



The State of the Rural Nation

1. Introduction

A general statement about South Africa would suggest that the country has rich natural resources, a growing economy and a relatively high average annual per capita income of more than \$4 000. This is typical of an upper-middle income country, and yet for many South Africans this classification has little or no significant meaning. Many people are struggling to find work, to access quality education and affordable healthcare, or to have access to basic services. People hoped for the prospect of a better life after the apartheid era, but South Africa is still a place where social and economic exclusion, poverty, and inequality are the reality for many, especially in the rural areas.

It is estimated that 45% of South Africans are still living in poverty in the post-apartheid dispensation, according to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) in 2007. This means that almost 21 million citizens are living below the poverty line (that is, less than R422 per month) and most of the poor are situated in the rural areas. However, it should be pointed out that the distribution of poverty is not the same throughout the nine provinces. According to the Human Development Report of 2003, 57% of the country's poor live in three provinces: Eastern Cape (68.3%), Limpopo (60.7%) and KwaZulu-Natal (60.3%). These provinces all contain former 'Bantustans' and have some of the largest rural communities in the country.

Rural communities commonly experience great inequalities in terms of socio-economic development when compared to urban areas, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the rural poor to effectively gain access to, and benefit from, the few opportunities available to them. This uneven situation is partly caused by the remoteness of certain rural areas, but the root cause of the problem comes from the legacy of colonial rule and the apartheid system. These two historically discriminatory events made it possible for a minority to have access to cheap rural labour, exploiting a rural population that was desperate to make a living and willing to travel great distances for a minimal wage. This, in part, contributed to a cycle of poverty which led to underdeveloped rural areas where socio-economic exclusion is widespread.¹

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the state of rural South Africa, and to point out some key factors that contribute to the current situation: poverty, unemployment, education and, in particular, land. A second briefing paper will follow which will look at the key interventions being proposed by government, opposition parties, non-governmental organizations and academia to address socio-economic conditions in rural South Africa.

2. Poverty

South Africa's rural populace makes up around 50% of the entire population and is spread all over the nine provinces. Many live in remote parts of the country in areas that often experience low levels of service delivery, a lack of basic infrastructure like clean water, toilet facilities and houses, and an absence of sustainable development. In addition, a large number of people in these rural areas experience real poverty. According to a report by Leibbrandt *et al*, in 2008 57% of South Africa's rural population was

living in poverty, compared to 43% of those living in urban areas. The following figures indicate how poverty has evolved in rural and urban areas between 1993 and 2008.

	Population			Poverty share		
	1993	2000	2008	1993	2000	2008
Rural	51%	45%	40%	70%	62%	57%
Urban	49%	55%	60%	30%	38%	43% ²

It is interesting to note that the levels of rural poverty have declined from 70% (1993) to 57% (2008) in comparison to urban poverty, which increased from 30% to 43% during the same period. These poverty shifts can be explained by rural-to-urban migration during 1993 to 2008, with the poor moving to urban areas for the prospect of better economic opportunities. According to May, those who migrate are likely to face different livelihood opportunities, costs and social conditions, and although migration has led to a poverty spread between rural and urban areas, the depth of poverty still remains greatest in rural areas.³

The high level of rural poverty can be directly linked to the legacy of apartheid. This is noticeable when the poorest rural districts are found in the crowded former homeland areas like the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal. According to StatsSA, in 2001 the rural poor were mostly made up of Africans (94.4%) and coloureds (3.7%), compared to Indians (0.1%) and whites (1.8%), while 60% of all female-headed households were poor compared to 31% of all male-headed households. Factors that influence the high poverty rates amongst female-headed households are the existing wage gap between male and female; the high female unemployment rate; and the fact that most female-headed households can be found in rural areas where poverty is at its highest.⁴

The latter is clearly not confined to South Africa. The Holy See's Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations noted in 2012 that:

“Rural women oftentimes work in deplorable situations against odds that defy imagination. Long hours of unpaid work, unhygienic situations, poor nutrition, lack of access to water, limited access to healthcare, discrimination and exposure to violence, including against pregnant mothers, are just some of the challenges many of them face. All these challenges impact on their ability to care for themselves, their children and their families.”⁵

Other reasons why rural poverty remains higher than urban poverty are the lack of resources and technology; vulnerability to natural disasters; and a lack of access to basic services. Most rural areas are agriculture-intensive and a lack of new technology, low employment rates and low wages for farm workers are common. These factors have a severe impact on the progress of rural areas.⁶

3. Unemployment

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey from StatsSA in December 2011, it was estimated that the national unemployment rate was 21.8%. A further breakdown of the figure suggests that 27.7% of Africans and 21.1% of Coloured people were unemployed, compared to 8.5% and 6.7% of Indians and Whites respectively. Male unemployment stood at 21.8% in comparison to 26.5% of females. These unemployment figures are based on the following definition:

“Unemployed persons are those (aged 15–64 years) who: a) Were not employed in the reference week and; b) Actively looked for work or tried to start a business in the four weeks preceding the survey interview and; c) Were available for work and; d) Had not actively looked for work in the past four weeks but had a job or business to start at a definite date in the future and were available.”⁷

However, the total unemployment figures in rural areas are significantly higher than those in the urban parts of the country. This observable fact is expressed in a study conducted by Kingdom and Knight in 2005, where they show the difference between rural and urban unemployment in 1995 and 2003 respectively.

	1995	2003 ⁸
Rural	37.9	49.7
Urban	24.1	36.8

An interesting comparison between the unemployment figures of 1995 and 2003 reveals that the level of unemployment increased faster in urban (12.7%) than in rural areas (11.8%). This is partly the result of an increase in rural to urban migration, where the labour market is more competitive in the latter. However, rural unemployment is still the highest, and is particularly problematic amongst black youth who are new to the labour force. This can be linked to the historical disadvantages experienced by the population in rural areas, as well as the fact that few existing rural economic opportunities are becoming available as school-leavers enter the labour market.

