



Discussion Guide

Season 5.0, 2013

“Dear Mandela” (South Africa), 60 minutes



DEAR MANDELA

A film by Dara Kell & Christopher Nizza

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Film

Dear Mandela follows the journey of three friends from their Durban, South Africa shantytown shacks to a major Constitutional Court victory challenging the Slum Act (which had legalized mass evictions). Mazwi, Zama, and Mnikelo, are part of a new generation who feel betrayed by the broken promises of Nelson Mandela's political party, the African National Congress. As part of Abahlali BaseMjondolo (Zulu for "people of the shacks"), the trio invoke Mandela's example and become leaders in a growing social movement of poor people resisting social injustice.

The film offers a new perspective on the role that young people can play in political change and is a fascinating portrait of post-apartheid South Africa coming of age. The everyday experiences of the young activists reveal intergenerational conflict, a panoply of complex economic challenges, and the legacy of a government willing to suppress opposition with violence. Despite increasingly contradictory demands and expectations, each of them emerges as a leader, dedicated to holding their elders accountable and continuing the struggle for full and lasting justice.

Keywords: activism, African National Congress, constitutional law, economic development, homelessness, housing, human rights, land use policy, leadership, Nelson Mandela, poverty, Slums Act, South Africa, urban renewal, youth

Background

Selected People Featured in the Film

Mazwi Nzmande – President of the Youth League of Abahlali, a high school student whose family has been on the waiting list for a house nearly his entire life

Mnikelo Ndabankulu – Spokesperson for AbM and shopkeeper

Zama Ndlovu – An AIDS orphan, student, and working mother who helps run AbM's drop-in community center and food aid program

Context

In 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa, his government was faced with a seemingly insurmountable task: providing a better life for those who had suffered under apartheid. The cornerstone of Mandela's "unbreakable promise" was an ambitious plan to ensure housing for all.

Years later, as the number of families living in slums doubled, a frightening tale of betrayal began to unfold. The government adopted a policy of trying to eradicate the

slums by evicting shack dwellers from their homes at gunpoint, in scenes eerily reminiscent of apartheid-era forced removals.

In 2007, the Province of KwaZulu-Natal passed the **Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Act** (known commonly as the “Slums Act”)

“to provide for the progressive elimination of slums; to provide for measures for the prevention of the re-emergence of slums; to provide for the upgrading and control of existing slums; and to provide for matters connected therewith.”

Meant to be replicated across the country, the Act gave provincial Housing Ministries authority to force municipalities and private landowners to evict squatters and demolish slum housing.

Forced evictions escalated in 2009 as South Africa prepared to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup. **Abahlali baseMjondolo** (AbM), the Shack Dwellers Movement, formed to respond and resist. Those who joined the movement had learned to distrust the predictable, perennially unmet guarantees made by those running for office that adequate transitional and permanent housing solutions would be provided to people displaced by the demolition of shantytown homes.

Citing **Section 26 of South Africa’s Constitution**,

“No one may be evicted from their home or have their home demolished without an order of court made after considering all of the relevant circumstances. No legislation may permit arbitrary eviction.”

Abahlali baseMjondolo argued that the Slums Act was illegal. In May, 2009, they took their case to South Africa’s highest court. On October 14 of that year, the **Constitutional Court** decided in AbM’s favor, declaring the provisions of the “Slums Act” related to forcible evictions to be unconstitutional.

Discussion Prompts

General

Describe one new insight you received from watching this film. What actions might you take as a result of that insight?

What questions and issues does the filmmaker want you to think about and how do you know? Were there any other questions you wanted to ask?

Share a moment from the film that you found to be particularly inspiring or disturbing. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

What emotions did the film evoke for you? How did this aspect of your viewing experience compare or contrast to others in the room? What do you think accounts for the similarities or differences?

Reviewing Core Content

What did you learn from the film about:

- South Africa and the legacy of apartheid
- Social justice activism and leadership
- The effects of generational differences on approaches to politics
- Equitable approaches to housing and urban development
- The relationship of poverty to power

Understanding the Conflict

AbM President, S'bu Zikode asks, "How can anyone come and destroy it [my shack], leave me homeless in my own country?" How do you think the lawmakers who passed the Slums Act would answer that question? Who benefits from the Slums Act?

What are the connotations of the term "informal settlements" to describe the shacks in the slums or communities like Kennedy Road?

Provincial Housing Minister Mike Mabuyakhulu says that there is no need for the lawsuit against Slum Act because, "it is better for us to work together with them because we are on the same side." Do you find his explanations convincing? Why don't the shack dwellers see themselves as being on the "same side" as the Housing Ministry?

In your view, given the country's history, does the South African government have a responsibility to ensure that all its citizens have housing? If so, who should fund the fulfillment of that promise? Is housing a basic human right? Do all governments have a responsibility to ensure that every citizen has adequate shelter, or only those governments addressing historical inequities?

The government responds to AbM's resistance with a variety of tactics. Consider the impact of each of the following:

- Pogrom-style attacks on the Kennedy Road settlement
- Threats to kill AbM's President
- According to Mawzi, police fail to respond when shack dwellers call, but are on scene to arrest those who were trying to protect the community
- A government spokesperson acknowledges the violence but denies the damage
- City Councilor, Jacob Baig blames the AbM and attempts to publicly discredit the organization: "It's as a result of what activities the Abahlali group are indulging in and which has led to this kind of situation coming to a head and where confrontation then ensued. So I'm not casting any aspersions on them but rumor has it that members of that group are implicated in this problem."

