

How NGOisation Provides Cover for the Murder of Shack Dwellers

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In South Africa ten members of a militant shack dwellers organisation have been assassinated in the past six years. Yet many progressive organisations have distanced themselves from these militants. Jared Sacks exposes the complicity of a mainstream NGO that could have played an important role defending the movement against these political assassinations. Sacks argues that when movements refuse co-optation, repression, including assassination, become necessary to maintain power.

On 12 June this year, at an Executive Committee meeting of the eThekweni Municipality (Durban, South Africa), the Mayor and Chief Whip made a number of veiled threats against the South African shack dweller movement Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM). The threats included references to a conspiratorial 'third hand' controlling the movement, harkening back to apartheid intelligence services patronage of the right-wing nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party in what effectively turned KwaZulu Natal (KZN) into a war zone. After vilifying the movement, these African National Congress politicians also made it clear that it was now open seasons against Abahlali: 'we will deal with them', they said.

This was not the first time the movement had been directly threatened by politicians acting in their official capacity. Ten members have now been assassinated in the past six years. As recently as 22 May 2018, hitmen murdered S'fiso Ngcobo, the chairperson in their eKukhanyeni branch. Then, on 29 May, the movement's president, S'bu Zikode, was nearly killed when he lost control of his car; mechanics later found that the vehicle was sabotaged in a clear attempt on his life. Zikode has now been forced to go underground to protect himself and his family after intelligence services warned that an attempted assassination was imminent.

One would think that civil society organisations and media outlets would come out in numbers to collectively condemn the continued targeting of Abahlali members. Indeed, given that the sector share a desire to target former president Jacob Zuma's ANC for corruption and abuse of power, verbalising support for the basic rights of the largest independent social movement in the country should not be a controversial stance. However, beyond a handful of sympathetic organisations, such as the Right 2 Know Campaign and the Social Justice Coalition, most organisations have maintained an eerie silence.

There is a long history behind progressive organisations distancing themselves from Abahlali.

However, beyond left sectarianism, there is one significant mainstream NGO that could have played an important role defending the movement against these political assassinations: Shack Dwellers International. SDI is a top-structure NGO that funds a network of community-based organisations as well as various civil-society support and finance organisations. It claims a progressive politics that employs grassroots development strategies to fight poverty and upgrade shack settlements.

It is a shock to some, then, that when KZN politicians have refused to engage with Abahlali, even threatening its leaders, they have also made a point to foreground SDI and its collection of support organisations as a reasonable alternative 'movement' of shack dwellers. In 2007, the provincial housing department ordered Abahlali members to join SDI or be arrested. Within days of refusing, beatings and arrests of members began. And on 12 June this year, while vilifying Abahlali, Mayor Zandile Gumede said that the municipality would work instead with SDI. Recent press statements by AbM have made clear that they expect violence against the movement to increase.

For its part, SDI has been more than happy to steer clear of this 'conflict'; their approach is overwhelmingly technocratic, seeing it as necessary to circumvent politics and act as a conduit for dialogue and collaboration with government. Indeed, their idea of community participation in the development process is contingent on maintaining a positive working relationship with politicians and officials, rather than mobilising the collective political power of shack dwellers and other workers through protest and resistance. It is not surprising, then, that their board of directors have often featured government officials such as former Minister of Human Settlements Lindiwe Sisulu. This is also why they're so willing to promote their partnerships with government rather than stand in solidarity with movements facing repression.

Reblocking and its discontents

Emblematic of SDI's approach is a process called 'reblocking, which it sees as a bottom-up in-situ development scheme that rearranges informal homes into a more ordered and institutionally legible formation. Reblocking, for them, is only possible with buy-in from community-based organisations. It is meant to provide significant benefits such as improved access to services, prevention of shack fires and flooding, while enabling the passage of emergency vehicles - all with minimal disturbance to residents.

However, this process has become contentious in shack settlements across the country. If reblocking is as participatory as SDI claims, why is it frustrating residents who stand to benefit from it?

In Estineni shack settlement in Tembisa near Johannesburg, hundreds of shack dwellers have been up in arms in response to the Ekurhuleni municipality's attempts at reblocking. The effects on residents has been anything but beneficial.

Happy Ndebele's home, for instance, was one of the nicer ones you might find - beautifully decorated with 6 small bedrooms, nice furniture, ceramic tiled floors and self-connected electricity. Their flush toilet stood out to me since the municipality had previously claimed that, without reblocking, plumbing was impossible to install in the settlement. Apparently, some families had gotten together and collectively installed their own sewage system.

After police and demolition crews arrived on 12 March, Ndebele's home was completely demolished and her flush toilet uprooted to make way for another family as part of the municipality's attempts at densifying the already over-crowded shack settlement. At the age of 59, she spent seven days sleeping outside in the rain until she was able to put together enough money to rebuild.

This is what reblocking often looks like to the poor; development as its antipode.

