

# ***Home as a Site of Resistance & Learning: The Housing Assembly, South Africa***

## **Executive Summary**

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South Africa Case Study: The Housing Assembly, Cape Town

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## Introduction

This study explores the learning and knowledge making practices of the Housing Assembly, a grassroots social movement that emerged in Cape Town, South Africa out of peoples struggles for decent housing and a decent life. What began in 2008 as an anti-eviction struggle of a small group of homeless families has over the ensuing decade emerged as a formidable social movement that fights for decent housing amongst Cape Town's poor communities. This Executive Summary provides a synopsis and overview of the report, and will hopefully entice the reader to engage with the full and more detailed case study report. The case study on the Housing Assembly, is part of a four movement, four-country study, on the learning, education and knowledge-making practices of social movements in conflict affected contexts. We encourage all readers to consult the website for access to all of the research products (<https://knowledge4struggle.org/>).

On 1 May 2018, the informal settlement named Siqalo, in the Western Cape, was the site of struggle for decent housing and access to basic services (Groundup News Agency, 2018). It quickly turned violent with two people injured and one person being killed. Earlier in the day, 30 people were arrested by the police following clashes between the police and protestors. In the aftermath of the protest and violence, the situation became charged with racialized tensions (Mail & Guardian, 2018).

Siqalo informal settlement, which means 'the beginning' in Xhosa, was given its name because the residents believed that living in a shack in the informal settlement was the first step towards owning a decent house. Owning a house was the beginning of a new life: it was the first step on the ladder to a life free from poverty. Siqualo residents are not alone in that belief. It is a belief based on promises made by the African National Congress ahead of its electoral victory in 1994. It is a belief deeply rooted in the post-apartheid constitutional provision on the right to decent housing.

This is why the protests and the subsequent racialised tensions in Siqualo represented the perfect storm, in which South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacy came into violent confrontation with the post-apartheid democratic vision. The fact that there remains a housing crisis more than 20 years into its post-apartheid era, has left the country's Black<sup>1</sup> population in disbelief and anger. As each tries to make sense of this, people begin to reach back into the racialised past of apartheid to present the case for their right to housing and service delivery. And in that

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, "Black" is used in reference to African, Indian and "Coloured" people who were collectively characterised as "Non-White" under apartheid. It is also in reference to political identity used to organise against apartheid. Where racial divisions are further acted out differently per race group, specific racial classification will be referred to

process of reaching back, there is also the pulling forward of apartheid racial terminology, race divisions, violence and conflict, done by both survivors of apartheid as well as the newly democratised state.

Siqalo remains one of the formative moments for the Housing Assembly, a post-apartheid housing social movement, organising those living in the Western Cape's informal housing. Whilst Siqalo is a microcosm of racial tensions around housing struggles, the Housing Assembly, in their day to day organising are faced with not just the struggle for decent housing but also having to encounter the strongly entrenched racial divisions that play out in the structured access to housing in South Africa.

At the heart of the Housing Assembly's organising is the vision that South Africa's working classes will live in decent housing, and this vision has found expression in its campaign for Decent Housing. Embedded within this struggle are multiple other interlinked struggles of race, class and gender as well as geography – all of which come together to reimagine what a decent house is in a democratic South Africa. This reimagining also contains a vision for what the future could be for the millions of poor living in informal housing in democratic South Africa.

The Housing Assembly is a unique example of a social movement in South Africa's history. It is rare to find a social movement that centers education and learning at the heart of activism, and the Housing Assembly embodies this. This research attempted to capture this learning-centered social movement and to document how it learns and produces knowledge; and how this impact on the individuals, the communities they organize and the movement as a whole. The research methodology was also an experiment in challenging how we, as Northern based researchers, learn and produce knowledge about those that are learning and producing knowledge. Hence the research paper should function as a way to challenge our notions of what we, as Northern based researchers, know about social movement activism in the South and for movements who are being studied to contest and challenge that knowing – thus it becomes an experiment in *'research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other'* (Smith, 1999: 2).

This report has six chapters which explore the Housing Assembly's learning and knowledge production, rooting it in South Africa's history and struggle for land and housing, as well as looking at how it transformed those strategies and tactics to center learning and knowledge production in its activism. The first chapter outlines the methodology used for the development of this case study. It was critical for those of us developing the case study to remain true to the purpose of this research project and use methodologies which disrupt the current colonial and patriarchal nature of academic research. We therefore made a conscious attempt to use decolonial and intersectional feminist approaches to research. The second chapter provides the context and backdrop to the Housing Assembly's struggle. South Africa has a history of colonialism, settler colonialism and apartheid – all of which had the same effect of dispossessing Black people from their land and taking ownership of their labour. It presents the unique

history of the Western Cape, where the Housing Assembly is based, as the first place that was settled by the Dutch and which became the blueprint for colonialism and apartheid mechanisms. The uniqueness of the Western Cape persists today where in post-apartheid South Africa, it is run by the official opposition party, The Democratic Alliance, rather than the African National Congress, which runs the national government and all other eight provinces. This chapter draws out the anti-apartheid struggle highlighting the role of women in the struggle. It also explores the transition phase and the shortcomings of that process before coming to the democratic government of the African National Congress, the rise of new social movements and the fraught relationship between the state and the movements. The third chapter explores the history and nature of the Housing Assembly, providing insight into its vision, its mission, the governance structures and its relationship with the Western Cape government. Chapter four describes how the movement learns and produces knowledge, exploring its strategy and tactics and its rootedness in systemic oppression, and developing a nuanced intersectional approach to the struggle for decent housing. Critical in this section is the fact that the movement was started by, enabled and grown by people who live the experiences of living in informal settlements, backyards and RDP houses and who experience the precarity of their existence through the violent acts of evictions. In chapter five, the paper explores the content of the learning and knowledge production and the centrality of the house/home as a political and pedagogical tool. It describes the distilling of complex knowledge into that which is accessible to all community members with the sole aim of building a knowledgeable movement, as well as some of the challenges still facing the movement as it grapples with intersectionality. The final chapter reflects on the effects of this learning and knowledge production, focusing on individual effects as well the effects on the shape of the movement and the nature of its struggle.

