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PEASANT FARMING AND THE RURAL ECONOMY OF THE EAST CAPE

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Abstract

Peasant agriculture seeks to supplement off-farm sources of income rather than to sustain rural families. In order to enable small part-time farmers to make the most efficient use of the existing agricultural resources, support systems must be designed keeping this reality in mind. These systems will differ in many respects from those designed to facilitate the establishment of farmers.

1. Introduction

The word "rural" generates a mind picture of people dependant on farming and activities related to the farming community for their livelihood. Nothing could be further from the truth in rural Ciskei. As will become clear in this paper, the rural population in the developing areas of South Africa are not primarily agriculturists. At the same time it is also true that agriculture is their major natural resource and a significant asset to many rural households. As a result of this reality rural development thinking has shifted from an emphasis on agricultural production and the establishment of commercial farmers, to satisfying the needs of the rural population *per se*. The focus shifts to people, and agriculture becomes a means and not an end in itself.

2. Agricultural land use

2.1 Settlement pattern

The general land use pattern was compiled from personal communications and DBSA (1989). Total area is 823 137 ha and total population is 803 000 which gives an average population density of 98 persons per square kilometer. The settlement pattern is as follows. Two major concentrations are found in the areas bordering East London and King Williamstown. Lesser numbers live in the formally structured service towns of Whittlesea, Seymour, Balfour, Alice, Middledrift, Keiskammahock, Dimbaza, and Peddie. The rest occupy a large number of small so-called locations scattered all over the 562 240 ha of tribal land. Ironically the population density in four tribal authority areas surveyed by ARDRI (Williams, 1987; Williams and Rose, 1989; Williams and Ward, 1989) was even higher than the average for Ciskei as a whole, namely 1,3 persons per hectare. In these surveys it was found that in an area equivalent to a circle with a diameter of only 19 km, 4901 households comprising 36 274 people lived in 27 locations. This dramatically illustrates the pressure on the agricultural land available after deduction of mountains, conservation areas, other state land and formal towns.

2.2 Tenure on communal land

On tribal lands each household is entitled to a residential site which for all practical purposes could be considered to be equivalent to freehold title. It can be bequeathed by the head of household to any person. If for example a man has two sons, one may inherit the house, and the other one may apply to the Tribal Authority for a residential site, which may or may not be granted to him, depending on availability of land. A recent development is that residences are being sold, even to people from outside the community. Every household is entitled to run livestock on the commonage, and to fetch wood and water from it. In addition some households have an arable allocation which may vary between one to three hectares. The total area of arable land within a Tribal Authority area may not be extended without approval by the Department of Agriculture as to its suitability for cultivation.

2.3 Privatised farmers

In addition to the tribal lands, Ciskei farmers are being settled on formerly white-owned farms that were incorporated into Ciskei during consolidation. The total area of these farms (excluding the 4850ha of intensive citrus and pineapple farms managed by the Ciskei Agricultural Corporation) is 106 444 ha. This has been subdivided into 484 units averaging 220 ha, of which 54 have been sold to Ciskeians and the rest are leased with an option to buy. The average carrying capacity of these farms is approximately 40 LSU.

2.4 Irrigation schemes

The Department of Agriculture in Ciskei has developed four major irrigation schemes covering 2160 ha. Intensive vegetable production, dairying and field crops are the major enterprises on these schemes. Approximately 100 farmers have been established on 4 ha units and a further 2000 have foodplots of one-tenth of a hectare.

3. Household characteristics

3.1 Demographic data

The following picture of the average rural household emerges from ARDRI surveys (Williams and Rose, 1989; Williams and Ward, 1989; Rose and Williams, 1988).

- Average family size is approximately 6 members.
- 40% of households are headed by women, mostly widows.
- 44% of all household heads are older than sixty.
- Only one-third of households has a resident male in the 25 to 55 year age group.
- 70% of the heads of households stay at home, 18% commute daily or weekly and 12% are employed far from home.

3.2 Water availability

Fabricius and McWilliams (1991) surveyed 1732 rural households (aggregate of what they termed semi-urban and rural) in Ciskei, and found that only six percent have a tap inside the house or on site. Twenty-nine percent had access to a communal tap in the street and fifty percent obtained their water from a river or dam. The average distance of all these households from water was exactly one kilometer, and the average time for one return trip to the water source was 57 minutes.

Piped water supplies to each household is a powerful means of raising living standards. Lack of management time and able-bodied men are two of the most important constraints for

peasant agriculture. Fetching water for the household is clearly a strenuous and time-consuming activity. Furthermore, home gardening becomes a prohibitive activity, where in reality this should be the most important source of food production for the majority of households. Water planning and survival water during acute dry spells could increase year-round vegetable production tremendously, with a concomitant impact on the health status of especially the children.

3.3 Energy sources

Paraffin is the dominant energy source and accounts for just about eighty percent of the lighting according to Fabricius and McWilliams (1991). Paraffin (29%), wood (28%), and paraffin and wood (30%) were listed as sources of energy for cooking. Less than half a percent of households had electricity.

