

# **Poverty: Causes, Responses and Consequences in Rural South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines recent contributions to the analysis of poverty, particularly those emphasising the constraints on the poor posed by social relations and institutions that systematically benefit the powerful. It proposes an analytic framework for study of the causes of poverty, responses to poverty and the consequences of those responses. This framework is then applied to a case study from rural South Africa. The case study underlines the importance of understanding the processes linking poverty at the local level with the regional and national political economy. It also suggests that responses to poverty in this case may be unsustainable.



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## **1. Introduction**

Recent discussion of the analysis of poverty and livelihoods draws attention to the limitations of currently dominant approaches. Measuring the incidence of poverty is an important first step in understanding it, but measurement alone does not explain the causes of poverty. Analysing livelihoods in terms of the assets and strategies of the poor opens up space for taking seriously the priorities, choices and initiatives demonstrated by poor people, but it risks underplaying the constraints thrown up by social relations and institutions that systematically benefit the powerful. It also risks making an assumption that such livelihoods are sustainable. This paper draws on these discussions to develop an analytic framework for the study of poverty, one that examines its causes, responses to it and the consequences of those responses. It then uses this framework to discuss the lives of people in a remote rural area in South Africa. People's responses to poverty in this context appear to be becoming unsustainable and their livelihoods seem increasingly fragile. There is no necessary reason why responses to poverty should be sustainable.

## **2. Understanding Poverty and Livelihoods**

Understanding poverty matters because of the scale and depth of poverty found in many developing countries. Poverty reduction is now at the core of development policy-making and a key commitment of donor agencies. There is considerable disagreement, however, over the extent of poverty and over whether it is increasing or decreasing worldwide (World Bank, 2000; Reddy and Pogge, 2002; Ravallion, 2002; Wade, 2004). There is also disagreement over how to define poverty. Laderchi, Saith and Stewart (2003) identify four different approaches to defining and measuring poverty. These consist of approaches that attempt to measure individual deprivation, based on monetary income or on indicators of capability failure, approaches that are based on concepts of social exclusion and approaches that reply on participatory methods to establish the views of the poor themselves. All have advantages and disadvantages, in terms of the aspects of poverty that they highlight or draw attention away from. They are based on different conceptions of what poverty is and there is a significant lack of overlap between them. For these reasons, they differ in terms of their implications for who should be targeted by interventions and lead to quite different estimates of the scale and incidence of poverty.

However, progress has been made recently in analysing the causes of poverty and in making sense of the responses of poor people to the pressures that place them in poverty. Some of the most interesting work on these issues has been associated with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC), or has been engaged in debate with the CPRC. Research carried out by the CPRC has been diverse, but shares the premise that studying "the poor" as a homogeneous category is superficial and misleading, particularly where it is coupled with an assumption that their poverty stems from a lack of integration into the market economy (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). Hulme and Shepherd distinguish the chronically poor from the transient poor, arguing that the causes of their poverty are likely to be qualitatively different, as are the

interventions needed to eliminate their poverty. They offer a definition of chronic poverty based on duration, taking five consecutive years as the criterion. This criterion is driven partly by analytic considerations (five years is considered a significant period of time in most cultures), partly by data availability (many panel studies use five-year intervals for data collection) and partly because there is some evidence that people who are poor for five consecutive years remain poor for the rest of their lives. The criterion is essentially arbitrary (Bevan, 2004) and may exaggerate differences between those on either side of the cut-off point. Nevertheless, it is a useful attempt to operationalise a distinction between people who seem to be trapped in poverty from those for whom poverty is a shorter-lived experience and who may have some potential to secure, or even improve, their living conditions. This is an important first step in disaggregating “the poor”, though it is also essential to recognise that there are many different ways of becoming, and remaining chronically poor and that an analysis which makes sense in one context, or for one group of people, will not work for another (du Toit, 2005b).

What makes people poor? Answers to this question reflect analysts' disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical commitments and political judgements (du Toit, 2005a). Many mainstream economists are likely to conceptualise the answer in terms of asset endowments, responses to stochastic shocks affecting the household's ability to use these assets (ill health, entitlement failure) and conditions in the local, national and international economies (Baulch and Hoddinott, 2000). Baulch and Hoddinott suggest that poverty in any one year varies in response to asset endowments, the household's perception of returns to these assets, idiosyncratic and covariant shocks and mapping between income and consumption. They suggest that transitory poverty may be due to an inability to cope with shocks, while chronic poverty may be due to a low endowment of assets and a lack of ability to translate these assets into income. Over the longer term, poverty is determined by asset accumulation and depletion, initial conditions, the impact of repeated shocks and asymmetries and non-reversibilities in households' welfare trajectories and the impact of economy-wide secular trends. While these conceptual tools can be powerful, they can easily leave important aspects of poverty-generation unexamined, or even obscured, in generalised analysis of risks, contexts and economic trends. This kind of approach does not deal with the fact that many of the most relevant aspects of the external environment are often shaped by systematic factors, particularly unequal power relations. Thus many of the shocks to which poor people are subject are not best understood as stochastic. They are, instead, subject to a set of conditions that leave them constantly vulnerable (Wood and Salway, 2000). Additionally, people's ability to gain access to assets, and their ability to translate them into income, are shaped by the workings of labour and product markets, by their access to skills, information and social networks, by norms governing resource use within and beyond the household and by gendered power relations, again within and beyond households. Household structures and relations – whether households are unitary, co-operative or fragmented – also play an important role in determining resource use (Francis, 2000). Sociologists and anthropologists are likely to take such considerations as obvious starting points for an analysis of poverty. The challenge for them is to

ground this analysis in an understanding of political economy, at the local, national and international levels (McLaughlin, 2002; Bevan, 2004; Bryceson, 2004; Green and Hulme, 2005; du Toit, 2005a).

