Many people are asking me about the fall of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM). Since 2013, it has gone very quiet on the ground, losing members and leaders, among them me. It supported the pro-capitalist Democratic Alliance in the 2014 national elections. This is not what made AbM a darling of academics and left activists since 2005. Up until recently, in AbM they found people who would prove their theories about the revolt of the poor coming any day.

This revolt against the ANC was supposed to start after 20 years of no delivery. It was to be a very peaceful and democratic kind of revolt, a revolt that respected the constitution, using court cases and peaceful protest and moral pressure to bring out the humanity of poor people. The academics and left activists coming from the suburbs, they found shackdwellers that could be made to look like their dreams and assumptions. AbM was declared to have a philosophy the same as all sorts of writers and to have a politics like other sorts of poor peoples’ movements.

In South Africa, AbM was found to be unique. There have been many movements in SA, but the thing that made AbM so amazing was our website and press-statements. Journalists and academics could always raid this website for juicy quotes. “Speak to us, Not about us”, “No Land, No House, No Vote”, “A Living Politics”. For the journalist and foreign student, AbM was a useful thing to exist because it said things relevant to the budget, Marikana, the Occupy movement, Mandela, neoliberalism, xenophobia, World Cup, Zuma, or even the Comrades Marathon. But there were real problems eating away at the inside of AbM.

From the understanding of an activist, a social movement organisation is one formed by people to discuss and solve the social problems of the people. It is an organisation that practices and implements democracy. Its decisions come from the people not individuals. Social movements play a very big role in changing the lives of their members. Marginalised at grassroots level, the voices of the oppressed and poor use social movements to allow organised communities to sing in one voice.

I became an activist in 2008, in my neighbourhood community where I was serving as a community committee member. I then joined AbM which was widely stated to be the largest social movement in SA. And it probably once was but only because the others were even tinier. There is some argument about how big AbM was. Some people use the figure of 27000, I say about 2000 maximum. If we had a branch in any settlement, some leaders would count everyone who lived there. It is a small number of supporters nevertheless if you think that one million people supported the Economic Freedom Fighters, an organisation one year old and also organising in AbM’s constituency.

Still, I became the General Secretary of this movement on June 2010 at the age of 23, until April 2014. I became fully involved in AbM and was well known at protests. I was this young child who was very active and who could be sent anywhere on chores. I became a young leader.
I understood that AbM is a social movement that fights, protects, promotes and advances the dignity of the poor in South Africa. AbM was supposed to be a non-party political organisation and did not affiliate itself with political parties. It was supposed to practice a bottom up system where people take decisions for themselves and do nothing for the people without the people. Its role was to bring government to the people and the people to the government. AbM’s constitution states the same. This is how a social movement should be, as it attracts activist poor and oppressed people for these reasons.

The first tool used for these battles was negotiations with the government. Should that fail, then we would write media statements as the second phase. Protest was the third tool. And finally there was the legal route. These tools helped this movement grow and become well known by the government and the outside world.

There is no doubt AbM at its best did good work. We helped stop evictions through protests and court battles but the key tactic was protest. This came to be known as the “Dunlop”, because old tyres were set alight on roads. This kind of activity attracted the world, it made this movement known. AbM also appreciated being known for “Dunlop” activity, as it slowly became a protest organisation rather than a human rights or housing rights organisation.

Press statements were issued when there was a Dunlop protest and pictures were mandated to be taken for the website. More funding flowed in to assist the growing social movement to better the lives of the poor. And then, at some point in 2012, the protests we undertook were less about real anger or real resistance. They became more about impressing funders who could give their money if they wanted to, to many other organisations.

I must openly state that our press statements have always been this way, speaking about AbM in a way that was to make us attractive to outsiders. I did not in the beginning see the problem with that. But when supposed protests and not only press statements became focused on funders than real issues, I could see things were seriously wrong. Money came in and democracy went out. It finally happened that in our 2013 annual general meeting, AbM seemed to many of its leaders as the possession of a small clique of leaders who made a living out of activism. We had to leave AbM with sadness.

What were the problems eating away at the inside of AbM?

Outsiders: We were supposed to be a movement dedicated to speaking for ourselves, deciding for ourselves, independent of outside influence. But slowly and then with more confidence, we became willing captives of outsiders. Outsider academics controlled the website. We did not even know the password. This was important because it gave a few people power to control what was there and what was not there. Anything critical that warned of AbM weakness was excluded.

