

Reclaiming the Poor People's Campaign

Resources from a Living Politics
of **Abahlali baseMjondolo**,
the Shackdweller's Movement,
and the **Rural Network**.

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For more on Abahlali baseMjondolo, check the website at: www.abahlali.org

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Globalisation

<http://abahlali.org/node/2459>

Draft Briefing Notes for the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo Seminar to Prepare Delegates to the ILRIG 'Globalisation School' September 2007.

1. Globalization

1. 1. We're not necessarily against 'globalisation'. It is a good thing when we can be in solidarity with people around the world. For example AbM has supported the struggle of people in Haiti and people in Turkey have supported our struggle. Therefore we support some kinds of 'globalisation from below' if they can connect and build real democratic struggle and even when they just allow us to get to know each other. But here we are talking about real globalization – a globalisation where people in the poor countries have as much right and capacity to share and express solidarity as people in the rich countries.

1.2 Globalisation is not new. It is because of globalisation that Africans were taken to Haiti as slaves and that Indians were bought here as indentured labourers. Globalisation has always been driven by the rich in the rich countries with local elites as their allies. But it has always been resisted from below. We cannot go back to a time before globalization. What we have to do is to struggle to turn globalisation into something that the poor people of the world control.

1. 3. We are for the technologies that allow us to connect with people more easily – cell phones, internet and so on. We like them. But the problem is that the rich have access to these technologies – producing, selling and using them and so they are most often used against us (even though we do use them in our struggles too – especially cell phones and now we have our own website too although most comrades can't see it). We have to find a way to put these technologies in common so that they can be for everyone. For example we could start with demanding that there should be more libraries in every settlement with internet or trying to build these ourselves.

1. 4. We are against 'globalisation' when it means the 'globalisation' of the power of the elite in the rich countries. When they extend their power over the world they try to make sure that governments and local elites everywhere are working for them to be able to exploit the poor and the nature more ruthlessly. Governments are told to spend less on supporting society and more on controlling and exploiting it. They are told not to defend their people against the exploitation of big business. They are told that people must pay for everything – even what God has given us like water. The factories here, like the shoe factories in 'Maritzburg, are closing down because they can't compete with cheap imports and so we are losing our jobs. Some of our land is being turned into game reserves for foreign tourists and people are being forced off their land and into shacks. We're against the situation where suffering, exploitation and damage are globalised and intensified by the rich and powerful who use the growing possibilities and technologies of connection, communication and movement to spread their power. They can set up businesses anywhere but the poor cannot cross the borders. We are locked in to places like France (or Park Gate for the Durban people or Delft for the Cape Town people) because we can't afford transport costs. And we are locked into our countries because we can't cross borders while the rich roam the world freely to exploit us.

1. 5. It is clear that in principle, these possibilities (i.e., the possibilities and technologies of connection, communication and movement) could be good for people's struggles against injustice. These technologies could help the poor to unite around the world. But in our experience, what actually happens most often is that another elite, presenting itself as an ally of our struggles and calling itself 'civil society', appropriates these possibilities for their own interests, prestige and

power – and at the expense of actual movements waging actual struggles in actual communities. What we notice in this role of 'civil society' and the NGOs, is that it seems very easy to lie when you are using some of these opportunities of our globalised world but you are not accountable to movements at the grassroots – you can just put stories and claims about your research and your 'connectedness' with grassroots people and their struggles onto websites and in films and in emails to 'international audiences' (we notice that these audiences are usually the same sort of class of researchers and 'activists' with access to computers, telephone lines, internet and the rest, and who seem to meet each other quite regularly in conferences and hotels around the world talking about poor peoples' struggles. Most of them come from the rich countries). The grassroots people and their structures don't really have a way of knowing about what is said about them there, let alone challenging the claims and lies, and there is often no accountability. And very often what is being discussed through this technology is not the politics of the poor. It is a politics conducted in the name of the poor but that is a different thing. Our politics has to confront problems like what to do when the local councillor refuses to sign grant applications, how to connect when there is no airtime, how to arrange meetings when there is no public transport and so on. But the NGO politics is often about getting a mandate for NGO people to fly around the world and to network with other NGOs and academics – something we can't do very easily. Sometimes when we have challenged NGOs for their behaviour they have responded just like the government – by telling terrible lie about us (even in the media) and trying to divide us by attacking our elected leaders and giving other people money and presenting them as representatives of our organisations. It is clear that for some NGO activists, just like some people in government, their power to speak for us is the most important thing and they will defend it ruthlessly against grassroots struggle democracy. We all know this story.

1. 6. As far as we can tell, the bad patterns and circumstances of 'globalisation' definitely have some world-wide driving forces – for example, the powerful groups in rich countries like the United States, and those in western Europe, and Asia (including China), and in the world-wide organisations that they effectively control and use to try and force the world to follow their rules that suit their interests for profit and power (like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation(WTO)). But is also clear from our experiences that the bad features of our current world do not somehow fall from the heavens where these international forces are concentrated and then have 'effects' that mess up the lives of poor people living and working in particular places around the world. How the bad things of globalisation really and locally affect poor people also comes from the roles that are played by all sorts of people and organisations pursuing power and profit even down to the very local level. The kind of globalisation that works for the rich and powerful would not succeed without these links connecting the systems of oppression and exploitation to the places and people where suffering is actually experienced. Local elites exploit us for their own profit motivated by their own cruelty and desire for wealth. And some people say that globalisation started in 1989 when the Soviet Union fell. But our problems go back a lot further than that. Shack dwellers had to fight evictions in Durban in the 1920s and again in the 1950s. Some people in our movement remember being evicted from Umkhubane in the 1950s when they were children. The rich have always wanted the city for themselves – under colonialism, under apartheid and under neo-liberalism.

2. NGOs and Grassroots Struggle

2.1 Some NGOs are prepared to talk to movements and not for them. They want to offer support. But others want to talk for movements and think that they have a natural right to lead. This can be because of class prejudice, or race prejudice, or because of a political orientation that is vanguardist and not democratic. Abahlali has had some very good experiences with some NGOs and some very bad experiences too. We have also noticed that sometimes (actually, it is what they

usually do) 'civil society' experts and activists tell the grassroots people that it is mistaken to take up struggles that focus on a local enemy or a local problem because the 'real' enemy is globalisation, or global capitalism or the World Bank or something else. In our experience, firstly this is just wrong, and secondly, this approach hurts or undermines people's ability to wage effective struggles. This is because it means that the struggles where we live and work, where we are oppressed and where we can fight back, are then presented as not important. The struggles that are presented as important are international meetings that we can't attend! Effective and popular struggle actually is how we must fight against the bad parts of globalisation (and at the same time it is how we actually start to build a better global world for everyone). Using disempowering language and analysis of the globalised parts of the system to make local militants feel stupid or inadequate therefore does not make a better world come any closer – but it does help build the power of the NGOs and outsider activists who make grassroots people depend on them for the 'correct' (i.e., mistaken) line! In the same way this habit of some NGOs of never coming to our meetings but always expecting us to come to their meetings (which are in English, which are held during working hours, and in which the NGOs set the whole agenda before we arrive) indicates clearly that they are looking to use us, not to have a partnership with us. Also this thing of NGOs pretending that individuals are organisations or that 3 people are a movement continues. This is dishonest and undermines real unity. They are doing it because those individuals and 3 people movements are taking their money and will never challenge them. But that is a false politic. It is not a living politic. A living politic comes from free thought in democratic organisations.

From the experiences of Abahali baseMjondolo, this problem is one of the reasons we have learnt how important it is to be faithful to a 'living politics' – as S'bu Zikode put it in his article about the Third Force: "It is the thinking of the masses of the people that matters".

2.2 To sustain a commitment to a living politics during the Globalization school, it will be good to perhaps feel confident to consistently ask:

- 'do I/we understand what is being said?' (and if not, this must be challenged until the speaker speaks to be understood or the point is translated into a language you speak), and
- 'is what is being said useful for building our movement and fighting our struggle?' (and if not, it must be challenged as being irrelevant – or badly explained).
- Is the NGO here to work with us to build our struggle or are they wanting to use us to build their project?

2.3 A key thing will be to feel as confident as they are. You do not have to measure up to some silly idea that the hosts may have of 'capacitated' comrades 'engaging' the debates. It is always good to discuss with other people. We all have important things to learn from each other. But we are the Professors of your own suffering. We are the Professors of our own struggles. We have as much to teach the NGO people as they have to teach us. It is good for them to share their learning from books and meetings with us and for us to share our learning from suffering and struggling every day with them. But it is not ok if they are always the teachers and we are always the learners. We want partnership, not domination.

2.4 Given the history of AbM's challenge to exploitative, dishonest and undemocratic behaviour by NGOs (which includes the AbM protest at the SMI national meeting in late 2006, and people in and linked to the notorious Durban NGO publicly lying about AbM in the media and privately lying about AbM to other NGOs and activists and even, although they have never attended AbM meetings trying to overrule AbM decisions about who should represent AbM to the media and in international meetings!), there may be pressure on the comrades at this meeting. Ilrig has invited people to present at this school who are amongst the worst of those that told terrible lies about AbM when we asked for partnership not domination from the NGOs. This might make things

difficult. Confidence in a living politics is correct because the living politics is a democratic politics in the hands of the people that it speaks for – but sometimes the pressure really can be very intimidating and silence or retreat is also ok (it usually is not complete silence because there will be important conversations and connections with other people who are connected with real struggles from elsewhere around even if these connections and conversations happen outside of the 'official' programme).

2.5 As delegates from movements, the people going to the School do not have any mandate to negotiate (let alone agree to) the participation or endorsement by their structures of plans that are put to them during the time of the school. (For example, there may be people, using good comradely language, trying to pressure a commitment to 'unity' of 'social movements' and other plans. But we know from bitter experience that when some NGO people say 'unity' what they really mean is that we must give up our living struggle to them and to their project of conference specialism so that they can look good. We are 100% for the unity of struggles but we are for a democratic unity between real struggles) All you have a mandate to do is to report back to the next Abahlali meeting and to discuss any proposals there. If you come under any pressure just explain that your mandate is only to report back for further discussion.

Comment: S'bu Zikode, President Abahlali baseMjondolo

"As much as all debates are good, fighting only by talking does not take us much further. Sometimes we need to strengthen our muscles for an action debate, that is a living debate that does not only end on theories."

I want to assure all who weren't at the University of Abahlali last night that the level of engagement was far exceeding the expectations of most of us.

The second session was about the bigger and beautiful famous term, Globalization, which was described in a number of ways that are genuine and meaningful to ordinary people. It was unbelievable to hear a lot of deep thinkings of ordinary people interpreting the high rise and a seemingly complicated term to most people that often involve the IMF, World Bank etc. into its simplest meaning to ordinary people. What it is, what it involves and how does it affect us direct or indirect. It was clear to all that you have to approach it from the bottom, start small in a form like struggling against Baig, Mlaba etc, because in no ways you can jump into the World Bank while failing to identify a close enemy that you can see, touch, an enemy that denies us a right to life. Thus as much as all debates are good, fighting only by talking does not take us much further. Sometimes we need to strengthen our muscles for an action debate, that is a living debate that does not only end on theories.

We should encourage these kinds of seminars, I thus have no doubt that this delegation has what it takes to fully participate in such global debate that will of course be meaningful to ordinary global poor communities, such as rural and urban communities as opposed to a methodology that seems to pretend that when the struggle is to be thought there is no grass root level, there is no soil, no intellectuals without land and housing but only space where high and good people are to be found. The engagement and our experiences showed us that rural dwellers are our sisters and brothers, thus we will not be doing justice to ourselves if we turn to see these struggles of pain and suffering being divided from one another.

The idea of keeping these discussions in a documented form will be good, because it does say how much we value these discussions of ordinary, it becomes an asset of the Movement. This will still stimulate a debate around the alternative to Living globalization that is before us as we have started this journey of intellectuals. The idea of seeing development and involving ordinary people to things that affect them in a meaningful and practical manner by themselves to themselves is

called Abahlalism and is a living politic of ordinary people.

Thanks, S'bu Zikode, Abahlali baseMjondolo.

Living Politics

To Resist All Degradations & Divisions

extracts from: **To Resist All Degradations & Divisions**

full document at: <http://abahlali.org/node/5063>

To Resist All Degradations & Divisions

An interview with S'bu Zikode

...As Zulu people you were mostly respected for being a good fighter. It was the whole initial tradition – that being a good fighter gives you respect. As a good fighter you would be given a position as a commander of an aggressive group – that was the whole idea. When there were these mass attacks it was always organised. When there were funerals, where there were services, prayers, or any other traditional gatherings - a lot of people together - they were just seen as an opportunity to kill people. What counts is how many people were killed. That was the whole idea. When people praised themselves they talked about how many people they had killed, not about why they were killing, not about any politics.

Because of the South African history you still ask yourself if people in power are now matured to really understand politics. They assume that if we don't have similar ideas to them that automatically make us enemies. I doubt if people are yet in the position of understanding politics. If you do not agree with my ideas then you must die. I am sure that it is going to take time for people to understand that politics is about ideas, about discussion, should be about love and passion for one's country, so any tactic should be about how to serve the world better, how to win minds and heart of the majority. It is going to take even longer for people to understand that those debates should be open to everyone, that a real politics is not about how many people you are willing to arrest, threaten or kill; that a real politics is not a fight to be able to abuse state power but that a real politics is in fact about how many people you are willing to listen to and to serve – and to listen to them and to serve them as it pleases them, not yourself. ...

As you know I first came to Kennedy Road the day after the road blockade. People had just tried to march on the police station and had been beaten back. The settlement was occupied by the police and there was a very strong sense of people being on their own. That must have been a heavy weight to carry.

Ja, definitely. That was not easy. But we had to stand firm. That was the reality.

I had no idea that a movement would be formed, no idea. And I didn't know what form would be taken by the politics of the poor that became possible after the road blockade. I didn't know what impact it would have. That is why it is quite difficult when I get interviewed. Most people think that this was planned – that a group of people sat down and decided to establish a movement. You know, how the NGOs work.

There has been a lot of analysis and interpretation of the movement – sometimes we read it in papers. But all we knew was that we had decided to make the break. To accept that we were on our own and to insist that the people could not be ladders any more; that the new politics had to be led by poor people and to be for poor people; that nothing could be decided for us without us. The road blockade was the start. We didn't know what would come next. After the blockade we discussed things and then we decided on a second step. That's how it went, that's how it grew. We learnt as we went. It is still like that now. We discuss things until we have decided on the next step and then we take it. Personally I have learnt a lot.

There was a tremendous collective excitement and pride in the beginning. Did you share that?

Or were you, as a leader, under too much pressure?

Ja, although I was very angry with everything from a political point of view, very angry with the way the ANC was treating the people, very angry with their policies, I felt very confident when we began to rebel. I found my inner peace. The real danger when things go wrong like this is being silence. When you voice out, cough it out then you can heal. You can find this faith in yourself. There is all this frustration and humiliation. Humiliation from the way you are forced to live and humiliation from the way you are treated. When it is expressed it is like taking out a poison. You become free to act and you become angry and that anger is the source of an incredible energy.