The problem with 'participation'

SDI may very well respond that Estineni is a textbook case of top-down development and the pitfalls of failing to consult the community – something that is core to their development methodology. Yet a closer analysis shows that their concept of 'participation' is itself insufficient.

Resident Themba Nxumalo, a former member of the city councillor's Ward Committee task team on upgrading the settlement, insists that consultation did in fact take place. He paints a more complicated picture of what seemed like an authentic participatory process until community members began opposing certain aspects of the reblocking. Fearing their control over the process would be undermined, the task team began to hide certain details from the community; eventually the councillor removed Nxumalo from the committee for asking too many questions. In other words, participation was only seen as a way to co-opt residents. This points to a much larger problem: SDI's role as a conduit for government power.

In February and March of this year, reblocking went ahead until protests forced the police and construction crews to withdraw. If the Estineni community had the authority to direct the development process, they would have sought alternatives to reblocking. As community leader and Abahlali member, Melidah Ngcobo put it, 'reblocking was not needed.' The problem, according to her, is the difference between 'participation' and 'ownership.' Mam'Ngcobo quipped that 'they say we are undereducated; we don't know anything about civilisation.' The rise of a small Abahlali baseMjondolo branch in Estineni is indicative of resident's refusal to participate in the 'development game' any longer.

Providing a cover for repression

The link might seem tenuous at first; what could SDI possibly have to do with the assassination of Abahlali members over the past ten years? The organisation certainly is not directly involved in attacks on the movement. It even released a press statement in 2009 condemning the armed gangs which attacked the movement in Kennedy Road (though they have kept quiet since then). So, they are unlikely to approve of the repression AbM continues to face.

Rather, it is in the role that SDI plays as a more amenable and amenable alternative to Abahlali, that we can comprehend its role in exonerating government repression. This is linked to a trend under neoliberal capitalism which social theorists refer to as the *NGOization* of social movement struggles.

Over the years, the NGO has worked to co-opt communities into a top-down planning process using strategies such as reblocking; a process which has divided communities which might otherwise be sympathetic to Abahlali's more antagonistic method of resistance. SDI has therefore helped isolate the movement both at the grassroots level as well as amongst potential supporters in civil society. This is made manifest in their recent well-publicised memorandum of understanding with the eThekweni municipality that has explicitly excluded Abahlali.

But just as significantly, SDI also allows politicians and officials to make a binary distinction between good and bad communities – those with whom they can engage versus those that they accuse of being unreasonable, uncivil, and 'against development.' Shack dwellers aligned to SDI are then positioned against those encumbered by retrogressive and even manipulative leaders that want to make the city 'ungovernable.' Within this theoretical framework shack dwellers become the new colonised population: violent, barbaric and irrational in the case of Abahlali, and the naive noble savage in the case of those affiliated to SDI.

Any resistance is unjustifiable because SDI – through ostensibly grassroots development strategies

such as reblocking - corroborates the government's argument that a reasonable, democratic, and participatory approach is realisable.

The very emergence of Abahlali as an uncivil political actor therefore constitutes what Lewis Gordon calls an illicit appearance; within this binary worldview, they are deemed violent, immediately inviting (and justifying) a belligerent counter-response. This reply takes the form of authoritative means of repression: the use of demolition crews, armed private security and police repression - as in the case of Estineni.

However, direct repression is rarely sufficient because it tends to have the effect of uniting grassroots structures; hence it becomes necessary to also divide communities through violent populist appeals as well targeted hits on community leaders. In the case of Abahlali we have seen the former in the tribalisation of housing delivery that led to the 2009 attack on the movement in Kennedy Road. The latter has taken the form of political assassinations of movement leaders, such as S'fiso Ngcobo, Thuli Ndlovu, Nkululeko Gwala, and Sibonelo Mpeku.

In other words, when movements refuse co-optation, repression through various para-state means, including assassination, become necessary to maintain power. It is precisely this role of 'good shack dwellers' that SDI aims to inculcate on the one hand which justifies such violent responses on the other.

In post-Apartheid South Africa, Frantz Fanon's colonial city has been redefined. When Mam'Ngcobo asserts that there 'is no freedom in South Africa for the shack dwellers', she is describing a bifurcated city that corresponds to this civil/uncivil binary. Here, the rule of law applies only to a portion of the population. SDI's role here is to co-opt the 'noble' shack dwellers into believing they can operate within the conventions of civil society to which they have historically been excluded. In the process, their potential threat to the status quo is removed while their more subversive counterparts are delegitimised and therefore vulnerable to attack.

Yet, people like Ngcobo realise that they, as a subaltern underclass, are subjugated according to different rules of existence because of the very way in which society is structured. Because they are simultaneously marginalised while being subject to extra-legal means of repression, they have been forced to spurn the disciplinary power of NGOs like SDI and employ more uncivil means of resistance.

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