

MUSEU DA PESSOA

História

The Vital Voice of Activism

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Sinopse

Family background. Creation and development of activist organization. Explanation of the political and economic situation of Zimbabwe. Personal and familial connections to activism. Elaboration on the main political challenges faced in Zimbabwe. Difficulties with employment in the country. Thoughts on racism and Zimbabwean discrimination. Views on social forums and the world urban forum.

Tags

- [Zimbabwe](#); [political activism](#); [environmental activism](#); [poverty](#); [politics](#); [censorship](#); [racism](#); [immigra](#)

História completa

Projeto Memória de Habitantes Realização Instituto Museu da Pessoa Entrevista de Mike Davies Entrevistado por Thiago Majolo Rio de Janeiro, 23 de Março de 2010 Código: FUS_CB016 Transcrito por Luiz Fernando Ferreira Revisado por Isabela Borges Vidal Polido Lopes P/1 – First of all, I will ask your full name and the place that you were born. R – My name is Mike Davies, I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, my family lived there for about a hundred years. We originally came from Wales. I'm not a farmer, I've never entered a farm, we always lived in the cities. I'm 53 years old, married and had four children who live around the world as a result of the economic and political crisis in my country. The city I live in is the capital, with a population of approximately 1,5 million, but it's very much a seasonal population, so it swells in the dry season when the people come to the town to work and then go back to the rural areas in the rainy season to work in the land. So the population changes quite a lot. I've been an activist for about fifteen years, I started as an environmental activist working to protect some public space against property developers who wanted to turn it into a business park. As a result of that work, I was approached by residents of the area where I live to help create a residence association to represent the interests within the neighborhood. We soon realized that local organization is not very effective on wider issues, particularly on political issues, on policy. And we then joined another organization which had some representation across the city, and we worked in other fields. We drove a corrupt mayor out of office through public pressure, but the mayor was then replaced by an appointed commission, so there was no democracy at all. For three years, we fought to hold elections, we used legal messages, we used civil disobedience, tax boycotts, demonstrations, publicity. And eventually, forced the government to hold elections, at which we had a democratic election canceled. That cancellation lasted one year. When we instituted some democratic programs, the mayor had an open-door policy once a week. He would sit at the town board with the heads of department. Anybody could come in and say "I got no water, these are my problems", and he would turn to them and say "What are you doing about it?". That lasted for about three months, until it was banned by the government because they didn't want these discussions. And then the counsel was suspended, the mayor was fired, and again we had a commission that lasted for five years. So, in the last ten years we had about two and a half years of democracy at the local government level. I chaired the organization from 2002 to 2008. We changed the organization from a group of neighborhood associations into a direct membership mass organization. We had about eight thousand members, primarily in the poorer areas of the cities. Zimbabwe doesn't have favelas, barrios or slums in the same way that you have in Brazil. The city itself is only a hundred and twenty years old. There was nothing there before, an open land. It was created as a colonial city, and consequently, it doesn't have an organic development. You have the workers over there, industries over there, the rich are over there, the central business is over there. There's no integration. This was designed to control the working class, maintained by the independent government because it suits authoritarianism as well, and they are quite happy to keep the colonial controls. While at the same time condemning colonialism, they practice it themselves. The organization is primarily intended to give people a voice, but also to give people a sense that they themselves can take control of their own environment, their own destiny. So it's very empowering program and very subversive, because it cuts at the roots of the authoritarian regime. We've had many battles that we've been beaten, we've been to jail, some of our members have been tortured, others have been killed by death squads in an effort to suppress populist voice of the people. At the moment in Zimbabwe there is a unity government between the opposition and the ruling party, which has suppressed civil society. There's no space for us to talk at the moment, apart from which there's no free press, there's no independent television or radio stations, so people do not have access to the information that they need to make decisions about their lives. The counsel, which is democratically elected, does not have the ability to increase the democratic space. Many of the counselors are unemployed, or do not have the resources. It is not a paying job to be a counselor, you have to pay for yourself. You get some allowance