So even though we didn't have the houses we had found our voice. We didn't have all the answers. But the fact that we had built this platform, that on its own was a very remarkable progress.

...

There has been a lot of academic speculation, much of not researched at all, about where the politics of Abahlalism comes from. Some people have said it comes from the popular struggles of the 1980s with their stress on bottom up democratic practice, others have said that it comes from the churches with their stress on the dignity of each person, others have said that it is something completely new. Where do you think that it comes from?

When things go wrong silence speaks volumes. Silence is the voice of the defeated, people whose spirits have been vandalized. It is a big danger to be silence in times of trying circumstances. Condemning injustice, calling it by its real names, and doing this together; that on its own does a lot. That on its own is a kind of change, a lot of change.

The movement comes from recognition of this danger in conjunction with our cultural beliefs. It is a common sense that everyone is equal, that everyone matters, that the world must be shared.

My understanding is that this common sense comes from the very new spirit of ubuntu, from the spirit of humanity, from the understanding of what is required for a proper respect of each person's dignity, of what they are required to do.

Our movement is formed by different people, all poor people but some with different beliefs, different religious backgrounds. But the reality is that most people start with the belief that we are all created in the image of God, and that was the earliest understanding of the spirit of humanity in the movement. Here in the settlements we come from many places, we speak many languages. Therefore we are forced to ensure that the spirit of humanity is for everyone. We are forced to ensure that it is universal. There are all kinds of unfamiliar words that some of us are now using to explain this but it is actually very simple.

From this it follows that we can not allow division, degradation – any form that keeps us apart. On this point we have to be completely inflexible. On this point we do not negotiate. If we give up this point we will have given up on our movement.

It is not always clear what that should be done. We are not always strong enough to achieve all of our demands. This is one reason why we are sometimes quite flexible in our tactics. Sometimes we are blockading roads, sometimes we are connecting people to water and electricity, sometimes we are forcing the government to negotiate directly with us instead of the councillors, sometimes we are at court having to ask a judge to recognise our humanity.

The collective culture that we have built within the movement, that pride of belonging to this collective force that was not spoken about before, becomes a new concept, a new belief - especially as Abahlali in its own nature, on its own, is different to other politics. It requires a different style of membership and leadership. It requires a lot of thinking, not only on what is read, but on what is common to all the areas. Therefore learning Abahlalism demands, in its nature, the

form that it takes. It doesn't require one to adopt some ideas and approach from outside. When you pull all the different people together and make sure that everyone fits in, that it is everyone's home, that's when it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics and leadership. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility of thinking, able to deal with its uniqueness. It gives us the strength to support each other, to keep thinking together, to keep fighting together.

From what I have seen Abahlali is original but it is also natural – it gets generated from different people, with different ideas, who have grown up in different places, in different levels of space. Putting all this together requires its own genius. It's not the same like other movements that take their mandate and understanding from ordinary politics. It requires learning the demands that come from all the areas – its nature demands the form that the movement takes. It doesn't require one adopting some other ideas and approach from outside. Then when you pull all the demands together and try and make sure that the movement is everyone's home it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility to be able to deal with its uniqueness. The movement is not like an NGO or a political party where some few people, some experts in politics, sit down and decide how other people should be organised, what they should demand and how. Other movements take their mandate, or their understanding, from what has been read. We did not start with a plan – the movement has always been shaped by the daily activities of the people that make it, by their daily thinking, by their daily influence. This togetherness is what has shaped the movement.

I am not too sure where our ideas would come from if there was no daily lives of people, a living movement can only be shaped by the daily lives of its members. I strongly believe that. This is where we formulate our debates and then our demands. We are going to court on Tuesday – winning or losing will affect how we go forward. It is the environment that we breathe in that shapes how we carry our politics forward. But it is who we are, human beings oppressed by other human beings, that directs our politics.

My next question was going to be: "What is your understanding of a living politics?" but I think that perhaps you've just answered that.

No, that is a simple one because we are all human beings and so our needs are all, one way or the other, similar. A living politics is not a politics that requires a formal education – a living politics is a politics that is easily understood because it arises from our daily lives and the daily challenges we face. It is a politics that every ordinary person can understand. It is a politics that knows that we have no water but that in fact we all deserve water. It is a politics that everyone must have electricity because it is required by our lives. That understanding – that there are no toilets but that in fact there should be toilets - is a living politics. It is not complicated; it does not require big books to find the information. It doesn't have a hidden agenda – it is a politics of living that is just founded only on the nature of living. Every person can understand these kinds of demands and every person has to recognise that these demands are legitimate.

Of course sometimes we need formal expertise – we might need a lawyer if we have an eviction case, or a policy expert if we are negotiating with government. But then we only work with these people when they freely understand that their role is to become part of our living politics. They might bring a skill but the way forward, how we use that skill, if we use that skill, well, that comes out of a meeting, a meeting of the movement. By insisting on this we have found the right people to work with.

You've also spoken about a living communism before. Can you tell me what you meant by that?

For me understanding communism starts with understanding community. You have to start with the situation of the community, the culture of the community. Once you understand the complete

needs of the community you can develop demands that are fair to anyone; to everyone. Everyone must have equal treatment. And obviously all what needs to be shaped in the society must be shaped equally and fairly. And of course if everyone is able to shape the world, and if we should shape it fairly, that means that the world must be shared. That is my understanding. It means one community, one demand.

To be more simple a living communism is a living idea and a living practice of ordinary people. The idea is the full and real equality of everyone without exception. The practice, well, a community must collectively own or forcefully take collective ownership of natural resources - especially the water supply, land and food. Every community is rightfully entitled to these resources. After that we can think about the next steps. We are already taking electricity, building and running crèches, insisting that our children can access the schools. We just need to keep going.

Again I do not think we should be thinking away from ordinary people, having to learn complicated new ideas and ways of speaking. Instead we should approach the very ordinary people that are so often accused of lacking ideas, those who must always be taught or given a political direction. We need to ask these people a simple question: 'What is needed for your life, for your safety, for your dignity?'. That simple question asked to ordinary people, well, it is a kind of social explosion. From that explosion your programme just develops on its own.

Of course a struggle always starts in one place, amongst people dealing with one part of the human reality. Maybe they are, like us, living like pigs in the mud, strange pigs that are also supposed to survive constant fires. Or maybe they are being taken to Lindela or maybe they are being attacked from the sky, being bombed. You have to start with what is being done to you, with what is being denied to you.

But for me communism means a complete community. It does not mean a community that is complete because everyone in it thinks the same or because one kind of division has been overcome. It means a complete community that is complete because no one is excluded – a community that is open to all. It means a very active and proactive community – a community that thinks and debates and demands. It is the universal spirit of humanity. Obviously this starts with one human life. We know that if we do not value every human life then we would be deceiving ourselves if we say that there is a community at all.

We are communists here in the mud and fire but we are not communists because of the mud and fire. We are communists because we are human beings in the mud and fire. We are communists because we have decided to take our humanity seriously and to resist all degradations and divisions.

...

I know that it's a Sunday night and your family are waiting for you. This will be my last question. What does it mean for you when you say that Abahlalism is the politics of those that don't count, the politics of those that are not supposed to speak.

I think that I have a clear understanding of this. I know from my own personal experience how I came to have enemies that I did not have because now I am speaking. When you are quiet, when you know your place, you are accepted and you are as safe as a poor person can be. But the moment you start talking you become a threat.

When one talks about the politics of those that do not count one must start from the fact that the system makes it impossible for everyone to count. If ordinary people counted it would collapse immediately. The way to hide the fact that ordinary people do not count, and that the system depends on this, is to ensure that ordinary people are taken as being unable to think and therefore unable to say anything intelligent. We are supposed to be led.

The politics of those that do not count makes no respect for those who are meant to think for everyone else, to lead. This turning the tide, when the life turns one at the front and takes him to the back, it is like you are doing a chaos because you want to do away with the status quo. You want to be innovative, you want to be creative, you want to live your life but it seems that the only way is to undermine those who have led the way. So you do not accept that someone must be a slave and work for someone else. No boss will find this acceptable. You do not accept that someone must be a good boy or a good girl, an obedient follower who does not think and act for themselves. No politician will find this acceptable. They will fight up until those tides are turned back. So we must face the difficulty of this politics.

The understanding is just that simple. In order for those who count to defend their own territory someone should not talk, someone should just be led, someone should not question, someone should just be a beneficiary of those particular services that are meant to be given.

The moment that you begin to question then you are threatening the system. You are not supposed to do that, and your intelligence and capability are not supposed to allow you to voice or to take the space. The system keeps people separate. If you want to unite and to make a culture that people should be equal then you are invading the space that is forbidden to you, you are threatening the system.

That's very powerful. Thank you.

Meaningful engagement

S'bu Zikode, Kennedy Road Settlement, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, 24 July 2009.

It is a fact that may not be disputed that not all engagements between the state and the people are meant to be meaningful. What is called 'engagement' or 'public participation' is often just a kind of instruction, sometimes even a threat. Many times it is done in such a way that all possibilities for real discussion and understanding are closed from the start. In these cases what is called engagement is really just a way for the state to pretend to be democratic when in reality all decisions are already taken and taken far away from poor people.

However all purposes of engagement are meant to be meaningful by virtue of their intention. When you engage for a particular purpose you want the purpose itself to determine the nature of the engagement. The purpose therefore comes first. In each engagement we must be clear about who we are and what we want. This determines our tactics and what we can accept and not accept in each engagement.

It is one thing if we are beneficiaries who need delivery. It is another thing if we are citizens who want to shape the future of our cities, even our country. It is another thing if we are human beings who have decided that it is our duty to humanize the world.

Some problems are technical. Some problems are political. But we find that without our own political empowerment we can not even resolve the technical problems. The solving of even very small technical problems, like a broken toilet, requires that we are first recognized as people that count. If you are not recognized they will just say 'who the hell are you?'. To be recognized requires struggle. It took Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban three years of hard struggle – with many police attacks, many beatings and arrests – before we were even recognized as people who could negotiate with the state. Then there was another year of a different kind of struggle within the negotiations before we were properly recognized there. Right now in Cape Town Abahlali baseMjondolo are still fighting the first struggle against repression. Right now communities all over the country are in rebellion. Many are still at the stage of demanding to be recognized as people that count. We are very much encouraged by many of these rebellions. We support the land occupations, the strikes and the eating of food in the big shops in Durban. Of course we condemn the new xenophobia in Mpumalanga. When the anger of the poor turns on the poor it is nothing but disaster. Terrible, terrible disaster.

The road is long. We have travelled far in Durban but it remains possible that we could be pushed back. Therefore we must always remain strong – we must remain many, we must remain active, we must continue to think and to debate all issues. This is the only way to ensure that we keep going forward.

There are some clear rules for meaningful engagement. Firstly the people that are suppose to participate in that engagement must be informed prior to date of that engagement and they need to be aware of what is going to be discussed during that engagement. The time, place, language and culture of that engagement must suit the people.

The leadership of the movement or community that will attend the engagement also has important responsibilities. They need to inform all of their members about the engagement in

good time. They need to explain clearly what will be at stake. The organizing and placing of notices should not only be limited to a leadership or organizational level but to ordinary people to avoid any form of exclusion. Women must be included on the same basis as men. The young and the old must be included on the same basis. The poor and the even poorer must be included on the same basis. There must be no distinction between people born here and people born in other countries.

The local leadership must use its relevant culture and the strategies that are often used in that particular community. It is important not to allow the NGOs to teach people ways of being 'professional' about development that separate people from the culture of a community.

Representatives must be elected and mandated. When there is ongoing engagement it is important that representatives are rotated and re-elected for each engagement. All decisions must be referred back to the movement or community before being finalized.

During the engagement the processes should be conducted in a way that all the parties that are involved in that engagement feel that their opinions are being heard. You cannot have a situation where one party controls the agenda and chairs the meeting without consultation. Everyone must be able to speak freely.

My experience in the past has been that some government officials would come up with a concluded decision with no room to accommodate views of the people and then organize an engagement. This is the experience of most communities and most movement. In these cases what is the point of engaging under these circumstances?

This was most evident to us when the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature introduced the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Bill 2007, in the Kennedy Road Settlement. They started with a police helicopter just above us, flying low over the settlement. There were police everywhere. We were not allowed to speak if we couldn't quote a section of Act. Those who did speak were dismissed without respect. Our concerns were treated as if they were ignorant or stupid.

It became clear that there was no reason for the legislature to hold this public meeting except that they were required by the law to do it. We organized many shack dwellers to attend this meeting. We prepared for it very carefully. We read that Bill together line by line. We discussed each point in that Bill. On the day the Kennedy Road Community Hall was fully packed. But our presence was turned to be used to justify the passing of the Bill into an Act on the basis that a lot of people were present to endorse the Act! It is thus clear that the good move of holding public meetings can easily be monopolized and abused in order to justify the exclusion of the public from the discussions that really matter.

In such instances one can rightfully say that, such government officials see no need to engage ordinary people on policy formulation matters that affect them directly. This thinking goes with the idea that ordinary people should just become the passive receivers of services. They must just trust that everything that is done in their name and for them is an attempt to help them. Of course we cannot trust in this because people are being evicted everywhere. People are facing forced removals everywhere. People are being dumped in transit camps everywhere. People are being disconnected everywhere, burnt everywhere, arrested everywhere, beaten everywhere. We have good reason not to automatically trust the state. Where we have achieved trust with some officials it has been after long struggle and long negotiation followed by the experience of learning to work

together.

Active citizen participation is discouraged by those that hold the power. Sometimes it is discouraged with contempt. Sometimes it is discouraged with violence. Sometimes it is discouraged by making simple issues too complicated for ordinary to understand. Sometimes it is discouraged by just making it too difficult to engage. How many shack dwellers can afford to be on hold on their cellphones for twenty minutes?

We expressed our anger at the so called 'public participation' meeting for the Slums Bill. Some members of Abahlali baseMjondolo were then invited to the KwaZulu-Natal parliament to participate in the discussions there. They prepared carefully. They had a written submission and we were ready for all debates. They travelled there on a work day. But the Act was passed in their presence without any opportunity given to them to say a word. The Act was passed against the will of the people.

Meaningful engagement will of course mean different things to different people. But it is clear that a reasonable service provider, stakeholder, leader or official should not be judged by how many public hearing meetings or izimbizos it conducts but by the number of people whom they manage to reach and listen to and to take into serious account during those meetings. Meaningful engagement should make sure that both parties involved will be able to benefit from that engagement. It can never be meaningful if it is just for the people to listen and to never be able to voice out their own thinking.

The government says that it wants to 'bring government to the people'. It is much better to 'bring government to the people' than to send in the police, the private security and the land invasions unit to evict and disconnect and to then call that good governance. But bringing the government to the people is not enough. Meaningful engagement will only happen when we can, through our struggles, bring the people into government.

