Top-Down Advocacy as an Antithesis of Emancipatory Politics: A Brief Review of the Politics of Abahlali baseMjondolo

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Abstract

This chapter critically views top-down social and political advocacy as a vehicle used or encouraged by the powerful to unwittingly depoliticize any effort by the poor to emancipate themselves. Thus, established advocacy outside the locale of those it seeks to emancipate, becomes 'an erroneous' helping hand, which keeps the poor in their 'place' while an oppressive status quo remains untouched. Using Marxist terminology, advocacy on behalf of the poor without them being principal actors for their own emancipation, becomes the *opium of the poor*. For this reason, this paper argues that an emancipatory perspective does not spare non-state actors and agencies such as individuals or faith-based organisations that seem 'innocent' because, without deferring to the leading role of those they seek to help, their advocacy is inherently top-down and works well within an established order. By offering top-down intervention to the poor, advocacy groups occlude the incentive for agency on the part of the poor. In the effort of unmasking the hypocrisy of 'advocacy generosity', this chapter looks at the thinking and politics of the shack-dwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, near Durban, South Africa. This movement demonstrates that if the goal of political, social and economic activism is to emancipate the poor in society, then the poor should be integral participants in such activism and advocacy, rather than merely represented by others.

Keywords: Socio-political advocacy, Emancipatory politics, Living politics, Abahlali baseMjondolo

Introduction

Once advocacy and activism on behalf of the poor are normalised as permanent constitutive elements of the (hegemonic) status quo, they become impediments to the sustainable development of the grassroots and impoverished communities. This article presents how one grassroots social movement (which consists of shack-dwellers), through its day-to-day political thinking, challenges acts of advocacy and activism that (directly or indirectly) seek to support the very structures that keep low-income communities in continuous impoverishment. The article is divided into four sections. The first section will focus on socio-political activism and advocacy. The second and third will look at emancipatory politics and seek to show that this type of politics is synonymous with what Abahlali baseMjondolo (henceforth simply called Abahlali) calls 'living politics', despite current challenges in the movement. The fourth section will focus on Top-down Advocacy, the emancipatory politics of Abahlali baseMjondolo, and ongoing challengesIt is important from the onset to highlight that the information regarding Abahlali was not just obtained from text but also from one focus group discussion that we conducted in 2017.

Socio-political Advocacy

Social and political activism and advocacy are important in understanding how power politics play out in society, at the state, non-state and subnational levels, especially in contexts such as South Africa that have glaring inequalities. Social and political advocates come in various forms (ranging from individuals to non-governmental organisations [NGOs] including faith-based organisations) with various areas of emphasis, from seeking economic and political reform to the pursuit of social justice (Lee, Smith & Henry 2013:70). Socio-political advocates, such as those discussed in this article, have become more active in seeking to dismantle structural impediments that keep the impoverished in their condition.

Faith-based organizations usually combine activism with humanitarianism. Such advocacy is usually altruistic and done for benign purposes. The manner of social engagement, also usually takes a relatively pacifist and compromising approach, i.e., one that is not militant when it comes to protesting against injustice (Pommier 2011; Byrstorm 2014:406). This puts actors who are not militant at variance with more militant disadvantaged groups, whose

methods of protest occasionally move into what they see as 'redemptive' forms of violence.

Africa's struggle with poverty, disease and armed conflict have become Sisyphean, to the extent that advocacy and humanitarian intervention have become a need. While the moral intent of advocacy and humanitarianism in general cannot be impugned, the possibility that its specific manifestations or methods can be self-serving cannot be ignored, either. Some advocacy groups are seen by governments primarily as political instruments that promote certain political agendas. In Africa, non-state activism, especially when it caters to non-state actors, can be seen by governments as interference in internal affairs. However, even when it caters to the impoverished and marginalized, it fails to achieve longstanding positive results if its approach does not consider the primacy of the people and communities it seeks to support. This chapter will illustrate how those in Abahlali strives to have their context as the defining and most prominent feature of their advocacy.

