



Diakonia Council of Churches

**ECONOMIC JUSTICE LECTURE**  
**SPEAKER: MR SBU ZIKODE, CHAIRPERSON OF ABAHLALI**  
**BASEMJONDOLO**

**DELIVERED AT DIAKONIA CENTRE ON THURSDAY 28 AUGUST, 2008**

**“The Burning Issue of Land and Housing”**

I have been asked to speak on the burning issues of land and housing. 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 Diakonia Council of Churches for this platform.

The churches have rallied to our struggle in difficult times – after fires, after arrests, after beatings. We know about the role that the churches have played in Brazil 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 and tonight I want to say that we wish him a quick and full recovery from his illness.

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 Sun Coast. 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.

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 to keep us quiet in the name of a future revolution that does not come. We do not

allow the NGOs 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 that place in the courts. Sometimes we take it on the radio. Tonight we take it here. Our politics starts from the places we have taken. We call it a living politics 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 anymore but we keep thinking together. Sometimes a settlement stays strong. Sometimes a settlement fails to stay strong. But we keep going forward together.

Tonight we need to talk about the politics of land. We need to talk about the politics of housing.

We need to talk about the politics of fire. We need to talk about the politics of toilets. We need to talk about the politics of xenophobia and the politics of rape.

To think about all this we must start with where we come from.

It has become clear to us that when ever 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. 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 once they are finished building for the attraction of foreign investment. It is the same poor people that wash and iron for the rich who have live in shacks where it is very difficult to wash and iron their 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.

This is wrong. We need democratic cities. We need fair cities. We need welcoming cities. We need cities for all.

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 or men. This new togetherness must also understand that the world, what God has given to us all, must be shared by us all.

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 when ever we voice out our concerns. Tonight we remember Mthokozisi Nkwanyana, a student and a shack dweller, who was killed by the police in a student protest on Thursday last week. The system talks a lot about democracy, but does not practice democracy. The system talks more about all the rights, gender equality and justice but does not make any of this real. 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. Grass root 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 can not 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.

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 human 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's* 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 *jondolos*. This is not a matter for the police and the NIA. The reason for this is not that shack dwellers can not 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 were to be serious and respecting of those that they call 'beneficiaries'.

It is very sad that some business men, 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 eThekweni 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, Shannon Drive, Pema Ridge, and Arnett Drive just to mention a few. But while we were winning an important victory in the High Court against evictions in Arnett Drive on Tuesday the Municipality was outside illegally demolishing shacks in Siyanda at the very same time! If already the law is not respected by the authorities then it is difficult to imagine how other new laws like the very notorious KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Slums Act will be used.

It is very sad that some academics and NGOs continue to think that it is their natural right to dominate instead of to support the struggles of the poor. We

have kept our silence for years but now we must say that it is clear that at the Centre for Civil Society the work of the intellectual is to determine our intelligence by trying to undermine our intelligence. They try to buy individuals, intimidate our comrades and tell the worst lies to try and show that we are too stupid to think our own struggles. They fail to understand that we are poor, not stupid. This is their politics.

The shack dwellers believe that land and housing in the cities will bring about the 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. For this City 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 this city into a caring one.

One of the biggest mistakes when planning development in the city 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 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 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 that we do not want to move from filthy conditions. They say in the newspaper that "Zikode must educate his people", as if people living in shacks are stupid and as if they all belong to one ordinary man like Zikode. I want to make it very clear that we have built a democratic politics and that our settlements are far too well organized to be controlled or thought by one man like Zikode. Zikode has his own kids to educate like any other responsible parent who cares about the future of their children. But Zikode does not educate the people who elected him to speak when them and then for them. In fact every day Zikode is educated by the suffering and the courage and the intelligence of the people that elected him. Therefore it is very disrespectful to say that elderly people must be educated to light paraffin stoves or light

candles. The solution to fires is not education. The solution to fires is that electricity must be provided in all settlements. Electricity is not a luxury. It is needed to save lives. We cannot compromise on this point. I hope that tonight we can all agree on the need for the settlements to be electrified.

Abahlali's concerns over the shack fires that have terrorized our communities have caused this Movement to call upon all shack settlements to discuss this matter openly and to allow every shack settlement to have a say on what they think could be a solution. We have called a city summit on shack fires that will include all those who care about the lives of our people, be it the municipal authorities, progressive NGOs, churches, individuals etc. We believe that all of what is seen to be problems associated with the shack dwellers can be resolved by and with shack dwellers themselves. Thus Abahlali believes that the issue of land and housing is not just the issue for the technical people and for the government but of all who are meant to benefit from it.

The shack fire summit will be held on Monday 22 September. The day before, Sunday 21 September, we will hold a mass prayer for all the shack dwellers who have died in the fires.

People are often confused about what our movement stands for when it comes to land and housing. Tonight I want to suggest a list of ten demands on the burning 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 come out of years of discussion in our movement. We would be very happy if you could discuss them in your own organizations so that we can, together, start the work of shaping a new vision for our cities.

1. There must be no more evictions.
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. Land must be expropriated from Tongaat-Hullet 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 have a right to disagree with the government.
10. Shack dwellers have a right to organize themselves outside of the political parties.

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 or political party. 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 thank Diakonia for this invitation to speak. I thank the churches for their brave support during difficult times in our struggle. I invite everyone here to work to build a partnership for a democratic city together with us and with all democratic organizations of the poor. I invite you all to our summit on shack fires. Maybe we can start there. Let us see.