That does not mean that we want to replace one councilor with another or one party with another. It means that we want to bring the government, regardless of who is sitting on the comfy chairs there, under the control of the people.

That is why we also say that the struggle of our movements is a struggle to democratize the society from below. Yes we do want services. Services are needed by our lives. They are basic to life. We will always engage to try and get or to keep these services. These little struggles are important.

But we also want full recognition of our humanity. Things must be done with us and not for us or to us. Therefore the government must come under the people. This requires the current political system to be turned upside down. If each community and each movement builds its power by respecting its members fully so that as each individual grows in power each community and movement grows in its power then we can slowly achieve this step by step. That is our vision for meaningful engagement – a slow revolution from below fought day by day across the country.

Resistance from the other South Africa

Neha Nimmagudda (2008-07-17)

<http://abahlali.org/node/3794> and also at:

<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/49497>

“Leaders are meant to lead and to be led [by those who elected them]” - Lindela Figlan, Abahlali baseMjondolo movement

Fourteen years since the transition to democracy, leadership in South Africa is in a state of flux—and South Africans know a thing or two about leaders. For every Mandela, after all, there is an Mbeki. In his seven years of presidency, Mbeki has mistaken denialism for leadership and appeasement for diplomacy. The liberation victors in the ANC have tied up the ruling party in its own historical mythologizing, determined to hold its grasp on the state. Now, for every Mbeki, there is the possibility of a Zuma.

In May, immigrants living in the townships and shack settlements of South Africa woke to find that they no longer had a place in their adopted homeland, as their neighbors chased them out of their houses and shops. Yet for ten days while pogroms burned, their country's leader was nowhere to be found. Even afterwards, Mbeki and other leaders, in failing to acknowledge the profoundly xenophobic nature of the state, and blaming the violence on the poor themselves, did little to calm the storm. Thousands have since left in mass exodus.

Of course, turning to neighboring Zimbabwe to provide a shining example of good leadership in this dearth finds none as Robert Mugabe and his military junta continue their absurdist drama: struggle heroes turned autocrats, fighting their own people instead of fighting for them. For South Africans, whose roster of liberation fighters reads off names like Tambo, Sisulu, Biko, First and Hani, the present situation is somewhat of an anomaly.

But in midst of this crisis, hope for a new kind of leadership can be found in an unlikely place: the Kennedy Road shack settlement, in Clare Estate, Durban. In the middle of a Saturday night in June, a group of thirty odd women and men, some as young as 17, has gathered in a small room that serves as a community-driven crèche during the week. They are here to induct newly elected leaders of their organization of shack-dwellers who collectively call themselves Abahlali baseMjondolo. The Abahlali, since emerging in 2005, has grown to become the largest social movement in the country, with members in more than 40 settlements and over 30,000 active supporters in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The Abahlali take leadership very seriously. For years since the transition, they have patiently waited for their leaders—in the government and in the ANC—to fulfill their promises for land, housing and development. What they received instead were violent evictions, demolitions, and forced relocations to the peripheries of cities away from access to jobs, schools, and health care. Their former comrades in the struggle against apartheid now began treating them with open contempt, condemning their lifestyle, and criminalizing their activities. The poor found that they were not welcome in the new South Africa that they had fought for.

In response, the Abahlali have said, “Enough is enough [1].” In the three years since its launch, the movement has carried out a series of large-scale protests and marches, but has also resorted to other, less public means of resistance within settlements: by using legal tactics to fight illegal evictions and forced removals, by knowingly and safely connecting shacks to electricity and water, and by skillfully maneuvering the media, to ultimately advance a ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ [2] in response to a lack of state leadership.

The Abahlali workshops aim to facilitate a conversation on the qualities of good leaders and to teach leadership skills. Those who congregate come from settlements such as Foreman Road, Motala Heights, Jadhoo Place and Joe Slovo, and they plan to stay (and stay awake) through the night. Standing in front of the packed room, in this particular workshop, President S'bu Zikode poses the question: "What makes a good leader?"

The gathered group forms the leadership of the newly elected Youth League, whose president Mazwi Nzimande has just turned 17. All are volunteers—for Zikode, full-time—sometimes sacrificing other opportunities, including jobs, and all are here tonight by choice. Some have traveled great distances to attend, coming in from the movement's new branches in the settlements of Tongaat (EmaGwaveni) and Ash Road in Pietermaritzburg. Many of those present are also fathers and mothers, including Zikode. Philani Zungu and Ayanda Vumisa, husband and wife and active members of the movement (Philani is former Vice-President and Ayanda is the current Vice-Secretary of the Youth League), both arrive late from Pemary Ridge in Reservoir Hills, having waited until their children were asleep.

The wide demographic represented at this meeting also affirms the egalitarian nature upheld by the movement more generally. The Abahlali are proving that leaders are not of a certain age, gender, race or class. For them, leaders—holding foreign degrees, matriculating at elite universities and being well versed in the technocratic jargon that prevails in development discourses of the state—have all failed them. More important is for a leader to have intimate knowledge of their experience and of their plight: "They must feel what we feel," participants at the meeting declare, "and only those who feel must lead."

To this end, the Abahlali encourage affiliated settlements to democratically elect leaders from their own communities, and to ensure that all their decisions are taken in discussion with the people who chose them. Sihle Sibisi, from Joe Slovo, explains, "A leader is someone who listens to everyone, who respects everyone they lead." They "do not take a position on behalf of or for the people but with the people." Members express frustrations with the populist rhetoric of local politicians, who visit their settlements intent on gaining their votes for the next elections. Leadership cannot be reduced to this, they argue. It cannot be confined to a single term or a single meeting. Rather, it is an organic and "ongoing process" with no start or end.

"A leader is not born but made by those they claim to represent," says Vice-President Lindela Figlan, a fact that they must not forget. Derrick Fenner from Motala agrees, stating, "No one can lead us without us." They assert that a leader must replace the current lack of communication and interaction with "answers for those they lead...[someone] who shares and discusses the issues with all the people."

Each leader here was elected through a democratic process held at their respective communities, or, as in the case of the Youth League (launched 16th of June 2008), in a forum of made up of the movement's members from across the settlements. They are the faces of their communities; as Zikode tells them, as leaders they are "the hope of the hopeless, the homeless, the jobless, the poor and the marginalized."

It is for these reasons that the Abahlali practice strict political autonomy from the state, political parties, churches and NGOs. They do work with organizations that can bring technical skills, such as lawyers, and are engaged in a constant battle to subordinate the state's development project to the community committees in each area. But even here they demand that development or activist professionals "speak to us, not for us" and insist on recognition, dignity and full partnership from anyone wishing to work with them towards developing their communities.

Moreover, the movement has consistently espoused a philosophy of 'living politics' that grounds the collective thought and action that drives the struggles specific to each settlement in the hands of the people in that settlement. A living politics requires that a community seeking to join the movement make the decision autonomously and collectively. Recently, settlements in the Northern and Western Cape were formally inaugurated into the movement after residents read about the movement in the press, made contact and then discussed the issues internally within their communities, coming to identify with the Abahlali.

By remaining context-specific, the Abahlali recognize that the movement and its struggle 'must develop its own significance within each settlement' [4] whether it is responding to police brutality, government contempt, landowner intimidation, or shack-fires. Through Abahlalism—their self-deemed political culture—they are cultivating their own type of leaders, all of whom come from the shacks and all of whom are accountable on a day to day basis to the people who elected them

When Zikode asks the new branches' representatives to illustrate the difficulties of leadership in their respective communities, leaders describe repressive circumstances. Gugu Luthuli and Niza Chithwoya recount regular instances of police brutality and corruption in Tongaat. For Ash Road in Pietermaritzburg, Sibahle Dlamini explains that Abahlali organizing has gone underground because of municipality efforts to suppress the movement. Yet the result of this repression is that they have found support amongst themselves.

As they listen and respond to each other's stories, a common refrain within the group is "Qina Bahlali qina!" reminding one another to stay strong. Mutual recognition and support drive their struggle, and through them the movement helps to cultivate a shared sense of responsibility within their communities. It was the Abahlali who responded swiftly to the xenophobic riots in May, issuing a strong rebuke of the attacks in a widely circulated press statement that declared, "A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person wherever they may find themselves," and confronted the government for its role [4]. They actively worked against the attacks and there were no incidents at all in any of the Abahlali settlements. Bahlali were also able to take in some people displaced in the attacks.

Back at Kennedy Road, the meeting continues through the night and into the early morning. Members question movement structures, and debates emerge about the roles of the chairperson and other positions. They argue for greater transparency and challenge the current leadership of the Executive Committee, and the younger members composing the Youth League, to be up to the task. Throughout the discussion, every person's opinion is respected and taken seriously.

It is because of rescinded promises and betrayals of their elected leaders that every year, when the country commemorates the first free and democratic elections in South Africa, the Abahlali mourn their continuing lack of freedom [5]. What the Abahlali have found instead is that leadership comes from within—within these communities and within individual members of the movement. In the absence of role models in the Party and State, they have looked to each other for help in overcoming the daily struggles of living in the shacks. Each umhlali is a leader in his or her own right. With daybreak the next morning, the group of men and women young and old, shake hands and hug and finally disperse.

Maybe now is the time for national leaders to learn a thing or two from the people they purport to lead.

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Notes:

1. "Sekwanele!" in Zulu. For more writing on the context of their struggle and for articulations by

the Bahlali, refer to <http://www.abahlali.org>

2. Bayat, Asef. "The Politics of Un-Civil Society", available: <http://www.abahlali.org/node/237>

3. This point was shared with me by Mzonke Poni, newly elected chairperson of the Western Cape branch in QQ Section, Khayelitsha, during his visit to Durban on 13 June 2008

4. This press release and others can also be found on the Abahlali website, <http://abahlali.org>

5. 27th of April is known as 'UnFreedom Day' instead of 'Freedom Day' in these communities

Constitutional Court challenge to Slums Act

No Room for the Poor in our Cities?

by Bishop Rubin Phillip, March 2009.

<http://abahlali.org/node/4874> (and published the *Witness* newspaper in reply to an article from the provincial government department of housing which defended of the Slums Act).

Since the KwaZulu-Natal Slums Act was first mooted there has been tremendous concern about a piece of legislation that has been widely condemned as a return to apartheid legislation. This concern has been expressed by a large number of organisations and individuals beginning with the shack dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo and then including the churches and the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing at the United Nations.

As Christians we believe that every person is created in the image of God and is loved by God. Our social policies and practices must strive to reflect that. No group of people are expendable or unworthy of care and consideration. We therefore take the view that it is essential that our cities be organised on the basis of care and support for the most vulnerable. Any approach to social problems that seeks to create the impression of progress by simply sweeping the oppressed out of the cities must be vigorously opposed. If this happens it will be our duty as church leaders to, once again, stand before the bulldozers.

We are therefore very disturbed by the article from the Department of Housing's head of media services that appeared in the *Witness* recently[1]. The article is written in praise of the KwaZulu-Natal 'Slums Act'[2] and to celebrate the initial dismissal of a court challenge to the constitutionality of the Slums Act that was brought by Abahlali baseMjondolo. Abahlali have decided to take their challenge to the Constitutional Court itself, and we await the outcome of that process with considerable interest. In our view, Abahlali are clearly correct to challenge this odious piece of legislation. And, since the judgement against Abahlali is going to be reviewed, it seems inappropriate to say the least, for the Department to crow – let alone to ridicule and undermine the seriousness and integrity of its critics, and the justice of their cause.

Our first serious briefing on this matter took the form of a report from an Abahlali task team on what was then just a Bill. All the members of that task team were shack-dwellers. They had studied the document with scrupulous care and had an obvious concern to understand properly the real meaning of the proposed legislation. Their report-back was very well balanced, taking time to highlight the positive statements and intentions in the Bill before pointing out the problems they foresaw with it. And when independent experts looked at it – lawyers, academics, housing specialists and human rights activists - they all confirmed that Abahlali were correct and that there are serious reasons to be highly alarmed by this legislation.

By contrast, the Housing Department's language displays a worrying arrogance, and indeed a contemptuous attitude to poor people and to shackdwellers. When elites talk about the poor they all too often reveal an underlying assumption that the poor are essentially stupid and invariably criminal. What else explains the Department's opening comment that Abahlali's court challenge was done “probably without proper analysis of the act”? What else explains the Department's casual connection of the communities where shack-dwellers live with “havens for criminals”? As Christians we strive to always remember that Jesus Christ was a poor man, and affirm that whatever we do unto the least in our society we effectively do unto Jesus himself.

However we live in a society where open contempt for the poor is rank. We live in a society where irresponsible spending on vanity projects, like stadia, often trumps the basic needs of ordinary people. Given how deeply ingrained these attitudes are it's hardly surprising that what the

Department (repeatedly) describes as its "consultative" approach, was in fact experienced by poor people as contemptuous and intimidating. Until the rich and the powerful learn to be able to talk to the poor with respect it is surely inevitable that government policies and practices will be experienced as (and revealed to be) premised on a fundamental rejection of the poor. As religious leadership we must urge a completely different approach based on a completely new set of values. For Christians, we cannot avoid the clarity of Christ's singular message: to bring "life in all its fullness". This message simply cannot be reconciled with an approach to development that ultimately means bulldozers and prison for the poor.

There is no doubt that we collectively face a massive challenge to make sure that everyone has decent housing. There is no doubt that the government has done well to build many houses over the years. But treating shack settlements as an abomination to be moved out-of-sight, and treating shack-dwellers and the poor as stupid and criminal, is wrong in principle and counter-productive in practice. The creativity, intelligence, and struggles of the poor are the greatest resource for overcoming the challenges put before us all. Indeed we need to recognise that shack settlements, imperfect as they are, have been an effective means of providing housing for the urban poor. Working with people in a respectful way should be the basis for a proper partnership that begins to change our cities to more just, equal and shared spaces where shalom reigns.

And finally, if as the Department claims, "government at all levels understands the challenges of homeless people", then why are they proposing to destroy people's existing housing to address homelessness? Surely shackdwellers are correct to point out the need for better housing than the appalling conditions people are sometimes forced to endure in the shack settlements – but they are not homeless – not yet. God has promised us that there are many mansions in the Kingdom of heaven. It is our task to ensure that here on earth our cities are open and welcoming to all and that no one should fear that their fragile home will be bulldozed and that they will be banished to a transit camp far outside of the city where they work and their children attend school.

Bishop Rubin Phillip

Bishop of Natal

Anglican Church of Southern Africa

and

Chairperson

KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council.

[1] "Working towards a slum-free SA", Ndivhuwo wa ha mbaya , 24 Feb 2009, at: [http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global\[_id\]=19991](http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global[_id]=19991)

[2] the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Act 2007

Extract from Living Learning 2009: Session 4, 20th May 2009:

The discussions started with comrades sharing what they thought about the experience of going to the Constitutional Court as Abahlali and the Poor People's Alliance to challenge the KZN Slums Act.

