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Policy engagement as 'empowered representation': democratic mediation through a participatory research project on climate resilience

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Abstract:

Background: The article analyses the policy engagement component of a research project on climate resilience in vulnerable communities that took place in Cape Town, South Africa. Conducted in 2022, the engagement included community and stakeholder events in three research sites, and a cross-cutting policy event with municipal officials, held at the end of the project. Importantly, this policy engagement process occurred in a context of political marginalisation, that is, one characterised by low trust, and little meaningful representation or even communication between these vulnerable communities and the city.

Aims and objectives: This article examines the impact of policy engagement on political relations between local government and vulnerable communities.

Methods: The overall methodology of the article is qualitative, using an illustrative case-study research design to unpack the subjective experiences of both government officials and residents of vulnerable communities. Primary data included many primary documents, direct observation of the engagements and post-event interviews.

Findings: First, the engagement process created new 'invented' spaces for the representation of community perspectives to the city, and also the city's perspective to the community. Second, the engagement facilitated community self-representation through educating community members to advocate for their own ideas in these new invented spaces. Thirdly, this engagement tended to be more constructive and deliberative than polarising and confrontational.

Discussion and conclusions: Drawing on the theoretical framework of 'political mediation', the policy engagement process is characterised as a positive instance of democratic mediation through 'empowered representation', with some specified limitations.

Keywords: climate resilience, participatory research, representation, democratic mediation

Introduction

The climate crisis is causing significant challenges for all living in urban areas, but none more so than those in informal settlements in the urban south (Gasper et al 2011; Mendelsohn et al 2006; Douglas

et al 2008, Barbier & Hochard 2018). The poor of the urban south are impacted disproportionately by the growing extremes in weather, be it water shortages caused by drought, fires that run through dense informal settlements in dry and windy conditions, or localised and widespread flooding during the rainy season (Anguelovski *et al* 2016; Pharoah 2012; SERI 2018; UKRI 2020). These kinds of catastrophic events are on the rise in informal settlements, thus compounding the existing poverty and marginalisation of the urban poor (Satterthwaite et al 2020, Williams et al 2019).

The state response to climate crises in informal settlements in the urban South is typically limited (Sikder et al 2015), and often involves government demands that these areas formalise (Anciano & Piper 2019; Satterthwaite et al 2020, 147). In addition to the obvious problem of a lack of resources, and the frequent failure to incorporate local knowledge and preferences, state response is also constrained by political considerations too. As noted by Chatterjee (2004), democratic states of the south generally are ambivalent towards informal settlements and their residents. This is because, on the one hand, informal residents are voters and representatives in government may need their support. Further, most democratic states of the south have some kind of normative commitment to uplifting the poor, not least through constitutional and policy promises (see Palmer *et al* 2017). On the other hand, however, informal settlements are almost always established outside of the law as they involve land invasions of some sort, threaten property relations, are frequently comprised of cultural, ethnic, and national minorities, and necessarily involve informal and sometimes illegal means of meeting daily needs.

In such a context, as Chatterjee (2004: 34) argues, the state tends to treat informal settlements as 'populations to be managed for their wellbeing', rather than 'individual citizens bearing rights'. The language and recognition of individual rights tends to be reserved for those citizens who live by the formal rule, especially the middle classes, who constitute 'civil society'. The illegal/informal standing of informal settlements both makes it harder for residents to claim rights as citizens and incentivises their representatives to engage states as designated 'populations of the needy' to get targeted group funding. Finally, Chatterjee argues that these representative relationships between the poor and the state tend to be mediated by clientelist practices of political parties, and thus because of their legal 'greyness', and party clientelism, the poor of the informal south are better described as belonging to 'political society' rather than 'civil society'.

This ambivalence towards informal settlements and the urban poor in general is evident in many municipalities in South Africa, including the City of Cape Town – the location of our case – where the first response of the city is to try and stop informal settlers occupying land through the Anti-Land Invasion Unit. However, if this proves impossible, usually due to the weight of numbers, speed of settlement and determination of the settlers (Bayat 2000), the city then moves to formally recognise the settlement, and begins to service it (see Anciano & Piper 2019: ch4). This is because, once recognised as legitimate settlements, these informal settlements are entitled to basic services. Nevertheless, even once recognised as legitimate, the illegality and informality of daily life in these spaces leave them in what Yiftachel (2009) terms a 'grey' space between the 'white' of legality and black of illegality, where they remain in ongoing ambiguous relation with the state. As argued by Anciano & Piper (2019), this 'greyness' extends to informal forms of local governance that renders the actual rule of informal settlements particular to each place and often involves non-state actors playing an important part. Finally, it is important to note that informal settlements are invariably part of much larger spatial wards in the city, and that the local politicians that represent these wards tend to ignore informal settlements in favour of their more formal and populous neighbours. Thus, there are no formal representatives nor permanent 'invited spaces' of public participation for residents of informal settlements to engage the city (ibid).

