

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 47 | Number 1 | January 2016

## OPENING GOVERNANCE

Editors Duncan Edwards  
and Rosie McGee



# Contents

<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	iii
<b>Introduction: Opening Governance – Change, Continuity and Conceptual Ambiguity</b> Rosie McGee and Duncan Edwards	1
<b>When Does ICT-Enabled Citizen Voice Lead to Government Responsiveness?</b> Tiago Peixoto and Jonathan Fox	23
<b>ICTs Help Citizens Voice Concerns over Water – Or Do They?</b> Katharina Welle, Jennifer Williams and Joseph Pearce	41
<b>When Does the State Listen?</b> Miguel Loureiro, Aalia Cassim, Terence Darko, Lucas Katera and Nyambura Salome	55
<b>'You Have to Raise a Fist!': Seeing and Speaking to the State in South Africa</b> Elizabeth Mills	69
<b>The Right of Access to Information: Exploring Gender Inequities</b> Laura Neuman	83
<b><u>Men and Women of Words: How Words Divide and Connect the Bunge La Mwananchi Movement in Kenya</u></b> David Calleb Otieno, Nathaniel Kabala, Patta Scott-Villiers, Gacheke Gachihi and Diana Muthoni Ndung'u	99
<b>Test It and They Might Come: Improving the Uptake of Digital Tools in Transparency and Accountability Initiatives</b> Christopher Wilson and Indra de Lanerolle	113
<b>The Dark Side of Digital Politics: Understanding the Algorithmic Manufacturing of Consent and the Hindering of Online Dissidence</b> Emiliano Treré	127
<b>Glossary</b>	139

# Men and Women of Words: How Words Divide and Connect the Bunge La Mwananchi Movement in Kenya

David Calleb Otieno, Nathaniel Kabala,  
Patta Scott-Villiers, Gacheke Gachihi and  
Diana Muthoni Ndung'u\*

**Abstract** How does a movement for social justice, whose members are mainly drawn from the lower economic strata of society, build and sustain its power in the face of co-option, and social and geographical division? Members of the Bunge La Mwananchi movement in Kenya explored this question using action research. The movement carves spaces for debate and activism in the urban public sphere accessible to the unrepresented masses. The authorities leave these spaces mostly unmolested, in part because co-option by politicians and civil society organisations is as effective at wrong-footing the movement as mass arrests and riot police would be. The research reminded the members that the movement's power has always lain in its efforts to reach across internal divisions of ethnicity, gender, class and geography. As the research connected the debaters in one site with those in another, it demonstrated how communicative enquiry works to create solidarity within this most grass-roots of movements.

## 1 Introduction

*I'm one of the people who started Bunge La Mwananchi. We had numerous challenges from the then government. We were arrested many times but we did not give up. At some point, the movement had gone silent until in 2002 and in 2003, it was fully revived. We have not had a downtime in its operation since then. Kibaki's government elected in 2002 gave us a lot of hope in having a better country since it had taken in a number of people from the movement. We felt that the citizen would be more powerful since there was support from the government. Bunge La Mwananchi started getting a name then. However, this was short-lived. Those we had set our hopes on were absorbed in the system and did not advance the course of the movement (Bunge La Mwananchi organiser).<sup>1</sup>*

Gacheke Gachihi, a long-time organiser for Bunge<sup>2</sup> La Mwananchi<sup>3</sup> (BLM), the People's Parliament, describes it as a movement whose

aims are to bring about 'a Kenya where citizens enjoy unfettered sovereignty to organise to free themselves from all forms of oppression and domination' (Gachihi 2014). It is a social movement<sup>4</sup> that conducts its business in open parks, bus stands, markets, community centres and newspaper stands. A vocal grass-roots organisation, with no formal membership required, it is made up of whoever chooses to be part of it. The majority of its members come from the lower socioeconomic strata of Kenyan society (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010). Its leaders (spokespeople, organisers, activists) emerge from within its membership. These are Eric Hoffer's 'articulate minority', the men and women of words whose eloquence, ideas, organising capabilities and energy drive them to lead discussions, mobilise action, plan campaigns, lead demonstrations and think up and deploy slogans with style and passion (Hoffer 1951: 104; Nasong'o 2007). It is a movement that offers its members a space not otherwise open to them to listen, exchange ideas, propose and act on public affairs. Formal civil society organisations (CSOs) – registered and funded by governments, foundations, charities and the private sector – do not appear to BLM members to offer such a space for the real participation of the lower economic classes. The formal political system likewise does not invite them in on equal terms.

