QWASHA! CLIMATE JUSTICE COMMUNITY DIALOGUES COMPILATION VOL 1: VOICES FROM THE STREETS

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I INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 expresses a commitment to environmental rights and guarantees the rights of all to participation and expression.¹ Yet the vast majority of ordinary South Africans have not mobilised around these rights in the context of climate change. Why is this the case?

Many writers have suggested that the low level of participation by activists and members of poor communities is due to the lack of knowledge about and interest in the climate change phenomenon. However, this research suggests that this may not necessarily be the case, since marginal communities have already started to feel the impact of climate change in their daily lives, like the high and rising costs of basic food staples such as flour, maize, vegetable oil, sugar and other staple grains, as well as the rising cost of energy reflected by increases in energy prices (25 per cent annually since 2008 in South Africa); this, coupled with the increase in droughts and floods that have led to the general reduction in food supply and rising uncertainty about the future.

This article – and the Qwasha! Project on which it is based – used the occasion of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) Conference of Parties 17 (COP17), which took place in Durban during November and December 2011, as an opportunity to try to investigate the relative absence of rights-based climate change mobilisation. It did so by dialogueing with various members of South African civil society about their understanding of the climate change phenomenon, their views on the formal COP17 process, as well on the role of the official civil society space hosted by the Committee of 17 (C17) civil society organisations in facilitating participation and critical expression for ordinary people outside of the officialdom that has come to characterise international events such as COP17.

¹ University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), School of Built Environment and Development Studies.
² Qwasha is an isiZulu word [v/i], imperative, singular of ukuQwasha (v/i) to lie awake without sleep, very alert. Used in everyday language to denote becoming conscious of one’s surroundings.
The Qwasha! Project uses a web platform as a depository for materials gathered after setting up, training and facilitating local collectives to run local archival hub stations across eThekwini municipal area. Initial networks have been created and interest is high in the 15 Durban communities: four in the South Durban basin (Umlazi, Chatsworth, Wentworth, Folweni); four in the centre (Durban CBD, Umbilo, UKZN, Overport); and seven in the northern parts of the metropolitan area (Inanda, uMzinyathi, KwaMashu, Marrianrige, Clermont, KwaNgcolosi, Durban North).

Qwasha! Climate justice community dialogues compilation vol 1, is essentially a series of ‘pavement-broadcasts’, made on the streets, based on audio conversations, recordings of songs, life stories and interviews by the Qwasha! collective-in-the-making. The bulk of observations, interviews and conversations took place between November and December 2011. Typically conversations were initiated by an open-ended question such as: ‘Can you tell me what you think COP17 is about?’ Based on the response, follow-up questions were then asked. This approach proved useful to the extent that no two interviews were responded to in the same manner; hence a great variety of responses and perceptions were generated.

The audio recordings consist of a total of 55 semi-formal interviews and 17 audio recordings of songs and conversations. Among those interviewed were: three local development practitioners/members of local development organisations; four members of C17 organisations; 10 women activists (especially rural (6) and elderly women (3), but also three young women respondents) who gave perspectives on how climate change/Cop17 impacted women’s lives; four respondents from the ‘COP17 volunteers’ or the ‘Green Bombers’, as they came to be called; and 25 random interviews, which included stories of fisher folk and members of subsistence farming communities, casual workers within the services, securities and cleaning sectors, taxi drivers, and informal traders at the Warwick Junction Market Precinet and migrant communities. Three of the interviews were with official participants within COP17, nine interviews and conversations were with activists attending the alternative civil society spaces organised by C17, and eight interviews and conversations were with artists and counter-culture activists to gather views on how culture and critical awareness can inform and critique the politics of climate justice. The above, taken together, represent a sample of the demographic variables including, for example, gender, age, literacy level, class position and race.

So what are the participants’ views on climate change? How has the COP17 process influenced their understanding and capacity to make a change from an individual, group and community level, if at all? What are the messages that are filtered down to the streets where ordinary people dwell? Can ordinary community voices find relevance in these global negotiations – or in the organised civil society activities?