To this institutional political marginality, we can add a practical political marginality reinforced by the history of mass mobilisation and protest in anti-apartheid politics in South Africa, where protest is the main means for marginalised communities to get state attention. Hence the turn of phrase associated with protest, 'the smoke that calls' the state (Van Holdt et al 2011). This 'spectacular' but episodic politics stands in contrast to more effective but longer-term and resource heavy 'slow activism' linked to cross class, and multi-organisational campaigning (Robins 2014). Indeed, for marginalised communities frustrated at state failure, protest became the most common form of political engagement with the state after 1994, leading many commentators to declare South Africa the 'protest capital of the world', and characterising protest as the 'rebellion of the poor' (Alexander 2010). While this politics has been unpacked in various ways, for example as forms of spectacle, auditing, sabotage, and blocking (MacFarlane & Silver 2016: 144), it is generally observed that relations between the City of Cape Town and informal settlements is one of political disconnection, transcended in temporary and tense moments of engagement following protest and disruption (Anciano & Piper 2019).

This context of political alienation between the local state and informal settlements, poses additional challenges for a participatory research project on climate resilience to do meaningful policy engagement. The existing literature on participatory research on climate resilience warns of the limitations of taking resilience at face value, as this may mean simply re-producing or conserving dominant and neo-liberal power relations, or holding local communities responsible for processes that occur at much wider social scales (MacKinnon & Derickson 2013, Cretney 2014) – for example, as reflected in the response to environmental crises that informal settlements must formalise (Anciano & Piper 2019 Ch4: Satterthwaite et al 2020, 147). In addition, the discourse of climate resilience might empower outside actors to impose their views on a local community, and also presume that the community will respond in one way to a crisis (McDonnell 2020). As noted above, the dynamic of state imposition on informal settlements is intrinsic to the general relationship with the formalisation demands of the state in the urban south, and not just around climate resilience issues. Further, as with all politics, the assumption that any group is always united on any issue, is fundamentally naïve. However, in addition, the political marginality of informal settlements in the urban south is a further challenge for policy engagement. It is this political problem that informs the policy engagement methodology outlined and assessed in this study.

Water & Fire: A participatory research project on community resilience in Cape Town

Publicly funded research projects typically have some requirements for policy engagement informed by the findings of the research. As noted above, research on climate resilience encounters multiple considerations that impact policy engagement including the potentially conservative or top-down framing of resilience. Further, participatory research on climate resilience must reflect on how local knowledge is surfaced rather than ignored, especially in informal contexts where everyday practices contravene some policy and legal provisions. Finally, as argued in this paper, research on informal settlements in the urban south must do policy engagement in relation to places and peoples who may be politically marginalised. All three of these sets of problems were confronted in the case under consideration in this paper: a participatory research project named 'Water and Fire: Enhancing capacity and reducing risk through 15 'Best Bets' for transformative adaptation with vulnerable residents on the Cape Flats, South Africa'. Termed 'Water & Fire' for short, the main aim of the research project was to identify actionable resilience bolstering outcomes at the community level.

The project research design (not this study) identified three case study sites of community responses to fire, water shortage and flooding. The study was underpinned by an initial household

survey as a baseline overview to generate data on demographics, living conditions and individual perceptions of the environmental hazards under study (Ncube et al 2023). In each site, the survey included transient households and households with no fixed address. The survey identified prominent themes, and enabled purposive enrolment of community-based co-researchers, for a subsequent participatory research process. The subsequent participatory process identified what the community members saw as the most effective actions, or 'Best Bets' to strengthen individual and collective resilience to disasters (Petersen *et al* pending). It also used visual participatory methods organised so that community participants could identify collectively what they saw as climate related issues, the exact nature of issues, the emergent needs and some options for local and state future action (Black et al forthcoming).

