– SUBSTITUTING FOR THE STATE: The Sovereignty Impacts of Diverse Citizens' Off-grid Infrastructure Strategies in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, citizens in both low- and high-income areas are increasingly providing their own services to mitigate the unreliability, unaffordability and inaccessibility of state services. This article examines diverse case studies across socio-economic and residential typologies to explore shifts in service provision responsibilities from the state to the citizen. Applying an interdisciplinary approach, this article considers the political impacts of these strategies, arguing that the ways in which citizens supplement and substitute for the state contests and (re)negotiates spaces of sovereignty. While urban studies overwhelmingly analyse these actions through the lens of informality, we argue that sovereignty (the supreme authority of a state to govern itself without external interference) offers a less binary analytical lens. State substitution is increasingly a daily act for many, not only in low-income settlements but also among elites. The article further examines state responses to citizen-led actions in supplementing or substituting services, demonstrating how they range from inaction to permissive negotiation and, rarely, repression. Thus, the political impact of service substitution requires deeper reflection, raising questions regarding the nature of the state and the social contract.

Introduction

In South Africa, there are increasing shifts by citizens[1] to provide their own services to mitigate the unreliability, unaffordability, and inaccessibility of state services such as security, water, sanitation and energy. This is taking place both in low- and high-income[2] residential areas, in formal and informal settlements and housing typologies, and across both public and private housing. To critically explore these material hybrid and off-grid[3] practices and their political implications, this article discusses diverse case studies of citizens substituting and/or supplementing state infrastructures with private services across Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa's two largest metropolitan

1   Throughout this article the language of citizen and citizenship is broad and inclusive, using these terms in reference to the activities of diverse urban dwellers who have a relationship with the municipal state and have expectations of access to services, by virtue of their urban residence and irrespective of their legal status.

2   We employ the broad and relative terms 'poor/low-income' and 'wealthy/high-income' to differentiate between urban residents who inhabit disparate residential spaces, incomes and class groups. We do not define these categories according to strict data measurements (e.g. by income), but rather based on residential locations and housing typologies (informal settlements and public housing on the one hand, privately-owned property in suburban areas on the other). While recognizing that these residential areas may include residents from other socio-economic groups, the categories of settlement-type reflect spatialities of privilege and marginalization in the city.

3   We utilize and build on the recent surge of scholarly analysis of such strategies using the framing of the 'off-grid city', which recognizes that the 'grid' extends beyond reticulated infrastructure (e.g. to include the invisible and social 'grid'), and that the 'grid' is not synonymous with the state (Caprotti *et al.*, 2022; Lemanski, 2023).

municipalities.[4] It investigates the process whereby diverse non-state groups increasingly 'deliver like a state', and examines the implications for state-citizen relations and state sovereignty. The article further examines state responses to citizen-led actions related to supplementing or substituting services, demonstrating how they range from inaction to permissive negotiation and, rarely, repression.

The article lies at the intersection of multiple conceptual and disciplinary threads, and takes seriously the idea that service delivery (i.e. state provision) of basic services such as water and power is not simply a technical concern; rather, it is deeply and irrevocably political (Lemanski, 2020; Graham and Marvin, 2022). Analysing service provision offers a lens through which to explore the interface between the state and society, and to theorize the ever-evolving social contract in cities of the global South (Anciano and Wheeler, 2021). It also provides a reconsideration of urban informality, traditionally conceived as a residual activity for the urban poor, but with growing evidence demonstrating that it is becoming a core practice of elites, including the state (e.g. Roy, 2005; Ghertner, 2017; Pow, 2017; Moatasim, 2019; Banks *et al*., 2020). We use the idea of sovereignty as a heuristic framing that illuminates critical investigation into the implications of these practices. Traditionally, a sovereign body is understood as one unlimited by a higher authority to which it must be accountable (Bodin, 1992). Our research demonstrates that sovereignty is diffused, whereby the state does not have absolute control, legitimacy and authority over all spaces and practices within its legal territory, and consequently citizens engage in practices to govern and control certain aspects of the everyday that are beyond state authority. We argue that sovereignty is a useful device because it allows scholars to think about why and how other actors start 'acting like the state', particularly where residents take on 'state-like' practices including aspects of service delivery. This approach demonstrates the interdisciplinary method of the article, bringing theories dominant in political science (state sovereignty) and urban studies (informality, governance and service provision) into conversation with each other.

This article is novel in three ways. First, the parallel self-provisioning practices of diverse income groups are rarely juxtaposed or seen as analogous (*cf*. Lemanski and Oldfield, 2009; Koepke *et al*., 2021; Rateau and Jaglin, 2022), but arguably they challenge the nature of state-citizen relationships, reveal differentiated practices of citizenship, and shift sites of sovereignty. In taking such a stance, the article refocuses on the political implications of everyday actions. Consequently, our second contribution is to bring urban studies and urban political science literature and framings into dialogue, and use this interdisciplinary approach to produce new insights. Third, in the context of the scale and pace at which citizens in South Africa are taking responsibility for service provision, this article considers implications for the relationship between the state and citizens, and uses sovereignty as the key conceptual medium to discuss and understand these processes and practices.

To explore this terrain, the article first considers sovereignty as a concept that has loomed large in political science but has been given less attention in spatial and urban studies. We discuss how this concept is a more useful framework to understand practices of state supplementation/substitution than the dominant urban studies framing of informality. Second, we respond to the emerging and powerful literature on both Southern theorization and comparative urbanism (e.g. Caldeira, 2017; McFarlane *et al*., 2017; Bhan, 2019; Robinson, 2022) by introducing diverse methods employed to research four empirical case studies across South Africa's largest metropolitan municipalities. The core of the article is dedicated to demonstrating how citizen-led

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4   Representing South Africa's largest and most similar (in demographic and financial terms) municipalities, Cape Town and Johannesburg have both recently experienced significant city-centric and nationwide service-provision challenges related to both water and energy. They are selected as indicators of larger trends across South Africa (and potentially African and global South cities more broadly).

forms of service delivery are renegotiating and reformulating citizen-state relationships. The article concludes by reflecting on how state sovereignty, as a political ideal and practice, is challenged when citizens supplement and substitute services that are constitutionally in the state's domain. In so doing we highlight the utility of sovereignty as a concept, and its explanatory and theoretical power.

Substituting for the state: rethinking sovereignty

Sovereignty is a core state characteristic, encompassing the ideal that the state has ultimate authority to govern. Within political science, a sovereign body is understood as being one unlimited by a higher authority to which it must be accountable. First defined by the sixteenth-century philosopher Bodin with reference to the unfettered and undivided power to make laws by which all citizens must abide, sovereignty effectively determines what is 'formal' or legitimate. Consequently, where citizens contravene the formal system, the sovereign state can render these 'informal' actions illegal and penalize the perpetrator(s). More fundamentally, because these informal actions violate state rules they may be seen as transgressive and subversive, essentially contesting the state's authority. Therefore, disciplining 'informal' actions/actors allows a state to (re)assert its sovereign authority. In this view, sovereignty encompasses the authority and ability of an institution, actor or set of practices and instruments to make decisions that affect citizens' socio-economic lives (e.g. law, policy, technology) (Sadowski, 2021).