While African governments have been willing recipients of monetary aid and food relief, for example, they look askance at humanitarian advocacy when it is aimed at citizens who are perceived as victims of their governments. Uganda, for example, lashed out at what described as donor meddling when foreign donors looked askance at Uganda's multiparty pretences and Museveni's unwillingness to engage the Lord's Resistance Army in negotiations rather than force (Wallis 2005). This is a result of a conflation of advocacy with alleged political activism that could radicalize the marginalized against their governments. By providing material relief and intangible help in the form of advice on legal entitlements, for example, advocacy groups can politicize their interventions in ways that cause governments to accuse them of having a political agenda. If advocacy groups offering help to marginalized groups come from foreign (for example, Western) countries, governments are likely to suspect countries from which such groups come of politicizing interference. Despite this, external aid, irrespective of its agency, can be of help to 'citizens of the target state from flagrant violation of their fundamental human rights usually by agents of the state' (Ayoob 2002:81). Abahlali considers itself as victim of the South African government's failure to cater for the historically disadvantaged citizenry. In this case, it is easy to defend individuals and agencies that offer help. However, as the chapter will reiterate, this help sometimes takes away the agency that the disadvantaged need to emancipate themselves. Advocacy that comes as tutelage to disadvantaged communities misses the

target for emancipation and unwittingly perpetuates the same power politics it seeks to dismantle between the poor and those who keep them in that state.

Alongside the expectation of Western (or other foreign) involvement in African affairs is the delicate line of where and when outside involvement, in both tangible and intangible ways, could continue to be seen as humanitarian or morph into disruptive intervention or interference. The colonial 'toga' is often ascribed to Western intervention, even to non-state actors from the West, when African governments are uncomfortable with it, irrespective of whether or not it could be to the advantage of ordinary African citizens. This paper uses the analogizes Western involvement in African affairs to the involvement of advocacy groups in the affairs of marginalized and impoverished communities in Africa. The following section of the article probes the concept of emancipatory politics and why it is germane for the current study. The main difference between what has been said thus far and what ensues is that while many traditional forms of advocacy seem to stem from grand narratives, pushed by the developed world, emancipatory politics localizes agency and liberation; the affected masses are the chief architects of the change they seek to engender in their communities, and other powers may only supplement the activism that is already available.

Emancipatory Politics

The failure of institutional or representative politics in Africa has prompted scholars like Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (as early as 1994) to proclaim African politics as facing an insurmountable crisis. This crisis can be traced to the adoption of 'dominant historical modes of politics which have organised political processes since the nineteenth century' (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994:249). The reason for giving this brief historical background of the failure of institutional politics is that he wants to propose a political route that he deems operative, most possibly efficient, revolutionary or progressive. This is a brand of politics that does not serve the masses but one in which the masses are the agents. Such people-driven politics he calls emancipatory politics. It is a politics 'rooted in the fundamental masses of the people – workers and the poor peasants – is no longer incarnated by existing dominant historical modes of politics' (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994:249).

Paulo Freire (1970) understands emancipatory politics as cultural action developed in opposition to the elites that wield power. Such an action

'constitutes the means whereby the oppressed acquire consciousness of themselves as a political force' (Mayo 1995:363). Frantz Fanon (1963) blames the failure of the colonial struggle on the nature of politics which excluded the people/ masses and sought to think and work on their behalf. Fanon was critical of the domestication of the masses because he believed that their full involvement was tantamount to a true emancipatory victory over colonial hegemony. Fanon (1963:155–156, 159) argues that:

> In Algeria, we have realized that the masses are equal to the problems which confront them. In an under-developed country, experience proves that the important thing is not that three hundred people form a plan and decide upon carrying it out, but that the whole people plan and decide even if it takes them twice the time taken up by explaining, the time 'lost' in treating the workers as a human being, will be caught up in the execution of the plan. People must know where they are going and why … (because) everything depends on them; … if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and … if we go forward it is due to them too, that there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take the responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people.

Emancipatory politics is not imposed from outside, but it is inherently a constitutive product of people's real experiences. It is an inherent response which people exhibit when confronted by any form of injustice or an attitude that undermines their humanity. An emphasis on the agency of the people in their emancipation can be witnessed in the writings of Celestin Monga (1994) and Achille Mbembe (1992) among others. Theorists like Monga (1994) assert that there has always been an element of protest against unfair practices exercised by the dominant groups over the masses in African indigenous communities. Monga's main argument is that there has been always a quest for freedom in Africa which is deeply embedded in the grassroots. The driving force behind this quest is 'anger'. People get angry when they are systematically oppressed; they develop ways to escape repression, necessitated by the need for an inclusive democratic process. Inasmuch as Monga focuses on Africa, protests against injustice are not confined to Africa; they are noticeable in other regions where inequality is present. John Holloway (2010) uses the

word 'scream' to describe the masses' response to neoliberal capitalism around the world. Ted Robert Gurr (1970) tries to explain the underlying factors behind the 'anger' (as highlighted by Monga) or the 'scream' (as pointed out by Holloway). He uses the term 'relative deprivation' as having the potential 'for action'. This understanding is useful for conceiving how frustration can make individuals participate in political protest. According to Gurr, the relationship between deprivation and action serves as the fundamental basis for understanding civil strife, where deprivation is proportional to discontent.

