

‘Alternative foods’ and community-based development: *Rooibos* tea production in South Africa's West Coast Mountains

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Abstract

Rooibos tee (red bush tea) (*Aspalathus linearis*, *Fabaceae*), which is indigenous only to the Cedarberg and neighbouring mountains of South Africa, has become popular internationally as a result of its apparent health-giving properties. Situated within the broader contexts of alternative food networks, alternate economic spaces and local/community-based development, this paper examines how two marginalised communities have successfully penetrated international markets by supplying organically produced *rooibos* tea which is certified by the international Fairtrade system. Focusing on the cases of Wupperthal and Heiveld, the paper explores the dynamics of the production and marketing process and the key variables involved. Success has been achieved through active NGO support, which has engaged with local skills and social capital, and has led to significant social and economic upliftment among the participating communities. The experience illustrates how, given the right conditions, poor communities in the South might participate successfully in global alternative food networks.

Keywords: *Rooibos* tea; South Africa; Community-based development; NGOs; Alternative food initiatives; Alternate economic spaces; Fairtrade

Introduction

In recent years, the recognition of the existence of ‘alternative economic spaces’, economic processes and products which exist in ways that are alternative to mainstream capitalism, has gained increasing attention in academic discourse (Cook, 2005; Leyshon, Lee, & Williams, 2003; Williams, 2003). A key facet of this new focus is an investigation of the emerging significance of ‘alternative foods’, which have received attention in academic debate and are now appearing in increasing quantities on the shelves of western supermarkets (Goodman, 2003; Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005). Concerns for healthy lifestyles, and an increasing global desire to ensure that products are produced and traded fairly, have encouraged the development of production and marketing systems which differ from mainstream capital-intensive agribusiness-style systems. Farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, farm stalls, urban agriculture, organic, ethical and Fairtrade production,¹ have all been classified as forms of alternative food initiative (AFI). While many of the ‘alternative’ goods on display on retailers’ shelves in Europe and North America are sourced from the global South, an examination of the literature on AFIs suggests that studies of local production and marketing systems in the South have been relatively under-represented. As Goodman observes, ‘...the literature on networks, quality conventions and artisanal production and marketing systems is narrowly ethnocentric in its focus on North America and Western Europe’ (Goodman, 2003, p. 4). In response, this paper explores the emergence of one alternative food product from the South, namely *rooibos tee* (red bush tea—*Aspalathus linearis*, *Fabaceae*), which is unique to the mountainous areas within, and closely bordering, the northwestern regions of South Africa's Western Cape province. Over and above, the appeal of the beverage for health reasons, *rooibos* is of particular interest because a growing proportion of the commodity is sourced from two community co-operatives (Wupperthal and Heiveld) situated in the neighbouring Cedarberg and Bokkeveldberg mountains, where it is produced organically and sold under international Fairtrade labels

(Oettle, 2005) (Fig. 1). This paper seeks to elucidate some of the connections between these isolated communities and international trade regimes.

