The management of parks and nature reserves in Johannesburg – exploring partnerships between communities and City Parks

The cases of Golden Harvest, James and Ethel Gray, Mshenguville Parks & Melville Koppies, Klipriviersberg Nature Reserves

A class research project, by 3rd year Planning & Politics students, Wits University, coordinated by Prof Claire Benit-Gbaffou

Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) is currently aiming at developing partnerships with park users committees (that they term, using a British expression, Friends of the Park, FoPs). This is a response to the chronic lack of funding that has hampered park management for more than a decade, and has led to the de facto delegation of parks management to local communities (with formal or informal agreement between the City and groups of residents). This is simultaneously an innovative attempt to make government more responsive to the people – as emblematised by City Parks’ institutional shift: it used to report to the Environmental Sector, and, since 2011, under the name JCPZ, reports to Community Development.

This conjunction of neoliberalisation (the scarcity of public funding for public amenities, leading to forms of delegation and alternative fund-raising initiatives), and democratisation (partnerships with civil society and the increased accountability at the local level this may imply), makes the study of parks management in Johannesburg at this point in time particularly interesting. What can be learnt from these engagements, what are inspiring examples and counter-examples of joint problem-solving? What would need clarification and formalisation, what should remain informal?

Our selection of parks (and nature reserves) for this study was therefore based on the existence of park users mobilisation (with different degrees of formalisation), in engagement with JCPZ. This seemed to exist in suburban/ peripheral parks, where a stable residents basis exists. We also were interested in regional diversity, and selected parks across the whole metropolitan area.

Golden Harvest Park

► Long standing and dynamic Friends of the Park committee: meeting once a month, together with Park manager, consisting of middle aged white professionals, most of them passionate about the environment and residing around the park.
► Under-used yet beautiful and well-managed wild park. FoP emphasize a conservation agenda (park almost treated as a nature reserve), and tries to incite City Parks staff to remove alien plants. Emphasis on water quality in the dam (monitoring, investigation with JRA about sewerage water leakage, etc): FoP exploring (and overcoming?) some of the fragmentation of the City.
► Presence of houses in the park (City staff, tenants, squatters). Some houses are derelict, some are under renovation (but no sense of a master plan nor overall vision). FoP has been calling for the eviction of residents (houses as a missed opportunity for nature oriented activities); not considering that residents might provide, if accepted and integrated, natural surveillance for the park (“eyes on the park”), in the absence of dedicated parks personnel.

Main lesson for CJPZ – Continue with regular technical engagement, develop joint strategic vision and share a bit of power

In spite of a functional technical partnerships, it seems FoP are not part of decisions to renovate specific houses – not informed, not consulted, not mobilised. This creates unnecessary frustration amongst FoP, and limits potential for innovation and commitment. Jointly crafting a Master plan could reconstruct a dynamic of partnership.
A long and fraught engagement with local communities

► Contestation around the development of the park by a residents’ Committee: JCPZ is developing an ‘eco-park’; whilst a group of residents claims it should be a golf course (as it used to be in the past). How can “the masses demand a golf course”? Nostalgia, pride in what made the place unique, golf as ‘heritage’, aspiration to middle class status, fear against an ‘eco-park’ (perceived as poorly managed, low-cost type of park), desire for diversification in Soweto’s open spaces and sports?

► JCPZ’s justification for an eco-park is confused and confusing. It mentions environmental concerns, limitations in park development budget, issue of principle (golf as elitist), and level of operational costs to manage a golf course. This lack of clarity is disempowering, preventing the Committee from developing responses to those valid points (e.g. environmental mitigation, step by step development, education programme to broaden access to golf, residents’ participation in management)

► JCPZ confusion might stem from a long and contradictory history of plans for this park. Staff turnover and City Parks reshuffling lead to a loss of institutional memory and a lack of continuity, creating frustration amongst residents. Expectations of a golf course were created by a 2010 golf course design, disappointed by an unfavourable (but ambiguous) Environmental Impact Assessment in 2013, shattered by a new eco park design in 2014 – all this with limited and unsatisfactory community engagement and participation.

► Missed opportunities for constructive engagement with a mobilised group of residents: confusion and opacity, blurred memories and unclear City discourses lead to rising anger and oppositional mobilisation, instead of constructive engagement.

(Not) learning from past mistakes in Mofolo Park

- Jane Jacobs: the surroundings of the park are key to its success (both in its use and in its management). There needs to be specific attention paid to the borders of a park, that need to be activated, and the mobility patterns across a park that allow for a diversity of uses at various times of the day.
- Mofolo Park: only half of the park is developed, the other half (reeds on the stream, litter, cattle, hazard) is undeveloped – yet it is precisely the interface between park and residents.
- This lack of attention to the interface residents-park lead to vandalism and lack of appropriation of the developed portion of the park ➔ long term management challenges

Cattle in the park! Or elephant in the room

► Like in Mofolo park, Mshenguville park is used by cattle grazing in the open space, belonging to various hostels indunas. It is a whole economy; an informal but legitimate use; a form of urban agriculture.

► Nobody seems eager to engage these stakeholders, and yet their presence is glaring. There is no strategy at JCPZ around cattle grazing in Soweto, and yet they are to be affected by the current policy of developing parks in Sowetan open spaces.

► Or, would the pattern of developing only half of the park (as in Mofolo), although not making sense from a parks use and management perspective, be a way of informally sharing space without confronting or even engaging indunas?

