

INTERPRETING THE BUSINESS PLANS OF EXPERTS AND THE REDESIGNING THEREOF BY SOUTH AFRICAN LAND REDISTRIBUTION BENEFICIARIES^{1,2}

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ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that land reform as initiative is predominantly motivated by issues of equity. In South Africa land redistribution have a strong focus on the maximisation of agricultural production, and mitigate aspects concerning the restitution of rights. Business plans are used by experts to approve or discard proposed land redistribution projects. Prescriptions are set and expectation is raised regarding highly skilled and technologically sophisticated farming practices. It is often heard that many farms transferred do not match expectations and that land reform is failing. By examining the design of business plans, valuable insights are gained regarding the expert stance towards viability, desirability and sustainability, as well as their envisioned future. Beneficiary interpretations of these prescriptions provide a view of the kind of development that beneficiaries desire, or what they are able to manage considering available resources, networks and experience. Some recurring issues emerged through ethnographic research which highlight that agricultural activities on land reform farms are just one component of various means to contribute to the overall livelihood of beneficiaries. Observations that support this statement are: beneficiaries had their own reasons why they became involved the way they did; few beneficiaries are practising full-time agriculture; previous acquired skills are used; the land is used as a base from which to be involved in other industries and activities; beneficiaries are innovative by using second hand production inputs, or by making their own production inputs, and; a serious mismatch exists between the desires of experts and beneficiaries regarding production, as well as between resources and skills needed to produce as prescribed. Ignoring the desires, resources and skills of beneficiaries for too long may jeopardise the long term stability and sustainability of the land reform programme as a whole. The expert system is challenged to embrace the concept "innovation system" that involves innovation processes that are socially and economically relevant.

Keywords: Land redistribution beneficiaries, business plans, expert system, ethnography, actor-oriented approach, socio-technical landscape, socio-technical regime, actor projects, niches, livelihoods, productionist perspective, extension approach, innovation system

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally seen, when an intervention like land reform is initiated in any country, it addresses a wide array of issues. Economic concerns, amongst others, are entangled with political struggles and issues regarding (in) equality and social (in) justice (Bernstein 2004: 191; Devereux et. al. 2000; Groenewald 2003: 1). Most commentators acknowledge that in land reform "equality should be regarded as the guiding principle" (Van Zyl et. al. 1996: 3). Also in South Africa, land is seen by many as crucial to restoring citizenship, since historically land was central in denying the entitlements to citizenship (James 2007: 11).

The South African government, through the Land Policy White Paper of 1997, endorsed that land reform should be enacted through three main land reform programmes, namely land

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² Empirical data for this paper was primarily taken from the author's unpublished MSc. thesis "Pinching shoes: The use of business plans in South African land redistribution to foster the expert's vision of development", completed at the Wageningen University and Research Centre under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Paul Hebinck.

restitution³, land tenure reform⁴ and land redistribution. The land redistribution component of South African land reform was constructed to enable black⁵ South Africans to have equitable access to land. James, amongst other critics, bemoan strict policy divisions to address long term social, economic, and historical processes disrupted by the legacy of colonialism, segregation and apartheid (2007: 33). Many commentators expect that land reform has a broader role to play than just optimising production (*ibid.*: 32) and maximising of the economic potential of agriculture (Deveroux et. al. 2000).

With regard to land, emphasis shifted towards an emphasis on “agricultural development” and the maximisation of agricultural production (Weideman 2004; Wegerif 2004: 2). Critics regarded this shift to be aligned to the productionist⁶ paradigm that existed prior to democracy (Hebinck and Fay 2006; Lahiff 2007). It seems that National Government currently strongly support this paradigm and use economic viability of projects to measure the success of agricultural support programmes in land reform (Gazette, Government 2010). In the Western Cape provincial government this paradigm is also strongly supported (WCPL 2010).

The current broader policy concept of market-based land reform seeks to draw “emergent farmers” into commercial forms of production (Lahiff 2007: 4) and it is expected that recipients of land should make productive use of the land or lose the land (AfricaFiles 2008; Minister Media release 2009: 3). Private consultants appointed, and (agricultural) officials, construct business plans in such a way that a “commercial” logic is imposed on the intended beneficiaries (Lahiff 2007: 15; Hall 2004; Wegerif 2004; Jacobs, Lahiff, and Hall 2003: 5, 25).

2. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

It is often heard that “land reform is failing” (Agri SA Media Release 2009; Du Toit 2004; Lahiff 2008: 32) and that land reform projects do not succeed in developing an economic performance that matches expectations (Agri-Africa Consultants 2005: iv). This also resulted that many of the farms transferred could not repay loans or other debt incurred, with the consequence that a lot of this land had to be sold and were lost again in terms of the land reform program (Hall 2004: 58). The practical farming experience and skills gained by beneficiaries on these “land lost” are also lost from the land reform programme.

Persons who want to participate in the South African land redistribution programme and who want a project registered to access government funding and post-settlement support need to submit a business plan. These plans are compulsory and are used by the experts to judge applicants’ projects. These business plans are typically compiled by design agents (also known as consultants) who receive payment when a project is eventually approved and transfer of the project takes place. Assessment of projects is towards “viability” as perceived by the experts.

These business plans therefore serve as prescriptions which the experts may use to make sure that development occurs towards a future preferred by experts and the state. The experts can in the process amplify their preferred land reform script and structure the future and shape the socio-technical landscape⁷. Through this shaping of the landscape the socio-technical regime⁸ can be further entrenched.

The beneficiaries may not accept the expert prescriptions and pursue their own interpretations or actor projects. They may establish niches, through the use of alternative technologies and by following practices that may not fit the expert paradigm. These actor projects may be indications of the way that the beneficiaries construct their ideal script regarding land reform. It should

³ To redress dispossession of property under racially discriminatory legislation between 1913 and 1994 (Gazette 1997 b).

⁴ To redress tenure insecurity (Gazette 1997 a).

⁵ According to South African post-apartheid legislation “Black people” is a generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians (Gazette 2003).

⁶ A productionist paradigm relates to mechanisation and modernisation of production. It includes a commodity-oriented emphasis on improving the productivity of land, labour, technology, and chemical inputs to prevent food shortages (Lang and Heasman 2004: 18-21).

⁷ The socio-technical landscape is discussed in more detail under the heading “Methodology”. It can be defined as the material culture of institutions, infrastructures and values, which may be shaped by policy discourses of the state.

⁸ The socio-technical regime is also discussed in more detail under the heading “Methodology”. It can be defined as the rule set or grammar prevalent within practices, skills and procedures, production process technologies and product characteristics. These include ways of handling relevant artefacts, handling persons and ways of defining problems.

reveal the beneficiaries' support or resistance of the plans as legitimised by the experts, and their stance towards, for example, a productionist perspective.

The way that the beneficiaries interpret these prescriptions may also be informative regarding what they deem possible considering the overall environment in which they operate and the kind of development that they can manage considering available resources, networks and experience. By understanding the reasons behind the practices of beneficiaries in response to the experts' specialised forms of production⁹, and modernised and mechanised techniques, may assist in providing an appropriate extension approach. Such an approach should actively encourage agricultural extension personnel to learn from these niches that new farmers pursue.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to uncover and understand the reasons behind the behaviour of the various social actors involved, and to gain an insider's perspective of their meanings, I made use of an ethnographic study through an actor-oriented approach¹⁰ within the constructionist perspective¹¹. The actor-oriented approach caters for "the making and remaking of society through the ongoing self-transforming actions and perceptions of a diverse and interlocked world of actors" (Long 2001: 2) and acknowledges that multiple realities exist where social actors interact. Development is "many sided, complex and often contradictory in nature" and different sets of social forces could be involved (Long and Van Der Ploeg 1988: 37).

It is accepted that all actors do possess agency, which is "the capacity to make a difference" (Long 2002: 3). Therefore actors, through agency, can turn their own situation into something different or into something that would not have existed (*ibid.*: 15). All actors, which include land reform beneficiaries or individual actors within an expert system, do possess agency through which they can contest and renegotiate events. (Hebinck and Fay 2006: 4). Experts, or even an expert system¹², cannot ignore or dismiss people's capacities and abilities to intervene and shape social life (Arce and Long 2000: xv).

