

# The Crises and the Commons

Durban debates on politics, economics and environment  
4-7 November 2009

Join us for a Durban Reality Tour and discussions at the  
University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society  
cohosted by *Amandla!* Magazine and iKwezi Institute  
School of Development Studies, Memorial Tower Building, Howard College

Welcome from Dennis Brutus, with special guests Immanuel Wallerstein, Dani Nabudere, Michael Hardt, Hazel Henderson, Eunice Sahle and others

**The world is in turmoil; so are Durban and South/Southern Africa!** How do we make sense of it? Do we continue allowing the powerful to offer only 'false solutions' to our vast political, economic, social and environmental problems? If not, what can ordinary people do, working through institutions of civil society? Will the state continue to block our aspirations, and will capital continue to run wild? Can we beat back xenophobia, ethnicity, patriarchy and class conflict within society? *Will crises persist, or instead can a 'commons' strategy joining humanitarian and ecological values across national boundaries arise, imposing on the state and capital new values and politics, transcending profit as the core rationale for economic activity?*



guinea pigs). But reforms have failed, and the economic and ecological crises we face require more urgency, sophistication and creativity than the elites are offering.

**Why 'the crises'?** The world's and South/Southern Africa's deep economic crises can be traced deeper than the short-term catalysts in the 'financial sector' - to long-term causes within capitalism's distorted 'real sector', as well; both need analysis and action. In addition, environmental crises – especially climate-related but also threatening water, fish stocks, air quality and other ecological commons – are becoming potentially lethal to planetary health and the very survival of our and many other species. These problems in turn will create more geopolitical, social, gendered and psychological tensions. Because these crises are interlinked, we need holistic analysis: 'world systems', political economy and political ecology.

**Why 'the commons'?** Instead of an individualistic approach, which too often retreats from confrontations with socio-economic injustice, we need a new approach to liberatory politics. We need to tackle not just the *distributional* problems – unequal access to goods and services - which

**The limits of internal capitalist reform are now clear.**

Too often, civil society institutions have been forced to adapt our strategies and lower our expectations, accepting narrow reforms 'within the box'. For economic development we have been told we need to be entrepreneurs to move 'from the second to the first economy', in part by becoming more 'competitive' for export markets regardless of the ensuing economic injustices. To address the climate crisis, we have been told that we must use the market-based strategy of 'carbon trading' (with Durban landfills serving as



have already generated world-leading human rights campaigns in South and Southern Africa (e.g. social struggles and mutual aid systems in the health and water sectors, where civil society activists have opposed corporate/state neoliberalism and won free medicines and the defeat of privatisation, respectively). In addition to fairer distribution of a greater share of capitalism's spoils, the 'commons' as an idea allows us to move beyond a world based on profit, to one in which basic needs goods are supplied as a human right.

**Through and beyond 'rights'.** But a new debate has emerged, about whether civil society strategists should transcend 'rights talk' which sets struggles on legal and individualized terrain - sometimes unsuccessfully, as Sowetans learned in the September 2009 Constitutional Court case regarding Free Basic Water and prepayment meters, but sometimes successfully, as Abahlali baseMjondolo showed in defeating the KZN Slums Act in October 2009.



**A regional commons of the people.** In addition to South Africans, other activists in our region are exploring these lessons and adapting strategies/tactics accordingly. A regional commons of *people* can also be constructed, as was shown in April 2008, when in our local port (Africa's largest), a Chinese ship carrying three million bullets destined for use by Robert Mugabe's armed forces was sent home by trade unionists and church leaders. In contrast, the economic crisis is exacerbating various structural factors that contributed to South Africa's 2008 xenophobia outbreak: migrant labour, tight housing markets, Home Affairs corruption, extreme retail trade competition, and crime. These need to be addressed in short- and long-term ways, so that the regional commons happens bottom-up, instead of a commodified economy being imposed top-down.



**Commoning nature, too.** A commons perspective takes the full life-cycle of the subjects of social advocacy and campaigning seriously. For example, the drops of water enjoyed in Johannesburg swimming pools and flushed into a polluted water table which affects water access downstream in Mozambique must be understood from their origins in the mountains of Lesotho. In Durban, the Inanda Dam is the immediate source of water, and a major campaign was recently declared successful: restoration of land rights which were violated for the local Qadi clan during the late 1980s when the dam submerged their traditional residential and burial sites. The energy

commons will be highlighted with studies of global warming and the Inga hydropower facility that will potentially export electricity as far north as Italy and as far south as Cape Town, while ignoring the vast majority of needy Southern Africans – especially women - who operate with ever-scarcer woodlots as their primary energy source. The commons is especially important for environmental analysis given the threat posed by carbon trading to a holistic strategy for climate change.



**The cultural commons.** Thanks to South African and Zimbabwean cultural artists, the fusion of politics, ecology, music and poetry all come together as the basis for launching the Centre for Civil Society's new space at UKZN: the top three floors of Durban's tallest building. Join us from the bottom (Memorial Tower Building courtyard) to the top for some enlightenment of the brain and inspiration of the soul on Friday, from 6pm 'til late. Then on Saturday, activists return to hard work.



