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The Africa That Pushes Back **By Mukoma Wa Ngugi** **BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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I have been asked many times a variation of the same question: "Why do Africans wait until it is too late?" For most Westerners, Africa is hunger, war, despotism, AIDS and poverty - full of Africans who are either helpless victims, or who choose to sit on their hands, only lifting them up to accept Western handouts.

But there's another side of Africa, the one that pushes back. This side is comprised of political and social organizations and activists, school teacher organizations, journalists, and health professionals, as well as women, worker and youth organizations that patiently chip away at Africa's problems, usually with no funding, media coverage, or national and international recognition to speak of.

These Africans work against great odds to prevent famine, war, human rights abuse, the spread of AIDS, and a host of other urgent issues. When tragedy strikes, they work hard to ameliorate the effect. But even when they aren't facing political persecution, they are under-funded and without the protection that comes with media coverage. They are the unseen, under-supported and unrecognized pillars of African societies.

When I was in South Africa last summer, attending a conference, the Center for Civil Studies at Kwazulu Natal University organized a Durban Reality Tour to counter the "be happy, don't worry" tourist tours of beaches, cultural dances, and national wildlife parks. We went to one village where we found little children with discolored feet

because of playing barefoot in contaminated fields – chemicals having seeped into their playfields from nearby factories owned by the new black elite. The reality tour took us to visit with shack dwellers living in fields after being forcefully evicted from their homes by the South African government.

Meet Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African shack dwellers' movement that has been at the forefront of organizing the residents against evictions. The work of Abahlali baseMjondolo is all the more complex because the poor from neighboring Zimbabwe and Mozambique also trickle into the poor settlements to compete for already scarce resources. When South Africans attacked other Africans in poor townships and settlements in May 2008, killing over 50 immigrants, Abahlali baseMjondolo rose to the defense of the African immigrants. They declared, "A human being cannot be illegal."

While the rest of the world this past July was celebrating Mandela's birthday, giving millions of dollars to pet causes and celebrating the fall of apartheid, Abahlali baseMjondolo trudged on fighting evictions and xenophobia, under-funded and unrecognized.

Then there is the AFRICA 15% NOW! Campaign that is pushing African governments to commit at least 15% of their annual budget to health issues. In a continent where thousands of Africans die daily from preventable and treatable diseases, this is an urgent and worthy campaign. If they are successful in making African governments take responsibility for the health of their citizens, instead of leaving it to international NGOs, millions of lives over generations will be saved. Yet in the West, the AFRICA 15% NOW! Campaign is absent from any discussions on the short- or long-term solutions to the health crisis.

Meanwhile in Kenya, women from Kibera, the slum worst hit by the political violence following the flawed elections earlier this year, formed an organization to deal with police and ethnic violence. The organization, Kibera Women for Peace and Fairness, has over the last few months, evolved to deal with issues of AIDS, violence against women, and other social justice issues.

Then there are several U.S. based organizations such as TransAfrica and Africa Action that work shoulder to shoulder with these courageous African NGOs. These organizations have been involved in practically every issue affecting the continent, from AIDS drugs patents that benefit pharmaceutical companies at the expense of the dying to the crises in Zimbabwe, Darfur, and the Congo.

With an Obama presidency on the horizon, activists in the United States and Africa have formed, Resist-AFRICOM. The U.S. African Command Center seeks to coordinate U.S. military operations in Africa but the activists see this as a further militarization of U.S.-Africa relations. Better equal trade than more guns and bombs.

So the question isn't whether Africans sit on their hands waiting for Western handouts. Rather, the question is why it is much easier for us to listen to philanthropists talk about what is wrong with Africa rather than the serious and dedicated political activists on the ground. Why are we not helping those who are helping themselves?

We love glossy packages that promise big bangs and super solutions. Take the Bill Gates Initiative, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa that promises super seeds

for super plants to end famine in Africa. A simpler and more long-lasting solution lies in organic African farming, growing more food crops over cash crops, the diversification of African agriculture, and the depoliticization of food and other basic human necessities.

The point is that every little bit of support counts and it can come in many forms – moral solidarity, awareness-raising, or financial support. But this help should not be afraid of the Africa that pushes back - or come at the expense of long-term solutions. One helping hand should not kill dreams with the other.

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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, *Mukoma Wa Ngugi*, is a writer and political analyst, the author of *Hurling Words Consciousness* (AWP, poems 2006), a *Foreign Policy in Focus* contributor, where this commentary first appeared, and a political columnist for the *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*. Click [here](#) to reach Mukoma Wa Ngugi.

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