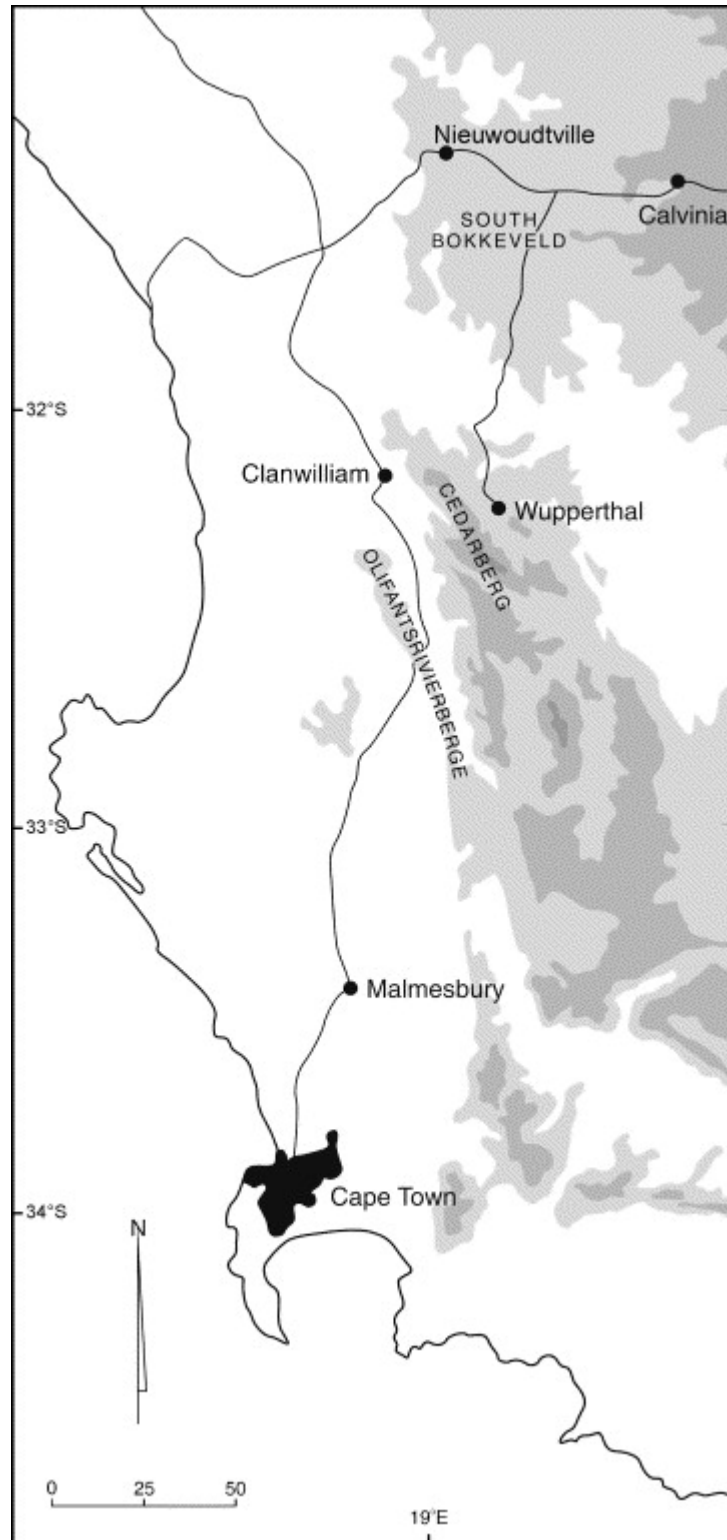


Fig. 1. Study area.

Isolated rural areas, such as those where the Wupperthal and Heiveld (centred on Nieuwoudtville) initiatives are situated, exhibit many deprivations, and economic engagement via *rooibos* production offers local communities a rare opportunity to achieve socio-economic upliftment. It is within this context that this paper examines the evolution of the alternative food networks for *rooibos* in the two

communities, and demonstrates the contribution that such initiatives can make to socio-economic transformation in one of the more economically marginalised areas of South Africa. Furthermore, this paper seeks to enhance existing alternative food and alternative economic space literatures through consideration of the ways in which such initiatives can contribute to local economic development (LED) and poverty alleviation. At the same time, Southern African-oriented LED literatures may be enriched through examination of such globally connected community-based agri-food initiatives. Such considerations are of particular importance in the South African context, where the well-documented legacy of the apartheid era includes stark racial and spatial disparities which often still pose persistent development challenges (Lester, Nel, & Binns, 2000; May, 2000; United Nations Human Development Programme (UNHDP), 2004).

The paper begins by contextualising these projects in relation to recent published research. Concepts drawn from the alternative economic spaces and alternative food and LED literatures are particularly pertinent in identifying an appropriate analytical framework through which to evaluate the chosen case studies. Section 2 provides detailed biographies of the *rooibos* initiatives in Wupperthal and Heiveld, outlining the processes by which they have evolved, the key factors driving the projects' development and the socio-economic outcomes that have been achieved. Section 3 evaluates the projects' outcomes and considers the lessons that can be learned by community development practitioners. The pivotal roles played by NGOs in these cases are of particular importance. Lessons concerning the social and economic sustainability of such initiatives are drawn and policy recommendations are outlined.

Economic alternatives, alternative foods and development

Emerging debates in economic geography, which draw on post-development thinking and the work of David Harvey, articulate the need to identify and promote economic activities which are alternative to mainstream capitalism and introduce new decentred conceptions of the economy which focus on the identified 'spaces of hope' (Cook, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2005; Leyshon et al., 2003; Williams, 2005). To date, a key work in this field has been an edited volume by Leyshon et al. (2003) entitled 'Alternative Economic Spaces', which develops our understanding of the conceptual significance of different forms of economic activity that are in various ways 'alternative' to the mainstream economy. According to Williams (2003, p. 863), alternative economic spaces are, 'a product of both structural economic transformations and the existence of cultures of resistance to the logic of commodification'. This emerging school of thought encourages the need to think of the economy 'otherwise', and to conceptualise alternative discourses of the economy which do not conform with the dominance of mainstream capitalism (Leyshon et al., 2003). Within this line of reasoning, the production of unique products by community-based systems, as examined in this article, is clearly of direct relevance. Fair-trade, which also features in the case studies, is perceived as representing a critical analysis of production chains, and an example of an anti-capitalist movement which seeks to replace exploitation with 'fairer' terms of exchange for producers (Leyshon et al., 2003).

In a similar vein, European and North American academics have given increasing attention to analysis of food production systems that might be labelled as 'alternative' (Goodman, 2003; Watts et al., 2005).² A review of the relevant literature reveals increasing reference to such terms as AFIs (Allen, Fitzsimmons, Goodman, & Warner, 2003), 'alternative agro-food networks' (AAFNs) (Goodman, 2003), and 'alternative food networks' (AFNs) (Watts et al., 2005). In parallel with the alternative economic space literature, there is a defined focus on food networks which bypass conventional global trading systems and challenge the hegemony of capitalism (Hughes, 2006; Sonnino & Marsden, 2005). There is much debate about what is actually 'alternative' about the activities concerned. In essence, their alternative status is derived from the fact that they operate in some way counter to the prevailing logic of the broader agro-industry, which has become increasingly dominated by multinational companies (MNCs). This is summarised succinctly by Allen et al. (2003, p. 63), who suggest that

New, locally situated and decentralised agri-food initiatives are framed as counter movements that challenge the control of corporations and other national and global institutions and resist the destructive practices of the contemporary agri-food system. These new AFIs engage the imaginations, hopes and energies of people located in very different sites within the agri-food system. They affirm a shared political agenda to create food systems that are eminently sustainable, economically viable and socially just. Most frame their engagement as opposing the global by reconstructing the local (Allen et al., 2003, p. 61).