It was my first time to go there. I saw those eleven judges sitting there listening attentively to our case. So, whether you win or lose, everything you have said has been listened to. So, whatever decision they make will not be 'out of the blue' but the result of a proper discussion. This is so different from the experience in the Durban High Court. How come these courts are so different? Surely, they are both law courts, in the same country, with the same laws and constitution so they should be in the same approach? Even the environment of the Constitutional Court speaks for itself – it's not a fancy intimidating building, just an old building.

All the others who had been there agreed with this analysis.

I was happy because the judge was asking the state's attorney - "you are just evicting people and not thinking about the consequences". And the state lawyer didn't know all of the answers. I thought our lawyers were very active and good, and it was clear they had prepared well for the case. Our lawyers faced some of the same questions they had been asked before, but this time they were prepared to answer. Early on, I thought the judges were just attacking our lawyers with tough questions, but then I saw that they just wanted to check the information properly and carefully – and they also asked the state lawyers like that too.

And there was no 'eye bribery' between the state lawyers and the judge as we saw at the Durban High Court.

Let me add that even the security was not so tight there – everyone was free. When I looked at those eleven judges it made me think of a soccer team, which is also 11 players, so I was thinking they are working as a team together.

To me, we have won the case. We don't have to wait for the judgement because we had a fair hearing. So winning is not about the judgement but it's about being listened to. To see poor people going to such a very high court in South Africa is a victory on its own. Although we are poor, we are rich. What else do we need? The only question we are left with is that we have a poor government!

Ja, that Constitutional Court is not at all like a court – maybe they should call it Constitutional House instead because it doesn't work like a court at all.

I was fascinated by the wave after wave of solidarity as comrades from the different movements, in different places around the country, arrived there on that day to give their support and solidarity. There was singing and flags flying: poor people are claiming this space.

Theology

Abahlali baseMjondolo Churches s/c minutes, 2006¹

Notes from the first meeting of the churches sub-committee of Abahlali baseMjondolo held at Kennedy Road Community Hall on 6 November 2006. Present: M'du Hlongwa (Lacey Road), Sihle Sibisi (Joe Slovo), Mnikelo Ndabankulu (Foreman Road), Alson Mkhize (Motala Heights), Bhekuyise Ngcobo (Motala Heights), System Cele (Kennedy Road), Philani Manzi (Foreman Road), Vuyi Mvula (Jadhu Place), Nkosi Dladla (Jadu Place), M'du Ngqulunga (Kennedy Road), Mbongeni Madlala (Juba Place), David Ntseng (Church Land Programme), Mark Butler ('Maritzburg).

Background

The question has come up as to how Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) should or could relate to the churches. So far, AbM has sometimes approached churches, and more and more, AbM is being approached by church people and church-based organisations. But the churches are complex, and they might have their own, different agendas and possibilities in relation to AbM's struggle. So, after various discussions within AbM, the sub-committee was established at a general meeting held on Saturday 4 November, and it met for the first time on the 6 November 2006.

Discussion

The discussions responded to the following 2 questions. First, "What are our experiences of the church in our struggle so far?", and second, "What do we need from churches?".

So far, in the struggles of the AbM, there has only been a loose connection with churches and it has not been well-defined. It has really only arisen from time-to-time in response to incidences of tragedy. For example, after there was a death from a shack fire, a couple of Bishops attended a memorial service for the victims. Later, a delegation from AbM attended the funeral of the son of one of these Bishops. That Bishop, Rubin Phillip of the Anglican church, had been with us when tragedy struck us, and so it was important that we should be with him when he needed to be supported.

But beyond these tragedies and crises, there has been no time really to celebrate liturgy in our place together with church people, and nor have we had a constructive workshop to talk about these things properly before now. Because of this loose connection, the church doesn't know about our life in the shacks, it has no experience of it. Because it has not been present, the church does not know about the difficulties that the people go through and it does not know about the crises we face – like the destruction of homes at Motala Heights recently – and so, the church does not feel our pain.

Because of this loose connection too, the church is not here with us to pass on important moral principles that are about how it is to be human beings - the church is not here with us.

This distance is not healthy. The tragedies that happen here in the shacks, and the knocking down of people's houses, can put people onto the streets. Surely in these cases, the churches could even provide temporary shelter? But more than that, church ministers are people that others are prepared to listen to and so, if they were there with us, then it is possible that their presence could even stop demolitions from going ahead. And if we from AbM and the churches grew closer together, it is possible that we might start learning better about what they believe – for now, we

¹ <http://abahlali.org/node/639>

don't really know.

We have all noticed that, at the beginning of our discussions there was silence in response to the first question. This is really because the church has not been here in the struggles of AbM. But now we have this sub-committee and the connection with the Church Land Programme (CLP), this will grow. But even this weak connection that are discussing, and what we have said already, shows that we need each other and that we need to make our voices stronger together because it is important to build a common struggle. For a long time in our struggles, many people looked down on us because we are from the shacks, they think of us almost as if we are criminals who prey on others. But our recent connection with the Bishop makes us think that some people are thinking hard and seriously about our experiences, and they do not just assume we are a bunch of worthless hooligans. That our struggles are taken seriously by respected people is important.

In addition, these respected people in the churches have connections overseas, and maybe they could help with some of the immediate crises of poverty that affect people in the shacks. We know that there are families in our places who go to bed without food, or whose children have no clothes to wear. It will be important to carry on discussions of these issues in all of the different local areas that are part of AbM as well.

Although we ask the question about 'what do we need from the churches?' we must start from the position that we must work together. We must acknowledge that we are together actually because, inside the church, we have women, children, people who are from the jondolos – so why do we disconnect the 'Sunday church' from the day-to-day life and struggle AbM? This '2-in-1' division must be discussed and the two aspects must be made to complement each other.

We acknowledge that the government is a very bad listener to the poor. But it listens to the churches. So maybe we can use that to add to the strength of our voice. Perhaps church leaders can use their status to persuade the government on our issues. How would it be if church leaders joined us in our marches – wouldn't that make the government listen more? The church leaders give their support to many important public awareness campaigns (for example regarding the protection of children's rights, or the fight against crime) and this is because sometimes people are prepared to listen when church people say things. Looking at the poster on the wall of our meeting room here about the churches supporting the call for an 'HIV/AIDS free generation', perhaps there is a challenge to the churches to launch a new awareness campaign for a 'shack-free generation'. We have seen in our experiences that, sometimes when people were losing their rights – for example to their land – that some priests and churches stepped in to stop it, or at least to provide help.

This discussion makes us think not only about the church out there. It is starting to revive the religious person in us and we are beginning to wonder, 'what is our religious belief?' - if we are God's children, then what does this mean for us living in the shacks? And what does it require us to do?

We know that church is the closest place to the people because a church is not a church without people. And so the people know it as the most recognised place – a place of safety, where there are no thieves and others who prey on us. So we have this feeling about the church that everyone has a 'willingness' to support and give dignity. We are nobody without the church. Somehow in this way, the church can be a bridge between AbM and the government because it will be seen that we are not animals. And then nothing is impossible.

In the history of South Africa, before 1994 and at the peak of mobilisation and unrest, we saw some religious figures playing a role. But discrimination, racism and apartheid are not over! Now apartheid is between those who are rich and those who are poor, and we see that this apartheid is

getting worse. This should make the church to be uncomfortable and therefore, the need for their intervention is just as important now as it was then – and they cannot do it on their own, they must work with the movements of the poor.

There is a perception that religious people are trustworthy. As we come from the shacks, we are not trusted. Even our churches from the shacks are not trusted.

When we look at charity and relief work like feeding schemes, it is better when these come from churches than from political parties because when it comes from the political parties it is actually like a 'bait', something is expected from us in return. And also, if the churches were involved in this kind of work, then they would know about how our life is, which is important.

There are statements in the Bible that are important. For example: 'You will reap what you sow'. So, if the churches ignore the poor, then that's what they will reap, but if they work with the poor, then that's what they will reap. And it is not right to talk about some future kingdom in heaven without looking at what is here and now.

Churches are meant to be agents of justice. They understand that unity is important in some of their own work, and in different areas they are joining together to work better. This approach should also apply in connection with social movements and justice.

At the close of the meeting it was agreed that this has been an important and useful first discussion, and that the work of the new sub-committee will continue and will strengthen the AbM. There seem to be many possibilities that can be developed between the struggles of AbM and the churches. But, we are also not naïve about the churches. We know that some parts of the church pray with the rich and powerful people, that some parts of the church continue to give their blessing to this government. But although the church has these problems, we are sure that God is on the side of the poor. It was hoped that the work of the sub-committee would be useful for the speech that the AbM President will be giving at St Joseph's Catholic Seminary on Friday.

Abahlali baseMjondolo meeting with church leaders, Kennedy Road, 2007

<http://abahlali.org/node/2815>

Notes after an Abahlali baseMjondolo meeting with church leaders, at Kennedy Road, 9 October 2007.

Preliminaries

This is a first draft. It seems very important to try and write down some of what is emerging – but somehow the writing seems very inadequate to capture the subtlety and wisdom of the encounter. I hope others who were there will take some time to add and correct this account. (It is not an attempt to write everything that was said.) I hope also that doing so feeds the movement - and perhaps helps church to be church.

The meeting did not happen in a vacuum and some of what went before is important to record. That history would need to include the strong place of people's faith and prayer throughout the life of Abahlali baseMjondolo, and the ongoing work of the churches sub-committee within the movement. At this particular meeting however, what was perhaps uppermost in our minds was the march of the 28th September, which had ended in the police unleashing unprovoked violence against the thousands of highly disciplined 'bahlali, and in the arrests of 14 members of the movement for 'public violence' and 'violating the Gatherings Act'. An eyewitness account of the events noted that: "When the police attacked this protest yesterday, church leaders had been leading the people in prayer and were standing at the front of the crowd - they were among the first to be thoroughly doused when the water cannon was turn on".

In response to this attack on the people, some church leaders, most of whom had been at the march with Abahlali baseMjondolo, issued a public statement firmly condemning the police action and reiterating their commitment to solidarity with movement:

Police Violence in Sydenham, 28 September 2007: A Testimony by Church Leaders

We are appalled and deeply disturbed by the unprovoked violent and aggressive action of the SAPS at the public gathering organised by Abahlali baseMjondolo held in Sydenham, Durban on 28 September. In good conscience, we cannot remain silent in the face of the SAPS's flagrant disregard of our country's legal provision for our hard won right to express dissent, let alone their sheer disrespect of our common humanity as children of God.

As leaders in various churches and ecumenical organisations, we were present in the march organised by Abahlali, joining with them in their call for an end to the ongoing eviction and exclusion of the poor, and the destruction of their homes. The march was extremely well prepared, with the city officials being given ample notice, and arrangements having been made with the SAPS. The march was conducted in a disciplined manner, with the clear and stated intention being to deliver a memorandum of demands to the Mayor. Whilst the marchers were waiting for the Mayor to arrive to receive the memorandum, the SAPS chose to attack the people assembled at the agreed upon venue.

We wish to state clearly as eyewitnesses, that prior to this attack by the police:

- * no participant of the march threatened any violence, or threw, or threatened to throw, stones or sticks or any objects at the police, or any members of the public ;
- * no orders were given by the police calling for the dispersal of the people assembled, nor were any instructions or warnings given by the police;
- * no "warning shots" or anything of that nature were given by the police.

What we did experience, was a completely unprovoked violent attack by the SAPS on people gathered to submit their demands to the Mayor of our city. This thuggery is deeply disturbing, and even more so as it was led by senior officers of the SAPS. Instead of protecting members of society, the SAPS violated and betrayed their trust. We cannot allow such behaviour to go unchecked, and expect the leadership of the SAPS to be held accountable for such despicable behaviour.

It was with shock that we then learned of the audacity of the SAPS in charging 14 participants of the march with "violating the Gatherings Act" and with "public violence". The only public violence experienced in Sydenham on 28 September was that inflicted by the SAPS. The attack of the SAPS on these residents leaves us outraged. In the face of this violent attack by the SAPS, and in keeping with our vocation as church, we will continue to stand alongside the poor as they struggle for the recognition of their own humanity and dignity. We cannot be silent whilst our brothers and sisters suffer such brutal injustice.

"In Truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me..." (Matthew 25:40).

Bishop Purity Malinga (Methodist Church of Southern Africa); Bishop Rubin Phillip (Anglican Church of Southern Africa); Rev. Dlamini ; Rev. Mavuso; Rev. Mtetwa; Rev. Ndlazi (United Congregational Church of Southern Africa); Brother Filippo Mondini (Comboni Missionary); Dr. Douglas Dziva (KwaZulu Natal Christian Council); Dr. L. Ngoetjana (KwaZulu Natal Christian Council); Mr. David Ntseng (Church Land Programme); Mr. Graham Philpott (Church Land Programme).

Brother Filippo Mondini had also written after the march:

"Last Friday the institutions, especially Major Mlaba and the police, have again attempted to vandalize the humanity of the poor. The violence shown by the police is just one example of what happens when poor people speak for themselves. ...Abahlali has shown again its strength with the thousands of people that the movement was able to mobilize. Among them also several religious and priests. The Churches are finally recognizing that to be at the side of Abahlali is something important, something that they cannot miss.

The presence of priests, pastors and religious, the presence of a bishop, do not add anything to the struggle of Abahlali. The movement and the righteousness of its cause do not need the Churches. On the contrary, it is Abahlali that is helping the Churches to be Church. Shack Dwellers, with the strength of their prophetic voice, are pointing at the "Reign of God". When Shack Dwellers are struggling for houses, land, participation and democracy they are participating in God's dream for all humanity. God dreams of a world where nobody is exploited, where the goods of the earth are shared among all human beings. The 'Reign of God' is not something that we have to expect after this life but it is something concrete and real. The struggle of Abahlali is making God's dream true and real. That is why nobody will break this movement. Moreover, whoever disrespects Abahlali disrespects God."

These are powerful statements of church leadership finding church and God in the actions of movements of the poor. But not all responses of church institutions are the same (and indeed, we should not exaggerate the extent to which the institutional church responds at all). Even in the build-up to the march, as well as its aftermath, some others persistently offered to 'mediate' on behalf of the movement, to convene and direct 'civil society support', and/or quietly questioned the strategies and leadership of Abahlali baseMjondolo. In this context, a meeting of the movement with 'church leaders' cannot proceed naively assuming an unproblematic solidarity – it is also a continuation of the ongoing struggle of the poor to speak for themselves. In discussions prior to the planned meeting, some connected with the movement reflected that there is an important, and potentially useful difference between how some church leaders had responded

after march (by partly at least asking 'How can I support?') and the many other responses of FBO [Faith-Based Organisation] and NGO people who keep wanting to mediate with city on behalf of the movement. This distinction is crucial: the former ('How can I help?') keeps open the possibility of AbM staying on the path it chooses and within the 'spaces' of action where it is strong; the other (offers of 'mediation' etc.) are an attempt to impose strategies and a politics where the movement is disempowered at the expense of giving power, prestige, and ultimately control, to outsiders like the NGOs and the churches. This critique of the 'mediation' and 'advocacy' approach is actually a big topic but for now we should at least make clear that:

- theologically and politically it is imperative that the poor and oppressed speak for themselves
- mediation and advocacy are sometimes appropriate when conditions are such that people truly
- cannot speak for themselves, but they are always at the expense of the voice of the poor and oppressed
- Abahlali baseMjondolo can and does speak and think for itself, so offers by 'civil society' (including church leaders and FBOs) to 'mediate' are not appropriate
- rather, those parts of civil society that really want to help, must start from some clear pre-conditions:
 - that they respect the movement and the people;
 - that they will act in ways that affirm the truth that the movement think, acts, and speaks for itself; and
 - that they will act in ways that build the power of the movement to do so.
 - (by implication: they will not act in ways that undermine or take away the movement's voice, or replace it with their own.)