The movement and the website became two separate things, as if we were in two universes. Other outsiders quoted things that are not accurate, not written by shack-dwellers. One white academic, for an example, drafted our statements. Everything had to go via him. Some of our press statements he wrote word for word without us having any input. For example, the AbM statement supporting the students in Turkey was all his work. People in Turkey could mistakenly think that they were on the agenda of SA shackdwellers, when they were not concerned but the academic was.
In other cases, we would send him a draft of facts that happened and he would write back fixing the English but also adding paragraphs of politics, putting slogans, giving what he called background. I can now see what was happening. Our politics was being shaped and we did not care so much because we were desperate to sound good to the outside world.

The strangest of all was how AbM was used to fight battles in academic areas that shackdwellers had no knowledge in and I feel I must add, no interest in. At Middlesex University, a department was being closed. It was the department of a good friend of the academic who wrote AbM statements. Next thing a letter in AbM’s name, drafted by the academic went to the university rectors saying the department closing was “an attack on one part of the struggle to humanise the world”.

There are many examples of this and the pattern is the same. We have immediate issues. We tell the academic about them, he writes a press statement or helps us with the draft but the price is that the statement carries all his add-on politics and interests.

**Funders:** Funding plays the role of helping the movement continue on its course and facilitate its activities. The movement should address finances openly and not be controlled by funders. However, at the same time, funding also can destroy social movements. When funders give money to an unregistered organisation, it lacks accountability. It makes people want to reach the position of leadership, where they enrich themselves and lose the focus and vision of the people. It is true that money destroys social movements. People forget what they joined movements for, and focus on materialistic things. These fade away, but the struggles and challenges remain the same. At that point, one asks whether social movements are formed for a good cause or formed because poor people are always used as a step ladders to enrich a few individuals?

Likewise there is the politics of pictures, where leaders encourage communities to engage in democratic activities like protests, workshops and meetings. This is good, until those activities are transformed into money-oriented marketing. The very same pictures are used to fundraise, and those who have created the scene benefit nothing. That is why we mostly see organisations emerging today and fading away the following day: leaders focus on things that do not take the struggle forward.

Once donors learn of the diversion of funds by leadership of that organisation, they distance themselves from funding that movement. But they do not make them account and pay the funds back. So leaders of such movements are aware that whatever damage they do, it will come to a point where donors will stop funding them, but they would already be rich by then. So there is no strict rule in place to halt such doings.

At AbM we became obsessed with pleasing funders. We would spend an incredible time writing reports, and thinking of rallies that would get funding. Often we had to juggle reports as two funders give money for the same event. Our main outside advisor would keep warning that we should not alienate the funders with too radical actions. This took the fight out of us in Cato Crest. In communications from this academic, I picked up the clear impression that it would be better for funder support for us to be seen to be larger and with a broader impact than what we had. He also constantly warned me against talking to people that he had problems with in the academic world.
**Statements:** We became quite good at press statements. We learnt that this kept us in the public eye and gave a sense that we were everywhere. So often while we had nothing to do with a mobilisation, we quickly owned it. This was helped a lot by supporters in the suburbs who would phone and inform of us of an event that we must make sure we comment on. The academic I mentioned before was mostly the one involved. We would comment, it would go to him, be edited and quickly be put on the website. The consequence often was that we paid less attention to what was on the ground.

**Academics:** We became a darling of some academics. We liked to know that we were read all over the world. Big professors would come and visit us from Harvard and their students would spend time with us. We learnt what to say that would interest them. What usually worked was “Speak to us not about us” and “we are our own leaders”. These simple statements for some reason really impressed them. We were also called to do just in time research for academics with the promise of future funding. I have an email in which an academic asked us to do some instant research on healing for a paper to be presented in Japan. At the end of the letter he made some vague comment about funding. So suddenly healing became our war cry. We stopped when we realised there was not funding from Japan.

As another example, in doing his doctoral degree, as general secretary, I did not see any communication from the academic writing our press statements seeking permission from the organisation and individuals within it to research AbM or us as individuals. At all times during our dealings with him we thought he was an actual supporter of the movement. I, and others, only opened up to him and shared information with him on this basis. The academic seems to have left out of his thesis the depth of his own role in AbM. People reading his thesis would not know that he was in daily contact with AbM during my tenure of 3 years and that he drafted press statements for us all the time. It was these press statements after all that contain our ‘own’ ideas. He gives the impression that his role in AbM was minor when it was not.