The views captured in this series can be regarded as a reflection of micro perspectives of how ordinary people understood, framed and articulated a narrative about the global climate change phenomenon. This narrative helps provide a counter-balance between official and formal civil society discourses, which are framed within a ‘summit’ discursive paradigm that were in circulation during COP17 in Durban. Some scholar activists have held that the COP17 ‘summit’ can be read as a platform for nation states to negotiate global issues. As a fellow researcher, Felix Platz, put it at a Centre for Civil Society (CCS) seminar presentation: ‘an arena in which different actors construct, articulate their issues and discourses’.

Below we have selected and rendered to written text, a few quotes from the audio interviews, songs and retellings, which seem succinctly to capture the essence of the entire audio collection, whilst taking cognisance of the need to avoid bias and to be demographically representative of the total sample of views shared.

When asked about her perceptions of what COP17 is about, Emily Dlomo, a long-time gender and community organiser from KwaMashu, whom we met on the streets of Durban during the march on the Global Day of Action (3 December 2011), said:

People are asking what is COP17, not much has been done on the ground to show people the uselessness of these negotiations, out of ten people only three could tell you what is climate justice. Only a select few in city based NGO [non-governmental organisation] have an idea. Even as we march here today, I can promise you that all these people standing on the sidewalks have no idea whether we are marching in favour of climate change or against it. Much more needs to be done at community level where talk about the effects of climate change can be explained based on people’s lived experiences. 87% of arable South African land that was stolen by the apartheid regime away from its original users is yet to be returned, the new democratic regime has only been able to redistribute … like 4%, that means we do not have enough land and the little land we have has been poisoned by the same industrialists and large-scale commercial farmers. Unless these facts are at the centre of climate justice agenda, it will remain an area colonised by middle-class environmentalist.

Emily Dlomo is advanced in age, but her spirit is energetic, having been active since the 1970s in the struggle against apartheid and the oppression of women; she is still fighting to this day. She shares her uncertainties about the future of South Africa, especially in this day and age where the challenges seem so much more, yet the enemy is not as clearly defined. Emily Dlomo feels that rural people, especially women, have been neglected by the current political dispensation; yet the same rural communities hold the answers to the challenge of climate change.

Regarding rights, Nobuhle Sokhela is frustrated. Nobuhle, who matriculated in 2000, has two children and lives with her mother and three unemployed brothers in Embumbulu in the south of Durban, stated:

It seems black people and poor people in this country do not count for much, we have been denied our rights to a better education, we have been denied the opportunity to get decent employment; I don’t want to talk about water and housing … we have had to struggle for every bit of good thing we have … now they are telling us that climate change is going to
cause more floods and droughts which means even the weather is being turned against us. Then you ask me about paper rights ... they mean nothing if you have no potatoes or greens growing in your garden ... you are as good as dead.

When we asked Ndumiso Sondezi, a young community organiser from Inanda township in the north of Durban, what he thinks about the official COP17 negotiation process taking place at the ICC, he put it this way:

Those people gathered in there don’t know how to reverse climate change because to reverse climate change means to let go of this modern lifestyle, reliance on petrol and burning coal for generating electricity.

Ndumiso is an unemployed youth, he has been a head of his household of four siblings since he was 15, when both his parents passed away due to illness. He is a community activist who is involved in many voluntary projects in Inanda and KwaMashu townships of Durban. He is of the view that the solution to climate change lies in radically altering all that which is considered 'normal' in the urban modern society and looking to rural communities as examples of how to use energy resources efficiently.

The above is an isiZulu protest song sung by activists while protesting outside the Democratic Socialist Movement event at the C17 People’s Space venue at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN); activists staged a disruptive walk-out because of the bad conditions at the climate refugee camp, exhaustion from excessively long bus and train rides, hunger and no space to take direct action against the Durban COP17. Loosely translated, the song means: The Black Boers are causing us worry ... the Black Boers are causing us to burn up. It is a word play on the Boer; the previous oppressors and controllers of state power and its attendant violence, who have now been joined by aspirant members of the new black ruling class after transition to democracy in South Africa.