What helped ensure that the initiative stayed with the movement for this particular meeting was making very clear who called it, who drove it, and who's agenda was on the table. Even the structure of the programme and the venue (at the crèche in Kennedy Road) for the meeting reflected this. After singing, prayers and watching video footage of the events at the march, the welcome and clarification of the purpose of the meeting was the responsibility of the movement leadership. This was to be followed by presentations by Abahlali and only thereafter presentations, in response, by the church leaders. After that, the meeting would move to think concretely about 'ways forward' for supporting Abahlali.

The meeting

In his opening remarks, Abahlali baseMjondolo president, S'bu Zikode said we are here to honour the presence of God in this place and in the people and in their struggle. He said that our wisdom is given by the Lord. We cannot act without the Lord. We are not too clever – the wisdom we have is God-given. In discussions like this, and in the actions of the movement, we define ourselves – we define ourselves in and through the presence of God. Our struggle, which is also and always our choosing to be truthful, is not divorced from God, and God is on our side. Our theologians tells us that God is not neutral but takes the side of the poor – and this is confirmed today when the church leaders are here at Kennedy Road – they have descended to this level where the people are rather than having a meeting in the City Hall or the offices of powerful. By the end of the meeting we should be able to say who is the church?, and what is the role of the church in the struggle and in our communities?

Zikode outlined who was present from the movement – the executive was represented, and there were the 'Kennedy 6' hunger strikers; the 14 arrested at the last march; and those who had been beaten and injured by police at the same march.

Ma Nkikine, from the Joe Slovo settlement and one of those arrested at the march (she was also shot 6 times in the back with rubber bullets), spoke. She remembered the names and actions of those who had continuously knocked down the shacks where she had lived during the apartheid times. The change since apartheid seems very little – and sometimes it feels like it was better before. She suggested that perhaps the church leaders can persuade the new political leaders, like Mayor Mlaba and President Mbeki, to change their ways. "The Mayor sometimes comes to my church, he asks for blessings and this helps him to get elected. Maybe the church leaders can give their blessings to Abahlali baseMjondolo and strengthen it?"

Mnikelo Ndabankhulu, who was arrested after the march, talked about the march and the police action. He stressed that, even though the movement had done everything it could to act within the law, the people were treated just the same as if it had been an illegal march – they were treated just the same as they were on June 16, 1976 in Soweto, or at Sharpeville in 1960. "The police don't even fear God and they showed no respect for the priests and church leaders."

Shamita Naidoo, from Motala Heights, spoke about 'abahlalism' from her experience of the unified struggles of African shack dwellers and poor South African Indians in tin houses at Motala. She said Abahlali baseMjondolo had awakened the Indians and showed them the light. They see that Abahlali is really fighting for something that is right. The movement is a help for those who cannot be heard, who are hidden, to be known and to speak for themselves. In this way, they can show how the poor are really suffering. Perhaps the church leaders' solidarity with the movement can help to open doors to other communities who are hidden and silenced. It is hard work building the movement but it is good work and we present ourselves to the world in a deeply dignified way.

"The march was my first experience of such a thing and even people from the media commented to me how dignified and organised we were."

Louisa Motha spoke. She is also from Motala Heights. Echoing the words of one of the hymns sung at the beginning of the meeting, she repeated: "Nkosi sikelele" - but we are not yet blessed. The leaders of South Africa say we are free, but the poor are not free. Their 2010 [soccer world cup] is coming – but it will bring more arrests, more evictions, more demolitions; the street kids will be taken away to Westville prison to impress the international visitors. These leaders will need the prayers of the church leaders because they have sins, and the blood of children, on their hands. She said that the land and the resources on it are a gift from God for all the people. No one person can own what God gave to everyone. "In your last days, you will need to ask forgiveness for what you have done to the poor."

M'du Nqulunga was a hunger striker in prison:

"If it wasn't for the presence of the Bishop who visited us in prison and of God, perhaps I would still be there, in prison. I refused food in prison for Abahlali baseMjondolo. Our challenge to church leaders is to always be available – we were arrested before and it seems clear, we will be arrested again – so keep coming, day in and day out. Perhaps we should give a big thanks to [councillor] Yakoob Baig because his oppression has united all the people to make the movement strong. Abahlalism is bigger than 'land and housing' – it is also socialism because we must socialise what we have and share all things in common. What is happening in the life of your neighbour, of the people next door, matters. We must think whether they have eaten today or whether they will be able to eat tomorrow. So we must prioritise humanity amongst Abahlali."

Sihle, also from Joe Slovo settlement, stressed that they have gained a lot since joining Abahlali baseMjondolo . "We have heard about the history of struggles - even in 1976 to resist Afrikaans in our schools. They won this and one day too, we will win. During the apartheid times, we saw leaders of churches supporting the struggles and we need this again. Across all the denominations, we need the prayers for Abahlali baseMjondolo, prayers for their dignity because they are not respected. The experience of the march shows us that the virus of not respecting the poor is spreading from the political leaders to the police too who also showed us no respect when they gave us no warning to disperse but attacked us."

After these presentations, S'bu asked what do the church leaders say?

Nazareth priest, Baba Mkhize said he was initially surprised to hear about church leaders in the march – what were they doing coming into politics? "But I have seen and listened to the points – especially that we struggle to bring back our humanity; and that we must be aware of our neighbour's needs. The struggle has raised important challenges to the church leaders. We used to feel proud and satisfied if our congregations filled up our churches on Sundays – but now we must think about the rest of their real lives – are they hungry and poor? Some church leaders are poor too. We usually do not hang our own dirty laundry in public because the people put their trust in us and we fear what they would think if they knew. Sometimes we say that we are fasting in a religious way – but this can be a sort of automatic fasting because we have no food actually. The local church leaders who are here in the settlements must come together, must pray together. Before the next big march perhaps, we will pray together. Even if these local churches are poor too, we can provide 'soul food' for the struggle. We will pray for just one thing - a better life. The leaders of Abahlali baseMjondolo must continue to bring challenges to the church leaders. I will report on these matters to my superiors in the church because now is the time to act."

Bishop Rubin Phillip of the Anglican church was grateful for the opportunity to be at this meeting and explained that he was "Here to listen to you, to the people – I am not here with big answers and solutions. I need to learn how you believe the church can help in your struggle – you have taken the initiative, you have suffered, you know. In your successful march of the 28th, you have shown that you are not powerless but you are powerful, that you are determined to bring about change. That's a powerful thing to have decided. Good will come out of your march.

I am here today as head of the Anglican church in this part and also the newly elected chair of the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council. I will use my position and influence to help in any way that I can. I have been thinking hard about Sbu's question: "What is the church?". Is the church made of the powerful and the middle-class, or the oppressed and the poor? If we are honest, the truth is that we have lost our way; we no longer stand with, march with, are in prison with, or take our place among those who still suffer, those who are still hungry. What is true is that we church leaders drop everything when we are called by the State President's or the Premier's offices. I think we like to mix with the rich and powerful – and they provide very good catering at their lunches! The church has been co-opted and has been made to forget its rightful place among the poor. Abahlali baseMjondolo helps us to re-discover our identity and our role.

I have tried to listen carefully to what has been said. I have heard some of the following things:

- * be in solidarity with your struggle – in marches, in prison, where ever it is necessary
- * provide 'soul food' for your struggle, gather together in prayer
- * work with the people to play a role to really change the structures that cause pain, unemployment, hunger and all other sufferings of the poor
- * be practical.

I will take these things to my council. We can call a meeting of wider church leadership and we

would like you to come and make your voice heard, and help to create consciousness of these things. In the meantime, call on us, keep setting the agenda. This is the true church – or challenge is how to bring the leadership alongside. I am proud of the leadership of this highly respected movement. They can no longer ignore you and I offer a great word of appreciation for what you are doing."

Bishop Dladla said he would not repeat what others had already covered. He emphasised that the churches had not prayed enough. "I support Bishop Rubin to unite all the churches here and I think we should organise a big gathering where everyone wears their church uniforms too. We don't need long stories and trying to put the blame on people but we must simply unite and say 'when will these people be free?'. We must also pray for the leaders of Abahlali baseMjondolo because it is clear that, once they start speaking they become enemy number 1 and they are in danger. I was a shop-steward in the past. During negotiations with the bosses I never took any food and drinks that were offered because it could poison you. The churches must learn this too when they are invited to the Premier's offices."

Brother Filippo Mondini said, firstly, that "A most powerful thing that Abahlali baseMjondolo has achieved is that you speak for yourselves, you are the masters of your own suffering, you know. So what the church cannot do is steal your voice again. You have won your voice and it is wonderful. It is also so important to acknowledge that there are churches in the settlements – engage with these people; learn and discuss how they read the Bible; discover with them that Jesus' project was a revolutionary one – and so you carry on with what is already happening to liberate the gospel. This connection with Jesus' revolutionary project and the Bible is not just strategic or 'political' – the gospel is relevant to the struggle."

In his closing prayer, Brother Filippo remembered that God is like the good shepherd who does not abandon the flock when the wolf comes – and asked God to give the churches the same courage as Abahlali.

The meeting agreed to mobilise for a mass prayer gathering at 9am on 11th of November, 2 days before the next court appearance of the 14 Bahlali arrested at the march. If possible, we could connect this also with the solidarity actions that are being planned by the poor people in Turkey who have sent a statement of solidarity and who are planning to make a protest at the South African embassy there. We will pray that, in their actions, they will not be treated by the police like we were at our march.

Bishop Rubin Philip

UnFreedom Day Speech

<http://www.abahlali.org/node/3489>

SPEECH DELIVERED TO: ABAHLALI BASEMJONDOLO EVENT FOR UNFREEDOM DAY

KENNEDY ROAD COMMUNITY HALL, CLARE ESTATE, DURBAN, KZN, 27TH APRIL 2008

BY BISHOP RUBIN PHILLIP, ANGLICAN BISHOP OF NATAL AND CHAIRPERSON OF THE KWA-ZULU NATAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

For many years the courage and dignity of our people under oppression was a light to the world. There was a time when our country was a light to the world. But that light has grown so dim that there is a real danger of it being extinguished altogether.

Today millions of our people live in shacks in life threatening conditions, constantly at risk of fire and disease because they have no electricity or sanitation, while we build stadiums, casinos and theme parks.

Today we are, once again, forcing the poor out of our cities to rural townships where there are no jobs or schools or prospects for hope.

Today our brothers and sisters are being beaten and tortured by the criminal state in Zimbabwe and, when they have fled to our country for sanctuary, beaten and burnt out of their homes by ordinary South Africans and deported by our government.

Today women are still not safe in our country.

Today schools are still not safe in our country.

Today some see political office as a route to mastery over the people instead of a vocation of service to the people.

Jesus took his message to the poor, not the Rabbis – the experts of his day. Today when we do remember the suffering of ordinary people we tend to go to experts and to seek answers from their laptops rather than to the people themselves. The poor are even excluded from the discussions about their fate.

But in this darkness the courage, dignity and gentle determination of Abahlali baseMjodolo has been a light that has shone ever more brightly over the last three years. You have faced fires, sickness, evictions, arrest, beatings, slander, and still you stand bravely for what is true. Your principle that everyone matters, that every life is precious, is very simple but it is also utterly profound.

Many of us who hold dear the most noble traditions of our country take hope from your courage and your dignity just as we take hope from the recent actions of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union and the courage of so many ordinary people of Zimbabwe. A clear and

compelling call to conscience has been issued and we will listen and we will act.

I know that this is a difficult time for your movement. I know that last weekend a candle was knocked over in the Jadu Place settlement and two hours later 1 600 people had lost their homes and all their possessions. I know that this year there have already been terrible fires in the Foreman Road settlement and right here in Kennedy Road. It is unacceptable that the poorest people in our cities must live with this plague of fire. Today I am making a strong and clear call to our Municipality, and to the Municipalities of all our cities across the country, for immediate action to stop these fires. The settlements must be electrified, fire hydrants provided and access roads for fire engines built.

I know that people in your movement continue to face unlawful evictions. It is a matter of deep concern that the poorest people in our city living the most precarious lives should also have to face this plague. Our Christian faith requires that we honour our neighbours. There is no honour in illegal evictions that expel the poor from the city. I know that when you have been able you have gone to court to stop unlawful evictions and that the judges have always found in your favour. Today I am making a strong and clear call to our Municipality, and the Municipalities of all our cities across the country, to declare every part of our country an evictions free zone. Today I promise to call a meeting between yourselves and other organizations to see how we can build an alliance between churches, lawyers, shack dwellers and others against unlawful evictions and for the clear and public assertion of the right to the city for all.

I know that your movement has suffered terrible abuse at the hands of the police when you have tried to exercise your basic democratic rights. In September last year I was very pleased to be part of a group of 12 church leaders that condemned a violent police attack on a peaceful and legal protest by your movement. Even some clergy were beaten that day. Today I affirm that you have every right to express your views in this country. Today I promise that next time you march I and others from the church will march with you again.

I know that your movement organises crèches, support for abused women, legal support for people facing eviction, support for families whose children are being forced out of schools because they cannot pay fees, support for people who have lost their homes in fires and much, much more without donor support. Today I promise to mobilise the churches to offer practical support to your movement and to the work that you are doing.

Jesus Christ was a poor man. His disciples were poor men. He ministered to poor women and men. When our society and our world rejects the humanity of the poor it rejects the core of the message of Christ. What ever is done to the least of our sisters and brothers is done also to God. For too long our city and our country and our world have put the poor last on the list of concerns. It is time for the last to be first.

Bishop Rubin Phillip
27th April 2008
bishop@dionatal.org.za

Church leaders' statement after police attack on march

Police Violence in Sydenham, 28 September 2007: A Testimony by Church Leaders

We are appalled and deeply disturbed by the unprovoked violent and aggressive action of the SAPS at the public gathering organised by Abahlali baseMjondolo held in Sydenham, Durban on 28 September. In good conscience, we cannot remain silent in the face of the SAPS's flagrant disregard of our country's legal provision for our hard won right to express dissent, let alone their sheer disrespect of our common humanity as children of God.