Experts involved in land redistribution are frequently referred to in policy documents as the "key stakeholders" with "key responsibilities" (DLA 2008: 3,11,13). These include officials of the National Department of Agriculture (DoA), the (previous) Department of Land Affairs (DLA)¹³ and the Provincial Departments of Agriculture (PDoA). Other key stakeholders are also mentioned, for example the private sector advisors or consultants that design business plans and those on district committees that evaluate if the designed project is appropriate and viable (DLA 2008: 8). Considering the definition of an expert system, these "key stakeholders" can be examined as an expert system.

Van der Ploeg convincingly demonstrates that the capacity of actors' agency is influenced by the expert system's socio-technical networks of resources, rules, procedures as well as agendas and solutions posed. This authority is used to define and determine images of the future which they prefer (Van der Ploeg 2003: 1-43). Van der Ploeg argues that when such a system becomes dominant, then only those actions that correspond with the preferred future count as valid (*ibid.*: 10). This professional expertise, or expert system, creates the rules that define and authorise participants.

The system may also be entrusted with the allocation of certain resources (like the allocation of a grant after approval of the business plan). But Van der Ploeg argues that the expert system's potential power and influence lies especially in the capacity to authorize the behaviour of others. Thus the expert system has "the power to define behaviour as rational, and therefore as desirable, whereas alternatives will appear as less rational, if not irrational" (*ibid.*: 230).

⁹ These typically require high levels of input and skills.

¹⁰ Not a theory, but an approach for understanding the processes by which particular social forms or arrangements emerge and are consolidated or reworked in the everyday lives of people (Long 2002: 3-4).

¹¹ The constructionist perspective accommodates different possibilities of development, whatever the structural circumstances may be.

¹² Sir Anthony Giddens define an expert system as "a system of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of material and social environments in which we live today" (Giddens 1990: 27).

¹³ Since 2009 the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform.

The expert system, by having already identified “the future” and the macro project, has a clear picture of the solution to problems. Their planning, personnel, language and relations are conditioned to realise the macro project. In addition, subsidies offered, extension services, applied research, etcetera, are all geared to drive this structural development. The business plans required by the expert system act as handy prescriptions towards the land reform script constructed by politicians and experts.

Within the expert system, the twin concepts of socio-technical regime and –landscape, as postulated by Rip & Kemp (1998) further provide an appropriate frame of analysis. The socio-technical landscape is defined as “the material culture of institutions, infrastructures and values, which may be shaped by policy discourses of the state” (Rayner and Malone 1998: xxxiii; Rip and Kemp 1998: 388; Hebinck 2001: 125). The socio-technical regime is defined as “the rule-set or grammar embedded in a complex of engineering practices, production process technologies, product characteristics, skills and procedures, ways of handling relevant artefacts and persons, ways of defining problems- all of them embedded in institutions and infrastructures” (Rip and Kemp 1998: 388). Additionally, the concept regime provides insight into how technological change proceeds, and can capture the redesigning of technology by users, thus provides a more appropriate account than just structure to explain change (Hebinck 2001: 127).

Niches, or alternative technologies introduced (Rip and Kemp 1998 357) by land reform beneficiaries, can also be investigated when using this framework. These are at the level of the farmer, thus from “below”. These niches may exert pressure, thus challenging the predominant regime, especially when the predominant regime became “static, inert and entrenched” (Hebinck 2001: 126). The difference between the regime and niche is that the regime is characterised by relative stable networks, where the direction of processes and progress is basically beyond dispute. Niches still have less formal and stable networks than those of the regimes. (*ibid.*: 126).

In niches the learning process are open-ended and less obvious, progress is made through trial and error and no dominant design exist (*ibid.*: 126). It is expected that farmers that resist the predominant regime will develop their own niches. Typically they will try to interlock these with others to establish and further strengthen their own niches.

The ethnographic interview was implemented as data collection technique, which is an unstructured, non-standardised, open-ended, in-depth interview. Individual and group face-to-face verbal interchange as the predominant type was used. Field notes were recorded on paper, with the consent of the interviewees. This technique provided rich and valuable data. Participant observation of behaviour as a stream of actions and events that unfold were recorded on paper. Observation was unstructured, meaning that I did not use predetermined categories and classifications, thus behaviour was observed as it unfolded naturally.