In this way participatory research design methods were deliberately used to surface local rather than external actors' knowledge of the climate crisis and what could be done to address it. It also foregrounded collective discussion where community members identified the most important issues and possible solutions but did not require consensus or eliminate minority suggestions (Ibid). Finally, in the research phase of the project, the narrow meaning of resilience as a return to the status quo was resisted by encouraging participants to develop further existing practices into novel solutions that could be implemented by communities themselves, rather than just accepting the need for formalisation or only demanding state action. In addition, however, and as will be argued below, the policy engagement process itself allowed for new forms of political practice by informal settlement residents that also contribute to a new and more empowered conception of resilience. This insight emerges in this paper from a focus exclusively on the engagement process of the project, and so it is with a summary of this that we start.

The policy engagement process of the 'Water & Fire' project began by presenting the 'Best Bets' identified in the research phase at three community engagement events. These 'Best Bets' were the ideas for addressing practically the needs in connection with fire and flooding crises that were workshopped by community participants in the research project. These three engagement events were held in (or adjacent to) the research sites so that other people living in those areas could participate. To maximize the engagement opportunity, representatives from local government departments and local NGOs and were also invited to attend.

Based on inputs from these events, and researcher contributions, the final list of 'Best Bets' were further expanded and fine-tuned by community participants to integrate the collective findings across all research sites. In the end, a total of 18 distinct Best Bets were co-produced through the 'Water and Fire' project. A final cross-cutting policy engagement – the 'Co-production towards urban resilience indaba' was undertaken with community, government, and civil society representatives in September 2022. In total then, the four engagement events were conducted to support decision-making, collaboration, and collective action between both communities' and policy makers.

Policy Engagement for democracy

To explore the impact of this engagement process on local state-society relations, and the extent to which it could be said to democratise these, it is helpful to draw on two sets of democratic theory. The first is Gaventa & Barrett's (2011) meta-analysis of 100 studies of community participation that holds that participatory political processes can be said to deepen democracy when they affirm (a) the construction of democratic citizenship, (b) the strengthening of practices of political participation, (c) strengthen responsive and accountable states, and lead to (d) the development of inclusive and cohesive societies. Notably, Gaventa & Barrett follow the mainstream participatory literature in exploring existing participatory institutions and practices that supplement representative democracy

with the goal of deepening it, rather than supplanting it as on the more radical participatory theory of Carol Pateman (1970) for example. On this view, democracy is deepened is when the outcomes of participation lead more people to become democratic; social relations to become more inclusive and cohesive; more people to participate in more forms of political decision-making; and the representative state to respond better to the popular will.

In addition, in a context of strained and even alienated relations between the city and informal settlements, the theory of mediation is a mid-range theory that can help unpack systematically the policy engagement process to analyse whether it achieved these democratic outcomes. Writing on local state-society relations in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Lavalle *et al* (2005) identify mediation as one of a range of representation claims advanced by civil society organisations to justify their right to represent the poor. The appeal to 'mediation' was understood by Lavalle et al. (2005) as 'open[ing] up access to public decision-making institutions that otherwise would remain inaccessible', capturing a sense of 'third-party' intervention between state and society. Importantly, for Lavalle et al. (2005), mediation is used in a very specific sense of overcoming marginalisation from formal decision-making, and in some kind of constructive or democratic way according to the self-understanding of civil society actors. This is exactly the problem confronted by the engagement process of the Water & Fire project, and the solution identified.

The idea of mediation as a new form of representation of the poor and marginalised urban residents to the state is built upon by Von Lieres & Piper (2014: 5), who add that: (i) mediation practices are often informal, that is they exist alongside the formal institutions of representation set up in the political system. Further, mediation takes place between marginalised groups in society and the state through (ii) intermediaries who are *not* of the poor and marginalised. This distinguishes it from the practice of representation by those who informally claim to speak on behalf of the poor because they were in some way elected, or are of the poor, or have poor membership, or are of service to the poor. Importantly, this means that mediation can be both (iii) democratic and undemocratic. In sum then, mediation can be seen as a form of political brokerage between political authorities and poor and marginalised groups that happens alongside formal political processes. Finally, Von Lieres & Piper (2014: 11) unpack the practices of mediation in terms of the identity of the mediator, the objective of the mediation, the mode and outcome to produce the following typology in Table 1.

This framework offers a structure to analyse the policy engagement phase of the 'Fire & Water' project, and whether it achieved any of the four democratic outcomes identified by Gaventa & Barrett (2011). This provides the basis for an answer to the main research question: In what way, and to what extent, was the policy engagement phase of the 'Fire & Water' project a form of democratic mediation?

