

# WORKING Paper 16

## What is a ‘smallholder’?

Class-analytic perspectives on small-scale farming and agrarian reform in South Africa

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# Abstract

It is often argued that the primary beneficiaries of land reform in South Africa should be 'the rural poor' and 'smallholders', rather than 'emerging commercial farmers'. The term 'smallholder' is problematic, however, because it tends to obscure inequalities and class-based differences within the large population of households engaged in agricultural production on a relatively small scale. Much usage suggests that smallholders form a relatively homogeneous group, and fails to distinguish between those producers for whom farming constitutes only a partial contribution to their social reproduction, those for whom it most of their social reproduction requirements, and those for whom farming produces a significant surplus, allowing profits to be reinvested and, for some, capital accumulation in agriculture to begin. This paper argues that a class-analytic perspective centred on the key concepts of 'petty commodity production' and 'accumulation from below' is essential for understanding the differentiated character and diverse trajectories of small-scale agriculture within capitalism. The paper explores the policy implications of such a class-analytic approach, and proposes that land and agrarian reform should aim to support a broadly-based process of 'accumulation from below', in combination with supporting supplementary food production on small plots and fields by large numbers of rural (and peri-urban) households, in order to enhance their food security and reduce income poverty. This in turn could see a marked increase in the numbers of (black) small-scale capitalist farmers. This class would be well placed to play the leading role in reconfiguring the dualistic and racialised agrarian structure inherited from the past, through being able to compete with large-scale commercial farmers in supplying both domestic and export markets.

# Keywords

Land reform, agrarian reform, smallholders, petty commodity production, accumulation from below

# Acknowledgements

Thanks to Henry Bernstein for useful comments on earlier draft.

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# I. Introduction

Who should be the primary beneficiaries of redistributive land reform in South Africa, and how will land redistribution contribute to the reduction of rural poverty? Fifteen years after the transition to democracy, these remain controversial and contested questions. Despite its poor performance to date, and concern over low levels of production on redistributed or restored land, there is little sign of land reform being abandoned by the ruling party, the African National Congress. The powerful symbolic resonance of the 'land question' means that it remains high on the political agenda of post-apartheid South Africa. Recently, however, there has been renewed debate on the *economic rationales* for land redistribution, with a particular focus on poverty reduction, employment and economic restructuring. At least at the level of rhetoric, the primary beneficiaries of land reform are now, as in 1994/95, being identified as 'the rural poor' and 'small-scale farmers', or 'smallholders', rather than the 'emerging commercial farmers' that government policy was fixated on under the Mbeki presidency.

But what is a smallholder? In this paper I argue that the term is problematic because it tends to obscure inequalities and significant class-based differences within the large population of households engaged in agricultural production on a relatively small scale. Much usage suggests that smallholders form a relatively homogeneous group, and fails to distinguish between producers for whom:

- farming constitutes only a partial contribution to their social reproduction
- farming meets most of their social reproduction requirements
- farming produces a significant surplus, allowing profits to be reinvested and, for some, capital accumulation in agriculture to begin.

I also suggest that the term 'smallholder' does not facilitate analysis of the dynamics of differentiation within populations of small farmers (i.e. the causal processes through which inequalities emerge), and draws attention away from internal tensions within households (often gender-based) over the use of land, labour and capital. Furthermore, it can misdirect the formulation of land and agrarian reform policies aimed at addressing structural inequality, and result in misleading emphases on common interests in attempts to organize and mobilize small-scale farmers, when divergent (class and gender) interests, together with other forms of social differentiation, are often real obstacles to such attempts.

The term 'smallholder' does have a certain degree of *descriptive power*, when it is qualified by adjectives such as 'semi-subsistence', 'semi-commercial', or 'commercially oriented'. These sub-categories indicate at least some key differences in how land, labour and capital are combined within different households and production units and their associated farming systems, if somewhat imprecisely. The key indicators implicit in these sub-categories are scale of production and extent of marketed surplus. But this typology is much less useful when seeking *explanations* of differences and their underlying dynamics.

I argue that a class-analytic perspective on small-scale farming, centred on the key concepts of 'petty commodity production' and 'accumulation from below', is essential for understanding the differentiated character and diverse trajectories of small-scale agriculture within capitalism. The paper explores the policy implications of such a class-analytic

approach, and proposes that land and agrarian reform should aim to support a broadly-based process of 'accumulation from below', in combination with supporting supplementary food production on small 'garden' plots and fields by large numbers of rural (and peri-urban) households, in order to enhance their food security and reduce income poverty. It argues that a differentiated population of producers requires appropriately differentiated policies – as well as a politics of land that build on an explicit recognition of incipient class differences within the ranks of the 'poor and landless'<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. 'Small-holder farmers' as potential beneficiaries of agrarian reform in South Africa

How are 'smallholders' defined in arguments that land and agrarian reform should be re-oriented to benefit the rural poor? This section reviews recent literature, together with evidence on the nature and scale of the demand for land by black South Africans.

A report from the Second Economy Strategy Project recently commissioned by the Presidency argues that land and agrarian reform has a key role to play in creating rural employment, because it addresses key aspects of structural inequality (TIPS 2009: 9). The document notes that the small farming sector performs a much more limited employment and/or safety net role in South Africa than in many developing countries, as a result of past policies that coerced rural populations into migrant labour and dispossessed them of land<sup>2</sup>. In addition to forced 'de-agrarianisation', the former bantustans (reserves) were deprived of investment in infrastructure, services and human capital, which means that these areas (predominantly rural in character) now face a chronic development deficit. The report distinguishes between 'smallholders' and 'subsistence' producers, although no definitions of these terms are offered, and argues that investment in small-scale farming is imperative because of its potentially positive impact on poverty. This will involve institutional support to create economies of scale, increasing access to services and markets, land redistribution, facilitating rental markets for arable land in communal areas, expanded access to irrigation and water harvesting, and promoting forms of economic co-operation to facilitate access to value chains. Most of these interventions are focused on support for 'successful' farmers (presumably smallholders rather than subsistence producers).

The Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (DRDLR, 2009) announced by government in July 2009 identifies five categories of land redistribution beneficiaries:

- (i) landless households who seek land for subsistence purposes;
- (ii) 'commercial-ready subsistence producers', who are capable of a more commercial focus but need land and support to farm, mostly on a part-time basis;

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<sup>1</sup> Space limitations preclude an elaboration of the political implications of the class-analytic approach advocated in this paper. I am working on a separate working paper on this issue.

<sup>2</sup> See Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 21-224) for a detailed analysis.

- (iii) 'expanding commercial smallholders', who already farm commercially on a small-scale, but are constrained by lack of land and other resources;
- (iv) 'well-established black commercial farmers', who are already farming at a reasonable scale but are disadvantaged by location and other circumstances;
- (v) 'financially capable, aspirant black commercial farmers' (black businesspeople, who will mostly farm on a part-time basis).

Two key variables are evident in this typology: size of land holding and 'focus' of production (subsistence or commercial). The document does not prioritize any of these categories, or indicate the distribution of scarce state resources between different types of beneficiaries.

A recent collection edited by Ruth Hall contains several contributions that suggest that smallholder farmers, along with subsistence producers, should be the primary beneficiaries of agrarian reform in South Africa<sup>3</sup>. Hall and Cliffe argue (2009: 13-14) that coherent land and agrarian reform policies must provide answers to three 'foundational questions': (a) *land reform for what?* (clarifying its social and economic rationales, including issues of investment, productive land use, farming systems and employment); (b) *land reform, how and for whom?* (indicating the nature of the demand for land, clearly identifying intended beneficiaries, and specifying how land is to be acquired); and (c) *land reform, with what rights?* (indicating how property rights within land reform settings are to be secured). These elements of policy are inter-connected, and coherence involves ensuring a good fit between them, something which she suggests has been lacking in South African policy frameworks to date. A key gap is a focus on 'small-scale production by poor households on their own land' (Hall 2009a: 35).

In Hall's analysis, neglect of 'small-scale production' arises from the incoherence of policy as much as from deliberate choice. She describes the limited range of options or models of production and organization available to land reform beneficiaries at present, arising from the combination of market-based land acquisition, small grants for land purchase relative to farm prices, lack of subdivision of large farms, and the emphasis in business planning on maintaining the existing production regimes on acquired commercial farms (Hall 2009a: 25)<sup>4</sup>. As a result four models have emerged in land reform contexts: (a) large groups of beneficiaries who farm collectively as a single commercial entity<sup>5</sup>; (b) large groups obtaining farms and farming individually or in small groups, often after the collapse of group-based production; (c) individuals, families or small groups farming as a single commercial entity (usually established by wealthier beneficiaries with access to capital); and (d) joint ventures, such as equity share schemes, contract farming and 'strategic partnerships' (Hall, 2009a: 25-33).

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<sup>3</sup>This volume is in many ways a 'state of the art' summary of the debate on agrarian reform in South Africa. Several chapters by Hall comprehensively review the empirical evidence on the progress and impacts of land reform since 1994, and explore emerging policy options. These are complemented by useful chapters on the potential for employment creation through redistributive land reform (Aliber *et al*), private sector engagement in land reform (Kleinbooi), current dynamics in the commercial farming sector (Hall) and the politics of land since 1994 (Jara and Hall). Innovative approaches to securing land tenure on redistributed land and to institutional mechanisms for effective implementation are suggested in chapters by Lahiff and Cliffe, and an interesting experiment with alternative approaches to assessing land needs is reported by Andrews *et al*.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of this issue see Lahiff (2007) and Cousins and Scoones (2009), who describe a hegemonic narrative of 'viability' based on a normative model of large-scale commercial farming.

<sup>5</sup> Although officially discouraged since 2000, this model is still common and is dominant in land restitution claims settled by restoration of land.

Unplanned forms of production sometimes emerge after business plans have been found to be unrealistic or large group models have collapsed, or after land occupations (which can occur after long delays in settling a restitution claim - see Lahiff *et al* 2008). They usually involve small-scale, household based production, but without official support. Hall concludes that group models predominate in South African land reform. Her review of the empirical evidence shows that in most cases the livelihood and poverty reduction impacts have been minimal, although some studies may have underestimated non-monetised benefits (*ibid*: 44).

Hall proceeds to discuss alternative policy stances, and asks: who should be targeted to receive land and agricultural support, what should be the mix of 'subsistence, small-, medium- and large-scale farmers', and what does the choice of beneficiaries mean for poverty reduction, agricultural output, exports and employment? (*ibid*: 50). She suggests that agriculture needs to be disaggregated by scale of production, level of output, profitability, employment and debt, as well as by the number of livelihoods supported (*ibid*: 50-51). These questions are answered as follows: agrarian reform requires: (i) a more mixed farming sector and growing numbers of smallholders; (ii) increased opportunities for 'small-scale farming of commercial crops and subsistence production', often combined within the same productive unit; (iii) priority areas for restructuring include agricultural sub-sectors in decline, areas where land is under-utilised or high levels of debt are found, and places where opportunities exist for labour-intensive farming or agro-processing. Hall suggests that 'smallholder producers often have the potential to compete with large-scale producers' (*ibid*: 51). She concludes that the 'neglected option of smallholder production for consumption and the market should be the priority' in land and agrarian reform (*ibid*: 56).

How does this conclusion align with identified demand for land in rural South Africa? Hall (2009b: 68-71) reviews the available evidence, which shows that the great majority of rural dwellers who express a need for land desire less than 5 hectares, with a sizeable proportion wanting one hectare or less<sup>6</sup>. The reasons for wanting land were mostly for food production and secure residence (well over half of all respondents in the HSRC study of 2005), and a much smaller proportion wanted land in order to increase their incomes (between 15% and 34% in the HSRC study).

Andrews *et al* (2009: 175-181) report on the nature of the demand for land in the Breede River Winelands Local municipality in the Western Cape. Three quarters of the sample said their households needed land, and of these 61% indicated they wanted less than one hectare, 34% wanted between one and five hectares, and only 5 % wanted more than five hectares. The most common purposes for which land is needed are housing and household food production, with smaller proportions wanting to cultivate food or other crops for sale, to graze livestock or run a business. Andrews *et al* conclude that this is consistent with the nature of demand for land elsewhere in South Africa: the bulk of the demand is for 'small plots for smallholder production, primarily to supplement other sources of income, alongside a secure place to live, while the demand for larger plots for sizeable farming is restricted to far fewer people' (*ibid*: 175-76). They also suggest that the survey reveals the potentially significant role of land in multiple livelihood strategies of the poor, as well as the highly differentiated types and extent of land need, pointing to the need for a 'variegated land reform strategy to address these different types of land need' (*ibid*:181).