The people's parliaments occupy spaces that are autonomous and open, carved out of the intermediate geographies of the official and private property city by the presence and commitment of unrepresented people. This article looks at how the movement loses and gains power, as its men and women of words are dragged outwards by the centrifugal effects of money and social division, and pulled inwards by their commitment.

The movement thrives on discussion; indeed it was founded in the face of prohibitions on free speech about public affairs at a time when public talk, especially from low-paid formal and informal sector workers, unemployed, homeless, street workers and students was strongly repressed by the ruling Kenya African National Union regime. It grew in the streets of Nairobi's city centre in the early 1990s, emerging from street gatherings such as the 'Kafiri Movement' in Aga Khan Walk, at a time when President Moi's hold on power was being challenged by rising social unrest (Murunga and Nasong'o 2007: 9). Activists on street corners began organising political education for Nairobi workers on themes of African liberation. The movement itself first appeared in the late nineties, carving out a physical space for public discussion on two facing benches in Jeevanjee Gardens, a public park in the centre of the city, whose worn-out grassy squares, shady trees and time-worn statue of Queen Victoria had just been saved from the developers' bulldozers by public activists (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010). A few years later the space and the talk took on the name of Bunge La Mwananchi, 'the People's Parliament', as debates in the park took place on two facing benches with a speaker between, modelled on African village parliaments (Gachihi 2014). Such parliaments are usually to be found under a tree whose shade defines a set of procedural rules of inclusion, debate and decision (Brocklesby, Holey and Scott-Villiers 2010). The

name not only draws on Africa's great past, but also characterises the movement's appeal to an irony-appreciative section of Kenya's poorer and more radical-idealistic elements by referring to the present constitutional parliament at City Square in Nairobi.

By claiming to be a parliament for the people, the movement critiques the real parliament for not representing the ordinary Kenyan people, a critique that they act out in their daily practices (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010: 153).

Debates in the early days were enriched by older activists who had been in contact with the Mau Mau revolt of the 1950s and, according to Gachihi at a research analysis session in Nairobi in July 2015, their presence 'helped to shape the consciousness of the young generations' towards the rightfulness of and necessity for oppressed classes to struggle for a fair share of voice in building the nation. The street debates contributed to a massive change in national consciousness, and a change of government in 2003. A coalition of opposition parties, backed by many in civil society, took power.

While this heralded an opening of the public sphere to many whose voices had once been silenced, the new government also absorbed many of the men and women of words who had once been activists (Murunga and Nasong'o 2007). Nevertheless, the Jeevanjee site continued to attract a daily gathering of citizen debaters and new *bunges* (as they are called) claimed public spaces in Nairobi's informal settlements – the slums of Mathare, Kibera, Githurai and Huruma Kiamaiiko – and in public spaces in the centres of other cities and towns – Mombasa, Kisumu, Eldoret, Nakuru and Kakamega. Each one took on its own name: for example, Bunge Mashinani (the Grass-Roots Parliament) in the Mathare slums, or Bunge La Wamama Mashinani (the Grass-Roots Women's Parliament) in east Nairobi, or Bunge La Mwananchi Kaptembwo (the People's Parliament at the bus station in the centre of Nakuru town). The BLM movement offered the potential for broad public participation in political affairs. Nearly 30 years later, the movement is still alive and kicking.

## **2 Action research method**

The article draws on the findings of a short action research study carried out in Nairobi and Nakuru between May and July 2015. Led by two BLM long-time organisers, David 'Cidi' Otieno and Gacheke Gachihi, with support from action researchers Diana Muthoni Ndung'u and Nathaniel Kabala, and with some provocation from Patta Scott-Villiers at the Institute of Development Studies, the team joined BLM activists in a number of different sites for discussions about solidarities and fault lines in their movement. In Nairobi, we targeted Bunge La Mwananchi Jeevanjee, which is considered (by some) the epicentre of Bunge La Mwananchi countrywide, Bunge Mashinani in Mathare and Bunge La Wamama Mashinani in Huruma Kiamaiiko, both in the east of Nairobi. In Nakuru County, the study focused on Bunge La Mwananchi Kaptembwo.