Documentary sources provided rich data. Examples are the minutes of various meetings as well as working documents of the experts and other actors, diaries of the farmers, personal notes and institutional reports. In conjunction with the interviews and observations, these documents were used in triangulation where the findings of the one could be checked against the other. This enhanced the validity of the data and the study. Thick descriptions (Punch 2005: 186), thus “the context to convey the full picture”, were pursued.

The research area traversed the border of the City of Cape Town and the West Coast district municipalities in the Western Cape. Data was collected during two periods of field research (August to October 2007 and January 2008) on two land redistribution farms¹⁴: Good Hope Farming Trust & the Lethu-Sonke Farmers.

¹⁴ Names have been changed to protect the identity of the farms and interviewees.

4. FINDINGS¹⁵

Empirical evidence revealed that the beneficiary desires were seldom accepted unchanged into the approved business plans. The experts demanded rather extensive changes before the plans were finally accepted. An example of this is where the beneficiaries, in their plan, declare that production will be towards crops that they know, and that they will focus on house gardens. The beneficiaries proposed that they only want to start producing on a bigger scale when the necessary infrastructure is in place. The approved plan, in contrast, mentions that in the first year two of the four hectares will be cultivated, and in the second year all four hectares will be in production. The approved income and expenditure analysis is based on a planting programme that is scheduled to start only two months after infrastructure establishment. The rules through which business plans were judge, and the grammar used by the experts, were also indicative of a strong productionist orientation.

It became clear that business plans can serve as prescriptions that the experts use to ensure that development occurs towards their preferred future. Business plans that correspond with the expert envisioned future are thus supported and approved. It therefore became evident that in business plans the agency of beneficiaries was suppressed. Beneficiary suggestions and desires were, in general, not taken into consideration in plans that were approved.

It seems if beneficiaries know that they need to “play along” and accept the experts’ desires, if they want their project approved. But, after project approval, it seems if beneficiaries take calculated risks, use their agency, and deviate from the expert plans. Thus after land transfer the practices of beneficiaries testifies about actors who follow their own interpretations, make their own choices, and establish their own niches or actor projects. They do this even if they know that it is not supported by the experts and that it may hamper future support. Beneficiaries choose to turn their own situation into something different or into something that would not have existed. Many of the actual beneficiary practices or technologies deployed are those that are regarded as inefficient and unsustainable by the experts.

It became clear that beneficiaries redesigned plans. A lot could be learned from the reasons and the ways in which beneficiaries change the expert prescriptions. The reasons for redesigning are myriad, but originate mainly from constraints, practicalities and preference. The most visible constraints were a lack of skills or resources, especially financial resources. Cash flow problems impacted heavily on some of the expert proposed practices. An example is where “vibracrete” walls were provided to the beneficiaries for building pig sties. Some beneficiaries could not hire additional labour to erect these walls¹⁶. Some beneficiaries thus chose not to erect their structures using this long lasting quality material, but instead chose to use old wooden beams and rusted corrugated roofing sheets that they got somewhere cheaply. Using such material to construct a pigsty did not require specialist skills or additional labour.

Changes due to practicalities and preference only made sense when the total context in which the beneficiary operate were understood. Each actor had their own reason why they became involved (or not involved) in the way they did. Their actions seemed logic to themselves. Some recurring issues and patterns in beneficiary practices were visible:

- The beneficiaries all used their unique and previous acquired skills in one way or another.
- Beneficiaries engage in other (economic) activities than just agricultural production on the farm. Many examples exist where beneficiaries use the land as a site from which they are involved in other activities. Many of these activities are related to things that assisted them in creating a livelihood before accessing land.
- Basically none of the beneficiaries practiced full-time farming. Time allocated to agricultural activities differs tremendously from beneficiary to beneficiary. All have their own reasons for choosing the measure of involvement.
- The importance of social networks (for example old friends and people not involved with agriculture) also plays an important role.
- Interesting niches were established by beneficiaries. Examples include traders who buy from the beneficiaries to market the products as “produce from a land reform farm”.