Hlengiwe Mkhize, a mother of three and four grandchildren from the rural areas outside of Pietermaritzburg, gave this response:

I have come as a mother from the rural areas to the march in order to add my voice to the people who are demanding attention from the government and NGOs to consider people living in the rural areas, and that climate change is really putting our lives in danger. I don’t believe that these negotiations are legitimate because it is the same people causing pollution negotiating with their government friends about the direction of our lives (rural communities). Even the organisers of this march are all well fed city people who have no idea about what they are talking about only that it pays their salaries.

Hlengiwe informed us that she had to borrow money from her neighbours in order to attend the march because she was under the impression that they would make their way into the main conference hall at the International Convention Centre (ICC) and interrupt proceedings for the day. In which case, she had hoped to tell the COP17 delegates of the hardships of having no food...
because the rains have failed and seeing all your children leaving the rural areas to seek work in the cities, only to return sick or dying.

Mzonke Poni, a long-time community organiser in the Anti-Eviction Campaign based in Mandela Park, Western Cape, had this to say regarding the civil society process towards the COP17 activities in Durban:

I must say I have a whole lot of uneasy feelings regarding the whole manner in which things were approached. Although we can see a lot of effort went into the logistics, we commend this, but of course as grassroots organisers, we cannot but wonder and ask: who really is controlling the civil society space, who is coordinating the space or how the space is being managed? So far what a lot of us have seen is that this whole process has been a power relationship in terms of those that coordinate and also those that are excluded from the coordination. Whenever a space is created, within civil society, we must realise that when we talk about civil society then we are talking about different groups and these groups operate differently. Some are professionalised NGOs, you look at trade unions you know … they are professionalised, you look at community-based organisations which are grounded at a community level. But when we come to events such as the COP, the professionals dominate the civil society voice and dictate the means to engage with the powers that be. There are all these divisions, in-terms of the use of language.

Having been involved in earlier social movement mobilisations against UN conferences, first in 2001 at the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) held in Durban, and then in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Mzonke bemoaned the apparent decline in radical politics in the social movement sector, noting that the spirit and rapport of the C17 process lacked the grassroots organising and movement building ethos that had characterised earlier mobilisations. Because of the concentration of discussions amongst a chosen few leaders, many activists were not well informed about the political strategy of civil society engagement with the official COP17. The reluctance by many activists who did make it to Durban to participate in C17 activities at the People’s Space and a refusal to be made to play along in domesticated top-down political performances of the C17 aspirant elite seemed more of an issue than the lack of knowledge about the impact of climate change on poor people’s lives.

From Cape to Cairo (Azania, Azania, Azania)
Morocco to Madagascar (Azania, Azania, Azania)
iAzania yizwelethu, soliwela nge bhazooka … (Azania, Azania, Azania)

[From Cape Town to Cairo, from Morocco to Madagascar … Azania is our land we will fight for its liberation with our bazookas …]

The song above was sung during the spontaneous mass walk-out of social movement activists during the first plenary session of the Democratic Left Front (DLF) in the main lecture theatre venue of C17 People’s Space; this led to a subsequent slow ‘boycott’ of many other activities in the People’s Space by community activists. Those involved in the interaction lyrically registered protest or disagreement by pounding the floors and furnishings in a repertoire of supportive rhythms typical of the toyi-toyi genre of political refusal in song or musical arrangement. This, along with other militant songs sung by activists outside official venues and at the climate refugee camp, suggests that on the street the mood was less reconciliatory towards the activities at
COP17. Despite intimidation and the exclusion of activists, they continued to speak/sing a language of contentious collective actions, bemoaning the domestication of South African activist response by C17 as a kind of NGO occupation of social movement space.

An old Mkhonto we Sizwe liberation isiZulu song was ‘remixed’ in the following manner:

*Makuliwe... makuliwe omakuliwe makuliwe ngoba uObama akafuni ukusayina phansi makuliwe ... uyabhaleke nang’yabaleka uObama nezinja zakhe ...*

[Let there be war because Obama does not want to commit and sign an agreement. Look Obama is running away, he is running away with his dogs.]

