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The No Land, No House, No Vote Campaign Still on for 2009

By M'du Hlongwa

South Africa does not think of the poor. The poorest of the country are the majority but we are kept voiceless. The poorest I am talking about are the shack dwellers, the street traders, the street kids, the flat dwellers who can't afford the rent and the 'unemployed' from Cape Town to Musina in the Limpopo Province and from Richard's Bay on the Indian Ocean to Alexander Bay on the Atlantic Ocean.

We always say that the fact that we are poor in life does not make us shortminded. We know that our country is rich. There are all the minerals like gold and aluminium, the water and the forestry, the trade and the industry, the agriculture, the art and the culture and the science and the technology. The Freedom Charter said that the wealth of South Africa should benefit the people of South Africa but it is not like that.

The land of our ancestors was taken for the farms and the forests. Our grandparents and parents worked on those farms and in the mines and factories and houses. Now we are either trying to make a living selling to other poor people or we are the servants who come quietly into the nice places with our heads always down, to keep them nice, and to keep them working for the rich. Most of our time goes into just trying to survive. To get some little money, to get water, to see a doctor, to rebuild our homes after they have burnt down, to get our children into school or to try and stop evictions. We shouldn't be suffering like this.

Our shacks are flooded during heavy rains. Sometimes they are even washed away because the City won't let us build proper structures or build proper houses for us in the city where we need to be to work and study. And our shacks get burnt down in fires because the City thinks that we don't deserve to have electricity. We are always losing our belongings in these fires and sometimes loved ones, especially children and old people, are lost.

The constitution says that everyone must have adequate shelter. We don't have adequate shelter and the situation is not getting better. Now the city is trying to evict us and is leaving people homeless on the side of the road. How many lives will be destroyed before our voices are heard? How many children will drown in rivers on the way to school because 'there is no budget' to build bridges while casinos, and airports and theme parks have huge budgets?

Who will do something about the fact that the police who are supposed to protect the people are always abusing us? Is it right that they come into our houses and ill-treat us, insulting us, stealing from us and hitting us? Who will do something about the fact that even when our youth finish grade 12, they just sit at home because there is no work and because our parents can't afford to send us to university? Who will turn our economy from something that lets the rich get richer off the suffering of the poor into something that lets all the people make a better life?

The politicians have shown that they are not the answer to our suffering. The poor are just made the ladders of the politicians. The politician is an animal that hibernates. They always come out in the election season to make empty promises and then they disappear. But we know that lies are for the time being but truth is for life. These guys get into power by lying to us and then they make money. They don't work for the people who put them up there. In fact our suffering ends up working for them. Their power comes because they say that they will speak for us. That is why in Abahlali [Shack Dwellers Movement] we started to say 'Speak to us and not for us' and why we vote in our own elections for people who will live and work with us in our communities and without any hopes for making our suffering into a nice job.

We know that our country is rich. We know that it is the suffering of the poor that makes it rich. We know how we suffer and we know why we suffer. But in Abahlali we have found that even though we are a democratic organisation that gets its power from the trust of our members and have never hurt one person, the government and even some NGOs call us criminal when we speak for ourselves.

We are supposed to suffer silently so that some rich people can get rich from our work, and others can get rich having conferences about having more conferences about our suffering. But the police never come to these conferences. These conferences are just empty talking. When we have big meetings where we live, the police are even in the sky in their helicopters. These conferences demand our support but they never support our struggles. We are always on our own when the fires come, or when the police come, or when the City comes to evict us.

I want to say clearly that I am a Professor of my suffering. We are all Professors of our suffering. But in this South Africa, the poor must always be invisible. We must be invisible where we live and where we work. We must even be invisible when people are getting paid to talk about us in government or in NGOs! Everything is done in our name. We are even told that the 2010 World Cup is for us when we can't afford tickets and will be lucky to watch it on television. The money for stadiums should go for houses and water and electricity and schools and clinics. Even now shacks are being destroyed and street traders are being sorely abused by the METRO and SAPS police to make us invisible when the visitors come. This World Cup is destroying our lives. I call 2010 'The year of the curse'. South Africa is sinking. It will only be rescued if the poor take their place in the country.

But before 2010 is 2009. This is the year of the National Elections in our beloved country. When the elections come I want to see who will be queuing in that hot or rainy day to vote. I see voting as the same as throwing your last money in a flooded river. I believe that many people who voted before want to go and ask to get their X's back. Abahlali sensed this early and in the 2006 local government elections we said "No Land, No House, No Vote". We said that whenever we have voted for people who say that they will speak for us, they hibernate afterwards. We said that we would struggle for land and housing against all councillors. We said that we would make ourselves the strong poor by building our settlement committees and our movement.

We got beaten for that by the police. Some of the NGO people said that we were too stupid to understand what elections were for and that we needed 'voter education'. They need an education in the politics of the poor. They should come and live in a settlement for even just one week before they say that we are too stupid to understand our own politics. Our boycott brought the percentage of

voters in the areas where we are strong right down. In these areas the councillors can't claim to represent the poor and we have made our own organisations, which do represent the poor because they are made for the poor by the poor, much stronger than the councillors. Abahlali is much stronger than Baig and Bachu and Dimba.

I am sure the number of non-voters who choose to work very hard every day struggling in their communities instead of giving trust to politicians will be multiplied in 2009. I will personally be pushing for Abahlali and our sister organisations to take the 'No Land! No House! No Vote!' campaign into the 2009 National Elections. Oh! South Africa the rich, sinking country! There is no more need to vote for politicians in this country. I always say to people that they should vote if they ever see even one politician doing something good for the poor.

But from the local government to the provincial and national parliaments I only see politicians on gravy trains and holidays and in conferences with the rich. They are the new bosses, not the servants of the poor. They deceive us and make fools of us. They ask us for our vote and then disappear with our votes to their big houses and conferences where they plan with the rich how to make the rich richer. Their entrance fee for these houses and conferences is us. They sell us to the rich. Can anyone show one politician who has stood up to say build houses not stadiums? Can anyone show one politician who has said that Moreland's land should be for the poor who are still waiting to be a real part of South Africa and not for more shops and golf courses? Can anyone show one politician who has said that it is wrong for the police to beat us and arrest us when we want to march? Can anyone show one politician who has stood with us when the police shoot at us?

Let us keep our votes. Let us speak for ourselves where we live and work. Let us keep our power for ourselves. The poor are many. We have shown that together we can be very strong. Abahlali has now won many victories. Other organisations are working hard too. Let us continue to work to make ourselves the strong poor. Let us vote for ourselves every day.

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