As far as the politics of AbM goes, as reflected in speeches, press statements and the like, he states that his help was only procedural when it was much much more. He wrote large passages of AbM’s many press statements and speeches. He added lots of content. He controlled our website and mailing list. He constantly interfered in our organisational debates. It seems academically problematic to then discover and portray AbM’s politics as coming out of us organically when he has in fact played such an influential role in creating this politics from above.

There is evidence of this in dozens and dozens of emails. One which sticks in my mind is 13 September 2013, when he was sent a press statement to edit. We were criticising Durban’s housing policies. The version we got back had a new paragraph: “In Cato Crest our homes have been illegally demolished, we have been beaten by the police and threatened with death by the ANC”. He tended to add things like this which, from what I experienced, made the local conditions more dangerous for us, more tension, more animosity. I do not know if he realised how dangerous it is in township politics. I am not saying the violence that has affected AbM is his fault but I am saying that those writing our press statements were very unstrategic at times and did perhaps not fully think about the effects on us local activists when you go up against violent elites so openly.

**Leaders:** This is a very crucial issue. Remember we were supposed to be more democratic than the ANC or trade unions or anything else that existed in South Africa. But the actual
truth is that we were a top down organisation. The office was the place where decisions were made. And increasingly AbM’s founding clique assumed an authoritarian style. Our President had the ear of funders, he told us. He started to behave in a very Presidential manner. He had two bodyguards with guns. There were direct lines between him and the academic where the strategy was to build the President of AbM as the big man who knew everything: “living communism”. But the President stopped visiting communities, except when there were blankets to hand out after the fire. This was not living communism, this was living the high life of speaking tours and conferences until the President was no longer even a shackdweller any more. His decision to join the Democratic Alliance was only made possible through this kind of central leadership.

Let us speak the truth. The decision to support the DA was widely regarded as not complying with proper democratic procedures. The deputy President, spokesperson and general secretary all resigned because we felt the decision was politically wrong and not complying with our constitution and democratic ways. Anybody who wants to do research, just go to shack settlements and ask if they know about the story of AbM and support for the DA. They will laugh. The more important question to answer is how did the President of AbM turn AbM into what increasingly looks like a one-man show?

Funding played a role in corrupting AbM. Our whole lives became pleasing the funders, more than working for the people. We had to write reports and organise a protest just to please the funders. We became media stars instead of stars in the eyes of the poor. We became more actors than activists. We believed our own stories. We never had 10 000 paid up members in 60 branches; we had 12 branches with ±2000 members. But the more people wrote that we were the biggest movement in South Africa, the bigger we felt even if it was not for real.

The worst thing was remote control by academics. As we became more famous so the outside influence got bigger. There were words there that were put in that we never heard of.

This is not about personalities but about the politics of truth. These truths must be seen as political. But while we are arguing, the people we supposedly working with and struggling with, the vulnerable shack dwellers, are lost.

**Sexism and tribalism:** We got a reputation of being above tribalism and fighting sexism. The truth is that tribalism was all over the AbM and nobody wanted to deal with it. We said tribalism was the invention of the ANC and we were its antidote so how could we admit tribalism inside of AbM? But it was there all the time. When the AbM fall-out occurred, the fault lines were Mpondo speakers versus Zulu speakers. The same with sexism. Women were treated with some disrespect. After I left AbM, attempts have been made to shame and silence me in official AbM statements as being under the influence of a male lover. How sad that an organisation like AbM resorts to sexual innuendo but cannot debate the real issues.

**Role of media:** Most organisations use media as the key tool in their struggle, to expose the government and fight injustices. The media have played a big role in making sure that these doings are exposed and the truth is known. From good exposure in the media, some AbM members became popular and famous. When being popular makes an individual feel they are a celebrity, that’s when the problems start. They find themselves bigger than the people. They also become a threat to the government when they say it is corrupt, and then they become real celebrities. They then require security like bodyguards, better living conditions and a move from shacks to suburbs.
**Lines of communication:** An organisation should build strong relationships with the people, and maintain a consistent relationship with its members. They should become one big family and not become companies where leaders become bosses. In fact, when we speak from a realistic point of view, members who have elected leaders are the bosses of the leaders and should take a direct mandate from people. Then the leaders implement the mandate. One of the most important ways to strengthen a movement is to have meetings with members on a regular basis, general meetings once a month, and community meetings weekly. A meeting should not be the source of conflict: talking about people’s names, telling people what should be done, strategising on how to suspend or dismiss other comrades if they become more popular than existing leaders. It should be a gathering where people talk about their challenges and how to overcome them. The leadership should be visible to members and branches; this will help to strengthen communications. Activist leaders were not meant to be office bearers and be behind the desk.