## Methodology

In challenging and disrupting colonial research methods and processes, this research project questioned: who was determining the research; for whose use; who was “doing” the research; what did “doing” the research mean; and where value was being placed in the research process. At each stage of engaging with these questions, the Housing Assembly tried to reimagine the research process with them at the heart - what would the research process look like if they were determining the research - including giving meaning to the four research questions, undertaking the research so that it was beneficial for the Housing Assembly and help build the movement. What would the research look like if the Housing Assembly themselves did the research and designed their own methodologies and approaches?

In a sense, what the Housing Assembly tried to do in this research process, is to take ownership of shaping the research agenda, in order to shape how the research process was going to unfold. The attempt here

was to make the research process less extractive, more democratic, and connect it to the socio-economic context as experienced by them every day.

In so doing, the Housing Assembly took a decision not to have a lead researcher but rather to put together a research team comprised of six members, drawn from within the movement. They would work with a long-time ally of the movement and social movement researcher who was part of the international research team. Their role was to collectively interpret and shape the research questions; design the research process and the methodology; shape how they were going to collect the data; conduct the data collection themselves; translating and transcribing the data; and shaping how the research would be written up.

In putting together the six member researcher team, we adopted an intersectional feminist approach where race, class, gender, geographical location and housing type played a key role. The six member research team represented the different housing types that the Housing Assembly organises for decent housing: informal settlements, backyard dwellers, social housing (RDP) and rental stock. The team was also made up of the dominant race groups who are living in the different housing types to ensure full representation. It was made up predominantly of women of colour, so that the experiences of women of colour and Black women be centered and attention paid to their experiences both in terms of who was asking the questions and engaging in discussion with respondents but also in terms of shaping the research questions to center women of colour at the heart.

This approach drew into focus the importance of reflexive practice and positionality. The makeup of the team created an awareness of each person's "intersecting identities" which we understood would *'influence their understanding of their context and shape their point of view'* (Reddy and Hollowell et al, 2019:556.... we attempted to be as reflexive as we could by ensuring that regular spaces for reflexive practice were created to pay *'specific attention to unequal power relations'* (ibid) that we had identified above.

Feminist approaches to research were also adopted for how we worked together and for how we would go about conducting the research. We deliberately chose a feminist approaches to research because it aims to *'understand, interrogate and ultimately dismantle social and political structures that systematically disadvantage women, and the power dynamics that underpin these structures'* (Leung, Miedema Warner et al, 2019:431).

We started the data collection process by holding a focus group with the research team in which the research questions that we collectively designed were posed to the team. This gave the team an idea of

how the questions sounded, and allowed us to ensure that the questions were accessible to the average Housing Assembly activist.

This was followed by two commissions of 30 people, each held with a mix of new and founding members from Cape Town and Witzenburg (a rural area, North of Cape Town). The use of commissions was learnt and borrowed from the research process of NOMADESC in Colombia, another case study in this research project. In the commissions, participants were divided into three smaller groups where they moved their discussions between various levels: from the individual to the organisational to the social consciousness level. From both commissions, up to 10 people were selected for individual in-depth interviews, making sure that women, youth, and the different housing types were covered.

Seven focus groups were held with constituent groups in both Cape Town and Witzenburg which included between 10 and 15 women, youth, and representatives from areas involved in recent occupations.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted with 20 people representing a cross section of housing types, women and youth. In addition a further 10 interviews were conducted with individuals who had participated in a recent occupation or prevention of an eviction. A further five interviews were conducted with participants attending the political school.

All interviews were conducted in the language that those participating in the data collection felt comfortable with. Where needed, translators were on hand to ensure that interviewees felt comfortable and safe to share their experiences. The data was analysed against the four research questions. Common themes emerging were highlighted and documented manually. Interviews were then grouped according to those themes, and where sub-themes were emerging, these were also highlighted and documented. These themes were presented to the international research team so that common threads could be drawn from our various research projects.

## Context

The struggle for housing is deeply connected to South Africa's settler colonialism history, and embedded in struggle for land. Through the eras of British colonialism, Dutch settler colonialism and subsequent apartheid, Black people were stripped off their land, dispossessed of their rights to their own bodies as their labour was captured for capitalist production, and denied fundamental social, economic, political and human rights. But this did not happen without a fight. Community organising at grassroots level has been as prevalent in South Africa's history as every step that the colonialists and apartheid architects took – for every attempt taken to dispossess and oppress Black people, a struggle was waged in response.

Apartheid laws tried to crush these struggles through legislation that made it illegal for people to gather, to protest, to meet and organise, but it was through community organising and through informal networks of communication that the struggle to end apartheid was sustained.