Research has long shown how sovereignty is not restricted to the state but rather is distributed among a range of state and non-state actors at multiple scales, from international globalization to neighbourhood vigilante groups (Foucault, 1998; Picker, 2019). Recent work in the global South demonstrates the complexity of state-citizen relations, and in turn, sovereignty. Here, numerous servicing relationships are in effect simultaneously, with state agencies and non-state actors operating at a variety of scales (see De Herdt *et al*., 2012). In addition, the role and strength of the state is often not predicated on the provision of services; indeed, in many places in the global South self-provisioning is actually the norm. This is evident, for example, in research on the informal provision of water in informal settlements (Kacker and Joshi, 2016) and gated communities (Caldeira, 2000; Le Goix and Webster, 2008; Lemanski *et al*., 2008).

As these examples demonstrate, the state does not have absolute power or control over all spaces and practices within its legal territory. In this article we explore citizen-led practices to govern and control certain spheres of daily life that are in tension with, or beyond, state authority. Claiming and exercising this sovereignty is constantly negotiated and renegotiated (Ong, 2006; Dean, 2010; Cooper-Knock, 2018). Negotiating sovereignty in everyday life creates what Cooper-Knock (2018: 36) calls 'permissive space', which 'is a space of impunity, which can be expanded, contracted, closed or collapsed in negotiation with those inside, outside, and in the shadows of the state'. Like Osha's (2014) work on the temporality of the social contract, Cooper-Knock (2018) points to the changeability of sovereignty across spatial and temporal scales, or depending on the audience. They argue that:

> permissive space captures the idea that those who act illegally must negotiate their impunity with other citizens and the state, so as to avoid repercussions for their actions either within or beyond the criminal justice system … Negotiations over permissive space shape the imaginaries, boundaries and practices of states and societies across the globe (Cooper-Knock, 2018: 29).

The nature of these negotiations can vary greatly, and at times the line between negotiation and imposition can feel faint. Moreover, the nature of this negotiated space

may differ. It can be relatively stable in the acts it allows and the actors it empowers, or it can be relatively unstable, resulting in a fragile impunity that can be revoked at any time. The state may play a varied role in the negotiation of this space, alongside state instruments of power such as the criminal law system and the constitution (*ibid*.). Even within these permissive spaces the state is not entirely removed from the everyday lives, claims and negotiations of residents; for example, the South African constitution often acts as a point of reference for determining who maintains overarching sovereignty and legitimacy in the social contract (Landau, 2010).

While we propose the concept of negotiated sovereignty to analyse the causes and consequences of citizens substituting and supplementing state services, the idea of informality is more commonly used. Informality is a broad label for practices and spaces not governed by the state. The term was coined by Keith Hart (1973) to describe economic enterprises that he witnessed in Ghana, which were unregulated but vital to socio-economic life. Informality is also used to describe unregulated spaces of the city (e.g. 'slums'), and the extra-legal practices of their occupants. Recent critical reflection highlights the limitations of employing a term that is defined by the absence of 'formality', and which has historically been applied to the spatial and economic practices of low-income citizens (McFarlane, 2012; Varley, 2013; Lombard and Meth, 2016; Banks *et al.*, 2020). Despite increasing scholarly recognition that informality is not a binary but a porous process that cannot be restricted to a spatial zone or employment typology, using the language of 'elite informality' (e.g. Pow, 2017; Moatasim, 2019), even if not intended by the author(s), implicitly suggests that 'authentic' or 'default' informality remains reserved for the poor. While the canon of informality has expanded to include diverse actors and practices, state responses implicitly distinguish between 'default' and 'elite' informality. The idea of informality further implies that only the sovereign (i.e. the state) has the authority to determine what is (in)formal (Roy, 2005; Haid and Hilbrandt, 2019; Picker, 2019). However, in practice de facto sovereignty is constantly (re)negotiated, disaggregated and graded across multiple (often contested and overlapping) sovereign entities.

Conceptually, sovereignty broadens informality's gaze, revealing the fluidity and politicization of its definition, and highlighting the importance of positioning state substitution and supplementation within political renderings that illuminate state-citizen perceptions and practices. For example, Ghertner (2008) reveals that India's 'informal' spaces are not defined by strict planning rules, but via arbitrary and constantly changing politico-economic agendas. Informality debates have largely focused on the implications for infrastructure, urban materiality and land, with limited attention paid to political consequences. We argue that practices of state supplementation and substitution fundamentally shift state sovereignty, thus foregrounding the diffusion of power, legitimacy and the agents engaged in (re)negotiating the social contract. Utilizing the concept of sovereignty allows an understanding of the diffuse nature of power, and the implications of shifting responsibility to different scales, agents and actors.

In this article we frame our analysis around contexts where individuals and communities are stepping into roles that have historically been perceived and/or legally mandated as the state's responsibility, through the concepts of exceptional and negotiated sovereignty. As our empirical cases reveal, the reliance of urban dwellers on informal, private and/or off-grid services to access security, water, sanitation and energy arguably challenges the state's authority to govern and control within and beyond these specific spheres of urban life. While recognizing that the modern infrastructural ideal (state provision of uniform basic services) has never been universally delivered (nor is it even feasible or desirable), expectations that an effective state can deliver basic services remains widespread (Graham and Marvin, 2001). This is particularly prevalent in South Africa, where the state has a constitutional duty to provide, or at a minimum to facilitate, access to services such as policing, electricity, water and sanitation (see the

Constitution of South Africa; Republic of South Africa, 1996). State provision of basic services is a *material* representation of *political* state-society rights and responsibilities, and evidence of a functioning social contract of reciprocal citizenship (Lemanski, 2020). However, this extends beyond South Africa, being relevant also in contexts such as India, where Bhan (2019) argues that emerging Southern theory should be closely linked to practical applications that are relevant to existing realities. This article explores the implications for citizenship and sovereignty when citizens supplement and substitute basic service provision. As the case studies demonstrate, state sovereignty is challenged not only through the state's inability to meet its constitutional responsibility to provide services, but also through the state's attempts (albeit often ineffective) to regulate or ignore citizens' practices of state substitution and/or supplementation.