Table 1 here

Methods

Study design

The overall methodology of the paper is qualitative. The reason we take a qualitative approach, and in particular a case-study using primary documents and interviews, is to explore a novel practice, in this instance, the policy engagement process of a participatory research project designed to produce certain democratic outcomes. The data we seek here are the experiences and attitudes of participants, both from informal settlements and the city, to see if the mediation process has changed these in

democratic ways. The use of these methods to evaluate changes in political attitudes is well established in the urban studies and resilience literatures (Jacobs 1993, Cantelmi et al 2021, Taylor et al 2020). These participants were considered as co-researchers in the participatory research process as they were actively involved in aspects of research design as well as generating and analysing research data (Black et al forthcoming). Furthermore, the project placed emphasis on the community-driven selection of priority challenges and action to effect change as a part of the research process itself (Israel et al. 1998, O'Fallon & Dearry 2002, Minkler & Wallerstein 2003, Themba-Nixon et al. 2003).

A qualitative approach is best suited to exploring this interpretive idea of knowledge as understanding as opposed to knowledge as causal explanation (Halperin & Heath 2017: 41). As the methodology of engagement as political mediation is a relatively understudied one, we embrace an illustrative case-study approach which is well suited to demonstrating the degree to which a research project can consciously play a political mediating role, and the positive and negative impacts of this in democratic terms. The choice of illustrative study is especially appropriate when the topic in question is relatively unfamiliar or has not been framed in a particular way before.

Engagement events

The dates, names and locations of the engagement events referred to in the Findings and Analysis section are shown in Table 2. All events were held in Cape Town.

Table 2 here

Data collection

The data collected for the study took the form of primary sources including observation, minutes, and videos of engagement sessions, as well as interviews from March to September 2022. In total, 13 documents were collected, 5 events were directly observed, and 8 interviews were conducted. All the interviews were transcribed and coded using the above mediation framework. Thematic analysis proceeded deductively using the same framework, but we also examined the text for any emergent themes relevant to the research question.

Findings & Analysis

Who was the mediator?

The key mediator in this case was the research project, or more accurately the NGO commissioned to conduct the fieldwork for the research project and manage the engagement component. This NGO, the Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation (SLF), has a significant track record in doing various forms of both research and community engagement in townships and informal settlements around South Africa (Charman 2023). Other typical mediators identified by Von Lieres & Piper (2014) include political organisations, and individuals or networks. While SLF is not a political organisation in any common meaning of the term, some consideration should be given to whether the mediator could better be described as a network. The reason is that the research sites selected for the 'Water and Fire' project are all places that SLF had worked in previously, and where they had established contacts with community members. Further, these community members were often the initial contact for the

'Water and Fire' research. However, the vast majority of the community members who participated in the project, and especially those who became co-researchers, were new to SLF (Co-researcher interviews). In sum then, we can conclude that the primary mediator was a civil society organisation rather than any other kind of organisation or established network.

What was the objective of mediation?

The objective of SLF in this process was clearly not to 'capture' the mediation space for their own ends, as per Table 1, but rather, using Von Lieres' & Piper's framework, to facilitate a combination of 'educational' and 'diplomatic' activities. Thus, through the research process SLF set out to support advocacy by educating participants how to advocate *their* ideas to state officials *themselves*, and to do so through making arguments rather than just demands. As noted, making demands and protest is the mode of political engagement most associated with informal settlements in the City of Cape Town. Being able also to engage the state in other ways adds to the tactical resources of local communities.

In the participatory spirit of the project, neither SLF nor the research project, identified the Best Bets and then advocated for these to the municipality. Rather, the project consciously designed a process by which community members were empowered both to identify the Best Bets, *and* to advocate for them directly to City of Cape Town officials, and to do so in a deliberative spirit. In terms of identifying the Best Bets, community members from each of the research sites came together in several workshops to identify and analyse crises related to fires, flooding, and water shortage in their communities. As noted above, this included taking part in a visual methods research process integrating digital storytelling (Lambert 2013, Mpofu-Mketwa, T.J. et al 2023) (Figure 1), community mapping (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights 2011) (Figure 2) and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997, Black et al forthcoming) (Figure 3). Further, it is crucial to note that while the primary activity for policy engagement was a formal event called the 'Co-production towards urban resilience indaba' it was not an isolated event. There had already been three preceding site-specific/localized community engagement events (see Table 2). Residents of the research sites (including members of the participating communities that had not taken part in the research process/methods), representatives of local NGO's and City of Cape Town officials were invited to these site-specific events.