The participatory planning approach piloted in the Breede River Winelands municipality involved a 'visioning' exercise in which participants developed a range of alternative options for landholding and production (*ibid*: 185-86). Model A involved plots of around one

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<sup>6</sup> The relevant studies are Marcus *et al* 1996, CDE 2005, and HSRC 2006.

hectare, for food gardens (and occasional sales) cultivated by individuals and families, together with access to commonage grazing, and 35% of the total land for redistribution was allocated to this model. Model B involved 'smallholdings' of between 2 and 5 hectares, for 'small family farms' or co-operatives, on 25% of total land. Neither of these two models would involve hired labour. Model C involved small- to medium-scale intensive farms of between 5 and 20 hectares, to be operated by families or co-operatives, and some hiring of labour alongside self-employment. Another 25% of land was allocated to this model. Model D was a commercial farming option on holdings of 20 or more hectares, and would involve hired labour; 15% of total land was allocated to this model.

TIPS, Hall and Andrews *et al* appear to distinguish 'smallholders' from 'subsistence' farmers by identifying the production of crops or livestock for the market as well as consumption, as the key criterion. Size of holding is the other key variable. Hall (2009b: 51) indicates that a higher degree of labour-intensity distinguishes smallholders from commercial farmers, and sometimes smallholding appears to be equated with farming that relies mainly on household labour. However, at other times the term appears to be a catch-all for small-plot agriculture which contributes only part of household income, and is thus not clearly distinct from 'subsistence farming'. Smallholders in these documents are often referred to as forming part of another broad and undifferentiated category, the 'rural poor'.

Further inconsistencies in definition are evident in the study by Aliber *et al* (2009). The authors develop a number of agricultural employment and self-employment scenarios that explore the implications of alternative agrarian reform options, using baseline data drawn from Labour Force Surveys conducted twice every year by Statistics South Africa. These provide a rough indication of current numbers of small-scale agricultural producers and employees (see Table 1).

Table 1. Forms of employment in agriculture in 2005

Type of employment	Est. numbers
Large scale black commercial farmers	1000
Black smallholders & medium scale commercial farmers	200 000
Semi-subsistence farmers	4 000 000 <sup>1</sup>
Formal agriculture employees	70 881
Smallholder employees	100 000
Agro-processing employees	380 000

<sup>1</sup> From 2 000 000 households

(Source: tables 6.3 and 6.5 in Aliber *et al* 2009)

Aliber *et al* define 'semi-subsistence producers' as those engaged in agriculture mainly for own-consumption purposes. These are distinguished from smallholder black farmers, defined as small-scale producers who consistently market a surplus but who do not necessarily regard agriculture as a full-time activity or as their only source of income (*ibid*: 142). Elsewhere in the chapter, however, discussion of the LFS data suggests that this category derives from those who indicate that farming is their *main* source of income (which is a different criterion), and the authors also describe this group as 'emerging commercial farmers' (*ibid*: 136-37), or as 'semi-commercial smallholders' (*ibid*: 150)<sup>7</sup>. In the baseline scenario, smallholders and 'medium-scale commercial farmers' (not defined) are categorized together, and distinguished from large-scale black commercial farmers. Average

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<sup>7</sup> 'Semi-commercial smallholders' is the term used by Aliber *et al* (2009: 150) in their discussion of a scenario they term 're-peasantisation', which links the terms 'smallholders' and 'peasants'.

farm sizes and exact numbers within these categories are said to be difficult to determine from the LFS data, and the authors admit that their definitions of these categories are 'imprecise' (*ibid*: 141-42).

Aliber *et al* compare three consolidated agrarian reform scenarios in terms of net livelihood creation by the year 2020 (*ibid*: 154-55). A base scenario, defined as the continuation of current trends in agricultural employment and continued stagnation of former homeland agriculture, together with a failed redistributive land reform, yields less than a million net livelihoods, due mainly to small-scale gardening keeping pace with population growth in the former homelands (which off-sets the continued loss of jobs in commercial agriculture and agro-processing). A commercial farming scenario involves de-racialisation of commercial agriculture together with the commercialization and consolidation of farming in the former homeland areas. This yields relatively few net livelihoods, less than 500 000 in total, mainly in employment on commercial farms.

A diversified, smallholder-led scenario yields over 3 million net livelihoods. This model involves successful, large-scale land redistribution of 30% of commercial farm land, mainly to semi-commercial smallholders but with smaller proportions of land also being transferred to semi-subsistence and black large-scale producers as well. This scenario also includes maintenance of the productive core of white commercial farms, and 're-peasantisation' of the former homelands, (i.e. the resuscitation of 'semi-commercial smallholder' farming plus higher rates of land utilization by all those with fields). The scenario yields around 750 000 smallholders, and much higher numbers of semi-subsistence farmers (around 6.5 million).

The smallholder-led scenario not only creates the largest number of net livelihoods, but also supports around 20 000 large-scale back farmers, as well as over a million additional semi-subsistence farmers, and around 400 000 smallholder employees. Aliber *et al* argue that 'a balanced land reform package offers significant increases in all three categories of land reform beneficiaries' (*ibid*: 146). The scenario explicitly assumes that smallholder farming, both in the former homelands and on redistributed land, can be made into a more attractive economic proposition than it currently is, which will require a different set of land and agricultural policies than are currently being pursued. Aliber *et al* suggest that semi-subsistence producers also need to be catered for in agrarian reform policy, given 'the widespread importance people attach to having small amounts of land from which to supplement their diets' (*ibid*: 157). In their view the jobs created for smallholder employees are likely to be 'poorly remunerated and highly casual/seasonal', and they characterise this as an 'inferior economic opportunity' (*ibid*: 157).

Many of these contributions to the debate on who should benefit from land and agrarian reform suggest that beneficiaries should be disaggregated, and that policy frameworks need to be adjusted to cater for a diversity of needs and requirements, but that the category most poorly served by existing policies are 'smallholder farmers'.