In recent years, many researchers and policymakers have responded to calls for a broader approach to poverty analysis by adopting the concept of livelihoods, by which is commonly meant “the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living” (Chambers and Conway, 1992). This definition of the object of study allows one to move beyond a focus purely on assets and income to look at resources more broadly and the relationships which shape their use. Livelihoods research has been carried out through diverse methods and for very different purposes. Murray (2002) distinguishes between circumspective, retrospective and prospective livelihoods research. Circumspective research typically focuses on how people combine modes of livelihood at a particular point in time, through surveys, interviews and “participatory” methods. Retrospective livelihoods research adopts a longer timescale, through longitudinal methods, such as panel studies, repeat studies or collecting life histories. Such an approach aims to capture household trajectories of accumulation or impoverishment. Prospective approaches, typically adopted by development practitioners, attempt to identify potential means for improving livelihoods through interventions and better co-ordination of sectorally-based agencies.

One approach to livelihoods analysis, Sustainable Livelihoods (SL), has been adopted by a number of donors and agencies, notably the UK Department for International Development, Oxfam and UNDP (Scoones, 1998; Carney, 1998; Carney *et al.*, 1999; Solesbury, 2003). The SL framework adopted by DFID proposes that people construct livelihoods from a portfolio of assets, which consist of a combination of human, natural, financial, social and physical capital, usually portrayed as an asset pentagon. People’s ability to construct livelihoods from these assets is shaped by a “vulnerability context” and by “transforming structures and processes” which affect livelihood strategies and, hence, livelihood outcomes. The SL framework has several virtues, in particular the way in which it draws attention to a broad range of resources relevant to livelihoods, the encouragement it gives to policymakers to think cross-sectorally, its emphasis on the impact of institutions on resource use and the attention it pays to the agency of poor people. However, the SL framework also has some serious weaknesses. At the broadest level, this framework runs the risk of making it appear that poor people have more agency than they actually have. This problem applies to both the asset pentagon, with its stress on the strengths of poor people, and to the concept of livelihood strategies, which encourages the assumption that people are typically in a position to strategise, something that is often not the case (Wood and Salway, 2000; du Toit, 2005a and b) There are other problems with the asset pentagon. Poor people’s access to resources is shaped by their relationships with the non-poor and powerful. Thus these “assets” are not just endowments, or attributes; they are inextricably relational and these relations have consequences for people’s ability to use their assets (Murray, 2001). Finally, the term “sustainable livelihoods” carries with it the assumption that the livelihoods people construct are sustainable, or, at least, that sustainability

is a realistic goal for intervention. These are claims that need to be examined, rather than assumed.

Critiques of the SL framework, and of much livelihoods analysis more generally, therefore suggest a different approach to studying poverty. Bevan advocates a sociological approach, by which she means a focus on the ways in which social actors are located within relationships involving differential power. These

*socially construct a range of diverse interlinked dynamic livelihood structures (including 'households') and lifeworlds."...Taken together these small unequal structures constitute larger unequal social structures (political economies/cultural structures) which must also be seen as dynamically constructed, reconstructed and occasionally destroyed through ongoing interactions among people with differential power. (Bevan, 2004: 9).*

Larger structures themselves constitute and are embedded in global political economy and cultural structures.

Bevan's framework is constructed partly through a critique of the CPRC approach to the analysis of chronic poverty, particularly what she sees as an only partially digested inclusion of "qualitative" approaches to analysing poverty (Bevan, 2004). Green and Hulme (2005) go some way towards dealing with these shortcomings, by advocating exploration of the constraints that close off opportunities for upward mobility and the politically entrenched social relations (at the household, community, national and international levels) that produce chronic poverty. Du Toit calls for a "fine-grained, critical sociology of chronic poverty" and advocates an analysis of the structural dynamics that "create marginality, maintain vulnerability and undermine agency for poor people" (2005b: 26). He argues that, while livelihoods analysis can offer such an analysis, the SL framework itself is only a rough schema. It can easily lend itself to a reductionist and ahistorical approach. Instead, du Toit advocates an approach that he considers less abstract than that offered by the SL framework of "households", "capitals" and "vulnerability contexts". Instead, he advocates looking at the "real, social world in which people – individually and in groups – make their decisions, enter into conflict, or make and break alliances" (2005b: 23).

There is some overlap between this approach and Wood's analysis of the constrained choices made by poor people and the consequences these have for keeping them in poverty. Poor people face chronic risks, which are institutionally and relationally generated, in the form of "inequality, class relations, exploitation, concentrations of unaccountable power and social exclusion" (Wood, 2003: 457). Such risks may force them to make choices that deliver short-term security, at the expense of longer-term reductions in the risks they face. These choices may include over strong reliance on family relations, or allegiance to more powerful people, in ways that perpetuate their dependence.

All this suggests that poverty analysis should pay close attention to the following:

- (1) mapping the institutional landscape (at local, regional, national and global levels), where this includes, centrally, power inequalities: making connections between these levels of analysis and household level is critically important;
- (2) examining how poor people respond to the pressures generated by this institutional landscape. Whether or not these responses can give rise to livelihoods that are sustainable is an open question.

### **3. Poverty in Rural South Africa**

The remainder of this paper uses this framework to examine the causes of and responses to poverty in a relatively remote, but densely populated, rural area in North West Province, South Africa. Such areas are common, a legacy of population removals to the “homelands” carried out by the *apartheid* regime from the 1950s to the 1980s. The characteristics of people living in such areas are in some ways peculiarly South African – very few have access to agricultural land, while older people have access to government pensions – but in many other respects, particularly in terms of reliance on labour migrancy and the prevalence of unemployment – their predicament resembles that of people living in migrant-labour economies across Eastern and Southern Africa (Francis, 2000).

#### **a) The causes of poverty - mapping the institutional landscape**

##### *(i) Winners and losers in the transition from apartheid*

The causes of rural poverty in South Africa stem from historically-generated power inequalities. These have not been substantially altered by the configurations of power which have emerged since the transition to democratic rule. Taking the long view, one can observe a shift in the class basis of the state, from the infamous alliance between “gold and maize” (Trapido, 1971), to one dominated by an alliance between industrial, financial and mining capital in the 1970s and 1980s, with landowners playing a less important role. In the 1990s, there has been a further weakening of landowners, particularly the small landowners who have been squeezed out of the farming sector by rising real interest rates, and a rapprochement between capital and the small, African middle class.