Figure 1-3 here

The meaning of participation in the 'Water & Fire' project extended to the engagement phase too and helps fill out the meaning of political empowerment in the project. Thus, in preparation for the community engagement events, SLF facilitated a series of workshops with the community participants where they were coached and supported to i) analyse their visual materials and identify Best Bets to address environmental hazards in their areas; ii) further unpack and expand the Best Bets; iii) collectively decide how best to frame and present the Best Bets; iv) co-design event agendas; and even v) rehearse presentations. Professionals from SLF facilitated the process, whereas the substance of the discussion and the conclusion were driven by community members themselves.

To illustrate this approach in more detail we outline the example of Overcome Heights, one of the two informal settlements included in the 'Water and Fire' research. To prepare for the engagement events, the SLF research team facilitated six engagement preparation workshops with seven participating community members from Overcome Heights (see Table 2). Workshop one outlined the steps that were going to be involved in preparing for the engagement activities (SLF 2022a). Workshop two identified the Best Bets for Overcome Heights, where community representatives iteratively analysed their visual materials (digital stories, community maps and photographs) to identify (in their

own words) the overarching Best Bets to counteract fire outbreaks in their settlement. The community representatives drove the substantive discussion (SLF 2022b). The final compilation of Best Bets was as follows:

1. More spaces between houses to reduce fire risk.
2. Emergency services and organisational support in the case of fire.
3. Community interdependency and working together around fire prevention and response.
4. Keeping ID documents safe in the case of fire.
5. Having access to water and sand during a fire (ibid).

On the same day, the community participants collectively decided which visual materials (stories, maps and photos) would be presented at the engagement events and who from within the group would present them.

At workshop three, the community participants unpacked the Best Bets to generate a basket of priority and contextually appropriate potential *interventions* that could be implemented by community members and government departments – working together or independently – to achieve them. They also collectively decided how to frame the Best Bets and to present them, along with the unpacked potential interventions, to their fellow community members and City of Cape Town officials. During the third workshop, the community participants also co-designed the agendas for the engagement events and began compiling their presentations for these events. Importantly, emphasis was placed on making arguments through appealing to principles all could agree on rather than just making demands.

Workshops four, five and six gave the community participants time to refine and rehearse their Best Bets presentations. These engagement preparation workshops were supported by two members of the Safety Lab, an NGO partner organization in the research project. The inclusion of the Safety Lab was important because of their insights into engaging City of Cape Town officials and their experience in creating contexts where community members could shape engagement processes themselves (SLF 2022d: 2). All six workshops were co-facilitated by a team of four to five SLF staff. The site specific/localized community engagement event for Overcome Heights was held at an NGO called Living Hope, located in Capricorn, a formal township within walking distance of the informal settlement. According to the workshop reports, the objective of this preparation was to 'empower participants and give them a sense of autonomy… in the process to foster a sense of ownership for their event' (Ibid: 7). It was important to support participants in refining their narratives 'so that they are well prepared and confident in their presentation on the stakeholder and community engagement event', and the dress rehearsal helped 'to prepare for a smooth running of the stakeholder and community engagement event' (Ibid: 2).

As observed in the record, the community engagement event at Living Hope generated 'lively engagement with stakeholders and community members engaging in dialogue about fire experiences and solutions', including between City officials and community members (SLF 2022e: 14). The report also notes that, 'participants grew from lacking confidence in their presentations to becoming more confident and well empowered. The five Best Bets to counteract fire outbreaks were well executed (Ibid).' There were some limitations to the event too, for instance, the report notes that 'more community members could have attended and more stakeholders from other organisations who promised to attend could have also come. Some guests left earlier before the presentation of Best Bets (ibid).' This raises concerns regarding the exclusion associated with the initiation of deliberative spaces and how individuals can be adequately represented despite their physical absence (Martin 2012).

What was the mode of mediation?

At first glance the mode of mediation that was most prominent in the policy engagement process appears to be what Von Lieres & Piper term 'advocacy' – but it is a particular kind of advocacy. Hence, the final component of the engagement process was precisely to organize a cross-cutting event attended by community participants from all three research settings and representatives of various relevant departments of the City of Cape Town municipality at which the 18 Best Bets for improving resilience to climate change could be presented, with the hope that they would influence real world practice (SLF 2022e).