We began by identifying issues among ourselves, drawing out the main concerns of the two BLM organisers about movement growth and influence and setting them against theories of civil society, social division and the public sphere. Then the Kenyan team members went out and listened to what BLM members were talking about in all the selected sites. We also conducted interviews with onlookers, passers-by and local business owners and workers. In the way of action research, each day of listening and interviewing leads to new understandings which in turn raises new questions. These we posed to active and passive members within the *bunges* in the study, in group discussions and one-on-one interviews. This, in turn, led to a larger debate which the BLM activists organised to bring together members of Bunge La Mwananchi Jeevanjee and Bunge Mashinani in Mathare, to establish how the members of the two *bunges* view and cooperate with each other, provide the space for renewal of ties, and observe what could be learned from such an initiative.

### 3 Solidarity and political opportunity

BLM is a movement that prides itself on its success in bridging the politicised tribal divides in the country. During the ethno-political bloodshed of the post-election period of 2007/08, BLM members resisted politicians' calls for division and engaged in the *bunge* parliaments side by side, reinforcing the movement's sense of identity and cohesion and emphasising its determination to tackle the real political issues of the day, including inequality, unemployment and violence.

Today, Jeevanjee Gardens continues to be a space in which discussions on issues ranging from national and county politics to entertainment and sports are open to all-comers. Sometimes there is more than one grouping, each discussing different things, and at other times when there are burning issues, one large gathering forms the *kikao* or sitting.<sup>5</sup> At this and the other *bunge* sites the discussions sometimes coalesce into action: deputations to local authorities or joining demonstrations organised by activists from within or without. Members like to see the sittings as a neutral space, where, unlike other street corner political spaces, anyone can come and discuss any issue without fear of being victimised for party, tribe, class, gender, disability or ideology.

*There are different bunges in the city but what we have at Jeevanjee is unique. When you go to City Hall, you need to be focused on one thing. You need to be supporting someone politically. It is the same with the bunge at Aga Khan Walk. Bunge La Mwananchi at Jeevanjee Gardens accommodates everyone across the political divide, social class and any other interest (Bunge Jeevanjee participant).<sup>6</sup>*

The debates at Jeevanjee Gardens tend to be concerned with non-local, national or international issues. The park and its surrounding cafés and small restaurants are often the places where protest campaigns are discussed and coordinated, in liaison with national lobbying groups and other movements such as Pawa 254 (an activist hub that

does much of its debating and organising online). The *bunges* in the informal settlements like Bunge Mashinani tend to debate and act on local issues. Many of these issues, such as extra-judicial killings and rape, are addressed case by case, often with help from an activist with a high public profile called in from Jeevanjee or one of the human rights organisations. Bunge La Wamama Mashinani, the women's *bunge*, was formed so that its members could speak specifically about women's issues, because they were not getting adequate airtime in the male-dominated spaces. *Bunges* in other towns in Kenya discuss national issues as well as local ones, but not being in the capital, they lead fewer national campaigns. Each of these *bunges* has a different unwritten rule about its way of operating, different capabilities for action and different powers to resist dissolution or co-option. The movement has done much to open a once closed public sphere to marginalised voices from the grass roots and it faces the difficulties of channelling grass-roots decisions into political action with ever-renewed determination.

