

Is Sanco a sleeping giant?

Sanco is often portrayed as an organisation in crisis, bankrupt and weakened through its alliance with the ANC. **Elke Zuern** examines how Sanco has survived. Can it become a vibrant, participatory social movement, which empowers the poor and supports the ideals of participation and democracy?



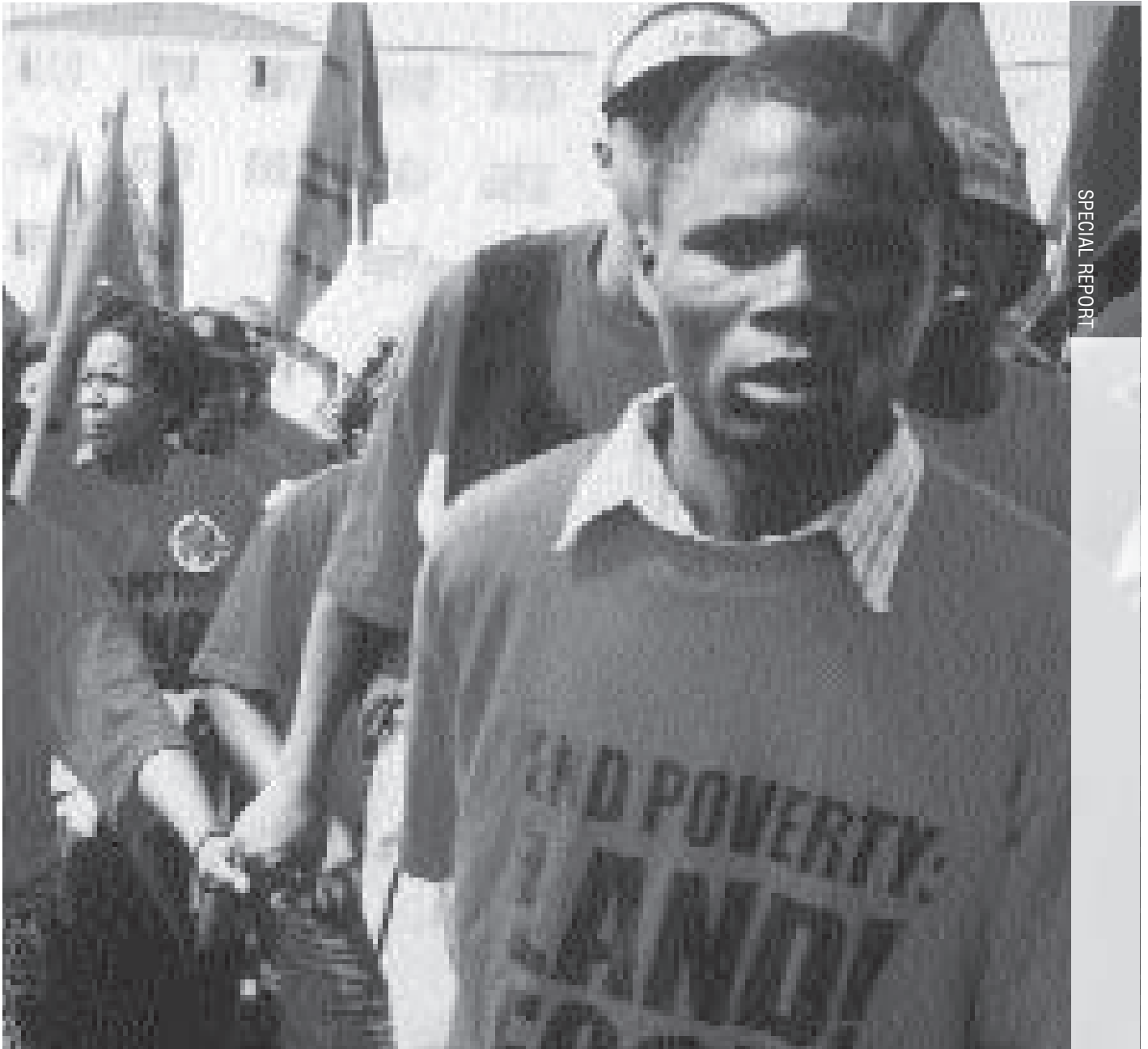
When the new dawn came in 1994 the pundits of change offered two predictions. Civil society organisations were expected to shift their focus from a largely conflictual, if not hostile, relationship with the state, to play a more supportive role. Broad-based social movements were expected to disband to make way for political parties and formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), leading to a decline in popular mobilisation. There was widespread consensus that many organisations and movements, which fought

apartheid, would fold or dramatically transform themselves for an era of institutional, rather than extra-institutional, politics.