James C. Scott (1990) shows that oppression is never tolerated and the will to 'scream' or express 'anger' can never be suppressed. He uses the word 'infrapolitics' of the subordinate group, by which he means 'a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance which dare not speak in their own name' (Scott 1990:19). Infrapolitics is the social space where the oppressed develop their own discourse and their own norms. This is the place where the forbidden is permissible. It is a safe space for the subordinate, but an uncomfortable domain for those who dominate. Bringing this back to Africa, Mbembe (1992:6) shows how this kind of 'infrapolitics' played itself out in the way the people of Togo identified the French as the 'sound of faecal matter dropping into the sceptic tank'. Instead of directly confronting the oppressor, the oppressed used language in the form of imagery of pervasive filth to challenge colonial hegemony.

One of the most important current theorists of emancipatory politics is Michael Neocosmos, who argues that emancipatory politics is, first and foremostly, about thought. He concludes that 'politics is thought, thought is real and people think' (Neocosmos 2016:26). Central to this politics is an emphasis on the ability of the people to think for themselves, and hence, the agency of the people is of paramount importance in their quest for emancipation. People are thus always capable of thinking beyond the status quo and imagining a world other than the one that they are experiencing. According to Neocosmos, everyone thinks, although their thinking may not be political thought. By contrast, emancipatory political thought is always collective, not individual. It is the thinking of people, together; it is also always practical; it is about acting in the world. Thus, emancipatory politics is collective thought practice but, critically, it is the collective thought practice of the universal. This brand of emancipation is not limited to those who advocate it; but is rather seen as a better way of living that everyone deserves. It can be better understood within the framework of prefigurative politics (Tornberg 2021:

83). In current hegemonic understandings, politics is considered the representtation of different interests, identities or markers, for example, ethnicity, sex, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, and so on. However, these are modes of exclusive politics. In contrast, to continue with Neocosmos' view, 'there exists, at certain times in certain sites, a politics beyond interests and … this politics is the core idea behind a politics of emancipation, as emancipation is always "for all", and never for "some"' (Neocosmos 2016:22). Thus, emancipatory politics transcends the interests of either a group or a segment of the population and it rests on the radical assumption that there is only one human race, an important point that will be illustrated later.

Emancipatory politics might seem abstract and unfeasible because of the dominance of conventional liberal politics, including interest group politics noted above, which seems to be the only option possible. Unfortunately, the prevalence of emancipatory acts that we witness every day goes unnoticed, because the *status quo* usually governs our definition of politics. As expressed earlier, these acts are expressed daily through 'anger' or 'screams' of the oppressed. This 'anger' or 'screams' are not just a mere emotional expression but a genuine manifestation of counter-hegemonic acts. These acts are not meant only to express the lack of material goods but an uncompromising quest for human dignity. They are not asking for unsustainable handouts that make them more dependent, but for an egalitarian world, where institution-driven advocacy is not the overriding factor for the impoverished and marginalised. Emancipatory politics does not deny the need for material goods which the poor really need, but it further seeks to create a world where deprivation has no place. It is important to note that the deprivation of materiality is intimately related to that of one's dignity. The expansion of humanitarianism in a neoliberal world where resources are in abundance is a clear sign that something is wrong. The next section will highlight emancipatory acts in post-apartheid South Africa, with a specific focus on Abahlali. This group will give us a better insight into what poor people really want through their politics and philosophy.

Abahlali baseMjondolo: Emancipatory Politics as Living Politics

Abahlali is a South African shack-dwellers' movement. The movement was founded out of people's 'anger' or 'scream' due to the way the government

took them and their grievances for granted. It consists of people who have tried to be in the mainstream of economic activities but were always relegated to the economic, political and social margins by longstanding inequalities. Some of them come from rural areas looking for greener pastures and found themselves homeless and in deplorable conditions. Early in 2005, they decided to block Kennedy Road, which passes through their shack settlement to Durban. This became the first known widely written about protest the social movement embarked upon (Pithouse 2006). After this event this social movement started to be an organized force with a formidable philosophy and politics, which haunted top-down structures like the government and some NGOs.

