

Rural self-reliance strategies in South Africa: community initiatives and external support in the former black homelands

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of the concept of self-reliance in the context of rural community economic development in South Africa. Whilst changing global and local circumstances oblige impoverished communities to become more pro-active in the enhancement of the quality of their lives, they nevertheless cannot ignore basic market forces and the need for an appropriate level of external assistance. Four community-based agricultural ventures in South Africa's former Homelands are examined. A comparison between the four schemes permits an assessment to be made of what such community ventures require if they are to succeed and have a meaningful impact on job creation and poverty alleviation. The role of external support agencies and access to markets in each case features prominently in the assessment.

Keywords: community development; economic development; post-apartheid; poverty alleviation; rural economy; South Africa

1. Introduction

Desperate economic realities in many African countries, both oblige and compel communities to seek solutions to the circumstances in which they find themselves. According to the United Nations, for almost “one-sixth of mankind, the march of human progress has become a retreat. In many nations, development is being thrown into reverse. And after decades of steady economic advance, large areas of the world are being thrown back into poverty” (in Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992, p.22). The effective collapse of government services, infrastructure and social provision in many parts of Africa, coupled with hyper-inflation, vast debt burdens and the disastrous effects of global trade and structural adjustment packages mitigate against any significant development intervention on the part of national governments. As a result, the limited development endeavours that do exist tend to be those of Aid agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), or cases where communities are forced to look inward at their own resources and potential in order to carve some form of future for themselves and their children.

An impressive range of community-based local development initiatives has been documented in Africa and these are variously referred to as 'self-reliance', 'development from below', 'development from within' and 'local economic development' (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992). In contrast with the better resourced and externally assisted local development initiatives in the North, the majority of such African endeavours tend to be wholly driven and controlled by stakeholders within the locality. Minimal, if any external support, usually from NGOs, is the norm, although as the case studies in this paper will illustrate, such external involvement can be critical to the survival and success of such initiatives. Where local endeavours do exist, ventures tend to be the result of unique combinations of local leadership and resources.

Although Stöhr's (1981) concept of 'bottom-up' development has much to commend it, both from idealistic and practical perspectives, as Stock (1995) points out, such action is unlikely to be successful beyond a limited handful of cases. In fact, according to Stöhr (1981) and Simon (1992), 'bottom-up' initiatives need to complement and harmonise with 'top-down' support and facilitation. Whilst such an argument is commendable, the practical reality is that government in the South is frequently impoverished and incapable of rendering realistic support. In addition, even in remote rural villages, the so-called 'global village' has extended its tentacles and the success or failure of community self-reliance might well be determined by external market forces. Such forces can either facilitate or hinder community endeavours, dependent on the initiative's comparative advantages and whether or not it poses a competitive threat to other market role-players. This paper examines the experience of four communities resident in former Black, rural racial reserves in South Africa (the so-called Homelands), and their struggle to become economically self-reliant through community-based projects. The potential of such initiatives, the variable role played by external support agencies, and their economic success are evaluated here. The four communities are those of Upsher, Seymour and Hertzog in Eastern Cape province and Mansomani in KwaZulu-Natal province.

2. Perspectives on community-based development in Africa

As most countries of Africa seem unable to aspire to the post-industrial (or even the industrial) status of the North, it appears that local coping strategies, reliance on the informal sector and self-reliance are the most effective survival strategies in many communities (Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992; Binns, 1995). Such approaches can manifest themselves in many forms, including local savings clubs, the informal sector in all its variations, a reversion to traditional craft and other industries and even the barter system. The growth of co-operatives and the increasingly important part played by women in ensuring the survival of their families are also of considerable significance (Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992; Brown, 1995).

In the view of Stock (1995), development strategies in Africa need to focus more on issues of local self-help and community self-reliance. Structural adjustment, droughts, warfare and the failure of traditional 'top-down' strategies have forced a large proportion of Africa's population to look inward to their own resources, skills and often what is

termed their 'indigenous technical knowledge' to cope with the harsh realities of the modern global economy (Binns, 1994). At its most basic level such strategies are often merely forms of survival. They do, however, find accord with new World Bank assertions about the need to foster 'participatory' approaches to development (Stock, 1995).