As a broad, mass-based organisation, which demonstrated its greatest strength through popular mobilisation against apartheid, the South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) faced a dramatic challenge. Political analysts, academics, political actors, journalists, and even some members and leaders of Sanco itself, claim the organisation was in serious danger of

collapse, that it would fold or should fold, or that it has become 'moribund'. But, despite these dire predictions, Sanco maintains a significant, though weak, presence as a national body with local branches.

While it has not lived up to its aim to organise and mobilise South Africans in defence of 'people-centred, people-driven' development, Sanco's survival as an organisation challenges observers to look beyond conventional wisdom to the dynamic and evolving relationships between state and civil society actors.



Why and how has an organisation, which so many believed had outlived its usefulness, survived? In what form has it survived?

Sanco claims 4 300 branches in 56 regions and a potential membership of 6.3-million. But it doesn't have the resources to support these claims. There is no single definition that can fully describe the diversity, multiplicity and contradictions of the organisation and its branches. Some analysts claim Sanco is a body of horizontal local associations, the ideal of civil society, thriving in local communities where residents come to Sanco leaders to act

as their advocates against local government, parastatals or private actors. This is a picture of vibrant grassroots democracy within local branches. Others describe a hierarchical organisation whose structures constrain the aspirations of lower level community actors.

This is a Sanco in crisis, bankrupt, ridden by scandal, and weakened by its alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC). But there is a third view, offered by some Sanco leaders, that Sanco is a potentially vibrant and massive social movement - a 'sleeping giant'.

WHO AND WHAT IS SANCO?

Sanco is about residential proximity. While Sanco defines itself as representing the poor, it is not a narrowly defined class-based movement. Sanco's leaders claim a presence in rural and urban poor communities across all nine provinces. Local branches work quietly in their local communities and are often dormant for long periods.

Sanco's organisational model is exceptionally broad. It is a tiered, unitary civic organisation, comprised of national, provincial, regional and local branches.

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Though this seems to be a model better suited to a political party than a grassroots association, Sanco leaders have historically supported the structure in an effort to enable Sanco to speak with a single voice at the national level. Sanco's national leadership is closely allied with the ANC. Currently two of its six office bearers also hold ANC positions in national government. At the local level, many Sanco leaders are also ward councillors, and the majority hold some position working in or with local government. As a result Sanco's successes and failures have been closely tied to its ability to position itself in relation to the ruling party.

Sanco has been variously defined as a 'social movement', a 'civil society actor', and an 'institution in a state of decay'. Which definition is accurate? Does it empower the poor, and support the ideals of participation and democracy that it rhetorically champions? Does it support or challenge the ruling party?

The ANC no longer encourages popular protest, but sharply criticises, even demonises, those who champion such

actions. The government understandably calls for active support for state institutions and demands law-abiding citizens. Sanco's model of mobilised popular advocacy coupled with support for the ANC, leads to a wide range of contradictions suggesting that the model can't work. It is only by bringing together the different understandings of Sanco at the local and national level and its alliance with the ANC, that the complex dynamics become fully visible and Sanco's continued existence can be understood.

THE HISTORY OF SANCO CIVICS

At its launch as a national, unitary body in March 1992, Sanco was the subject of great debate. The organisation at this time was popularly referred to as a 'non-partisan' structure which, in the words of Dan Sandi, would play the role of 'watchdog' over local government. In their attempt to define a new role for the civic structures, Sanco leaders encouraged local civics to actively champion issues of development in the townships.

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butter' issues regardless of which party was in government. While local civics had clearly supported the ANC during the struggle against apartheid, they also consistently pressed for community reform from outside of government and outside of the established political parties.