when you attend the meetings, but it's rubbish, it's nothing. So while we have a democratically elected counsel, the power remains with the minor pulled authorities, who were appointed by the previous commission. There's an illusion of democracy, but there's no real democracy, the same as in many countries. I stepped down as chair of the organization in 2008, and another person became the chair. Since then, I've been outside of the organization, while the chair has been getting used to being in the chair. And now I work as a country coordinator for the International Alliance of Inhabitants, which is a remarkable group of organizations and activists from around the world. Lots in South America, as you know, and slowly spreading into Africa. I'm responsible for trying to create one in Timor, in Southern Africa, that will attract membership from community organizations and individuals in Southern Africa. Ahead of the descending of inhabitants in Dakar, Senegal, in 2011. P/1 – I'm very curious about something. Is there a moment in your life that you can remember that inspired you to be an activist? Or, not a moment, just life happening this way?

R: I came from a very political family. When I was young, we were raised as non-racists in a very racist society. I'm like many of my peers, I grew up with respect for black people, I met black people who were not domestic workers and servants, and I was always taught to respect people, irrespective of color or class. My father was a lawyer and defended trade unionists in the 1940's. He was very, very political. I went into university to study politics, I was in South Africa in the 1970's joining the Soweto uprising. As a result of that, I withdrew from an academic life and I went into exile in Europe because I didn't want to fight in the colonial army against the liberation forces, which I supported. My family was split. Half of us supported the liberation struggle, half of us were fighting for the colonialists. One of my brothers was working in Tanzania, in Dar es Salaam, for the liberation, and another brother was in the army putting land mines on the border to stop gorillas coming into the country. The civil war affected us very deeply. I returned to Zimbabwe in 1980 after independence, hoping to be an activist and to be engaged in building the country. It became very clear to me that the liberation was an elite accommodation between the leaders of the nationalist struggle and the former colonial power who retained economic power, while the nationalists had political power, and together they moved forward. There was no space for socialist activists at that time. I tried for a few years to find a place to work, but eventually I said "no" and I withdrew into my private life, my business and my family for about twelve years, until I got involved in environmental activism, which gradually brought me back into a more political role. So, it's always been in my blood, I didn't have a moment in which I said "No, I gotta fight". P/1: A very political atmosphere. R: Correct. P/1: Besides the place where you work, what's the main organization in Zimbabwe? What are they fighting for, what are the challenges of the organizations, mainly in these issues of the residents and habitations and this kinds of things, more than others? R: I think that the overall fight is for basic human dignity and respect, and it manifests in different areas. For us, in a struggle for service delivery, for access to municipal services, for others is access to education, access to other resources... The struggle is pretty much the same. We, in 1999, in a civil society, including our organization, created the movement for democratic change, and it came out to the trade unions and students and resident associations. Within two years, our movement had become a political party in the parliament and was run by people in suits and ties. Many of us, activists, were pushed out of the movement. We continued to maintain an independent voice, but we suffered from infiltration by state agents to disrupt us, but also by political parties from the opposition, who used us as an entry into politics. They would come and work for us, run meetings for two or three years, then they would stand for election as a counselor and bye, bye [laughs]! It happens everywhere. P/1: There's one big challenge here in Brazil, I think most of the people said that here: how to build this new mind, this new generation to work with it? Because it is difficult to path everything you know with all the values. How is this in Zimbabwe? R: It's very difficult in Zimbabwe because we never had a democratic country in a real sense. It has been what we say "not just for the stomach but also for the mind". It is a very