Kerry Ryan Chance (2018) points out that it was in 2014 that Abahlali consolidated themselves as a militant group. She further highlights that this was in response to the emergence of leftist parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). What distinguishes Abahlali is that they do not subscribe to identitarian militancy espoused by organisations such as the EFF. Moreover, they also do not seek to capture state power. Today Abahlali stands as one of the biggest shack-dwellers' organisations in South Africa. The organisation also has branches in both Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town.

The movement has been involved in many activities. One of its major demands is the prioritization of the social value of land against its commercial value (Tshabalala 2014). Social value is people-centred, while the latter in most cases serves capitalist endeavours. Abahlali is prominently known for campaigning against land evictions and public housing. In addition, it is also known for refusing to be affiliated with any political parties, and it even boycotts elections. In order to frustrate the ruling party (which it considers as undermining its existence? and humanity), the organisation at one point supported the opposition (Tshabalala 2014), the Democratic Alliance (DA). This support was not permanent, but rather a temporary act calculated to threaten the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which seemed to be impervious to the plight of shack-dwellers (Tshabalala 2014). The movement described its way of doing things as entirely based on a kind of homemade politics accessible to everyone (Pithouse 2006). Such politics is not limited to what the poor think of their situation but in the actions that are informed by their everyday experiences. This people's politics was derived not from theories or books but from people's existential experiences and circumstances. Sbu Zikode, the leader of Abahlali, commenting in the foreword of Gibson's book, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa* (2011: v) emphasizes,

> we did not know about Paulo Freire or Fanon when we began our struggle. This we learnt on the way .... Every struggle must begin at the point where the people who have decided to rebel find themselves, with the resources that they have, on the basis of the experiences that they have had, in the face of limits and dangers they encounter and with the understanding that they have.

Zikode describes their politics as a force that enables the poor to move out of the places where oppression has assigned them. By contrast he describes conventional, state or institutional politics as 'dead politics', because it is designed to control the poor and make them be satisfied with their predicament (CLP 2013). For him, Abahlali's politics is a politics from below. He calls such a politics living politics, which is a politics for 'everyday life, thinking, language and struggle of the people – it is a politics of dignity. And it is grounded on what is happening and what needs to happen to achieve real change in the world' (CLP 2013:5). Chance (2018) describes living politics in relation to the way the state brutalises those who follow such politics. He also adds that such a politics is not confined to one race but cuts across races.

Chance's book, *Living Politics in South Africa's Urban Shacklands,* argues that living politics is fundamentally based on the actual language and humanity of poor people as well as their everyday practices and interactions with the state agents in South Africa's shack settlements. Living politics constitutes a collective group of poor people whose identity is beyond racial categorisation and classifications (Chance 2018). These are people whose lives and struggles are defined by their everyday activities. The state considers militant protests and unplanned erections of housing structures by shack dwellers to be illegal. To the shack dwellers, however, these actions are seen as necessary for desperate people who demand to be heard by the state. Lack of unemployment compels job-seeking citizens to erect shacks close to urban areas in search of employment opportunities.

Living politics has two main aspects, namely: it is fundamentally based on the experience of the poor, as highlighted earlier, and its thinking is collective. These two elements strongly resonate with Neocosmos' understanding of emancipatory politics and reflect emancipatory acts highlighted by Mbembe, Monga and others. As highlighted by the former, this politics is essentially shaped by the experiences of the people. Again, it begins not with theory, but is instead experientially grounded. It is important to note that living

politics is not against theory, as the organisation is acquainted with many theoretical frameworks. What theory does, however, is not to determine the organisation's politics, but rather to confirm what its people experience daily.

The second element of living politics is that it takes place within a strictly democratic space. People's politics, like living politics, differs from party politics in that the latter is top-down and works from a professional representation model. The former (living politics), on the other hand, refuses representation but opts for popular democracy, which defies financial rewards (Selmeczi 2010). Zikode highlighted that:

> The power of our organising comes when we reject this individualist understanding of liberation and accept collective responsibility for society, from the level of families, to neighbourhood, cities and the entire society. A progressive, democratic and just society in which everyone can participate in decision making and in which the land and wealth are shared cannot be built by individual endeavour …. When organising in Abahlali we do not encourage individual membership. In order to encourage the culture of collectivity, Abahlali reminds all its members of the importance of their families and neighbourhoods (Gibson 2011: vii-viii).