The few economic opportunities that do exist in rural areas are found primarily in the agricultural sector. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2011), this sector absorbed less than 5% of the total labour force. Women represented about 32%, while men made up 68% of agricultural labourers. It may seem small-scale in comparison to other sectors' labour absorption (the formal, non-agriculture sectors of the economy account for 75% of all jobs) but agriculture is one of the main economic activities in rural areas, and many households depend on it as their main source of income.

However, a more competitive global market, together with deregulation policies, has caused significant changes in the sector. It has forced the sector to adapt to these changes in order to be more competitive, and has also led to a restructuring of the agricultural labour force in which farms are moving away from employing permanent workers. They would rather make use of temporary and seasonal workers when they are needed (this usually happens during the harvest period) while keeping only a handful of permanent workers for day-to-day labour.⁹

For these reasons, most rural households are dependent on a variety of incomes including social grants, migrant labour remittances, wages, and entrepreneurial activities. The following table provides a breakdown of the various income sources in rural areas; the figures demonstrate the primary activities in rural economies. It is important to note that many rural households are dependent on a wage income in areas where job security is unpredictable and few economic opportunities exist.

<i>Livelihood strategy class in rural areas</i>	<i>% of Households</i>	<i>Poverty risk%¹⁰</i>
Marginalised (no wage income or welfare)	4.3	79
Welfare-dependent	11.5	74
Remittance-dependent	25.1	57
Secondary wage-dependent (wages from people living at home)	19.8	42
Primary wage-dependent (employed)	3.6	29
Mixed income with secondary wages	15.8	62
Mixed income with primary wages (employed)	8.1	38
Entrepreneurial	1.0	24

4. Education

For reasons such as poverty, low wages, and a competitive job market in rural areas, parents are very eager to make sure that their children obtain the highest qualifications possible. The prospect of better opportunities through the means of education is shared by many, but the reality is that education in rural areas is in serious trouble.

A systematic evaluation of Grade 6 learners' abilities in language, mathematics and natural sciences, carried out in 2005, revealed that rural children are falling behind their counterparts in urban areas.

<i>Type of School</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Pass Rate (%)</i>	
		<i>Mathematics</i>	<i>Natural Sciences</i>
Urban	64	46	58
Township	40	26	42

Rural	29	22	35
Remote rural	23	19	30
Farm	34	24	37

There are many reasons for this, all to do with the life circumstances of rural children, especially those who are poor. In some areas, children's time is consumed by household chores before and after school, leaving them with insufficient time for homework and study; some go to school hungry and are unable to concentrate properly; some have to walk great distances to their schools and are physically exhausted; and some do not have adequate resources to strengthen their capacity for learning.

Apart from this, many rural schools also struggle to obtain equipment like computers and scientific material for advanced learning, while others have to deal with a lack of infrastructure development or a lack of basic services such as water, electricity and libraries. When these problems are coupled with a large number of pupils in one classroom and the sometimes poor relationship between the teachers and the parents, as well as the ill-discipline of some learners, we have a set of conditions that is extremely unfavourable for the successful education of rural children.¹¹

5. Land and Chiefs

Land is becoming an increasingly sensitive issue in post-apartheid South Africa and 'real' ownership is the source of deep frustration between present and historical claimants to the land. This frustration stems from various apartheid laws that forced black people from land which was set aside for whites, and which prevented the former from acquiring rights to land. The impact of these laws and policies led to overcrowded 'homelands' and areas under the jurisdiction of chiefs and other traditional leaders.

Racial policies also created the type of rural areas that can be seen around South Africa today. The countryside is divided into large commercial farming districts that cover most of the viable land area, and which are served by small towns. Mostly poor, black people work on these commercial farms, still owned almost exclusively by white farmers, and live in the surrounding communal areas and small towns, if not on the farms themselves. The communal areas are mainly in former homelands and the people who live in these areas are mostly poor, relying heavily on remittances, pensions, subsistence agriculture and welfare.¹²

In order to address the 'land question', the government introduced a land reform programme in 1994. The aim of this programme is to transfer at least 82 million hectares (30%) of agricultural land to black citizens by 2014 in an attempt to provide greater access to arable land to poor rural communities. However, the programme had managed to transfer only 5.7 million hectares of land by 2009, blaming its underperformance largely on the constitutionally-required 'willing-buyer, willing-seller' framework.

However, another reason for the failure can be linked to the land-administrative, judicial and governmental powers that many chiefs and tribal leaders in former homelands still possess under the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 and other similar legislation. Some groups and tribal communities feel that they have the right to certain rural land, either through a historical claim or via land purchases, but these claims are not always recognised by the state because of a lack of evidence to support them. This situation creates huge tension between provincial and local governments, as well as among traditional leaders, about who owns and therefore controls the land. The traditional leaders feel that government does not respect their authority in this regard, and that it is trying to undermine pre-existing land rights, while local government sees tribal leaders as protecting their own vested interests, and thereby acting as an obstacle to rural development. In the process, the views of the rural poor are largely ignored and genuine rural development is delayed or even abandoned.

6. Conclusion

This paper has painted a bleak picture of the overall state of rural South Africa, focusing briefly on poverty, unemployment, education and the land question. The stark reality is that rural communities are in genuine

need of support to improve their lives and those of their children. Sustainable job-creation and access to basic services are at the forefront in rural needs- assessments, and these communities look to government and other civil organisations to help alleviate poverty and to create an environment where sustainable socio-economic development is possible. The second briefing paper on this topic will examine the policies that are currently being put forward to tackle the problem.

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