



FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE THROUGH MOBILISATION: BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE RURAL COMMUNITIES

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'Resilience is the capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure' (UN/ISDR in Oft and Tsuma 2006: 6). This paper looks at the initiatives and struggles of self-organised rural communities of small-scale and landless farmers in three local municipalities within the concept of resilience proposed by Oft and Tsuma (2006). The local municipalities are Langeberg in the Cape Winelands District Municipality (CWDM) and Swellendam and Theewaterskloof in the Overberg District Municipality (ODM) in the Western Cape.



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IN THESE RURAL communities, the main sources of income for a great number of households are seasonal commercial agricultural employment and social grants. The food security of these impoverished households is permanently under threat from the continued decline in agricultural labour absorption, the seasonality of employment, rising food prices and high dependency ratios.

The paper argues that one way of expressing resilience can be found in the experience of the Mawubuye Lands Right Forum in organising farming households to overcome dispossession, fight for land and promote food sovereignty. The emphasis is on the role of self-organisation by marginalised groups as a necessary step towards genuine agrarian transformation. In 2005,

Mawubuye was launched with the assistance of TCOE, a non-government organisation. Mawubuye is actively involved in raising awareness, identifying and building local leadership in the struggle for better livelihoods, and engaging in strategies that challenge existing power relations. Its main aim is to bring greater collective organisational and political cohesion to already established, self-initiated small-scale farmers' associations in these municipalities, where previously these associations largely worked in isolation. Mawubuye also provides the means to unite their voices with other impoverished members of their communities. Since 2011, Mawubuye and TCOE have been working with farm workers who live in the same communities and have been evicted from their farms, and for whom small-scale farming also provides a means of accessing food.

The paper examines some of the underlying structural obstacles faced by rural households involved in small-scale production used mainly to meet household needs. These obstacles include a lack of access to land and productive infrastructure and water. In some cases, the land may be available to the farmers but does not have long-term tenure security, water rights and productive infrastructure, thus restricting opportunities for optimal use of the land. The resilience of these farmers is reflected in their ability to adapt, resist and change, and the extent to which they are able to organise, increasing their capacity to engage and challenge government, and clearly articulate their demands and propose alternative policies.

This case study also reflects on research carried out by Mawubuye in conjunction with TCOE that looked at people's own understanding of the root causes of their impoverishment and the importance of collective organisation and action. The research found that, despite existing obstacles, small-scale farmers continue to produce while embarking on

collective efforts to engage government for access to more land, agricultural support and recognition of the significance of small-scale production as a livelihood strategy.

UNDERSTANDING RURAL POVERTY AND VULNERABILITY

Any understanding of rural poverty must include an examination of the underlying structural factors that impede rural households from being active economic players. Two of the critical factors that affect Mawubuye's constituency are agricultural employment and access to land.

THE NATURE OF AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT

The Overberg and Cape Winelands District Municipalities are well-known centres of successful and export-oriented industrial agriculture. However, this measurable success exists alongside rural poverty and food insecurity that affect many rural households. The industrial agricultural sector is one of the major local employers, as Table 1 illustrates. However, the work is seasonal and wages are extremely low (which gave rise to the widespread self-organised farm protests and uprising in these municipalities in November 2012). This means that when the agricultural peak season is over, rural households, which depend on industrial agricultural employment as a source of income, fall into greater depths of poverty and experience food shortages.

In 2007, TCOE and Mawubuye conducted a survey of rural household land needs and found that up to 80% of households had had little to eat during the previous year's off-season (TCOE 2009). The social grant, which is the biggest source of income for many households, is not enough to provide a safety net against destitution.

Table 1: Employment in agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing sectors

District Municipality	Local Municipality	Percentage employed in these sectors	Importance of the sectors
Overberg (ODM)	Theewaterskloof	36.1%	Largest employer
	Swellendam	13.6%	Third-largest employer, after 'unspecified' (19%) and wholesale and retail trade (15%)
	Average for ODM	21.3%	Largest employer
Cape Winelands (CWDM)	Langeberg	24.3%	Largest employer
	Average for CWDM	19.2%	Second-largest employer, after community and personal services (27.3%)

Sources: Urban-Econ: Development Economists (2011); Overberg District Municipality (2012)

As Table 1 shows, in these municipalities the agricultural, hunting, forestry and fishing sectors are major employers, of mainly seasonal workers who are among the most vulnerable.