By the terms of these lyrics, the COP17 is framed as an occasion for confrontation equivalent to the days of apartheid. In the past, the place where the song names (United States (US) president Barack) Obama used to refer to an apartheid president, specifically HF Verwoerd, PW Botha or JG Strijdom. Now the symbolic leader of global apartheid is the US president and the rest of the countries of the global North who refuse to commit real emissions cuts and move to a carbon free economy. The point being that though activists were not given the space to articulate a clear critique of the COP17 within the official civil society process, the consciousness among most was as clear as daylight and those we interacted with during the course of the research felt at best disappointed by C17’s ‘sell-out’ politics.

Bertha Swanerpool a soft-spoken activist from the Northern Cape had this to say:

The pamphlets are saying climate change in also about gender justice, how are the C17 leaders showing sensitivity to gender issues by making women travel over 24 hours and then command them to get ready to march upon arrival? We came here because we have a real problem with our place, it is very historical, and in around 1816 after the wars at Wittevier, the colonial queen Victoria of Britain, gave land to the people. Five Xhosa families and some coloured families. All the children attend the same school. We are brown people, not only black; we work together, there is no difference on race. But for the past five years we have been experiencing more droughts and constantly run out of food we want to talk to other communities experiencing these difficulties because maybe together we can come up with solutions; we have not been able to do this because right after the march we are told to gather our things for the trip back home.

Looking visibly exhausted, Bertha was sitting on the side of the road leading up the Durban beachfront, with what looked like a bag of her clothes, which she took with her on the long march because of her concerns about the safety of her personal belongings at the refugee tent. She spoke in a regretful tone at having travelled all the way to Durban and the prospect of the long trip back to the Northern Cape.

Activists who came with the Africa climate caravan were also disappointed, we spoke to Violet Mncube, a social worker and rural women’s rights activist from Zimbabwe:

... little has been said about the links between climate change and the prominence of lifestyle deceases like the increase in cases of HIV and AIDS, we need to be more vocal in criticising the role of industrialised countries especially their contribution to emissions of greenhouse
gases. A lot has been said about how poor people and countries must adapt to climate change, yet not much has been learned from traditional and indigenous cultivation techniques like the case of Zimbabwe: we are using uncomplicated methods like discouraging the use of large-scale tractors for cultivation. Instead, people concentrate on digging single holes for cultivation of a combination of food crops that are mostly to meet the needs of a household, not commercial goals of profit making. We also strongly discourage the chemical fertiliser industry.

Violet felt she expressed the opinions of many activists from across the continent who had made the long journey to Durban. She shared how many activists expected much more critique of a Western capitalist development trajectory and a stronger Pan-Africanist solidarity because of the vulnerability of the African continent and its people due to climate change; especially since COP17 was taking place on African soil. Yet, in the language of C17, no such critique was articulated. This, for her, represented a compromise that did not capitalise on converging African voices around a common threat.

During the march on the Global Day of Action, a large group of people (about 400) dressed in green official ‘COP 17 volunteer’ tracksuit uniforms formed a rearguard of the march and began to physically attack other protesters who were chanting anti-capitalist and anti-African National Congress (ANC) songs or displaying placards critical of the policies of the South African government as they marched.

We interviewed Xolani Zungu one of the people in the ‘Cop-17 volunteers’ group who had this to say about COP17:

"South Africa civil society should be celebrating COP17 as another ‘World Cup’ event and proof that the South African president Mr Jacob Zuma is well loved by the international community ... Mr Zuma is going to solve the climate change if people just vote for him ... the purpose of the march was to go and congratulate and encourage the South African government on a job well done."