Over time, it became increasingly clear that the academic understanding of civil society as outside of political society would be impossible to follow in practice. On one hand, the ANC supported this clear separation by stating in a political education discussion paper: 'we believe that civics have their own specific character and identity, which is different to that of the ANC. Their independence must be jealously protected'. But the same document betrays a clear suspicion of such a model of a fully independent and critical civil society in a newly liberated South Africa. The civics, for their part, tried to navigate the difficult terrain of the transition by remaining closely allied to and supportive of the ANC, but from time to time also working to assert their independence.



THE DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE

Civic leaders hoped that a close relationship with the ANC would give the national civic structure a privileged position to voice its concerns directly to government. For the first decade of its existence, Sanco was engaged in an informal alliance with the ANC. Sanco repeatedly stated that it would not work with the governing party if, in the words of Sanco's first president, Moses Mayekiso, 'its policies go against the interests of the community'. At the same time, Sanco vowed to follow a policy of constructive engagement. The current president, Mlungisi Hlongwane said in 1996: 'If you want to be an instant revolutionary these days and be involved in boycotts, Sanco is no longer a home for you'. He added: 'Although Sanco was an organisation that mastered the art of boycotts, it has made a complete break with the past. Sanco will never be the same again.'

As an example of this changing approach, the civics, which, prior to forming Sanco had championed, boycotted service payment against the apartheid regime, now urged

members to support the new government's Masakhane plan calling upon residents to pay for services.

In the run-up to the 1995 local government elections, the national structure of Sanco vowed to support the ANC, retracting its earlier muted threats to field candidates against the ANC. In return for its support, the ANC placed Sanco leaders on its election lists, ensuring many a position in local government. As a result, Sanco stood to lose the vast majority of its local, regional and national government leaders. This heightened an already pressing problem. Mayekiso left in 1994 to become a member of parliament; in January 1995, its second president, Lechesa Tsenoli, joined parliament to fill a vacancy. At this time, Sanco policy instructed that any Sanco leader joining government would have to resign from his or her position in the leadership of Sanco. Despite this fact, when over half of Sanco's leaders did enter government through local elections, many retained their Sanco leadership positions.

By the mid 1990s, the level of activity of most local civics across the country had reached a new low. As individual civic leaders, and at times entire civic structures, worked to help the ANC in national and local election campaigns, little energy was spent on traditional civic programmes. With the passage of time, attendance at civic meetings in a number of areas improved again. Community interest in civic events was, however, clearly dependent on the urgency of the matter which civic leaders hoped to address. For example, when electricity and water rate hikes were on the table, a large number of residents attended civic meetings; when local authorities threatened to switch off power, the meeting halls were overflowing.

While the national structure had rallied for a shift to development, 'development' proved to be an incredibly broad, almost all-inclusive mandate; it was up to local structures to determine what they felt their role in 'development' should be and how they should interact with government on the issues that they chose to address. A cross the

country, four broad themes of civic activity gained the greatest attention: service provision, crime, advice centres, and participation in community development projects.

While the first three clearly built upon post civic strengths, the last proved to be a new and significant challenge. Most often, local civic organisations simply did not have the necessary skills to actively participate in devising plans for community development. In some cases, they became involved as 'community partners' for privately funded development projects. The problem, however, lay in the potentially unchecked power that such opportunities offered local civic leaders. Since the link between local civic structures and regional, provincial and national Sanco structures remained incredibly weak, there was no effective system to check any potential corruption or favouritism. Hlongwane, admitted to the press in 1995 that Sanco's interactions with business donors were: 'open to manipulation'.

SANCO IN CRISIS

By 1997, just five years after its launch, Sanco was in a state of crisis. While Sanco's national leadership initially described its difficulties as a product of insufficient resources, as time progressed, it increasingly also pointed to the uncertain and difficult role that Sanco sought to play in the new democracy, and tried to find ways to address these challenges.

Since 1994, Sanco had lost many of its best leaders to government. This led the national general council to reverse its earlier policy and to allow individuals to remain in their leadership positions in Sanco while also accepting government roles. Sanco simply could not afford to lose these leaders in the short term. The problem, however, would be the longer-term impact that the 'wearing of two hats' by much of Sanco's leadership would have on the organisation. A regional Sanco leader commented: 'how will a Sanco leader, who also holds the position of councillor, conduct himself if he is called on to lead a march of residents against the local authority? Who will he lead the march against - himself?'

