

# Collaborative Research in Conversation

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At a recent workshop of feminist activists, Lorraine Heunis introduced herself like this:

"I have lived in an informal settlement all my life. In 2005, I helped backyard shackdwellers to set up their homes on the field in front of my house because they could not afford to pay rents and the government was taking too long with their promises of building houses. We have been confronting ever since. [...] I have met amazing people through this struggle. But I became involved in feminist activism through a misunderstanding. Koni called me up and said she wanted to come and speak to me about housing struggles and she would bring a fryer. I thought, wow, I need a fryer, mine is broken. She came with other housing activists and we sat and exchanged our situations. All the while I was wondering when I would get my fryer. But as they were leaving, she handed me a flyer. It was an invitation to a workshop with all the informal settlements they had met with. And so I had to laugh and tell her that I thought I was getting a fryer, not a flyer. That meeting launched me into a whole other world and I don't regret it, but I still remind her that I am waiting for my fryer!" (Heunis, 2009).

This piece draws on an ongoing conversation that started when a co-worker, Ronald Wesso and I decided to prioritise a feminist interpretation of collaboration in our work on housing struggles in Cape Town. This perspective has been at the centre, on the side, or lurking underneath many interactions amongst ourselves as NGO workers and housing activists, evident from the "fryer incident" onwards. Part of aspiring to solidarities that are critical of the various power dynamics at play, that centralise anti-hierarchical, and process-centred principles of feminism, have been evident in the continual dialogue about how we work together, who is involved, from what position, and for what ends. Here, I share some reflections made by four people: two housing activists involved in the establishment and defence of Zille-raine Heights land

occupation, Lorraine Heunis and Eleanor Hoedemaker, and two NGO workers doing research and popular political education with the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), myself, and Ronald Wesso. This is a snapshot of a conversation over time that has unfolded in the process of working together to begin to think through what it takes to create and sustain a way of collaborating that does not reproduce the very power dynamics we claim to aim to abolish.

In early 2007, the terms 'land invasion' and 'illegal occupation' made their presence felt in the media with articles appearing on 109 land occupations, 'mushrooming' 240 informal settlements in Cape Town, proposals of new legislation to make eviction easier and to 'eliminate slums', cuts to processes of community consultation, and new police units to demolish illegal shacks<sup>1</sup>. Over 50,000 people were earmarked for 'relocation' to the outskirts of the city, where the state suggested they be given four poles and a tarpaulin, and wait in 'temporary relocation areas' for their turn on the housing waiting list. At that stage, the list consisted of 400,000 families whereas about 11,000 units were built each year (Hartley, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. ILRIG spent the first half of the year doing an exploratory and very informal survey of the experiences of shackdwellers who had taken matters into their own hands, and were now under threat of removal. We wanted to know how and why people chose to 'occupy' land, their perception of the situation, their experiences, as well as the possibilities of fostering solidarity across segregated geographies of animosity and competition over waiting lists. Most importantly, we wanted to know what it would mean to take a feminist collaborative approach to this work.

We thought that the research and political education process could be useful to the participants and support resistance movements if experiences and strategies were shared. Our approach was informed by the feminist literature of collaboration that questions the power dynamics between the researcher – and the researched, as well as the possibilities of working across divides so characteristic of housing struggles in Cape Town<sup>3</sup>. We decided to invite housing activists and researchers to participate in the process. We also proposed that representatives from each area we would work in, accompany us on research visits and that community organizers/leaders we met across the city be invited to a collective workshop to discuss issues further<sup>4</sup>. In an interview about the proposed ILRIG research process, Ronald responded:

"I think anybody could have done it in the sense that whoever would have come with a similar idea I think people would have been open to

it – because people were ready, they had been involved in their struggles for some time, and everybody was very aware that although they were fighting and standing on their own, there were other people facing similar problems and it would be a good idea to communicate with those people and try to work together. It was a question of how to do that given the geography and all of those kinds of obstacles in Cape Town, and given the fact that most of the people lack resources to do that, I mean it is poor peoples' movements, so the organizations are also poorly resourced.

But there are specific reasons why we did it, and why nobody else would. I think the activity and struggles of people in informal settlements was not high on the priority list of any number of organizations that one expected to be interested. I don't understand the reason behind that except that it is difficult work to do. There are other things that an organization that would be interested in working on, that easier to accomplish. Working with unions is much easier. Working with people in communities who have been organizing for some time and where there is an existing structure of organizations is much easier. So you often find that the informal settlement struggles fall through the cracks. Also generally, if you are looking at social struggles, it is useful to draw attention to what you are actually trying to do – whether you are fighting for higher wages or for fair access to electricity. But when you defy the law, when you are labeled as an unlawful occupant or land invader, then it is perhaps in your interest, at particular points in time not to draw too much attention to yourself, until you are established and until you are under threat of removal, so that may also play a role." (Wesso, 2007).