3.4 Agricultural assets

The agricultural assets of the 421 households surveyed by ARDRI are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Agricultural assets of households in Ciskei (N = 421)

| | Percentage of households with | Average holding |
|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Arable land | 44 | 2,8 ha |
| Home gardens | 56 | - |
| Cattle | 31 | 5 |
| Sheep | 25 | 17 |
| Goats | 59 | 12 |
| Poultry | 73 | 11 |
| Pigs | 46 | 2 |

Only 42% of the arable area was under cultivation at the time of the survey. This is primarily due to:

- The unsuitability for crop production in terms of rainfall and soil (depth, slope and type) of much of the arable allocations.
- The absence of working age males.
- The mechanisation problem of working such small pieces of land in terms of cost and timeliness.
- Time spent on household chores, especially fetching water and wood and cooking.

4. Household income

The most striking fact about household incomes is the insignificant proportion of income derived from agriculture. This was a common feature of all the ARDRI surveys done in Ciskei and Transkei as well as by Steyn (1989). Agricultural income contributed only 5,6% to total household income (Rose and Williams, 1988) and even so, two-thirds of this small amount is derived from putting a cash value on produce for home consumption, whilst one-third was actual cash income.

The small contribution of agriculture to average household income is not surprising. Most of Ciskei is only suitable for extensive farming and the high population density in the rural areas implies that each household has access to only about five hectares of grazing that could sustain approximately one livestock unit.

Fabricius and McWilliam (1991) did not investigate income from agriculture *per se*, but since their data is the most recent information available the following results from their survey is relevant.

- Average total household income was R 517 per month.
- The major income sources were salaries and wages (42%), remittances (29%) and pensions (17%). Together these sources account for 88% of rural household income.

5. Peasant farming

5.1 Definition

The facts and figures quoted above shows that the majority of rural households do not depend on agriculture for a living. The term "subsistence farmers" is a misnomer. They do not subsist on farming. Part-time small farmers would be a more accurate description and will promote clearer thinking in terms of their needs. For example, one could argue that the development path for a subsistence farmer would be to become a commercial farmer. This entails concepts like economic units (consolidation of small units) formal marketing channels, and all the usual support systems associated with farming. The part-time small farmer on the other hand is mainly interested in augmenting his income from other sources and reducing his dependence on bought food (the purchase price of grain, meat and milk is generally double or more than double the local selling price through formal marketing channels). His major requirements are small quantity packaging of farming inputs, mechanisation services designed to serve scattered small parcels of land, and the physical infrastructure to sustain a local informal market.

5.2 True farmers

Rose and Williams (1988) and Eckert *et al* (1988) concluded that a real farmer class does exist and that this comprises about 20% of households. This group was identified by examining the correlations between various socio-economic and agricultural variables. Contrary to the usual expectation, sex, education, expenditure on food, income, and residential status did not correlate with the agricultural variables measured. On the other hand a large number of correlations were found amongst agricultural variables, thus indicating a focussed interest on agriculture as an enterprise.

It is therefore to be expected that if the right institutional conditions in terms of access to agricultural resources were created, a farming class would gradually emerge in a natural and unforced way.

5.3 Agricultural production

The estimated gross value of agricultural products in 1987 were as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Estimated gross value of agricultural products in Ciskei (1987)

| | R | Percentage |
|----------------------|------------|------------|
| Field crops | 1 906 125 | 3,0 |
| Vegetables | 2 338 444 | 3,6 |
| Fruit | 7 401 211 | 11,5 |
| Livestock production | 52 723 409 | 81,9 |
| Total | 64 369 189 | 100 |

Source: DBSA (1989)

This data clearly illustrate the dominance of livestock in Ciskeian agriculture. The major part of fruit production originates from state citrus and pineapple farms managed by the Ciskei

Agricultural Corporation. This implies that livestock farming off communal grazing represents close on ninety percent of the agricultural assets of small farmers.

5.4 The tragedy of the commons

It was shown above that communal grazing is the most valuable agricultural resource of rural people. The deterioration of communal grazing where-ever it is practised is well documented. Although wildlife, parks, rivers, etc. spring to mind immediately for the environmentalist, in reality natural grazing is our greatest environmental asset, and much more research money, discussion and effort should be directed towards people-livestock-environment interaction on communal grazing. The critical issue being to devise access systems which will integrate the needs of ruminants, livestock owners, non-livestock owners, and local values, and at the same time enjoy legitimacy by the community involved.

Current practices mitigate completely against the efficient use of communal grazing. To quote but one example, in commercial agriculture it is recognised that the protein content of winter grazing in the summer rainfall area is too low to maintain animals in a satisfactory condition. Provision has to be made for supplementary grazing on cultivated land during critical periods in the production cycle. Yet, in the traditional system there is very little integration between the use of arable land and animal production. The need was however recognised in the sense that in winter the arable allocations become part of the commonage so that crop residues are available to all stock owners. In a system where every household had both livestock and arable lands this may have been a agreeable arrangement. When this is no longer the case, the lack of integration is one of the most serious constraints to deriving full benefits from livestock holdings.

6. Conclusion

Peasant agriculture seeks to supplement off-farm sources of income rather than to sustain rural families. In order to enable small part-time farmers to make the most efficient use of the

existing agricultural resources, support systems must be designed keeping this reality in mind. These systems will differ in many respects from those designed to facilitate the establishment of farmers.

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