The overlap with the alternative economic space literature is evident in this quotation. A defining feature of many AFIs is that they are deemed to possess 'short food supply chains' (SFSCs) (Ilbery, Maye, Kneafsey, Jenkins, & Walkley, 2004; Marsden, Banks, & Bristow, 2000). This shortness is perceived to operate in different ways. In some cases, where consumers buy a product directly from the producer or processor, these can be classified as 'face to face' SFSCs. In other cases, SFSCs can be 'spatially extended', where the final product is sold beyond the boundaries of the region of production, with the information about the site, methods and social relations of production forming an important component of the consumers' decision-making process. The case studies outlined here clearly fit the spatially extended classification, as both include the production of Fairtrade and organic teas, and in most cases the associated consumer product marketing statements emphasise the unique characteristics of the Cedarberg region and *rooibos* tea itself. According to Watts et al. (2005), such SFSCs can be broadly classified as 'stronger' alternative food networks, as there are direct connections between consumers and the place of production. In this way, there is deemed to be less scope for the processes involved to be co-opted by MNCs. Hence, the networks are deemed to possess alternative status.

A common feature of these initiatives is the fact that both producer and consumer are making some form of connection relating to information about the production milieu. This information is important in influencing the consumer's purchasing behaviour, and is particularly associated with fair labour and environmentally friendly production practices (Goodman, 2003). The economic significance of these alternative forms of agri-production should not be underestimated. For example, UK sales of Fairtrade food and drink products in 2004 were valued at about £1.6 billion, representing a very significant 50% increase on the 2003 figure (Merten, 2005), while sales of other alternative forms of products are also growing rapidly. South Africa is rapidly establishing itself as a location for the production of such commodities. Fairtrade production is growing with more than 300 producers seeking accreditation by mid-2004. Various organic and ethical initiatives are ongoing in the wine and fruit industries, while community-based production of herbal teas such as *rooibos*, honeybush and *buchu* is on the increase.

At this point, it is appropriate to consider the role that AFIs can play as a form of LED. South Africa has been the focus of a burgeoning LED literature during the last decade, owing in part to the centrality given to the concept within government policy. The successful implementation of LED strategies is perceived to offer a viable route for the upliftment of South African society via, 'job creation, empowerment, the pursuit of economic growth, community development, the restoration of economic vitality ...and establishing the 'locality' as a vibrant, sustainable economic entity, often within a global context' (Nel & Rogerson, 2005, p. 5). Indeed, in poor areas, where access to natural, social and financial resources is often limited, there is an urgent need for development endeavours that can mobilise indigenous skills and capitalise on the collective strengths of communities (Mubangizi, 2003). Much academic work has focused upon evaluating the processes and outcomes of LED projects (see for example Bond, 2003; Cox, 2004; Nel & Rogerson, 2005; Simon, 2003; Tomlinson, 2003). Despite the emphasis placed upon the promotion of LED strategies within South African policy and praxis, successful LED initiatives have proven all too rare, with a multiplicity of problems constraining their sustainable development. As Hindson (2003, p. 4) observes, 'it appears that the results (of LED) have generally been disappointing', as many projects have failed. In this sense, certain forms of AFI would appear to offer an opportunity to catalyse successful LED at a community level in cases where locally produced commodities can be linked to national and global markets. Indeed, AFIs may offer

opportunities for communities, such as those in the Cape West Coast mountains, whose geographical isolation acts as a significant barrier to other forms of economic progress. Furthermore, it would seem that AFIs could offer much potential for challenging inequalities within the social relations of production, especially as socio-economic issues are clearly fore-grounded within the ethical and Fairtrade components of global AFNs. The remainder of this paper outlines and evaluates two South African community-based agri-food production systems that bear the hallmarks of AFIs.

Community-based *rooibos* production—an alternative pathway to development?³

The South African rooibos industry

Rooibos is a legume and part of the genus *Aspalathus* (Wilson, 2005). It is unique to the Cape floral kingdom, known locally as the *fynbos*, which has the distinction of being both the smallest of the world's six floral kingdoms, and the only one, occurring entirely within the borders of a single country (Editors Inc., 2002). *Rooibos* production mainly occurs in a region some 200–300 km north of Cape Town, within, and adjacent to, the Cedarberg and Olifantsrivier mountain ranges, and on the Bokkeveld plateau (Oettle, Koelle, Arense, & Mohr, 2002). *Rooibos* occurs in two main varieties: the domesticated or 'Nortier' tea, which is planted by producers, and secondly, a range of 'wild' or naturally occurring varieties. The tea has certain health giving properties—it is caffeine free and contains compounds which act as anti-oxidants. Independent commercial farmers supply the balance of production. Approximately 30% of the national harvest is exported, while virtually the entire production from the two community producers reaches international markets (Wilson, 2005).

Until the early 1990s, under the apartheid regime, South Africa's agricultural production was managed in Keynesian style by agricultural boards that generally favoured white producers and marginalised black African and coloured (mixed race) farmers. In 1991, the industry was deregulated, allowing a number of new commercial producers and marketing companies to enter the market. Unfortunately, this move did not allow small producers with limited capital and skills to find a market niche (Wilson, 2005). The real market break for community producers came when they were targeted for support by empowerment and development focused NGOs. Funding support for community-based local economic development became more significant for *rooibos* production, and international Fairtrade organisations offered to distribute the crop internationally. Annual production of *rooibos* is currently some 6000 tonnes, of which the communities of Wupperthal and Heiveld together supply about 100 tonnes.