The ANC’s 1994 election platform, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), was in many ways a compromise between its commitment to overcoming some of the most glaring inequalities of the apartheid era and the imperatives of the political settlement which underlay the transition to democratic rule. The RDP did not envisage large-scale redistribution in most sectors, though it did make a commitment to a major land reform. It planned for ambitious programmes of house construction and service provision, as

well as making commitments to address “economic imbalances” and “democratise” the economy (ANC, 1994). The new Government made a significant impact on the provision of infrastructure, housing and services to both urban and rural Africans. Racially-based restrictions in the labour, housing and land markets were removed and there is now formal equality of opportunity in the education system. The South African Government, unusually for a developing country, makes universal pension provision. In 1994, the new Government raised African pensions to the same level as that provided for other population groups. Those elderly people (the large majority) who receive a pension thus have a regular source of income, weakening the link between old age and extreme poverty. A small minority of Africans has benefited from opportunities offered by the new dispensation, gaining highly paid jobs in the public and private sector or taking advantage of support for emerging businesses.

However, the RDP was effectively abandoned in 1996 and replaced by a neo-liberal “Growth, Employment and Redistribution” programme, which aimed to boost jobs and growth through promoting export-promotion and privatisation. This shift of emphasis was intended to make the South African economy more attractive to foreign direct investment, expand exports, make the public finances more sustainable and stimulate economic growth. It can also be argued it reflects the interests of an emergent African middle class whose interests lie more in capturing the benefits of economic growth than in redistribution to the poor. GEAR has not been successful on its own terms. Gross Domestic Product grew only very slowly in the late 1990s, though it has increased at a higher rate since 2000 and GDP growth stood at 4.5% in 2004 (StatsSA, 2005a). Employment fell during the 1990s and early 2000’s and rose slightly only in 2005. Jobs in manufacturing and mining, which have long been central to the livelihoods of many working-class families, mirrored these trends. Manufacturing employment fell from 1.49 million in 1994 to 1.25 million in 2002, rising slightly to 1.28 million in 2004 (StatsSA, 1998a; 1998b; 2005b). It is too early to tell whether this is a reversal in the trend downwards. Mining employment fell from just under 800,000 in 1984 to just over 600,000 in 1994 and just over 450,000 in 2004 (Department of Minerals and Energy, 2005). Employment in mining and quarrying continued to decline between 2004 and mid-2005, rising slightly thereafter (StatsSA, 2005c).

The abolition of apartheid restrictions in employment and education has benefited a significant number of Africans, who have moved into higher education, better-paid employment and business. However, these changes have done little to improve the lives of the large majority. Seekings and Natrass (2005) attempt to delineate the class structure of South Africa, just before the demise of apartheid and in the years immediately afterwards. Because of the extent of unemployment and the small scale of smallholder agriculture, they suggest that the working class was in the middle of the social structure, with the majority of core working class households, in regular, relatively well-paid employment, situated in the richer half of the population and predominant in urban areas. The poorer half, the marginal working class and those below this category, constituted the majority in rural areas and

consisted of farm workers, domestic workers and those without working members, who depended on remittances or welfare payments.

Seekings and Nattrass suggest that in the last ten years there have been some changes to this class structure, but there are also significant continuities. Some Africans have experienced rapid upward mobility into the upper classes and income deciles, while urban workers have received rising wages. However, growing unemployment and the stagnation of both the informal sector and smallholder agriculture meant that the numbers of poor people increased considerably, while income inequality remained high, with estimates ranging from 0.69 to 0.70 for 2000. Income and Expenditure Surveys (IES) carried out by the Government Statistical Services (StatsSa) suggest that the Gini coefficient rose between 1995 and 2000, from 0.65 to 0.69. Income inequality between racial groups has declined, but interracial inequality has risen. According to the IES, the Gini coefficient for Africans has increased from 0.56 in 1995 to 0.61 in 2000 (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). There is a deepening divide in the labour market between workers in formal, regular employment and those in casual or contract employment. The trend towards increasing casualisation of the labour force is heightening the insecurity of some of the most vulnerable people.

Official unemployment data and independent poverty estimates confirm these observations. In 2005, the Government's Labour Force Survey indicated that unemployment stood at 26.7% of the labour force nationally and 27.4% in North West Province. A further 14.8% of the provincial labour force were classified as "discouraged workers". At the national level, the large majority of the latter are women (StatsSA, 2005c).<sup>1</sup> Meth and Dias' poverty estimates indicate the impact of such high levels of unemployment on income poverty. They suggest that, in 2002, around 22 million people were living in poverty, and that the number living in poverty rose by at least two million between 1999 and 2002 (Meth and Dias, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Insecure employment is often accompanied by other kinds of vulnerability, such as shack fires, floods (from building in flood-prone areas), crime, poor agricultural conditions, illness and death (Aliber, 2001). Many households also face the loss of prime-age adults through HIV/AIDS. By 2003, 5.6 million of the population were estimated to be living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2004). Such insecurities create psychological damage. The South African Participatory Poverty Assessment revealed the anxiety suffered by the poor about their ability to cope with unpredictable crises and the resignation to poverty felt by the long-term unemployed, their feelings of voicelessness and social exclusion (May *et al.*, 1997, cited in Aliber, 2001). Certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable to falling into a state of chronic poverty. Rural Africans are particularly vulnerable, especially the 900,000 households in the former homelands lacking access to arable land. People without permanent work, female-headed households, the disabled, the elderly, former farm workers, AIDS orphans and households of HIV/AIDS sufferers, cross-border migrants and the homeless are all vulnerable to chronic poverty.

The distribution of access to critical resources has changed little. In rural areas, most land is still held in the form of large farms, by white farmers. Most rural Africans remain living on small pieces of land in the former “homelands”. The labour market remains highly segmented, with Africans concentrated in lower-paid and more insecure work. Ownership of capital is still heavily concentrated in a few hands.

*(ii) Agrarian restructuring, rural development and land reform*

Agrarian restructuring has been much more about reforming the relationship between the state and the large-scale farming sector than it has been about asset redistribution and poverty reduction (Greenberg, 2004). The large-scale agricultural sector has been restructured through liberalisation of pricing, the abolition of generous subsidies to commercial farmers, which was a major plank of the *apartheid* regime, and the lowering of tariff barriers against grain imports. These changes represented a decisive shift in state support away from marginal, food-grain growers and in favour of export-crop producers (Greenberg, 2004). In contrast, asset redistribution has been extremely limited and now looks set to favour a small class of African larger-scale farmers (Hall, 2004a).

