, and how the action research approach in the end helped adjust the research so that it corresponded better to the understandings and lived realities of the participants. The story is told mainly from the researcher perspective. However, the text will include quotes from reflection interviews that were conducted with the Head of Research and Advocacy at CCODE, Wonderful Hunga, and Federation leader Lackson Phiri in preparation of this article. While the excerpts from the interviews complement the analysis it is still the voice of the researcher that frames the narrative presented. The article should therefore not be read as an attempt to 'speak for others', nor to 'represent others'.

Exploring the space for action research – an incremental approach

Action research can be conceptualized and operationalized in a number of ways. Personally I had worked with action research processes before both at the university and in the development sector. I had learned from experience how important it is that action research is firmly anchored in the context in which it is developed (Refstie and Brun, 2011). I therefore viewed the role of the university researcher, especially when coming from the outside, as a mere facilitator that could contribute with time and research skills to support community knowledge production processes. At the same time I was, together with my supervisor, interested in how action research processes could be scaled up to have impact beyond the immediate community level. I was also of the opinion that action research could benefit from a better integration of academic theorizing and practice (Levin, 2012; Pain et al. 2007).

Through previous work with an international development organization I knew that Malawi had recently started to develop various urban policies and that several grass root initiatives were active in informal settlements throughout the country. I was curious as to what motivated people in informal settlements to mobilize, if they participated in the different planning and policy processes, and how this all linked together at various levels of governance. I also found Malawi interesting as a case. With its low level of urbanization and fast city growth,

planning seemed to have the potential to make a significant difference in the country`s development. At the same time I was new to the Malawian context. To make the research relevant it was therefore important to find ways in which the research could be linked to existing processes and debates. I therefore contacted CCODE, which is the largest NGO working on informal settlement issues in Malawi. As mentioned above, a key mandate of CCODE is to support the Federation of the Rural and the Urban Poor in all its work. The organization also often act as a focal point for research and advocacy efforts that link experiences in informal settlements with wider policy debates. CCODE and the Federation therefore both welcomed the engagement with me as a researcher.

> Researchers add more value to our work. When you have this kind of movement and processes that we support, if people are just talking from the point of view of their experiences, then the validity of whatever issues that they are raising can easily be challenged if it is not validated by any form of research findings, or indeed if there has not been that kind of critical reflection of the situation. The fact that it is a researcher who seriously works on this makes the documents carry some weight with them. So in a bigger way, researchers kind of help us in terms of pushing forward for this particular agenda (Interview Head of Research and Advocacy CCODE 12.05.2017).

During the first months of fieldwork, I spent time at the CCODE office and worked to map the different actors involved in slum upgrading in Malawi. I also spent time in three informal settlements in Lilongwe – Chinsapo, Senti and Kauma – interviewing people living there. The three settlements were chosen after conversations with CCODE, the Federation leaders and representatives from another network called the Lilongwe Urban Poor People's Network (LUPPEN)[6] on the basis that the settlements all had mobilization processes going on, but at various stages and with different outcomes. The Federation, and in one instance LUPPEN facilitated the initial contact with the leaderships in the settlements (traditional chiefs, community development committee chairs, block leaders, church leaders and leaders of women`s groups). After this me and my research assistant, a planning student from Mzuzu University, moved around and did interviews in a more randomized pattern. The interviews had an open-ended design where we discussed everything from moving patterns, livelihoods, settlement issues, community mobilization and how people thought about and related to planning and

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[6] LUPPEN was established as a network to strengthen the voices of urban poor residents in Lilongwe to demand improved living conditions and enable them to actively participate in the development of their city. It has 3,000 members in 29 urban poor settlements. See https://luppenetwork.wordpress.com/about/ for further details.

slum upgrading efforts in their areas. In the interviews we pursued topics that were emphasized by the participants, and at the end of each interview we always asked the participants what they thought the research should focus on and whether there were ways in which the research could be made relevant for them. In parallel we also conducted interviews with a number of actors such as local and national government, NGOs, service providers, municipal associations, donors, researchers, development partners and so on. After this initial round of interviews we organized a focus group discussion in each of the three settlements to discuss emerging issues and initial findings. The group discussions worked to correct misunderstandings in interpretations, to facilitate analysis, reflection and discussion of the initial findings, and to crystalize some of the issues deemed important by the participants. Similar group discussions were also held with Federation leaders, and with the CCODE staff.