intolerant country for progressive ideas. It is a small country and it has a small mentality. Even now, the vast majority of people, the peers living in the land and everywhere are naturally conservative and cautious about change. The cities, as I said, people come to the cities to work, to earn money, but their hearts are in the rural areas. So even now if you ask black Zimbabweans "Where's your home?", they will say "In the rural area. Not in the city". People do not have the emotional attachment to the city, they don't want to invest effort in the city, it's there to be exploited for the benefit of their home in the rural areas. It's very difficult to get people to commit to community development. They come there as individuals, they don't know their neighbors, they're not of the same tribe, they come from different areas. So, it seems that it will take some generations to work after. People eventually will say "No, rural is my heart". That would allow more community organizations. At the moment, we are a very small voice, but it's better than no voice. P/1: In my personal opinion, there is a lot of very good literature in Africa nowadays. Is this happening in Zimbabwe? Are you trying to use literature to make politics, like in Nigeria, Chimamanda, and other kinds of art? Is there in Zimbabwe a very strong artistic voice? R: You must remember, in Zimbabwe we had a population supposedly of fifteen million, but seven million people have left. 70% of the adult population was gone. I came from a richer area, I'm upper middle-class. My wife, as an immigrant worker, she goes to England to work for two months, then she comes home for one, two months, then she goes back. So many of our creative minds, the journalists, the writers, the poets, the filmmakers, have left. But there are voices, and one particular phenomenon has happened in the last few years is music with culture, and we have some very good rappers in hip-hop who use the poetry of music to express social discontent. It's disguised, it is political in the lyrics, but because it is hidden in the music, they can't do it. But literature, writing, it's very difficult. People don't make money. We have a 90% unemployment rate, only 10% of people have formal jobs. People exist by trading, by "making a plan" as we say, they get a small thing and sell it or they go to South Africa, buy goods, come back and sell them. The capacity to engage in cultural activity is very small. People are concerned with daily survival. Even me, I have a big house, I have one hectare of land near the city center, five kilometers, six kilometers from the center of the city, and I've had no water for four years in there. So I had to spend some time every day going to my brother's house getting water from his well, carrying it back, putting it in the car, and driving home... We had water for maybe two weeks after four years. So even for people with privilege, like myself, so much time is spent just on daily content. We had electricity cuts nearly everyday, some days we have no electricity for twelve hours, so cooking food is a problem. We don't have much time for creativity, let alone for political activity. I'm lucky my wife believes in what I do, so I can do the work I do. I'm unemployed. I sometimes get some research jobs, but many people can't. It's very difficult. P/1: I believe that good forms of communication, like the internet, aren't widespread. Is it very hard to organize events, or that kind of thing? R: Oh, absolutely. The Internet is... many people use it, but they go to internet cafes. I don't have internet at home, I can't afford it. It would cost me US\$150 a month to have internet at home. Nothing. Even to going to an internet cafe, it costs me a lot of money, it costs me US\$110. It's very expensive. Telephone calls, cellphones are very expensive. People just cannot survive. I've been fighting the Mugabe regime for ten years, I've been beaten, I've been to jail, I've been threatened. At no point I've thought "I'm going to leave", but now with the economic crisis, I can't afford to stay there. So, I have to either find some employment there, which means I would have to do the political work or I'll have to leave and go to England or South Africa and get a job. P/1: We have this big event in which people from lots of places in the world communicate. It's an easy way to know different things and to create new minds. How do you think this could happen in Zimbabwe? Like a dream, not a reality. What's your dream for this kind of thing to happen? How can you make it? R: The big problem for our future is that our children have gone [cries]. If your children go, you have no future [pause, crying]. I don't think about the future [pause]. Our