The West Coast Mountain region

The mission station of Wupperthal lies deep in the Cedarberg mountains, while the scattered community of Heiveld is situated on the South Bokkeveld plateau, east of the Cedarberg (see Fig. 1). The study area is marginal for conventional cultivation, receiving only 125–300 mm of rainfall annually.

Geographically, the area is also marginal, with Wupperthal located over 80 km from the nearest town, Clanwilliam, along a single-track gravel road which traverses four mountain passes. The Heiveld farmers are equally isolated, being scattered across a high plateau to the east of the Cedarberg and to the south of the small settlement of Nieuwoudtville, where the co-operative has its offices (Oettle (n.d. a) and Oettle (n.d. b)). This barren and isolated mountain and plateau area is in desperate need of socio-economic upliftment. The region also lies on the provincial border between Northern and Western Cape provinces, which enhances its political marginalisation. Furthermore, the resident population, almost all of whom are either descended from the original Khoisan inhabitants, or are of mixed race (coloured), were discriminated against and marginalised by South Africa's apartheid system.

The Wupperthal *rooibos* initiative⁴

The Wupperthal community was founded in 1827, as a Rhenish mission station located in the high mountain valleys of the Cedarberg. The focal point of the community is the Moravian church (built in 1834), which took over the mission in 1965. The settlement (ca. 2000 people) consists of a central village where the church is situated, and 11 'out-stations' or religious meeting points. The rugged topography and arid climate place serious constraints on farming, such that out of a total land area of 36,000 ha, only 1000 ha is actually workable. Before the start of the *rooibos* project in 1998, the community had very limited income and over 80% unemployment. Not surprisingly, there was a steady stream of young people leaving the community. The entire community shares a common language (*Afrikaans*) and attends the local church. Families have lived in the valley for generations, and have developed remarkable levels of self-sufficiency and resilience, which have fostered high levels of social capital. As one of the community leaders commented, the mission has taught members '...to practise economic independence based on one's own resources, but to use it for the common good'. Strong local networks have been crucial in establishing a collaborative business venture.

Limited sales of *rooibos* tea to commercial producers in Clanwilliam started as early as 1900. The foundation of the current initiative was laid in 1997, following a 'needs assessment' involving agribusiness in sustainable natural African plant products (A-SNAPP), a USAID funded agricultural support organisation based at the University of Stellenbosch near Cape Town. A-SNAPP has been a key player in the success of the Wupperthal project, their mission is to support '...self-sustaining projects which... connect producers with buyers and provide guidance on export regulations' (A-SNAPP (2000) and A-SNAPP. (2005)). The needs assessment identified *rooibos* as a potential driver for development, and highlighted the pre-existence of local knowledge and skills in the area of *rooibos* production. A-SNAPP has also provided invaluable technical support in plant agronomy, improving production and quality, strengthening the organic aspects of production, financial management support and facilitating access to overseas markets and higher prices (A-SNAPP, 2005).

The community and church, as custodian of the land, formally decided to initiate the *rooibos* tea project. From a legal perspective, the project was initially run as an 'association', though it has since been restructured as a co-operative. Significant infrastructural inputs were required to initiate the project. Collaborative endeavours between the Association, A-SNAPP and LANOK (now re-named CASIDRA), the provincial government's rural development agency, helped the Association apply to the provincial RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) for R 290,000 in 1997. In 1998, the old tea court was upgraded, a new tractor purchased and a new store built. The provincial Department of Social Services provided R 300,000 in 1999, which was used to enlarge the drying floor to 1000 m² and to extend the storage shed (Casidra, 2005; LANOK, 2005). The project now functions independently of external funding.

Harvesting takes place in mid-summer (January). The tea is collected from farmers, using the co-operative's tractor and trailer and is then taken to the tea court for processing and drying. The process is labour intensive, since the tea must be turned every 2 hours. When it is thoroughly dry, the tea is sifted and bagged. The tea court employs 14 staff, working up to 18 hours each day during the 4 month processing season from January to April. The tea is sterilised and packaged in Clanwilliam. Most sales are made through a wholesaler. The first major customer of the co-operative, was a Dutch-based 'Fairtrade' firm, which approached Wupperthal in 1997/8, and which certifies the product as being organically produced. The farmers at present receive R 5.50 kg⁻¹ for green (wet) tea, which is eventually sold as dry tea for R 18 kg⁻¹. Prices are good, since the high altitude improves the quality of the tea.

The co-operative is managed by a community committee, which is democratically elected by the participating farmers at the Annual General Meeting. Since production commenced in 1998, there has been a steady increase both in the number of participating farmers and in *rooibos* production (see Table

1). In 1999, the Association was registered as an organic producer. Organic production is assured through the addition of animal manure, and use of natural pesticides derived from a local plant known as 'khakibos'. In 2002, profits reached R 102,000. At present, 10 tonnes are harvested from wild plants and over 70 tonnes from plantations. Individual farmers produce between 200 kg and 2 tonnes, employing up to eight labourers, ensuring significant employment benefits in the local community. The co-operative is optimistic about the future and hopes to double its income by initiating sales directly to European retailers. To facilitate this expansion, the co-operative has investigated the option of Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO) registration, which would allow direct sales from the tea court to European retailers using the Fairtrade Mark.