In summary, this review of some of the recent literature reveals that:

- The term 'smallholder' is often defined and used in an inconsistent manner, referring, *inter alia*, to producers who occasionally sell products for cash as a supplement to other sources of income; to those who regularly market a surplus after their consumption needs have been met; and to those who are small-scale commercial farmers, with a primary focus on production for the market. Two criteria (often implicit, sometimes explicit) tend to predominate: size of land holding and extent of production for the market. Other possible criteria such as the use of different types of labour (e.g. household or family labour, hired workers or co-

- operative labour), or source of farming capital, are occasionally mentioned but rarely discussed.
- Surveys reveal that the demand for land in rural South Africa is focused for the most part on small plots for supplementary food production, but that a sizeable minority also desire extra land for farming as a source of cash income (but on small farms, mostly less than five hectares in size). Some authors suggest that it is this latter grouping that should be termed 'smallholders' and seen as a key beneficiary of land redistribution.
  - 'Smallholders' are often characterized as forming part of the 'rural poor', together with subsistence producers and landless households. The emphasis is often on commonalities rather than differences eg in assets, income, investment and class identity.
  - Not discussed at all are the dynamics of change and the underlying processes which might explain why some producers are more 'commercially-focused' or 'commercial-ready' than others.
  - The need for policy frameworks that cater for a range of land needs and scales of production is widely acknowledged, but rarely discussed are possible trade-offs in the targeting of beneficiaries and the allocation of scarce state resources.
  - Contributing to the difficulties in defining categories such as 'subsistence farmers' or 'semi-commercial smallholders' more precisely is the lack of reliable large-scale survey data on small-scale agriculture in South Africa.

### 3. A class-analytic approach to small-scale farming

Existing definitions of smallholder farming tend to obscure important differences between households engaged in agriculture. In the past the common term for small-scale farmers who rely mostly on household labour, and who sell at least part of their produce for cash, was 'peasant', and this still a key term for some analysts (e.g. Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009, Hebinck and van Averbeke 2007, Ploeg 2008) as well as activists in national and transnational rural social movements such as the MST in Brazil and Via Campesina (Borras et al 2008). Some authors refer to both smallholders and peasants, and the basis for the distinction is not always very clear. Differences within the peasantry are often discussed in terms of 'rich', 'middle' and 'poor' peasants.

Academic debates on the peasantry in the 1970s and 1980s generated a vast literature with many competing approaches and much controversy. Rather than trying to summarize these here, I outline a version of a class-analytic approach, centred on the notions of petty commodity production and accumulation from below.

#### Petty commodity production

In contrast to views of smallholder farmers as being somehow outside of a commodity-based economy or constituted by pre-capitalist relations of production (as in notions of a 'peasant economy'), it makes more sense to locate contemporary smallholders within capitalism. This is an economic system in which most production and consumption is fully commoditized and mediated by competitive markets, productive assets (capital) are

unequally distributed and held largely as private property, and those who do not own capital must sell their labour power to those who do in order to obtain their means of existence.

The social relation between capital and labour defines the two essential classes of capitalism - the capitalist class and the working class (or proletariat). Profits have their source in the surplus value produced by wage labourers (i.e. the value of output over and above that needed to reproduce the worker, which is paid as wages) which is appropriated by the owner of the enterprise, the capitalist. Capitalist enterprises are under constant pressure to reinvest a proportion of their profits back into production, in order to survive within competitive markets. This enables successful enterprises to enlarge their scale of production, or level of output and income, and make yet more profit. The dynamic process of capital accumulation via reinvested profit is the driving force of capitalism.

Smallholder farmers in the contemporary world cannot reproduce themselves outside of commodity circuits, i.e. of markets for agricultural inputs, outputs and consumer goods, even when production involves family labour and no wage labour is hired, and a large proportion of output is used for home consumption (Bernstein, forthcoming). Cash income is needed to purchase many other goods for purposes of both production and consumption. If cash income from marketed farm produce is insufficient to meet these needs, then family members will have to engage in other forms of livelihood in addition to farming, such as wage labour, crafts or petty trading, in order to achieve their simple reproduction. 'Simple reproduction' here means both daily reproduction (maintaining the means of production and levels of consumption) and generational reproduction (raising the next generation of family labour).

Farming (as with small enterprises in general) is inherently risky, and the simple reproduction of rural households is by no means assured. Producers have to contend with both risks and opportunities arising from their conditions of access to land, credit and markets, their relationships with powerful groups such as landowners or agro-processing companies, the vagaries of nature, relative prices within markets for inputs, outputs and consumer goods, and state policies. Shocks such as drought and disease can undermine productive capacity. Inevitably, some producers fare better than others in responding to these risks and opportunities.

Within capitalism, small productive enterprises based on family labour power are best understood as *petty commodity producers* (Bernstein, forthcoming). Such producers combine the class places of capital and labour within the enterprise: they own the means of production, unlike landless workers, and are in this sense 'capitalists', but they also use their own labour power (unlike capitalists, who hire in the labour of workers). Some may hire in occasional labour for specific purposes, but family labour predominates. Peasants, like small shop keepers who keep long hours, or craft producers who labour for days to produce items of low market value, exploit themselves within the production process (which is one way of understanding the labour-intensive character of small farming). Often the sexual division of labour within the farm-household results in the exploitation of female and child labour by men, who direct the production process and in effect occupy the class position of capital. Capitalism tends to both create spaces for petty commodity production and to destroy them as the social division of labour alters over time due to technological change, the effects of competition, etc (Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985).

Some agricultural petty commodity producers make use of opportunities to produce a substantial surplus over and above the amount needed to secure their simple reproduction, and can reinvest all or part of this surplus in extending the material base of production unit (e.g. through cultivating more cropping land, intensifying land use through irrigation or the

application of higher levels of fertilizer, expanding livestock enterprises, purchasing tools or equipment which increase productivity, and hiring in more labourers. Such producers move beyond *simple reproduction* into *expanded reproduction*. Often this will mean having to hire in wage labourers. The farm begins to assume the character of a capitalist enterprise, dominated by the logic of profit and loss within competitive markets, an enterprise within which a proportion of the surplus value produced by wage labourers must be reinvested in production in order to maintain its productive capacity. These enterprises begin to engage in capital accumulation.