Sanco's claim to represent masses of community residents across the country was often greeted with scepticism, if not outright disbelief. As a result, Sanco's renewed ability to exploit its relationship with the ANC has been quite dramatic. It has allowed Sanco to maintain itself as a presence in South Africa despite its pressing weaknesses as a national structure.

Leaders at all levels of the Sanco structures complained that ANC leaders often attempted to give them instructions, and that ANC officials felt they had the right to veto Sanco programmes. But conflicts between Sanco and non-Sanco ANC members were most common at local government level. When civic branches criticised the work of local government in general or ANC councillors in particular, local ANC leaders often responded defensively and even aggressively.

Adding to its difficulties, Sanco was desperately short of resources. By 1996, Sanco national had also lost its last significant external donor support, leading the national office to cut its remaining two administrative staff members after six others had left earlier in the year. Sanco's attempts to represent the interests of the poor were significantly eroded by a simple inability to maintain offices and staff, to pay officers and assistants so that they might work for Sanco full-time and attend relevant community and government meetings, and participate in development and other stakeholder forums. In order to address this crisis, two major initiatives were established: a national investment arm, and a national membership. While both still exist today, neither brought the financial rewards that Sanco supporters had expected. The difficulties which both experienced also led to a number of scandals.

Muttering at grassroots became loudest. The unitary structure of Sanco fuelled tensions between the various levels by effectively making each level of Sanco responsible to the next higher level rather than the one below. While it is possible that local civics would have acceded to this power structure if they felt that they received something in return, given the dire financial state of the national office, local civics gained

few resources from their affiliation to Sanco. Sanco's lack of capacity also prevented its national structures from effectively addressing national issues relevant to the civics.

Given these difficulties, local structures within Sanco often found much to complain about. Those that complained the loudest tended to be some of the strongest structures prior to the formation of Sanco and those who had the fewest of their former leaders represented at the highest levels of the Sanco structures; these were, amongst others, the civics in South Africa's commercial heartland, Gauteng.

It was here, in 1997, that a combination of suspensions and resignations of a number of popular leaders severely fractured the civics. The debates within Sanco's ranks concerning each of these long-time civic leaders were both public and vicious. Sanco's response to the defections from its ranks did not help its public image. Its leaders frequently characterised the moves made by individual leaders away from Sanco as moves away from the ANC.

A number of local civic structures increasingly distanced themselves from Sanco and returned to the earlier strength of the civics - their localised nature.

REASSESSING SANCO'S ROLE

In response to this crisis, Sanco began to reassess itself. At Sanco's 1997 National Congress, in a clear attempt to tap into what they observed as a growing restlessness and frustration within many townships, Sanco leaders argued that they would not work through negotiations alone. In 1998, Sanco's president asserted: 'It (Sanco) will not discard its tactics of protest and mass action which it used in the '80s to effectively combat apartheid'. Such arguments clearly contradicted Sanco's earlier rhetoric that a

new era in South African politics meant a departure from revolutionary and mass action tactics.

A 1999 Sanco discussion document caused intense debate by suggesting, among other things, that Sanco should formally leave the sphere of civil society to enter political society and contest local government elections.

While this proposal was not endorsed and Sanco national again pledged its support for the ANC in the 2000 local government elections, the Eastern Cape region of Sanco defied this directive and vowed to support independent candidates. The president of Sanco, clearly rattled, threatened that an intervention from the national office might become necessary if there was no change in approach, but the regional leaders were undaunted.

Despite their efforts none of the Port Elizabeth candidates won local office. National leaders of Sanco employed this lack of success at the polls to underline their pronouncements that Sanco would not and should not become a political party. Despite these arguments, concerns, particularly within the ANC, that Sanco might reconsider, clearly remain.