During the interviews community members tended to focus on material changes they wanted to see in their areas in terms of infrastructure and service delivery. Access to clean water, removal of waste, drainage systems to prevent flooding, proper roads and bridges, affordable clinics and schools, police for security, and access to proper jobs and market places were typical concerns: "The priorities now are that we are concerned about the roads, infrastructure, water kiosks and health facilities. And to have clinics and small markets" (Interview female community member Chinsapo, Lilongwe 15.03.2013).

Security of tenure also came up as an issue, but most of the people interviewed did not fear evictions. The three settlements were built on former customary land, and most of the interviewees who considered themselves homeowners had some kind of documentation signed by the chief. Such documents are ambiguous in legal terms (Silungwe, 2009) but the people interviewed felt it gave them a high security of tenure. This does not mean, however, that people did not struggle with housing. Rent costs and fluctuations were listed as a main challenge amongst the renters interviewed, and renters make up the majority of the settlements.[7] To illustrate the gravity of the situation; three of the families interviewed had moved as many as three times during the past year because their rents had increased. Buying or building a house therefore featured high on their agenda. However, except for the additional need for affordable housing the priorities emphasized by the interviewees who were renting mirrored the homeowners.

Many of the interviewees were mobilizing both individually and collectively to address issues in their settlements. People participated in saving

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[7] Enumerations exercises conducted by the Federation and CCODE indicate that as many as 60-70 % of people in informal settlements are tenants (CCODE, 2012; CCODE, 2011).

groups, community meetings, community organization work, women`s groups, work through the church, projects organized by NGOs, and activities organized through traditional chiefs. This could be everything from digging drains, levelling roads, contributing with money, bricks and labour for construction, or participate in planning exercises. When asked about their motivations for participating in these various activities the interviewees often stated that they of course were motivated by the prospects of bringing change to their communities, but that more individual gains such as allowances for participating in meetings and project activities were important motivations as well. Another was the sense of community brought about by participating in activities and the possibilities to learn new skills. To 'do your duty' when the chief or other community leaders called on you was also frequently mentioned as a reason for engagement: "I am wasting time to the project, my business has gone down. But since I was chosen by chiefs I am not able to deny it" (Interview female community member Kauma, Lilongwe 03.03.2013).

While some participants were happy with the processes they were part of, many were frustrated and argued that they rarely saw results from their engagements. The interviews and the cases studied, both in this exploratory phase and at the later stages of the project,[8] confirmed that all too often planning documents remained on paper and projects were never implemented (Refstie, 2014a, Refstie, 2014d, Refstie 2015).

> So far nothing has been done even if the [City Council administration][9] representatives moved around. For example here in Ndirande and Ntopwa they even came to meetings. They appreciated our plans and that there were problems but nothing happened. For example in Ntopwa the Chief is very hard working, she got people to collect waste and bring to areas. But the City Council never showed up to collect it (Group discussion 28.03.2014 Ndirande Makata).

Frustrations around funding and implementation of slum upgrading[10] came up again and again in various forms in the interviews and focus group discussions.

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[8] Over the course of the project from February 2013 to May 2017 the research consisted of participatory observation over 9 months, 20 group discussions and 120 interviews with community members and other involved actors (Urban poor networks, NGOs, national and local government representatives, city associations, service providers, researchers, donors and other development partners), as well as participatory analysis discussions, workshops, meetings, and public radio debates.

[9] At the time of the research, Malawi had not had local government elections since 2000. A tripartite election was held in May 2014, and local councillors are now in place.

[10] In this article, slum upgrading refers to an integrated approach, small or large, that aims to improve conditions in a given area. These conditions relate to the legal (e.g. land tenure), the physical (e.g. infrastructure, housing), the social (e.g. crime or education) or the economic.