The above quote demonstrates the often-contradictory sentiments that prevailed amongst the marchers, who were all unified by the desire to demonstrate a show of strength for forces in South African civil society. The banner at the front of the march also added to this lack of clarity, as it read something like: ‘Civil society united against climate change’, which was a slogan not too different from the one used to brand the official Durban COP17 event. As a result, there were many informants who thought the march was a celebration of the South African government’s success as the host of the global negotiations.

Thembekile Khumalo, street trader (selling socks, sweets, underwear and other items) at the Durban Warwick Market Junction area, pointed out that:

"My son, this conference business, whether it is about war or jobs whatever ... you just have to look at who are the people speaking and what are their own conditions of life. We poor people need not be told about climate change and its dangers ... we are already feeling them in our makeshift shacks or crumbling ‘RDPs’ [government-built housing scheme]; we don't have water not to talk about toilets, I have been unemployed for ten years as you see me sitting here selling these small items ... When it starts raining; I become worried because I don't know if I will find my children and shack standing when I return home ... the weather and the world
has changed for the worse … especially for people like me, I don’t need a conference to tell me that, I live it every day …

III  MAKING SENSE OF THE TESTIMONIES

After extensive interactions with civil society actors at COP17, a picture that emerged was that politically, the march on the streets of Durban during the Global Day of Action could be read as a metaphor for the state of formal civil society in South Africa today. With the NGO leaders standing on raised platforms, having been seduced by the allure of the gleam and false comforts (bottled water, laptops and riding on truck transport as opposed to slogging it out on the streets) as signals of being liked and/or accepted by fat-cat politicians, remaining aloof from the monochromic T-shirted masses. At the back-end of this procession was a quasi-military formation – the ‘Green Bombers’, policing what are acceptable utterances and what are not, by threat of physical violence, the bodies of subalterns only useful for symbolic display to an external gaze of national and international media. The march became a poignant summary of all that has gone wrong in co-opted civil society spaces, it suggests that the form of articulation that formal civil society in South Africa is taking has become less imaginative and less progressively militant, a tamed civil society, which has become a rehearsed spectacle, acting more as an accomplice to power rather than a challenge to the established hierarchies of power.

At global forums such as typified by COP17, the views of ordinary people are often dismissed as having a shallow understanding of the complex issues being dealt with. Yet, micro perspectives such as those sampled in the quotations in part II above, can offer a powerful accompaniment to the silences and gaps in official archives; especially when an event is over and is in the process of being forgotten. Using reported speech has presented an opportunity to interrupt the flow of history-making narratives around mega conferences such as the COP, and to give space to African marginalised voices to ‘speak’ through creative texts, such as Qwasha! Climate justice community dialogues compilation vol 1. Our focus was less about ordinary people’s agency in climate change debates as circumscribed in national media or represented in the formal COP17 literature (although this is very important), and it was more about taking respondents’ experiential accounts about climate change, the COP and the alternative spaces opened for critical engagement and how these can link the past and present to the future of climate justice activism.

Though framed in a repertoire of experiential life-histories, casual conversational expressions and in protest songs; most respondents we spoke to

revealed an understanding of climate change as the rise in global temperatures and the failure of seasonal rain patterns resulting, for some in droughts, and for others in flooding. There was a shared sense that these changes had something to do with pollutants and human actions by large industries. In the context of South Africa’s recent history of injustice, which saw the majority of the African population systematically expropriated from their arable lands and removing the possibility for self-sufficiency for food production. The unprecedented hikes in food prices are not an academic matter, as Emily Dlomo pointed out above.

The official COP17 talks focused on efforts to ultimately secure a global agreement to reduce the amount of CO2 emissions (to levels of 350 ppm, according to mainstream scientific consensus, a minimum required to ensure that global temperature rise does not exceed an average 2°C increase in temperature levels); these attempts remain meaningless unless they also recognise that current levels of CO2 are a result of the fact that countries in the global North have been industrialising since the Industrial Revolution, and that, this was done largely at the expense of the rest of the planet, especially people of the global South. As such, there is a debt owed, especially, to the unborn children of the global South. Ignoring this acknowledgement and the continued postponement of reaching an equitable agreement that can be globally enforced, ultimately translates to the perpetuation of contraventions of the rights to life, a healthy environment, adequate and nutritious food, water, decent housing, and other related rights against the majority of the populations of the South. In contrast, the official talk about climate change in exclusively technicist and rational scientific parlance with scant (if any) reference to socio-historical justice issues made the COP17 seem, to ordinary people, just another occasion for developed countries and wealthy members of governments and the ‘Next Government Officials’ (NGOs) of the South to eat, strike deals and then postpone getting binding commitments to making substantial changes to the ‘business as usual’ approach taken by most countries of the North.