The next seemingly viable option, for Sanco to operate as a 'self-sustaining, commercially-focused and mass-based development agency', was presented as a more realistic but still not optimal choice. The discussion document authors argued that this would leave Sanco 'without any genuine political agenda' and that this option made sense only if 'we believe that we no longer have political space because of the democratic dispensation'. The final option was Sanco as a revolutionary social movement.

Hlongwane's victory in the presidential contest at Sanco's third national conference and the eventual collapse of the alternative

models, seemed to suggest that Sanco would follow the final option and transform itself into a truly revolutionary social movement. The conference's resolutions and Hlongwane's statements, however, demonstrated that Sanco would not fully pursue the distinct path laid out in the discussion document. This path placed considerable emphasis upon Sanco's independence from the ANC and the need for an end to the 'two-hats' policy.

In 2000 and 2001, Sanco engaged in a number of actions, which directly challenged the core principles of the government's macroeconomic policy. In May 2000, for example, Sanco, along with Cosatu and other organisations, protested Johannesburg's Igoli 2002 plan. In 2001, Sanco joined Cosatu's two-day stayaway to protest privatisation. The ANC was clearly frustrated by Sanco's support for the growing anti-privatisation movement championed, not just by Cosatu, but also by new bodies such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), which ANC leaders had collectively branded as 'ultra-left'.

Between the 2001 and 2002 Cosatu anti-privatisation strikes, Sanco's national leaders reconsidered their support for Cosatu. Sanco leaders underlined that their first priority was helping poor communities and that this concern importantly included the efficient delivery of basic services. Second, they were concerned by the conflict between Cosatu and the ANC which Sanco leaders defined as increasingly unproductive. It is clear that Sanco's leaders felt pressed to choose a side in the polarising debate. When Cosatu launched its next anti-privatisation strike in 2002, Sanco pulled out at the last minute. Hlongwane explained: 'The tone had changed... because we started realising that the issues that Cosatu were (sic) advancing were beginning to be much more broader than just fighting against privatisation, but it was beginning to question the leadership of the African National Congress in the alliance. It was also beginning to send wrong political messages to the masses on the ground about our confidence in an ANC government... In our view, it was departing completely from what we understood as the glue that held the alliance together, the fundamental pillars of

the alliance which included our shared vision of a society crafted along the principles of the Freedom Charter.'

Sanco national had both strategic and substantive reasons for withdrawing its support. In direct contrast to new movements such as the APF, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), which directly challenged not only forceful state-supported or state-led actions such as service cuts and home evictions but also the very policies of the state, Sanco leaders endorsed the state's cost recovery model of development.

Sanco's strategic decision, while creating some confusion and provoking sporadic resistance in local areas, did pay off in terms of the national structure's formal relationship with the ANC. In November, Sanco strengthened its ties to the ANC by electing two senior ANC members to Sanco's senior leadership. The Minister of Public Enterprises, Jeff Radebe joined the national executive committee, and Susan Shabangu, the Deputy Minister of Minerals and Energy, became Sanco's treasurer. At the ANC's national conference in December, President Mbeki importantly called upon the ANC to expand the tripartite alliance to a quad alliance, which would include Sanco as a full member. As the ANC sought to revive its branches and its connection to township residents in the wake of growing discontent and the rise of new social movements challenging the government, it was clearly reaching out to Sanco for help. In the run-up to the next elections, the ANC sought Sanco's support for door-to-door community campaigns in return for greater acknowledgement of Sanco's role as an alliance partner.

EXPANDING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

During the first decade of democratic rule, Sanco experienced a sharp decline as a national civic structure; it suffered multiple public crises and many of its local branches simply ceased to operate. Many of those that continued to exist were often dormant until a local crisis occurred. Sanco's claim to represent masses of community residents across the country was often greeted with



scepticism, if not outright disbelief. As a result, Sanco's renewed ability to exploit its relationship with the ANC has been quite dramatic. It has allowed Sanco to maintain itself as a presence in South Africa despite its pressing weaknesses as a national structure. Sanco could not realistically claim the breadth of support that it did, but it could finesse its position between the ANC and the local communities where it did still have effective and popular local leaders.