► Developing ‘half-parks’ in this way is not conducive to community engagement in the everyday management of their park. It is shortsighted and detrimental to the management of the parks.
Two organisations are involved in the management of the park: Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve Association (KNRA), a conservation-oriented association who was delegated the management of the reserve since its creation, and KlipSA, a coalition of entrepreneurs interested in developing the South of Johannesburg around tourism and the green economy.

Since 2012 JCPZ decided to regain control over KNR management. It may have been done abruptly – hiring KNRA former employee (requested to report to JCPZ, no longer to KNRA); changing the facilities lock to prevent KNRA from using it.

This led to a raging battle via the media, and an attempted conflict resolution through the establishment of a KNR Forum – with City parks, KNRA and KlipSA.

Tension erupted around the (much needed) upgrade of the entrance to the reserve. JCPZ presented the design to the Forum as a ‘concept’ to be further debated, but started construction short after. Officials fear residents systemic and frontal opposition whilst residents resent lack of transparency and respect.

Main lesson for CJPZ – Be clear on the rules of the game, consistently engage, share some power
Lack of continuous engagement, lack of clarity on respective mandates (and their shift), half-truths, concealed documents and decisions from JCPZ have consolidated tension and rigidified oppositional stances instead of exploring possible compromises and agreements. This has led to a vicious circle of disrespect and distrust.

Melville Koppies Nature Reserve

Melville Koppies Management Committee is a strong group of passionate and committed people. Most of its members have expertise in the environment and are also voluntary tour guides.

MKMC funds through organising monthly guided hikes (in the closed, central part of the reserve), as well as donations in particular appealing to the academic community nearby. With this regular budget it can hire staff to maintain the park.

MKMC has integrated members of the church coming to pray on the koppies – unlike many other parks and nature reserves which tend to reject them. Most of the churchgoers belong to the African Independent Churches, whose representatives participate in MKMC and have been hired as full-time conservation staff. This integration also means that MKMC can require churchgoers to follow certain rules, such as picking up litter, gathering in specific spots to limit environmental damage and far away from residences to decrease noise disturbance.

The main challenge encountered by MKMC is rising security issues – some criminals use the koppies as a high point to spot their victims, and even attack groups embarking on guided tours. This has reached a point where MKMC hires a security guard (additional to those manning the gates) to safeguard the guided tours. Clearly permanent staff is lacking to ensure minimum security – JCPZ seems a bit absent.

Main lesson – Integrating church goers a sharp move!
By integrating churchgoers rather than rejecting them, FoP have transformed an issue into a solution. Not only do they adopt a progressive view of ‘conservation’, and are they becoming more integrated and able to understand one another; but they also can negotiate basic rules with church goers, that contributes to a better management of the reserve.
James and Ethel Gray Park

- No structured Friends of the Park but active residents associations (Birdhaven Ratepayers, Melrose North Residents), coordinated by an active ward Councillor.
- One recurring issue for the park users committee is the unilateral organisation of events by JCPZ. As it is a small park surrounded by houses on two of its sides (freeway and golf course on the other), disturbance caused by events is high. Protocols for events management (mitigation of noise and disruption) should be applied bringing events organiser, City Parks and park users together – it is not always the case and there is no clarity amongst park users on what due process is.
- Chronic issue of homeless people present in the southern part of the park. Taking stock of the failure of repressive tactics, the park manager decided to rather integrate the homeless people in the park. The park becomes a shelter at night, on the condition homeless people clean their litter in the morning. JCPZ provides them with litter bags, and allows them to informally use his office for ablutions. This has changed the face of the park, now much cleaner.
- A similar issue exists with several groups of recyclers, who live in the Bird Conservancy behind Pikitup depot. Attempts to pragmatically integrate them and respond to their needs (organising a dedicated area for them to sort the reclaimed waste), as to better manage their impact on the park, have failed so far.

Main lessons: Park in the day, shelter at night?

Being pragmatic and practical rather than wishing the issue away (which makes it permanent and unmanageable): integrating rather than evicting is generally a more sustainable solution.

Concluding reflections

- **FoPs’ perceptions: confusion and opacity** around City Parks strategies, visions and processes for park management and development. This leads to a blaming, not fixing attitude; conflict rather than cooperation; inability to invent and sustain practical solutions. Only through regular engagement can FoPs start understanding CJPZ own structures, constraints and ways of working, and build from there solutions that can work.

- **Benefit of formalising Friends of the Park** as a conduit for better communication (on institutions and on projects) can only be reaped if JCPZ invests into Friends of the park mobilisation / consolidation, by official regularly attending meetings, following up on issues, providing clear and honest information, being clear on constraints and processes.

- **Important concerns around balancing conservation vs commercial development, residents’ tranquillity versus events organisation: a necessary public debate** rather than hidden agendas and avoidance tactics. This debate however cannot happen in a context of distrust, half-truths, lack of recognition and respect.

- **Give and take** – If FoP are going to continue participating in parks management, fundraising, etc., JCPZ needs to give them some role in decision-making (and minimally, demonstrate consideration by consulting and informing if not fully partnering). Unilateral decisions on renovation, phasing, facility developments, events organisations, cannot work in this context, even if CJPZ ultimately makes the decisions. It might help to clarify the current or desired distribution of roles and functions of each partner – but JCPZ might need to let go certain prerogatives if it wants a true partnership.

The team

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Look for the full report on [www.wits.ac.za/cubes](http://www.wits.ac.za/cubes), Feb 2016.