Here it is important to note that there are multiple overlapping political and technical causes behind the South African state's failure to deliver services, creating a context in which citizens substitute for and/or supplement the state. These include widespread rent-seeking behaviour and a fading line between state and party (Everatt and Pieterse, 2022) along with incompetence, nepotism and short-termism within numerous municipalities and local councils. All of these factors contribute to a governance crisis, and an inability to manage and implement the work of local government (Olver, 2017; Chipkin *et al*., 2018). This has been exacerbated by national-level questions about electricity production and distribution that have been dominated by what Jaglin and Dubresson (2016) argue is a technopolitical regime of small, politically-connected elites. This group has monopolized the power sector, and driven it to the brink of collapse through continued disinvestment and looting (Bowman, 2020). The result was hours of power-outages and significant loss of Gross Domestic Product. Water and sanitation have been two further areas of failure, with a concatenation of climate change, poor municipal maintenance of water systems, sewerage works and drainage systems, resulting in, for example, 'Day Zero' in Cape Town in 2018 where the city was expected to run out of water (Pascale *et al*., 2020), lethal floods that killed thousands in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in 2022 (Grab and Nash, 2024) and ongoing water-shedding in Gauteng, South Africa's most populous province.

The extent to which citizens across the socio-economic spectrum are substituting for the state (largely in the absence of explicit state permission or exception) reveals how sovereignty is increasingly shifting from the state to the citizen. In these circumstances of service self-provision, citizens are controlling, supplying/procuring and governing the provision of services within their boundaries without reference to, or consideration of, the state. In these case studies the state may have de jure sovereignty, but it has neither sufficient resources to enforce its own laws and regulations, nor the capacity to meet its de facto obligations. This article demonstrates how these citizen-led practices of state supplementation and substitution are not merely autonomous from the state; they fundamentally (re)negotiate new spaces of highly localized sovereignty.

Methodology

To explore shifts in responsibilities for service provision from the state to the citizen, the article examines four diverse case studies across socio-economic and residential typology spectrums in South Africa. South Africa is a relevant site of study for two reasons. First, it exemplifies a state that is weathering the *longue durée* of colonialism, and which established a new social contract in 1994 through a democratic constitution. However, the state's defined role within that social contract, i.e. delivering services, is not being fulfilled. The fact that this relatively youthful and generally lauded contract is being 'called into question' is worthy of exploration. Second, South Africa is a country of extremes, with some of the highest and most persistent inequality indicators globally (World Bank, 2023). Despite this inequality, both poor and wealthy citizens are supplementing and substituting state service provision. Research that juxtaposes the

relationship between state and society across the socio-economic spectrum is rare, and therefore offers new insights.

The case studies are juxtaposed through data collected using different methods, timeframes, disciplines and researchers. This is not a pre-planned form of urban comparison, but rather an opportunity to learn from differences in ways that reveal new insights about differentiated forms of politicizing urban life. This approach is situated within broader post-colonial calls to diversify the empirical sites of knowledge production through comparative urbanism (e.g. Robinson, 2022). This epistemological and methodological call to (re)create urban theory without privileging historically-hegemonic voices and spaces has divergent mobilizations within and across disciplines, including 'relational comparison' (Ward, 2010; Hart, 2018), 'conjunctural' analysis (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Sayin *et al.*, 2022) and the 'comparative gesture' (Robinson, 2011; 2022). This article draws on Caldeira's (2017: 5) 'juxtaposition of dissimilar cases' and Lazar's (2012) 'disjunctive comparison' to explicitly reveal the complexities of intra-urban difference *and* similarity (McFarlane *et al.*, 2017). The selection of case studies intentionally juxtaposes *divergence* in socio-economic profile and land-use regulations (informal settlement, state-subsidized housing and wealthy suburbs) within and between South Africa's two largest cities (Johannesburg and Cape Town) to explore relatively *similar* practices (substituting for state services) with visibly different manifestations (vigilantism, illegal electricity 'tapping', boreholes) and outcomes (state acceptance, rejection, indifference). In doing so, we advocate that disjunctures of dissimilarity can illuminate processes and structures that potentially remain unnoticed by comparisons-of-like.

The data for this article are drawn from three settlement-based case studies: the low-income and largely black neighbourhoods of Imizamo Yethu and Westlake Village in Cape Town, and the relatively wealthy and overwhelmingly white suburb of Parkhurst in Johannesburg. These community-based case studies are supported by research undertaken with a range of wealthy residents across various areas in Johannesburg and Cape Town. All methods are primarily qualitative, drawing from semi-structured interviews with residents, and in the latter case, open-ended responses to an online survey. Table 1 summarizes these case studies and their respective methodologies and dates.

Imizamo Yethu ('our struggle' or 'our collective efforts'), colloquially known as IY, is an informal settlement located in the suburb of Hout Bay, Cape Town. It formed in 1991 when five adjacent informal settlements in Hout Bay were moved onto a piece of land belonging to the then state-run Regional Services Council (South African History

TABLE 1 Summary of case studies, methods and fieldwork dates

Case study	Methods used	Fieldwork dates
Imizamo Yethu, Cape Town	Semi-structured interviews	2015–2022
Informal Settlement	Focus groups	
	Analysis of secondary materials	
Westlake Village, Cape Town	Semi-structured interviews	2004–2019
Public housing project	Infrastructure diaries	
	Quantitative housing assessment	
Parkhurst, Johannesburg	Semi-structured interviews	2017–2018
Wealthy suburb	Analysis of secondary materials	
Cape Town and Johannesburg wealthy residents	Online survey	2021–2023
	Semi-structured interviews; Analysis of secondary materials	

Online, 2023). Some 34 hectares of land were allocated to the settlement, with 18 hectares for housing and 16 hectares for community facilities. Imizamo Yethu has grown rapidly, with the 2011 census (StatsSA, 2011)[5] estimating that it houses over 15,000 people in approximately 1,800 formal (brick) and 5,000 informal dwellings (typically constructed of corrugated iron, zinc and wood pallets). Research was conducted by Fiona Anciano over eight years (2015 to 2022) through qualitative methods, including interviews with local leaders, police station officials, the ward councillor, focus groups with patrollers and residents, and observation, alongside secondary data sources.

Westlake Village in Cape Town is a small state-subsidized housing settlement occupied by residents who previously lived in adjacent informal and formal buildings and were eligible for the housing subsidy (Lemanski, 2008).[6] Constructed in 1999/2000, the settlement comprises 650 one-bedroomed semi-detached (mostly 27 m²) brick-built houses that are connected to municipal infrastructure networks, with most households receiving basic services from the municipality comprising subsidized water, electricity and refuse removal.[7] Since its construction, Westlake Village has experienced significant demographic expansion with the current population five times that originally planned, resulting in insufficient service provision and bulk infrastructure capacity to meet the needs of the estimated population of 13,500 people (Lemanski, 2020). Research was conducted here by Charlotte Lemanski from 2004 to 2019, drawing on a wide range of methods including qualitative (semi-structured interviews, infrastructure diaries), quantitative (assessment of infrastructure adaptations) and collaborative (attending community meetings, disseminating findings to the community) techniques.