Table 1
Wupperthal rooibos initiative

Year	No. of farmers	Production (in tonnes)
1998	25	16
1999	35	25
2001	70	91
2002	—	83
2004	—	46 (drought)
2005	152	100 (projected)

Source: Interview with Tea Court Manager, Wupperthal, 30 March 2005.

The *rooibos* initiative has brought considerable benefits to the Wupperthal community, notably:

- the participating farmers (170 had joined the co-operative by mid-2006) are now receiving a regular income, often for the first time.
- The project has involved many members of the community, both directly, as farmers, farm labourers and workers at the tea court. Increases in local disposable income are benefiting the local economy.
- The initiative has generated funds for community projects, such as providing an additional staff member for the school and purchasing computers. The Fairtrade premium (0.5 Euro/kg) has enabled the purchase of a 4×4 tractor and the subsidising of school improvements.

The initiative has benefited from the strength of social capital, which exists among this small, isolated mission community and the ability to produce a commodity which is spatially and ecologically limited and has a steadily increasing international market. The community recognises the rare combination of these factors, and a leader commented that, 'Wupperthal is unique'.

Despite the considerable success of the initiative, Wupperthal respondents identified a number of challenges facing the community and the *rooibos* initiative:

1. There are limited number of young farmers,
2. Wupperthal is isolated and has poor access roads. Thus transport costs are high.
3. FLO registration is costly.

4. With the evolving national land policy, it is not clear whether future land division will be for communal or individual ownership, which could impact on the co-operative's activities,
5. There is a need to maintain grazing land, and achieve a sustainable balance between *rooibos* production and preservation of the indigenous *fynbos* vegetation.

The Heiveld rooibos initiative

Some 600 people live in scattered farmsteads in the South Bokkeveld area, 90% of them are from the historically disadvantaged and marginalised Coloured population. Land is owned and worked in different ways, by individual owners, by share croppers and farm workers. *Rooibos* has always been grown in the area, but production was small scale and undertaken by individual farmers. Unlike Wupperthal, where activities focus on the village, the scattered nature of the Heiveld community, has been a barrier to progress. External intervention has been important in identifying development options through a participatory process, building social capital and establishing a co-operative to take the process forward (Oettle, n.d. a).

An NGO, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), played a key role in the foundation of Heiveld co-operative, and worked closely with the community to identify the potential for *rooibos* production. EMG's work in the area began in 1999, following a request from the Northern Cape provincial government to initiate a bottom-up development process (Oettle, n.d. a). EMG is closely linked with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, and has subsequently developed participatory training material for the UN and World Bank, based on the Heiveld experience (EMG (Environmental Monitoring Group), 2003). EMG is therefore well placed to support a community initiative based on the sustainable use of indigenous local products.

Following initial meetings with Heiveld inhabitants, EMG undertook a 'knowledge exchange', which involved taking community members to visit community projects elsewhere in the region. Visits were organised to various community projects, including the Wupperthal tea project in 2000. The success of the latter clearly inspired Heiveld members, who saw the potential for generating economic returns from the detailed indigenous knowledge base that they possessed. Community members recognised that although they had farming skills, they did not have the necessary management and organisational skills to establish a cooperative. EMG worked with the community to strengthen these skills through a participatory, active learning process, which was strongly driven by the principle of sustainable development. This attracted World Bank interest and led to the drafting of two manuals on 'community knowledge exchange' (Oettle & Kollé (2003a) and Oettle & Kollé (2003b)). A key element in this process was capturing and documenting local knowledge on *rooibos* tea production in a booklet entitled '*Die Juweel van die Berg*' (The Jewel of the Mountain) (Oettle et al., 2002). The booklet served the dual purpose of recording local knowledge and providing a practical resource for farmers.

Initial funding for the initiative was a modest R 1400, raised through membership fees. Canadian funders paid for a tea-cutting machine and also provided funds for training. Funding for the initiative has been received from the United Nations Environment Programme, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and the World Bank's Indigenous Knowledge for Development Programme. Further advisory support has been given by the Western Cape Provincial Agricultural Department (Oettle, n.d. b). The project was formalised in 2001 as a co-operative with 14 members (rising to 26 in 2003), and has its headquarters in the village of Nieuwoudtville (Heiveld small farmers co-operative, 2005). The co-operative's stated mission is, 'to produce and market the finest organic *rooibos* tea at fair prices on behalf of our members, and thereby create a better life for small-scale farmers and other less privileged members of the community' (Oettle & Kollé, 2003c, p. 43). The co-operative's constitution guarantees that 30% of the profits should be utilised for community development projects (Oettle, n.d. b).

Rooibos production takes place on scattered farms, while wild tea is collected from high ground over an area extending 50 kms south of the village. Wild tea is sometimes marketed separately as a niche product. The tea is processed at a private tea court in the area, which is hired from the owners. The board of the co-operative manages the project, and EMG now only plays a limited supporting role as the project matures. An international market for the *rooibos* production was secured from the inception of the project, when a Dutch-based Fairtrade organisation approached EMG and offered to buy the co-operative's products, provided that it was sold to and certified by their South African agent. In 2001, the first year of operation, 30 tonnes were produced, of which 6 tonnes were sold to the Fairtrade organisation, and 24 tonnes to the Clanwilliam factory. Two years later (2003), 30 tonnes were exported to Europe (EMG, 2003).