Development approaches which encourage 'self-reliance' are validated through the realities that:

- (i) Local communities are endowed with considerable resources, skills and indigenous knowledge which can be called on in times of crisis.
- (ii) In many situations, local initiatives constitute the only means of survival for the poor and disadvantaged, thus local control of resources and initiatives is critical.
- (iii) Declining macro-level resources, mounting debt and declining export earnings encourage inwardlooking strategies.
- (iv) Local self-reliance does encourage empowerment and local initiative and is often based on ecologically sound and sustainable development principles (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992).

Such considerations have been examined further by Taylor and Mackenzie (1992) who have built upon the ideas of Stöhr's (1981) 'development from below' thesis. They argue that this needs to be redefined as 'development from within' in the case of Africa. This notion focuses on enhanced participation and control by local people over their development endeavours in a fashion which embraces all members of a community. A second component, in their view, is "territory", which involves place, economics and social relations and which plays a defining role in development activities (Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992). Links with the locality studies approach in this connection are evident. Western-based literature also indicates the key role which local social and economic forces and the inherited pattern of skills and resources endogenous to a unique locality can play as a development catalyst (Massey and Massey; Cox and Mair, 1991). The same realities seem to apply throughout the world, a situation encouraged by greater personal freedom and the frequent decentralization or loss of central state control. In order to succeed in their endeavours, local people must exercise high degrees of control over the development process and appropriate, local structures need to be created. The focus on people and their local knowledge in the implementation of development has clear advantages (Stöhr, 1990). However, despite the appeal of such an approach, as Stock (1995) points out, the notion is constrained by the complexity and unpredictability of individual communities and strategies, a frequent shortage of resources and skills, and the important fact that communities are not isolated and autonomous. Stock (1995) p. 363) goes on to caution that this approach cannot be regarded as a panacea and it "is unlikely to achieve more than small sporadic victories for the disadvantaged majority".

Whilst the principles of self-reliance are admirable, there is the inherent reality, identified years ago by the dependency school, that it is impossible to distance oneself from the capitalist economy (Simon, 1992). The fact that most local communities, throughout the world have some degree of interaction with their national, and in turn the international, market makes them vulnerable to external shocks, constraints or perhaps even

encouragement. In financially poor communities, linking to what is a national and invariably an international economic system has often been disastrous, with cheap imports destroying the local retail and production base. This will apply in all cases, except in rare instances of extreme marginalisation and poverty where the barter system has been reinstated in communities which are so poor that they cannot participate in the formal economy in any fashion (Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992). In more developed areas, however, as this case-study of South Africa will illustrate, the break from the capitalist system cannot realistically be achieved and, instead, survival depends on the ability to apply self-reliance strategies which seek to participate at the lowest tiers of the capitalist system. In this scenario, the future for participants is fragile and unpredictable and success depends on the ability to be co-opted or excluded by the market. In parallel, support, or its absence, from institutional structures and external agencies is also critical for the survival or failure of schemes. As suggested earlier, despite the idealism of independent community initiatives, the practical reality is that external support can often be critical to project success. Simon (1992) argues that ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ planning should be blended together to ensure the success of locally based initiatives. He calls for planners to become more intimately involved with communities. In his view, the way forward is the “formulation of multifaceted, integrated policies sensitive to different group and local needs and embodying the most positive elements of both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ planning. In the contemporary world neither of these polar opposite approaches alone will achieve the desired results” (Simon, 1992 p. 41). Scott Fosler (1991) p. 15) endorses this standpoint and views the two approaches as “complementary, informing, challenging, and reinforcing one another”. Sengenberger (1993) also regards the most appropriate way forward as the search for a blend of approaches in which those at the local level complement national ones in order to ensure the local relevance of development strategies and to maximize their chances of success. There is a clear challenge here to governments, planners, local authorities, community leaders and academics to seek such a convergence in policies and strategies. In this paper, such considerations are examined in terms of the presence of support for four community-based initiatives in South Africa.

3. The realities of rural South Africa and the Homelands

Given the relatively more healthy state of the economy of South Africa, with its better infrastructure, resources and human capital, the country has not experienced economic debilitation to the same degree as other countries in the continent. This broad statement does, however, mask the reality that South Africa remains a highly unequal society as a result of its apartheid legacy. Decades of enforced spatial, social and economic segregation on the grounds of race have left a legacy which is only gradually starting to disentangle.