**Vanguardism:** We were always warned by AbM’s white press statement editor and writer about this thing called vanguardism. We were warned especially about other white or middle class activists who would impose their politics on us. We had never heard of it but the way I understand it is that these are people who believe they know everything, and that they like to control from the outside. He kept telling us about the authoritarian left and their bad ways. This was ironic in the end because our vigilance was dropped about especially the white middle-class people who warned us about others. This has been a theme in SA politics since the time of Steve Biko who spoke about the tendency of some white comrades, even well-meaning ones, to dominate the way issues are raised that affect mainly black people. What we experienced was a vanguardism and control like the Trojan Horse, where an outsider joined in and acted as if only passively listening to the people but then began to take over the ideological function. In email after email you see words and ideas smuggled in, and warnings issued. In sending drafts to the academic, wouldn’t you believe, it is he, not anyone in the actual struggle or actual shacks who adds paragraphs on the things we are most famous for “a living politics”, “a right to the city” “humanity” or “dignity”.

**From movement to NGO:** What happened to AbM was that we slowly transformed from a movement into an NGO. Once we operated from the community, but now we began operating out of offices in town. If we were determined to prepare to take the streets, now we had to worry what the Bishop we would think, what Amnesty International would think. We were warned by our academic minders to think like that. Was it our own or their own middle-class conservatism? In one hilarious email, an academic was worried about stoning of cars (a false accusation by police) because his wife might not like it! Payment of salaries became an issue. The President earned three times more than anybody else. So much for living communism.

**Speaking the truth to ourselves:** I think this was the biggest casualty. We agreed to tell lies about our branches, our level of membership, and our radicalism. This started by giving up control of our website and press statements. But this seemed to be a good idea at the time because we did not have those skills and what did it matter if students overseas wrote stuff about us in essays that were exaggerated. Maybe the ANC would treat us with more respect. So, often also we went along with lies about us in articles and newspapers because it made us seem powerful. In reality we were getting weaker. The control from outside was growing stronger. The lack of democratic practice became the norm. Instead of living politics, we...
were living from one press statement to another, from one funding proposal to another, from one research student to another.

**Lessons:** I have read about how movements go in cycles. Well while that might be true, at some stage we have to learn from the past and avoid these cycles. If social movements are to be more resilient, more combative then they have to start with internal democracy. No matter how hard it is, how long it takes, we need to empower our own people one discussion at a time, one meeting at a time.

My experiences in AbM have shown me that if we are going to build a real independent, autonomous movement, where poor people, men and woman, young and old, struggle together, then we must change what we have become. We must refuse outside influences and remote-control. We must refuse that anybody feels they have made people by sending them overseas. This is the privatisation of struggle. You must be sensitive to how the race and class advantage of those who offer you help can be abused to control you. We must avoid gatekeepers to our struggles and our own path.

I also think we must test out own strength more transparently. The No Land, No House, No Vote campaign was an easy way to avoid the fact that we were a minority in almost every settlement we entered. We could claim the no voters as ours. From 2010, we did not put ourselves up for real democratic trust by the shackdwellers who we said we represented. I am not saying we should participate in government elections, but our branches should at least have the names of people who have joined us and not just numbers of desperate people who come to meeting to hear feedback about what is happening to the housing waiting list.

When social movements grow to have a purpose or a vision they should live up to it. The lesson from AbM’s rise and fall is that people should always be respected. The bottom up approach should always be maintained. A people’s movement should be led by people and no one should own it. We need to discuss how to engage with the state. This is a very crucial issue. How do we remain militant but still engage. How do we rebuild internal capacity? Shack-dwellers have very little and so we have to constantly be on the guard that we do not once more become used by outside forces who use our situation for their own ends.

How do we engage with a United Front that the trade union Numsa is starting? How we discuss, debate and march alongside comrades in trade unions without losing our own sense of community struggles? Unions are powerful; they have resources and national profile. These are strengths that we need, but it also creates the possibility of dominance. For me the radical forces in this country are on the march. A new politics is coming into being. For those who are building once more, I hope that these reflections on AbM are a learning ground for the future.