As leaders in various churches and ecumenical organisations, we were present in the march organised by Abahlali, joining with them in their call for an end to the ongoing eviction and exclusion of the poor, and the destruction of their homes. The march was extremely well prepared, with the city officials being given ample notice, and arrangements having been made with the SAPS. The march was conducted in a disciplined manner, with the clear and stated intention being to deliver a memorandum of demands to the Mayor. Whilst the marchers were waiting for the Mayor to arrive to receive the memorandum, the SAPS chose to attack the people assembled at the agreed upon venue. We wish to state clearly as eyewitnesses, that prior to this attack by the police:

- * no participant of the march threatened any violence, or threw, or threatened to throw, stones or sticks or any objects at the police, or any members of the public ;
- * no orders were given by the police calling for the dispersal of the people assembled, nor were any instructions or warnings given by the police;
- * no "warning shots" or anything of that nature were given by the police.

What we did experience, was a completely unprovoked violent attack by the SAPS on people gathered to submit their demands to the Mayor of our city. This thuggery is deeply disturbing, and even more so as it was led by senior officers of the SAPS. Instead of protecting members of society, the SAPS violated and betrayed their trust. We cannot allow such behaviour to go unchecked, and expect the leadership of the SAPS to be held accountable for such despicable behaviour.

It was with shock that we then learned of the audacity of the SAPS in charging 14 participants of the march with "violating the Gatherings Act" and with "public violence". The only public violence experienced in Sydenham on 28 September was that inflicted by the SAPS. The attack of the SAPS on these residents leaves us outraged. In the face of this violent attack by the SAPS, and in keeping with our vocation as church, we will continue to stand alongside the poor as they struggle for the recognition of their own humanity and dignity. We cannot be silent whilst our brothers and sisters suffer such brutal injustice.

"In Truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me..." (Matthew 25:40).

Bishop Purity Malinga (Methodist Church of Southern Africa); Bishop Rubin Phillip (Anglican Church of Southern Africa); Rev. Dlamini ; Rev. Mavuso; Rev. Mtetwa; Rev. Ndlazi (United Congregational Church of Southern Africa); Brother Filippo Mondini (Comboni Missionary); Dr. Douglas Dziva (KwaZulu Natal Christian Council); Dr. L. Ngoetjana (KwaZulu Natal Christian Council); Mr. David Ntseng (Church Land Programme); Mr. Graham Philpott (Church Land Programme).

Church, Land and Development

Theology and Development Programme

Second Semester 2009.

Course taught by Church Land Programme, contact: graham@churchland.co.za

The course is **structured** along the development of the following argument:

Land

Issues like 'land' and food' are dealt with as terrains of politics constituted in and through militant struggles of the organised poor, i.e. those who are not counted, should not speak. Properly constituted through politics in this way, they point, in Badiou's terminology, to the void of a situation – as such they are precisely not the knowledge of the situation but its truth.

Development

For the terrains of 'land' and food', the situation of what *is* within the constraints of the status quo, is usually called 'development'. The truth revealed through struggles of the organised poor is that 'development' is a hostile project of capital accumulation against (most of) the people.

Empire

Development is thus not a narrowly economic project but more like war against the poor. It dictates a politics that cannot countenance the possibility of the people as subjects, let alone subjects who think. The state organises development (and especially its anti-politics) on behalf of capital, and has its own parasitical interest in carrying out the project. Civil society is (as Neocosmos has it: society organised as the state) the missionary/activist component of that project.

Beyond and against the state

Logically, 'something new' must therefore originate outside the state – it cannot be an outcome of the state of things as such, but only its undoing. Our argument is that the something new is the liberatory political sequence opened in the terrains of politics constituted in and through militant struggles of the organised poor.

Agency and Will

To sustain such sequences is fragile and requires fidelity to event that institutes them, and a continuous flow of prescriptive politics sustained by its agents, i.e., the will of the people.

Theology consolidated

Our understanding of God is that this sequence *is* God in history, i.e., the will of God. In describing the theological task, Gerloff describes Kistner's approach: "The *Word of God* is a public catalyst, leading to discipleship, and assisting us to search for God's will in concrete human situations. The role of *Theology* derives from here. Its basic task is to 'alert church and political authorities, the people who control big business as well as the millions of people who are in danger of giving up hope that, in the eyes of God, the people who appear to be insignificant *count*.'"

Food sovereignty

Um, and then we return to food!

Course Outline

	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Task</u>
<u>Session 1</u> Wednesday 22 July	Introductions: Course, people & expectations	Reading reaction due 29 July.
<u>Session 2</u> Wednesday 29 July	Land – a terrain of struggle	Reading reaction due 5 August.
<u>Session 3</u> Wednesday 5 August	Development – a hostile project	Readings.
<u>Session 4</u> Wednesday 12 August ???	Empire (1) – in dialogue with Abahlali	Dialogue response and reading reaction due by 19 August.
<u>Session 5</u> Wednesday 19 August	Empire (2)	Using reading material, prepare for debate in groups.
<u>Session 6</u> Wednesday 26 August	Politics beyond the state (1) Class debate	Write up key points and conclusions of debate. Readings for seminar.
<u>Session 7</u> Wednesday 2 September	Politics beyond the state (2) – theological focus	Individual reflective essay due 16 September. Prepare for class discussion on readings.
<u>Session 8</u> Wednesday 9 September	Agency and will ; people and God	Complete reflective essay. Prepare individual presentation.
<u>Session 9</u> Wednesday 16 September	Theology (1) Individual presentations	
Mid-term break		
<u>Session 10</u> Wednesday 30 September	Theology (2) Individual presentations	Complete final draft of reflective essay.
<u>Session 11</u> Wednesday 7 October	Food sovereignty (1) Case study	Long essay due 28 October.
<u>Session 12</u> Wednesday 14 October	Food sovereignty (2)	
<u>Session 13</u> Wednesday 21 October		

Current wave of rebellion and protest in South Africa

Extract from Living Learning 2009: Session 6, 22nd July

'Service delivery protests': I've been looking at what's happening here and around the world and I wonder: is it right, given what the people know, to call these actions 'service delivery protests'?; is that the right term?; and if it's not, then how can we call it? Also, I am battling with my inner peace each time there is a protest because some few people are always pointed out as the 'perpetrators' – and so it's not the system but the people that are targeted, and they suffer as a result. If you are vocal then government takes you as a target to blame for unruliness. I have been looking at this article about Marcos from the Zapatistas and wondering whether we from Abahlali will also be forced to run away from the pressure from the authorities in the cities?

It's being widely said that these actions seem to be dominating this year like they did in 2005, which we in Abahlali named 'a year of action'. Again this year too, not only the people across the country, but also trade unions and doctors are taking actions – and they are labelled as just service delivery protest. It is better to define ourselves before someone names us. So here too, others name this as 'service delivery'. If we were to accept this label it will mean that if Abahlali demands land and housing, then next month or next year that can 'deliver' it – give you the keys to your house and say: "Now, be silent". What we are looking for goes beyond service delivery. It's about citizenship, humanity and culture. In other words, it is all about **ourselves** – all what we want is ourselves. This label of 'service delivery' is shallow, it hides the truth and is misleading. So "reclamation of humanity" action might be more correct than 'service delivery'.

Yes, this is how we define ourselves before others define us – we must continue to be clear about what we say.

For some years the government has been saying "We are new. Give us time". I know there's a recession as well but the people don't care because the government has not been doing what the people expected from them all this time anyway. Now certainly we know that everyone is not at all satisfied with the government - even if we debate what to properly call the people's actions. So, if the government says now that they are still new, then the people really don't have to say – should they call the old one back to help this new one?!

Honestly, I don't think they even know the meaning of service delivery and development. The main thing they want to achieve is to paint a bad picture of poor people. They want the world to think that poor people are stupid and crazy and somehow don't want the 'service delivery' that government is trying to bring them. Even the system that government is using is undermining the poor people: they just build what they call a 'house' and give you a key. And so it seems to them that this is what they should do to keep us in our houses and not demanding that we speak for ourselves.

If you look at these protests carefully, you will see that the people who are protesting are always bigger than the target: they are bigger than the Ward if the protest is about a Councillor, they are bigger than the District if it's about a Mayor, and so on. But if you listen to the politicians (the Councillors and the Mayors), they clearly don't know the people, and they don't belong to that Ward. So even if it was service delivery, then they can't deliver because they wouldn't know where!

Also you will see that the people have been marching and demanding feedback from their previous marches and actions – **that** is mostly what they are protesting now.

Draft unpublished notes on the rebellions

July 2009

It is nauseating how elite media talks exclusively about 'violence' from below and keeps a murderous silence about state and structural violence, the scale of which is frankly enormous. The poor of our country are in an unviable state; their basic safety is at risk daily; and their humanity all but stripped away. The protests and rebellions they currently mount are, by contrast, the clearest affirmation of their inalienable humanity. Its repression and misrepresentation by the police, the media and the politicians only exposes the inhumanity and callousness of those who hold power.

It is surely very clear that a people's rebellion on the scale we see now in July 2009 is a moment of national significance. Yes, there are toxic elements on the fringes – but these are limited and cannot divert from the fundamental truth and urgency of what is clearly placed before us by the brave actions of so many of our people. Mostly it is a demand to be taken seriously as human beings, as citizens, as people who are counted for something even though they are poor and black. It is a demand for humanity, for decency, for life, for services, for inclusion, for food; it is an angry rejection of exclusion, eviction, immiseration, chronic hunger, abuse and predation; it is a crisis for a country and a government that pretends this is not the fundamental truth of our situation.

These cries and demands are of particular significance for us as we are reminded of Jesus' words: I was hungry and you did not feed me, thirsty and you gave me nothing, a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me.... The protestations in response are all too familiar: but Jesus, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, or naked? It is in the midst of the poor making demands for their humanity that we may begin to hear Jesus: whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do to me. A defining moment of choice has been placed before us as a society.

The moral teaching of the Christian tradition is very clear:

- if the people don't have food, of course they must take from supermarkets;
- if the people don't have land, then of course they must invade;
- if the people don't have the attention of those who should serve them, then of course they must act.

So many of the poor in our country are taking action publicly, thoughtfully and with determination and fortitude. For their brave witness, we should all be profoundly thankful. We should all be very attentive to the truth they speak with such abundant clarity. And the truth is that this is a massive and unambiguous indication from ordinary people that the current situation cannot be contained. It has been building for quite a while, but that crisis is now squarely in front of us all as a result of the people's actions. Within their thinking and passion, their organising and action, they offer the way out of this nightmare.

In this moment, it cannot be "business as usual". This is a crisis that is so severe that something has to change. The basic choice facing those who hold power is stark: either properly radical and humanising reforms, or barbarism of one sort or the other.

Either:

- more repression, violence and killing. This trend is already underway as state violence is unleashed against popular protest in the name of 'law and order', even defending the Constitution. More and more black neighbourhoods look like our townships during apartheid, when the state was more or less officially at war with its own people.
- acknowledge the depth of the crisis and find radical ways to truly open our society to everyone – economically, politically, socially and so on.

So far – and despite the contrary rhetoric - our new ruling class have *in practice* shown themselves to be with utterly unmoved by the violence, dehumanisation and poverty that systematically marks every aspect of the lives of the masses of our people. But perhaps with the 2010 World Cup coming, and the eyes of the world on us, they will blanch at scaling up the already high levels of state and police killing or unleashing an anti-Indian pogroms. As with any crisis then, perhaps there's actually an opportunity right now that's not being seized.

Over a year ago, in a memorable statement at the height of the violence unleashed against Africans from other countries, the shackdwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, said

“There is only one human race. Our struggle and every real struggle is to put the human being at the centre of society, starting with the worst off. ...

We have been warning for years that the anger of the poor can go in many directions. That warning, like our warnings about the rats and the fires and the lack of toilets, the human dumping grounds called relocation sites, the new concentration camps called transit camps and corrupt, cruel, violent and racist police, has gone unheeded.

Let us be clear. Neither poverty nor oppression justify one poor person turning on another. ... But the reason why this happens in Alex and not Sandton is because people in Alex are suffering and scared for the future of their lives. They are living under the kind of stress that can damage a person. The perpetrators of these attacks must be held responsible but the people who have crowded the poor onto tiny bits of land, threatened their hold on that land with evictions and forced removals, treated them all like criminals, exploited them, repressed their struggles, pushed up the price of food and built too few houses, that are too small and too far away and then corruptly sold them must also be held responsible”. (21 May 2008: Abahlali baseMjondolo Press Statement: ***Unyawo Alunampumulo: Abahlali baseMjondolo Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks in Johannesburg.***)

Sowetan newspaper article: "It's not xenophobia"

<http://abahlali.org/node/5549>

It's not xenophobia

29 July 2009

Peter Alexander and Peter Pfaffe

Promises made but nothing has happened

CONCERN that service delivery protests will degenerate into xenophobic violence was fuelled by reports from Balfour, Mpumalanga.

But there is a history of opposition to xenophobia in Balfour's township, Siyathemba. An analysis of the protest must take a different form.

This was said by Mohammed Waqas, spokesman for 30 foreign nationals, mostly Ethiopians, gathered outside Balfour police station.

"The people are right", he said. "I've lived in Balfour for five years. I didn't see the government build any road, any new houses. They didn't do anything for the people."

Lefu Nhlapho and Andile Matiwane, leaders of the present movement, recalled their intervention in a community meeting in May 2008. Local business leaders wanted foreign traders kicked out of the township but the duo countered arguments around crime and competition and blocked potentially dangerous xenophobia.

After the May 2008 xenophobia violence the Siyathemba community organised a sports day that brought locals and foreign nationals together. Locals with a little money provided a braai. Such was opposition to xenophobic violence that refugees from other townships fled to Balfour.

The recent violence flared UP after a community meeting on July 19. As people left the meeting, police fired rubber bullets, teargas and, according to some residents, live ammunition. There was another attack the following morning.

Simple barricades of large stones and burning tyres were erected in an attempt to block armoured Nyalas from moving around the township.

Protesters set fire to two buildings: a small municipal office and a partially ruined school store. On the Monday, in the course of the rioting, foreign-owned shops were looted.

Looting is a common practice in rioting everywhere. Indeed, we were shown South African-owned shops that had suffered this fate during the anti-apartheid struggle.

Unlike May 2008 the attacks were on the property of foreign nationals, not their bodies, and there is no evidence that looters were demanding "they must go".

Why were South African- owned shops spared? One possibility is that their owners remained in the township, unlike foreign traders. Significantly, Zimbabweans, Malawians and other non-South Africans living in the location were not attacked.

If there was anti-foreigner sentiment it was limited and condemned by all. A protest leader told us that people wanted foreign traders to return "because they are cheap and we befriended them".

Waqas confirmed that there were "very good relations" with township residents. He said they greeted South African shopkeepers rather than talking or visiting each other.

While xenophobia has been exaggerated, almost no attention has been paid to the police brutality that occurred. We saw two examples, but were told there were others.

