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Solidarity Networks as Entities for Resolving Conflicts

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Introduction: Neighborhood Networks at Mafala (Maputo City)

The successive crises and transitions which marked the 1980s and 1990s in Mozambique played a significant role in the process that brought about the weakening of the state. The state's inability to supply basic services to the population (Santos, 1998b: 11) meant that part of this social management was transferred to "civil society," which has begun to exercise many functions linked to the production of economic and social well-being – through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations and a variety of solidarity networks originating out of the networks of primary relationships (family and neighbors, professional, ethnic and friendship groups, etc.) existing in society (Nunes, 1995: 10-11). It was the weakness of the state, rather than its authoritarian power, that undermined its authority, and it was its absence and inability to produce basic services that led to an increase in alternative forms of social management.

The 'network approach' was used successfully for several decades to analyze urban social phenomena. Nowadays it is applied to the study of wider phenomena, such as situations of conflict, political power or even the analysis of problems such as hunger, vulnerability and poverty, as it improves understanding of the different types of existing strategies, particularly the aid networks developed to deal with these problems (Loforte, 1996; Andrade *et al.*, 1998; Ministry of Planning and Finance, 1998).

In Mozambique, where a process of urbanization marked by a large country-to-city migratory flow can be witnessed, the social relations created within society are vital, since they generate mechanisms that can deal with daily life and develop strategies over a longer period of time. The impact of social urban space on the structuring of

social bonds between people in relation to the economic, social and political situation that has characterized Mozambique during recent decades is not easy to measure. If, on the one hand, it is not possible to ignore the fact that many of the norms relating to a rural environment have been transferred and adapted to an urban context (and are relevant for an understanding of the systems of rights and obligations which are part of many of these urban groups, in which 'customary norms' continue to offer a certain security in the process of social relations), on the other hand we can also encounter cases in which these various survival strategies have been redefined. This not only reinforces 'customary norms', but also recreates new relationships based on solidarity, in which, for example, neighborhood relationships begin to play an essential role in developing bonds of solidarity and mutual help.

The networks constitute a social capital which may be defined in terms of the reciprocal relationships existing in society, based on social bonds in which factors such as the sex, age, religion and social position of their members define hierarchies and power relationships, and in which existing norms and relationships of trust, aid, cooperation and coordination work to the benefit of all (Loforte, 1996; Andrade *et al.*, 1998).

The study of alternative forms of social management involving the use of the network approach, in the context in which we propose to analyze such forms, necessarily entails using and working with concepts such as family and parenthood,¹ due to the essential role which cooperative relations established through the family represent in the construction and reconstruction of solidarity networks. Thus, while it is not our intention to analyze the various forms of theoretical approach which can be applied to the concept of family, we cannot ignore the fact that it represents a privileged space for the social construction of reality, in which, through the relationship between its members, socialization is produced (Saraceno, 1997), and in which relational dimensions (relationships of a family nature, affectivity or affinity), spatial dimensions (expressed as cohabitation) and economic dimensions (the common budget) all play an essential role in defining the strategies of the *amakhuwa*² in the Bairro da Mafalala (Mafalala neighborhood),³ even if we consider that the applicability of these relationships may vary, according to the complexities that characterize the country (Andrade *et al.*, 1998).

1. Social Management and Its Alternatives in an Urban Context

Using the case study of the Mafalala neighborhood in the city of Maputo, we proposed to identify the role played by solidarity networks in the resolution of litigation, within a situation of legal plurality such as the existence of community courts and traditional authorities. It is necessary to extend the vision of the administration of justice in Mozambique, in this case with specific reference to the urban forms of informal conflict management.

Actors and Networks

Starting with the option of working in an urban environment, the study of Mafalala, a community mainly composed of a Muslim population of *makhuwa* origin, enabled us to identify a privileged socio-cultural space in which the dynamics of solidarity networks could be understood. Since in the analysis of networks we are always confronted with contexts and social processes which can change at any moment, this case study makes visible the effects of the economic and social policies introduced in the country over the last two decades, as well as the alternatives used by this community to face situations of need produced by the fact that the state is not able to offer a number of basic services. In the process of establishing alternative strategies to deal with existing needs and access to basic services, the study identified: i) a set of primary solidarity networks (parenthood, co-residence, neighborhood and religion) that members appealed to in order to receive material or extra-economic support in situations of crisis; ii) societies and mutual aid groups of an informal nature (funeral societies, savings and mutual aid groups as well as women's committees); iii) formal associations with recreational and supportive aims, which functioned as resources in cases of need.

Social control and Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution

The informal systems of social control, which normally include mechanisms for the resolution of litigation, are therefore managed within the various networks which we have identified, functioning as first or second instances, according to each individual case. Working as mediators, members of these networks use rhetoric to persuade the different parties involved in disputes, since their authority is restricted to the power to arbitrate conferred upon them by the parties involved. The most frequent types of disputes include marital conflicts, conflicts between parents and children and conflicts between neighbors. Although these may be considered exceptions, the research team also observed that cases such as crime, robbery and commercial types of litigation were also submitted to arbitration through these networks, without the intervention of state justice, and also involved the use of persuasion. The Mafalala study showed that most litigation rarely leaves the community area, where it is settled, and is only rarely resolved by other bodies, such as the police or the courts. Cases involving some types of economic conflict and disputes over property or the custody of children are normally reserved for the latter institutions and only after the parents and the religious community have been consulted. We are looking at a situation in which legal demand is preferentially met through informal mechanisms, not just for economic and social reasons but also due to the cultural weight of Islam.

Notes

- 1 Seen as relationships based on solidarity and reciprocity.
- 2 A matriarchal society from northern Mozambique.

- 3 Because Maputo city holds the statute of a province, it is divided into several municipal districts, mirroring the overall administrative division of the country. Each of the municipal districts (five in all) is divided into neighborhoods. Mafalala is part of Municipal District 3. For further details see also note 18 in chapter 1.