Making a Living in Contemporary Rural South Africa

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Livelihoods and Landscapes: The People of Guquka and Koloni and their Resources

R e searchers and commentators have long been intrigued by the connection between people and landscapes, especially in rural environments, where such connections have remained inextricably linked to the impact of industrialisation and modernisation on society. Accounts for the people-landscape nexus reveal that humans contributed to shaping existing landscapes and adapted their livelihood strategies to changing landscapes. The interconnectedness of people and their rural landscapes has largely been projected as a sign of backwardness. Such projections are clear from images of Africa and its people, which have historically been linked to the livelihoods of rural inhabitants as if all people in the continent live in rural areas and under similar conditions. Mudimbe clearly articulated those images and their link to rural environments in the following words: ‘from the insistent image of the African continent as a “refused place” arise: a hot piece of land on which pathetic beings lived. A place to which the African continent as a “refused place” arise: a hot piece of land on which pathetic beings lived in rural areas. The authors correctly argue that livelihoods can be differentiated according to the way in which people make a living outside the sphere of economics. The book argues that livelihoods should be understood as co-production; that is, an outcome of a continuous encounter and interaction between the natural and social, the cultural and the social. The book therefore endorses the view that people and their environment are inseparable. The recognition of the mutual influences between the two (i.e. people and environment) is expressed through the links between livelihoods and landscapes. Landscapes, defined in their social, institutional, political, economic and biological contexts, set the scene and provide the natural resources for people to construct their livelihoods. The ongoing interactions between the ‘natural’ and the ‘social’ transform each other through conscious human action and agency. The assumption of the book is that livelihood transformations can be read from the transformations that occur at the level of landscape and also vice versa, that the landscape tells us something about the nature and dynamics of rural livelihoods’. This conception of livelihoods and landscapes is opposed to the idea of co-evolution, where the human-environmental relationship is less consciously managed. The book questions a common feature of the theses of deagrarianisation, diversification and modernisation, ‘which all appear to assume that the shift from agricultural land-based livelihoods to more diversified livelihoods is an inevitable and structural process’. It validates the deagrarianisation hypothesis but suggests the existence of the peasantry in South Africa.

Repeasantisation in the Post-apartheid Era

Studies on the decline of African agriculture reveal that the process was set in motion by a number of factors ranging from adverse agro-ecological conditions to population dynamics and state intervention. The question of the prospects of repeasantisation has resurfaced in post-apartheid South Africa in academic and policy circles. Drawing from Bandy’s seminal work on the African peasantry, Hebinck and Lent’s volume observes that the persistence of a peasantry does not only raise the question of why peasants have not totally dis-
appeared but also of what the prospects are for a process of peasanisation”. Defining peasanisation as a process by which rural people continue to make a living from utilising traditional livelihood strategies, the book not only suggests the existence of the peasantry in South Africa, but also links it with migrant labour. Migrant labour contributed to peasanisation through intense rural-urban migration. For example, migrant labourers, particularly the “Red” invest in the rural homestead to make a living from utilising traditional livelihood strategies, and this observation is confirmed by the increase in landlessness and partly by the reduction in the area of land per person divided by the increase in the number of people with access to land.4

Access to land was not only determined by the Natives Land Act of 1913 and Native Trust Land Act of 1936, but was also fundamentally shaped by planning policies. For example, betterment planning rearranged settlement and land use patterns under the guise of development imperative while also creating new, artificial boundaries of the development of bantustans.5 Betterment planning perpetuated the allocation and arrangement of access to natural resources that was central to the Natives Land Act and the apartheid state’s strategy to control and contain the black people after the Frontier Wars. This is so because betterment planning is based on the distinction of land categories for settlement, arable purpose and grazing purposes, which have been treated sharply with previously existing settlement patterns and use of the landscape.6 The Tomlinson Commission’s7 sought to redefine these categories of access to natural resources. It recommended that communal land tenure should be replaced by private tenure and that the rural population should be divided into a group of ‘Progressive farmers’. The landless group was to make a living in urban centres and industries in native areas. According to the Commission, the focus on black farming areas was not relevant, and the reserves were to be removed. Conceptually, betterment planning and the loss of land reconfigured resources, which in turn constrained existing livelihood patterns. It also changed the pattern of migrant labour.

As the authors have observed, the bantustan system provided jobs closer to the village. The question that arises from this historical condition is whether current policies change the configuration of resources that underpinned betterment planning in the 1930s. There is some merit in this observation. For example, the shift in land reform policy from access to land by the masses to a small group of black commercial farmers in 1990s suggests that South Africa is land reform projects that are not oriented towards farming above the peasantry. Despite these policy shifts the authors claim that peasanisation in rural villages was covered by the New Public Management of smallholder agriculture, and that the state should support that endeavour.

The authors’ call for peasanisation is challenged by case studies that demonstrate that there has been a declining role of agri- culture in the rural livelihoods of the inhabitants. It is unfortunate that the authors have not used land reform projects to demon- strate the viability of peasanisation and the form that it should take in the country. Clearly, South Africa’s market-driven land reform continues to determine access to land for housing, production and other development projects. The question arising from Hebinck and Lent’s8 edited volume is whether land reform in its current form has a negative or positive impact on peasanisation. Does the shift towards black commercial farmers advance black agriculture in the same way that white agriculture benefited from the apartheid state’s support for white-dominated agriculture and promoted policies and provided infrastructure that favoured white agriculture? As the authors note, this undermines their white counterparts whose access to markets improved the development of South Africa’s railway system, African producers continued to rely on wagons and sledges to transport their goods from farm to tractor, and from tractor to market”. Against this backdrop, what is required is a sympathetic state to support black farmers in post-1994 South Africa? Any form of state intervention in contemporary black agriculture should recognise the population and economic strategies that are in the social and physical characteristics of rural areas.

The State of Flux in Rural Areas

Rural development planning and approaches that ignore the dynamism of rural areas are most unlikely to succeed. As Hebinck and Lent’s book has shown, South African rural areas are not static; their bio-physical and social conditions have changed over the years. Moreover, rural areas such as Guqqua and Koloni are completely different from each other despite their location in the same vicinity. It should be noted that rural areas in South Africa are divided into two main categories. The first category involves white commercial farms. These farms have undergone significant changes over the last three decades or so. Most of them have been converted into game farms.9 The second category, which is central to the theme of the book, refers to areas of the former bantustans. Many studies confirm that areas of the former bantustans experienced large-scale degra- dation,10 which has been ascribed to a vicious cycle of overpopulation, deterioration of natural resources, migration and improve-

Notes

7. The consequences of the loss of land were worsened by mass killing of cattle follow- ing Nongququa’s prophecy.
8. De Wet provides a useful definition of bet- terment planning as “attempts by successive South African Governments to combat ero- sion, conserve the environment and develop agriculture in the ‘homelands’, and so also cut down on urbanisation, and in some phases even migrant labour, thereby keep- ing more black people in the homelands” (Chris de Wet, ‘Betterment Planning in a Rural Village in Keiskammahoek, Ciskei’, Journal of Southern African Studies, 15 (1989), pp. 326-345.
9. The purpose of the Tomlinson Commission was to advise government on the socio- economic development of black areas. The Commission’s Report of 1955 suggested plans for the centralisation of scattered re- sources, because the existing areas had no foundation for community development and growth (see Anthony Christopher, The At- las of Apartheid, London, Routledge, 1994).
10. In 1990, private enterprise managed 8.6 mil- lion hectares and received government spending covered some 17 million hectares.

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