Tactics and strategies that emerged during the fight against apartheid have found their way into the post-apartheid social movements' struggle. These movements breathed life back into community movements that went dormant in 1994 as the country shifted into its democratic era. It took less than five years into democracy for community structures to kickstart again as Black communities began to experience the reality of democracy – that it was a political victory but not an economic one. As poverty worsened, land and housing remained out of reach for the millions of dispossessed Black people, as segregation persisted on race and class lines, communities responded through organised protests, using similar tactics from the apartheid era to organise. With this emergence of a new generation of social movements, historical ways of struggle have been passed down from one generation of freedom fighters to the next through story telling, memories, and documented struggles, and taken up by whole family units as mothers, fathers and their children became social movement activists.

## History and nature of the Housing Assembly

The Housing Assembly comes out of this rich legacy of the new social movements. It was built on the past tactics, tactics, victories and defeats, and still organises alongside some of these movements, such as Abahlali base Mjondolo and new iterations of those movements. Whilst the new social movements were often in direct confrontation with the state, the Housing Assembly has taken a slightly different approach to social movement activism, putting knowledge production and learning at the centre of its work.

We explore the roots of the Housing Assembly and its connection to apartheid-era community organising strategies and struggle tactics. This is clearly evident in its vision and mission and features quite strongly in its structure, its organising and in centering knowledge production and learning in its activism.

Founded out of an eviction and introduced to activism through a learning event, the Housing Assembly has a strong working class politics and ideology. In 2008, a group of landless and homeless families had occupied land in Cape Town. They erected structures out of scrap materials. On that piece of land there was no access to water or toilets. The families, including children and babies stayed in these conditions for months. Every day they were violently and repeatedly evicted by the City of Cape Town's anti-land invasion unit. Every day, the homeless families would dismantle and bury the materials used to build their shacks. In the evening they would dig up their materials and reconstruct their houses. This was the only

way they could prevent their daily evictions and destruction of their homes. As if this was not enough violence and cruelty, one of the families lost their baby, and had to bury the body of the baby in the same place where they would bury their scrap materials for their homes. This powerful story has been told many times by the founding members of the Housing Assembly and is deeply embedded in the historical memory and DNA of the movement. It is the story that has formed the core of their struggle.

Confused and bereft by the violent and cruel nature of the democratic state, and knowing that their responses were unsustainable, the group joined a community activist course facilitated by an NGO, the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG). Most of them initially attended the workshop so that they could wash themselves in the bathroom and get some food to eat at the training venue:

It was during this time following the workshop at ILRIG that the group met veteran anti-apartheid activist and socialist, Michael Blake, who himself had survived evictions when he and his family were removed from the area they were living in when it was declared a Whites-only area under the Group Areas Act of the apartheid government (Workers World Media Productions, 2017). He was first strongly influenced by the writings of Steve Biko and the activism of the Black Consciousness Movement before beginning to engage with Marx's class theory.

After a year, in 2009, the Housing Assembly was born. Michael Blake had spent that entire year with the group taking them through a "community activist course" where they talked through their living conditions and shared their experiences.

Today, with a membership of close to 6,000, it organises in six districts – five in Cape Town viz. Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain, Southern Suburbs, Greater Athlone and Northern Suburbs; and one in Witzenburg, a rural area north of Cape Town. The movement organises across the different working class housing types including, those living in formal housing in former apartheid townships, informal shacks in townships and on occupied land, informal shacks build in the backyards of formal houses, social housing either as RDP houses or multi-story buildings. The Housing Assembly has built its membership through visiting each and every backyarders, shack dweller, households living in social housing and in transit camps; and through working with community movements

During door-to door visits, Housing Assembly activists met workers, unemployed people, young people looking for jobs, people who were in precarious employment. Realising that it was the same system that created unemployment, precarious work and homelessness, Housing Assembly partnered with the South African Municipal Workers union (SAMWU). The influence of working with a trade union can be seen in



the working class politics and in its democratic structures and accountability mechanisms. Housing Assembly and SAMWU worked with shack dwellers, back yarders, social housing residents and TRA residents on the local government elections held in 2011 and the need to use that moment to pressurise local government to provide basic services and housing to the poor in Cape Town.

In 2014, the Housing Assembly officially launched itself as a social movement campaigning for the right to decent housing and access to basic services. Its membership was made up of 50% women and most of the district and executive leadership were, and still are, women who are active and vocal front-line activists in the struggle. Housing Assembly was also able to develop a five-year strategic plan and managed to secure funding from War on Want, a UK NGO, to help it deliver on its strategy.

The first Annual General Meeting of the newly launched Housing Assembly took place in 2015. Housing Assembly elected a woman as its Chairperson – the first social movement in South Africa to be led by a woman.

The politics of the Housing Assembly is “working class”, “socialist” (Interview with Ebrahiem Fourie, researcher, 14 September 2018) with *‘its] structures, constitution and [founding] documents [being] socialist in nature’* (Open letter to the Steering Committee from Kenneth Matlawe, researcher, 2018). This is the beating heart of the movement and it is the lens through which they analyse and understand why it is that they are in existence, what they are struggling for and how they struggle.

The Housing Assembly’s vision is a society free of oppression, where the people shall all live in decent housing. It sees housing as an intersecting issue that connects the inadequate provision of basic services such as healthcare, water, electricity, education, public transport and employment.

Its mission is to have every person currently living in informal settlements, backyards, RDP and TRAs living in decent housing. Its aim is for all communities to be informed of the politics underpinning their living conditions, and to understand what their rights are in terms of the laws enabling evictions, occupations, protests and gatherings as well as the right to decent housing as enshrined in the constitution. The house is their political and pedagogical tool.