Project and community leaders promised grand things in the initial mobilization, but projects rarely lived up to the expectations. This therefore formed a topic to be pursued in the research.

Developing the action research project

The aim of the exploratory phase had been to map and understand the dynamics between different actors, and to scope out the potential for developing the research into action research. When discussing the initial findings from the interviews with CCODE and the Federation I suggested with basis in the interviews that we could work on a collaborative project to more closely identify and examine what community groups were able to do themselves through self organization, what they could achieve with some funds and more connections to actors such as the City Council administration, and what required more systemic change at the national level and beyond in terms of prioritization, resource distribution, and recognition of informal settlements. The CCODE staff and the Federation representatives were most eager to go deeper into the question of how informal settlement communities work with their city council administrations. They also wanted to include Blantyre, Mzuzu and Zomba, three other main cities in Malawi in the study. Initially, I was not thrilled about including more cities since I felt that it would be difficult enough to cover the three settlements in which we were already doing interviews. However, they argued that by including different cities we could show how the city council administrations relate to their settlements differently. In Zomba, for example, the city council administration was engaging quite actively with one of its informal settlements, while in Lilongwe the local administration tended to be out of reach for organized informal settlement communities. The project could use the good examples to push the city councils that tended to ignore their informal settlement populations into action. This was a good point and the scaling up of the project also resonated, as mentioned earlier in the paper, with some of the ideas me and my supervisor had been exploring on how to get action research to move and have an impact beyond the immediate local-community context. We therefore agreed that on my next visit I would travel to the other cities to link up with community groups and document and discuss planning and slum upgrading initiatives that were going on there. We would then see how we could develop the collaborative project also in terms of more actionable outcomes.

When I returned to Malawi in February 2015, I conducted interviews, observations, and facilitated discussions together with the Federation and CCODE in informal settlements in Zomba, Blantyre and Mzuzu to document different planning and slum upgrading processes. We, the project partners, had realized that most community processes in Malawi were undocumented, the exception being a

handful that had been developed to respond to donor-reporting requirements. This gave rise to the idea of developing a series of mini-case studies from all four of the cities that could be used to inform and engage decision-makers.[11] Several community representatives had argued that this type of write-up could be useful to their processes. On the basis of the visits in the three cities plus the exploratory research in Lilongwe, seven mini-case studies were therefore developed based on observations and interviews with community members and other actors. Community representatives also took part in the analysis by discussing and commenting on the drafts. The studies were translated into the national language of Chichewa (Tumbuka in the case of Mzuzu) and prints were distributed back to the community groups. The studies were also shared in various NGO and university networks, as well as at events organized by CCODE.

In addition to specific findings representing each case, the seven case studies together with the interviews from the exploratory phase also pointed to some overall conclusions. A recurring theme in the series was that the community groups were able to do small projects on their own, but they struggled with getting broader infrastructure projects such as drainage systems, roads, water and electricity implemented. Good plans were developed, but the plans were not followed up by resource allocations. The people interviewed were also unable to secure for themselves the same services that were offered in the wealthier areas of the city or to achieve complete secure tenure. Despite this, resource distribution, social justice and belonging in the city were rarely discussed in the participatory slum upgrading processes, which tended to rather be technical, depoliticized and area-based (Refstie and Brun, 2016). One conclusion was therefore that the participatory planning processes studied were not transformative. The processes did in some instances increase the influence of marginalized groups in decision-making, but they did not confront the forces that were causing the social exclusion to begin with. Following our theoretical framing of transformative participation this meant that agency by and of itself was partly realized through participatory planning, but political agency – defined as the capacity and ability to oppose unjust and inegalitarian practices – was not (Refstie and Brun, 2016).