The RDP committed the Government to an ambitious target of redistributing around 30% of medium- to high-quality white commercial farmland to landless Africans over five years, through a combination of market and non-market mechanisms. The programme combined elements of restitution and redistribution. Communities removed from land in white farming areas after 1913 who could demonstrate rights to land were invited to submit claims for restitution. Other individuals and communities were to be given access to a programme of land redistribution. The RDP also proposed major changes in institutions governing land tenure in the former “homelands”. Moreover, the Programme proposed to increase security of tenure for labour tenants and others living on commercial farms. A detailed discussion of the land reform programme is beyond the scope of this paper (see Murray and Williams, 1994; Schirmer, 2000; Cousins, 2001; Lahiff and Scoones, 2001; Hall, 2004a). Briefly, there were severe problems with all three components of the programme. Most of the settled claims in the restitution programme are from urban areas, many involving financial compensation, rather than restitution of land. The impact on rural poverty has therefore been very limited (Hall, 2004a). The redistribution process originally aimed to reach the poorest sections of the population. Land was to be made available to groups of households, which would jointly purchase land with a grant. The programme was dogged by capacity problems and there was no powerful political constituency putting pressure on the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) to speed up the process or remedy its defects. In 2001, in a major shift of goals away from poverty-reduction, the DLA introduced a new programme, Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD), which aims to promote a class of full-time farmers, operating on a relatively large scale. It has little to offer the rural poor. It is hard to conclude that rural poverty is a serious political priority. Hall argues that LRAD is an example of post-transition pacting between the state, white agricultural capital and a small class of

African, larger-scale farmers, all of whose interests it serves (Hall, 2004a).

Measures to improve tenure for people living and working on commercial farms have often proved counter-productive, contributing to evictions and job losses (Hall, 2004a). Tenure reform in the former “homelands” has been slow. A Communal Land Rights Act, passed in 2004, vests land rights administration in “communities”, either tribal authorities, in the case of much land in the former “homelands”, or in elected land administration committees. The Act was criticised by community representatives consulted at the Bill stage for failing to clarify or support individuals’ land rights or to secure rights for unmarried or widowed women. It was also feared that the Act would cause boundary disputes, external and internal to communities. These concerns were not addressed in the Act (Hall, 2004b). Such an arrangement renders vulnerable the large numbers of people, often a majority, who have moved into communities from elsewhere and whose relationship with traditional leaders ranges from good, to distant, to hostile. It also strengthens the latter politically at a time when relationships between them and elected local government remain unresolved and, often, tense. This approach to tenure administration is also vulnerable to land grabbing by the powerful (Cousins, 2001).

The focus of rural development activity is now moving away from land reform and provision of infrastructure by central government towards an emphasis on local economic development, on local partnerships between government and non-government bodies (in the private and voluntary sectors) and on popular participation in development planning (Pycroft, 2000a). The Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS), published in 2000, charges local government with responsibility for promoting rural development. The plan to improve co-ordination and to try to encourage locally appropriate forms of development may sound attractive, but there are some major problems. Municipalities face severe capacity problems, while most district municipalities lack the ability to raise sufficient revenue locally (Pycroft, 2000b). The ISRDS recognises this, but does not envisage putting any more money into rural development. Instead, the Government hopes to draw in private-sector funds. Local authorities are expected to compete with one another to attract projects. This puts poor areas, where revenues and local government capacity are weakest, at a severe disadvantage.

### **(b) North West Province**

North West Province contains many such areas. The Province consists of the former “homeland” of Bophuthatswana, together with the white farming areas and industrial towns of the former Western Transvaal. Bophuthatswana was declared “independent” of South Africa in 1977, under the Presidency of Lucas Mangope. Supposedly an independent Tswana “nation”, “Bop” remained closely controlled by the South African State and highly dependent on it, financially and politically. The creation of four “independent” states and six “self-governing” territories was intended to provide a physical and political reality to underpin *apartheid* policies. Each territory was claimed to provide a “homeland” for one of South Africa’s major linguistic groups, depriving them of

South African citizenship. The “homelands” were also intended to promote the political salience of ethnic identities in the African population.

Politics in Bop revolved around patronage, ethnicity and a re-traditionalization of local political institutions. Jobs, land and trading licences were pieces of patronage distributed in ways that aimed to maintain political support. Mangope and his immediate supporters were also personally corrupt, taking over large farms for their own use and skimming money off tenders and contracts, a practice also taken up by more junior officials (Lawrence and Manson, 1994; Seiler, 1999). Clientelist networks and rent seeking flourish when access to the state is the most effective way to accumulate resources and when civil society is weak. In all this, the Bop state bore a striking resemblance to authoritarian regimes elsewhere in Africa. Potential opposition was repressed and intimidated and the ANC was banned, operating underground and organisationally weak outside its base in Mmabatho-Mafikeng, the capital.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons civil society barely existed, a legacy that made it difficult to develop more participatory political institutions after 1994 (Seiler, 1999). Local government was vested in the Chieftaincy, as was the case in the other “homelands”. Chiefs were appointed by the Bop government, for which questions of loyalty to Mangope took precedence over popular concerns about legitimacy and responsiveness. Local politics revolved around resource access and service delivery. In their pursuit of an agenda of division, the “homeland” states practised open ethnic discrimination. Non-Tswanas living in Bop faced harassment by the administration and the security forces and discrimination in the legal system. (Seiler, 1999). Many found it difficult to get access to land, housing and jobs.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, as the South African state implemented forced removals, hundreds of thousands of people moved into the “homelands”. The largest numbers arrived in the early 1970s (Surplus People Project, 1983). Africans without residence rights were forcibly relocated from urban areas and from “black spot” settlements in white farming areas. At the same time, larger numbers still moved off white farms and into the homelands. Heavily subsidised by cheap credit, commercial farmers switched to more capital-intensive production methods. The overall demand for farm labour fell, while farmers also replaced permanent workers with seasonal, casual labour.<sup>4</sup> Natrass estimated that 500,000 “full-time” farm workers left the sector between 1960 and 1971 (Natrass, 1981).