Other agricultural petty commodity producers may become unable to reproduce themselves from their own production alone, as a result of drought, crop losses and livestock mortalities, or shocks such as the death of a productive adult, all of which can permanently weaken or undermine farming capacity. They may become increasingly dependent on the sale of their labour power in order to survive, or on other forms of petty enterprise, or on receiving assistance from other family members or the state (eg through drought relief or welfare programmes, or, in South Africa, pensions and other state grants).

The uncertain trajectory of petty commodity producers derives in part from the contradiction between capital and labour that is internalized within their household economy. As Bernstein (1986: 22) puts it:

*In terms of the enterprise as a whole, and its fortunes, (reproduction, decomposition, transformation), its distinctive combination of class places can help explain the contradictions petty commodity producers often confront between reproducing themselves as labour (daily and generational reproduction) and capital (maintenance, replacement, and possibly expansion of the means of production). Reducing levels of consumption (and increasing or limiting numbers of children according to specific circumstances), in order to maintain, replace or expand the means of production (i.e. accumulation) is an expression of this contradiction.*

The degree to which agricultural petty commodity producers are able to successfully negotiate these contradictions, deal with external risks and shocks, or make use of opportunities for expansion of their enterprise, is uneven. This results in a generalized tendency towards class differentiation in the countryside. In Lenin's (1964<sup>8</sup>) classic text, *rich peasants* are able to engage in expanded reproduction, and may be transformed over time into capitalist farmers; *middle peasants* are able to meet the exigencies of simple reproduction, and *poor peasants* are unable to survive without 'squeezing' either their capital or their labour power, or both; over time they may be forced to start selling their labour power in order to survive, becoming either semi-proletarians (if they continue to engage in some agricultural production) or full proletarians.

## Class differentiation in the context of migrant labour systems

Lenin's typology is problematic in the Southern African context because capitalist development here involved the deliberate creation of labour reserves in the countryside alongside the appropriation of large areas of productive land for an emerging (white) capitalist farming class, constraining the emergence of an African peasantry. Rural households located in the reserves had to sell their labour to survive, supplying cheap labour

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<sup>8</sup> Originally published in 1899.

to the emerging mining and manufacturing sectors through a highly regulated migrant labour regime. White farmers on large holdings were encouraged and supported by the state to engage in capital accumulation, in part through the use of poorly paid African labour in exploitative forms of share-cropping, labour tenancy and wage labour. Male migrant labour was 'cheap' because rural households in the reserves (and on labour tenant farms) reproduced themselves in part through their own agricultural production, which in effect subsidized low wages (Wolpe 1972).

Opportunities to become successful petty commodity producers were available in the early period of industrialisation, but were increasingly limited by discriminatory policies (Bundy 1979). Agricultural production in the reserves was negatively affected by the absence of male labour as well as by overcrowding, a growing shortage of productive land, and lack of infrastructure. Over time, farming contributed less and less to household reproduction, and the majority of households became highly dependent on migrant remittances. This oppressive and racially defined labour regime suppressed emerging socio-economic differences within rural society and constrained rural class formation – to some degree at least.

Because of the importance of 'racialised class relations' within the dominant sectors of the Southern African economy, there has been a tendency to downplay inequalities and differences between rural households in the reserves. Many analyses have portrayed rural social formations in the region as homogeneous in character, e.g. the view that the vast majority of rural residents have become nothing more than 'displaced proletarians' or 'semi-proletarians'. Neocosmos (1993) characterizes this as the 'linear proletarianisation' thesis<sup>9</sup>. In these approaches, inequalities in income within the rural population are viewed as distributional in character and explained by differences in the wages or wage equivalents paid to different members of the same class, rather than as deriving from incipient processes of class formation.

An alternative approach to analyzing rural social formations in the region is to view both proletarianization and the emergence of petty commodity production as class trajectories within a capitalist economy, and, furthermore, to see these as being able to be combined with each other (in complex and contradictory ways). This possibility yields the composite category of 'worker-peasants', in which simple reproduction is achieved through combining small-scale agriculture and wage labour<sup>10</sup>. Two examples of rural class-analytic typologies that employ this approach are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Class-analytic typologies of rural social formations that foreground the combination of agriculture and wage labour

Cousins et al (1992) for Zimbabwe	Levin et al (1997) for South Africa
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. <i>Petty commodity producers</i>: able to meet their simple reproduction needs through their own production</li> <li>B. <i>Worker-peasants</i>: combine wages and own production to secure their simple reproduction</li> <li>C. <i>Lumpen semi-peasantry</i>: unable to reproduce themselves without external assistance (family or state)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. <i>Petty bourgeoisie</i>: salaried individuals who engage in farming</li> <li>B. <i>Petty capitalists</i>: engage in petty commodity production, hire some wage labour; some have access to small businesses</li> <li>C. <i>Worker peasants</i>: wage workers with access to land</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> See also Levin and Neocosmos, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> See Cousins et al (1992), for Zimbabwe, First (1983) for Mozambique, Levin et al (1997), for South Africa and Neocosmos (1987) for Swaziland.

<p>D. <i>Rural petty bourgeoisie</i>: produce a surplus, invest in means of production, engage in expanded reproduction; often have an urban or business-based source of income</p>	<p>D. <i>Allotment-holding wage workers</i>: primarily dependent on wages and pensions, also have access to small garden plots E. <i>Rural proletariat</i>: landless or near-landless, depend almost wholly on wages</p>
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These kinds of typologies are based on analytical abstractions, and run the risk of suggesting that clearly defined, if sometimes composite, class identities with distinct political interests exist or emerge over time. Many analysts also stress the fluidity, blurredness and variability of class identities in concrete social formations, which means that while they may be useful for discerning and analyzing broad trajectories of change, they are often difficult to operationalise in the analysis of specific empirical data sets<sup>11</sup>. Bernstein (2009: 73) links fluidity, blurredness and variability to changing realities in an era of renewed globalization, and to his conception of the increasing (structural) fragmentation of 'classes of labour', by which he means all those who depend, directly and indirectly, on the sale of their labour power for their reproduction.