In June 2014, I facilitated a small workshop at the CCODE office where I discussed the initial conclusions from the study with CCODE, Federation, and TRI representatives as part of a participatory analysis session. Both the NGO workers, the Federation, and TRI representatives agreed that systemic change in terms of recognition, resource redistribution and representation was needed to realize the benefits participants sought through slum upgrading. This fed into an emerging discussion they were already having about how CCODE and the Federation could engage more actively with urban and national governance processes affecting life

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[11] The series can be accessed at: https://actmalawi.com/case-study-series/

in the informal settlements. At the level of problem definition there was thus a high degree of convergence between the understandings of the university researchers, the participants, and the project partners. As put by one of the Federation leaders:

> In a bigger way it was not like it was your process. It was as if it was a community process. That made the research study more relevant to us local people. And even with the way the results were shared, it is easier for us to take action based on the fact that we have been involved and know exactly what is happening and how the findings were arrived to (Interview Federation leader 12.05.2017).

The exploratory phase and the development of the case studies were both highly interactive processes with discussions amongst the partners and participants happening on a daily basis. In the periods in-between the fieldwork visits there was also a lot of communication between the researchers and the project partners over e-mail and through Skype. However, as the research proceeded deeper into article and thesis writing, where the broader segment of the material was analyzed together with emerging discussions in the literature, the conclusions continued to develop. In this process the nature of the partnership changed, and some divergence in understanding between the researchers, the project partners, and the other representatives from the informal settlements could be identified.

Critical research or a misguided search for the political?

In the first academic article from the project[12], my thesis supervisor and I made use of what we termed a 'trialectics' of participatory spaces to explain the research findings from the project. In Malawi, the collaboration had found that government and to some extent NGO-led invited planning spaces were typically technical and area-based. Consensus was also in many cases manipulated, as representatives were given little space in which to develop and express 'noise'. Noise was here defined as people raising their voices to challenge existing discourses and the status quo (Marchart, 2007). It represented a particular type of political agency present in insurgent urban planning processes (Holston, 2008) observed in other parts of the world (e.g. South Africa and parts of Latin-America) that we argued was missing from the participatory planning and upgrading discussions in Malawi. This understanding was itself inspired by the concept of 'transformative participation' from the literature on participatory spaces (Cornwall 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Miraftab, 2004) and recent debates in political and cultural geography (Davidson and Iveson, 2014; Dikeç, 2005, 2007, 2012; Isin,

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[12] Following the trends in academic publishing most PhD dissertations in Norway are now article based rather than written as a monograph.

2008; Kallio, 2012; Purcell, 2013, 2014; Rancière, 2001, 2009, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2014). Rancière, for example, suggests that within a hegemonic discourse people can talk, be visible and have a voice as long as they keep within the accepted understandings and frameworks for participation. However, only limited change may come from acting within the existing script (Isin, 2008). This resonated with the findings from the project, which showed that the current participatory spaces had little impact on the status of urban dwellers, their access to resources and their inclusion as full members of the city. Activities that challenged unequal power relations and redistribution of resources were to a large degree absent from the participatory planning and upgrading processes studied. Community groups tended to operate within the established frameworks and to focus on coping mechanisms and survival within the existing system instead of confronting the system and frameworks themselves. The spaces in which people *did* use insurgency and resistance to instigate change (Miraftab, 2004) tended to rather be found outside of and disconnected from the participatory planning framework – in the form of land invasions, squatting, the ignoring of planning regulations or public protests (Mwathunga, 2014). This is maybe not surprising considering how several of the processes studied were facilitated by the Federation and CCODE. The Federation and CCODE are SDI affiliates, and Slum Dwellers International emphasizes cooperation and engagement with decision makers (McFarlane, 2011; Mitlin and Patel 2014). SDI's politics is therefore typically "less oppositional" and situated within existing local political economic frameworks (McFarlane, 2011). Given their affiliation to SDI, CCODE and the Federation in Malawi work with many of the same instruments as SDI affiliates other places in the world. More specifically this means mobilizing through saving groups, profiling, mapping, and enumerations of settlements. Their work is also typically organized through existing leadership structures (McFarlane, 2011), which in Malawi tend to favour deliberations and consensus building (Cammack, 2007; Englund, 2006). Insurgent planning and protest as a radical response to exclusion is therefore not promoted as an avenue to influence decision makers in terms of slum upgrading. For instance, during a focus group discussion in Chikanda settlement in Zomba city some of the representatives explained to us that they had been developing a list of priorities and plans for Chikanda, which they had submitted to the City Council administration (CCA) in the hope of getting the activities included into the city budget. They had done a similar exercise the year before, but had not succeeded with getting any funding from the CCA. When asked if they thought their priorities would be included into the budget this time around the representatives said that they hoped they would, but that they did not have high hopes for it. "What will you do if they are not?" my supervisor and I asked. "We will go again and submit the document," a representative answered. "And what if they do not act this time either?" we asked. "Then we will continue to go there with our documents" (Focus group discussion Chikanda 10.02.2014).