In 1994, the homelands were reincorporated into South Africa. This led to rapid political changes, with the introduction of elected provincial governments. There has also been organisational change at lower levels, with the abolition, or reinvention of homeland development corporations, which had attempted to co-ordinate and finance “development” activities, and their replacement by line ministries accountable to provincial and, ultimately, national government. These changes have had marked effects on the local economies of homeland capitals. In Mafikeng, the capital of North West Province, many jobs have disappeared. Factories whose production was subsidised by the *apartheid* regime have closed, while public sector employment has been rationalised.

Political power has moved towards Pretoria, as line ministries follow national policy and rely on nationally-generated funding. Local government is fiscally weak and has weak capacity. The advent of democratic local government has meant that political power at the local level is no longer the sole prerogative of traditional leaders. However, they still control access to welfare payments (through their power to issue identity documents) and have been reinvested with power over land tenure. Official ethnic discrimination has been abolished, but informants in Madibogo village insisted that divisions between long-standing residents and incomers still mattered and still affected people's access to resources controlled by traditional leaders.

So there are continuities with the Bop era, as well as changes. Most important are continuities in the political economy of the relationship between the former homelands and wider South Africa. These areas are still migrant-labour economies, with a substantial proportion of households depending on remittances. Many migrants have kept strong links to households based in the homelands; bringing back remittances, returning when retired, ill or unemployed and leaving children in the care of relatives. Keeping a secure base from which to migrate or launch different kinds of livelihood-related activities is critically important. Recession and retrenchments, and increasing casualisation of work across the national economy, underline the importance of prioritising security. However, they make it much more difficult for people to rely on migrancy to deliver secure incomes. There is thus a contradiction at the heart of the relationship between these areas and the rest of the South African economy.

### **(c) Madibogo<sup>5</sup>**

Madibogo village lies 82 km south west of Mafikeng, the provincial capital. The 1996 Census recorded a population of around 26,000 people, while almost 7000 were recorded in the neighbouring village of Madibogopan.<sup>6</sup> Like many other rural settlements in the Province, Madibogo saw a rapid increase in population between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The village lies beyond daily commuting distance to any major centre of employment and there are few services. Most people who have moved into Madibogo in the last thirty years were allocated a house site, but have no rights over arable land. Longstanding residents have also been affected by land shortage and many of these also have only a house site, with little space for growing crops or keeping livestock. People who do have rights over land often do not work it, as they lack capital equipment. Some lease their land to white or to African farmers.

To understand the causes of poverty, one needs to understand the behaviour of the rich and powerful. The Bophuthatswana state discriminated systematically in favour of the well-connected, wealthy and well-educated, including in the allocation of access to arable land. Formerly white farms that had been added to the "homeland", and were owned by the state, were leased to those with good political connections and plentiful resources, in an attempt to create a class of larger farmers (Francis, 2000; 2002). In the post-

apartheid era, such inequalities persisted. In the Geysdorp area, close to Madibogo, landholders who benefited from these leases were given a purchase option in 1999, despite local demands that the land be returned to communal ownership. The farmers had access to NAMPO, the national maize growers' association, which lobbied the DLA on their behalf. Access to the state was thus vital both for their acquiring the land in the first place and in their successful efforts to hold onto the land after 1994. At Geysdorp, there has been no organised opposition to these developments. Stock from nearby villages often stray onto the farms and crop theft is common, but these inarticulate forms of protest have had no political impact. The winners in the transition from apartheid in this area are the articulate, wealthy and well-connected.

The new LRAD land reform also targets the well-resourced. Many of those who benefited from the old dispensation are thus also benefiting from the new one, while the rest of the rural population has been by-passed by land reform. The adoption at the national level of a development path that does not generate employment for the low skilled similarly leaves them by-passed. The state has adopted "rural development" as the solution to their predicament, with a remit for this handed to weak and under-funded local government. It is difficult to see how this combination of policies could do anything other than lock the large majority of people in Madibogo into continuing, and deepening, poverty. Allocating large farms to wealthy farmers will generate some local employment, but there is no prospect of institutional change that could open up escape routes from poverty.<sup>8</sup>

*(i) Differentiation and poverty*

People living in Madibogo differed markedly in terms of their incomes, the kinds and extent of the insecurities they faced and in their responses to insecurity. There was a chasm between a very small group of larger-scale farmers and business people, and the vast majority. Understanding the few success stories was as important as investigating how the poor survived, or why some poor households found it more difficult than others to put together a livelihood. My sample therefore attempted to capture differences in livelihoods, resource access and income levels.

<p><b>Group 1:</b> Households which experienced substantial income growth since the 1970s, or which have accumulated land, access to land and/or developed businesses. Their incomes were well over R50,000 per annum [5 households].</p> <p><b>Group 2:</b> Households receiving a regular income, in the form of more than one pension, comparably-sized remittances or trading incomes [16 households].</p> <p><b>Group 3:</b> Households receiving one pension or small, but regular, remittances [13 households].</p> <p><b>Group 4:</b> Households with irregular incomes [6 households].</p>
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Two people in the first group were leasing farms on state land at Geysdorp (171 ha and just over 340 ha, respectively); one, a headmaster, had jointly inherited a farm of 450 ha with his five siblings; one owned two shops and ran a small farm; another leased land on a sharecropping basis and had a small

transport business. Their incomes were all well over R50,000 a year. All had constructed multiple livelihoods, combining farming with waged employment or running a small business. Some people had put all of their resources and energy into farming, but they were not the most prosperous farmers. Part-time farmers could draw on wages and business profits for their farming operation, rather than having to reply on high-interest loans. Success in this strategy depended on the ability to mobilise family and kinship networks between sectors and across space, reducing the extent to which risks are co-variant.