The 'Unga Revolution' in 2010 was a high point for BLM. It was a year of intense debate and repeated protests at a time when the sharply rising price of *unga* (maize meal) was a burning issue. The call came out from the grass roots and was picked up by the *bunge* at Jeevanjee, whose members and contacts in other campaigning groups helped organise demonstrations and media stunts with wide participation of men and women from across Nairobi and other cities (Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2015). People felt that the BLM movement achieved national influence then. Media coverage was strong and government appeared to be concerned for its image in relation to class, poverty and hunger. Analysing it, the discussion groups pointed out that people from all walks of life were personally affected by the price rises. *Unga* is one of the most important staples in Kenya and the quadrupling of the price of the daily meal highlighted the rapidly rising cost of living, even to those on higher incomes. Even the middle classes seemed to have woken up, albeit temporarily, to the callousness of a political system that seemed unaffected by millions of citizens with not enough money to eat. 2010 was the year of the enactment of Kenya's new constitution and the country was in an ebullient mood; its people and politics had achieved something extraordinary. Middle and lower classes alike, working through or alongside the mobilising structures offered by BLM, and inspired by a new sense of optimism and opportunity, combined their repertoires of protest and campaigned for a right to reasonably priced food in a colourful outburst of contention.<sup>7</sup>

*The biggest moment for BLM is Unga Revolution. It happened in 2010 after a famine that struck most parts of this country. We were concerned that the common people would not be able to afford food because the price was too high. It also came at a time when a chief from Turkana had been sacked by the government for reporting that a number of people from his location had died from hunger. The Unga Revolution was a success because of the unity that was portrayed during the period. There were only a few people who were involved during the planning. When they agreed on the issue, it was taken to the different*

*neighbourhoods. The people there took up the issue and continued to mobilise their neighbours. They did not need to come to town. We decided to call it a revolution to get the government to listen since using the word 'food' would be too normal (Bunge La Mwananchi organiser).<sup>8</sup>*

Other campaigns did not achieve the same degree of cross-class, cross-site solidarity. We heard of several instances where issues like rape in the informal settlements were taken up by small coalitions of local and Jeevanjee activists with local authorities, but the issues did not become the subject of sustained protest. In analysing what could be learned from this, discussion participants suggested that when an issue does not reach across the divide between rich and poor, its power is diminished. BLM members' efforts to tackle extra-judicial killings (young men in the slums shot by people in uniform) were at first similarly attenuated – the issues did not gain traction among members. The issue belongs only to people living in the rougher areas of town; sometimes the victims are petty criminals, or random individuals whose cadavers are put on garish display labelled as gangsters caught in the act of fleeing the scene of the crime. The media hints that these youth probably deserved their fate. It is no longer the year of the new constitution and the political atmosphere has changed to one that is more fearful of crime and terrorism, and less optimistic about justice. BLM organisers did have another card up their sleeves to strengthen solidarity – a card that we will return to in Section 5, when we consider how solidarity works in the face of the centrifugal forces that threaten to atomise the movement into small knots of people talking in isolated, rubbish-strewn urban nowheres.

#### **4 Divisions: gender, class and geography**

When the mobilising structure loses its articulation, the movement is unable to galvanise itself. We learned about how outside players divert debates and upset proposed activities. Members in the informal settlements explained instances where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) act specifically to reframe and reprioritise certain issues. It is common these days, according to Jeevanjee regulars, for powerful individuals who want to suppress the talk there on a particular issue to hand out cash to spoil the debates. They may introduce alternative issues or attract people away from the sittings with offers of short-term employment. There are examples where demonstrations are planned, only for some members of BLM to be paid to disrupt them. Police intimidation of BLM members is not uncommon and many of its most seasoned and courageous activists have had repeated spells in prison cells on unspecified charges.

The ability of Jeevanjee and the other *bunges* to resist these divisive manoeuvres is a key factor in the power of the movement. The *bunges* manage to resist tribalism (the naming of tribe as a beneficiary or a threat), perhaps because it is embedded in the movement's sense of itself. However, on the other social divisions there is more difficulty. Although most members recognise the divisions arising from gender, class and geography, their management of them has not always been so successful.

We will unpick these three problems in this section, before moving back to what the BLM people are doing when they are resisting divisiveness.