*Classes of labour in the conditions of today's 'South' have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and increasingly 'informalised' wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment. Many of the labouring poor do this across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, as well as wage employment and self-employment. This defies inherited assumptions of fixed, let alone uniform, notions (and 'identities') of 'worker', 'trader', 'urban', 'rural', 'employed' and 'self-employed'.*

Bernstein (2007: 49) also suggests that this has implications for the politics of land and agriculture, which is more likely to involve 'contradictory and shifting alliances of different class elements and tendencies' than express the interests of any unitary or clear-cut class subject, whether proletarian, peasant, semi-proletarian or worker-peasant. The blurredness of subjective class identities also arises, of course, from the fact that social identities are always multiple, overlapping with and cross-cutting each other in a complex manner. In addition to age and gender, relevant identities in the rural areas of Southern Africa include 'tribal', ethnic and linguistic identities, lineage, religion, nationality, and political affiliation. These can profoundly shape and influence processes of class differentiation in specific places and times<sup>12</sup>.

Accepting that a degree of fluidity, variability and ambiguity in class identity exists within specific rural populations, it remains important to identify general tendencies and trajectories of change and to analyse their underlying causes. Analytical abstractions are unavoidable in this context – the argument is over which ones are most useful for these purposes. The key insight from a class-analytic perspective is that the social relations of production in a capitalist economy necessarily involve the class positions of capital and labour, which are combined and internalised within forms of petty commodity production

<sup>11</sup> In my experience such operationalisation is difficult, but not impossible (Cousins 1997).

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the intersection of class differentiation with gender, age and lineage in the communal areas of Zimbabwe, see Cousins et al 1992.

such as small-scale farming. This helps to explain the internal tensions within such units of production, and, together with consideration of the external conditions of small-scale production, (e.g. land availability, the dominance or not of large scale capitalist farms in specific markets, changing costs of inputs and consumption items, relationships with agro-processing firms, etc), helps to explain the relative stability or instability of agricultural petty commodity production and prospects for its expansion or decline. Given that small-scale farming is often combined with wage labour, another important condition is the nature of the labour market and the availability of employment opportunities.

For South Africa, I propose the following typology for different kinds of small-scale agricultural producers, as a way of disaggregating the category 'smallholders', that focuses only on those who engage in some kind of agricultural activity (see Table 3). The key variables in this typology are the degree to which agriculture contributes to social reproduction or expanded reproduction, and the degree to which hired labour is used in the agricultural production process. These are the key indicators of class relations in agriculture. The typology does not include those who live in rural areas but who do not engage in farming, and does not consider the class identity of those who combine various kinds of non-agricultural income for example, wages and a state pension.

Table 3. Proposed class-analytic typology of small-scale agricultural producers in South Africa

Class category	Criteria
Supplementary food producers,	Work small plots or gardens, do not have access to wage income, and rely on additional forms of income such as a social grant, craftwork or petty trading for their simple reproduction
Allotment holding wage workers	Work small plots or gardens but are primarily dependent on wages for their simple reproduction
Worker-peasants	Farm on a substantial scale but are also engaged in wage labour, and combine these in their simple reproduction
Petty commodity producers	Are able to reproduce themselves from farming alone (or with only minor additional forms of income)
Small-scale capitalist farmers	Rely substantially on hired labour and can begin to engage in expanded reproduction and capital accumulation
Capitalists whose main income is not from farming	Farm on a small-scale but their main source of income is another business.

The typology focuses on those who engage in some kind of agricultural activity, and the key variables are the degree to which agriculture contributes to social reproduction or expanded reproduction, and the degree to which hired labour is used in the agricultural production process. These are used as the key indicators of class relations in agriculture. The typology does not include those who live in rural areas but who do not engage in farming, and does not consider the class identity of those who combine various kinds of non-agricultural income for example, wages and a state pension.

As stressed above, the boundaries between these different categories are necessarily both blurred and fluid. For example, the distinction between allotment holding wage workers and worker-peasants rests primarily on scale of land-holding, the significance of which is highly variable. The boundaries can also be fluid over time, as in the case of a worker-

peasant who uses some of his/her wage income to increase the fertility of his/her fields or build a herd of cattle and then becomes a petty commodity producer on his/her retirement. Petty commodity producers may succeed in expanding the scale or intensity of their production in years of good rainfall, hiring in labour and becoming small-scale capitalist farmers for a time, only to revert back to petty commodity production after some poor years.

The utility of this typology is yet to be tested in an attempt to 'identify general tendencies and trajectories of change and to analyse their underlying causes'. This will require an engagement with existing empirical data sets, but the limitations of such engagement are illustrated in Table 4. This shows the difficulties in trying to re-categorize household types in Laurent *et al's* 1998 paper on survey data from Khambashe in the Eastern Cape when data on key variables required for class analysis (such as the degree to which farming supports simple reproduction, or the extent of reliance on hired labour) are missing.

Table 4. Recategorisation of rural households in Khambashe

Type of household	Agricultural activity	n	%	Recategorisation using proposed class-analytic typology
Moneyless	Limited agricultural activity	11	5.7	Possibly supplementary food producers
Depend on social welfare grants and family remittances	Farm for home consumption only	111	56.7	Supplementary food producers
Earn income from non-farming activities	Farm for home consumption only	14	7.2	Possibly supplementary food producers, or petty commodity producers, or worker-peasants
Main source of income is farming	Hire in labour and sell produce, involved in farmer's organizations	36	18.1	Possibly petty commodity producers, or worker-peasants, or small-scale capitalist farmers
Minor part of income from farming	Sell produce but less important source of income than wages or self-employment	9	4.5	Possibly allotment-holding wage workers, or petty commodity producers
Landless	No farming, depend on pensions or remittances	10	5.2	
Access to land but do not farm	Old people who cannot farm and rely on pensions or remittances	3	1.6	
Total		194	100.0	

Source: Laurent *et al* 1998 and author

## 4. Accumulation ‘from above’ and ‘from below’

Class-analytic perspectives can help to clarify the rationale and purpose of land and agrarian reform. In an earlier paper I argued that these reforms will contribute to reducing rural poverty in South Africa only if they create the conditions for a broadly based ‘accumulation from below’ (Cousins 2007: 235). Hall (2009c) has recently suggested that rural development must both support food production by the poor and promote rural entrepreneurs who can engage in ‘accumulation from below’, arguing that between the poles of tiny food security gardens, on the one hand and huge commercial farms, on the other, is a ‘missing middle’ – the untapped potential of smallholder farmers able to produce a marketable surplus. Both papers argue that land reform and accumulation from below are necessary to reconfigure a dualistic and unequal agrarian structure which is itself a structural cause of poverty. However, they do not explore the full implications of this framing for policy, or the uncomfortable questions that then arise.