doctors have gone, 90% of our architects and our teachers have gone. Fundamental destruction of our society will be felt for generations to come. The only way I can engage in the struggle is by dealing with small issues on a daily basis. And events like this are very important because people can get an idea of what is happening. I'm not saying that the struggle there is the same as the struggle everywhere, it's a struggle for dignity and freedom. But we are so weak in Zimbabwe, we don't have people to fight, not physically fight, but to organize. People have such a low standard of living that they don't have the energy to engage and struggle. Many people who do engage and struggle are opportunistic, they come in to earn a few dollars, to come to a meeting, but it's understandable, they're doing it for material gain. I'm lucky I have some resources and I can do this without wanting political power or to make money out of the struggle, but there are a lot of very good people, the riches go day by day. The struggle is the same as in Brazil, or in Zimbabwe, or in Russia, to allow people to take control of their lives, to engage in whatever activity that they want, free from fear, free from depression. In Zimbabwe I couldn't do this. We couldn't have this sort of thing, there would be secret service listening when I walk home. I'm alright because I'm white, I'm privileged, but for black people to come and do this when they walk home, they get tapped on their shoulder and people say "Stop it", you know? Or they get beaten or killed. It's very, very difficult. P/1: And your sons left Zimbabwe to study, to work and they...? R: Left to work. There's very little work there; if you do work, you're doing less money than you should for that job, you can't earn a living wage. My wife working in England as a home base career earns more in a day that I could earn in a month working as a professional. So, they left, most of them left when they were about eighteen or nineteen years old. Went to England or South Africa and never came back. One of them came back last year for a week. There's nothing there for them, their friends have gone as well. P/1: There's any kind of discrimination for Zimbabweans in others places, in Africa, South Africa for example, as a richer place? Do you think this happens? R: Only in South Africa. Zimbabweans are very well educated, they speak English, we have a 90% literacy rate, even in the most remote areas people speak English as a second language, they can read and write. So, when Zimbabweans leave the country, they find it quite easy to get work. There are 2 million Zimbabweans in South Africa, for instance, maybe one million in Britain. But there are no refugee camps. You will not find any refugee camps of Zimbabweans, even if maybe half of our population has left the country, because they find work, they trade, whatever. In South Africa they've been subject to vicious attacks along with other African refugees, Somalians, Ethiopians... The South Africans, to us, are like the United States are to you, in Brazil and South America, it's the imperialist power in the region. The South African economy is so dominant. But elsewhere, Africans are very hospitable, they open their homes and their hearts to refugees. You have the responsibility to look after people who have suffered misfortune. This is what we call "ubuntu", which is the spirit of community. When there was a war in Mozambique we had several million refugees in Zimbabwe, there were no attacks on them, nobody ever said "These are foreigners, they must get out". And at the same time, South Africans are attacking our people now, viciously burning them to death. Many people died last year in xenophobic attacks in South Africa. P/1: I'll ask you just one more. Most of the people who live in Zimbabwe are white or black? Who goes to work, the white? The black stay in Zimbabwe, or... R: No, no. P/1: There's no difference at all? R: The population should be fifteen million. Of that, the white population is thirty thousand. It's very, very small. The vast majority of the refugees are black, but the only racism in Zimbabwe is from the top, it's from the Mugabe regime who uses race to try to divide people. And it doesn't work. It's a political tool to take farms and assets away from whites by a very small percent of blacks who are prepared to do that sort of thing. You would be very unfortunate to find any incident of racism on the street or amongst the people. You don't really get that. Of course, there are racists, white racists, black racists... But in general, people are people in Zimbabwe. There's rich and poor, of course there are class differences, but even that, people have a real sense of humanity. We have an expression in Zimbabwe, "Make a plan", which means that we can have difficulties, but we can go this way, or we can go that way. It's not the "mañana" aspect, but what do you say in Portuguese, in Brazilian? "Não faz mal, não faz mal...", that spirit might get us through this problem. P/1: I said it was the last, but I swear, now it's the last one. R: You got people waiting, so... P/1: Yeah, just your opinion about this kind of event. What are the weak and the strong points of this kind of event? R: I come to these events with no expectations, because then I'm never disappointed. If you have expectations that are not met, you think that was a waste of time or whatever. For me, the importance of these events are the networks that are created between people. Not so much the formal discussions, the talks that we can read on the internet and stuff, but it's the human interaction, that allows links to be made, allows us to talk about our experience and to learn that we are not unique. Many people make that mistake, "My struggle is my struggle, is the only struggle that has ever been, and you must listen to me, you must support me, but I won't support you". The social forum is part of the social forum movement, it's a non-hegemonic, non-authoritarian event. I'm a bit disappointed that there are not more people. But then in the other hand, you walk 500 meters and you're going to the world urban forum, which is this elitist, well-funded event where they talk about participation, they talk about the right to the city, but you're going there and one of the first things you see is a restaurant that is only for the leaders. I can't go to that restaurant, you know. So, they talk one thing and they practice another thing. I'm a dialectician, I seek to understand the dialectical process and I don't see it happening here. There's no dialectic, there's that and there's this. I would like to see some synthesis, either the social form invades it, takes it, makes a statement. You know, they don't even let you put banners up. If you're going with a banner and put it there, they will confiscate it. So, they are not allowing people to have a voice, they're the critical voice of that process, and that is very wrong. P/1: They say "This is their voice", but it is separated from everything... R: Yeah, it's safe, they keep you in the backstreets... But you won't have a voice there. That's not right.