There is little doubt that the poorest of the poor in South Africa are rural dwellers. It needs to be appreciated that *de jure*, until recently, two rural realities existed and *de facto*, for many still do exist. This was the enforced divisions of rural space on the grounds of race. Whilst the majority of rural South Africa was, and still is, held under white control,

in the former Black reserves or Homelands (Fig. 1) the majority of the population only had access to 13% of the land surface of the country. These areas are characterised by severe poverty, disempowerment, dependency and the outmigration of the able (Lemon, 1987; Christopher, 1984). Under apartheid law, people were forcibly removed to the Homelands, in numbers which frequently exceeded the carrying capacity of the land. Many were forced to remain in such reserves by influx control measures (Platzky and Walker, 1985). Overcrowding ensued and conditions degenerated in the reserves. As early as 1900 the population in the Ciskei Homeland had already reached saturation point and by 1918 the land could no longer provide for the subsistence needs of the entire population (Switzer, 1993). Overpopulation and overstocking of the land induced serious erosion and the further deterioration of conditions. As a result, only 20% of Ciskei was deemed to be suitable for arable cultivation by 1948. Thereafter, economic conditions in the reserves worsened with destitution and dependence increasing in parallel (Switzer, 1993).

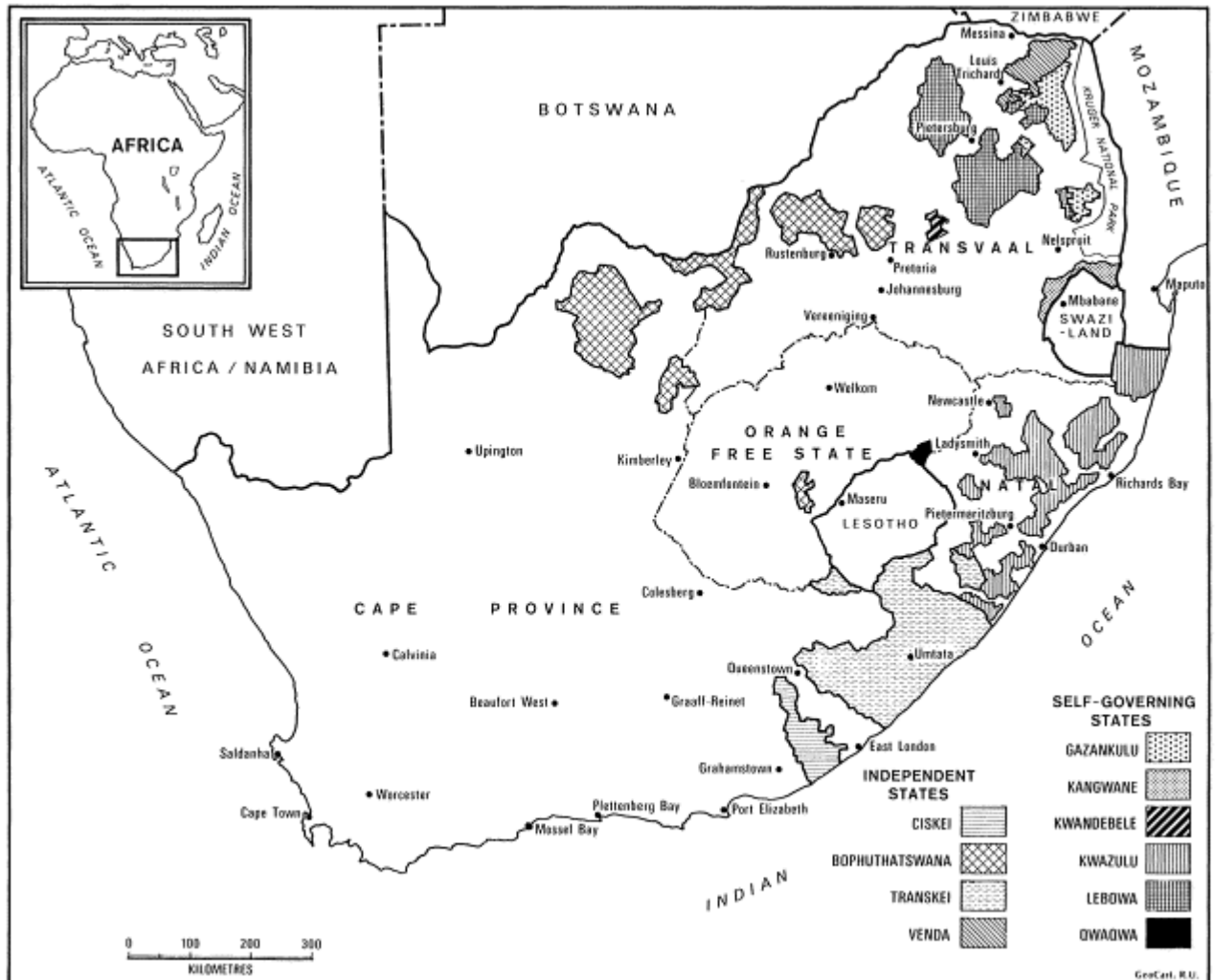


Fig. 1. South Africa and its former Homelands.

Extensive rural areas in the former Homelands are now severely degraded and research indicates that the primary sources of rural income are in fact from urban areas, namely migrant remittances and state old age pensions. In many rural areas, less than 1% of Blacks can be classified as full-time commercial farmers (Bembridge, 1987) and only 10% of income is not derived from urban sources (De Wet, 1993). Poverty levels in rural areas are considerably worse than they are in urban areas. Deng and Tjenneland (1996) note that average Black household income in rural areas is half that of Black households in the country as a whole. In terms of the percentage of households living in poverty, the difference is effectively a multiple of three between metropolitan areas and rural areas, varying from 10.7 to 28.3%. In certain rural districts up to 75% of the able-bodied men are migrants working outside the district on a semi-permanent basis. Decades of government discrimination and manipulation during the apartheid era forced the Black populace into a situation of dependence on white controlled capitalism and progressively entrenched their position as a servile proletariat.

4. Post-apartheid policies and realities