**Ladlong Cornelius Masire** (born in 1937) had been leasing a 171 ha farm at Geysdorp since 1974. Ladlong was not putting all his energy into crop farming, however. In 1999, for example, he did not farm the land himself, but, instead, had rented it out to a white farmer in return for half of the crop. The land was important to him – the maize it yielded fed his family and provided fodder for their cattle – but it was far from being his only source of income. Ladlong, his father and brother jointly owned 600 cattle that they kept 230 km away, at Kuruman. His brother looked after the cattle and Ladlong travelled there two or three times a month. Their father and mother divided their time between Kuruman and Geysdorp. The family acted like a firm spread across the wide spaces of the Northern Cape and North West Provinces.<sup>9</sup> Ladlong took most of the decisions about running the Geysdorp farm, but, after the harvest, he would take the paperwork to Kuruman to show his brother. The two of them would take the cheques to the bank. Their father still had the final say about the sale of cattle, however. He commented: “When you have a family, you should try different places. When you have a family, they shouldn’t be clustered in one place, because when they die, they all die. When they are in different environments, trying to make a living, they won’t all die at the same time.”

Such a strategy puts a high premium on flexibility, on access to information and on investment in social networks. These attributes are far from being substitutes for labour, skills, capital and access to the state, but they do make it possible to survive. Where they are joined with these resources the household can prosper. Children and dependent relatives may be called on to manage investments. Such a strategy may spread risk, but it raises problems of labour supervision (c.f. Berry, 1986). It can be difficult to discipline kin and they may refuse to be deployed in this way.

People like Ladlong, wealthy, diversifying his livelihood to accumulate resources, stood out. For most people, constructing a livelihood was a difficult business, a matter of managing from month to month on a pension, hoping that a daughter would bring groceries when she next visited, or finding ways to juggle the money needed to buy the next meal with the need to save a little capital to use in trading the following week.

This major contrast between wealthy farmers and the rest should not obscure the very real differences in life circumstances and livelihood strategies in the rest of the population, the most important of which was the contrast between people with some kind of regular income and those, the poorest of the poor, without this. Twenty-nine people in the sample lived in households with a regular income. Sixteen of these were receiving two pensions, regular remittances or a regular income from trading. Such people could feed themselves, and even save a little, but they lacked the resources needed to

trade on anything other than a very small scale. Those who did attempt to trade – mainly in cooked food – operated in a market that was close to saturation. Informal traders in rural South Africa face a market that has been largely captured by major retail chains. Competing on price is therefore extremely difficult.

A third category of households had lower, but still regular, incomes. Some were pensioners, underlining the importance of pensions in weakening the link between old age and extreme poverty. Some were receiving small amounts of money from spouses, parents or children living and working elsewhere. What made the difference between just about managing, albeit at a low level, and a constant battle to survive, was a predictable source of income. The poorest households had no regular source of income. People retrenched, or unable to find work might easily find themselves in this position. Illness, death and work injuries lay behind other people's fall into poverty. Several had been victims of violence. A rise in the number of dependants in a household could also put it under severe strain. Child-fostering and, increasingly common, the return of adult children to live at home could push a household into deeper poverty. Inability to access welfare payments, through lack of knowledge of the welfare system, or poor relations with traditional leaders who issued the necessary documentation, could prevent people from gaining the resources they needed to deal with these difficulties.

*(ii) How poor people respond to poverty*

Poor people's responses to poverty are shaped by their institutional environment, by the social relations in which they are enmeshed and by the repertoire of culturally-shaped practices available to them. They are often forced to prioritise a search for security and predictability over income maximisation. Insecurities explain the attraction of low-paid work, such as farm labouring, which at least offers the prospect of a predictable food supply (farm labourers are often paid partly in sacks of grain)<sup>10</sup> and why even those who did have access to arable land might choose to let others sharecrop it, rather than farm it themselves. Others sent children to live as dependent, semi-servile herders, with better-off households.

Institutionally generated insecurities also prompted many people to prioritise maintaining a rural base, from which some household members could move back and forth in search of work, often over long distances, making household composition fluctuate markedly. Such a response may also be explained by a long-standing repertoire of cultural practices that make it unwise to assume that stable, nuclear families are the norm. Russell stresses the importance of agnatic kinship idioms in shaping people's responses to the pressures of poverty in South Africa, arguing that it is a reworked "tradition", a "culturally specific rubric" (Guyer and Peters, 1987) and one of many such traditions by which people impose a "comforting continuity" in the interpretation of their lives (Russell, 2004). Thus people living together may not consider themselves a nuclear family, and co-residence may itself be a temporary phenomenon. Children may be distributed amongst a number of households and move between them (Russell, 2004: 42). Household membership may

therefore fluctuate greatly, even over short periods. However, this should not obscure the fact that such households usually revolve around one or more people who provide a stabilising base. Clustering around someone with a stable source of income was thus another response to the pressures of poverty. This person might be a grandparent, whose pension was a vital resource, or a younger woman receiving remittances from a spouse, parent or sibling.

*Lydia Akanyang Tshatsha stood at the centre of one such cluster, in Madibogo. Her father, William Motseki Tshatsha had been working as a mechanic in a dairy in Klerksdorp, 170 km away, for the last thirty-five years. There were seven children, four sons and three daughters, the youngest of whom was twenty. Lydia herself, now forty, had worked in the dairy for a few years in the early 1980s, and then, escaping a violent husband, worked in a hotel near Springs, on the East Rand, for five years. She came back to Madibogo when her mother died. Her father told her to do this, because there was nobody else to look after the family. Lydia was the stable centre of the household. Her two youngest sisters and her youngest brother, all still at school, lived with her, as did her four children. Another brother, Edwin, left his three children in Lydia's care a year previously, when his relationship with his partner broke down. The youngest of these children, now four, alternated between the Tshatsha household and that of her mother. Edwin himself had worked as a miner in Rustenberg until two years previously, when he lost his job. He moved to Mafikeng and found work in a shop for five months, but then lost that job and came home for seven months. He had left for Klerksdorp two months previously, hoping that his father could help him find work in the dairy. William's relationship with his children had deteriorated since their mother died. For the first six months "he took care of us properly", bringing money regularly and sending them milk to sell on pension day. Lydia used some of the money to buy chickens, which she slaughtered, stored in the deep freeze and sold on pension day. She also tried selling cooked food, but selling chickens paid better. Then William began a relationship with another woman. He still brought R3-400 home every month, but this was not enough money to trade with.*

It was difficult to tell whether such household instability was increasing. The growing difficulty of finding work was forcing people to move frequently, apparently more often than in the past. There was a striking contrast in this regard between the life histories of older people, who often remained in the same location, and job, for long periods, and younger people, forced to move back and forth between Madibogo and various towns in the region as they looked for work. Many such households were female-headed, *de facto* or *de jure*. Women in *de facto* female-headed households were in a structurally weak position, often lacking discretion over resource use. Women in *de jure* female-headed households might have more autonomy, but suffered from lack of access to a spouse's income. In this, their predicament resembled that of women in migrant-labour economies across southern and eastern Africa (Francis, 2000).