Hence for the Housing Assembly, understanding the politics and how systems act to oppress the poor, is critical. In all of their learning experiences, formal and informal, Housing Assembly establishes that the reason why people are living in the conditions they are in is because of the prevailing neoliberal capitalist economic policies. It is also the same economic policies that have resulted in rising unemployment, a decline in service delivery and public infrastructure development - the reason why public health care, education, public transportation, water, electricity costs are increasing.

In post-apartheid South Africa, divisions and rifts between communities often manifest themselves along racial lines which get played on and used by political parties for their own political use. The fact that apartheid spatial planning has not been rectified for the poor by the state but instead, through its housing policy has firmly entrenched it. Housing Assembly is aware that the racial tensions in communities like Phumlani and Sigalo (predominantly Black) and Pelican Park and Mitchell's Plain (predominantly "Coloured") is underpinned by a political ploy to divide, control and destabilise organised communities.

In attempting to bridge the rifts and build relationships across different housing types and across racial lines, the Housing Assembly has developed and implemented a structure to lead the organisation that inverts the hierarchical nature of organisations: Instead of the movement being led by its executive committee, it is currently being led by communities. The inverted pyramid of the Housing Assembly is only as successful as its grassroots structures are developed and strengthened. It relies on this for building the movement and to ensure that there are strong, organised structures on the ground. Therefore that connection to the house on the street in an informal settlement in Khayelitsha becomes more important than the executive committee lodged in the Housing Assembly's offices in the inner city area of Cape Town.

At the heart of the Housing Assembly is learning and knowledge production: learning is seen and used as an emancipatory tool. This is a critical intervention against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa's use of education as a tool of oppression.

Under apartheid, education was not really education but rather a tool for domestication and indoctrination of the Black population. The Housing Assembly's approach to situating learning at the centre of its activism and role as the social movement is a radical act of subversion. Whilst its vision is for every person to be living in a decent house, its theory of change is for every single person living in a shack, squatting in a backyard, living in a transit camp or badly built RDP house, to understand what the political underpinnings are for their living conditions. There are two fundamental reasons for this - the first is to remove the guilt and shame that has been transferred on to the poor by the democratic state's anti-poor narrative, and the second is to have people understand that the situation can change for good if the system is changed.

This approach to learning and knowledge is very much in line with Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon's approach to liberating the mind as the means to freeing ourselves from the shackles of the coloniser and oppressor. Fanon and Biko have both written explicitly about the complex parameters of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa – how racialised economic, political, social, geographic, cultural structures and systems

acted simultaneously to enervate the will of Black people and to create dependency, helplessness and inadequacy (Fanon, 1967, Biko, 2005). In every interview done for this research project, when asked the question “Why did you join the Housing Assembly?”, the answer was first and foremost “to learn” and the purpose of the learning was so they could change their living conditions

In the moments of feeling abandoned by the state through its neoliberal economic policies, the Housing Assembly has given people a space to come together and a purpose. The power in the knowledge production and learning processes of the Housing Assembly is its ability to build collective power. The idea of a house can be an individual pursuit and in many cases it is, but the Housing Assembly has shifted this to making it a collective struggle. Rather than individually waiting for a house for over 15 to 20 years, they are now collectively fighting for decent housing. Rebuking the apartheid approach to education, the Housing Assembly has turned learning and knowledge production into a tool of liberation – both from the system but also freeing the shackles of oppression from the minds of the poor. At the center of its learning and knowledge production is “the house” which has become a political and pedagogical tool. Through the concept and struggle for a decent house, activists and community members get to understand the systemic and structural nature of their oppression. This is why so many members of the Housing Assembly have testified that they joined the Housing Assembly because it went further than getting a house to seeing knowledge as the catalyst for changing the system that will result in getting a house.

## How does learning and knowledge production occur in movements?

The Housing Assembly has made use of both formal and informal methods to produce knowledge and to learn. Alternative methods for educating community members is what is unique about the movement. Every opportunity and space is seen as potential for passing on knowledge. This knowledge comes not from outsiders coming in and teaching the community activists about their conditions of existence, but rather it is their conditions of existence and their lived experience that drives the learning in the Housing Assembly. It is a movement that has emerged from its context – from the lived experiences of its members and from the conditions of their existence. Because the right to decent housing is the fundamental basis for this movement, it has become the political and pedagogical tool to organise, to build knowledge and to develop activism from. It is therefore crucial that, in staying authentic to its working class politics and ideology, the Housing Assembly has used the house/home to defy the neoliberal conception of the house as private and individualised and has transformed it into a public good and a collective struggle. It is also the space through which the Housing Assembly has encountered the any intersecting identities and struggle that has enriched the movement and its activism.

The Housing Assembly has developed a number of different methodologies for learning and knowledge production. Some have been firmly embedded as the core strategy of the movement, such as the Door to Door, the Political School and the Train the Trainer programmes – each designed to deliver on the key knowledge produced by the movement, namely “Decent Housing”; “Everyone an Organiser” and the politics of power depicted in the “Big Fish Small Fish”. However, at the centre of everything is the space of the house/home, which remains its principle pedagogical and political tool.

In the Housing Assembly there is always an understanding that through democratic and participatory principles the movement will grow. As education is key, the movement takes a popular education approach and this puts activists and those living the struggle at the center of deciding what is relevant to understand at that moment, what will build the knowledge within the activist, but also looking for collective solutions and understanding the power everyone has when working together. This way the learning becomes a two-way stream that consistently flows both ways.

