

# South Africa: The Politic of Land and Housing

Monday 14 February 2011, by [ZIKODE S'bu](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2011).

I have been asked to speak on the politic of land and housing in our cities. I only get these invitations because of the strength of the movement of which I am part and so, on behalf of Abahlali baseMjondolo, I thank the University of Chicago African Civilizations Program for this platform.

The churches have rallied to our struggle in difficult times – after fires, after arrests, after beatings and of course after the violent attack in Kennedy Road settlement in September 2009. We know about the role that the churches have played in Brazil, Italy, Zimbabwe and in Haiti and we believe that the churches can play the same role here if they take a clear decision, as some church leaders bravely have already, to be with the people, to clearly take the side of the people instead of being just another 'stakeholder'. Bishop Rubin Philip has stood strong in the politics of the poor.

The right to land and the right to housing remain huge problems in South Africa. These problems are not technical, they are political. These problems will not be solved by consultants' reports, academic conferences at the ICC and meetings with the MEC at Suncoast or Sun Cities. These problems will be solved when the people who do not count in this system, the people that have no proper place are able to stand up and to take their place and to be counted as citizens of this country and our world.

Our politics starts by recognizing the humanity of every human being. We decided that we will no longer be good boys and girls that quietly wait for our humanity to be finally recognized one day. Voting has not worked for us. We have already taken our place on the land in the cities and we have held that ground. We have also decided to take our place in all the discussions and to take it right now. We take our place humbly because we know that we don't have all the answers, that no one has all the answers. Our politics is about carefully working things out together, moving forward together. But although we take our place humbly we take it firmly. We do not allow the state and its councillors to keep us quiet in the name of a future revolution that does not come. We do not allow some NGOs or academics to keep us quiet in the name of a future socialism that they can't build. We take our place as people who count the same as everyone else. Sometimes we take that place in the streets with teargas and the rubber bullets, sometimes we take our place in the board rooms and sometimes we take our place in other countries as we believe there are no human boundaries. Sometimes we take that place in the courts. Sometimes we take it on the radios. Today we take it here.

Our politics starts from the places we have taken. We call it a living politic because it comes from the people and stays with the people. It is ours and it is part of our lives. We organize it in our own languages and in our own communities. It is the politics of our lives. It is made at home with what we have and it is made for us and by us. We are finished with being ladders for politicians to climb up over the people.

Sometimes it gets hard but we keep going forward together. Sometimes we don't know what to do any more but we keep thinking together. Sometimes a settlement stays strong. Sometimes a settlement fails to stay strong. But we keep going forward together.

Today we need to talk about the politics of land. We need to talk about the politics of housing. We need to talk about a politic of the poor – about a living politics thought, organised and owned by ordinary people.

We need to talk about the politics of fire. We need to talk about the politics of toilets. We need to talk about the politic of class. We need to talk about the politics of AIDS, the politics of xenophobia and the politics of rape.

To think about all this we must start with the history of where we come from. Who are we and what type of society we want to build.

It has become clear to us that whenever we talk about history we are seen to be launching an offensive. It has become clear to us that this is because the rich want to believe that we are poor because we are less than them – less intelligent, less responsible, less clean, less honest, less educated. If we are poor because we are just less than the rich then we must be happy for every little thing that we are given, we must be happy with a hamper or some old clothes when our children are dying in the rats and the fire and the mud.

But we are not poor because we are less than the rich. We are poor because we were made poor. The rich are rich because they were made rich. If your ancestors had the land you will go to university and get a nice job and look after your family well. If your ancestors lost the land you will be lucky to find a dangerous job that you hate so that your family can just survive.

The growing poverty in rural communities encourages mostly young people to migrate to the cities. Therefore as long as the cities grow in the same way as poverty, urbanization is not an exception. People will have to keep moving to the cities in search of hope. This reality calls upon all city authorities to learn to share the cities and to accept this growth. It is the same poor people that build cities and then get kicked out to rot in places like Parkgate and Blikkiersdorp once they are finished building for the attraction of foreign investments. It is the same poor people that wash and iron for the rich while living in shacks where it is very difficult to wash and iron their own clothes. It is the same poor people that bravely guard the homes and business of the rich who come home to find their homes illegally destroyed by the criminals that are called the Land Invasions Unit. It is the same poor that look after the children of the rich as they grow to become even richer. This is wrong. We need democratic cities. We need fair cities. We need welcoming cities. We need cities for all.