In addition to the benefits of collaborating with an international Fairtrade organisation, the fact that the community also produces the tea organically has helped to secure a defined market share. In 2000, all of the farmers were registered as organic producers in accordance with EU standards. During 2004, Heiveld *rooibos* was awarded the Fairtrade mark, and was subsequently marketed in the UK by the firm Equal Exchange as the first Fairtrade *rooibos* available in the UK (Equal Exchange, 2004). Interestingly, the 'short, spatially extended' aspect of the product supply chain is emphasised through the precise geographical source of the tea being displayed prominently on the front of the tea's packaging. Some of the tea is also sold in North America, where it is distributed by Mate Revolution, an 'alternative trade organisation', which supports the principles of the International Federation for Alternative Trade (Heiveld Co-operative, n.d.). In addition to tea production, another community initiative in Heiveld involves the making of cloth bags for packaging tea, by women in the associated Melkraal Women's League (Furniss, 2002).

Heiveld Cooperative gained profits in 2002 of R 104,000, which increased to R 140,000 in 2003. Earnings per kilo have doubled since 2000. During 2005/6, 42 farmer members produced 36 tonnes of organic *rooibos* achieving a financial turnover of R 1.5 million. Of the profits 70% was distributed among participating farmers, in proportion to their contribution to the project, while the remaining 30% was distributed among disadvantaged members of the community (Oettle, n.d. a). By 2005, the community had invested R 100,000 from its profits into a tea processing facility with a further R 120,000 projected for investment during 2005 (ICRISAT, 2006). In March 2005, the Heiveld co-operative was exploring the possibility of increasing its revenue by working directly through independent agents in Europe. Respondents commented that, Fairtrade buyers pay R 23/kg, whereas independent agents in Europe could pay up to R 44/kg.⁵ Commercial *rooibos* by comparison sells for R 14 in world markets.

Evaluating the initiatives

Community-level impacts

These *rooibos* AFI's have undoubtedly had a significant impact in addressing local development needs and in improving the overall socio-economic well-being of a marginalised region. Furthermore, there have been important economic multiplier effects in regional centres such as Clanwilliam where processing occurs. The initiatives clearly demonstrate how in the production of an 'alternative food', both social capital and indigenous knowledge have been firmly embedded in the development process, giving the initiative a distinctively 'alternative' character as detailed by authors such as Leyshon et al. (2003) and Williams (2003). Both communities are producing a commodity that is environmentally sustainable, meets ethical criteria, is destined for the international market, and is traded through processes which, locally at least, do not interface with MNCs. In due course, the 'short, spatially extended' supply chain could be simplified if new certification procedures are adopted and the communities are able to sell directly to European retailers. In relation to environmental sustainability, the communities have shown awareness, through their detailed local knowledge, of the importance of

managing natural resources sensitively, by not over exploiting the *rooibos* plant (Oettle et al., 2002). This is particularly important in the case of wild *rooibos*, which grows on environmentally sensitive mountain tops and high plateau areas.

The local communities have also recognised the importance and potential for diversifying their local economies. Community members in Wupperthal are already producing soap from *rooibos* extract, and a small percentage of the *rooibos* is flavoured and sold as lemon *rooibos* tea. There might also be scope to investigate the production and international sale of other natural products, such as 'buchu' and 'honeybush' teas, both of which occur naturally in the Cedarberg. In addition, *rooibos* and its associated products are already becoming an important component of the region's identity and thus, through associated publicity are contributing to the rapidly growing tourism industry. Diversification can also include efforts to increase value added by involvement in more stages of the supply chain. Interestingly, the two communities have recently come together in a Cape Town based venture, 'Fair Packers', where *rooibos* is packaged for export (Binns, Bek, Nel, & Ellison, 2007; van der Walt, 2006). This packing plant provides some employment for local people who have migrated to Cape Town.

Lessons for community development praxis

In terms of community development praxis, there are important lessons to be drawn from the experience of these two communities. Nel and Rogerson have observed that LED has often been stymied in South Africa due to failure to overcome key challenges such as 'capacity shortfalls on the ground, limited resources and the failure to embrace the internationally recognised concept of partnerships' (2005 p. 12). The developmental experiences in Wupperthal and Heiveld have certainly shown that these challenges can be met successfully when the correct institutional arrangements are in place.

NGOs have played critical roles in facilitating these projects. The developmental role of NGOs has been the subject of much debate in recent years. While NGOs can have a very positive impact on local development initiatives, there is also evidence of their negative impact (Bebbington, 2004; Mallaby, 2004; Roff, 2004). In the cases of Wupperthal and Heiveld, the experience has been overwhelmingly positive. This has included local training, conducting needs assessments, assisting in the acquisition of key resources and, in the case of ASNAPP in particular, the successful identification and targeting of markets. Indeed, it should be emphasised that a crucial underpinning aspect of these projects' success has been the pre-existence of a market for the produce. Such an observation may seem obvious, but in too many cases development projects have been pursued without proper scoping of the broader market realities, leading to otherwise promising projects withering on the vine (Nel & Rogerson, 2005).