We observed that many respondents in and around the various activities during COP17, articulated themselves in songs and dance performance, it is for this reason that we felt that in this research project, a song cannot be just a song, echoing African art historian Margaret Drewal:

In Africa, [musical] performance is a primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed ... Not only that, but performance is a means by which people reflect on their current conditions, define and/ or reinvent themselves and their social world, and either reinforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders.\(^7\)

Perhaps then, activists are on point when they sing that climate change negotiations cannot be ‘business as usual’ any longer; contestation is required, because US president, Barrack Obama, the leader of what is believed to be

\(^7\) MT Drewal Yoruba Ritual Performers, Play, and Agency (1992) 17.
the most powerful country on earth is ‘running away’ from the responsibility to commit to making a change in the development model utilised by his country, along with ‘his dogs’ – referring to other developed countries who have similarly shown reluctance to commit to radically changing how production and profit is accumulated in the global North. In a sense the songs are a commentary about the legitimacy of the entire COP negotiation process leading up to what was the 17th occasion in Durban. The implication is that until the day on which these climate negotiations move from recognition of justice and equity to being at the centre of all talk of change, only then may the legitimacy of the entire process be restored in the eyes of ordinary people. There is a basis for this view; one needs only consider the fact that, so far, none of the developed countries and mainstream media in general, has emphasised the human rights dimension and rights of the planet when discussing the climate change crisis. Instead, dominant narratives from the countries of the North emphasise that countries of the South are equally responsible to reducing emissions and adapting to the consequences of climate change.

In general, many of the respondents of the interviews and conversations felt that they were largely barred from most of the official COP17 venues, as well as being left out of the formal orchestrated civil society programme (though many participated in the march on the Global Day of Action). Most raised the critique of the climate change within a generalised critique of capitalism as a socio-economic system, many pointed to inequalities and the proliferation of injustice as a result of capitalism. The crisis of climate change is not separated from long-standing modes of crisis within which people on the margins are forced to exist. Climate change and outside mobilisation of rights discourses are understood not in isolation from other pressing mobilisations such as those against privatisation of water or land evictions to make way for industrial agriculture and so on.

Thembekile Khumalo’s frank sentiments seem to capture the tone which most of the respondents adopted in relation to COP17. Most were sure that there need not be a conference held 17 times in order to realise that something drastic has to be done about climate change and that capitalist production is the main culprit behind the industrial pollution and poisoning of the environment. As such, conferences represent the extension of business in that they end up self-perpetuating themselves, not for the sake of finding solutions, but rather by becoming the ‘business’ – to paraphrase Thembekile Khumalo. Some even make a career out of and constantly pursue networking opportunities from each successive meeting in a different part of the world. Violet Mncube pointed out that on the ground, poor people especially African women, have had to absorb the additional burdens of uncertainty and disease. From these women’s perspective, then, COP17 was not meant for them since they need not be told by a conference that their quality of life has worsened, this is a reality they ‘live (with) everyday’ as Thembekile Khumalo put it. In a similar vein,
Hlengiwe Mkhize felt that many governments and NGOs pretend to speak particularly for African rural women, when in actual fact little practical action is done to ameliorate the conditions of life for rural people; yet conference after conference makes reference to rural vulnerability.

Furthermore, the elusive average of 2°C within which global warming should be contained remains strongly contested by most African activist and other allied networks, arguing that it is still dangerously high, with a potential for destructive impacts on biodiversity, subsistence agriculture and regularity of extreme weather (excessive flooding and regular droughts), all of which threaten the quality of life of African populations.