¹⁵ Empirical evidence are detailed in the unpublished MSc. thesis “Pinching shoes: The use of business plans in South African land redistribution to foster the expert’s vision of development”, which are available on request from the author.

¹⁶ At least two persons are needed to lift the “vibracrete” slabs in position.

- Beneficiaries make use of tenants to work on the farm. These tenants provide labour without a payment in cash, but instead receive a place to stay and may keep a component of that what is produced (thus payment in kind).
- Beneficiaries are innovative by making their own production inputs, for example by using the droppings of cows and pigs as fertilizer, or by using rests of produced vegetables as feed for pigs. They therefore attempt to disconnect them from the markets, thus saving on input costs.
- Another recurring item is the vast amounts and different “mini-projects” pursued by actors. Examples include the renting out of facilities on the farm to non-beneficiaries. In one case this potential income would have been used to re-connect the electricity supply to the farm.
- Attempts to have cooperative work arrangements also occur, for example “*ilima*” by the Lethu-Sonke Farmers.
- Most beneficiaries do not prefer communal farming, and most individuals preferred to take individual decisions regarding their farming venture.
- Basically all the beneficiaries interviewed had the desire to be connected to land in one way or another. Land meant more to them than just a place to practice agricultural activities.

In essence, the beneficiaries did not embrace the productionist orientation proposed by the experts. After project approval the beneficiaries were much bolder in their stance to oppose the expert proposals and advice, even if they knew it may hamper future support.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems that not all beneficiaries that participate in land redistribution have the desire, skills or financial assets to become the commercial farmers that the expert system expect them to be. The expectations regarding agricultural production are set extremely high, especially when taken into consideration that beneficiaries do not have abundant agricultural experience. In addition, beneficiaries are lacking existing networks with which they can connect to support their initiatives. Agricultural production that requires high input costs seems to be not the first choice of many beneficiaries when considering the broader context.

Policy and expert service delivery that focus on modern and mechanised agricultural production are not embraced by many land reform beneficiaries. It is clear that actors attach multiple meanings to land and land reform. These multiple realities of social relationships and multiple livelihood strategies seem to be ignored by the experts. When these projects are judged according to strict financial criteria as posed in the expert plans, they may be found “unsustainable” and “failing”. Although beneficiaries do not perform as expected, it would be inaccurate to say that the two projects under investigation are downright failures. Many of the beneficiaries do experience life to be “better” after accessing land through land redistribution.

The expert system may be challenged to reconsider their stance towards the kind of development that beneficiaries desire and the way beneficiaries want to connect to land and create livelihoods. It is recommended that the expert system should revisit their preferred future regarding the role that land redistribution in South Africa could play. The desires of land reform beneficiaries need to be taken into consideration. Possible innovative solutions are killed off when land is seen as an agricultural production factor alone. The expert system may be challenged to embrace the concept “innovation system” that involve innovation processes that goes beyond traditional linear thinking centred on research systems and a preset preferred future. Instead the focus should be on the successful introduction of new products and processes that are socially and economically relevant (Davis et.al. 2008: 35; 37).

The innovation system concept requires a paradigm shift to be made. It acknowledges that agents have the ability to learn, have the ability to gather information and the ability to be creative. It recognises that successful innovation depends on the capacity of individuals and organizations to learn and innovate (ibid.: 37; 38). The expert system with their pre-determined future and everything that goes along with it is basically the opposite of that which make an innovation system successful. The role that farmers play, as well as their micro-projects and resulting niches are made prominent in the innovation system. Indigenous or local knowledge

are accepted as real contributors to what constitute the paradigm alignment. As mentioned, the beneficiary niches are often not embraced and part of the experts' home discourse and do not really fit the expert productionist paradigm.

In conclusion, empirical evidence does suggest that extension delivery to land reform beneficiaries should focus more on the human component. When focussing on technology, it should rather support innovations and niches from the new farmers, than to blindly follow the "expert" paradigm. Ignoring the desires, resources and skills of beneficiaries for too long may jeopardise the long term stability and sustainability of the land redistribution programme as a whole.

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