#### 4.1 Gender

*I come from a community where women are already marginalised. Amplifying their voice becomes even more difficult (Young woman, Mathare).<sup>9</sup>*

A group of women formed Bunge La Wamama Mashinani (the grass-roots women's *bunge*) in Mathare, because of difficulties of timing and location in the male-organised *bunge*, but also because the debates in the other *bunges* tended not to focus on issues they cared about. Men in Bunge Mashinani agreed that women did not normally show up in their discussions. Some attributed this to a culture where women do not sit on the same platforms as men. Some organisers there have tried to address the problem by sharing information between the men and the women in their different spaces:

*Personally, issues in this community are at heart. I often go out and meet many women, and even their bunge [Bunge La Wamama Mashinani] and listen out to them. I then bring those issues to our bunge where we also discuss. At our bunge, we discuss issues affecting everyone. Here in Mathare, information flows very fast. Issues that affect women here reach us (Male Bunge Mashinani organiser).<sup>10</sup>*

In Jeevanjee, there is similarly a gendered divide and, even though people are concerned, there are few initiatives to cross it: 'Women are not interested in sitting for the discussions. There was a day some young women passed here and said that what we always discuss is politics. I think that is why women never come and their issues are not represented too.'

#### 4.2 Class and 'civil society'

In weighing up the relative problems caused by gender relations and those caused by co-option by donor-funded CSOs, women in Bunge La Wamama Mashinani concluded that they had begun to resolve the gender issue, but not the class co-option problem. While they felt that they could mobilise men in BLM to support them in their priorities, they felt powerless to deal with the CSOs, their money, their exclusive spaces and their sense of superiority and pity.

*We [women] do not have the aim of getting money from the CSOs. They want to get funding from our work yet we are interested in amplifying the voices of the marginalised. They are using our voices for their own interests. We want to amplify women's voices for all generations. We feel betrayed by them yet we look at them. We end up being threatened by the government. That is the reason why the men have started their own bunge and they are very active. They got tired of being used by the CSOs. They want to amplify their own voices (Bunge La Wamama Mashinani).<sup>11</sup>*

Our discussion groups decided that some of the movement's greatest difficulties at present revolve around issues of money and class.

*You realise that in Kenya there are two tribes. The rich and the poor. This is by my definition. If let's say you are poor, you are used by the rich and they will do anything to ensure that you remain poor because they are mostly the ruling class. They will not allow you to join them. They shall employ you and give you a little just enough for your survival so that you do not die. When you raise your voice, they will want to help you only to a certain level (Bunge Jeevanjee).<sup>12</sup>*

After almost two decades of struggle for constitutional reforms that was largely led by what some BLM members describe as 'middle-class' civil society,<sup>13</sup> Kenya adopted a new constitution billed as one of the world's most progressive. Despite commitments to wide-ranging economic and social rights for citizens, many BLM members point out that five years later, nothing has changed for the lower economic classes. The hoped-for signs of change to conditions of poverty, marginalisation and rights abuse have yet to emerge. This has led to growing criticism, especially from younger members of the movement, of the performance of CSOs. They want to know why, when the country has reported year-on-year economic growth, there is rising hunger, joblessness and insecurity. BLM members question whether CSOs are really on the side of the grass roots at all.

While civil society in Kenya varies from local associations to large corporate NGOs and trades unions, BLM members are concerned that the civil society space related to the political public sphere has been colonised by middle-class leaders and ways of doing business. 'Middle class', they explain, is about money and power. The middle classes are separated from grass-roots interests materially and socially. It is not uncommon for a talented grass-roots organiser to be tempted to join an established organisation as a salaried worker and so begin to move away from the grass roots. Members believe that this is one of the reasons why, after 30 years of effort, citizens at the grass roots are still left out of national debates. They note that their issues and perspectives hardly find their way into CSO discourses and they feel they are caricatured in CSO documents and campaign slogans as a way to gain funds and notoriety.

BLM is unusual in Kenya in that it is a movement that is accessible to and largely led by people who are politically and economically marginalised. People see people discussing in public spaces and they join in, or existing members invite them in, or they experience injustice and seek a space for activism. In Mathare, being a member of Bunge Mashinani is a source of strength in the face of the provocations of slum life, but precarious incomes make sustained involvement difficult. Jeevanjee offers world-expanding discussions and sometimes protest, while also offering possibilities of income, a chance to try out for political leadership, or a step up into paid lobbying positions. In all the sites, when a person gets money they might leave the movement and not return.