Parkhurst is a middle-class residential area, built before the second world war and located close to the centre of Johannesburg. Properties are expensive with relatively small stands[8] for a high-income area, indicating high purchasing-power among the residents. The 2011 census put Parkhurst's population at about 4,800 people in 2,152 households, with 2,952.41 people per square kilometer, which is a relatively high density for a wealthy suburb in Johannesburg (StatsSA, 2011). It has a very active residents' association, and residents pride themselves on Parkhurst's sense of place and 'village-like' atmosphere. Margot Rubin conducted research here from 2017 to 2018, using a multitude of secondary material including recordings of annual general meetings, documents and newspaper articles, as well as semi-structured interviews with key figures from the Parkhurst Residents' Association.

Johannesburg and Cape Town are two of South Africa's most populous metropolitan municipalities, and the country's most prominent economic centres. Due to their relatively good service provision and economic opportunities, these cities see a strong inflow of migrants from other provinces and countries. However, government-provided water and electricity have recently become strained due to drought, alleged mismanagement and an ongoing electricity generation crisis. In this context, there is growing disaffection and concerns about the viability of maintaining suburban living standards. For the analysis in this article, Christina Culwick Fatti draws on a recent research project carried out from 2021 to 2023 which included an online survey (with open and closed questions) completed by wealthy residents, including those living in Johannesburg and Cape Town suburbs, semi-structured resident interviews, and secondary sources such as newspaper articles and documents.

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5   Although not the most recent census, the 2011 iteration remains the most relevant data to the fieldwork periods. Granular ward-scale data from the 2022 census had not yet been released at the time of writing.

6   South Africa's housing subsidy is restricted to South African citizens with a household income below ZAR 3,500 (GBP 150) per calendar month, who are married or with a dependent, and who have not previously owned a home or received a subsidy.

7   Municipalities respond to their constitutional responsibility to ensure services to the poor through the provision of free basic services. The mechanisms and amount vary by municipality.

8   Average value ZAR 3.2 million (GBP 133,000, USD 122,000), compared to South Africa's average house price of ZAR 990,000 (GBP 41,000, USD 52,000) (Property24, 2017).

Substituting and supplementing the state in urban poor and urban wealthy communities

In each empirical case citizens have been faced with circumstances in which the ability of the state to provide services as expected or desired is in question, thus prompting communities[9] to seek alternative strategies to obtain those services. This section explores the circumstances that motivate communities to supplement or substitute for the state and the complex processes involved, including the myriad actors who co-produce new landscapes of service provision (Rateau and Jaglin, 2022). Crucially, although these practices reflect the supplementation and substitution of the state, the state is rarely absent from the processes involved (Lemanski, 2023).

–   Safety and security in Imizamo Yethu

Low-income residents of Imizamo Yethu are highly reliant on 'patrollers' (the *Isolezwe*)[10] rather than the South African Police Service (SAPS) to resolve the informal settlement's endemic violent and opportunistic crime. This is a relatively recent response to rising crime; in 2015, after a spate of murders, muggings and rapes linked to gangs, several hundred residents, supported by local leaders, confronted and killed two young gang leaders.[11] Those involved in the vigilante action subsequently established a nightly patrol. Over time, these patrollers became formally linked to the nearby police station through the Hout Bay Community Policing Forum, whereby patrollers were booked on duty every evening with the SAPS, wore reflective bibs and carried identity cards.[12] While the 2015 group of patrollers was large and violent, the patrollers were not the first community watch group to operate in Imizamo Yethu. Iterations in 2000, 2003 and 2007 fluctuated in terms of activity and sustained power over residents. In contrast to the 2015 group, previous iterations had no formal workplace or funding, and were not a dominant presence in the settlement[13] (Tefre, 2010; Piper and Wheeler, 2016).

The dominance of the post-2015 patrollers was further enhanced by a 2017 fire in Imizamo Yethu, which displaced nearly 10,000 people. Literally overnight thousands of people were left without a home, becoming reliant on state provision and consequently on the brokerage of state-society mediators. This reinvigorated a reprise of the patrollers, disrupted existing patterns of leadership and opened space for new forms of authority (Anciano and Piper, 2019). As criminality increased during and after the chaos of the fire, a new group of patrollers gained community traction and institutional legitimacy; for example, the ward councillor awarded patrollers the centrally-situated old Imizamo Yethu library as a base. Subsequently, narratives about the power and influence of the patrollers have shifted from collective and universal security provision towards privatized and targeted options. For example, they no longer only provided nightly patrols. Instead, for ZAR 200 (GBP 8.60) per male client and ZAR 100 (GBP4.30) per female client,[14] residents can hire patrollers' services to settle criminal disputes.[15] These interventions frequently involve violence and pressure to ensure their client is compensated by the accused.[16]

The key motivation for citizen groups to substitute for the state in this situation is safety. High levels of sustained everyday criminality, coupled with the state's inability

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9   We use the concept of 'community' in this article as a descriptive term denoting those who share interests in common, including, but not limited to, living in the same neighbourhood.
10   Meaning: 'we are watching'.
11   Imizamo Yethu community leader, interview by Fiona Anciano and Laurence Piper, 17 August 2015.
12   Senior Hout Bay SAPS Officer, interview by Fiona Anciano, 7 December 2016.
13   Patrollers A, focus group by Fiona Anciano and Conrad Meyer, 7 December 2016.
14   Patrollers explained the different prices: 'men can join us, so they must pay more if they don't patrol with us' (Patrollers B, interviewed by Fiona Anciano and S.J. Cooper-Knock, 11 April 2019). If someone is a patroller, they can access the services for free. Women are allowed to join in principle, but there are no female patrollers.
15   Patrollers B, interviewed by Fiona Anciano and S.J. Cooper-Knock, 11 April 2019.
16   IY resident, interviewed by Fiona Anciano and S.J. Cooper-Knock, 11 April 2019.

to police crime, identify and prosecute perpetrators, and facilitate safe public spaces, have led citizens to supplement and ultimately usurp the state as the arbiter of 'justice'. The actors substituting for the state are powerful and hold localized authority. There is a strong sense among Imizamo Yethu residents that one cannot oppose the patrollers unless one has countervailing power.[17] This creates contradictions and tensions in the community, since while residents are highly reliant on the security offered by the patrollers in the absence of an active police presence, they simultaneously fear their dominance and violence. For example, a long-time community leader of Imizamo Yethu, who is also the government-paid Community Development Worker (and has used his role to prevent patrollers expelling individuals for alleged crimes), is resigned to their authority, claiming that there is 'no getting rid of them' and they 'think they are the law'.[18]

–   Basic services in Westlake Village
        While citizen supplementation strategies in Westlake Village focus on accessing basic services (water, electricity, refuse removal and sewerage), the motivation for supplementing the state remains a perception of state abandonment and failure. As a public housing settlement, Westlake Village's houses are connected to the electricity grid, water and sewerage networks, and most plots are eligible to receive free basic services. However, because the state (erroneously) assumes there is only one household/dwelling per plot and designs services accordingly, many households have no or minimal access to networked services, which are restricted to formal houses. In Westlake Village, where multiple households (around 20 people per plot, comprising the occupants of the original house plus residents of backyard dwellings)[19] share services designed for a single household, residents unsurprisingly find innovative ways to supplement and supplant absent and insufficient municipal services (Lemanski, 2020).

