

"Land invasion is not the answer," says new NLC chair

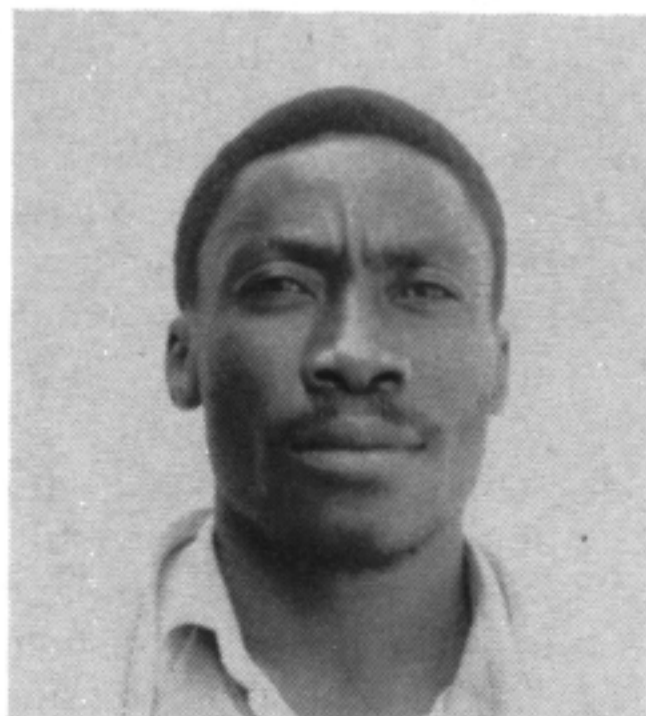
NEW chairperson of the NLC, Mdu Shabane, comes from a background which could stand him in good stead in his new role. He's personally lived through an attempted forced removal and the triumph of reprieve. Before he arrived at AFRA, and then the chairpersonship of NLC, he did voluntary work on various development projects in the area where he lived.

He was born in St Wendolin's, a peri-urban township 14 kilometres outside the industrial heartland of Pinetown in KwaZulu-Natal.

In 1968, the people of St Wendolin's, among them Shabane's parents, were removed to make way for a power station. "They were removed under the Expropriation Act," he says, "but my father wasn't compensated, so maybe we could bring a claim?" he speculates. "All he got was two wooden temporary shelters. I was five years old at the time."

Shabane recalls that the family faced a further attempt at removal, in the 1970s. "This was under the Group Areas Act. But the community resisted this and we were reprieved in 1986.

In August the National Land Committee (NLC) elected a new chairperson. He is Mdu Shabane, AFRA's Redistribution Unit's head. Shabane has worked for AFRA for three years in a fieldwork capacity and has been involved in national task teams of the NLC.



After the reprieve, the community got involved in development of the area - building roads, putting in electricity, water and a clinic."

Shabane became involved in these projects through the local civic organisation, where he served on the management committee. He was also the chairperson of the St Wendolin's Youth Organisation. The work, although almost full-time, was voluntary. "My first paid job was as a clerk at a bank in Pinetown," he says. He worked there for four years, after which he realised the bank wasn't where his future lay. "It was too bureaucratic and didn't allow for any creativity," he recalls. "Because of my involvement in St Wendolin's, I wanted to work on development issues full-time."

AFRA came to his rescue, with a vacancy for a fieldworker in 1992. Although taking the job meant living in Pietermaritzburg, he says he hasn't regretted making the move. His recent election as NLC chair will mean less work in the field and more time in meetings. It could also spell frustration as the

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network restructures itself to meet the challenges of land reform within the context of the reconstruction and development programme.

Reflecting on the NLC's achievements before the watershed of the April election, Shabane points out that in its earlier days, the NLC and its predecessor the NCAR (National Committee Against Removals) was able to challenge the former government's policies on behalf of people who were voiceless. "The eventual removal of the racist land legislation was a terrain of struggle led by the NLC," he says. "Then there was the introduction of Advisory Commission on Land Allocation. Although the Commission was not what people wanted, it was some indication that the former government recognised the struggles of the NLC. There were also smaller issues, such as the campaigns, various marches and the protest at the World Trade Centre before the election," he says.

Now the challenge for the NLC is to ensure that the promise of a just land reform programme becomes real. "Before the elections, the ANC promised to improve the quality of people's lives. It promised to either return land or to compensate victims of forced removal and it promised to redistribute 30% of land over the next five years. The main challenge now is to make sure this happens and that the landless get access to the 30% of land for redistribution."

Shabane acknowledges that the restitution process, soon to become law, is limited in terms of how many people's

land needs will be satisfied. "A lot will depend on interpretation of the legislation. It will be critical for the NLC to focus on how the procedure can be extended to include land rights for people like labour tenants, for example. We must try to broaden the interpretation and push the boundaries," he says.

Another area where the NLC should contribute is in developing a framework for land reform. "We need an integrated rural development programme. Land reform will only have meaning if it is linked to the RDP rural strategy. The government has not yet produced a White Paper on Land Reform and we need to identify potential gaps in the future policy. For example, state assisted land acquisition through the Provision of Certain Land For Settlement Act is quite expensive."

He identifies a major weakness of the NLC as being its reactive style of operating. "We haven't been proactive enough in shaping policy," he says. "Our strength is our experience and the diversity of our affiliates. We have a lot of information and experience but we haven't put this to good enough use as a network."

Having gone through a strategic planning exercise recently, the NLC is now putting in place the structures to make the new strategy work. His role will be to ensure that the new strategies get implemented.

Shabane is openly critical of recent land invasions. "There's a lot of sensitivity about this. People are still in a resistance mode but land invasion is not the answer. There are also the pressures

of ongoing farm evictions, violence against rural tenants and impounding of livestock. These things make people desperate and frustrated but there are processes being put in place now to deal with land claims and general land needs. It won't be long before there is a legitimate mechanism through which to address land claims. People need to be patient. NGOs in the NLC, such as AFRA, should be talking to rural people with land needs about these new processes," he says.

He believes the new government and Ministry of Land Affairs should be commended for the work they've done, especially around restitution. "Whereas the former government's policy was to dispossess people, the new government has gone out of its way to address the needs of the dispossessed. There has been a clear shift to try to redress the imbalances in land ownership."

But he is critical of the overtures that are being made to assuage the fears of white property owners. "Perhaps the government is too apologetic to white property owners, assuring white farmers all the time, saying their land rights won't be tampered with."

The NLC should work with the new government as a supportive, but critical partner, he believes. "We share many views on land reform and how this, should be addressed. This is a good enough basis for us to be supportive of the government. For example, there are Presidential Pilot Projects around redistribution. We should ensure that these are properly implemented."