While this is true, we argue that SLF is better understood as *facilitating* advocacy**,** as the Best Bets were presented to City of Cape Town officials by the community members that formulated them. Furthermore, this facilitation took three key forms. The first is that SLF worked to create new opportunities for engagement between community members and local government officials that otherwise would not have existed. In addition, the second way that SLF enabled advocacy was through empowering participants to speak for themselves. As outlined above, substantial time and energy was invested in preparing community members for engagement with city officials. The third way was to emphasise the use of reasoned dialogue – alongside appeals to emotions and values – to convince city officials to co-operate in solving common problems. This was a significant addition to the more customary and confrontational *repertoire* of protest politics and angry demands and denunciations of the state.

What were the outcomes of mediation?

In respect of the outcomes of mediation, there is a strong case that these new spaces for political engagement and the empowerment of marginalised people to make use of them are both democratic outcomes. In respect of the undemocratic outcomes of mediation identified in Table 1, the only one that can potentially apply on the given evidence is to 'entrench the role of the mediator'. However, the deliberate attempt to empower community residents through preparation of community researchers themselves to articulate the Best Bets (which they had also developed) to city officials reflects an effort to reduce the political role of the mediator in this case. There was no evidence of the Best Bets being diluted by SLF or Safety Lab in their communication to City officials. Indeed, the suggested interventions were developed and fine-tuned through the six engagement preparation workshops held with the groups from each research site (see Table 2). At the site specific/localized engagement events and the Co-production indaba, the contents of the Best Bets were presented in the words and format that had been collectively agreed by the community participants during the facilitated preparation phase. The rehearsal session that was built into the preparation phase supported the co-researchers to recall their speeches and to gain confidence in their delivery.

Turning to the positive case for democratic outcomes, the engagement process clearly achieved progress in respect of each of the emergent features of democratic mediation listed in Table 1. First, building a sense of democratic citizenship was probably the core element of the engagement component of the research. A substantial proportion of the time, energy and resources went into preparing community members for deliberative engagement with City of Cape Town officials, and this followed a research process that had affirmed participants as co-producers in the knowledge process. This quote from a Sweet Home Farm co-researcher demonstrates the point:

> I [realised that I] can speak in front of the audience [of] government stakeholders [that I can] raise my problem but in a proper and good manner…the only way we use to raise [grievances were] to make toyi toyi, [to] take some tires and burn them [at the traffic light]. [But] we [did] this project I noticed that there are proper ways to raise your voice where you can make the people to feel and see the way you feel, [and] now I do have confidence that even a person from UK can see and feel the way how things are in Sweet Home Farm. So, the whole project did teach me a lot, [about how to raise] grievances. (Co-researcher 1: 2022a)

Second, in terms of strengthening political participation, the project culminated in the creation of new forms of deliberation based on shared values and principles between local government and residents of marginalized communities, where very little had previously existed. From the side of government, the response was overwhelmingly positive. A senior Community Liaison Officer serving in the Office of the Mayoral Committee Member for Water and Sanitation stated:

> Here today I heard testimonies of lived experiences. What it means to go one day without water. What does it mean for a chronically ill grandmother who needs to take medication. That's life-threatening. To hear that, it shifts the narrative. You start seeing that provision of water is indeed a human right to life.
> Once you have a party at any negotiation table who's prepared to say I'm not blaming and I'm not playing that game, so, a person who can also see the problem but still identify the solution, if that is the attitude where they see the City as a working partner, one they can trust, that could go a long way (CCT Official 1: 2022a).

In addition, participating community members gained significant exposure to deliberative participatory processes for the conceptualization, planning, preparation and execution of policy engagement. Hence, as one participant from Sweet Home Farm stated:

> [T]he project has taught me that old ways of doing things are not that important anymore because time has changed. I can't be asking for services the same way my grandfather has been asking for services from government in the past, that is through violence and marching. [Now] there are digital platforms to do that. I learned that there's methods, photovoice (taking pictures) drawing, and handing it to the right people. It has the same impact as the olden way but it's less violent and when we are doing it, it's fun like everybody is laughing but at the end the message that we want to get out there its strong and powerful. So, if someone in power sees this and still feels nothing, then they not [in their job] are for passion but for the paper. So that is what this project has taught me; that you can use what you have without breaking it (Co-researcher 2: 2022b)

Third, in respect of enhancing state responsiveness, the project achieved unprecedented interest and enthusiasm from City of Cape Town officials through the four engagement events co-led by the community participants. In addition, there is evidence of further informal engagement after the project ended, building on relationships established during the engagement process. A Civil Engineer, Executive Technical Support Officer, Department of Water and Sanitation, City of Cape Town said:

> What I've experienced here is enlightening. Listening to the whole video with the women's experience that they presented through pictures. It's giving us real data on the ground… We want to do more, but I think it's just for the community to understand the City's challenges so that there can be a dialogue between us, so that you can have better services and a quicker response time (CCT Official 2: 2022b).