ACCESS TO LAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE

In South Africa, access to land and infrastructure development is a high priority area in policy discussions aimed at addressing rural poverty and unemployment. The government recognises that a root cause of rural poverty is the historical land dispossessions, which limited millions of South Africans to merely 13% of the country's land, in the former homelands. At its 52nd National Conference in Limpopo, the African National Congress (ANC) noted that 'colonialism and apartheid were rooted in dispossession of African people of their land, the destruction of African farming and super-exploitation of wage labourers, including farm workers and their families' (ANC 2007). Historical accounts of previously independent and successful African farmers in South Africa and their subsequent decline are well documented (Bundy 1979).

The chief aim of the democratic government that took over in 1994 was to redress apartheid policies. A comprehensive policy framework, the Reconstruction and Development Programme, was developed as a cornerstone to inform the direction of change with the objective of addressing poverty. This objective was stated as one of the main priorities of the democratic government. The ANC promised to undertake land redistribution of 30% of agricultural land to previously disadvantaged individuals to alleviate poverty especially in rural areas, as a sub-programme of overall land reform.

However, after 20 years of democracy, rural communities continue to be trapped in poverty, with low levels of income, poor access to state services, food insecurity and landlessness. To date there has been very little land or water reform: 'by 2012, some 7.95 million hectares had been transferred, only about a third of the 24.6 million originally targeted' (*Think Africa Press*, 19 June 2013).¹ By 2008 only 1–2% of land in the Overberg District Municipality was in black hands (CNdV Africa Planning & Design 2008). In addition, many of the farms transferred through the national land reform programme are struggling, while

others have completely collapsed. This was because of unrealistic project planning, which was based on maintaining the production regimes on the acquired commercial farms, and limited post-settlement support.

An outstanding example of this unrealistic approach occurred in the CWDM. In 2001, the then Department of Land Affairs randomly identified 147 residents from Zolani (Ashton) as beneficiaries of a 1080-hectare land-redistribution farm, situated about 40 km from where they lived. Since the redistribution, the farm in question – Sandfontein – has not been productive because of an unrealistic farm plan, as well as the lack of water rights and high levels of conflict among the large number of beneficiaries. As a result, some of those who genuinely want to farm are still confined to their backyards and municipal commonage², which in turn leads to overgrazing in the municipal commonage near Zolani.

The minimal land reform means that resource-poor producers are restricted to using backyard gardens and municipal commonage to produce food and raise livestock. However, access to municipal commonage continues to be a struggle, given the lack of compliance by local government to make commonage and the relevant infrastructure available to the previously excluded poor black farmers.

Policy makers do not sufficiently appreciate the critical role of local municipalities in land reform. The Department of Land Affairs (now the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform) attempted a seemingly progressive approach to decentralise the land reform programme by involving district municipalities. The department envisaged incorporating land reform in the municipal Integrated Development Plans, as part of their area-based planning. One of the requirements was for district municipalities to conduct land audits of all available municipal land, which could be linked to land-use plans aimed at nurturing small-scale production.

If existing municipal commonage is not available (which may be for a possible range of reasons), the department has funds available for the purchase of new commonage and to provide infrastructure in all commonages. However, this requirement is largely ignored, particularly in cash-strapped municipalities, which prefer to rent out their available commonage to wealthy white industrial farmers at market-related rates, as an additional source of revenue, and make no efforts to acquire new commonage. The failure to make municipal commonage available to small producers is another instance in which land reform opportunities have been lost. Despite the municipal mandate, black small producers continue to struggle to access municipal commonage, as the following examples show.

In 2012, the Langeberg Municipality decided to put municipal commonage out to tender (in Ashton and McGregor), whereupon Mawubuye embarked on a campaign to raise awareness about people's rights to commonage. Local black farmers then mobilised to challenge local government, on the basis that commonage is an important component of land reform and should be used to address the land needs of previously disadvantaged residents. They demanded meetings with the council and even staged a protest to challenge the decision. As a result of the landless people's mobilisation, the council reconsidered its decision and made its priority to address immediate land needs of the poor in Ashton and McGregor. Furthermore, farmers from across other municipal areas are continuing to demand that local authorities carry out audits of all available municipal land.

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In Zolani, livestock farmers had been farming for years on municipal land without any lease agreement. As the number of people keeping livestock grew, the farmers began to extend their grazing area, partially occupying adjacent commercial land belonging to an absentee landlord. On the municipal land, farmers erected makeshift kraals and pig pens to keep their livestock without obtaining approval from the Langeberg municipality. After years of discussion, the municipality agreed to let the farmers use the land and made some improvements by building four grazing camps. In addition, the municipality undertook to find the absentee landlord (believed to be in Italy) to discuss the possibility of buying the land for redistribution through the commonage programme.

Over the past six years, in the absence of state support, TCOE and Mawubuye have used participatory-based approaches to understand and build on self-initiated, bottom-up, land-based livelihood strategies.