        For example, the 60 kWh per month of 'free' electricity per plot is insufficient for one household, let alone for multiple households. Consequently households rely on gas canisters and firewood for cooking and heating, in addition to 'illegal' electricity tapping, to supplement the unreliable and expensive metered networked electricity. This also applies to water provision; while the City of Cape Town has installed water management devices that provide 350 litres of free water daily per plot, this is insufficient for multiple households. Therefore, backyard dwellers pay to receive a proportion of the main house's free water, and most households supplement by filling bottles and buckets from natural springs and adjacent water mains pipes that frequently burst. For refuse removal, as the single bin per plot collected by the municipality cannot contain the weekly refuse of 20 people, a large children's playing field adjacent to the settlement's primary school has become a dumping ground for excess rubbish. However, arguably the most dangerous service supplanting strategy is releasing human excrement into the settlement's stormwater drains because of the absence of public toilets. As these examples demonstrate, due to the inadequate capacity of state services, Westlake Village residents have adopted alternative strategies that bring significant health risks.

        Unlike the case studies from other settlements, the strategies of Westlake Village residents to supplement state services are situated within an ongoing context of a high reliance on, and expectation of, state services. In other words, households supplement services to survive, and view this as a temporary rather than a permanent fix, with no expectations of, or desire for, future secession from public services. In fact, residents express a strong civic expectation that the state should do more to meet their needs,

17   Such countervailing power might be linked to economic power derived from owning a source of income, such as a taxi.
18   Community leader, interviewed by Fiona Anciano and S.J. Cooper-Knock, 25 August 2019.
19   Backyard dwellings are structures (typically constructed of zinc and wood, but sometimes of brick) situated in the yard of another property. In most cases they have no foundations or legal rights.

often displaying a lack of knowledge regarding their rights and responsibilities as homeowners:

> [The toilet] backflowed. I phoned the city because it was the city's fault. The drain was blocked in the road, so the city came out to fix it. I asked them to paint the bathroom, but they didn't.[20]

These examples of citizens supplementing state services via bucket systems for sanitation, 'illegal' electricity tapping and extension cables, cooking with wood, and filling water buckets from open pipes and streams are relatively common across low-income urban settlements in the global South (e.g. Silver, 2014; Pilo', 2021; Dipura *et al.*, 2024). However, it is surprising that no private entrepreneurs have emerged to supply medium-/large-scale alternative services or technologies within the settlement (house-occupiers 'sell' municipal water to backyard tenants, but this remains a state networked service), especially given the dominance of this in other settlements in South Africa and beyond (e.g. Truelove, 2019; Beard and Mitlin, 2021; Bobbins *et al.*, 2024). Instead, citizens are temporarily developing their own mechanisms to provide essential services while at the same time demanding that the state meets its service obligations. These demands are expressed through persistent enquiries, either directly to the municipality (as shown in the above quotation) or via the ward councillor, as well as through regular violent protests (e.g. throwing petrol bombs and rocks, burning tyres) that shut down the local area (Lemanski, 2020). This case demonstrates that while the state remains central to the expectations and demands of citizenship in this low-income community, citizens recognize the state's limits and are active in meeting their own needs, albeit in a highly atomized way, in the context of perceived state failure.

–   Off-grid strategies in Parkhurst

In 2015 Parkhurst residents considered collectively shifting 'off-grid' in response to ongoing and sustained loadshedding.[21] Led by the Parkhurst Residents and Business Owners Association (PRABOA, n.d.), the goal was to create a self-sustaining community that generated electricity via a solar-powered micro-grid, with water supplied through boreholes and other water catchment technologies that are disconnected from municipal supplies. This was envisioned as a stepping stone towards a self-sufficient 'green' suburb with community-owned biogas and bio-fuel production plants to generate methane gas for cooking, community education to grow food and recycle water, and an 'internet of things' to share and distribute power between households (Gordon, 2015). This Go Green Initiative (GGI) was driven by PRABOA and was both an act of service substitution and a protest against a state perceived as disconnected from residents' needs. The energy produced in the suburb would be for domestic use as well as street and traffic lights and other communal needs, with surplus sold back to the municipal grid. However, despite general community interest, at the time only 25 households went through the full process and installed the infrastructure necessary for energy self-provisioning. Despite this initially small take-up (which has subsequently increased significantly), the media deployed anti-apartheid struggle lexicons in framing the project as a 'power struggle' (Greyling, 2015), as 'power to the people' (Oxford, 2015), and as '… a striking example of grassroots democracy in action, [where] residents voted with their wallets and their custom: they decided how much they were willing to pay, and found a company prepared to supply [it]' (Fripp, 2015).

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20   Homeowner, interviewed by Charlotte Lemanski, March 2016.
21   Loadshedding refers to scheduled power cuts in order to reduce the 'load' or demand for electricity, and is largely due to insufficient power production.

Even though very few households initially pursued the GGI's off-grid format, the initiative was motivated by widespread and deep dissatisfaction with the quality of state service provision and a shared sense that the 'City [of Johannesburg] is leaving everything to rot'.[22] However, while state discontent is widespread, Parkhurst's initiative was extremely localized, effectively drawing both a symbolic and territorial line between residents and the surrounding areas, between those who were included and excluded from technological 'solutions'. GGI was framed as a 'collective effort', but was also in effect a tactical form of isolated and localized sovereignty (Cooper-Knock, 2018).

– Private water investments in Cape Town and Johannesburg
The motivations identified across the final case study—a desire for reliable basic services—resonates with both the low- and high-income communities of Westlake Village and Parkhurst respectively. South African cities have faced a series of water security challenges in recent years. From 2016 to 2018, a nationwide drought resulted in many cities and urban areas experiencing water shortages and restrictions. Cape Town was particularly affected by this drought and faced a real risk of 'day zero', where taps would be turned off and water rationing would be implemented (Ziervogel, 2019). Ultimately this was avoided through a range of interventions, and water restrictions were largely removed after rainfall in 2018.