Fifteen years after South Africa’s democratic transition, land and freedom remain linked in the minds of many (Gibson 2009). This is partly because large numbers of black South Africans (including long-established urban residents) either experienced a form of dispossession themselves, under apartheid, or are closely related to people who experienced such dispossession (*ibid*: 55). But ‘land’ has also become a potent symbol of the promise of post-apartheid transformation because of the very high levels of unemployment and deep poverty found in both rural and urban areas (Walker 2008). South Africa has one of the highest inequality rates in the world, and the redistribution of productive assets remains a key political issue. Simply de-racialising the composition of elites in government, business, mining and farming is not politically viable, as shown in recent and continuing internal struggles within and between the ruling party and its tripartite alliance partners, and in widespread, often violent, service delivery protests and bitter struggles over housing and tenure security in informal settlements.

In effect, current political dynamics revolve around the need for a more substantive democratization that delivers real improvements in the material conditions and livelihoods of the majority. This is why redistributive land reform remains politically salient, and why the redistribution of land to small numbers of black large scale commercial farmers, through the market or state programmes as a form of black economic empowerment (BEE), is not seen by many South Africans as a resolution of ‘the land question’.

In a class-analytic perspective, BEE-type land reform can be seen as a peculiar form of accumulation from above, in which a highly inegalitarian agrarian structure is left largely intact, and only the racial identity of large scale capitalist farmers alters. Accumulation from below, in contrast, implies that the inherited agrarian structure is radically reconfigured so that much larger numbers of people begin to participate in the agricultural sector and benefit substantially from such participation. However, it also suggests that these new producers must be able to produce as least as much (if not more) than large scale commercial farmers, replacing them in supplying local, national and international markets. Beyond the household food security of small-scale producers and the rural poor is the critical issue, sharply posed in the classical agrarian question, of how agriculture can

contribute to the economic development of society as a whole, support a growing urban population, and help reduce structural unemployment (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009).

These are key issues in South Africa today, but they are a nettle that many contributors to land reform policy debates fail to grasp. Critical questions that have to be confronted include how to enhance farm productivity and aggregate levels of output within South African agriculture<sup>13</sup>, which will in turn depend on the agro-ecological potential of land, the availability of irrigation water, farm technology and levels of farm inputs, labour supply and its cost, farming and managerial skills, sources of capital, access to markets, and institutional arrangements to address coordination costs. Land (its location, quality and size) is a key resource, but capital and labour are also critically important, and appropriate skills are key.

A class-analytic perspective suggests that only some small-scale, family-based farmers are likely to ever meet this productivity challenge, in part because high potential land is so scarce in South Africa. In addition, inequalities in land access, livestock holdings and sources of finance within rural populations suggest that class differentiation already exists to some degree. And successful petty commodity producers and wealthier worker-peasants will be better placed to benefit from agrarian reform interventions than those for whom food production is only a minor supplement to their livelihoods. Here, as elsewhere, agrarian reform is likely to most benefit those producers who 'already have access to the means of production to cultivate [land] ...' (Levin and Neocosmos 1987: 7).

Successful accumulation from below, then, would necessarily involve a class of productive small-scale capitalist farmers emerging from within a larger population of petty commodity producers, worker-peasants, allotment-holding wage workers and supplementary food producers. All these categories are legitimate beneficiaries of land and agrarian reform policies aimed at poverty reduction, but only those able to fully utilize the productive potential of the scarce land and water resources of the country, and engage in significant on-farm investment, are likely to be able to replace those productive large-scale commercial farmers whose land is acquired through land reform, and compete effectively with those that remain. 'Accumulators from below' are potentially a much larger group than existing large-scale farmers<sup>14</sup>, as suggested by Aliber *et al* (2009: 154-155, see discussion above), perhaps four to five times as large, but even so they would clearly constitute a minority of the rural population as a whole.

Tough questions then arise: who should be the primary beneficiaries of redistributive land reform, given the scarcity of high potential land, irrigation water and state resources – should it be only those with the clear potential to become accumulators from below, or a wider group? If the former, how will this potential be identified? Are there policy trade-offs to be made, for example between poverty reduction on a large scale and overcoming dualism? And if there are policy trade-offs, can they be ameliorated through careful design and targeting?

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, productivity must be enhanced in a sustainable manner, which raises the question of ecologically sound alternatives to current models of industrial agriculture, and the potential role of labour-intensive (rather than fossil fuel intensive) farming systems (Weis 2007: 170). Space limitations do not allow discussion of this issue here.

<sup>14</sup> There are currently around 45 000 large-scale commercial farmers.

## 5. Policy implications

This section offers a few, tentative suggestions on the policy implications of the class-analytic perspective on smallholder farming outlined in this paper, as a contribution to further debate. Land and agrarian reform policies should aim to improve the prospects for small-scale farming *in general* in communal and commercial farming areas and on redistributed land, be as broad-based as possible, and aim to benefit large numbers of rural (and peri-urban) people with access to agricultural land. If successful, these policies would see the expansion of marketed output by increasing numbers of petty commodity producers and worker-peasants, and create conducive conditions for accumulation from below. This in turn could see a marked increase in the numbers of (black) small-scale capitalist farmers. This class would then be well placed to play the leading role in reconfiguring the dualistic and still racialised agrarian structure inherited from the past, through being able to compete with large-scale commercial farmers in supplying both domestic and export markets.

Such an emphasis would not have to see the abandonment of rural poverty reduction as a key policy goal (which in any case must involve creating livelihood opportunities outside of agriculture). Agrarian reform policies should support supplementary food production on garden plots and fields by poor households, as well as improved systems of multiple-function livestock production on communal grazing, and aim to enhance food security. Policies to promote accumulation from below and to expand supplementary food production can be complementary in some respects, for example by increasing the availability of farming inputs in rural areas.