South Africa's relatively 'peaceful revolution' of the early 1990s, and the first democratic election in 1994, have heralded significant changes for the country and its citizens. In terms of rural policy, however, resource and capacity constraints on the part of government have delayed the implementation of widespread change. Despite the drafting of the key Reconstruction and Development Programme (African National Congress {ANC}, 1994) as a national development strategy, the associated Rural Development Strategy with its implicit support for Local Economic Development (Republic of South Africa {RSA}, 1995), and the draft Rural Development Framework document (RSA, 1997), understandably, relatively little has been achieved thus far in terms of tangible progress in the development of rural areas. Possible exceptions to this are the impressive programmes which have extended water and electricity supply into many communities.

Despite the changes which have occurred at a national scale, the economy remains firmly controlled by large, essentially white, business interests. In terms of agricultural activity, the buying power and collective bargaining of established agri-business, co-operatives of large, white farmers and the legacy of fixed sourcing and supply agreements makes it difficult for newcomers to penetrate the established market and compete effectively (Meyer, pers. comm., 1996). These constraints are particularly acute for Black rural communities, living in spatially isolated areas, characterised by poor support and physical resources and infrastructure, and having to compete with established agri-business in an open market (ANC, 1994). Lack of machinery, skills, capital, buying power and networks all further restricts opportunities. Although there have been cases of Black farmers receiving state assistance, either individually or collectively, to farm or acquire former white land in more favourable areas, their lack of experience and capital are often a major inhibition as field evidence in the Wartburg and Gallawater areas reveals (Fetsha, pers. comm., 1996; Bokavu, pers. comm., 1997). Under these conditions, as certain of the case-studies examined will show, having links with an external agency or business partner can prove critical to the success of a community-based initiative.

5. The case studies

Attention now shifts to an examination of how four Black, rural communities located in former Homeland areas, have tried to fight adversity and launch concrete, community-based self-reliance strategies focusing on agricultural ventures. These initiatives have been undertaken despite entrenched structural constraints, lack of access to resources and infrastructure, a low skills base and the agri-business dominated market. Any initiative which is undertaken in areas such as these needs to break with the legacy of limited activity and marginalisation which characterises most former Homeland areas. The four communities are those of Hertzog, Upsher and Seymour in the former Ciskei Homeland (incorporated into Eastern Cape province in 1994), and that of Mansomani in the former Homeland of KwaZulu (now KwaZulu-Natal). In this section the history and development focus of the four schemes are outlined before proceeding to an analysis of the differing results and experiences of each. It also needs to be pointed out that this study reflects the particular situation in former Homelands and does not seek to reflect trends within the national space-economy as a whole. The four studies illustrate different levels of external support or its absence and differing levels of success attained.