Johannesburg also faced water restrictions during the same drought, and although the impact was not as severe as in Cape Town, the city was awakened to the possibility of its own potential day zero (Engelbrecht and Monteiro, 2021). In late 2022 and early 2023 the combined impact of heat waves, intermittent pumping of water due to electricity interruptions and infrastructure failure led to demand outstripping the water supply in the city, and as a result some areas experienced periods of low water pressure while others lost access to water completely on a near-daily basis. The municipality cut water off in some areas each night to enable reservoirs to build sufficient capacity and ensure access to water for all households for at least a few hours per day. Although the municipality found interim solutions for these localized water supply issues, the city continues to face significant ongoing water provision challenges because of population growth and changing rainfall patterns.

Many private households and businesses in both Johannesburg and Cape Town have invested in alternative water sources (e.g. rainwater tanks, boreholes) to protect themselves from insecure water supply and drought-related water shortages. Although some investments are fully off-grid infrastructure solutions, most households remain 'tied' to municipal water networks in hybrid configurations, with off-grid supplies operating as a backup. The most common reason cited for having a borehole was to be independent of the water grid and maintain current high standards of living (e.g. filling pools, watering gardens). Residents with boreholes also reflected that increasing water tariffs and a desire to be more environmentally sustainable were important motivations. However, respondents without boreholes questioned their sustainability, arguing that 'it's morally wrong to plumb into the ground water' and that it 'is not sustainable for everyone to have boreholes, depleting underground sources'.[23]

In all four case studies, the key motivation for supplementing state provision of services across high- and low-income settlements is to secure reliable access to basic services for households and communities. However, while Parkhurst and Imizamo Yethu have both developed active (arguably activist, and in the latter case violent) collective resident groups that worked to confront (and, in the case of Imizamo Yethu, briefly collaborate with) the state, Westlake Village lacked the capacity to develop a coordinated effort, while residents in Parkhurst and in Johannesburg's and Cape

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22 Parkhurst respondent, personal correspondence with Margot Rubin, 2018.
23 Open-ended responses from 2023 online survey.

Town's wealthy suburbs draw on their significant financial and professional capacity to collaborate with private sector service providers. Consequently, similar motivations for state supplementation and substitution result in differential strategies (often according to income and capacity) and diverse state responses.

State responses to citizens supplementing/substituting state services

This section explores state responses to different citizen-led actions supplementing and substituting state services. State responses are considered on a spectrum from minimal or no reaction, through negotiating a 'permissive space', to repression. These responses provide insights into the state's perception of different actors and strategies, and at what point(s) these actions go beyond the boundary of what is acceptable for the state. Notable is that none of the cases demonstrate any significant or explicit state repression of citizen action, even where these actions clearly frustrate the state. This is arguably indicative either of an overwhelmed and uninterested state, or of implicit state acceptance of the necessity of citizen supplementation or substitution— or potentially both. Of course, the state is not a single uniform entity, and state responses vary across the cases according to the department and/or the scale of the state, as well as temporal changes in the political situation. Undeniably, therefore, state responses to citizens supplementing or substituting services are complex and contradictory.

–   Looking away

First on the spectrum of state responses is ignoring or overlooking citizen practices of state substitution. This is either due to weak state capacity and/or represents a form of tacit state acceptance, and is evident across the socio-economic spectrum. For example, in Imizamo Yethu, after attempts to incorporate the patrollers into formal state governance structures failed (due to the incompatibility of the patrollers' reliance on retributive violence with a SAPS-led forum), the patrollers have effectively been abandoned by the state and are allowed to tacitly operate as vigilantes outside police authority, with minimal legal intervention. While respondents indicate that the police occasionally incarcerate patrollers following particularly violent acts, these isolated incidents of police regulation do not alter overarching narratives that the police cannot control the patrollers, and that the patrollers exist because of police failure. Consequently, the state's response to patrollers has shifted from a permissive space to state silence (except in extreme cases of murder or violent assault). This is significant because state silence (which is arguably a form of state tolerance) in the face of citizens' self-provisioning implicitly and effectively awards patrollers the right to appropriate the state's alleged monopoly over the means of violence, and in so doing undermines state sovereignty. It also points to a constant (re)negotiation of sovereignty between actors and the fragility of both the state's and the patroller's power to control the space.

State silence and tacit tolerance are equally evident in response to wealthy residents' shifts to self-provision of basic services in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In Parkhurst, while the City of Johannesburg and City Power (the entity responsible for electricity in the city) expressed concerns about the fiscal implications of citizen secession from municipal services, these grumbles did not translate into any official attempt to directly engage with Parkhurst residents, who were perceived as legitimate citizens acting in their own self-interest. Similarly, state responses to citizens' private water investments are sufficiently ineffectual that the de facto strategy encourages citizen compliance while 'looking away' from non-compliance. For example, City of Cape Town officials acknowledge that they have no capacity to regulate or monitor compliance with their guidelines on water installations and groundwater resource management, while in the City of Johannesburg a lack of consensus within the municipality regarding whether to incentivize or penalize private water installations has resulted in a policy vacuum. Consequently, in the absence of clear and enforceable legal

and regulatory frameworks citizen practices of state-substitution are accepted and ignored by the state, although frustrations are expressed: 'We are just waiting for people to come and apply [for borehole registration] and we know that other people are doing it anyway [i.e. installing without registration], and that's illegal'.[24]

As with the patrollers in Imizamo Yethu, the state has attempted to create a permissive space for citizens to self-provide, but is largely ignoring the (potentially damaging) activities of residents who establish their own private water supply without registration. Households, community organizations and communities have largely stepped into the breach since there is limited or uneven sanction for these actions, and much to be gained from them.

–   Negotiating permissive space

At times, and in certain spaces, the state seeks to negotiate permissive space with citizens who are substituting state services. This is clearly illustrated in Imizamo Yethu. While the state, in the form of SAPS and the City of Cape Town, has an ambivalent relationship with the patrollers, its initial response was to incorporate patrollers into the formal participatory governance structure of the Community Policing Forum (CPF). CPFs typically comprise a mix of local stakeholders—residents, businesses, private security and SAPS—meeting regularly to collaboratively support community safety and security. The attempt to include patrollers in the CPF was significant, because participating in a state-run governance institution effectively legitimized the patrollers and their (often violent, retribution-centric) approach to security. However, while other CPF members suggested that the police did not initially see the patrollers as vigilantes but rather as active and effective community stakeholders,[25] arguably the invitation to join the CPF was also a state strategy to monitor and control the patrollers. Indeed, while there were 'quite a number of meetings' between SAPS, the CPF and patrollers to explain that the latter could not self-enforce the law but must report crime to SAPS,[26] the collaboration ultimately failed. This is important because inviting a vigilante group into the state's formal governance not only conferred civic legitimacy to patrollers; it also demonstrated that the state was open to negotiating flexibility in how state security was governed, and ultimately therefore also to renegotiating state sovereignty via permissive space.