A recurring observation was that groups typically continued to work within frameworks given by the City Council administration, planning institutions or

NGOs regardless of if they gave results or not. Protest and dissatisfaction was also seldom voiced in a direct way. In a participatory planning process in Blantyre for example, community representatives expressed their dissatisfaction with the process in interviews, but they did not raise their voice in the actual budgeting process. The participants interviewed rather spent their energies on area based initiatives which had a technical focus in terms of developing maps and planning documents. My supervisor and I initially interpreted this as a form of passiveness since the work conducted did not create 'noise' - it did not challenge the status quo. The lack of 'noise' also meant that the community processes were not able to reach their stated goals. In our article we therefore argued that if participatory planning in Malawi were to be transformative, it would be necessary to strengthen the more agonistic dimension of participation and ensure that the various planning spaces connected and overlapped (Refstie and Brun, 2016).

CCODE and Federation representatives agreed with this overall conclusion, but pointed out that most of the participants in the study wished to be included *into* existing frameworks rather than to challenge them. This also became visible in workshop discussions where the understandings expressed in the article were presented, and in an interactive live radio debate that was organized as part of the project. It was thus important for us as researchers to understand that 'the political' – defined as challenging unequal power and resource distribution – is not necessarily the prime motivation that drives people to participate in planning processes (Kapoor, 2002). At the same time the research showed that many of the benefits that participants sought at both individual and community levels required political transformation, as the current participatory spaces had little impact on status, access to resources, and the inclusion of informal settlements into city service provision. From the researchers' perspective it thus seemed as if many of the partners and participants were somehow 'trapped' in a technicalized, depoliticized, and localized participatory planning discourse. This did not mean that we as researchers sat with the answers, nor that we were not equally 'trapped' in our discursive thinking, but we believed that the action research project held the potential to disrupt the existing participatory planning discourse by asking some critical questions about implementation, resource distribution, and the limits of consensus based participatory planning (Friedman and Rogers, 2009; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Moini, 2011). This discursive approach was not discarded by the project partners, but they stressed that it was crucial to work within the current frameworks with strategies that were familiar to, and acceptable for the community representatives and members to engage in.

'Social weightlessness' in political theorizing

As mentioned in the introduction, McNay (2014) shows in her book "The misguided search for the political" how political theorizing has a tendency to remove itself from the everyday understandings and practices of people. When

critical theory aims to speak more directly to strategies of change they therefore run the risk of becoming 'socially weightless'.

> It is my claim that some types of democratic theory have become so enmeshed in a style of abstract and closed reasoning about the political that their relevance to the phenomenal social world and to the logic of embodied action is cast into doubt along with, ultimately, their purportedly progressive political implications (McNay, 2014:4-5).

In our project critical theory in the spirit of Castells (1972), Harvey (1973, 2012), Lefebvre (1974), Marcuse (1964), Mouffe (1999, 2000), and Rancière (1992, 2001, 2009, 2011) worked well to explain why things were the way they were. However, the same theories did not provide a framework for solutions that resonated with the motivations and understandings of the partners and participants. This represented a divergence in understanding between the researchers, the project partners and the participants – a divergence that was exacerbated by the geographical distance that prevented the constant dialogue characteristic of the initial phases of the research. As put by one of the project partners:

> Because you move elsewhere to write from afar [Norway], you do not get the same amount of input. You have the analysis at the level of case studies, but it is also important to test if the conception of the argument would be as you have conceived it at the abstract level in the academic articles too. Because those arguments is from the knowledge that you have collected from these people. I think sometimes, when you have participant observation and then move out, you lose out on certain developments of the discourse. At the same time this particular process cannot be indefinite and I think you have done very well in drawing most of the answers of the arguments from this kind of discussions that we are having (Interview Head of Research and Advocacy CCODE 12.05.2017).