Regarding the C17 civil society process, Mzonke Poni’s ‘uneasy feelings’ are not without basis either; as we too observed from the onset that there remained large divisions on what a shared civil society position should be regarding the UNFCCC. The members of the C17 were adamant that in the interest of maintaining unity, the C17 would not engage the substantive issues up for negotiation at the UGCC, nor, philosophical, ideological, political matters linked to the climate change negotiation processes; these would be left to individual organisations and C17 leaders citing that ‘there are differences, with some organisations working with business and some being anti-capitalist, which meant it was difficult to do common messaging’.

However, a closer examination of the groups leading the C17 reveals that most have been members of the Climate Justice Now! Activist network, and as such, were part of a political and ideological critique of the COP negotiations; this then begs the question, why did these organisations adopt a neutral stance when they had been privy to the contestations that characterised global civil society’s engagement with the COP process? The programming of much of the C17 activities was done to the exclusion of critical input from grassroots’ activists to the extent that there was no space provided prior and during the COP17 event for discussions on political strategies, let alone political action beyond the carnival march. Therefore, it was not surprising to hear views of people like Xolane Zungu along with other ‘Green Bombers’, who believed that the march on the Global Day of Action was aimed at congratulating the South African government for a job well done.

While at the same time, people like Bertha Swanerpool expressed the opposite sentiments of complete lethargy and deep disappointment that so much organising energy had gone into putting on a show for high government officials rather than focusing on building relationships among the multitude of activists attempting to create strategies for harnessing a grassroots’ movement for climate justice. In this way the C17 initiative is regarded as being short sighted, amounting to silencing the possibility of a unified civil society initiative to go beyond the COP17 event as the only frame of reference for articulating a politics of climate justice. Far from leaving activists empowered and energised, the activity left them feeling disoriented and discarded (in their terms: ‘as used condoms’) after playing a political game of some unseen committee (C17) situated in a phallic tower (UKZN) on an aloof hill looking...
down at the refugee camp where the makeshift tents for poorer activists were located.

IV BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

We went into the ‘field’ armed with clear questions, a reasonable amount of theoretical readings on contemporary activist issues and backgrounds of being community media activists ourselves with a modest research strategy that aimed at getting responses that could be checked against other sources for factuality and truth-worthiness. What we came out with was a rich collection of life stories where people told us what they wanted more often than what we wanted to hear. The subjects of the many conversations and interviews we held, spoke back at us in a way that no document could ever do – no matter how well written. Giving us a glimpse of the world according to how they saw it (or sang it). These glimpses, fragmented as they may be, provided the tools with which a different construction of the past-present could begin to take shape.

For us, the Qwasha! Climate justice community dialogues compilation vol 1 was first and foremost, an artistic contribution. After all, stories need not be either true or false and need not be proven beyond being talked about. They do, never the less, carry other types of empirical valorisation, like additional commentaries on apparently unrelated subjects that have a bearing on the truth-worthiness of the story being told at any point in time. Furthermore, our effort in Qwasha! Climate justice community dialogues compilation vol 1 was targeted at testing new ways of finding out how people at the margins create, express and remember their own selves. We were enriched by the effort and learnt lessons about the limitations of our effort. There is a need to properly ground community archival efforts in the actual communities themselves where genuine relationships can be nurtured and outputs shared as a means of deepening the bonds among members. As it were, the COP took us away from our communities into the conference circuit where we were constantly treated as outsiders.

Very limited resources meant that we stretched ourselves too thin and exhausted the little resources available on an event that bore very little results for people on the ground. However, the experience of co-habitation, constant production meetings and field application has built lifelong bonds among collective members and was a necessary step towards a more long-term arrangement. Based on the experiences of producing Qwasha! Climate justice community dialogues compilation vol 1, we have begun a conversation on how best to re-frame and refine texts on the online archive in such a way as to allow them (the marginal texts and voices) to speak for themselves.