With the support of A-SNAPP and EMG, social capital has been strengthened, the communities have gained in confidence, and have enhanced their production, marketing and management skills. Community empowerment and capacity building have been achieved in both communities. In both cases, the communities still 'own' the initiatives and benefit directly from them. Rather than completely taking over the production process, both NGOs have sought to facilitate the development initiatives, thus preserving community independence through democratically managed participatory processes. Evidence suggests that, the stronger the 'social infrastructure', and issues such as local engagement, voluntary support and commitment of local leadership, then more likely is the potential for successful community-based development projects (SHARP, Agnitsch, Ryan, & Flora, 2002). This accords with Blakely and Milano, who suggest that the community should be the focal point for development, drawing upon local resources and human and organisational capacities to enhance, '...skills and their capacity to generate their own economic wealth' (2001, p. 2350). Other writers have indicated the importance of community empowerment in the gradual improvement of local conditions and more sustainable environmental management (Roseland, 2000; Wint, 2002).

Furthermore, there is no doubt that NGOs can play a key role in linking marginalised communities with sources of external funding and potential markets (Hulme & Edwards, 1997), and also in capacity building and strengthening local institutional structures, particularly among poor communities (Roff, 2004, Rodriguez-Carmona, 2004). In these cases, NGOs have assisted in the development of macro-forms of social capital (Grootaert & Van Bastelaar, 2002), allowing isolated communities to connect with important national and international organisations and institutions, thus enabling financial resources and markets to be accessed.

Although the projects have clearly been associated with a number of positive dividends, it is important to sound some notes of caution. Such projects are not easily replicable, since their success has been predicated on the existence of a number of time and space contingent factors, such as the pre-existence of socially cohesive communities and the easy availability of a marketable commodity. It is certainly important to be mindful of the fact that both the schemes considered here have received considerable external support, including the donation of resources to implement necessary physical infrastructure and/or training. The involvement of EMG and A-SNAPP has ensured that resources have been well targeted in these instances. However, other avenues for sourcing finance, perhaps including more private sector input, may be required in order to reduce pressure on the public purse if similar initiatives are to be rolled out.

In both Wupperthal and Heiveld, the NGOs have shown a sophisticated awareness of the sensitivity of engaging, and then dis-engaging, with the communities at an appropriate point in the development cycle. This issue has been noted as an important factor in the success of other community based initiatives where NGOs have been involved (Nel, Binns, & Motteux, 2000). While contemporary donor support policies are increasingly predicated on the notion of project self-sustainability, ongoing dependency upon NGOs is often a problem. Disengagement is a complex process, and it is not altogether clear at what point communities will be ready to completely manage the projects themselves. Empowering communities, or at least key individuals within communities, to this degree has proven an immense challenge within community-based agri-projects in South Africa (Bek, McEwan, & Bek, 2007). Commentators within wine industry-based community projects, for example, have noted that formidable barriers to entry exist when it comes to negotiating with actors at the top end of global value chains. NGOs such as A-SNAPP and EMG possess years of accumulated experience and personal contacts within global supply networks. Such complex forms of human and social capital are not easily transferred, and it will only be in the fullness of time that we will be able to see if these communities can survive once the umbilical cord of NGO support is cut. As such, in terms of post-development conceptualisations of the key role that traditional or community organisations have to play in creating alternative economic opportunities (Williams, 2005), the role of supportive external agencies is clearly a key finding.

The asymmetric nature of global food supply chains poses further concerns for the medium- to long-term future of these schemes and their likes. The international regulatory environment promulgated by the WTO, increasingly supports a 'fair and market-oriented' (WTO, 2003) trading regime for agricultural commodities. However, as some commentators have pointed out (see for example Harvey, 1996; Leyshon et al., 2003), such a mission statement is inherently contradictory, since a market-oriented system enables some enterprises to develop a competitive advantage by gaining privileged access to resources (Gwynne, Klak, & Shaw, 2003). Researchers writing within the broad alternative food genre are increasingly detecting tendencies for alternative forms of production to become co-opted by mainstream economic agents, thus watering down the social and environmental credentials of the projects concerned (Jaffee, Kloppenburg, & Monroy, 2004). In the case of Fairtrade, production is being increasingly controlled by large corporations, who are able to maintain a stranglehold over key elements in the supply chain, for example, by providing processing facilities for smallholder coffee producers (Raynolds, 2002; Renard, 2003). Furthermore, UK retail chains are keen to jump onto the ethical and fair-trade bandwagon by offering own-brand 'fair-trade' products, and thus cutting into the market share

of the original alternative providers. In this way, the retailer can maintain a controlling influence within these alternative networks (in effect rendering them less of an 'alternative'), while boosting their own profits by directly meeting the requirements of a niche consumer group (Renard, 2005). Similar observations have been made concerning the mainstreaming of alternative food initiatives in California (see Allen et al., 2003). In this sense, the defining characteristic of AFIs through which they reconstruct the local in opposition to the global (Allen et al., 2003) is increasingly being challenged and broken down.