Three sibling-based households were being supported financially by parents living elsewhere. Other complex households consisted of people looking after their siblings' children, pensioners looking after grandchildren, or living with their unemployed adult children and their offspring. Many of these households had come into being through marital breakdown, or from unemployed young adults' inability to set up households on their own. People living in complex

households faced several challenges. For older people, the most common of these was the challenge of maintaining their authority over and getting access to the wage incomes and labour power of the next generation. People who were fostering children had to negotiate the delicate issue of how such children would be supported when their parents sent little or no money for their upkeep, as seemed to happen quite often.

*Modiegi Johanna Mokoatsi and her husband were both receiving pensions. As well as her own children, Modiegi had brought up the two sons of her unmarried sister. Now these men, Ishmael and Abraham, had children of their own. Abraham's wife had gone off to work at Stella, 40 km away. He used the house in Madibogopan as a base, leaving his three children with Modiegi while he did a series of insecure, badly-paid and short-term jobs on farms and construction sites. He usually returned empty handed, but Modiegi found it hard to imagine sending the children away.*

Kinship is still a safety net for such children, but it is being stretched tight by the pressures of unemployment and insecurity. It cannot be assumed to be an indefinitely available resource. Fostering of children and adults' mobility between kin, while an accepted part of a "culturally specific rubric" must rest, ultimately, on a material base. People with nothing to offer cannot assume that such a rubric will provide support for them indefinitely. Particularly worrying is the impact of unemployment and insecurity on young people's ability to form households, or, indeed, make any kind of long-term plans.

*Herbert Modisakoma, or 'Teacher', as he was known, was the eldest of Ruth Modisakoma's seven children. When I visited him, Teacher, then 32, was living in the family house in Madibogopan with two of his sisters, a brother and a nephew. The house was dirty, neglected and dark. The sitting room was sparsely furnished, with a table, some chairs and an old, worn out sofa on a concrete floor crawling with ants. As had been the case for all of Teacher's life, Ruth was away in Johannesburg, working as a maid. Teacher's father, who had a little business doing construction work in Johannesburg, had died in 1992. Ruth came home only every two or three months, but she sent them money every month, sometimes R200, sometimes less. One of Teacher's sisters, a woman of 27, had gone to live with her mother in Johannesburg after falling ill. It was her small son who was living in the house with Teacher. One of his brothers was living in Mafikeng, looking for work after losing his job as a security guard in the Department of Works. Another brother, who was still at school, was living with relatives nearby. The family had no land. Teacher's father's brothers inherited it. The family had just four goats.*

*Teacher had left school in 1985, when he was in Standard 5. He tried many different ways to earn a living, but he had never managed to find regular work. After looking for work in Mafikeng, he decided to come back to the village and found casual work on white farms nearby, cutting wood and loading it onto trailers. This brought in about R150 each time. Teacher would try to earn some extra money by persuading the farmer to give him some of the wood, which he then sold in the village. It was hard work and after two years, he had had enough. "The job was weakening me and I wasn't getting much out of it." So he left for Johannesburg, finding a place to live with relatives. He never found a permanent job. He fitted carpets and did some gardening, but the piece jobs dried up, so he decided to come home. "I felt I was a burden to the people I was living with."*

*People with building skills could sometimes find contracts locally, though it was very difficult to make a steady income. When he returned to Madibogopan, Teacher was taken on by a man in Khunwana (around 20 km away) who did building work. Then, in 1998, he decided to start working for himself. He and two other men occasionally managed to find building-work locally.*

While these different responses to poverty raised their own, particular challenges, some problems could undermine any attempt at strategising. Ill health and disability were recurring themes in the life histories.

*Florence Mosadi Moroka was twenty-three. She and her husband, Ishmael Onkokame Mphothe, aged forty, lived in a cramped little house in Madibogopan with their three children. Ishmael had inherited the house from his parents, who had died "a long time ago". All of his brothers and sisters died of illness. Florence, her brother and sister all had epilepsy. She had never been able to look for work, while Ishmael lost the only steady job he had held, in Mafikeng, when he contracted asthma. He came back to Madibogopan and, for a year afterwards, worked on a new school building. This allowed him to pay R1200 for Florence's bridewealth and they married in 1994. Afterwards, he started doing seasonal work, weeding and harvesting, but he didn't manage to find another regular job. He heard that there were building jobs going in Rustenburg, but when he got there he discovered that he was supposed to pay a R500 tip to the person who was doing the hiring. Since he didn't have the money, he didn't get the job. Then he tried unsuccessfully to get a job building a new village hall next to the Chief's house in Madibogopan. Florence commented "the people who do the hiring practice a kind of apartheid. If they don't know you, they don't hire you." Florence was unsure whether her epilepsy would entitle her to disability benefit. Besides, she could not apply for it because she did not have an identity card, though she had twice tried to apply for one. The first time, she missed the people. The second time, she was told to produce her parents' marriage certificate. Florence's family was too fragmented for her to be able easily to meet this demand. Her parents were divorced and neither of them lived in the village. Her mother, a domestic worker, was living 40 km away in Stella. Florence's father was a miner in Kuruman (230 km away) and was sometimes away for as long as four months.*

*Florence and Ishmael had no land. They used to own four cows, but these died in the 1992 drought. They had three chickens. The only income they could hope to get was from the weeding and harvesting work that Ishmael did for a local white farmer. In 1999, Ishmael weeded crops from February to May and he expected to start harvesting in June. He was paid R10 a day and given the money at the end of the week. He also received some sacks of grain, sometimes twenty sacks, at harvest time. They sold ten and kept ten, storing the sacks at the village shop. They normally sold the grain to the farmers, selling one sack for R30.*

The most vulnerable people were those, like Florence and Ishmael, without access to a secure source of income and who could not reduce their insecurity by constructing multiple livelihoods, whether because of disability or ill health, or inability to leave children unattended. Social marginality compounded the effects of disability. Other vulnerabilities might seem to be the result of contingencies (illness, death, a quarrel in the family), but these could often be traced back to poverty and insecurity.

