27 August 2019
Cotonou, Benin Republic

LA FEDERATION D'HABITANTS DES ZONES DE TAUDIS / BIDONVILLES EN REPUBLIQUE DU BENIN

NIGERIAN SLUM / INFORMAL SETTLEMENT FEDERATION

jei JUSTICE & EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES – NIGERIA
community legal support initiative

FEDERATION OF URBAN & RURAL POOR (FEDURP)

CENTRE OF DIALOGUE ON HUMAN SETTLEMENT AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION (CODOHSAPA) "Transformation and Development"

FEDUP FEDERATION URBAN POOR

JOINT PRESS STATEMENT: GLOBAL MOVEMENT OF THE URBAN POOR CONDEMNS FORCED EVICTION OF WATERFRONT RESIDENTS IN COTONOU; CALLS FOR URGENT ENGAGEMENT WITH RESIDENTS TO PREVENT FURTHER FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The Benin Federation of Slum / Informal Settlement Residents joins hands with sister movements from the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) movement across Africa to condemn the recent forced eviction of thousands of residents of Wxlacodji beach community in Cotonou. We further call on the Benin Government to engage with our members from waterfront communities across the city to find alternatives to the current projects that threaten further of tens of thousands of hardworking urban poor residents living along the waterfronts with displacement.

On Tuesday, 20 August 2019, the government demolished an estimated 160 houses in the Wxlacodji beach community without adequate notice or any resettlement plan for the thousands of residents who have suddenly found themselves homeless and living in desperate conditions.

According to the Neighborhood Chairman, Agbossi Anani, *"[Representatives of the national government, the mayor of Cotonou, and the national police] came with caterpillars [excavators] to destroy the informal settlements. To our great surprise, they evicted and destroyed over 160 houses. The evicted residents had no warning. Following the exercise, people are left homeless. Many are sleeping outside and we have already recorded the death of a 15-year-old young man." What kind of a country are we in?"* he lamented to Federation representatives who investigated.

The sudden forced eviction of Wxlacodji beach has thrown tens of thousands of waterfront residents across Cotonou into a panic, fearing that dozens of other communities may face imminent eviction by the same authorities and suffer the same desperate fate.

During the last week of July 2019, representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development and the mayor of Cotonou visited several waterfront communities along the Cotonou Lagoon and Lake Nokoué to mark some houses for demolition and tell people that they would be evicted within the next two weeks. No exact details were provided as to who would be affected and no information provided about resettlement or other provision for those displaced.

Federation members of six waterfront communities under threat quickly organized to write to the Ministry, the representative of the Littoral Department, and the mayor of Cotonou to seek more detailed pursuant to the country's freedom of information law. In violation of national law, three weeks later, the relevant authorities are yet to reply and provide any of the requested information.

The Constitution and national law in Benin unequivocally prohibits forced evictions and requires safeguards to protect people who may need to be resettled in the event of any development project. Benin is a signatory to the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both of which prohibit forced evictions and protect the right to adequate shelter. Among others, the applicable law requires the government to put in place a full resettlement action plan prior to any project that would displace more than 100 households. This and other legal safeguards apply irrespective of tenure state.

Despite these clear provisions, the forced eviction of Wxlacodji beach community took in violation of the clear provisions of national law and contrary to the fundamental rights of those evicted. Tens of thousands of residents of other waterfront communities now live in daily fear of the same fate.

Adding to our grave concern is the publication of a communiqué by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development on 21 August 2019 that amounts to a blatant smear campaign, defaming residents of the waterfronts of Cotonou as "uncivilized" and a risk to public health. In cities across the West African region, we have seen similar public assaults on the character of people living in informal settlements portend mass forced evictions and greed-fueled land grab.

We, the residents of waterfront communities and our sisters and brothers from movements of the urban poor across the region, condemn the forced eviction of Wxlacodji beach community, the threatened eviction of other Cotonou waterfront communities, and forced eviction in general. We remind our leaders that forced evictions do not solve development problems; instead, they exacerbate poverty, destroy wealth and existing infrastructure, and undermine human development. We reaffirm our commitment to partnering with our governments to improve the quality of life in our communities without displacement and exploring all alternatives to eviction.

The Benin Federation of Slum / Informal Settlement Residents is a movement of the urban poor for dignity and development with membership across dozens of informal settlements in Cotonou, supported by Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI) and affiliated with Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global movement of slum dweller federations from across over 33 countries.

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