Have you encountered similar tactics in other places or situations? If so, how did you respond or what did you learn that might be helpful to the shack dwellers or other South Africans who want to hold their government accountable?

Strategies for Change

The shack dwellers are well-aware of ANC's original promises of housing for all, and even of Mandela's call for patience saying that it could take five years. More than a decade later, they are still waiting for that promise to be kept. If you were part of the ANC administration, what would you do to transform Mandela's ideals into reality? Who would you involve in the process?

Mazwi says to fellow students, "I see the big dogs doing what they call 'development', but all they do is evict people and move them far away. They say development will upgrade us, but it really doesn't." Where have you seen changes made in the name of "development" and who has benefited from those changes? Who has been disadvantaged by them? How might cities *equitably* address city planning and the need to eliminate unsafe or substandard housing?

AbM's lawyer in the Slums Act case, Stuart Wilson, says that if they, "are successful not only will it stop the Act from being harmful, and stop it being used to evict thousands of people all at once – but it will also demonstrate to government that if they don't want to be sued, they had better start participating and consulting meaningfully in the first place." What would "meaningful" consultation look like?

Speaking to a crowd of housing activists, Mazwi says "Down with the ANC." How do you explain the silence that follows that chant? What does the response reveal about generational differences? In terms of political organizing, how effective is Mazwi's attitude towards the ANC? If you were an ANC member, what would you say to Mazwi?

ANC members chant, "Down with Abahlali baseMjondolo," and the government seeks to disband the organization. Yet there are members of AbM who are also ANC members. Given the pogrom-like events at Kennedy Road, are there ways to oppose government policy without also opposing the ANC? What might be a pathway to reconciliation under these circumstances?

Mazwi says, "Here in South Africa, no one writes about the poor people." Why does it matter whether or not someone writes about life in the shacks? What difference does it make to be visible and to have a voice in the public sphere?

Mnikelo says, "I never thought that I'll be an activist because I never expected that we will be fighting for something that we've been promised." In your view, what is the right balance between patience and activism? What types of things would spark you to activism?

Legacy

Mnikelo says, "I would like to meet Dr. Nelson Mandela and ask him about how does he feel about these unstable conditions that we are living under... I do not like the fact that what he has been jailed for has never been

achieved." If you were able to talk to Mandela, what would you want to ask? What do you think Mandela might say to Mnikelo?

At an Abahlali meeting, Louisa Motha says, "In 1982, the white government came with bulldozers and destroyed everything. The government we are struggling against now is new but the residue of the past still remains." What do the housing protests and the attempts to enforce the Slum Act reveal about the legacy of apartheid? What do they reveal about Mandela's legacy?

What is the significance of the film's title?

Beyond winning the court case, what are the benefits of AbM to its members? What difference does it make in people's lives (and the strength of their resolve to make change) to have camaraderie, support, education, and/or a meeting place?

Mnikelo says, "You don't need to be old to be wise." What wisdom might the older generation learn from the young activists featured in the film? What wisdom could anti-apartheid veterans impart to the new generation of activists?

Mnikelo says, "You know when you are dying you must die with credibility. The people must talk about you, especially good things saying you were the man amongst the men, not just an ordinary man." How do you think Mnikelo and the other AbM leaders will be remembered? In your view, has Mnikelo achieved his goal to be more than "an ordinary man"?

Resources

Official Film Website: www.dearmandela.com/

In addition to information about the film and filmmakers, the site includes ideas for taking action and links to relevant organizations.

AfroPoP series information page: <http://AfroPoP.tv/ally>

Abahlali baseMjondolo

<http://abahlali.org/> - The website of South Africa's Shack Dwellers Movement (AbM) includes a rich library of articles and readings along with updates about current events and actions.

COHRE – Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions

www.cohre.org - The website of this international housing advocacy non-profit provides easy access (under the "Regions – South Africa" tab) to key background documents, including *Business as Usual? Housing Rights and 'Slum Eradication' in Durban, South Africa* (2008) and *Any Room for the Poor? Forced Evictions in Johannesburg, South Africa* (2005)

SERI – Socioeconomic Rights Institute of South Africa

<http://seri-sa.org/index.php> - This non-profit conducts research, engages with government, advocates for policy and legal reform, facilitates civil society coordination and mobilization, and litigates in the public interest. The website includes general background as well as information on specific cases of forcible eviction.

Amnesty International

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/end-forced-evictions> - See the site of this human rights organization for information on campaigns against forced evictions. Also see the website of the South African chapter of Amnesty International:

www.amnesty.org.za/index.php/get-started/1-displaced-people-should-not-be-forcibly-removed-from-temporary-camps

War on Want

<http://www.waronwant.org/> - Do a search on "Abahlali" to find information about resisting forced evictions from this UK-based grassroots anti-poverty organization.

Picture the Homeless

<http://picturethehomeless.org/> - This U.S. response to criminalization of homelessness provides a model of organizing that, like AbM, is by and for homeless people, ensuring that those who are homeless have a way to speak and advocate for themselves.

Thank you for taking the time to review this guide. Written by Faith Rogow, Ph.D.

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