Abahlali is clear that their goal is not limited to land and housing, but they further seek respect and dignity because houses and land can be used to silence and keep them comfortable in oppressive places. When they blocked Kennedy Road, they were not just doing this to get houses, but they realised that the government's listening ear is more inclined to the needs of the rich and powerful than the genuine needs of the poor. This selective attitude reveals that the poor do not matter and their needs can be met on condition that they 'behave' in line with the dictates of the status quo, a status quo that has not substantially changed longstanding social and economic inequalities, and seeks to speak on behalf of the marginalised rather than allow their voice to dictate how they want to overcome persistent marginalisation. Abahlali's protests cannot be reduced to service delivery, but to the quest for human respect and dignity.

What is important to Abahlali is empowerment and sustainable livelihood of the poor. As a result, when offered help, they usually question the underlying implications of such help. The movement has realised that the

nature of help that has been given to them was designed to keep them rooted to their deplorable conditions. In a focus-group discussion that was conducted with them in March 2018, they expressed how manipulative not only political parties are, but NGOs as well. According to them, some of these organisations offer sponsorship in order to control them and their activities. For them, the poor are a means for the privileged to get what they want. They expressed the concern that these organisations are not concerned about the wellbeing of poor communities, but that they use communities to enhance their images. The poor become merely a steppingstone towards their anticipated goals. Some NGOs seek to neutralise the struggle by using money to control the activities of grassroots organisations:

> We used to work with a certain NGO before. They had the perception that the movement, they have to report to them all, they wanted to tell us what to do, and they have specific ideas on how we conduct ourselves, and whenever we address some of the issues. They also wanted to be in control of the movement (AbM[1] focus group, 2017).

In support of what the Abahlali focus group said, literature has also shown the way NGOs, especially international ones, operate. A magazine called BINGOS[2], *The Big Charity Bonanza*, explores the works of charity international NGOs. In the magazine, Ransom (2005) sees these powerful NGOs as having an escapable effect of undermining agency of the people who are supposed to benefit from them. He further points out that these NGOs are powerful, self-righteous institutions, whose revenues and assets run into hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars. With so much economic influence, Ransom (2005) tries to show that BINGOS are indirectly major players on the political stage. Moreover, for him, instead of being 'charitable' they can actually promote starvation. In other words, these NGOs are playing an ambulance role, bandaging the wounds instead of challenging and precluding the chief causes of disasters.

Ransom (2005) talks about people being force-fed 'the poisonous brew of free market economics and fake democracy that is concocted by corporate globalisation and neoliberal politics. The brew is homemade in the

[1] Abahlali baseMjondolo is abbreviated as AbM.

[2] BINGOS means Big International Non-Governmental Organisations.

countries, where almost all BINGOS live'. Organisations that usually buy into neo-liberal orthodoxy sponsor such ideas among the people they seek to 'help', irrespective of their different circumstances (Ransom 2005:5). Ransom argues that NGOs can be complicit in maintaining established inequalities between political and socio-economic institutions and the marginalised, whether consciously or unconsciously. He highlights the fact that even if NGOs claim to be working outside the state, the state also wields some influence over them, and/or they share the logic of state politics.

Nevertheless, the focus group discussions that we had with Abahlali revealed that they are open to partnership with other organisations; moreover, they do not shy away from support if these organisations respect them as thinking beings rather than as a means to an end. They even indicated that they work closely with certain NGOs, especially the Church Land Programme (CLP). The CLP respects Abahlali as an independent organisation whose thinking is a brainchild of the shack-dwellers. Apart from CLP, other organisations (such as KZNCC and CCS) and the government seek either to interfere with their struggle or to neutralise it. During the focus-group discussions with members of Abahlali, they expressed how CLP was genuinely supportive as follows:

> CLP was not that kind of organisation that wanted to impose things to us, but they came to us to support …. Because whenever we are facing challenges, we are asking for their support; they would be there even physically, not just financial support. They come to our struggles. If we are going to court, they used to be there. CLP does not control what we do. But they always support our decisions (AbM 2017).

As has been shown, Abahlali's politics is inseparable from emancipatory politics as articulated by Neocosmos above. This is so because Abahlali's politics is a product of the people's thinking and their experiences. It does not subscribe to individualism but is a collective product of the people. Lastly and more importantly, this politics is universal. What this means is that it does not seek to emancipate merely those who are fighting oppression, but seeks a free humanity. This was demonstrated by Abahlali in its statement against the 2008 xenophobic attacks, in which it condemned those South African poor communities that attacked foreigners. Part of the statement that

the movement presented read:

> There is only one race. Our struggle and every struggle is to put the human being at the centre of society, starting with the worst off. An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal wherever they may find themselves. If you live in the settlement you are a neighbour and a comrade in that settlement. We condemn the attacks, the beatings, rape and murder in Johannesburg (subjected) on people born in other countries. We will fight left and right to ensure that this does not happen here in KwaZulu-Natal … Let's us be clear, neither poverty nor oppression justifies one poor person turning on another. A poor man who turns on his wife or a poor family that turns on their neighbour must be opposed, stopped and brought to justice (AbM 2008).