Similarly, in the case of private water investments the state negotiated new permissive spaces that facilitate, rather than regulate (or discipline, in cases of non-compliance) citizens' self-provisioning. For example, Cape Town and Johannesburg have recently developed guidelines and a draft policy (respectively) directed at businesses and households that are reducing their reliance on government-supplied water. This guidance essentially encourages customers installing alternative water technologies to comply with safety and registration processes, but with minimal to no penalties for non-compliance. In negotiating this permissive space, municipalities are risking their constitutional responsibility to ensure safe and subsidized drinking water in the expectation that affluent households' increased reliance on alternative water sources will contribute to the City's water diversification strategy: 'as part of our water security strategy we are trying to diversify that water supply mix a bit. Look at effluent, look at reuse, look at groundwater'.[27]

This could pose significant risks given that private water systems can contaminate the potable water supply (both municipal supply and/or individual stands),

24   CoJ official B, interview, 2022.
25   Private Security Provider, interview by Fiona Anciano, 6 December 2016; CPF executive, interview by Fiona Anciano, 23 November 2016; Hout Bay Neighbourhood Watch executive, interview by Fiona Anciano, 7 December 2016.
26   CPF executive, interview by Fiona Anciano, 23 November 2016.
27   CoJ official A, interview by Simbarashe Nyuke, 30 June 2022.

concentrated abstraction of groundwater can damage natural resources and affect municipal water supply systems, and the loss of municipal revenue from water tariffs directly undermines municipal capacity to subsidize services to the poor. Notably, this permissive space is offered to 'affluent' citizens, potentially because their strategies of supplementation/substitution are perceived as rational and potentially high-quality (i.e. employing professional installation) even though they undermine state sovereignty.

–   Frustration and judgement

Despite the provision of permissive spaces, the state does also express its frustration with, and moral judgement against, certain types of citizen-led strategies of state substitution, particularly where there are perceived negative consequences for the state. This is clearly demonstrated in the Westlake Village public housing settlement, where the municipality is vocal in criticizing residents' adaptation practices on the grounds that they are ungrateful and behaving inappropriately (Lemanski, 2020). From the state's perspective, having delivered subsidized housing in a fully-networked settlement to low-income households, residents' subsequent construction and consumption of informal and/or illegal and unregulated infrastructure (e.g. backyard dwellings, burst water pipes, electricity tapping) not only challenges the state's expectations that citizens will function as passive housing recipients, but also has financial implications for maintenance and repair budgets (Lemanski, 2020):

> [Westlake is] not as bad here as elsewhere because it's associated with a formal township … there are boundaries, streets, pipes and drains … Engineers say the facilities are sufficient here. This doesn't register as a crisis … [The] City [of Cape Town] invests so much money, but they're frustrated by how people respond.[28]

As the above quotation reveals, the municipality is 'frustrated by how people respond' in substituting for the state, rather than recognizing the limitations of its public housing policy or the inadequacies of the official service provision in a high-density settlement where demand exceeds the capacity of existing state infrastructure. Consequently, officials in the City of Cape Town value the 'expert' views of engineers, while devaluing the views of those who live in the settlement. This further alludes to an anti-poor bias against the Westlake Village citizens' actions, which are perceived as irrational and destructive despite clear parallels to strategies of self-service provision in high-income settlements that are tacitly accepted as rational responses to state failure.

However, despite the recognition of rationality awarded to high-income strategies and the permissive space allowed, residents' actions are still subject to other forms of state judgement and frustration because of the consequences for municipal revenue. South Africa's municipal finance system is reliant on cross-subsidizing revenue from rates and services from high-consumption citizens to deliver services to the poor. Consequently, as businesses and wealthy households invest in alternative infrastructure sources, there is a direct loss of municipal income. Some City of Johannesburg officials repeatedly expressed frustration at the fiscal implications of high-income citizen secession and self-provisioning, despite policies to encourage the use of alternatives. An official noted that '[municipalities and] especially the finance people, they do not support it [the off-grid water policy], even the Joburg Water itself, they do not support the policy because of the revenue implication'.[29] This also points to schisms within the state, and indicates that even state sovereignty can be uneven and contested.

In the City of Cape Town state frustration and judgement are more explicit, with the municipality's public registration campaigns effectively blaming citizens for

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28   Municipal Planning Official, interview by Charlotte Lemanski, 11 February 2019.
29   CoJ official B, interview by Christina Culwick-Fatti, 7 Sept 2022.

unsafe electricity installations: 'Register your [solar] PV system. Connecting without approvals is illegal and dangerous. Illegally connected systems could compromise the safety of your family, our family and the electricity grid' (taken from a City of Cape Town campaign).

While state frustration regarding citizens' self-provisioning is related to financial consequences for the state across all case studies, the targets of state responses differ in terms of the extent to which citizens themselves (rather than their actions per se) are deemed problematic (as in Westlake Village and IY), as opposed to official frustration with the consequences of strategies that are broadly acknowledged as individually rational (as with high-income alternative water and energy). This reveals the state's implicit and unconscious pro-elite, and arguably anti-poor, bias in responding to citizen supplementation.

The diversity of examples in this section demonstrates how the state (across multiple arms) adopts inconsistent and contradictory responses when citizens supplement or substitute state services. Responses range from permission to frustration and from tacit acceptance to ignoring, albeit with attempts at regulation without enforcement. However, the starkest divergence is between Westlake Village, where the state has shifted the blame for its failures onto residents as 'misuse' of infrastructure, and PRABOA in Parkhurst where explicit strategies of self-provision to secede from state authority were essentially ignored by the local government. Parkhurst residents' actions were neither openly violent nor required additional state maintenance, and were within the state's 'aesthetics' of pro-elite acceptability (Ghertner, 2008), and therefore their actions did not prompt an active response beyond frustration regarding the municipal revenue implications.

Arguably, the most significant state response is silence. For example, in the case of the wealthy moving off the water grid, the state has largely been mute. The City of Cape Town requires borehole registration, but there are no obvious sanctions if this is not done. Consequently, as elites go about a 'quiet encroachment'—a term used by Bayat (2010) in reference to marginalized populations—of both natural resources and state authority, these actions become normalized and legitimized through the absence of state response. This is important because ignoring the practices of citizens who are not only substituting state services (e.g. water, security) but also contravening state legislation, regulation or guidance (through violence or non-compliance) effectively undermines the sovereignty of the state, and awards implicit legitimacy to citizens (individually and collectively) even when their actions are in direct contradiction with state goals (e.g. security, cross-subsidization of services). Consequently, citizen actions of self-provisioning that may well be individually rational have potentially problematic collective consequences in both material (service-delivery) and political (renegotiating the social contract) terms. This reveals the consequences of effectively legitimizing small-scale strategies of state supplementation or substitution in contexts that lack a sovereign entity with the capacity to prioritize the collective interests of society.

