

Launch of Akiba Mashinani in Nairobi, Kenya

27th November 2003.

One has to go back to March 1991 and to the Sharpeville commemorations at the very first Federation meeting in South Africa, to recall an African Federation gathering as poignant, as moving as this morning's launch of Akiba Mashinani in Nairobi Kenya.

The event was a high intensity replication of the usual Federation gathering. Busload after busload of slum dwellers arrived at Kasarani Gymnasium in downtown Nairobi, until there were thousands of poor people, mainly women, sitting patiently for hours as the hall filled up and the programme participants got their act together. They were entertained by enthusiastic community cultural events and by the usual barrage of exhortations, platitudes and slogans from the masters of ceremony. Then they sat patiently through a long list of speeches from Ministers, dignitaries and international guests.

And yet there was a spine tingling poignancy to the proceedings. The thousands of slum dwellers in the audience were celebrating the launch of their very own movement. This was a kind of coming out celebration for Kenya's urban poor. As one of the banners said, the launch of Akiba Mashinani meant that voice and visibility was at long last being given to one of the most viciously exploited and marginalised urban poor classes in Africa. After decades of total insecurity, characterised by violent evictions and other aggressive anti poor practises by the State, the people of the slums of Nairobi and other Kenyan towns had gathered in their thousands to launch their own organisation, and to invite the recently elected leaders of the country to work with them to eradicate homelessness, landlessness and poverty. Kenya's dispossessed had come together to declare their intention to transform the face of Nairobi, one of Africa's most troubled but dynamic cities.

Shack Dwellers from South Africa and Uganda were there to help in the preparation of the launch and the sharing of the festivities. After two days of intense engagement they returned to their homes, infused and energised by the optimism, confidence and emerging power of their Kenyan comrades. They had been empowered by the knowledge that the Kenyans had not only come of age, but were aflame with a self confidence and an excitement that was going to simultaneously challenge and enhance their self-same struggles back home.

The patience and persistence of Pamoja Trust and hundreds of community leaders has at last paid handsome dividends. Nairobi's urban poor have at last got a real platform on which to build, an authentic voice that seeks engagement with formal institutions committed to change and that reaches out to similar communities in other parts of Africa and the globe in order to learn and to teach, in order to give and receive, and to build a movement that has the potential to bring real change to the cities of the South; a change to the built environments and a change to the current power relations that create the conditions for their extreme inequality.