*Bunge Mashinani has really empowered people here. I know my rights and can go to the police station and report in case anything happens to me... I can go and call a person from the carwash to come and listen. However, if I do*

*not have money to give them, the next time I call them they will not come since they would have gotten some money if they stayed at the carwash (Bunge Mashinani).*<sup>14</sup>

*People come to Jeevanjee to get skills and strategies so as to seek seats in the national and county government. It is the best place to sharpen your political skills since you are free to speak your mind. You also meet with others who challenge you (Bunge La Mwananchi).*<sup>15</sup>

The men and women of words who keep the movement linked and active also spin off into other activities. If living in the slums means not getting heard then moving into politics or NGOs offers the possibility of becoming an audible voice. A number of BLM activists who have the ability to speak well have joined politics or become members of registered campaigning organisations. But many of them appear to have ceased to speak for the grass roots.

*We have these nominated members [who have joined politics] who are silent. We ask them what they have done since they were nominated to the county assembly and all they say is that they raise issues and bills to the county assembly. They however say that once their issues fail in the county assembly, they take them to the courts to look for solutions. This is not the way it should be. They should come back to us and tell us who stopped them and why (Young man, Nakuru).*<sup>16</sup>

### 4.3 Geography

What is lost when a leader moves away from a *bunge* space? In their analysis the members concluded that solidarity was jeopardised, because communication across the *bunge* spaces diminished. It was natural for a single *bunge* to focus on its own affairs. So what keeps them part of a single movement?

*I came to know BLM when there was effective communication. Whenever there was an issue, it could be communicated to the grass roots. I used to go to Jeevanjee for meetings. With time, I realised that I could not afford to go to town every day. This was not only me... We started meeting here [in Mathare] and discussed mostly on the constitution... With time, though, we started discussing [local] issues which were affecting the members of the community (Bunge Mashinani).*<sup>17</sup>

People in Mashinani, Wamama and Kaptembwo all spoke of the inaccessibility of the *bunge* at Jeevanjee. Some said that they were not sure whether Bunge La Mwananchi still exists as a national phenomenon, others spoke of being unable to reach organisers, while others spoke of lack of knowledge regarding whom to approach for help with taking an issue forward. Nakuru members felt that Bunge Jeevanjee was acting as if it were at the top of a hierarchy instead of as one chapter among equals. In Mathare, Mashinani members explained their grievances against Jeevanjee:

*There is no connection between Bunge Mashinani and Bunge Jeevanjee... We used to have support from Bunge La Mwananchi but now they do not come.*

*We do not have the backup that we need and the Member of Parliament would easily bring his own people to take over our conversation. If we had BLM there, he would be scared. I think they stopped coming because they used to have resources then and now they do not (Bunge Mashinani).<sup>18</sup>*

The reaction in Jeevanjee to this criticism was mixed. They believed that issues that they discuss and take action on affect all marginalised people, but only after they reach Jeevanjee do the issues encompass a larger context. Some people from the margins felt that Bunge Jeevanjee was indeed superior to their 'local' *bunge* and ought to have been giving guidance. On the other hand, Bunge Jeevanjee members opined that the other *bunges* ought to carry out their activities independent of Jeevanjee, only to ask for advice when they get stuck. The BLM members in the informal settlements and in the towns outside the capital feel abandoned by Bunge Jeevanjee because they are only contacted when Bunge Jeevanjee has activities that require numbers of people. When faced with issues, each *bunge* now finds its own ways of solving problems and they rarely involve one another.

### **5 The counter-maneuvres**

The movement lives on and is once again gaining strength. As the research findings became part of the members' discussions at each site, more and more people saw divisions in the movement (whether arising from co-option, loss of key spokespeople to salaried jobs, or communication breakdowns) as interfering with their mission to confront social injustice. The discussions turned to asking what its active organisers were doing now. Otieno and Gachihi are doing action research. They have been working with *bunge* members from several sites across Nairobi to take a rigorous look at extra-judicial killings. In the process, the *bunges* have communicated to a new level. During the reflective action research with IDS on which this article is based, between one meeting and the next, members began to take action. Bunge Mashinani members came and spoke to Bunge Jeevanjee members and vice versa. These meetings concluded that the informal settlements are some of the most important sites for people's parliaments; the power base of the movement. They agreed on activities that would strengthen *bunges* at the grass roots. Jeevanjee members agreed to spend more time at other *bunge* sites in Nairobi. Relations between Jeevanjee and Nakuru also took a step forward.