State-substitution across diverse urban spaces and actors: governance implications

This article has explicitly brought into conversation the actions of citizens who occupy diverse residential spaces—informal settlements, public housing, private suburbs—in adopting strategies to substitute and supplement state services. While the actors, processes and services differ, the motivations are remarkably similar as citizens across all case studies take action to self-secure access to reliable services in the absence of adequate state provision. However, while this parallel analysis seeks to avoid binary discourses, there are arguably differences in how state-society negotiations emerge that may be traced back to citizens' divergent access to income and resources.

—   Divergent expectations and responses of the state

While residents in all case studies implement strategies that diminish their reliance on the state and circumvent public restrictions on resource consumption, only the two low-income communities simultaneously demonstrated high expectations of the state while also substituting or supplementing services, such as partnering with the police in Imizamo Yethu and supplementing (rather than supplanting) core state services in Westlake Village. While residents across the socio-economic spectrum might prefer that the state provides basic services, it was particularly noteworthy in Imizamo Yethu and Westlake Village that residents viewed their strategies of substitution and supplementation as temporary necessities, remaining hopeful of improved state provision in the future despite current perceptions of state failure. For example, many Imizamo Yethu residents argue that it is the duty of the state, not the patrollers, to provide protection. Westlake Village residents hold similar expectations regarding state responsibility to deliver services and are overwhelmingly dependent on the state, adapting (rather than circumventing) public services to meet their needs at the same time as demanding that the state should extend services.

In contrast, wealthy residents who have invested significant financial capital in alternative water and/or energy technology view this as a permanent solution to a state that is perceived as unable to govern effectively. In Parkhurst, PRABOA saw their role not only in terms of providing services, but also as 'the fourth tier of Government' (PRABOA website, nd) with the function to intervene between residents and the state. This effectively seeks to reconfigure the social contract so that state-citizen rights and responsibilities are mediated through an additional community platform, which meets the requirements of legitimacy (as it has been voted for by residents) and reciprocity in helping to provide services (von Lieres and Piper, 2014).

Regardless of the expectations of the state, or the temporary or permanent nature of the service substitutions, the citizens in all case studies are constantly negotiating and renegotiating their sovereignty. For example, the patrollers have attained some degree of social legitimacy from residents due to their consistent provision of services over a sustained period of time, and act in a collective way to claim sovereignty over security provision. Differing from Imizamo Yethu and Parkhurst, there is little collective action in the case studies of Westlake Village and the households who are hybridizing their water and energy provisions. Here, individuals are taking control of their service provision (even if cumulatively their actions aggregate to an agglomerated substitution of state services), pointing to differentiated forms of sovereignty.

Finally, a key reflection from the article's juxtaposition of economic cases is that wealthier residents are able to secure access to more reliable services, and have greater capacity to self-provision without state interference, than lower-income groups, and they may therefore have an easier route to negotiating sovereignty. In practice, however, elite forms of state substitution also have negative implications for state legitimacy and municipal revenue. This is confirmed by earlier research in South Africa indicating that the practices of the wealthy, such as illegally restricting access to public streets or appropriating land without legal permission, are largely ignored or subsequently legalized. Conversely, the poor are penalized if they engage in similar practices, for example by being evicted from land occupations (Lemanski and Oldfield, 2009). Such practices resonate with divergent state responses to unregulated land construction in India, where slums are designated unauthorized settlements that require eradication while shopping centres, mansions and suburbs constructed without permission, but which adopt a 'World Class' visual aesthetic, are formalized and incorporated into planning regimes (Ghertner, 2008). This reveals how the wealthy are just as likely to function outside formal planning regulations as the poor, but they are more likely to negotiate tacitly approved sovereignty and subsequent official permission for their acts than lower income citizens. In part, this is because elites can leverage their

education, wealth and personal connections to manipulate legislative ambiguities (Pow, 2017; Moatasim, 2019; Rubin, 2021; Lauermann and Mallak, 2023) in ways that are inconceivable for low-income citizens.

Conclusion: negotiating sovereignty in urban South Africa

This article has demonstrated how citizens across the socio-economic spectrum and across urban residential spaces are increasingly substituting and supplementing services that were previously provided by, and are expected from, the state. The article adopts an interdisciplinary approach across political science and urban studies to consider the political impacts of these strategies—specifically, the ways in which citizens supplementing and substituting for the state effectively contest and (re)negotiate spaces of sovereignty.

It is evident across all the case studies that there is no singular 'sovereign', but rather that sovereignty is fluid and constantly (re)negotiated. From patrollers who use illegal force to punish suspects without trial to wealthy residents who collectively secede from the state's networked electricity and water, these actors implicitly and explicitly negotiate permissive spaces (Cooper-Knock, 2018) in cooperation and confrontation with the state. While the state may be ambivalent towards, unable to prevent or choose to ignore these spaces of sovereignty, claiming them does not delegitimize the state. For example, while residents in Parkhurst attempted to fully substitute state energy services, this community was not fully sovereign over other aspects of their lives where the state remained dominant. While these cases highlight the longstanding reality that sovereignty is diffuse and distributed among various actors, the key difference is that, historically, clear lines have demarcated the state's responsibilities. Now, however, these boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. This blurring destabilizes the idea of what the state is and what actions and practices constitute it, leaving a sense of insecurity and instability in its wake.

Notably, the cases further demonstrate that while sovereignty may be localized, its impacts are not. For example, the cumulative impact of thousands of residents adopting solar power has changed the national configuration of energy provision, and has consequences for those with and without the technology (Swilling, 2023). Although shifting and contested forms of (local) sovereignty are not new phenomena, the language used to describe these acts frequently relates to 'informality'. This article argues that rather than thinking about them in terms of 'informality', which contrasts them with 'formal' strategies and carries an implied assumption that one kind of action is imbued with rationality while the other is chaotic, the notion of shifting sovereignty offers a less binary analytical lens. This article is important as it highlights the rapidly changing scale and frequency with which citizens are substituting for the state, thereby (re)negotiating sovereign space.

Substituting for the state is now a daily act for many, not only in low-income settlements but also among clusters of elites. The range of individuals and groups claiming sovereign spaces is expanding, and thus requires deeper reflection on the political impacts of service substitution. This raises the question of the nature of statehood in South Africa and, looking forward, what will sit at the heart of the country's social contract in the future. Is South Africa a state that will provide and aggregate services across socio-economic groups to prevent a splintered urbanism and deepening inequality? Or is it one that will shrink in on itself, providing minimalist neo-liberal infrastructures and thereby contravening its own constitution?

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