To summarise, Madibogo is deeply stratified between a tiny minority with access to the state and to capital and a large majority who lack these advantages. In this much larger group, we have seen that people with access to a regular income are in quite a different position from those without. The general trend of national policy-making, which systematically favours the highly skilled and those involved in high-value export sectors, suggests that the latter group will continue to grow. Land reform is now relevant to people in Madibogo only insofar as new, large-scale farmers can provide employment. Rural development is in the hands of institutions with capacity problems and which are financially weak. The key question is therefore whether responses to poverty built on constant movement in search of temporary work are sustainable. Russell rightly underlines how common child fostering and residential instability are in the region, but the sustainability of such arrangements rests on the willingness of kin to foster migrants' children, often with no financial support, and to make their own incomes available to migrants in the periods when they are at home and unemployed. It is difficult to see how this willingness can continue indefinitely.

#### **4. Policy Implications**

The scale of unemployment and poverty in South Africa has prompted calls for a pro-poor distributional regime, including a basic income grant (BIG), which would provide a minimum income for all those not currently receiving a grant or pension (Samson and Standing, 2003; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). Proponents argue that a BIG would be both politically acceptable and economically feasible; politically acceptable because there is widespread acceptance that the depth of the unemployment problem warrants intervention and economically feasible because the degree of income inequality means that it would be possible to finance the BIG by a large increase in indirect taxes (Le Roux, 2002, cited in Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). A BIG could make a significant difference to the lives of the poor and make some of the responses to impoverishment outlined above more endurable. However, the levels of support envisaged (R100 a month) would not do more than make life in continued poverty sustainable. A BIG could not tackle "the constraints that close off opportunities for upward social and economic mobility" (Green and Hulme, 2005). Seekings and Nattrass argue that intervention to tackle unemployment requires a new social accord to bring about labour market reform and policies to create new jobs (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). Such an approach is vulnerable to the charge that it sidesteps the deep power inequalities that have shaped the current distributional regime (du Toit, 2005b). However, the alternative on offer is not widespread asset redistribution, but, rather, the continuation of policies generating, at best, jobless growth.

#### **5. Conclusions**

This case study underlines the importance of understanding the processes that link poverty at the local level with the regional and national political economy. The large majority of people in Madibogo have been left behind by a national political transition that has reconfigured political power towards a

small, African elite and, in rural areas has constructed new alliances between this elite and commercial farming capital, particularly exporters. Government adherence to a neo-liberal growth strategy also has little to offer the rural poor. Poverty at the local level is, thus, largely caused by these wider processes. The value of a local-level study, in this case, then, is to examine the responses poor people make to the institutions and processes that keep them in poverty and to attempt a judgement about the consequences of these responses. In this case, the judgement is that responses to poverty may well be unsustainable.

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<sup>1</sup> “Discouraged workers” did not take active steps to find employment in the month prior to the survey, but professed a desire to work. Kingdon and Knight (2001) argue that there is strong evidence to support the contention that the latter should be included in unemployment statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Meth and Dias used a variant of the headcount method to estimate the number of people falling into the bottom two expenditure classes (R0-399 and R400-799 per household per month), using the 2002 Labour Force Survey (StatsSA 2003) and the 1999 October Household Survey (StatsSA, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Mmabatho, the administrative capital of Bophuthatswana, was grafted onto the town of Mafikeng. The urban area as a whole was renamed Mafikeng when Bophuthatswana was reincorporated into South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> De Klerk (1984) and Marcus (1989) give overviews of the impact of agricultural restructuring on employment in the commercial farming sector in this period.

<sup>5</sup> I carried out forty-one separate life history interviews with people in forty different households in the villages of Madibogo and Madibogopan and with farmers on nearby state land at Geysdorp between March and June 1999. I used a unified interview framework that included questions about contemporary livelihoods and interviews lasted around two hours. The households were chosen in order to capture diversities, rather than to construct a statistically representative sample. Interviewees were therefore chosen to reflect diversities in sources of livelihood, apparent income level and generation of the household head. I also conducted interviews dealing with the local and regional institutional context with Paramount Chief Phoi at Madibogo, the chief at Madibogopan, their headmen, local councillors, other local political activists, members of local community-based organisations (CBOs), officials in the Central District Council, the provincial Departments of Land Affairs, Agriculture and Local Government and Planning, and the National African Farmers’ Union.

<sup>6</sup> (StatsSA, 1998c) Data from both the 1996 Population Census and the 2001 Census are not completely reliable. The 1996 Census appears to have undercounted children under five years old (UNFPA, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> It is not possible to give accurate population data to track changes over time. Pre-1994 population data, including the 1991 Bophuthatswana Population Census, are highly unreliable, while the 1996 and 2001 Censuses were also problematic (see footnote 6). Breutz, a government anthropologist, surveyed the area in the mid-1950s and estimated that Madibogo then had a population of about 2000, while there were 1800-2000 people living in Madibogopan (Breutz, 1955). In 1983, the Surplus People Project estimated that 20,000 people were living in Madibogo (Surplus People Project 1983), while the 1991 Bophuthatswana Census recorded 22,000 in Madibogo (Bophuthatswana, 1993). The 1996 Population Census recorded 26,327 people in Madibogo and 6817 Madibogopan (StatsSA, 1998c).

<sup>8</sup> C.f. Green and Hulme (2005: 876): “Frameworks based on the understanding of poverty reduction as linearly increasing household income or consumption through economic growth are unlikely to generate development policies and mobilize public action that can adequately tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Conceptualizing deprivation in terms of chronic poverty, exploring the constraints that close off opportunities for upward social and economic mobility, and analysing the politically entrenched social relations (household, community, national, and international) that work to produce the effects that constitute the experience of chronic poverty provides a potential means for deepening understanding and guiding action.”

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<sup>9</sup>C.f. Ferguson's (1999) description of a similar family 'firm' in rural Zambia.

<sup>10</sup> C.f. Sender, 2002.

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