
How forced removals and evictions affected rural communities.

Can We Forget?



Trucks removing families' belongings to a resettlement area. A once all too familiar sight in rural areas whose legacy lives on.

ERASING certain apartheid laws from the statute books has not removed its imprint. Apartheid's hand still smudges the lives of people who were removed or evicted from their homes and dumped in strange and often frightening new surroundings.

Few people would today deny the hardships inflicted on victims of the forced removals policy of the apartheid era. But it is all too easy to dismiss these victims' burning desire to have past injustices redressed, their inability to simply let 'bygones be bygones'.

It is easy to forget what the policy of forced removals did to its victims. For rural communities, firmly tied to their land for generations, forced

removal and eviction was more than just an involuntary change from one area to another.

Often it meant a traumatic change in lifestyle, an abrupt break with the past and an inability to accept or adapt to this change.

Studies show people are worse off

Authorities on the subject stress this point: "Educated, highly mobile people are largely unaware of the extreme multidimensional stress that is associated with forced relocation of rural communities with strong economic, social, religious and emotional ties to their land and homes," says Thayer Scudder of Clarke University's Institute for Development Anthropology, in a 1982 Working Paper entitled

Regional Planning For People, Parks And Wildlife In The Northern Portion Of The Sebungwe Region, Zimbabwe.

"To date," continues Scudder, "well over 50 studies have been carried out on low-income rural communities who have been forcibly resettled in connection with development projects around the world. Without exception these studies ... show the majority of people to be worse off during a transition period following removal which rarely is less than two years in duration and may last for an entire generation. During this transition period rates of illness and death frequently increase, especially among children and the elderly. Elderly men and women of all ages are apt to

suffer profound psychological stress while economic and social life suffers through loss of a range of productive and socially important activities".

Scudder's findings are repeatedly borne out in AFRA's work with victims of forced removal. And, in the case of South African forced removals, which were aimed at political rather than developmental ends, the effects were even worse.

Mr Zungu's case

Take the case of Mr Ndala Zungu. In 1989 Afra interviewed Mr Zungu for a booklet on evictions in the Weenen District. He told AFRA that he was born on a farm in Mngwenya Valley in Weenen. His father and grandfather were also born and buried there. He, himself, had worked for absentee landlords in Mngwenya Valley for 47 years.

No doubt Mr Zungu's life was not easy, but at least it had a certain stability to it. He was living in the place of his birth, the place his family had occupied for as long as he could remember.

All this changed in 1986. Mr Zungu was given three months' notice to leave the farm. When, at the end of the three months, he refused to move, he was arrested and charged with illegal squatting. He was sentenced to three months' jail or a fine of R150.

After a month's imprisonment, Mr Zungu's family managed to scrape together the R150 for the fine and he

was released from jail. But, after this, still refusing to move away from the land he knew and loved, Mr Zungu was arrested again and charged with illegal squatting. In July 1987, after his conviction, he spent another 11 days in jail. At the end of it, he was given until August 3 to leave the farm. Fearing another spell in jail, Mr Zungu went into hiding on a hill near his home. Because of the eviction threat, he sold his cattle and did not plant seasonal crops.

Forced to live in Emergency Camp

In November 1987 he again appeared in court on charges of illegal squatting. After several postponements, his case was withdrawn in May 1989. After that he was finally evicted from his home and was forced to live at the Weenen Emergency Camp. He was 63 years old.

Wrenched away from his life as he had known it for 63 years, how was Mr Zungu expected to survive? The fabric of his own life had been ripped apart. He was waiting, hoping that death would not come in a strange place. He was clinging to the hope that he would one day be able to return to the land was part of him.

The case of Mr Zungu and so many others illustrates that for rural people the land which they occupy and work is more than a commodity to be exchanged. The land provides them with dignity, security and a sense of belonging. It also provides contact with

ancestors, for it is on the land which people have occupied that the graves of their ancestors are located. Land provides a secure social base from which people are able to deal with the wider world. Without the land, around which the tapestry of their lives has been woven, they are lost.

"I would rather die here.."

At a meeting between a Natal community of labour tenants and a large forestry company in June 1992, older members of the community made their sentiments about impending relocation clear. The community had lived on the farm for many generations. They had come to see the farm as their own, since they believed that their generations of labour for white farmers had earned them a right to the land. Before its sale to the forestry company, the farm was used as a labour farm, solely to house the farmer's labour. Then the company came and tried to evict the inhabitants.

"Two old people were sick at the time when you arrived," an old man told the company. "When they heard about your plans to move us, they prayed every night that they would die so that they could be buried on the farm and not be removed. Even I, I would prefer to die at the farm rather than be killed elsewhere. Maybe the company should rather take our lives and bury us there than kick us out to die somewhere else."

"We have been living a quiet life, grazing our cattle and ploughing. We like it just like that - nothing else. And we have survived. The company must bear in mind that our social life, our way of living is centred around these things...I don't know where I would go if I had to leave this land."