### *Building people’s power through informal learning*

When Housing Assembly’s founding members started to build the movement, they were introduced to the “door-to-door” method of organizing. This method was the corner stone of community organising under apartheid and introduced to the Housing Assembly by Michael Blake, who was active in the civic movements during apartheid and familiar with this revolutionary style of organising. The door-to-door has become a powerful tool for building the Housing Assembly. The first few years, from when the movement was born out the eviction and occupation to its launch, was spent building the foundations through the door-to-door. It emerged as a practical, revolutionary act of organising to build the movement without relying on external actors or funders but also, drawing on the method’s legacy, building power where power is. This method has brought something important two things to the fore: the first is making public the private issue of the house/home; and second is making the house/home both as pedagogical tool but also the site of resistance and belonging. These sit as complementary as well as in tension with each other. Using the home as the first point of political and activist engagement, the Housing Assembly has again defied the neoliberal conception of the home as the private, individualised sphere. And so it is that the living, breathing, organic home becomes a site to harness the emotions and develop an intersectional approach to struggles. Through the struggles of oppression that Housing Assembly members encounter through the door to door visits, not only do they use the visits to share learning and build the knowledge of the right to decent housing, but they also learn from the people they are visiting. Through this learning they are able to develop their actions.

The majority of the members of the Housing Assembly are women. They also occupy a number of the leadership positions in the organisation from district structures to the steering committee and executive leadership. When the women were interviewed for this research project and asked why were there so many women involved in the Housing Assembly, they said it was because they were affected the most by the lack of water, electricity, and badly built houses or living in shacks.

Even though the Housing Assembly is fighting for decent housing, and that this struggle is emanating through their engagement with families in their homes, dismantling the patriarchal nature of the family and how it plays itself out in the home is not yet on their political agenda. In very few instances, women members were able to shift the household power dynamics that keep them in the submissive role of being wholly responsible for the unpaid care work in the home. While the struggle for housing is led by the women of the Housing Assembly, it has not yet transformed into a struggle to eradicate patriarchal power from within the household. The fight for housing is being done whilst keeping that intact such that if houses are delivered, it would not mean or translate into the emancipation of women from the yoke of patriarchy in community, and in the household.

Similar to how the water meter was used as a pedagogical tool by the new social movements, the Housing Assembly has used the 'house' as a tool for learning and a way into activism. The Housing Assembly has used the door to door visits as a means of personalising and humanising the fight for decent housing. By crossing over the threshold of the house and into the home, the house has become the site of resistance and learning. But at the same time, the Housing Assembly are in the home to talk about the house and the living conditions. Using the house as the subject or theme, and bearing in mind that the Housing Assembly activist who is leading this conversation in the home comes from that area and lives in exactly the same conditions, an exchange happens that is not only centred on sharing experiences but learning is also taking place.

Representatives from the movement are mentored in order to share their stories of what it means for them to live in poverty, to live in a shack, to be unemployed. This encourages others to speak out – it becomes easier to share amongst people who have had similar experiences or worse experiences. It becomes a space free of judgement and embarrassment, a space for collective experiences, sharing and learning. The 'speak outs' provide a platform for people to share their own experiences of struggle and the impact it has on the whole family and the community as a whole. Women are often the first to get up and speak out.

Speak-outs give people confidence to share their own stories, allow space for communities to get to know each other better and at the same time expose the suffering under capitalism. To ensure equal representation and opportunities to engage and have a say in the development of the organisation, the Housing Assembly encourages members to attend all meetings, to participate in all activities, to own the spaces and to steer from below. This means everyone is checking in on processes and ensuring everyone is accountable.

Speak outs are also planned across districts, thus taking the sharing and learning beyond the community. This builds a stronger movement and also raises awareness across the city of Cape Town. It also becomes a space for where knowledge from research that the Housing Assembly has conducted can be shared. This is all for the purpose of building an informed, grassroots led movement.

During door to door visits, members of the Housing Assembly take along a booklet which they produced that outlines people's rights to decent housing. In the booklet is a petition calling for the local authority to commit to delivering decent housing to the people of Cape Town. As each member visits a family through the door to door and has the discussion about housing, the family is asked to sign the petition. The door to door activities which eventually lead to the speak outs is a critical methodology for shifting the learning into activism. It is in these spaces where people are recruited into the movement, where they can sign onto a petition to submit to the City council, where they can begin to collectively organise a community march or protest whilst feeling safe that they are not acting alone.

#### *Building activism of scale through formal learning*

The Housing Assembly has two key formal learning processes. The first is the Train the Trainer programme and the second is a national workshop in the form of the Political School. Both methodologies are attempting to build activism at scale. With the train the trainer programme, the scale is horizontal with the purpose of building grassroots people's power, whilst the Political School is attempting to reach a vertical scale of activism by transcending from the local to national organising. Over the three years that the political school has been run, it has been able to bring together the diversity of the movement in one space to learn about the systems of oppression, to share experiences and to build solidarity. The school is a combination of formal learning through workshop sessions as well as informal learning through sharing of experiences. It is a space for cross generational learning with the youth collective sharing space and learning with some of the older members of the movement who have been struggling for decent housing since the days of apartheid.

#### *Learning through protest*

In 2019, there were 176 occupations in the City of Cape Town (Housing Assembly Office Bearer, 2019). Each of these occupations created a space for learning to take place through the Housing Assembly. When an eviction or an occupation is taking place, comrades from the Housing Assembly are called in to assist. When they get there the first thing they do is help stop the eviction from taking place. This means asking the law enforcers for the legal notices that grant permission for the eviction. In addition to having the legal documents for the eviction, the owner of the property can only carry out the eviction if he/she has found alternative accommodation for those being evicted. In most cases either the paper work or the accommodation is not secured and the eviction is stopped. The time is used to then pass on information to those being evicted of what their legal rights are. Once the eviction is stopped, the Housing Assembly works towards getting people back into the space they have been evicted from – this could be either in a RDP house where people have been evicted because of water arrears, or from government rental stock because of rental arrears or from a vacant piece of land that people have erected their informal structures.