We found that people setting up shacks on open spaces of land never considered themselves as 'invaders'. They said that their problems, not they or the communities they had built, needed to be 'eliminated'. More importantly, there was no uniform policy, plan, or response from the state or from the residents living in adjacent formal settlements to their plight. Some dwellings had been demolished and some residents faced immediate eviction orders. Others had electricity connected and had even constructed brick houses in the areas where they resided. It was clear that people achieved what they had organised to gain. Aunty Gerty Square's description of the role of women, requiring the constant confrontation needed to establish, defend and secure 7<sup>de</sup> Laan was common:

"There were no new houses built here since I moved in when my children were small, now I am a grandmother. So we started 7<sup>de</sup> and 8<sup>ste</sup> Laan land occupations. I spoke to the city year in and year out, about the housing backlog. Meetings. Years. So we organized and said, "fine, you have no money but land, we'll mobilize backyarders and take land and build". It was not easy. People were desperate, sick, living in overcrowded conditions with high rates of TB. We built shacks in the field. Once shack was complete, in came the army and the city police and every kind of law enforcement. As if we were [...] murderers on that field! The police demolished, used rubber bullets – all for that half-built structure. So we formed a circle and said "People are living there, you won't touch it!" When they left in the evening, we started to build again. A month later we got a summons to court. Then there was a court case for three years. Before we won, there was no water or toilet facilities and the city says "No money for water or toilets and besides you invaded the land and are illegal." One day I woke up and said, "I'm going to get 7<sup>de</sup> Laan and get people to get buckets and washing powder and we are going to the civic centres and property of the city and we'll take water from there". We told women to mostly bring panties and hang the washing on the wires so all the city workers can see and we said, "Call your boss so they can see what we are doing because if there are no toilets on that field, we'll be here using water everyday, and we won't let the guard close the gate because we will need the toilets tonight." The very next day they laid pipes and put in 18 toilets. They gave us nothing with a smile. Everything we have to take." (Square, 2007).

As well as exchanging stories and strategies, the role and relationship to NGOs, especially creating collective ways forward, was intensely debated at the meetings that followed the site visits and workshop. In particular, a conversation around creating an umbrella organisation to unify struggles against forced relocation initiated much discussion on who could and would anchor the process and supply necessary resources to so that people met regularly. Issues of control, direction, and agendas were crucial to these debates. Lorraine's response was:

"We are poor, but we are not stupid. We don't need you to take decisions for us just because we live in informal settlements and you have skills and resources. But we can use your help. It is better to raise these issues here today, instead of sitting here and then we leave and have a lot to say." (Heunis, 2007).

**In an interview last year, Eleanor explained what work with this organisational solidarity had enabled:**

"When we occupied land, we didn't know anything. I think the more support you have, the more information you have, people can't just evict you. [...] Myself and Lorraine went blindly into this and we didn't know our rights, nothing. By trial and error we came to know all our rights. With all the organizations we came to know more. I think it is because we had all the organizations behind our court case, that we were not evicted from here." (Hoedemaker, 2008).

**ILRIG wasn't building houses, wasn't paying legal fees, wasn't even giving fryers, yet when I asked Eleanor what motivated them to work with us, she responded:**

"The workshops gave us knowledge and power, to know our rights. To know we were right to defend ourselves. But it was also that you walked with us. From morning till afternoon [...] We walked about looking for an advocate for months. We used your resources, like phones and computers which other organisations did not allow. We were encouraged, but the decisions were always for us to make. Some activists want to work with NGOs and some not. When we first met you, it was with the AEC (Anti-Eviction Campaign). But then they said we should stop going to the Community House, because "these people want to use you". Lorraine and myself said "No, there are good and there are bad NGOs and this one is helpful for us." You are honest with us. We say we need 1, 2, 3 and you say you are able to do 2 and 3 with us. The AEC gave us the choice of ILRIG or the AEC. But the AEC works with academics who also take their life stories and write books and things and get paid. Without all this knowledge and support, we would not still be busy with our struggle and Zille-raine would be over. Being a housing activist is too much pressure for one person and I need support wherever I can get it. There are only a few women who are consistently here, and the men – this is where patriarchy comes in – they come and go and are not interested. [...] We need time and encouragement and we got it from you and Ronald and then Jessica. Now we joke with the AEC that we are waiting for them to come put up their shacks on our site." (Hoedemaker, 2009).