Action research has, despite its good intensions, been accused of being just another tool used by Western researchers and agencies to legitimize their agendas and impose them onto people from the global South (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Spivak, 1988). At the same time, researchers can contribute with theoretical and analytical tools that can help interrogate established and taken-for-granted practices and make visible 'hidden mechanisms of control or seductive appearances'. They can help disturb discursive normalization through critical inquiry (Beauregard, 2012: 479; Freire, 1970). In our project we therefore adopted an integrated approach that focused both on analysing and deconstructing discourses in order to challenge them *and* on finding ways to operate within the existing frameworks.

An integrated action research approach

The case studies were used to document existing practices, to facilitate learning between places and levels, and to provide a basis for advocacy towards decision-makers focusing mainly on what could be done within the existing frameworks in the short and medium term. For example, funding that was long overdue was addressed by a UN agency after one of the case studies was published and sent to them. Some groups also used the case studies to fundraise for their community funds, while others used 'their' case study to initiate a dialogue with the relevant city council administration on issues in their settlement. The studies were also used for learning between community groups and within CCODE as an organization. The larger analysis of the research project included more of a system critique of how the participatory planning discourse was practiced in Malawi. Here, critical theory and discourse analysis were used to make visible mechanisms of exclusion and create reflection on the limitations inherent in the practised discourse (Refstie and Brun, 2016). The discussions were facilitated through smaller meetings with different stakeholders, a workshop, and the national live interactive radio debate mentioned earlier (*ibid*.). The meetings and events worked to disseminate the mini-case studies and the findings from the overall study, to create dialogue between stakeholders, and to bring up some of the more contentious issues that tended to be avoided in the participatory slum upgrading processes studied. This more critical oriented part of the research process thus made visible some of the difficult decisions that need to take place for slum upgrading to happen (see Refstie and Brun 2016). It also prompted CCODE and the Federation to engage more with how national and urban governance dynamics and relations influence the results they seek through participatory urban planning processes.

> Some of the issues that you have raised have actually informed how we are doing our work now. That concept note I sent you, on the proposal that we did, which project we are doing now. You will see that some of the issues that were brought out in the research are issues that we have taken aboard in terms of projecting the arguments that we want to pursue, so in a way you have given us a very good basis for some of our interventions (Interview Head of Research and Advocacy CCODE 12.05.2017).

The dialogue between the university researchers, project partners, and the participants led to the development of the integrated action research strategy. However, it also prompted the researchers to dig deeper in terms of academic theorizing. The research had not succeeded in presenting a model for change that resonated fully with the understandings of the project participants and partners. In the theoretical framework for example, we had conceptualized 'noise' as a necessary component for change. However, the opposite of 'noise' is not necessarily silence or passiveness. The people involved in the study, both as partners and participants were in fact actively pursuing a variety of strategies. The lack of 'noise' could for example be seen as a strategic choice. By not drawing

attention to their areas, people were able to continue a range of informal practices related to housing and planning without the government's interference (Mwathunga, 2014). For many, it also made more sense to try to negotiate their individual place within the system than to challenge it in a collective way (Cammack, 2007). Resistance was rather found in the ways in which people settled in informal settlements and organized themselves directly with service providers (Refstie, 2014a), or in how community groups organized services for themselves (Refstie, 2013, 2014 b,c). This is more in line with what Bayat (1997) describes as the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' and represents a type of 'tolerated encroachment' from the side of the state (Rao, 2013) - a 'tolerated encroachment' that could be jeopardized if people made too much 'noise'. People also exploited bureaucratic slippages and connections and made use of a multitude of subject positions to negotiate their state or client relationships (Millstein 2017). In Nancholi Chimiire, an informal settlement in Blantyre, for example, community representatives managed to get several aspiring politicians to fund parts of their community development plan in the run-up to the tripartite election in 2014 (Refstie, 2014b). Similar initiatives were also documented elsewhere.