Whilst the learning that takes place through an eviction or occupation is on legal rights to prevent an eviction, and the right to housing to facilitate an occupation, the knowledge being produced is beyond that which can be found in research reports. The knowledge being produced out of the learning is practical knowledge to survive the economies of abandonment. The ultimate aim of the Housing Assembly is for all communities facing evictions to have the knowledge to prevent eviction, without having to call in an office bearer or member of the steering committee to assist.

## What do social movements produce knowledge and learn about?

The idea that members of the Housing Assembly hold in their imaginations of what a decent house is drives them forward with their struggle for decent housing. The idea for what decent housing should be comes from the movement's own politics which tries to push beyond and disrupt the state's plan for housing.



In order to achieve the imagined and envisioned “decent house” with the brick walls and spacious rooms, the running water, electricity, toilets inside the house, the warmth, the safety, the yard and garden, the parks, clinics and good transport system, the Housing Assembly has developed an image to show how power shows up in the capitalist state and how this power can be disrupted by building the power of people. The image of the big fish and the small fish has been used as a powerful tool to explain that if the poor organise they can become a powerful tool to take on the big fish. Through the image and being able to name who the big fish is, members of the Housing Assembly have learned that neoliberal capitalism creates inequalities not only in relation to income but also in terms of how power is held, used and distributed. By including the slogan “Everyone an Organiser”, the movement is providing the means to disrupt this unequal power and to inevitably disrupt the neoliberal capitalist economy. The slogan of “Everyone an Organiser” gives people ownership over their futures and of the organisation. The movement is only as strong as the people who come together to engage in the struggle for decent housing. The movement is also only strong if its members are properly informed.

The Housing Assembly has taken the complexity of neoliberal capitalist economics and the inequalities that persist through intersectional oppression of race, class and gender, and captured it in an image. The solution to the problem has been captured in its slogan: Everyone an Organiser. This has emerged from their own lived experiences shaped by their material conditions. It comes from grassroots knowledge. There is brilliance in this approach of the Housing Assembly’s distilling of complex ideas of structural oppression into a set of knowledges that when used together, has the effect of doing what Biko, Freire and Fanon have been arguing for and that is that grassroots knowledge is power and has the ability to change the situation and shift power.

*Women’s rights and the Housing Assembly*



The most powerful shift that has happened in the Housing Assembly has been the space it has given for women to feel powerful, to feel like they have a voice. The movement has between 80-90% women members and the majority of the leadership at all levels is women. This, combined with the knowledge that has been passed on to these women, has resulted in growing confidence amongst women members to take on municipal officials and farm bosses

The Housing Assembly has also provided a space for women to talk about how access to basic services affects them differently. For example, not having a toilet affects a woman differently, especially when she is menstruating. In informal settlements, not having a toilet or bathroom in the house means that women have to walk a distance to access the portable toilets provided by the state. At night, this walk has to be done in the dark because there are no street lights thus placing them at even greater risk of violence. However, none of these experiences have been used in the education and learning in the movement, or in the setting of the agenda when demanding basic services, including decent housing, but it is, nevertheless, the driving force for the increased number of women in the movement.

This is even though Housing Assembly women have started discussing patriarchy, it has not evolved into shifting power within the household but seen more in relation to women's leadership in the movement. However, even though there are more women in the movement and in leadership, the call for decent housing and basic services has not been done from the perspective of achieving gender equality in the home, or transforming societal norms. Or framing that call to the state to make sure that providing public funded basic services is being done in a gender responsive way rather than only because it is a way to address class inequality. The outcome of such a shortcoming means that while public funded basic services such as water and electricity have a way of reducing women's care burden in the home, it does not redistribute it. And this could be the role of the Housing Assembly in its communities and through its methods of reaching people in their homes.

Engaging in imagining what a decent house means to the membership of the Housing Assembly is a powerful tool that has allowed the movement to engage in prefigurative politics where democracy, and the world the activists want to live in, is embodied in that imagined house that extends beyond its four walls, electricity, water, indoor toilet and yard, but also includes schools, health clinics and parks. It is a powerful imagery that spurs the movement to continuously engage with their existing conditions because it is a fight that is bigger than the house. It is a fight for a transformed system which is depicted in its slogan of Everyone an Organiser and its Big Fish Small Fish imagery. This has shown us that grassroots knowledge is a powerful transformational tool that has the ability to change systems. Yet whilst imagining

a transformed class system, the Housing Assembly has not imagined the patriarchal system transformed where women have equal rights in the home, in society and in activism. The fight for decent housing is being led by women in the movement but is not connected to the fight for women's rights. It is being led by women because the inadequate housing and lack of basic services is hindering the women from doing their domestic care work properly and without inconvenience. Whilst there are lone women's voices trying to push the boundaries of the working class ideology to begin to incorporate struggles against the patriarchy, it has yet to be centered in the movement in the same way that working class politics has been rooted.