5.1. The Hertzog Agricultural Co-operative in the Eastern Cape: limited success without outside help

5.1.1. Background to the initiative

The Hertzog area is occupied by approximately 1000 persons living in a series of settlements spread out along the banks of the Kat River (Fig. 2). Prior to the launch of a self-initiated, community-based development scheme in 1994 (Nel and Hill, 1996; Nel et al., 1997) the unemployment rate, in common with most neighbouring rural districts, was as high as 85% (Community Survey, 1996). The community's acceptance of the fact that they could not wait for an overcommitted government to solve their unique problems, and the reality of near-starvation, prompted them to launch what is one of South Africa's most noteworthy 'self-reliance' ventures (Nykae, pers. comm., 1996). Features identified by Stöhr (1990), such as local leadership, innovation and resourcefulness, which are critical in ensuring the success of any local economic development undertaking, are clearly apparent in the Hertzog initiative.

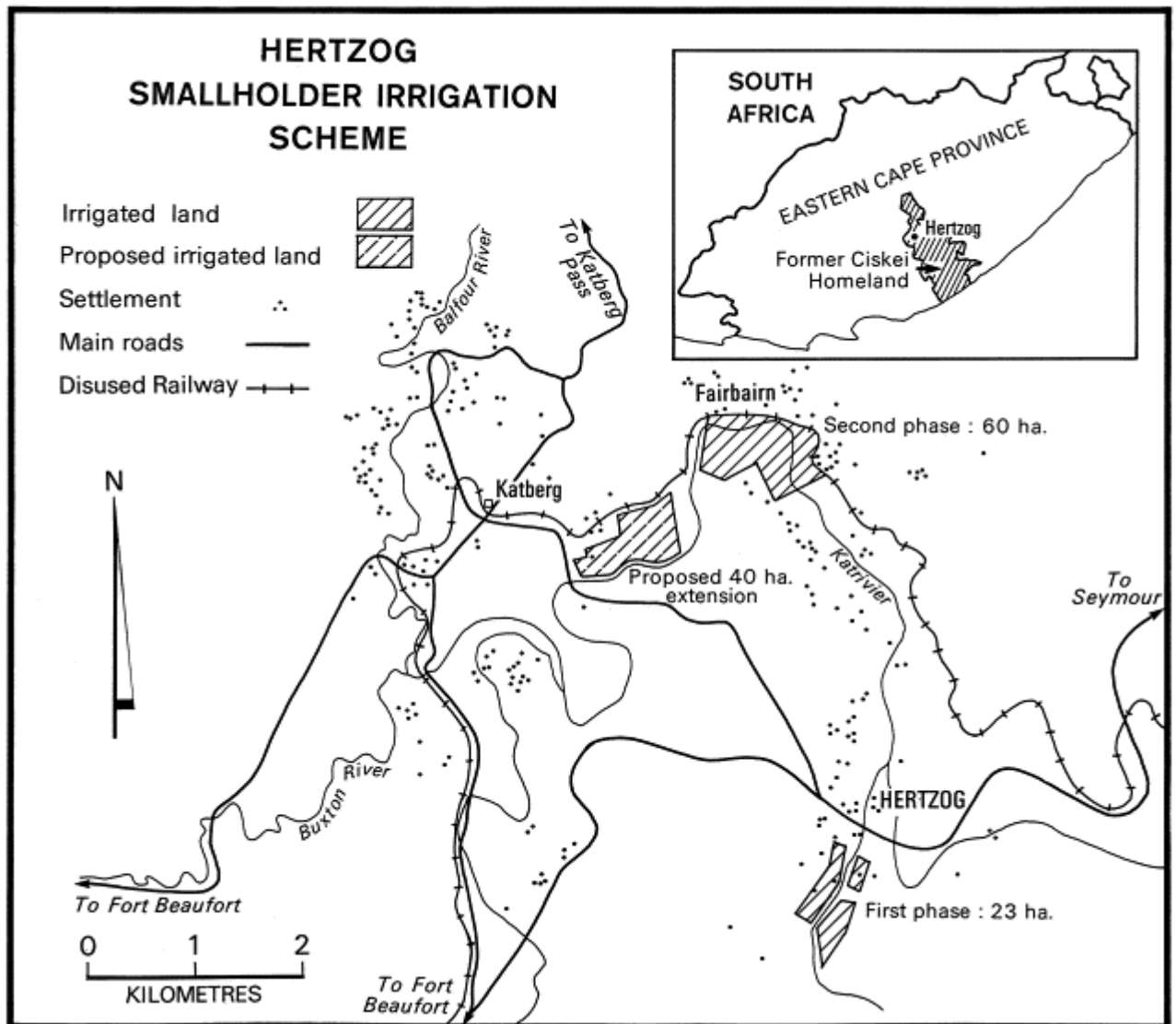


Fig. 2. The Hertzog Scheme.

The valley in which Hertzog lies has significant comparative advantages; located in the foothills of the Katberg mountains in an area characterised by moderately high rainfall and fertile valley soils. Unlike many other former Homeland areas, land tenure in the area is freehold, and not the more common tribal (communal) tenure which may be a barrier to entrepreneurial activity.

5.1.2. The development initiative

Political change in the 1990s and the collapse of the Ciskei state impacted positively on the community. The weakened hold of the state over the land and society in general led to the local community taking the initiative. High levels of poverty, the relaxation of

controls and the presence of talented, popularly supported leaders catalysed subsequent events. In 1994, residents of the valley formed the Hertzog Agricultural Co-operative (HACOP) which aimed to find a solution to prevailing poverty. The decision was taken that it would be in their best interests to utilise their skills as ex-farm workers, and use the farm land and agricultural implements in the valley which were abandoned by white farmers following apartheid removals (Meyer, pers.comm., 1995). The initial challenge was to secure access to land. The new, post-apartheid government has been far more supportive than the previous regime and has allowed the people of the region to farm individual units for ten years, pending a final decision on access to state land (Nykae, pers. comm., 1997). As the area had previously been cultivated under a system of intensive irrigation, the co-operative decided to implement a similar approach, based not on large-scale operations, but rather on small-scale, individual peasant farming