> There was a problem where children had been falling into the river and the community was in need of a bridge. The chief in Ntopwa [informal settlement in Blantyre] therefore approached a shadow MP [Member of Parliament]. He was yet to be bribed so he said he could contribute. Two bridges were then constructed (Group Discussion Federation members 30.03.2014).

As for more visible protests, these were also present, but typically conducted separate from the participatory planning and slum upgrading discussions (e.g. the 2011 protests against the government).[13]

The lack of noise with regards to failed planning processes did therefore not necessarily mean, as argued by Cammack (2007) that civil society in Malawi was "weak" and silent, not easily roused to civic action, or demanding of government, even after years of "strengthening"' (Cammack, 2007: 601). It rather meant that people were finding alternative ways to influence their everyday lives in line with what risks they were willing to take and what practices they believed would yield results. The initial framework of transformative participation and understandings of political agency brought in by the university researchers were not able to cater for this reality. It therefore had to be expanded to account for what Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield (2014) describe as the balancing people do between "the complex

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[13] In July 2011, civic activists organized nationwide demonstrations in response to economic hardships and deepening governance problems such as postponed local elections, stricter censorship measures, and heavy corruption. For more information see Cammack, 2012.

negotiation of local clientelist linkages that render daily lives bearable" and "the generally more external, ephemeral, and oppositional politics of rights, which often discard, expose, or confront clientelist links, at the risk of losing resources, if the new mobilization network does not last or succeed" (Bènit-Gbaffou and Oldfield, 2014: 286).

> The complex articulation between economically impoverished – often informal – residents' everyday politics of access to resources, and collective mobilization to claim rights, is often overlooked; considered unproblematic in formalistic approaches to 'rights' in mobilization for the substantiation of democracy in developing post-colonial African urban contexts; understood in overly broad and often depoliticized notions of a 'rights to the city' – little more than any form of mobilization taking the city as its object; or, underestimated in importance and impact, when analysis prevails that focuses on the reproduction of 'political society' (Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield, 2014: 292).

This realization on behalf of the researchers did not necessarily happen in a linear fashion. It was a result of revisiting the empirical material, observations, new directions in the literature, feedback from presentations, and reviewer comments such as the ones for this article. Most important though, it was the result of the on-going dialogue between the project partners, a dialogue that pushed the researchers to dig deeper into the empirical material and focus on what people were actually *doing*. In this process a more nuanced understanding of the strategies people use to influence their position in the system was produced.

> Where different types of knowledge such as academic erudition and popular knowledge are combined or enter into dialogue, the outcome may deconstruct assumed or accepted framings, leading to the creation of alternative ways of seeing the world (Fals Borda 2013). The extent to which engagement either expands how we see the world or reinforces unquestioned prior positions is an important indicator of whether or not meaningful co-construction of knowledge in research and learning approaches has been achieved (Dolan et al. 2017: 39).

Considering the above, the project could be said to have achieved a dialogical research process with certain degree of meaningful co-construction of knowledge (Dolan et al. 2017). However, our project did not comply with the gold standards of action research that uphold the participants as full owners and drivers of research projects (see e.g. Jordan and Kapoor, 2016, Winterbauer et al. 2016), or for a more critical discussion Garret and Brickell 2015, Kesby et al. 2005; Shaw, 2012). This became most visible in the final phases of the research, which consisted of academic article writing. Participation and representation are two

important principles in action research. However, the academic writing process is not necessarily well suited to accommodate this, which in turn raises a number of ethical questions. Some of these could maybe have been solved through a more active use of co-authorship. However, academic publishing takes a lot of time and effort and is not necessarily a priority for project partners outside of academia. Furthermore, co-authorship does not always solve the power challenges inherent in knowledge co-construction (Ahmed, 2000; Franks, 2015). The partners and participants are therefore represented in this article through interviews only, framing the article mainly as a researcher's narrative.

