

## We Need a Conversation about Development

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From the Communist Party across to the corporate spin-doctors and down to the Development Committees in the shack settlements, more or less everybody in South Africa speaks the language of development. In some ways this is a good thing. It indicates a hard won agreement that the realities of inequality in our society are so cruel and perverse that any social project can only be credible if it will ameliorate these divisions and the suffering they cause.

But one of the key problems with this consensus is that it carries a degree of authoritarianism while lacking a clear content. The result is that it is simultaneously difficult to be against development without seeming anti-social and to know exactly what counts as development. And as soon as we are all supposed to line up in support of some concept that is not clearly defined elites are able to define that concept to their advantage. When the rich are at their most rampant they tend to take the view that supporting development requires the removal of the barriers that limit their right to accumulate. They argue that everyone will benefit from their wealth as it trickles down. But we all know that in reality this approach to development results in the poor getting poorer precisely because of the manner in which the rich are getting richer.

Of course the meaning of development is continually contested. When a shack dweller's organisation decides to blockade a road to demand 'development' it means something very different to a property owner's association lobbying, also in the name of 'development', to change the law in order to make the eviction of shack dwellers easier.

But it's vastly easier for corporate or state power to win sustained access to a national public than any it is for any poor people's movement. And with the right spin almost any attempt by the rich to further enrich themselves at the direct expense of the poor can be justified in the name of 'development'.

Vast amounts of cash and political energies that could have been directed towards meeting the basic needs of people living in intolerable conditions have been wasted on stadiums for 2010. There's been similarly reckless spending on other vanity projects for years. The failed uShaka Themepark in Durban is a case in point. When it opened with the grand promise of development there were near riotous conditions at the gates as thousands of people who would never afford the entrance price descended on the park in search of the handful of menial and precarious jobs on offer. But year after year it has sucked money out of the public purse and in to private hands like some kind of crazed giant vacuum cleaner in a fourth rate horror movie.

But development is not only an ongoing and massive set of state subsidies for the rich. It is often a direct attack on the poor. Around the country the livelihood of street traders is under attack as they are forced out of long established markets in city centres. In Durban

this is being done in the interests of developing a corporate mall. And everywhere shack dwellers are being forcibly removed from their own shacks on well located and therefore valuable urban land to government shacks outside the cities. Farm workers are also being forced off the land in the interests of elite projects like game farms.

Of all the attacks that are currently being mounted on the poor in the name of development, the most surreal is almost certainly the deal that former KwaZulu-Natal Premier S'bu Ndebele brokered with Ruwaad Holdings in Dubai to expropriate 16,500 hectares of land from the Macambini clan on the Northern Coast of KwaZulu-Natal in order to build an 'AmaZulu World' themepark. The eMacambini Anti-Removal Committee estimate that 50,000 people will be evicted from their land if resistance to the themepark is defeated and the development goes ahead.

As the ANC increasingly became a vehicle for elite accumulation, often justified in the language of the left and in the name of the poor, many took heart from our constitutional commitments. And over the years the Constitutional Court has made some compelling interventions in support of the dignity of the poor. Five years ago the Court famously declared that when it comes to adjudicating competing claims for urban land it is necessary to "infuse elements of grace and compassion into the formal structures of the law." In the same judgment the Court also insisted that with the transition to the post-apartheid legal order, "People once regarded as anonymous squatters now became entitled to dignified and individualised treatment with special consideration for the most vulnerable."

But the reality is that state and private power continue to act unlawfully with regard to the poor. The reality is also that the 'housing roll out' has often been an authoritarian and corrupt process that, in many instances, has functioned to physically exclude poor people from cities by dumping them in peripheral ghettos. The commitment to providing 'houses' in these ghettos has recently changed to a commitment to providing 'housing opportunities'. People are now often being dumped in one roomed government shacks in 'transit camps' or 'temporary relocation areas'. With their razor wire fences and single entrances policed by armed guards they have a clear familial link to the concentration camp. No one could look at these places and seriously conclude that they are intended as spaces in which people will flourish. It is entirely obvious that they are places for surplus people - people that do not count.

The N2 Gateway Project in Cape Town has deservedly become the most notorious of the state's housing projects. It was certainly not undertaken in a consultative manner and although it has always been justified in the name of the poor, both the state and its bankrupt private partner Thubelisha Homes, have sought to use it to free up well located land for private profit by instituting a mass forced removal to government shacks in transit camps on the urban periphery. This project is a classic case of development at the expense of the poor rather than for the poor.

Last week the Constitutional Court endorsed the forced removal of 20,000 people from the Joe Slovo shack settlement in the interests of this development. The judgment has

shocked many progressive lawyers who see it as, at best, profoundly and culpably naive. The judgment is an improvement on that previously granted by Judge Hlophe and it does seek to blunt some of the edges of the ruthlessness initially planned by the state and Thubelisha Homes. But it is nevertheless clear that the Court has subordinated its own elegantly stated ethical commitments to the tyranny of the language of development.

We are in urgent need of a national conversation about the nature of development. That discussion needs to include serious consideration of whether or not it is right to so often expect the worst off, the poor, to pay the highest price for our development model. But in order for this sort of genuinely national discussion to be possible we'll need to face up to the fact the monopoly that elites have long wielded over the interpretation of our common commitment to development will have to be broken. Breaking that monopoly will require a radical political empowerment of the poor against elites in the state, business and civil society. And given the paranoia and authoritarianism with which elites tend to respond to a demand for equality issued from below we must accept that this will not happen without a fight. The road ahead is long and almost certainly bitter.