## Nov 7: CCS, *Amandla!* magazine and the iKwezi Institute's Skenjani Roji Seminar Series present a day of discussion:

### *Development, Protests and Democracy in South Africa: Social Movements and the Crisis of Service Delivery*

South Africa has experienced major protests over services delivery in recent years, with police counting roughly 8,000 per year. The last few months, in spite of hope for a new and different state leadership, the protests have increased in tempo and ferocity. The authorities have responded with intense repression, but also major concessions.

Yet there is a conspicuous absence of social movement organisations providing leadership and articulating community interests, especially in view of the depth of SA's economic crisis.

What is the state of the new social movements in South Africa? Have these organisations been decimated since their rise a decade ago? Or is there renewed space to organise and build democratic social movements which has not yet been taken advantage of?



The national democratic state has delivered services to communities at a rate higher than the apartheid state did, yet prices of water, electricity and housing have risen to unaffordable levels for many. In this context, do the protests challenge the legitimacy of the democratic local state, similar to the way urban protests of the 1980s undermined the legitimacy of apartheid's Black Local Authorities? Are communities properly informed of development plans by municipalities? Is local corruption a problem? Do

community organisations have adequate voice? Are protests linked to internal political crises within the ANC, or are external political influences guiding the protests? Are the uprisings a manifestation of residents' genuine frustration over the state's failure to serve – because of municipal shortcomings and because of inappropriate national policies and inadequate national funding subsidies?

Today, social movement organisations seem to be peripheral to the community protests, at a time they could be providing leadership, articulating development challenges that affect communities, negotiating with authorities, utilising information based on organic research, and proposing genuine solutions.



So what is the future of social movements if they are not present in the communities during this period of social and political crisis? How should they reorganise, if that is the challenge? Are they now facing a crisis of legitimacy too?

Durban and South African activists working in community, environmental, social and labour organisations - and more broadly for a democratic left - have been divided, and need to unite.

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at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society  
cohosted by *Amandla!* Magazine and iKwezi Institute  
School of Development Studies, Memorial Tower Building, Durban



## Nov 4 – DURBAN REALITY TOUR\*

7:45 **Bus pick-up at UKZN in front of Memorial Tower Building**  
8-9:45 **Warwick Early Morning Market & Albert Park** – hosted by Baruti Amisi  
10-12 **South Durban toxic tour** – hosted by Oliver Meth  
12:15-2:30 **Chatsworth/Crossmore** (with lunch) – hosted by Orlean Naidoo  
3-4:30 **Cato Manor** – hosted by Faith ka Manzi  
5-7 Other Durban discussions, solidarity and cultural events at **UKZN MTB Courtyard**



**Wallerstein**

## Nov 5 – DEBATING THE CRISES

8:30-9 – **INTRODUCTION** – Patrick Bond, Mazibuko Jara and Dennis Brutus  
9-11 – **DURBAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN CRISES** with speakers TBA  
11-11:15 – TEA BREAK  
11:15-1 – **REGIONAL AND AFRICAN CRISES** with Dani Nabuderi & Eunice Sahle  
1-1:45 – LUNCH \*



**Nabudere**

1:45-3:30 – **GLOBAL CRISES** with Hazel Henderson & speakers TBA  
3:30-3:45 – TEA BREAK  
3:45-5:15 – **THE MEANING OF COMMONS** with Michael Hardt & Ashwin Desai  
5:15-5:30 – move from Memorial Tower Building to Howard College Auditorium  
5:30-7 – **WOLPE LECTURE by Immanuel Wallerstein:**  
“Crisis of the Capitalist System: Where Do We Go From Here?”  
7-8 – Dinner, discussions



**Henderson**

## Nov 6 – DEBATING THE COMMONS

8 – **SERVICE DELIVERY PROTEST** (called by Wentworth and other Durban residents:  
march from Botha’s Statue to City Hall, with transport back to UKZN)  
11-1 – **COMMONING RESOURCES:** Alaska, Ecuador’s Yasuni, Niger Delta, Xolobeni  
1-1:45 LUNCH \*  
1:45-3:30 – **COMMONING SERVICE DELIVERY:** Health/meds, water, electricity, land  
3:30-3:45 – TEA  
3:45-5:30 – **COMMONING PEOPLE:** local unity, national alliances,  
regional anti-xenophobia, international solidarity  
5:30-6 – **CLOSURE** – Trevor Ngwane, Orlean Naidoo, Patrick Bond, Dennis Brutus  
6-9 – **CULTURAL ACTIVITY** with regional and local performers in **MTB Courtyard**



**Brutus**

## Nov 7 – ACTIVIST STRATEGY DAY \*

**Skenjani Roji Seminar Series with iKwezi Institute**  
**Development, Protests and Democracy in South Africa:**  
**Social Movements and the Crisis of Service Delivery**  
plus workshops on related themes, 9-5

\* RSVP essential: Lungi 031-260-3577 (a modest fee to cover costs may be levied)  
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