Finally, in terms of substantive gains for the community, some of the Best Bets can be implemented by the community members themselves. For example, one community participant reported that the formation of block committees in Overcome Heights was a direct outcome of the research project. One of the functions of the block committees is to be on fire watch and sound the alert to urgently notify settlement residents when a fire breaks out, but it has other functions too including local security surveillance (Co-researcher 3: 2023).

Furthermore, there is real evidence of state support for some of these Best Bets. An example is that project participants from Sweet Home Farm presented Best Bets connected to flooding to the Department of Water and Sanitation in a Public Participation process informing strategies to reduce pollution in the water ways of the city. In addition, Overcome Heights was recently selected by the City of Cape Town for a pilot project to limit the spread of fires in informal settlements through the coating of shacks with Vermiculite, a fire-retardant substance that was first trialled at Epping Fire Station (Ward Councillor 2023). Furthermore, the Ward Councillor reports that she remains in personal contact about community challenges with a least one community participant from the research engagement process – even though the person is from another marginalized area of the city rather than Overcome Heights (Ibid). It is not possible to say with absolute certainty why some of the Best Bets were not adopted or have not yet been adopted. This may be due to a lack of government resources, especially with regards to major infrastructural enhancements that were included amongst the proposed interventions. It is also possible that some of the Best Bets do not align with the immediate concerns of the City of Cape Town with regards to development policy and practice. It is likely that the locations being proposed for Best Bet implementation are not being prioritized for government intervention as is often the case especially for informal settlements (Chatterjee 2004; Sikder et al 2015; Anciano & Piper 2019; Satterthwaite et al 2020).

Discussion

Informed by the theory of political mediation, we conclude that the policy component of UKRI GCRF funded 'Water and Fire' project is best described as a form of democratic mediation between politically marginalised communities and the City of Cape Town municipality that we term 'empowered representation'. There are three aspects to democratic mediation as 'empowered representation'. First, the research project deliberately set out to create new 'invented' spaces for the representation of community perspectives to City officials, and vice versa, through its engagement processes towards the end of the project. In local state-society relations theory, 'invented spaces' are spaces for participatory engagement created by citizens or civil society, in contrast with 'invited spaces' which are constructed by the state (Cornwall 2002). In this case, a civil society organisation created the space for and set the agenda for engagement rather than the city. In addition, by openly engaging city officials with the Best Bets to build climate resilience in townships and informal settlements, SLF was establishing what is termed a 'short route of accountability' (World Bank 2003: 1264). This means that citizens can engage officials directly about issues that affect them, rather than

indirectly through their elected representatives, otherwise termed the 'indirect' or 'long route of accountability'.

The key limitation of this representational gain is that the spaces of engagement were non-binding, and non-decision-making, so the access to state was one that enabled influence rather than direct decision-making. This is a common problem of most participatory spaces, however (Shankland 2014). A further limitation was that these spaces were temporary, and thus the opportunity to influence was limited to a small window in time. With the demise of the research project, these spaces would most likely close too. Finally, there was some evidence from the Ward Councillor that the establishment of these spaces created some tension with formal representatives who perceived them as potential rivals to their power and status (Ward Councillor 2023). This is almost certain to become a dynamic if these spaces were institutionalised long term, as has been the experience with the partisan or business capture of other forms of participatory spaces in South Africa.

Second, the project facilitated advocacy within these spaces primarily through empowering community members to state their own ideas about how to mitigate environmental hazards. This was done through workshopping with peers, and preparing and rehearsing presentations, facilitated by SLF and other professionals who also offered feedback from their experience. It is important not to overstate the empowerment achieved in these various projects as there is little doubt that exposure to the new knowledge and skills associated with participatory research is not the same as learning this knowledge and skills as in sustained formal training over many years. The same would apply to the positive experiences of recognition by community members. Once the project ends, these benefits will clearly diminish. Indeed, perhaps the main limitation of the 'empowered representation' model is the sheer volume of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that need to be learned in a short period for effective self-representation. At best the educative process undertaken through the 'Water and Fire' project can be considered as the start of a longer learning pathway.