Sanco's greatest public coup through the alliance with the ANC concerned electricity arrears in Soweto. Sanco's overall policy supported the logic of the credit control measures, even where this meant widespread electricity disconnections and the installation of waterflow restrictors. As residents became increasingly desperate and angry, groups such as the SECC, which took a more radical approach, gained in popularity.

Sanco's response to this challenge was to leverage its position by threatening mass action in an attempt to upstage the SECC while simultaneously presenting itself as a credible negotiating partner with Eskom. In 2002, Sanco participated in negotiations with Eskom and government representatives, which led to an agreement that residents with faulty meters would pay a flat fee of R120 per month until their meter was fixed. In local

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areas such as Zola, civic leaders strategically drew attention to these agreements to try to convince community residents that Sanco, rather than the SECC, would find a solution to their problems. Sanco effectively sought to assert itself as the primary broker between township residents and state actors.

Sanco's triumph came in May 2003. Eskom and the Ministry of Public Enterprises along with the Human Rights Commission and Sanco came to an agreement to write off R1,39-billion in Johannesburg arrears. While this write-off was clearly in response to the great impact that groups like the SECC and APF had upon government policy, Sanco, rather than the SECC or APF, was included in the negotiations as a public representative, and therefore given at least formal credit for the write-off.

Sanco therefore presented itself to local communities as a problem solver, which could employ its relationship with the government to address residents' concerns. In contrast, in Tshwane, where Sanco leaders participated in a series of negotiations with the metropolitan government council and where no group such as the SECC had engaged in large mobilisations prior to negotiations, the council refused Sanco's request to write off outstanding arrears.

Sanco's success on the question of electricity arrears in Tshwane was therefore limited by its relatively non-confrontational approach, but Tshwane's greater vibrancy as a

local Sanco region was a result of a diversity of seemingly contradictory tactics. Tshwane serves as an interesting case study of a Sanco region, as it is both an active region and remains connected to the higher-level structures of Sanco. It therefore serves as an excellent example of both the strengths and limitations of the Sanco model where it works effectively.

Though Sanco believed in protest action only as a last resort, local Sanco leaders repeatedly argued that it was necessary to demonstrate their capacity for protest and even the potential to cause 'damage' to draw attention to their concerns.

Sanco leaders openly acknowledged that their actions contradicted Sanco policies, but noted that this was simply the most effective way of bringing about change. Sanco leaders therefore navigated a careful line of supporting popular community demands while presenting themselves as viable and reliable negotiators with local government authorities. This brokerage role allowed Sanco to exploit its local position as well as its alliance with the ANC. In this case, what was often seen as an impediment was turned into a strength. Sanco could capture the power of a locally based social movement by encouraging protest, and harness its politically connected national institutional structure.

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SANCO TODAY

Sanco defines itself today as a revolutionary social movement seeking to promote 'people-driven and people-centred development'. Sanco leaders argue that they have opened doors for greater participation in public debates by engaging government within established institutional structures and convincing the ANC of the importance of Sanco as an alliance partner. This naturally leads to the question, asked by many, as to whether Sanco has simply been co-opted by,

or sought to be co-opted by the ANC.

Local and national Sanco leaders consistently argue that Sanco does not seek to draw attention to itself through the media and that it seeks to bring about change through negotiation. This clearly clouds the question of co-option, because Sanco leaders will argue that their interests in general correspond to those of the ANC government. It is therefore difficult to demonstrate recent instances in which Sanco as a national body has affected changes in government policy.

One Sanco officer, a well-known Tshwane leader who is now the organising secretary for Sanco Gauteng, argued that Sanco's overall role is to ease relations between township residents and the government. Sanco clearly plays this brokerage role. It has positioned itself as an intermediary between communities and local government authorities. How well it plays this role and whether or not in doing so it represents the interests of the majority of local residents, completely depends upon the actions of local Sanco leaders. Tshwane's success has been a result of the dedication of its leaders and their ability to work within the given context. Where local leaders can effectively manage the contradictions they face, they can potentially help both government and poor communities. Where, as is often the case, Sanco structures are weak or non-existent and local Sanco leaders are seen as too closely allied with government, or are government leaders themselves, frustrated communities have increasingly organised alternative movements to more directly challenge the state.