*Since we had the debate with Bunge Jeevanjee, things have improved. They call us to attend meetings with people and institutions that are important to us. Now, we do not have to know someone in Bunge Jeevanjee in order to reach any organisation. I feel we have the right contacts right now. We have attended many forums, which have opened our eyes. I think the meetings that we had with Bunge Jeevanjee opened both our and their eyes (Bunge Mashinani).<sup>19</sup>*

Rachael is an organiser in Mathare. In 2015 she has a job as a leader of a government programme in the settlement, organising young people to labour at digging drains and constructing sanitation infrastructure in the valley. She is still a leader of BLM.

*Everyone still knows that I am an activist who likes stirring things when they are not right... I still advance the struggle even within [the programme I am leading]. I still go for demonstrations when they are called. In the struggle, you look at the situation and know how to react (Rachael, Mathare).<sup>20</sup>*

*People like Rachael leave the space of BLM for other assignments. In her new position she has been able to meet new people. She fought for a social hall to be constructed. She has mobilised the community. In future she will come back and build the movement. It's not everybody who leaves, but many, they have memory – they will continue the struggle in their new space (BLM organiser).<sup>21</sup>*

These counter-manoeuvres help to clarify the positive mechanisms that link the will to speak on public issues to the will to resist the inevitable forces that will try to reconfigure this unmediated voice. We see how spaces which could be just messy corners owned by no one, are subtly returned to order and power by reminders of what the movement's name means: a space of power that is not just anti-tribalism, but anti- any kind of negative discrimination. We see how communication across lines of social and geographic difference helps solidify a sense of a movement that has power, membership and scope. And we see that when an organiser moves out of the space and into another, she can still be in the BLM space, if she cares to be.

## **6 Conclusion**

It may appear ironic that freedom of speech undertaken in public spaces, the very purpose and performance of the movement, is also its Achilles heel. It suggests that we need to do more to understand the processes by which unmediated public speech becomes influential; how it gains and loses power in movements for social justice. In our research together, members of the Bunge La Mwananchi movement learned what Nancy Fraser has already pointed out in her article criticising Habermas' ideal view of the public sphere – that class, gender and geography have profound effects from the inside as well as from the outside. They affect who is involved in a discussion, which issues are taken up, under what umbrella and with what effect (Fraser 1990). However, BLM activists counteract Fraser's argument that declaring a space devoid of social divisions 'is not sufficient to make it so' (1990: 60). When they act on declarations of anti-tribalism, anti-classism and anti-genderism, they remind the movement that this is its identity. By facilitating freedom of speech, not just in the random interstices of the city, but *across* these spaces, they build a tangible network of communication between masses of people and numerous places. When they manage to get members and supporters from the city centres to commit to connecting with and across the informal settlements, they are building a power to rival the formal institutions that try to ignore them.

Talk across class, gender and geography works easily at times of national inspiration, like it did in the year of the new constitution and the Unga Revolution. As inspiration turns to realism and talk between

people in different positions turns to mistrust and misunderstanding, then so fluid a movement can move into danger. Yet just at the point when we think that we can understand the patterns of voice and its susceptibility to co-optation and division, we hear it rising again; using its own ability to connect by using questions, analysis and performance, to work out what might have been wrong and take steps towards renewal.