of one hectare units. The co-operative also initially succeeded in acquiring a loan from a commercial bank which had been used to bring over 110 one-hectare plots back into production by 1997 (Nykae, pers. comm., 1997). Market gardening and the fortuitous existence of irrigation systems abandoned by white farmers who had previously resided in the area led to significant outputs in the years from 1994 to 1996. The significance of the inherited irrigation systems should not be underestimated in terms of their contribution to the success of the initiative, and the apparent uniqueness of the project in the context of the impoverished former Homelands. It is likely that replication elsewhere would be extremely difficult in the light of this particular advantage. Although not all people in the valley have access to land and there are internal disputes, the household food budget has been supplemented, whilst incomes have often tripled for the members of the co-operative (Nel and Hill, 1996).

HACOP's initial success has not, unfortunately, been matched in the 1996–1999 period. Drought, and a failure to secure reliable markets, are the key constraints which have been experienced. Interviews with co-operative leaders and field-research indicated that marketing appears to be the primary constraint. Even though successful farming has been pursued, the output is of too small a scale to capture a secure market and links with an agri-business to secure market share would help significantly (Meyer, pers. comm., 1996). However, the limited output of the co-operative and what appears to be the somewhat variable quality of its produce does not make it an attractive competitor in the large, commercial markets. The fact that the co-operative does not possess a truck to take vegetables to the nearest market is a key barrier to increasing community income. As a result, the co-operative has had to try and sell its produce in the local area and in nearby towns (Meyer, pers. comm.,1996). This translates into lower cash turnover and a market which cannot be guaranteed. The remainder of the produce is sold in villages in the Kat River valley. Farmers take sacks of potatoes and cabbages to hawkers in the valley, who act as agents for the co-operative (Meyer, pers. comm., 1996). On the positive side, the scheme has recently received its first ever assistance from an external agency. A European funder has made available several electric and diesel pumps and will assist with the future provision of seeds (Nykae, pers. comm., 1999). Whilst the independent action of the co-operative is admirable, the absence of effective, external support in terms of farming and marketing has taken its toll. The recent support received, as detailed above, is unlikely to impact significantly on the overall viability of the project.