One was a fifteen-year-old boy who had allegedly been shot with rubber bullets. Another was a young mother. Dragged from her hiding place under a bed, she had her stomach ripped apart by a rubber bullet.

Siyathemba is a desperately poor township where many residents lack electricity, water and sewerage.

The community submitted a memorandum to the Dipaleseng Municipality on July 8 2009. Most demands concerned basic issues such as a request for a police station, a mini- hospital and high-mass lights.

Topping the list were calls for a skills training centre and policies governing job recruitment in the area.

These reflect the fact that while the protest was backed by the community, leadership was provided by the township's youth. It is this generation that suffers most from unemployment and lack of housing. Moreover, many of the older leaders are now politicians and tender-seekers.

The council failed to respond to the July 8 memorandum, hence the July 19 meeting voted for a stayaway. Some activists suspect that police violence was aimed at intimidating them. It had the reverse effect. People fought back and the stay-away lasted four days.

On Saturday we attended a meeting called by the Dipaleseng Youth Forum, made up of young men and women with matric certificates but no jobs. Forum spokesperson Sakhela Maya is a Wits graduate.

The meeting was militant, democratic and passed a motion of no confidence in the mayor and councillors. They were given a week to respond.

On Monday a meeting called by deputy ministers and local stakeholders asked for a reconsideration of this deadline. It remains to be seen whether this will happen.

It is clear that the failure of the authorities to deliver very basic services has given rise to the new movement. Waqas linked this to the election. Promises were made, he said, but nothing happened.

From Balfour, we should not fear xenophobia. What we face is a new generation fighting for basic rights that democracy has failed to deliver.

Mercury newspaper article: "A cry for deep structural change"

<http://abahlali.org/node/5547>

A cry for deep structural change: The service delivery protests that have swept the country are a demand for an end to the contempt of the ruling elites for the poor

July 29, 2009 Edition 1

Imraan Buccus

OUR country is burning, and the leading lights in the new cabinet are out shopping for expensive cars. The long-standing disconnect between the political class and ordinary people has become a chasm.

The rebellions have made it abundantly clear that we cannot go on as before.

The political class thought that replacing Thabo Mbeki with President Jacob Zuma would pacify the people. The people have smashed that illusion to smithereens. Every day they are burning that illusion in the streets. It is clear that all politicians are now objects of popular suspicion.

This is a time of real risk and real opportunity for the country. Most of the recent protests are a progressive demand for social inclusion. This is a demand that we can all support and, if heeded, could result in real changes.

However, some of the protests have indicated a deeply disturbing return to xenophobic attitudes in which foreigners are blamed for the failures of our political class.

Our task is to oppose xenophobia as militantly as possible and to support the progressive protests and try to link them up so that their demand for social inclusion becomes impossible to ignore.

But it is clear that there is a long way to go. When politicians say that a basic income grant is unacceptable because it will cause "dependency", they are clearly living on another planet.

A basic income for all will free people from the shame and frustration of poverty. It will empower. It will give everyone a sense of real citizenship.

But the machinations of some among our political class in Durban are cause for even greater concern, especially the obscene attempts to stir up anti-Indian racism around the Early Morning Market issue.

There have been many societies in which elites, confronted with a rebellious populace, have tried to channel the people's anger towards foreigners, minorities and so on.

The Nazis did this in Germany in the 1930s with their anti-Jewish politics. More recently, Robert Mugabe did this in Zimbabwe with his attacks on homosexuals, and the BJP has done it in India with its anti-Muslim and anti-Christian politics.

If our own local elites are so morally bankrupt that they are willing to try to stir up anti-Indian sentiment to channel popular anger away from where it should be directed - to politicians and big business - it is essential that we all unite around the values of the Freedom Charter and the constitution: South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

On this principle, there can be no compromise. We cannot tolerate any form of racism or xenophobia, whether it comes from our so-called leaders or from the base of society.

Trevor Ngwane's recent article in *The Mercury* is an exemplary form of the kind of clear ethical principles that we need to engage into all aspects of our social engagement. The incredible ongoing anti-xenophobic work by grass-roots movements around the country is also exemplary.

Some political leaders think they can keep their game going by turning the poor on one another.

But if people of principle can succeed in opposing this, then it becomes clear that the only real way out of this crisis will be deep structural change in our society.

That structural change will have to be economic - everyone needs a decent life and everyone needs it as quickly as possible. This means that a basic income grant is an urgent priority.

We also need radical land reform and a mass public works project to create employment and build houses.

However, that structural change will also have to be political. Grass-roots movements have been rebelling against ward councillors and refusing to vote since 2004. They are not anti-democratic.

But they are against a form of democracy in which parties exert a top-down control over communities. There is a clear demand for a radicalisation of democracy. People want a bottom-up politics.

The deep structural change that is required has to be ethical. Our society is rank with crass materialism, corruption and a general contempt towards the poor. The political classes have to live simply and to forgo the BMWs and Johnnie Walker Blue. Politics has to be about service - not plunder.

The rebellions that have swept the country are a demand for deep change, and they will produce deep change. The question is whether this change will be progressive or reactionary. If we pass this test, a promising future beckons. If we fail this test we will slowly sink into disaster.

This may sound dramatic. But when burning barricades block so many of our streets, when the police shoot at protesters every day and when hundreds of protesters are sitting in jail cells, the situation is very serious. We ignore the seriousness of the situation at our peril.

Business Day newspaper article: “Burning message to the state in the fire of poor’s rebellion”

<http://abahlali.org/node/5508>

Richard Pithouse

Published: 2009/07/23 06:30:32 AM

DU NOON, Diepsloot, Dinokana, Khayelitsha, KwaZakhele, Masiphumelele, Lindelani, Piet Retief and Samora Machel. We are back, after a brief lull during the election, to road blockades, burnt-out police cars and the whole sorry mess of tear gas, stun grenades and mass arrests. Already this month, a girl has been shot in the head in KwaZakhele, three men have been shot dead in Piet Retief, and a man from Khayelitsha is in a critical condition.

There are many countries where a single death at the hands of the police can tear apart the contract by which the people accept the authority of the state. But this is not Greece. Here the lives of the black poor count for something between very little and nothing. When the fate of protesters killed or wounded by the police makes it into the elite public sphere, they are generally not even named.

The African National Congress (ANC) has responded to the new surge in popular protest with the same patrician incomprehension under Jacob Zuma as it did under Thabo Mbeki. It has not understood that people do not take to the streets against a police force as habitually brutal as ours without good cause. Government statements about the virtues of law and order, empty rhetoric about its willingness to engage, and threats to ensure zero tolerance of “anarchy” only compound the distance between the state and the faction of its people engaged in open rebellion.

Any state confronted with popular defiance has two choices — repression or engagement. If it wishes to avoid shooting its people as an ordinary administrative matter, the first step towards engaging with popular defiance is to understand the dissonance between popular experience and popular morality that puts people at odds with the state.

A key barrier towards elite understanding of the five-year hydra-like urban rebellion is that protests are more or less uniformly labelled as “service delivery protests”. This label is well suited to those elites who are attracted to the technocratic fantasy of a smooth and post-political developmental space in which experts engineer rational development solutions from above. Once all protests are automatically understood to be about a demand for “service delivery” they can be safely understood as a demand for more efficiency from the current development model rather than any kind of challenge to that model. Of course, many protests have been organised around demands for services within the current development paradigm and so there certainly are instances in which the term has value. But the reason why the automatic use of the term “service delivery protest” obscures more than it illuminates is that protests are often a direct challenge to the post-apartheid development model.

Disputes around housing are the chief cause of popular friction with the state. The state tends to reduce the urban crisis, of which the housing shortage is one symptom, to a simple question of a housing backlog and to measure progress via the number of houses or “housing opportunities” it “delivers”. But one of the most common reasons for protests is outright rejection of forced removals from well-located shacks to peripheral housing developments or “transit camps”. Another is the denial or active removal of basic services from shack settlements to persuade people to accept relocation. Moreover, to make its targets for “housing delivery” more manageable, the state often, against its own law and policy, provides houses only for shack owners, resulting in shack renters being illegally left homeless when “development comes”.

It is therefore hardly helpful to assume that protests against forced removals and housing developments that leave people homeless are a demand for more efficient “delivery”. On the contrary, these protests are much more fruitfully understood as a demand for a more inclusive mode of development, in the double sense of including poor people in the cities and of including all poor people in development projects.

If the state actually engaged with any seriousness with the people to whom it has promised to “deliver services”, these kinds of problems could be resolved. But the reality is that the state very often imposes development projects on people without any kind of meaningful engagement. One reason for this is the pressure to meet “delivery targets” quickly — a pressure that was greatly worsened by the ludicrous and dangerously denialist fantasy of former housing minister Lindiwe Sisulu that shacks could be “eradicated by 2014”.

Another reason why the state systematically fails to engage with poor people is that when it does negotiate, it tends to substitute ward councillors and their committees, as well as local branch executive committees of the ANC, for the communities actually affected by development projects. But the fact is that in many wards the councillors and local party elites represent the interests of local elites, who often have very different interests to poor communities. Moreover, it’s entirely typical for these local elites to seize control of key aspects of development projects, such as the awarding of tenders and the allocation of houses, for their own political and pecuniary gain. It is not at all unusual for ward councillors and allied local elites to threaten their grassroots critics with violence. Ward councillors are often able to order the local police to arrest critics on spurious charges.

It is hardly surprising that ward councillors are a key target of popular protests.

Once a community has realised that their local councillor is hostile to their interests, there are often no viable alternatives for engaging with the state. Attempts at making use of official public participation channels generally fail to get any further than a solid wall of bureaucratic contempt in which everyone is permanently in a meeting. Polite demands for attention are frequently responded to as if they were outrageous. Outright contempt of the “know your place” variety is common. In the unlikely event that representatives from a poor community are able to access a politician higher up than their ward councillor, they are most likely to be sent back to their councillor. There is a very real sense in which we have already developed a sort of caste system in which the poor are simply unworthy of engaging with politicians on the basis of equality.

If development was negotiated directly, openly and honestly with the people who it affects rather than with consultants bent on technocratic solutions, and ward councillors bent on personal and political advantage, things would take a little longer but their outcomes would be far more inclusive and far more to people’s liking. If the ANC is serious about democracy, it should aim to subordinate the local state to the inevitably time-consuming, complex and contested mediation of the poor communities that need it most, rather than the often predatory aspirations of local political elites.

The heart of the moral economy behind the protest is a firm conviction that the poor are people who also count in our society. For some, this means that every citizen counts and one way of realising this is by turning on people seen as non-citizens. For others, everyone, documented or not, counts. But for as long as the state, in its actual practices, does not affirm the dignity of poor people by consulting them about their own future and including them in the material development of our collective future, the rebellion will continue.

Critical notes on Human Rights discourses

Analyzing Political Subjectivities: naming the post-developmental state in Africa today²

Michael Neocosmos

[extracts from]

... the political disorientation resulting from the gradual decline of the NLS mode through its subversion by state politics, as well as from the difficulties in consolidating truly independent nationalist politics in a so-called 'Cold War' context on the World scene, became the main conditions for the ultimate rise of Western Human Rights Discourse (HRD) to a position of dominance by the 1980s.

...

In South Africa a similar process of 'victimisation' occurred, but only in the 1990s and then directly as an effect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, during which erstwhile political agents were interpellated by the TRC as victims seeking redress, via claiming their human rights, from state institutions (Neocosmos, 2007). It has been the rise and hegemony of HRD which has ultimately sealed the fate of emancipatory thought, whether popular or statist, on the continent.

...

Ultimately the *Sovereign National Assemblies* failed to impose the popular will on the state, while popular organisations in South Africa and elsewhere soon became part of a new state politics as they entered into more or less formal corporatist contracts, while democracy was reduced to its liberal statist variety (Neocosmos, 1998). They even came to constitute 'civil society' itself as the latter, from a domain of politics in which organisations of all sorts operated, was reduced to some of those organisations themselves (predominantly NGOs) within hegemonic neo-liberal discourse. The reasons for this conceptual shift were many, but fundamentally the fact that civil society organisations failed to sustain a politics independent of the state was a crucially important factor (Neocosmos, 2007). In the process the names 'development' and 'nation' fell by the wayside and were replaced by 'democracy' and 'human rights' as the organising substantives of politics. A new political sequence had arrived. Some, rather enthusiastically, referred to it as the 'second liberation' of Africa, a cruel joke as it soon turned out.

...

Those who feel excluded by the new alliance between state and organised interests, such as many social movements, wish to be included as stakeholders, hence their state-focussed politics. Contrary to much Left opinion, there is no major *political* distinction between NGOs and social movements; rather politically, all such civil society organisations operate within the limits of practice and thought largely set out by the state or "in dialogue" with the state (i.e. within the globally hegemonic discourse of "good governance", "human rights", "democracy", etc). As a result, alternative modes of politics with a potential for emancipatory practices today can only exist outside or at best at the margins of civil society and are excluded from the 'public sphere'. An emancipatory politics today can only be found in sites beyond the state domain of politics, beyond

² I am grateful to Mahmood Mamdani and particularly to Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba Bazunini for important comments and encouragement on an earlier draft. The usual caveats apply.

the 'public sphere'³.

It is policy (i.e. law, rights) which is said to provide (i.e. to "deliver") development. This is encapsulated in the term "good governance". So-called governance (good or bad) is the name of the politics of the new state. It combines notions of administrative efficiency with law and rights. But this is not working for the majority of the people, especially the poor, as the issue for them is one of asserting their political agency, not the victimhood associated with human rights discourse (Neocosmos, 2006b). Their concerns are with the enabling of a popular democratic politics (which is the only way in which their voices can be heard) which can make the state accountable to society, not law/right as such.

This comes across for example in many of the statements of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), the shack-dwellers movement in Durban, South Africa. They maintain for example that: "the constitution is not for us, only for the rich" and that "freedom is for those with money" so that they celebrate "unfreedom day" every year to draw attention to the fact that the poor have not been included in "liberation". They publically refuse to vote under the slogan "No House! No Vote!" To do so would be to legitimise their representatives whom they see as both arrogant and corrupt. In fact today, the AbM constitute the most important site in South Africa from which the politics of the post-developmental state are being systematically contested and rejected (Zikode, 2005; Pithouse, 2007). In particular, they explicitly reject "stakeholder politics" in order to maintain their political independence, stressing that government, local authorities, NGOs and other institutions of power "talk to us not for us". They are thus not averse to talking at all, but only on equal terms, maintaining their political independence jealously. So far, local state structures and most NGOs have found this impossible to do as they clearly see themselves as trustees with appropriate knowledge, status and power. AbM have also insisted that all inhabitants of shacks must be treated the same by all in their political activities, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion or nationality. In fact during the xenophobic pogroms in South Africa in May, 2008, the areas in which AbM had a presence showed no evidence of xenophobic attacks. The statement they released on these events was the most progressive in the country. It stressed that:

There is only one human race. Our struggle and every struggle is to put the human being at the centre of society, starting with the worst off (sic). An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person wherever they may find themselves. If you live in a settlement you are from that settlement and you are a neighbour and a comrade in that settlement.⁴

Apparent 'foreigners' then should not be treated differently from anyone else, as people have been living side by side for years and faced the same problems; only in this way can a nation of human beings be conceived. We have here a complete rethinking of rights as applicable to all and not only to some, to formal citizens. In fact AbM attempt to maintain in their politics the axiom which Badiou (2008) has consistently stressed: "There is One World Only". In this manner they are rethinking and providing new political content to both democracy and nation.