## What are the effects of the production and learning of knowledge in movements?

The Housing Assembly is less than 10 years old. It has taken the long route in its building of a movement, placing learning and production of knowledge as the foundation. It sees an educated membership that understands their material conditions within the context of systemic and structural oppression as the key driver for change. The tactics borrowed from anti-apartheid struggles merged with their learning and knowledge production have had a transformative effect on individual members, on the politics of the struggle and the shape of the movement itself.

The biggest impact that the Housing Assembly has had has been building the confidence of those living in poverty. Confidence has been gained as a direct result of the production and learning of knowledge that has happened in the movement. Everyone interviewed for this research project said their confidence had grown because they know their rights, because of what they had learnt about capitalism and that their living in poverty was not their fault. This helped to fill members of Housing Assembly with pride and dignity which the state has tried to strip away with the narrative that the reason for their living in poverty was because they didn't work hard enough or because they were lazy.

The Housing Assembly has, by producing knowledge and opening up learning spaces to explain the systemic and structural nature of the oppression of community members, undone generations of state-sanctioned denial of education, knowledge and information for Black people. The Housing Assembly was able to see and value their community members and through doing that has created a cadre of housing activists that are strong and confident and powerful agents of change.

When members were asked what they did with knowledge they had gained from the Housing Assembly, every single one of them said that they went back to their communities, to their families and passed on that information.

They said they did this because they felt empowered after learning what they had and they felt that this power needed to be passed on.

This passing on of learning has developed a powerful knowledge base at the grassroots level that has translated into people being organised into the movement. This is an effect of the Housing Assembly's "Everyone an Organiser" slogan combined with the "Big Fish Small Fish" imagery. This was a powerful learning tool that has not only created a movement but also instilled a sense of ownership of every individual which has translated into a collective ownership of the movement. This was far more effective than the slogan, "Everyone a Leader" used by the new social movements, because it has shifted from the individual leader and an individual pursuit to the collective building of a movement.

Using the house/home as the site of resistance, the Housing Assembly has disrupted the neoliberal capitalist narrative that the house is an individual and private pursuit, and transformed it into a collective and public struggle. The house as a site of resistance comes through, not just in what knowledge and learning is produced on the conditions of existence, but also in the how of the learning – this learning takes place in and through the house. The house, which is at the center of the struggle, has also become the pedagogical tool which can be seen in the door-to-door visits. And in so doing it has opened up the struggle for decent housing to a collective one, through which a mass based movement is developing – a movement that is forming not just to secure decent housing but a movement for system change.

This learning through practice that took place through the door-to-door and in the house itself, has shaped the movement into what it is today. And this has been a profound shift into an intersectional approach to struggle. On meeting people in their homes they found different kinds of workers in various stages of precarity, and they found that the house was also a holding space for struggles around access to basic services, to education, to health services, transport issues, social issues – all of which have its roots deep in racial inequality. This realisation has helped to shape the Housing Assembly's struggle from one that was a working class struggle for housing, to a working class struggle for systemic change.

The effects of the how and what of learning and knowledge production of the Housing Assembly is slower to see, but the groundwork has been established for real power shifts to happen that are driven by a grassroots movement. The Housing Assembly has turned the site of its struggle into the pedagogical tool and together with that, has grounded the pedagogy in the politics of systems of oppression as experienced through the house. It has taken an apartheid tactic for organising and turned it into a powerful tool to build a movement where its cornerstone is learning and knowledge production. The house as the site of struggle has also enabled the movement to push through the barriers of former social movements and

anti-apartheid movements to present the struggle as intersectional, as not a singular struggle by incorporating racial and class oppression (and more recently gender oppression). Perhaps one of the key effects of the knowledge production and learning has been that in the bid to build a grassroots movement for systemic change, it has also defied the individualism perpetuated by capitalism, by creating a space – a common area almost- for community members and activists to feel like they belong, that they are part of a family, that there is a collective struggle and voice.

## Conclusion

The housing crisis has deep roots in South Africa. It is rooted in colonial and apartheid history. The dispossession of Black people from their land and their homes, the denial of their right to claim basic human rights and the violent repression of the colonial and apartheid state to act out this dispossession and violation lies deep in the consciousness of Black people. But that past has laid the foundation for what is present in South Africa in two fundamental ways.

The first is that the housing crisis still remains today. This paper has reflected on the economic choices made by the African National Congress at the point South Africa became a democracy. Abandoning its redistributive ideology founded in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the ANC consciously chose a neoliberal path upon which to take newly democratised country down. This homegrown structural adjustment programme saw basic services being turned into privatised, for-profit assets of the state. Housing, which was promised in the 1994 elections, became a commodity upon which private developers (rather than the state) traded a profit. Not enough houses could be built through this private-public partnership. Not enough jobs were created. And more and more people were plunged into poverty and forced into homelessness either in shacks in informal settlements, shacks in backyards or in temporary relocation camps. Those fortunate enough to get social housing found that in order to make a profit, private developers used inferior building materials and in some cases handed over incomplete houses. The waiting list to get an RDP house is now over 20 years long. And as this paper has mentioned, the people who were poor during apartheid are still poor today.

The second foundation laid by the past is grassroots community mobilisation and resistance. One of the answers to the question of why poor Black South Africans were so quick to react and respond to the effects of GEAR was that the struggle against apartheid was so strongly rooted in the grassroots communities. Black people from state-neglected and impoverished communities felt, very quickly, their lives getting significantly worse because of the neoliberal capitalism that came with democracy - so much so that there was a sense of nostalgia that sat uncomfortably even with those who uttered the words *'things were better under apartheid'* (Benjamin, 2011). Most still remembered how much was lost to apartheid and none were prepared to lose any more. This frustration,

anger and disappointed found an outlet through grassroots community organising and mobilising – the structures of which remained after apartheid.

