



LEARNING HUBS



ACT UBUMBANO

Learning Note #2

Abahlali baseMjondolo & Church Land Project:

Solidarity - Wind beneath activists' wings

08 July 2020

“ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights enshrined the right to adequate housing as well as protection from forced evictions. In mid-May of this year, the United Nation Habitat set out a policy statement on evictions and relocation during Covid-19 urging “Member States and governments at all levels to stop all relocations and evictions at this time.”

‘Abahlali is where it is because of the people who’ve walked the journey with us’

We have a duty to make sure that social justice flourishes in this country... none of us can do this on our own... [it’s] a universal challenge that obligates all of us’

Empathy invites our humanity, our conscience to ‘wake up’. Solidarity is not an academic exercise. It’s a human endeavour to [confront] injustice [and] if we are to [confront injustice] there is no place for silence in our society’

Background

Despite the above statement, communities all over South Africa, particularly in informal settlements, have been targeted for evictions. Church Land Programme (CLP), in solidarity and partnership with Abahlali baseMjondolo, ran a campaign to make sure that the violations being experienced by community members in three informal settlements in the eThekweni municipality were made visible nationally and globally.

In response to calls by Abahlali, CLP decided to conduct research into to the injustices shack dwellers were suffering at the hands of the government. This took the form of desk-top research, direct interviews, and visits to the settlements for 'on the-ground fact-checking'. CLP also started a campaign to put pressure on the City of eThekweni to stop these illegal evictions and demolitions of people's homes. They mobilised other institutions in South Africa and abroad, including academia and solidarity partners of Abahlali in countries like Ireland, the USA and England. They issued statements against the city and started a petition that has since been signed by more than 5000 people.

Abahlali were already making calls to end the illegal evictions and demolition of people's homes when CLP began their solidarity work, and they communicated with each other throughout the campaign. The final report has been handed over to the leadership of Abahlali and has become a useful tool in their ongoing work of defending their rights and livelihoods.

Insights gained

'We are not the leaders of struggle... we do not have the sleepless nights... so we have to be led by the needs and experience of those experiencing the challenge...'

Solidarity practice demands that in whatever action that is taken, civil society organisations (CSOs) shine the light on the work that the activists are doing and not that of the CSO. Their role is to amplify the ‘unrecognised’ voices of activists who are already making demands to liberate themselves and who will continue to engage in resistance long after the organisation is gone. CSOs should be careful to ensure that their actions do not undermine the power and visibility of the activist community, and inadvertently causing further harm to those they purport to support.

‘You learn over time how to walk with formations of the poor... there are no ready-made products’

There is no formula on how to go about doing solidarity work. What is needed from both the activists and the CSO is maturity and humility to know that no one has all the answers. There needs to be preparedness to work with others based on values of respect, trust, honesty, mutual benefit, sharing of skills and resources. This takes time and often involves conflict and disagreement, but it is only through an authentic, honest, and committed journey of relationship building that participants develop strong and healthy ways of working together.

‘Movements have to be really clear about what solidarity should look like [for them]’

Solidarity action is an active process that requires that all parties have agency. In addition to knowing what you want, it is equally important that the needs and expectations of the partner be respected. Solidarity is built on mutual trust, respect and engagement.

‘[Your work is as] an amplifier, same voices same people, but louder and in more places’

Working in solidarity requires a high level of discipline from CSOs to not take centre stage and represent the struggles of others. The discipline extends to maintaining the integrity of the relationship, doing the hard things

that make them accountable and in turn holds others accountable for their actions. Solidarity organisations should follow the lead of the activists, fighting the temptation to speak on their behalf and always acting with integrity - calling out issues when these arise and being willing to be called out themselves.

‘Both parties need to be humble... it needs great maturity and humility and to be unselfish [acknowledging] that we can only create change along with others’

Solidarity calls for the courage and honesty for each participant in the relationship to speak out about and defend their positions, beliefs, strategies and tactics. It requires that the parties sometimes act independently, but always in coordination. It is important that the parties maintain their independent identities and where necessary disengage when their values and ideology diverge.

‘We should return solidarity to others who need it, not just receive ‘solidarity’ welfare’

We have to be conscious of the potential binaries that govern our work – that one group will always be in need of solidarity while the other, more powerful act in solidarity. At various points we all have some power to contribute towards the struggles of others and we should always be willing to use our power, however little it might be, in support of social justice struggles everywhere.

‘Observe a ‘do no harm’ principle [because] it is important that what we do does not cause additional challenges for communities’

Communication and agreement on strategy and action is important to make sure that the actions we take, however well meaning, do not have unintended, negative consequences. We must know and trust our collaborators and work together, focussing all our energy on achieving justice and human dignity while also making sure that our actions do not have negative consequences for others.

Questions for our practice

- Do we take the time to build strong, honest relationships or do we simply follow the project timelines? Do we consult properly, or do we merely confirm our own biases in these relationships? Are we willing to be led instead of leading?
- How do we show solidarity in ways that will not further undermine the work that the activists are already involved in, especially when we ourselves have to live with the consequences of the actions taken?
- What are other ways of showing solidarity in our current context of CSOs struggling with inadequate resources? How do we support others' struggles now? How could we support others' struggles in the future?
- How do we campaign on issues affecting communities without taking centre stage? How do we resist the temptation to engage those in power 'on behalf of' rather than facilitate the direct engagement of affected community members?
- What is our role in relation to the State? Can and should we act in solidarity with the State at times? How do we balance our role as watchdog and enabler?
- Are we being creative enough in the way we build our resistance? The world around us is changing rapidly. Are there new strategies and tactics we should be developing?

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