³ A distinction between state or elite domain of politics and a popular domain of politics has been theorized by Chatterjee, 2004, following on from debates in *Subaltern Studies*. This distinction transcends the idea of a single 'public sphere' as it suggests the possibility of exclusion of popular politics from a state domain. I have extended the conceptual distinction to cover the subjectivity of politics in Neocosmos, 2007.

⁴ All the appropriate statements (including this one by Abahlali baseMjondolo "Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks in Johannesburg", 21/05/2008) and other documents concerning AbM can be found on their excellent website which also contains a number of commentaries and academic studies concerning the movement as well as analyses comparing AbM with other movements in the World such as Lavalas in Haiti for example. See <http://abahlali.org>

The state consensus is today being constructed around human rights discourse. Human rights have now replaced development as the hegemonic political discourse in Africa. While the latter still retained some element of political agency and choice, the former no longer does in any real sense, as it is constituted by a discourse of victimhood of people and trusteeship of power. Active citizenship has been replaced by passivity, agency by victimhood⁵. Agency from within human rights discourse consists in petitioning the state not in prescribing to it; hence its usual shift from the political to the juridical, away from political practice towards legal claims on entitlements (Neocosmos, 2006b). In fact it can be asserted without too much fear of contradiction, that the implicit neo-liberal 'social contract' involves a trade-off between the promise of the provision of state guaranteed (i.e. institutionalised) human rights on the one hand for the abandonment of any real form of political agency and choice on the other. A refusal of this contract today leads to a contestation of the neo-liberal consensus itself. This is in fact what AbM are doing as they constantly redefine, in their practice, both democracy and nation.

Today there is no state social project, only "good governance" in formal subservience to the West (law/rights). The politics of the new state regime are governed by the "right to rights". Some have the right to exercise their rights (e.g. the middle classes, the formally employed), others (foreigners, poor, shack-dwellers) do not. For example the local state systematically violates human rights, often with impunity, when dealing with shack dwellers and the poor more generally in Durban, South Africa (Pithouse, 2008).

Given the absence in public discourse of any name (or given the vacuity of existing names) which may suggest movement/change/vision to something better (e.g. development, revolution, transformation, freedom, equality), the only thing which remains is formal democracy and human rights subsumed under "good governance". There is nothing else provided to thought, not even a glimmer of a better future. Hence the "democratising mission" (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 2007) of the West (following upon its earlier "enslaving", "civilising" and "development" missions in chronological order) as the core ideological feature of the new imperialism is crucial for these politics.

...

the discourse of civil society and human rights ... are part and parcel of this new imperial democracy (Chatterjee, 2004).

For example, the popular sovereignty necessary to hold the people of the South's own leaders to account for their misdeeds and to build a culture of public accountability, is being systematically undermined by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for instance, precisely through the use of a human rights discourse. The idea of arraigning state leaders before this court for gross human rights violations (the most important so far having been Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic and Charles Taylor) on the one hand, and so-called humanitarian interventions by the super power and its allies on the other, have combined to undermine national sovereignty. Such processes have been shown to be applied with a partiality which has reinforced Western

⁵ In South Africa, one of the absurd indicators of this change and its accompanying political disorientation has been the attempt by a human rights NGO to develop a "Victim's Charter". The absurdity consists in the fact that the idea of a charter is exclusively focussed in that country, on the "Freedom Charter" which has constituted since 1955, the core expression of popular nationalist agency (see Suttner and Cronin, 1986). Victims of course have little or no agency by definition.

dominance. Interestingly Milosevic was posthumously exonerated by the International Court of Justice, while the United Nations has been criticised for undermining local efforts in Liberia to bring Charles Taylor to justice earlier (Laughland, 2007; Pailey, 2007).

In the 1970s and 1980s, so-called humanitarian NGOs had already begun to justify their direct interventions in foreign countries bypassing national states through reference to human rights. Rights began to overtake development in international NGO discourse. Gradually, this rationale began to be claimed by Western states also as they came to view themselves as the defenders of human rights and democracy worldwide (Albala, 2005). Since then, various American administrations have expanded the 'right of interference' outside the law, citing the absence of human rights as the justification for intervention:

As the Bush Administration made patently clear at the time of the invasion of Iraq, humanitarian intervention does not need to abide by the law. Indeed, its defining characteristic is that it is beyond the law. It is this feature that makes humanitarian intervention the twin of the "war on terror." (Mamdani, 2008a)

This is why (*inter alia*) it can be maintained that human rights discourse is at the core of the new imperialism. Globalization – the name of the new imperialism – goes about systematically undermining democracy through its ostensible mission to democratise the world (Chatterjee, 2004). Today this apparent paradox can no longer be countered by pleading relativism (e.g. Africa is not ready for democracy or democracy is against African values), as we know that this only opens the door to authoritarianism, but only by arguing that Western democracy does not, in the present context on our continent, amount to democracy at all⁶. In Africa today, democracy is the name of a state political subjectivity which is oppressive of the majority of the population; the fact that even in South Africa, the epitome of 'successful' democracy on the continent, around half of the population live in poverty, should be sufficient proof of this, although in dominant discourse of course, poverty is abstracted from politics and associated with apparently politically neutral economic forces to be managed exclusively by state policy. In actual fact, democracy should be understood as a variant of the historical mode of politics which Lazarus (1996) calls the "parliamentary mode". Here political consciousness is subordinated to a consciousness of the state; 'political society' for this mode is the state and only the state. In order to give adequate political content to the term democracy so that it genuinely comes to reflect the general will, it is necessary to develop both in theory and in practice a different mode of politics founded on the

⁶ The imperial character of democracy has led to a contradiction between it and state nationalism in certain countries such as Zimbabwe and Iran. These states have been oppressive of their populations while simultaneously attempting to assert their national independence from the new form of democratic Empire. In Zimbabwe, this contradiction between democracy and nation has paralleled one between town and country as the rise and assertion of nationalist politics has led to a state enforced land reform whereby large White landowners have been (often violently) expropriated contrary to human rights norms. This attempt at the resolution of longstanding legitimate national grievances by the state has increased confrontation with the West and has been simultaneously accompanied by greater repression and violation of human rights in urban areas due to economic decline and eventual collapse occasioned at least initially by the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes by the regime itself and subsequent sanctions from the West. Increased repression has been exacerbated by the regime's attempt to cling to power. This state of affairs has given rise to a disparate opposition coalition combining imperialist forces, White commercial farmers and urban-based trade unions and civil society organisations. An important effect has been political disorientation as the traditional Left-Right dichotomy has vanished and a fundamental contradiction between human rights and national rights has been solidified. Disorientation is quite apparent in the reference by some authors to "two Lefts" in the country, a nationalist and a human rights/internationalist Left (see Moyo and Yeros, 2007). The proliferation of 'Lefts' suggests that the Left-Right distinction is no longer able to orientate political thought. Briefly put, the Zanu-pf regime in Zimbabwe can be understood as attempting to cling on to a politics of authoritarian state nationalism which is today historically redundant in a period dominated by neo-colonial authoritarian democracy. For a serious attempt at analysis see Mamdani, 2008b.

subjectivities emanating from sites where popular experiences and struggles for genuine democracy are constructing alternatives to what exists.

Western interests/donors and more broadly the new form of imperialism also operate through funding and expanding civil society and “empowering victims” (‘victimology’) of all kinds in Africa, a process which is said to be participatory/ empowering/democratising and central to the politics of “good governance”. The politics of the new post-developmental state and the new form of imperialism refer to a form of politics which binds state and civil society together and both of these to Empire through a human rights discourse. In order to understand the political content of human rights discourse, Wa Mutua’s employs what he calls a “savage, victim, saviour” metaphor. As Wa Mutua (2002:19, 30) explains, “although the human rights movement arose in Europe, with the express purpose of containing European savagery, it is today a civilizing crusade aimed primarily at the Third World [...] Rarely is the victim conceived as white”. Indeed Wa Mutua shows that the victims of the savagery of the African state (and indeed of African culture as the state, being ‘neo-patrimonial’, is a product of such culture) need their ‘saviours’ from the West, while Alain Badiou concludes directly:

The refrain of “human rights” is nothing other than the ideology of modern capitalism: we won’t massacre you we won’t torture you in caves, so keep quiet and worship the golden calf. As for those who don’t want to worship it, or who don’t believe in our superiority, there is always the American army and its European minions to make them be quiet (Badiou, 2001-2: 2-3).

In an important sense then it can be said that the new form of state in Africa ‘corresponds’ to the new form of Empire. There can today no longer be a state-driven national emancipatory project⁷. States have failed in their emancipatory endeavours. Such a project today can only emanate from beyond the realm governed by state politics, including that of civil society.

Examples of the imperial politics of NGOs are legion but note the recent case (Nov-Dec 2007) of the French NGO (Arche de Zoe) which it seems had been kidnapping children in Chad to ‘resell’ to French families. Of course the idea was to ‘save’ children from the terrible conditions of Darfur and the war in Sudan. There were big protest demonstrations in Chad rightly comparing this activity to the slave trade. Parents were lining up outside government offices to find their children who had been promised free education by the NGO. See also the contemporaneous Amnesty International call on the Arusha Tribunal not to send suspects of genocide to be tried in Rwanda on the grounds that Rwandan legal institutions (*Gaçaça*) do not measure up to European standards. Both are recent examples of ongoing colonial politics involving NGOs in Africa which have made it into the Western media (see BBC reports), but similar political practices are the norm rather than the exception. Of course the lifestyle of international NGO workers matches that of diplomatic and United Nations personnel.

⁷ This same point can also be argued structurally: the developmental state required a Fordist regime of accumulation which was accompanied by mass production and mass consumption and made possible an interventionist state founded on a ‘historic corporatist compromise’ between capital and organized labour. Under ‘flexible’ accumulation regimes which dominate today, a welfare state along the lines of the social democratic ones of the twentieth century is no longer possible (Neocosmos, 2006). Welfarism and indeed democracy require, for social democratic arguments, high levels of material wealth. It is to a version of this argument that Ulrich Beck refers for example, when he asserts that: “the simple truth is that without material security there is no political freedom and no democracy, only a threat to everyone from new and old totalitarian regimes and ideologies” (2000: 62-63). This ‘simple truth’ is of course totally Eurocentric; it is to condemn the majority of the World’s people to ‘totalitarianism’. The point rather is that throughout the World at different times, people have been able to fight successfully for democracy under conditions of extreme poverty created more often than not precisely by the Western desire for material security.

More often than not, local NGOs are linked into this neo-colonial system unless they consciously fight against it which would then tend to limit their access to jobs and to funds from donors. In particular it should be stressed that radical NGOs in Africa today play a similar role to that of Left political parties in the developmental state within the first phase of the post-colonial state. They serve to mobilize and channel popular politics into a state domain of politics which is simultaneously neo-colonial in character. Hearn (2007) has rightly stressed the 'compradorial' character of the politics of local NGOs in Africa (see also Manji and O'Coill, 2002). Of course none of this means that in specific circumstances, civil society organisations cannot resist the state through the use of human rights discourse. What it does mean is only that an emancipatory politics cannot be thought from within this discourse, and that ultimately some form of accommodation with the state is more than likely. The move of many 'civil society activists' into state employment is thus quite predictable.

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Conclusions

Using the language of sovereignty, we can conclude that as governments hand over power to non-accountable bodies (WTO, IMF, WB, G8, Human Rights Courts, etc) the gap between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty appears to widen. States do not so much give up their own sovereignty as that of their people who are left with less control over their worlds (Albala, 2005). In particular, it is the politics of the African state which make it subservient to the World Bank and the whole retinue of financial institutions and funders which follow in its wake, and not the other way round. Asserting a popular nationalist and pan-African position requires a total rethinking beyond present subjective parameters. This means a re-assertion of popular politics in society; but this cannot be effected from within civil society which largely contributes to the reproduction of state power.

Contrary to an oft-repeated Left mantra, just because new players have appeared on the scene in the form of NGOs, social movements and so on, this does not of itself imply the existence of a popular politics independent of the state in its thought and practice. On the contrary, despite their frequent Left credentials, these organisations on the African continent today operate overwhelmingly within a domain of state politics delimited by civil society and human rights discourse. Thus it is not so much that the state has been supplemented as a site of debate and political action by independent organisations of civil society. It is rather that state and civil society organisations - both in conflict and in cooperation - combine to delimit and impose a conception of politics which becomes truly hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, via its deployment in the arena of civil society and the 'public sphere'. This process thus gives rise to a national political consensus which excludes emancipatory alternatives.

Any conception of emancipatory politics is in this way evacuated from society as it had earlier been from the developmental state and from the state-driven development process. Today, civil society is simply society as seen from the perspective of the state, as a simple ensemble of interest groups, rather than what it objectively is: a domain of political activity within society dominated by the state's conception of what politics consists of, and which thus includes those which operate within state political subjectivity, while simultaneously and crucially also excluding alternative political subjectivities inherent from time to time in specific sites (Neocosmos, 2007). In terms of the

dominant subjectivity, the construction and reproduction of this domain simply reproduces the hegemony of state politics and knowledges within society. Hence the possibility of an emancipatory politics today can only arise as a result of a critique of such hegemonic politics and thus in sites beyond the subjectivities of state and Empire, and also beyond those of civil society itself.

Any emancipatory politics worthy of the name can therefore only exist “at a political distance” from such state subjectivity (Lazarus, 1996).

At the intellectual level, this requires the development of theoretical categories outside the limits of neo-liberal political thought, and/or the providing of new content to existing categories. Difficult struggles have to be conducted to contest the dominant consensus and to propose alternative modes of politics, alternative political subjectivities. In doing so we should learn from the new politics developing in sites where such alternatives are being constructed. Within AbM, the main site of alternative politics in South Africa today, both democracy and the nation are being redefined. This is not simply because both names are used more inclusively than hitherto. It is rather because the former is being rethought in a manner which insists on the organisational as well as political independence of popular organisations of the poor vis-à-vis the state, and because with reference to the latter, it is being understood that a nation worthy of the name – a truly *political* community - can only be imagined and constructed on the basis of respect for the other; that social justice cannot be bought at the expense of the oppression of others (foreigners, ethnic groups, women, children or whoever). This constitutes the beginnings of a new conception of politics, one which takes seriously the axiom of the *Freedom Charter* – the core statement of South African popular nationalism dating from the 1950s – that: “South Africa belongs to *all* who live in it” (*emphasis added*). There is no guarantee that such a politics will be sustained over time, but it does seem as though, for the moment, it enables us to think a way forward.