At the time, this attempt was unsuccessful because the asking price for the land was more than what the municipality was offering (R5 million).

These examples raise questions about the effectiveness of existing national land reform and rural development policies to deliver on the objective of poverty reduction. Government's policy choices have also limited the scope for exploring a range of options and models of production available to land reform beneficiaries (Hall 2009). Over the past six years, in the absence of state support, TCOE and Mawubuye have used participatory-based approaches to understand and build on self-initiated, bottom-up, land-based livelihood strategies. These processes took various forms, such as visioning exercises, drawing social maps for a transformed countryside in the area and speak-out campaigns, all which

were aimed at piloting alternatives that reflected people's resilience and collective ability to imagine and construct an environment that can overcome structural obstacles.

LIVELIHOODS ON THE MARGINS: STORIES OF RESILIENCE

Mawubuye and TCOE continue to support small-scale production in building resilience, through expanding the organisational strength of small-scale farmers' associations in the municipalities mentioned. As an entry point for achieving food sovereignty, Mawubuye encourages people to make use of any available land to produce food for their own consumption. Some of the initiatives supported by Mawubuye include:

- ✦ *Community-based nurseries.* With government support, over the past few years nurseries have been set up in the towns of Bonnievale, Robertson, Ashton and McGregor (CWDM), and Barrydale and Genadendal (ODM) to produce and distribute seedlings to household and community gardens. As a result, over 1000 food production sites have been established. Members of Mawubuye manage the nurseries on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, after a capacity-building interchange with Brazilian land movements, the food programme coordinator has been conducting regular information sessions and oversight at each nursery to build the management capacity of the volunteers. The outcome of TCOE's tailor-made train-the-trainer workshops was 13 skilled coordinators who run the nurseries and offer support to local food gardens. The coordinating team keeps records of every visit to nurseries and a database of gardens, and holds monthly local meetings to identify areas where additional support is required.
- ✦ *Accessing municipal and community land.* A women-led local forum in Bonnievale (CWDM)

has a membership of women, farmers, youth and physically-challenged people. The forum has managed to secure access to 13 hectares of municipal land and build the local nursery on church-owned land, after successful negotiations with the local church.

Another local association, in Buffeljagsrivier (ODM), negotiated with the local primary school to use one hectare of land for growing food and offered, in return, a portion of their produce to the school's feeding scheme. Crop theft led to a security gate being put up, and responsibility for the school garden has since been transferred to the school. The group of 12 women shifted their focus to home gardens but continue to support the school garden by supplying it with seedlings. The group also established a working relationship with a neighbouring commercial dairy farmer, who offers them free compost and use of his tractor.

In Zolani, the crèche made land available for a community garden, while a church also offered land for the construction of a nursery.

At meetings between livestock producers in Swellendam and Rivieronsderend (ODM) and municipal officials, the agenda includes a slot for discussing land needs and access to municipal commonage, and to make inputs into the municipal planning processes. Unlike other areas, Rivieronsderend has three different farmer associations that use the same five hectares of land. Up until 2012, these farmers were losing large numbers of their livestock because of municipal impounding and killing of livestock by neighbouring industrial farmers and golf estate owners. Despite a successful Cape High Court challenge on 7th August 2012 to municipal impounding of livestock, incidents of private land owners killing livestock found on their land have escalated. This highlights how efforts by poor

farmers to build alternative livelihoods are destroyed because of the lack of land redistribution. Yet despite this, farmers continue to engage the municipality and the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform to have their land needs addressed.

✦ *Agro-ecology as a farming method.* As part of promoting alternative farming methods to industrial agriculture, members of Mawubuye are learning about agro-ecology and have been on exchange visits to Brazil, Senegal and Zimbabwe. One of the members has been assigned the role of coordinating the food production programme to spread new knowledge through regular visits to various sites.

✦ *Promoting traditional seeds.* Mawubuye food producers have also participated in an on-going, capacity-building course aimed at rescuing, saving, breeding and storing traditional seeds, which are a critical component of agro-ecological farming. The programme was initiated by TCOE in partnership with Brazilian land movements, through an accord between the Brazilian government and the South African government (represented by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform).

✦ *Water campaign.* Access to water is a key challenge for all farmers, whether producing food in backyards (using household water at high costs) or on larger pieces of land. Like land reform, promises of water reform remain unfulfilled. The Mawubuye leadership facilitated the establishment of local water forums, which record the water problems faced by farmers and households. These problems are then taken up with local municipalities and relevant local forums organised by the Department of Water Affairs, such as the Breede Overberg Water Catchment Management Agency (BOCMA). By participating in the BOCMA over the last few years, Mawubuye

captured government's attention and has been invited to information sessions and workshops and other public forums where the issue of water is discussed. Ministers and other high-ranking government officials have also paid visits to the areas affected. The Villiersdorp (ODM) Water Forum has embarked on a campaign of maintaining water sources in their area with no support from government, while the Bonnievale (CWD) Water Forum successfully tackled the municipality over the high water bills incurred by poor households.