Third, and finally, the engagement approach focused on building the deliberative capacities of community members, rather than relying only on more common confrontational discourses of protest politics, thus adding to the 'repertoire of strategies' available to a marginalised community (Rossi 2023). Key here were appealing to grounds for arguments that all could agree on – such as a shared human experience – the defining feature of deliberative democracy. Importantly, these practices, while learned through example rather than overt instructions, echo principles of deliberative democracy that emphasise making decision based on 'reasons that all can accept' (Bohman & Richardson 2009). This granted, it seems safe to assume that more conscious and informed instruction in deliberative approach to engagement with would have bolstered the informal modelling that occurred.

In summary then, the overall impact of the engagement approach can be termed democratic according to Gaventa & Barrett's (2012) criteria that they opened new spaces for citizen engagement with the city that did not previously exist, built new skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship on both sides of the local governance equation, and added deliberation to confrontation in the tactical arsenal of local actors. In addition, both the research and engagement processes strengthened community participation by deeply involving community members in activities to co-construct, plan, prepare for and execute the engagement events. It slightly enhanced state responsiveness, albeit temporarily by introducing new opportunities for community members to advocate to the state. Finally, the approach brought some minor tangible benefits to the three marginalised communities in that some of the Best Bets are being implemented by the communities themselves, and some are being considered by city officials.

Conclusion

While there is much written on the broader impact of participatory research on power relations, very little has focused specifically on how a participatory project can impact local state-society *political* relations, especially in a context of political alienation between a city and informal residents, and furthermore, on the urgent topic of climate change resilience. Policy engagement is, by definition, a political act in that it attempts to influence governance, and we have demonstrated how a participatory research project can conduct policy engagement in a way that targets both sides of local state-society relations to produce some modest democratic outcomes. Indeed, the engagement component of the 'Water & Fire' Project can be characterised specifically as a form of mediation through 'empowered representation' that was generally positive for democratic local state-society relations.

The case shows how the policy engagement component of a participatory project can act as a third-party mediator between state and local society. It also shows how this can be done to democratic ends, not least by working with the participating community members and city officials as equally important stakeholders in the engagement process. Integral to this approach is that advancing climate resilience in marginalised communities of the urban south requires the production of local knowledge by community members, and the uptake by the state of contextually appropriate and promising practices initiated from below. This outcome is built on introducing new opportunities for community self-representation to local government, and the empowerment of community members through peer learning to represent themselves in deliberative ways in these opportunities. This adds to the resources of local communities to make the state more accountable. The main limitation of this approach is that is not sustained down time, and thus it remains an open question as to the longer-term impact of these marginal democratic gains.

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Table 1: Emergent features of mediation

Identity	Objective	Mode	Outcomes
Civil society organisations	Diplomat – secure access to decision-making	Coercive – secure outcomes through threat of violence	Undemocratic: - Repress rivals - Fragment citizenship - Divert resources to local elites - Entrench role of mediator
Political organisations	Educator – build democratic citizenship	Clientelist – trade support to patron for resources to client	Democratic: - Build a sense of democratic citizenship - Strengthen participation - Enhance state responsiveness - Tangible benefits to the group
Individuals or networks	Captor – secure own ends	Advocacy – champion rights and needs of group to political authority	
		Empowerment – building forms of self-reliance to solve problems	

Please note that any one of the features in each the columns could be found alongside any other of these features in another column. The table is to be read by column rather than row.

Table 2: Engagement event programme for Water & Fire project

Date (2022)	Research site/abode of community group	Name of event	Location of event
28th March	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop one	SLF premises
29th March	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop two	SLF premises
30th March	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop three	SLF premises
31st March	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop four	SLF premises
4th April	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop five	SLF premises
5th April	Overcome Heights	Engagement preparation workshop six	Living Hope, Capricorn (in close proximity to Overcome Heights)
6th April	Overcome Heights	Site-specific/localized community engagement event	Living Hope, Capricorn
11th May	Sweet Home Farm	Site-specific/localized community engagement event	Philippi Village, Philippi (in close proximity to Sweet Home Farm)
2nd June	Delft	Site-specific/localized community engagement event	Central Sports Complex, Delft
28th September		Co-production towards urban resilience indaba	Philippi Village, Philippi

Figure 1

Source: photographs by SLF
Community participants from Overcome Heights and Sweet Home Farm taking part in a 'Water and Fire' project digital storytelling workshop at the SLF premises in Cape Town.

Figure 2

Source: photographs by SLF
Community participants taking part in 'Water and Fire' project community mapping processes.

Figure 3

Photographs taken by community participants during 'Water and Fire' project photovoice activities in Delft and Sweet Home Farm