Furthermore, it must be recognised that the international Fairtrade movement is in fact highly heterogeneous with various organisations purporting to be supporters of 'Fairtrade' (Binns et al., 2007; Low & Davenport, 2005; Smith & Barrientos, 2005; Tallontire, 2002). However, the standards supported by different organisations do vary considerably, with some failing to meet any recognised standards of fairness (Kruger, 2004). Isolated rural communities are poorly placed to discriminate between different organisations seeking to source produce under a 'fair trade' banner. On a more positive note, there is much work ongoing within South Africa to ensure that the 'southern voice' is heard in the evolution of Fairtrade networks, such that mainstreaming and the imposition of Western values upon local production systems are being resisted (Kruger, 2004). The success of such endeavours could have a huge bearing upon the future sustainability of initiatives such as Wupperthal and Heiveld.

At present, *rooibos* production is relatively insulated from many of the pressures imposed by retailers' supply chain management systems. The niche nature of this product, its relative novelty in overseas markets, and its high value added, are all important factors which ensure that notable benefits are experienced by communities. However, in time, retailers or branded companies may seek increasing control over local processes and impose price pressures. The limited geographical supply of *rooibos* is an important factor presently favouring current producers. Locally, there is the potential of competition, as other communities are investigating opportunities to produce *rooibos* under organic and Fairtrade banners. At the same time, white-owned plantation units, favoured by their enduring commercial experience and contacts, are also engaging in increasing levels of Fairtrade and organic production. Thus, further expansion of production within South Africa, or even its uptake in other parts of the world, should not be discounted, with potentially damaging implications for producers in localities such as Wupperthal and Heiveld, unless sufficient diversification and locality-based brand awareness can be developed.

Conclusion

With South Africa's legacy of social and spatial marginalisation among Black and Coloured communities, it is likely that addressing the legacies of apartheid will be a protracted process, such that many communities will remain marginalised and disempowered for the foreseeable future (Lester et al., 2000). This is particularly true in isolated rural communities that are distant from centres of economic and political power. In light of their geographical, political, social and economic marginality, the achievements of the Wupperthal and Heiveld communities are particularly significant. With some timely and sensitive external support, these impoverished communities have developed impressive Alternative Food Initiatives, which have succeeded in tapping into international niche markets and developing alternative economic opportunities to capitalism as conceptualised by Leyshon et al. (2003).

Several key questions for further research arise from these studies. In line with Watts et al. (2005), further research is needed to understand the broader outcomes of alternative food networks. More specifically, how is value distributed within the chain of *rooibos* production, and to what extent do 'short chains' actually facilitate increased wealth production at the producer end? Furthermore, such projects may be useful for improving household sustainability and reducing poverty, but can households experience ongoing increases in income levels? Or, is there a ceiling to the levels of wealth that may be

generated for producers? Furthermore, to what degree are patterns of socio-economic differentiation occurring within the communities?

Quite clearly, the two communities are in the unique position of having access to a rare and relatively easily grown product for which an emerging international demand exists. Furthermore, they have succeeded in being recognised and endorsed by the international Fairtrade movement. But even for Fairtrade products, the playing field is by no means level, and international trade creates uneven patterns of development which favour those with privileged access to the world market (Gwynne et al., 2003). The reality that the international Fairtrade movement itself contains a multiplicity of actors, some with less altruistic motives than others, cannot be ignored (Kruger, 2004). These issues need to be carefully considered by proponents of alternative food initiatives as a pathway for community development. While elements of the process of community economic development and support from NGOs might be generic, access to the economic opportunities afforded by a spatially limited product such as *rooibos* clearly is not. The development challenge, therefore, is to identify economic development opportunities for both those communities privileged by access to similar unique resources, and also for those without such access. The community-based development process, as exemplified by Wupperthal and Heiveld, does provide many useful lessons that are applicable to all forms of community LED.

In the cases of Wupperthal and Heiveld, it is important that the communities now capitalise on their successes and avoid the potentially negative impacts that could result from as yet unrealised attempts by MNCs to tap into local production. At this point in time, the future seems bright, but as production expands and perhaps diversifies, there is a danger that other problems arise in developing direct sales links with European retailers. It is hard to envisage that these isolated communities will be able to successfully negotiate such challenges unaided. Thus, informal advice and support from NGOs, export promotion agencies and development practitioners, with their finger on the pulse of alternative food network dynamics, will be essential if these initiatives are to prove sustainable in the longer term.

Exchange rate: The international value of the South African Rand has fluctuated widely during the period under consideration. In October 2006, US\$ 1=7.50 SARand, approximately.

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Notes

¹ Ethical trade refers to a project that concentrates on improving conditions of labour within the place of work; unlike Fair trade, which explicitly challenges unjust power relations in trade between rich and poor countries by guaranteeing accredited producers a ‘fair’ price for their commodities and usually involves the payment of an additional social premium to be invested in community development projects (see Smith & Barrientos, 2005).

² See also special issues of *Environment and Planning A* (2003, 35, 3), *Journal of Rural Studies* (2003, 19, 1) and *Sociologia Ruralis* (2002, 42, 4).

³ The empirical material considered in this paper is largely the product of a three-year (2004–6) field-

based research investigation during which the rural communities have been visited on a number of occasions. Interviews were conducted with a range of informants, including community representatives (farmers and their farmers' association, church leaders and the tea court manager), NGO project workers and local government representatives. Semi-formal discussions were also conducted with various representatives from the commercial *rooibos* industry in the region.

⁴ See Binns et al. (2007) for a detailed account of the Wupperthal initiative.

⁵ A 100 g pack of organic *rooibos* loose tea retails for approximately R 17.50 in the UK.