The following section discusses how emancipatory politics, in the form of living politics, is an antithesis of top-down advocacy on behalf of the marginalised.

Top-down Advocacy, the Emancipatory Politics of Abahlali baseMjondolo, and Ongoing Challenges

Abahlali operates in a South Africa that is highly capitalised, to the detriment of those on the economic fringes of society. To address past injustices, the South African government embarked on an extensive social welfare system that was ideally pro-poor. However, just as international humanitarianism could be used as a tool to further the preferences of those sponsoring it, locally bred intervention, driven by certain interest groups, carries the potential to do the same. Interest groups advocating issues that specifically pertain to their mission can run the risk of pushing their agendas which, without insight and direction from those they want to support, might be at variance with a people-driven, bottom-up, emancipatory politics.

It is commendable that Abahlali is demanding more than just land and other material provisions which the state can dispense. At the heart of their activism resides a desire to claim 'the dignity of the poor in South Africa' as Bandile Mdlalose (2014:346), the former General Secretary of the movement puts it. Socio-political activists who want to help in this respect will thus be

more appealing to Abahlali, though such activists should not lose sight of the fact that Abahlali comprises the principal actors. The CLP has been hailed by Abahlali because of its acknowledgement of the primacy of Abahlali's activism in agitating for a better life. The movement's diplomatic victory after a legal battle with government over resettlements and eradication of slums, demonstrated just how social movements, while largely operating from established systems, can nevertheless use established structures, in this case the courts, to reinforce their activism (Huchzermeyer 2014). Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill (2002:568) argue that the work of NGOs 'contributes nothing marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression'. They argue, in Gramscian terms, that even organisations that operate formally outside the state could inadvertently help to reinforce state institutions, hence supporting the status quo instead of uplifting the masses and support their struggle for emancipation and development. With the collapse of the colonial system and the retreat of missionary institutions that also supported Western structures, NGOs seemed to have assumed the role of the missionaries; they tend to pay cursory attention to the insights of those, like Abahlali, whom they claim to represent. Alain Badiou (2005:73) talks about the 'politics of the masses that sets itself the task of involving the people's consciousness in its process, and of taking directly into consideration the real lives of the dominated'. Our argument goes beyond 'involvement' of the masses; it advocates 'pre-eminence' wherein the masses are not a supplement or an addendum to advocacy but are the primary actors.

Despite the stellar work that Abahlali has done to shine light on the plight of the poor, any appraisal of the organisation would be remiss if it did not touch on challenges to this and potentially other similar movements. The first is charting the formula for activism. Movements such as Abahlali are more likely to attract attention through disruptive protests that block traffic, for example. The risk for this formula of protesting is that it could be hijacked by people or organisations with selfish interests against the ruling establishment. In fact, Mdlalose (2014:347) reports that Abahlali has lost its initial mandate and lustre, and that members 'became willing captives of outsiders' with mainstream political ambitions. The movement could be well counselled to guard against vested interests of those who might come to its aid, financially or otherwise, with outward demonstrations of solidarity but in fact pursuing their own interests.

Conclusion

South Africa has admirably entrenched the tenets of democracy through relatively free media spaces that allow for opposing voices to co-exist, a fiercely independent judiciary, a robust legislature and some spaces that also allow for protests. These conditions embolden social movements such as Abahlali not to pare down their demands for human decency through only focusing on social service delivery. The equivocal efficacy of socio-political advocacy offers a salutary lesson for social movements that might have immediate needs for resources that some advocacy agencies have in abundance. However, the synergy that might ensue between advocacy agencies and social movements should not undermine the primacy of grassroots movements in championing their demands. This research has argued that, while some of the intentions of socio-political intervention cannot be besmirched, inadvertently such intervention has fallen into the pitfalls of top-down strategies that speak for those they intend to help rather than supporting them in their quest for a just and egalitarian society. What is needed is a nexus between advocacy activists and community movements, but one that respects that the principal players are the people enduring the politics of deprivation.

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