One concrete example might be a large-scale horticultural support programme aimed at increasing the output of fresh garden produce, for household use, sale on local markets, sale to small town supermarkets, and to sale to niche markets in larger town and cities. Key components of such a programme could include the promotion of water harvesting and small-scale irrigation schemes, subsidized fencing and irrigation infrastructure, improved access to inputs, training and extension support, the establishment of a fresh produce market information agency, and co-operative marketing to niche markets. All the class categories in my suggested typology could benefit from such a programme to a degree. (Of course, the fierce competition that characterizes fresh produce markets everywhere would inevitably see some producers benefiting more than others, as suggested by a class-analytic approach – which sees class differentiation as intrinsic to processes of accumulation from below).

Land and agrarian reform also involves difficult trade-offs, however, which should be openly acknowledged and confronted. These arise from the fact that productive land, irrigation water, and government funds and capacities are all in scarce supply in South Africa. Only about 10% of land in South Africa is potentially arable, and of that only around 11 % of this has irrigation potential. It is possible that these are underestimates (because of the overwhelming focus in the past on large-scale commercial farming and consequent neglect of small-scale irrigation potential in communal areas), but even if this is the case, the magnitude of error is likely to be fairly small. The generally limited agricultural potential of land in South Africa means that hard choices have to be made about who should benefit from the redistribution of high potential land and irrigation water. Given their potential to be efficient users of such resources, small-scale (black) capitalist farmers, as

well as the more successful petty commodity producers and worker-peasants (rather than those supplementing their food supply) are the most likely candidates.

Table 5 outlines a range of possible policy options disaggregated in terms of my suggested class-analytic typology of agrarian reform beneficiaries. All categories benefit to a degree from land redistribution, but high potential land, some with irrigation, is reserved for those categories likely to be able to engage in accumulation from below. Improving access to and productivity on irrigated land by accumulators from below should be a key focus for agrarian reform. Subdivision of large farms into smaller, privately-owned and self-contained units is suggested as the tenure option for small-scale capitalist farmers, but not for petty commodity producers and worker-peasants, who can be highly productive within communal tenure systems. Worker-peasants who engage in agricultural production in a significant scale could be key beneficiaries of a livestock improvement programme, which needs to take account of the fact that members of this category are often at home in rural areas at weekends or on holidays. Pension payment days, on which large numbers of local residents regularly gather at a designated site, provide a key opportunity for inputs supply, marketing and extension programmes aimed at supplementary food producers in communal areas.

Table 5. Agrarian reform and 'accumulation from below': disaggregating beneficiaries and policies

<i>Class-analytic categories</i>	<i>Small to medium-scale capitalist farmers (SSCF)</i>	<i>Petty commodity producers (PCP)</i>	<i>Worker-peasants (WP)</i>	<i>Allotment-holding wage workers (AHWW)</i>	<i>Supplementary food producers (SFP)</i>
<i>Agrarian reform policies</i>	Access to high quality arable land, some with irrigation, via land redistribution	Access to high quality arable land, some with irrigation, via land redistribution	As for PCP, & in addition: Focused support for livestock herd-building by migrants, together with livestock improvement	Access to land for settlement and supplementary food production, via land redistribution	
	Access to grazing land for commercial livestock production	Access to grazing land for multi-purpose herds, usually as communal grazing	Extension & support services on weekends when migrant workers at home	Access to additional grazing land for multi-purpose herds, via redistribution  Food security programme via food gardens in CAs as well as on redistributed land	
	Subdivision of large-scale farms into smaller farm units	Subdivision of large-scale farms into arable plots and communal grazing		Water harvesting to supply irrigated gardens in CAs as well as on redistributed land	
	Co-operatives for inputs supply and marketing	Co-operatives for inputs supply and marketing		Inputs supply and crop marketing support, focused on pension days & associated local markets	
	Mentoring by large scale commercial farmers	Establishment of new small-scale irrigation schemes on redistributed land			
	Support farm worker's rights				

		Appropriate rehabilitation of existing small-scale irrigation schemes in CAs		
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'Win-win' agrarian reform policies will be hardest to achieve in relation to farm labour. Accumulation from below is likely to result in the emergence of a small-scale capitalist farming class that employs wage labour, often on a casual or seasonal basis, at very low wage rates and without job or tenure security. This requires policies focused on securing the rights of farm labour on small- and medium-scale (and black-owned) farms, as well as on large-scale (white-owned) commercial farms (where tenure reform has been elusive to date). Another nettle to grasp is the likelihood that gender-based tensions over the deployment of household labour, different forms of land use, and the disposal of surplus and profit, are likely to be exacerbated if accumulation from below begins to occur. This suggests that policies to promote equitable decision-making and benefit-sharing within agrarian reform beneficiary households need to be developed, a task which has proved to be extremely challenging thus far (Walker 2003). Acknowledging the existence of class- and gender-based tensions and contradictions, however, is preferable to denying their reality. It provides an essential starting point for effective policy advocacy and development, as well as for political interventions around land and agriculture (mobilizing, organizing, building alliances).

## 7. Conclusion

This paper seeks to stimulate further debate on a critically important issue in debates about policy frameworks and the politics of land and agrarian reform in South Africa: the need to clearly specify the identities and key characteristics of beneficiaries, in order to develop policies and support programmes which have the potential to radically reconfigure an agrarian structure that is a pillar of post-apartheid structural poverty. The paper focuses on only one key aspect of the issue, class differentiation, and explores some of the possible policy implications of a class-analytic approach.

The paper has not discussed the complex political implications of the argument, or a number of other important variables and dimensions of agrarian reform. These include particular opportunities and challenges within agricultural sub-sectors (eg grain, fresh produce, tree crops, extensive livestock etc); agro-ecological and locational factors; questions around ecologically sustainable technologies and farming systems; up-stream and down-stream linkages from farming and the character of agro-food value chains; and agricultural trade dimensions. These also need to form part of the debate – but rural class differentiation is, in my view, an essential but neglected dimension of land and agrarian reform in South Africa today.

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