Every child that is born into this world has the same right to grow in safety and to reach their full potential and to shape their world in equality with all other people. When you take this seriously your politic does not impose ideas on people – it imposes people on ideas. Taking the value and dignity of every person seriously – and taking it seriously now and not after services have been delivered, development achieved or socialism built – is a simple politic. But it is also a dangerous politic. It is threat to oppression which is always justified by making some people count for more than others. Anyone who threatens oppression will find that they are called criminal, violent, unpatriotic, short minded, treasonous and more.

We need to think about how we can create a new kind of communism, a new kind of togetherness. A living communism that recognizes the equal humanity of every person wherever they were born, wherever their ancestors came from, whether they are poor or rich, women, men or GLBTs. This new togetherness must also understand that the world, what God has given to us all, must be shared by us all. The earth should be recognised as God's gift to humanity and not something to be fenced in and bought and sold for private profit.

The system we suffer under now keeps the land in the hands of the descendents of those who had

stolen it through the barrel of colonial guns. The system turns the once most trusted leaders in our cities into enemies. The enemies that do not only hate and neglect the poor but the enemies that send police to beat the poor, arrest and shoot them whenever we voice out our concerns. The enemies that hire the thugs to attack us. The system talks a lot about democracy, but it does not practice democracy. The system talks more about all the rights, gender equality and justice but does not make any of this real. Progress in courts and conferences doesn't always mean progress in ordinary people's lives. We continue to insist that the real lives of people, all people, must be the measure of progress.

This is a system where almost everything is done in the name of the poor but only for the poor to be betrayed and undermined again and again. This is a system that allows formations of many institutions such as NGOs, NPOs, businesses and states to violate the human rights of the poor and the marginalized in our society.

We need to ask ourselves what is this system? This system is a system where the people are separated into two – those that count and those that do not count. Those that count are those with money. Those that do not count are those without money. This system values business profit before humane value. This system turns democracy into a way to become rich. Money is made to dominate human thinking. Therefore we have to turn it upside down and put the human being first. Always we must start with the worst off.

What went very wrong in our society is when business profit is put ahead of human value. What went very wrong in our society is the thinking that sees development as being only the job of the few clever technical people, who are meant to think about development for the majority. Grassroots organizations such as Abahlali baseMjondolo are strongly opposed to this top-down approach to development that sees people as nothing else than the helpless individuals who cannot think for themselves. In this view the work of the poor is to vote when we are told and to be passive receivers of services. This is why the so called experts on the poor and our struggles always want to call our protests as 'service delivery protests' even when we clearly state what we are struggling for. They are failing to understand that our politic is actually based on a demand for dignity and equality. Our demand for active citizen participation is just a demand for democracy. In fact citizen participation is required by any democratic state yet it is seen as act of violence. The fact that our demand for dignity is taken as violence means that we have to accept that change may not always be easy or sweet. We will be beaten, we will be demonized. Some of us will be killed. Right now these realities lie before the whole world in Tahrir Square in Cairo in Egypt.

We are the people that are not meant to think. We are the people that are not meant to participate in planning and to debate on issues that affect us. We are the people that should be happy to live on hampers. The poor are strongly opposed to these dehumanizing characteristics of the top down system that has terrorized our communities and our lives.

Abahlali have said over and over that the majority of our people believe in a true democracy, a democracy that caters for every gogo and mkhulu at home, a democracy that does not see people differently, a democracy that does not make few people better than the majority, a democracy that is not driven by the wealth that has torn our society apart. We believe in a participatory development of the people, for the people and by the people themselves. We are concerned that at least most of the houses that are being built, they are built for the people, without the people. This is why some people reluctantly accept these houses and then they either rent them out or sell them to some desperate fellows and run back to shacks. This is not a matter for the police and the National Intelligent Agency (NIA). The reason for this is not that shack dwellers cannot think or are stupid. The reasons for this is the failure of authorities to involve shack dwellers not only in the planning but right from the project identification through to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation – in

fact all through the project cycle. If you take people out of their communities, sometimes at gun point, and move them to rural human dumping grounds where there is no work they will not stay there. People have to survive. We want it to be clearly understood that the bottom up development approach that recognizes that a properly human life is what the majority of the poor prefers. Thus communication and consultation is vital if authorities are to be serious and respecting of those that they call 'beneficiaries'.

