

eKhenana residents are tilling for freedom

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Residents of eKhenana, a land occupation in Cato Manor, Durban, have started planting vegetables. Food sovereignty and other forms of self-sufficiency, they say, will be achieved through tilling the soil and opening themselves up to new knowledge.

The settlement was created in 2018. Many of its residents came from rented lodgings in a nearby area. After facing evictions, they decided to establish a new community. They named it eKhenana, isiZulu for Canaan. Residents say the name represents their aspirations. They want to transform eKhenana into a place fit for humans, with all the residents' needs catered for.

“As young people with historical poverty attached to our names, we need to start promoting the concept of developing practical pathways that ... challenge the ... corporate-controlled food system based on capitalism and tackle food inequality at its roots,” says Lindokuhle Mnguni, the elected leader of the eKhenana settlement. “This will enable many South Africans who are affected by poverty with limited access to information and healthy choices to develop customised alternatives that could change our relationship with food sovereignty and sustainability.”

There are 109 families on two hectares of land, one of which is dedicated to farming. Each family has a small plot on which a shack is built with recycled materials.

Mnguni says their community was inspired by Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST), which is based on Marxist and liberation ideologies. MST emphasises equality and the transformation of capitalist society through agriculture, cooperation and the protection of the environment. To apply these ideas, the community gets help from the shack dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, to which it is affiliated as a branch.

It is not enough to only work the land. Community members must know why it is important to be self-sufficient. Mnguni and his team have developed educational programmes covering the importance of food sovereignty, among other concerns.

‘We are not land invaders’

“We arrived here when it was just a dense, neglected forest,” says Samkelo Majiya, 26, a resident of eKhenana. “We all had been experiencing similar challenges of eviction and unemployment. When we got together, we identified this place and gradually claimed it as our new home because we were discarded by the same system that is expected to prioritise the poor South Africans who suffer historical oppression. Our parents have passed on waiting. We cannot watch as more generational poverty continues to widen in South Africa.”

eKhenana is an offshoot of Cato Manor, one of the oldest shack settlements in Durban and home to about 90 000 people. Many settled in the area because of its proximity to the city.

Ayanda Mjila, 28, talks about the group's historical struggles. He says that each week they hold classes to share information on political education, English as a communication tool and strategies for the survival of the food projects.

“The life we are trying to adopt in eKhenana allows for an opportunity to discuss how land and the debate on land expropriation can be used in the urban context, to ensure that unused unproductive vacant land in cities can be expropriated for the provision of housing and other services for the urban poor.

“We are not land invaders or illegal occupants. We are committed to creating a sustainable place where even the poorest can prosper. We have made efforts to try mitigate the socioeconomic problems brought about by apartheid, and the consequence of a corrupt system meant to liberate us 26 years ago,” says Mjila.

Covid-19 and evictions

Many eKhenana residents are young adults, some with families, and each with complex, disparate backgrounds. But they all fear being evicted. Settlements similar to theirs, and nearby, have been razed to the ground.

Covid-19 has not helped. Many in the community have lost jobs because of the hard lockdown. Statistics South Africa revealed that unemployment figures have risen sharply in recent months. A research report by the Church Land Programme into the eviction of shack dwellers in eThekweni during the early days of the hard lockdown showed that there has been a total of 18 illegal evictions in eKhenana, Azania and Ekuphumeleleni settlements. About 900 people were affected.

“On 21 and 22 April, Calvin and Family Security violently attacked the eKhenana settlement in Cato Crest by firing live ammunition at unarmed people, destroying homes, stealing possessions as well as subjecting residents to abuse. This is following an interdict that the 109 families in eKhenana successfully secured ... from the Durban high court against the illegal evictions occurring,” reads the report.

“We are South African residents who are victims of otherwise avoidable circumstances,” says Nokuthula Mabaso, 37. “We are born into poverty, but we are expected to progress into an unattainable lifestyle. The current South African system does not seem to favour the poor citizens. We are left to fend for ourselves, but what is a man's wealth when he has no land? And how is a native man homeless after our forefathers and fathers fought for equal rights and justice for all?”

Tired of rebuilding

Since its establishment, eKhenana has been under siege from the eThekweni Municipality, residents say. They have had to rebuild their homes many times over.

Recently, the settlement experienced another eviction. Abahlali baseMjondolo released a statement condemning the incident: “On 28 July 2020, the occupation was attacked by the Metro Police, the anti-land invasion unit and Calvin and Family Security. They destroyed 13 homes and stole the building materials. They also stole people’s personal property, money and lots of cellphones. Two people were seriously injured in the attack and are now in King Edward Hospital.

“The residents of this occupation are protected by a court order that was granted on 27 December 2019, and then reaffirmed on 24 April 2020 after the municipality repeatedly attacked the settlement in violation of the court order, the Constitution, the law and the lockdown regulations,”

Phumelele Mkhize, 29, was beaten with the back of guns carried by the attackers and cut on the arm with a bush knife while sitting inside her home. Msawakhe Magwaza, 30, was also hit with the back of guns. Kwanele Mhlongo, a 15-year-old with learning difficulties, was severely beaten. Mnguni, the settlement’s leader, was also injured.

Despite the threat of mass evictions and violence, residents continue to till the soil and plant seeds, looking forward to food sovereignty in the promised land.

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