Tactics and strategies that emerged during the fight against apartheid have found their way into the post-apartheid social movements' struggle. These movements breathed life back into community movements that went dormant in 1994 as the country shifted into its democratic era. It took less than five years into democracy for community structures to kickstart again as Black communities began to experience the reality of democracy – that it was a political victory but not an economic one. As poverty worsened, land and housing remained out of reach for the millions of dispossessed Black people, as segregation persisted on race and class line, communities responded through organised protests, using similar tactics from the apartheid era to organise. Historical ways of struggle have been passed down from one generation of freedom fighters to the next through storytelling, memories, and documented struggles, and taken up by whole family units as mothers, fathers and their children became social movement activists.

The Housing Assembly comes out of this history as one of the new social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. They have brought into the present the continued struggle for decent housing, basic services, fair and just treatment for the poor. Through their own analysis of why the poor, twenty years on, are still homeless, still don't have access to basic services, education, health care and jobs, they have found that this is because of systemic and structural oppression given expression in neoliberal capitalist economic policies that have been imposed by the democratic government. Using this knowledge, they have begun passing this information on to shack dwellers, backyarders, renters, people living in TRAs and in social housing. The Housing Assembly have done this using tactics for organising and mobilising that were developed in 1980s apartheid South Africa – a time when anti-apartheid activists were heavily surveilled, violently repressed and forbidden from gathering.

Even though South Africa has transcended apartheid and been hailed as Africa's great success story (because the country transitioned peacefully into democracy) it still remains a state in conflict with the poor. From its violent economic policies, use of violence to evict and make people homeless, to its excessive use of violence against activists and social movements shows a state that has not cut its ties with the past but instead has brought that past into the present.

In the moments of feeling re-abandoned by the state through its neoliberal economic policies, the Housing Assembly has defied the individualistic nature of capitalism and given people a space to come together. Even while evictions force people from their land, dispossessing them of everything, the Housing Assembly has provided a collective space, a home, a family and a sense of belonging. And it has used learning and knowledge production to do that. As this report has showed, community members joined the Housing Assembly, not to get a house or to

see the movement as a vehicle to protest for a house, but to learn and gain more knowledge so that they could make sense and understand their material conditions, so that they could know their rights to protect themselves, to feel dignity and purpose again.

The power of the knowledge production and learning processes of the Housing Assembly lies in its capacity to build collective power. It has used the struggle for housing, which for all the intent and purpose of capitalism can be an individual pursuit, and shifted this into a collective struggle. Rather than individually waiting for a house for over 15 to 20 years, or individually standing on the sidelines watching their shacks being demolished, they are now collectively fighting for decent housing. Rebuking the apartheid approach to education, the Housing Assembly has turned learning and knowledge production into a tool of liberation – both from the system but also freeing the shackles of oppression from the minds of the poor. At the center of its learning and knowledge production is “the house” which has become a political and pedagogical tool. Through the concept and struggle for a decent house, activists and community members get to understand the systemic and structural nature of their oppression. This is why so many members of the Housing Assembly have testified to why they have joined the Housing Assembly – it went further than getting a house to seeing knowledge as the catalyst for changing the system that will result in getting a house.

The Housing Assembly has made use of both formal and informal methods to produce knowledge and to learn. Alternative methods for educating community members is what is unique about the movement. Every opportunity and space is seen as potential for passing on knowledge. This knowledge comes not from outsiders coming in and teaching the community activists about their conditions of existence, but rather it is their conditions of existence and their lived experience that drives the learning in the Housing Assembly. It is a movement that has emerged from its context – from the lived experiences of its members and from the conditions of their existence. Because the right to decent housing is the fundamental basis for this movement, it has become the political and pedagogical tool to organise, to build knowledge and to develop activism from. It is therefore crucial that, in staying authentic to its working class politics and ideology, the Housing Assembly has used the house/home to defy the neoliberal conception of the house as private and individualised and has transformed it into a public good and a collective struggle. It is also the space through which the Housing Assembly has encountered the any intersecting identities and struggle that as enriched the movement and its activism.

Even the act of imagining what a decent house means to the membership of the Housing Assembly is a powerful tool as it has allowed the movement to engage in prefigurative politics where democracy, and the world the activists want to live in is embodied in that imagined house that extends beyond its four walls, electricity, water, indoor toilet and yard, but also includes schools, health clinics and parks. It is

powerful imagery that spurs the movement to continuously engage with their existing conditions because it is a fight that is bigger than the house. It is a fight for a transformed system which is depicted in its slogan of Everyone and Organiser and its Big Fish Small Fish imagery. This has shown us that grassroots knowledge is a powerful transformational tool that has the ability to change systems.

This understanding house as a political and pedagogical tool has also transformed the movement and how it approaches struggle. Through the house Housing Assembly activists have encountered a multitude of different but connected struggles – it was no longer a single issue struggle of the working class for a house but an intersectional struggle that mapped race and class discrimination over each other. However, the movement is still to overlay the patriarchy as another system of oppression and include, in its struggle, the fight for gender equality and women’s rights. The fight for decent housing is being led by women in the movement but is not connected to the fight for women’s rights. It is being led by women because the inadequate housing and lack of basic services is hindering women from doing their domestic care work properly and without inconvenience. Whilst there are lone women’s voices trying to push the boundaries of the working class ideology to begin to incorporate struggles against the patriarchy, it has yet to be centered in the movement in the same way that working class politics has been rooted.

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