Sanco leaders openly admit that the national level of Sanco has become largely irrelevant to local communities across the country and that it has not effectively responded to issues arising in local communities. They add, however, that Sanco will continue to exist, regardless of the strength, weakness, or perhaps even existence of Sanco national.

The last five years have been quite clearly marked by the rise of new, radical social movements, rather than the revitalisation of Sanco as a mass-based, revolutionary actor. Though Sanco national has made considerable

strides in encouraging ANC leaders to publicly acknowledge and praise the role of Sanco, there is little evidence that Sanco has been able to act as a full member of the alliance, except in implementing election campaigns preceding national and provincial elections. Sanco has failed to follow the course of the revolutionary social movement that it set out for itself. In areas such as Tshwane, local Sanco branches are quite vibrant and leaders are engaged in an impressive schedule of meetings to discuss local concerns and the most effective means of addressing them. But even here, local leaders admit significant difficulties in signing up members and relaunching branches in areas that have ceased to operate.

CONTINUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Many analysts and political actors who expected or called for Sanco's demise following South Africa's formal transition to a democratic state, argued that the changing context and its new political opportunities and constraints worked against a civil society organisation as broad as Sanco. Sanco's model, many argued, was only viable in a non-democratic state in which truly oppositional political parties were banned and government sought to repress, rather than represent, the majority of the population.

In this earlier context, a broad range of civics offered local residents the opportunity, not only to meet and discuss local concerns, but also to pressure the state to address these concerns. With the legalisation of banned opposition parties and the advent of a democratic state, the institutions of the state were now meant to take over many of the roles that the civics had performed, thereby making them redundant. This static and one-dimensional understanding of political opportunity misinterpreted the developing context.

These arguments failed to recognise the severe challenges faced by the new local authorities after 1994, and the ways in which these challenges were to affect citizen-government interactions. Local and national government simply could not meet the overwhelming material needs of poor communities, from housing and services to

jobs and security. Local government authorities were under-resourced and far too frequently failed to adequately represent, let alone meet, the basic concerns of their constituents. The increasing material deprivation and the dearth of popular local representation that followed the formal transition of power, provided a space for Sanco branches to continue to operate; it also provided an opportunity for a new breed of social movement which would stand to the left of Sanco and put far greater pressure upon the state to meet popular demands than Sanco was able or willing to do. This combination of the state's lack of local capacity and the growth of these new radical movements, offered Sanco an opportunity to navigate the gap by employing the potential influence of its remaining local branches to broadly support the ANC government.

Sanco's loss of resources after 1994, both material and human, dealt the organisation a major blow from which it never fully recovered - but Sanco is not moribund. It has a presence at the national level as an ally of the ANC and has sustained itself as an actor in numerous local communities despite its weaknesses. Local Sanco branches, Sanco leaders and even the Sanco dissidents who have formed competing civic organisations, hold on to the model of the national, broad-based civic in contrast to what they refer to as single issue campaigns, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Landless People's Movement (LPM) or the SECC. In this way, Sanco has roundly defeated the prophets of doom and analysts who pointed to the opportunity structure of the new democratic

dispensation to argue that there was no room for such a broad structure. Clearly, the space for Sanco is limited. It is frequently caught between its challenge to and its support for the ANC government, and between its local and national interests. But what political opportunity theorists missed were the possibilities for Sanco to build upon the discontinuities within its own structures and the wider political system. Sanco's continued ability to navigate the local contradictions of democratic rule do not, however, imply that it successfully empowers the poor and marginalised. While Sanco's local support rests upon its representation of community needs, its national level support (from the ANC) at times seems to rest upon its ability to effectively contain community demands. As a result, Sanco's overall impact upon redistribution and democratisation is mixed. While it may champion popular representation at the local level, the structure of the national organisation channels and co-opts such representation. In this way, Sanco clearly assists the ANC in pursuing its goals for the development of a new South Africa and to represent those who endorse its policies. Its continued existence will therefore remain closely tied to the successes and, more importantly, shortcomings, of the ANC government.

16

Zuem is an assistant professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College in the US. This is an edited version of a case study prepared for the UKZN project entitled: 'Globalisation, Marginalisation and the New Social Movements in post-Apartheid SA'.