Web of significance

It is this deep attachment to the land and the web of significance it holds which has kept alive people's desire to return to land from which they were removed. Mr Andries Radebe is one of those. In 1977 the government removed him from his land at Crimen, to which he had freehold title. Today, 87 years old, he is still struggling to get back the land he lost. He explained why to AFRA: "The graves of my ancestors are at Crimen Farm. Our tradition depends on ancestors and it is very important for us to be near and to have unconditional access to their graves. We need to visit the graves for our ceremonies and to make important decisions. After the removal it was very difficult to do this. Even today, I desperately want to go back to my land at Crimen."

"I do not understand why we were taken away from Crimen. For many years after the removal nothing happened on the farm. In 1988, it was sold to a white farmer. But even now there is very little happening there. Our houses, our schools and our church have been destroyed. I have never seen the grass so tall..."

Brutal process

The process of removal was often brutal and blatantly unjust. Mr Radebe remembered his eviction from Crimen in 1977 like this: "My removal from Crimen Farm happened in 1977. It is painful for me to think back to this event. I was never officially approached and told about the reasons why I had to leave my land. I was never asked whether or not I agreed with this, how much my land was worth, or any other such questions. I never received or saw any document relating to my removal, and I never signed any agreement or contract in this connection. I was simply told to pack my things and move."

"I recall that there was a meeting in July 1977, I think on the 20th, at which a group of eight white government officials and a black policeman told the community that they had to leave their homes and would be taken to Ezakheni Township in KwaZulu. The removals were to start on the following day. I was late in arriving to this meeting, as I had been at work during that day. I arrived towards the end of the meeting and heard some people asking questions about conditions in Ezakheni. I heard from other people that many people had raised objections to the removal during the meeting."

"After the meeting people rushed to their homes to pack and make arrangements for their cattle. I loved my land at

Crimen. I did not want to go, but we had no option. During the days of the removals, there were soldiers on the road on Crimen Farm. There were six or seven trucks full of soldiers. We knew there would be trouble and we could even get killed if we resisted. So we had to go to Ezakheni."

Mr Hadebe, another Crimen landowner, remembers how he was 'compensated' for the land he was forced to leave: "They gave me R500 for my land. They asked me if I was the one who had a large piece of land and they gave me the money."

Poverty and hardship result

And what awaited the victims of forced removal when they were torn away from their land? The Pickard Commission of Inquiry, set up to investigate irregularities in the Department of Development Aid, acknowledged that poverty and hardship was often the result of forced removal. In a summary, setting out his general observations and recommendations, Judge Pickard spoke of the work of the Department: "Removals of black people from certain areas designated to be white, to areas identified to be black, became almost its primary function. This entailed, inter alia, the creation of infrastructures to receive persons so moved and to provide the necessary basic facilities required to make such removals possible. True enough, the policy was sold on the basis that all such removals (forced or



A new arrival at Waaihoek resettlement area. Can she forget?

voluntary) would be for the benefit and general betterment of the persons so moved. History has, however, shown that this was not always achieved. Unhappiness, hardship, economic deterioration, unemployment and the like were frequently the result of such removals."

This is what Mr Andries Radebe found in Ezakheni. He and his family, like many others, had to abandon security and relative comfort for a new life with meagre options: "When we arrived there we were put in small houses. We were told to get rid of our things from home, as we would not be needing them at Ezakheni.

"Our lives changed drastically at Ezakheni. Everything was money. There was not even a small garden for us to plant food. If you wanted to eat, you had to pay a lot of money. You had to pay for a house in which to stay. You had to pay for transport.

"At Ezakheni there was no place to keep your cattle. In 1977 I had 10 livestock. I had to take them to Matiwane's Kop. At Matiwane's Kop a number of them died. Others I had to sell to get money. By 1987 I had no cattle left."

In a report on forced removals in Natal, published in 1983, the Surplus People's Project (SPP) described Ezakheni as being in no way a self-sufficient urban centre, nor a model township.

"A proper hell"

"There are very few openings for local employment and unemployment is high. The township is a displaced suburb of Ladysmith which is where most of its workers are employed and where most of the income they earn is spent. Facilities, though superior to those found in many more rural relocation areas, are inadequate to service the needs of 50 000 people. Water shortages

have recurred periodically. In 1977, 4 000 people were without water for three weeks because their reservoir had dried up. Work only started on a new reservoir to ease the problem in 1980. There is no electricity in the site and service section and residents are disturbed about the lack of street lighting which they feel encourages crime and violence.

"Most of the people relocated into (Ezakheni) have come from rural backgrounds and have had no previous experience of township life. Adapting to their alien surroundings has been a struggle and the strain of that adaptation is evident in the social fragmentation, the violence and the high crime rate in the township. Eliot Mngadi, currently mayor of Ezakheni, describes the place as 'proper hell'."

What is to be done?

Ezakheni and other townships born out of forced removal still scar the landscape of the present. The Mr Zungus, Mr Radebes and others cannot forget, cannot let bygones be bygones. And it is unreasonable to expect them to do so.

Resolution of the land question in South Africa must take into account the economic, social and psychological harm that has been inflicted on the victims of forced removal. Steps must be taken to repair the damage of the past so that shattered lives can be made whole again. Only then can we begin to talk of building a new South Africa.