✦ *Food production.* Small-scale agricultural production contributes to varying extents to the livelihoods of farming households in the municipalities, as illustrated in studies by TCOE and Mawubuye in the Breede River Winelands – now Langeberg Local Municipality (TCOE 2009) and in the Swellendam Local Municipality (TCOE 2012). The Swellendam study, of self-identified and significantly differentiated farming households, showed that, despite marginalisation, agricultural production by small-scale farmers had increased since 1994 and makes an important contribution to household and community food security. This remains unacknowledged and unaccounted for in official statistics. While many of these producers are unable to produce beyond subsistence, small-scale production is creating opportunities for income generation through sales of food crops and livestock. Even though income from agricultural production remains low,

these farmers have demonstrated their capacity to expand and contribute to the reduction of rural poverty.

Given the magnitude of vulnerability experienced by small-scale producers, the broad spectrum of initiatives (legal interventions, lobbying, expanding access to land and protest marches) all combine to define organisational strength as a necessary ingredient for expressing resilience. The small-scale farming sub-sector has the potential to play a significant role in addressing rural poverty. Investment in small-scale farming is imperative because of its potentially positive impact on poverty (Cousins n.d.). Despite this potential, policy makers do not recognise that small-scale farming is already making a contribution and has great potential for growth, but support is needed to nurture existing small-scale production initiatives. Presently the Ministry of Rural Development and Land Reform, the Ministry of Agriculture and local government authorities lack the capacity, methodology, vision and political will to develop and support this sub-sector in a systemic way and thus transform the rural landscape and power relations. Instead of developing appropriate policies to support small-scale production, the policy emphasis has been on building a layer of small black commercial farming elite.

Mawubuye continues to consolidate its membership, through interventions that increase access to land and water, and to build the capacity of members to produce and experiment with environmentally sound and sustainable methods of production. Although the ANC (2007) has stated that a lack of popular participation undermines efforts to accelerate land redistribution, Mawubuye's actions reveal another reality. Land need is expressed in a number of ways: identifying pieces of land and pro-actively engaging the municipality about

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accessing them, presenting plans for production, and approaching the Department of Agriculture for support.

The efforts and initiatives of Mawubuye is an indication of the resilience of communities that are able not only to cope but to thrive in the presence of obstacles, challenges and continual change (Regional Municipality of Waterloo 2010). As a formation of the landless and marginalised small-scale producers, the Mawubuye Land Rights Forum strives to transform the rural countryside by challenging policy makers to consider a pro-poor agrarian policy agenda. Mawubuye mobilises and campaigns for access to land, water and a range of support services, as the basis of building livelihoods and sustaining production of rural farming households to promote food sovereignty. The desire for more land is made politically visible by producer forums, as they continue to engage government at all levels to recognise and act on their demands as economic players in their own right.

CONCLUSION

The case of Mawubuye reveals that resilience is expressed not only as a chain of responses to adapt to and resist prevailing conditions but also translates into a pursuit for alternatives to *change* circumstances. These include confronting

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landlessness and lack of access to water, and rejecting subjugation to an oppressive industrial model of production. This is expressed through engaging government, adopting production methods that are relevant to their material and environmental conditions, and building relationships with like-minded organisations.

Organised small-scale producers and landless rural communities continue to fight poverty and ensure food security through land use. The experiences of these interventions demonstrate that resilience is a sustained effort both to claim space to articulate the demands of the small-scale producers and to implement practical production and distribution solutions. Politically, the issues of land, water and seeds, which are essential for sustainable food production, form the basis of Mawubuye's work with various organisations to build their capacity, express their interests and explore alternatives. In addition, the scope of Mawubuye's work has expanded, to include seasonal farmworkers and building farm workers' unions, with the aim of unifying and developing resilient rural communities.

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NOTES

- ¹ Cieplak P, South Africa: Land Reform Debates Heat Up Again, 100 Years after the Natives Land Act, *Think Africa Press*, 19 June 2013. <http://www.thinkafricapress.com/south-africa/south-africa-land-reform-debate-natives-land-act>.
- ² Municipal commonage is land owned by a municipality or local authority that was usually acquired through state grants or from the church. Unlike other municipally owned land, residents have acquired grazing rights (or other benefits) on the land. Municipal commonage is not the same as communally owned land held in trust by the state and usually occupied and administered by tribal authorities.