**An umbrella body was not born of these meetings, but rather an agreement to (a) work together, (b) to resist relocation and, (c) find alternative land and housing close to where we lived. The idea of situated solidarities, of asking**

what each person/organisation in the room was best positioned to do to contribute to this broadly defined goal, resulted in a small range of creative and strategic interventions in Cape Town, and also nationally. The group analyzed and wrote a response in preparation for a representative to attend an Anti-Slum Bill coalition meeting in Durban called by the shackdweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo ([www.abahlali.org](http://www.abahlali.org)). Women were asked by the Legal Resource Center to take statements and by activist organizers in Joe Slovo to speak to other women resisting relocation from Joe Slovo to Delft (Hawker, 2007). For the most part, we focused on creating media and doing research that would support the upcoming legal battle to prevent eviction from Zille-raine Heights. We called on media activists from Indymedia to support the production of newsletters to resentful neighbours residing in brick houses in the area, to explain the case, experiences, and analysis of 'land occupiers' (ISIS, 2007). A distribution strategy and support petition were designed, linking issues of water cut-offs in formal settlement houses due to bill arrears, with the shackdwellers' situation. We photographed the living conditions in the proposed relocation area – Happy Valley – to illustrate the slogan "not from bad to worse". We sent briefs to the mainstream media, created photo map banners that would attract the mainstream media to the courts, and staged a teach-in outside the courts (Oliver, 2007; Prinsloo, 2007). We also drew on Legal Aid advice that we conduct research examining the 'relevant circumstances' to support our case against the proposed evictions. Assisted by Professor Sophie Oldfield, we designed and collectively carried out a household survey in Zille-raine Heights to show that the community's circumstances were defined within the 'vulnerabilities' criteria set out in post-1994 laws preventing evictions<sup>5</sup>.

The process of making a plan of action based on who needed and could do what, made for an intensive year of learning and lobbying where people from across movements, organisations, institutions, and segregated spaces worked together with a sense of politics that was about more than just Zille-raine Heights. In Ronald's assessment:

"I think this has also been a good example of collaboration between different kinds of people and organizations, community-based organizations and NGOs and individual academics. In South Africa at the moment, it is a usually controversial and difficult, painful issue, in that people you would expect to logically work together do not, and spend lots of their time fighting one another across these fragmentations:

NGOs versus social movements, different social movements versus one another – because they have different relationships to (each other) NGOs, etc. So any kind of good example that is appreciated by both sides is [...] potentially very important. We'll see. The achievements are important for what they make possible. Right now we have not won anything. Forced relocations are still on the cards [...] but we are forging the means [...] the people [...] the spirit that would carry the struggle." (Wesso, 2007).

These conversations reflect some of the critical issues that have framed this work on women and housing activism in Cape Town and its NGO-social movement collaborative elements. They expose the implicit power dynamics embedded in the relationship between NGO workers and social movement activists on the front line whilst also critiquing these. Careful examination of the multiple obstacles to moving forward, and the answers to the difficult questions raised about what it would take to build movements free of the vexing NGO-social movement dynamics, certainly needs more time and attention than has been given here.

Each re-telling of Lorraine's fryer tale works to both make people laugh (and me blush), and to surface shared politics as well as tensions, needs, expectations and power that emanate from our different positions. This, we agree is an important place from which to start, and made an important mark on the work of collective action across difficult boundaries we have done together. Although still contested and pending an appeals court ruling, Zille-raine Heights remains standing today. In the midst of many fall-outs between social movements and NGOs the work continues, taking its shape as people and organizational support enter and exit the process – leaving much to be done, and many conversations to be continued.

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## Interviews

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- Hoedemaker, Eleanor, interviewed by Koni Benson, Zille-raine Heights, July 14, 2009.
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## Endnotes

1. (Benson (2007), Gophe (2006), Huchzermeyer (2007), Kassiem (2007), Legassick (2007) Williams (2007).
2. For the gap between policy and practice, see Chapter 3 of Mercy Brown-Luthango's *Our Struggles, Our Stories, Our Rights: Reflecting on Women's Access to Housing Rights*.
3. This included publications, for example, by Ballard, Benson and Nagar, Dreze, Gluck and Patai, INCITE, Kerr, Kruzynski, McKinley, Mohanty, Nagar and Geiger, Roy, and the Sangtin Writers.
4. This included Zille-raine Heights, Civic Road, Hangberg, Imizamo Yethu, Kabaskraal, Khoisan Heights, Huguenot Community Center in Belhar, 7deLaan, 8steLaan, Happy Valley, Delft, QQ Khayelitsha, Montagu Village, Hillview/Lavander Hill (Overcome Heights, Military Heights, China Town, Mitchel's Heights, China Town 2, and Cuba Heights).

5. According to the Constitutional Court, the Prevention of Illegal Eviction (PIE) was adopted with the objective of over-coming abuses and ensuring that evictions take place in a manner consistent with the values of the new constitutional dispensation. The mere establishment of unlawful occupation and structures that are unauthorised, unhealthy and unsafe, does not require a court to make an eviction order. Rather, the court must take account of all “relevant circumstances” of the people under threat of removal – such as length of stay, income, disability, number of children, women-headed households, and so on.  
Karrisha Pillay. 2004. “Property v housing rights: Balancing the interests in evictions cases” *ESR Review*, 5(5); Marie Huchzermeyer. 2003. “Housing rights in South Africa: invasions, evictions, the media and the courts in the cases of Grootboom, Alexandra and Bredell,” *Urban Forum*, 14(1): 8-107.