It is very sad that some businessmen, like Ricky Govender in Motala Heights, have been terrorizing their communities in search for a land to expand their business and wealth. In Motala Heights the settlement leadership and very senior families have been forced up and down the lawyers and courts to defend their right not to be evicted from their land. It is the same with the eNkwalini community who have consistently been threatened with eviction by the farmer, who had just bought the farm in Northern KwaZulu-Natal. What is more upsetting with all the evictions that are taking place in the country is that they are not only illegal because they are carried out without the court orders but that they are also criminal. We have had to advise the police and municipal officials quite several times of Section 26 of the South African Constitution and the Prevention of Illegal Occupation of Land Act that protects the homeless, the poor and most vulnerable members of our society, children and women.

Abahlali baseMjondolo has managed to stop most evictions in eThekweni in settlements like Motala Heights, New Hanover, and Tumbleweed in Howick just to mention a few. The old settlements, which were founded by land occupations, are now safe. But the new occupations are still at risk of eviction. We have seen this recently in Motala Heights and eMmause.

The shack dwellers believe that land and housing in the cities will bring about a safer environment, an environment that is free from shack fires, an environment that is free from rats, rapes and crime when our children and women have to find water and toilets in the bushes. If we were to be serious about caring cities, the first step will have to be to respect human life and human dignity.

Mnikelo Ndabankulu a spokesperson for Abahlali baseMjondolo often says that "we do not need electricity, it is needed by our lives". Our settlements are not temporary. Some of us have lived our whole lives in them. Our children have grown up in them. Electricity, water and sanitation can no longer be denied to shack dwellers. The eThekweni Municipality has often told us that money is not a problem, but that the problem is land. But the problem has never been just that there is no land in the cities as we have always been told. There is land. The political problem is that that land is privately owned by companies like Tongaat-Hulett. That problem can be solved but that would require recognizing the humanity of everyone and there has never been human recognition in the first place. In all our cities being poor, living in a shack or selling in the street, is seen as a crime. Until this is fixed right the poor will always be taken as trouble makers when in fact they are excluded from positive thinking that could contribute in the building of a caring city. A city where everyone has a say and an equal opportunity in shaping and reshaping these cities into a caring cities.

One of the biggest mistakes when planning development in the cities is when the City does not provide basic services that are urgently needed by human lives. I am talking about services like the inadequate provision of water supply, not enough toilets, the no electricity provision and no proper collection of refuse as there is no access road to inner shack settlements. The result of these denied services is very serious. Without refuse removal there are rat bites and diseases. Without electricity there are shack fires. Who is to be blamed for the fact that we still live without these life saving services other than those who are meant to serve and to save the public in governments? We have seen the authorities shifting blame to the poor themselves with childish claims that the shack dwellers are dirty or lazy or drunk or that we do not want to move from filthy conditions.

People are often confused about what our movement stands for when it comes to land and housing. Today I want to suggest a list of ten demands on the political questions of land and housing that could be used to begin a discussion about a platform for a united front on land and housing. These demands came out of years of discussion in our movement. We would be very happy if you could discuss them in your own university and organizations so that we can, together, start the work of shaping a new vision for our cities and our world.

1. There must be no more homelessness and poverty.
2. Life saving basic services, including electricity, water, refuse removal and toilets, must be provided to all settlements.
3. The land on which the settlements have been founded must be transferred to the collective ownership of the people living in each settlement.
4. Settlements must be upgraded where they are where ever this is possible.
5. When people have to be relocated they must be given the option of moving to well located land.
6. Unused land must be expropriated from big corporates or rich individuals to house the poor.
7. There must be no more forced removals. People must only be relocated voluntarily.
8. Government must negotiate with the organizations that represent each settlement and not with the councilors.
9. Shack dwellers, tent dwellers or farm dwellers have a right to disagree with the government, big corporates or NGOs.
10. Shack dwellers have a right to organize themselves outside of the political parties and outside the state control.

We have asked people to speak to us, not for us. We have asked people to work with us, not for us. We have asked people to think with us, not for us. We have asked people to understand that our movement will always belong to its members and never to any NGO, political party or individual. We have asked people to understand that we need a living solidarity, a solidarity that is built in partnership with our living politics, a solidarity that is built around the real everyday suffering and struggles of our people.

I hope that this is clear.

In recent days comrades have been arrested in Mandela Park, here in Cape Town, and in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. We stand in solidarity with these comrades.

We also, together with people all over the world, stand firm with the comrades in Tahrir Square. We are far apart in distance but close in spirit. Their courage is an inspiration to us all.

I thank you all.

**S'bu. Zikode**

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