### Notes

- \* The research on which this article is based was funded by the Research, Evidence and Learning Component of Making All Voices Count.
- 1 Interview, Jeevanjee Gardens, 3 June 2015.
- 2 *Bunge*: parliament in Kiswahili, derived from the Ha language in Tanzania, meaning a place where elders discussed matters of state (Mbaabu 1985).
- 3 *Mwananchi*: citizen; a politically charged word, its original meaning is 'child of the country/land'. Political leaders often wield the term to mean dutiful, innocent, common, ordinary or average person, but also to imply a racial or indigenous specificity, i.e. an African person (Hunter 2015).
- 4 We understand a social movement to be 'a collective attempt to further a common interest or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions' (Giddens 1997: 511). The definition should encompass 'the distinctions not only between community and class or popular and elite movements but also between organised and unorganised, spontaneous or anomic movements, and, as such, it is rooted in concrete African social processes' (Nasong'o 2007: 20).
- 5 *Kikao*: a sitting under the shade of trees.
- 6 Participant in a focus group discussion with BLM members, Jeevanjee Gardens, 19 May 2015.
- 7 The elements of social movement theory used here are drawn from McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996).
- 8 Interview, Jeevanjee Gardens, 2 June 2015.
- 9 Interview with female human rights activist. Listening post at Mathare, 15 May 2015.
- 10 Interview with young man, focus group discussion with members of Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 May 2015.
- 11 Interview with young woman, focus group discussion with Bunge La Wamama Mashinani, Mathare, 18 May 2015.
- 12 Focus group discussion with active Bunge La Mwananchi members, Jeevanjee Gardens, 19 May 2015.
- 13 Civil society is understood here in the way Nasong'o puts it: 'organised social life that is voluntary and self-perpetuating and though bound by a legal order, is beyond state control' (2007: 24). The civil society role in pushing for and influencing the content of the new constitution was substantial. After the first multi-party elections in 1992, which were won by the incumbent because the opposition was riven with division, the Kenya Human Rights Commission (a CSO) and 15 other organisations called for a push for constitutional reform – including of the electoral commission, security, public order, powers of the local administration, and

- freedom of assembly and speech (*ibid*). As more and more organisations joined in, the constitutional reform process gained momentum until, 18 years later, a new constitution was made law.
- 14 Young man at *bunge* debate in Mathare, 17 June 2015.
- 15 Interview with *bunge* organiser, Jeevanjee Gardens, 2 June 2015.
- 16 Interview with young man, Bunge Kaptembwo, Nakuru, 23 May 2015.
- 17 Young man at debate between BLM and Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 June 2015.
- 18 Young man at debate between BLM and Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 June 2015.
- 19 Interview, Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 1 September 2015.
- 20 Interview, Mathare, 20 May 2015.
- 21 Analysis session, Gigiri, 29 May 2015.

### References

- Brocklesby, M.A.; Hobley, M. and Scott-Villiers, P. (2010) *Raising Voice – Securing a Livelihood: The Role of Diverse Voices in Developing Secure Livelihoods in Pastoralist Areas in Ethiopia*, IDS Working Paper 340, Brighton: IDS
- Fraser, N. (1990) ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text* 25/26: 56–80
- Gachihi, G. (2014) ‘Bunge La Mwananchi (The People’s Parliament) Pt. I: Reflections on Social Movement Struggles in Kenya during the Era of Neoliberal Globalization’, *Pambazuka News* 705, www.pambazuka.net/en/issue.php/705 (accessed 7 October 2015)
- Giddens, A. (1997) *Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Hoffer, E. (1951) *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Movements*, New York NY: HarperCollins
- Hunter, E. (2015) *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kimari, W. and Rasmussen, J. (2010) “‘Setting the Agenda for Our Leaders from under a Tree’: The People’s Parliament in Nairobi”, *Nokoko* 1.1: 131–59
- Mbaabu, I. (1985) *New Horizons in Kiswahili: A Synthesis in Developments, Research and Literature*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau
- McAdam, D.; McCarthy, J.D. and Zald, M.N. (1996) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Murunga, G.R. and Nasong’o, S.W. (eds) (2007) *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy*, London and Dakar: Zed and CODESRIA
- Musembi, C. and Scott-Villiers, P. (2015) *Food Riots and Food Rights: The Moral and Political Economy of Accountability for Hunger in Kenya*, IDS Working Paper 461, Brighton: IDS
- Nasong’o, S.W. (2007) ‘Negotiating New Rules of the Game: Social Movements, Civil Society and the Kenyan Transition’, in G.R. Murunga and S.W. Nasong’o (eds) (2007), *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy*, London and Dakar: Zed and CODESRIA

This page is intentionally left blank