> I think the writing is also a self-awakening process, because when you are writing then there are also new issues that come to your mind. But at some point you have to divide the audiences. So there are issues that are of interest to the academia, and then you would have a different set-up where you engage with policy makers. At the same time you are bouncing the ideas as you are writing. And this is something that occurred to me. So then you are sharing that with the people, so in one way or the other they are consciously participating in your writing process (Interview Head of Research and Advocacy CCODE 12.05.2017).

Research projects have to respond to a variety of demands, in our case made by the research participants, the partners, as well as the formal requirements of the university institution issuing the Phd. In this process the research becomes a negotiated outcome, and it is exactly in the dynamics of negotiation between the researchers, project partners and participants that the critical capacity on both sides develops, and 'social weightlessness' is avoided. In this lies the potential of action research in critical scholarship to create research that is at the same time critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable.

Conclusion

The main dilemma in our research process still stands. Many of the benefits participants sought in slum upgrading processes are not achievable without significant systemic change, and it is difficult to see how this type of change is to be accomplished within current participatory planning practices (Refstie and Brun, 2016). However, the collaborative approach helped us to understand that participants navigate the planning practices in different ways, and that participation in planning was only one amongst a number of strategies that the participants employed to reach their goals in terms of improving their living conditions. For many it therefore made more sense to work for inclusion into planning frameworks rather than to challenge them. This had to be reflected into the action research process and led to the development of the integrated approach that focused both on analysing and deconstructing discourses in order to challenge them *and* on finding ways to operate within the existing frameworks. The dialogue also pushed the researchers to go deeper into the material and develop a more nuanced

understanding of the strategies people use to improve their livelihoods and settlements.

Another dilemma was how to operationalize participation throughout the research process. As the researchers worked with a large number of groups in several cities at different times rather than with a fixed smaller group, it became more difficult for participants to develop ownership, to keep track of the research process and to keep the researchers accountable. The process had to rely heavily on representatives, both within the communities and with the partners. This can of course be problematic, since one risk supporting unjust power structures that are in place. However, since the project moved between levels and places this was seen as the most efficient way of maintaining a project partnership that could ensure that the research project was integrated into existing work and ongoing discussions. The distance between the researchers, the partners, and the community members interviewed was mediated by holding regular meetings, discussions and presentations with representatives throughout the project. However, as the researchers moved from Malawi to Norway, and engaged more actively with academic article writing conclusions continued to develop without direct engagement from the project partners and participants. This concentrated more power in the hands of the researchers than is advocated, for example, in more participant-centred approaches to action research (Jordan and Kapoor, 2016; Choudry, 2014; Spivak, 1988).

One conclusion is therefore that the integrated approach did work to reduce 'social weightlessness'. It did also to a certain extent respond to the critique made against action research for not engaging with structural inequality and systemic change at scale as the research project brought different actors together and opened up a space where the potentials and limitations of the current participatory planning practices in Malawi were discussed (see Refstie and Brun, 2016). However, the research process did not escape the problems of representation, which is considered an imperative in much participatory research. The research process was also limited in the sense that the participants and partners were less active in the final phases of the research. This may have reduced the potential to connect more deeply, also at the theoretical level with the lived realities and motivations of the people involved.

The integrated approach developed in our project did therefore not reach its full potential in responding to the multiple imperatives for research to be critical and rooted, explanatory and actionable. However, it represents one way in which critical scholarship and action research can be combined to produce socially situated research with a critical potential. If we do not engage fully with the groups we research with, we run the risk that our critical theorizing becomes rootless instead of radical (hooks, 1990). 'Who' researches matters (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) and action research holds the potential of including more people into critical theorizing. It can therefore help critical scholarship connect with and

grow from the roots and reduce the risk for 'social weightlessness' in theory and change making.

Acknowledgements

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