Despite the current marketing problems, this example of community driven rural development in Hertzog illustrates that communities can take the initiative and implement local economic development and self-reliance strategies. However, such endeavours can, at times, be problematic, particularly in terms of the absence of external support and advice which is clearly a constraint in its own right. Advice on farming and the improvement of yields and outputs is desperately required. Ultimately, the key constraint is that of access to the external market, and in a country now committed to the pursuit of free market principles, it is difficult to see how emerging Black farming initiatives can break into the market if there is no guaranteed place for them (Editors Inc, 1997). Support from an external agency or agri-business could enhance productivity and distribution of produce from the scheme and ensure greater measures of future success.

5.2. Zamukphila Women's Community Project, Upsher: limited success but with minimal external support

5.2.1. Background to the initiative

This case-study parallels that of the Hertzog initiative in that it examines an initiative which has thus far received minimal external support and achieved limited results. In 1994, a group of 13 women living in Upsher village, close to the town of Balfour (Fig. 2), established a community vegetable-growing project named Zamukphila, meaning “trying to survive”. The women were motivated by low levels of income and nutrition, particularly among their children, and concern about their husbands squandering the limited household income on alcohol (Dyantyi, pers.comm., 1996, 1999).

5.2.2. The development initiative

The women contacted Ulimicor, the then Ciskei State Agricultural Corporation, to ask for advice and land. Ulimicor advised them to establish a co-operative and assisted them in drawing up a constitution (Ulimicor, pers. comm., 1996). Although there is a chairlady and a treasurer, there is no formal committee and the group takes decisions co-operatively. Ulimicor allocated the women approximately two hectares of land adjacent to the village and provided irrigation water, whilst a local farmer, Mr Jonase, occasionally assisted with ploughing and the provision of fertilizer and seeds in the first few growing seasons (Nxyeka, pers. comm., 1997).

The women concede that the project has experienced mixed fortunes, but nonetheless it has provided them with a valuable supplement to household food budgets. Crops grown include cabbage, carrots, beetroot, potatoes, onions and spinach and intercropping is practised. In 1996, for the first time, the women managed to supplement household income from the sale of surplus produce. Crops are mainly grown for sale (two-thirds of the 1998 produce) at the roadside and the rest are used for domestic consumption (Dyantyi, pers. comm., 1999). Problems experienced in the last year include hail damage which ruined their crops, the absence of a tractor to plough the lands, now that the farmer has withdrawn his support and the hardness of the soil which has prevented them from hoeing. Additionally, the Ulimicor parastatal has since ceased operation and access to water is no longer guaranteed as the irrigation infrastructure is not maintained. They have

actively sought external help, including from the rural local government of the area, but to date have had to effectively be totally self-reliant. Some tasks are physically demanding and they do see that they will need help in this regard (Doyi, pers. comm., 1999). Although major difficulties are now being experienced, the women remain optimistic and have acquired a sense of self-achievement from their endeavours (Nxyeka, pers. comm., 1997; Dyantyi, pers. comm., 1998).

The case of Zamukphila clearly illustrates the capacity and desire which exists in rural communities to bring about an improvement in their livelihoods and raise their living standards. The limited initial support received was vital to the establishment of the initiative, however, the lack of continuity in obtaining key inputs has jeopardised its future sustainability. Limited external support in the form of occasional extension advice and ploughing, once or twice a year, would transform the project. In its absence, despite high degrees of local motivation, the future looks somewhat bleak.

5.3. The Seymour Development Forum: limited success with some external help

5.3.1. Background to the initiative

Like Hertzog, the town of Seymour lies on the banks of the Kat River in the former Ciskei Homeland (see Fig. 2). Also as in Hertzog, the community was subjected to the ravages of apartheid-based removal and expropriation in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving the town as an economic shadow of its former self and its residents destitute. The collapse of the artificial Ciskeian regime in the early 1990s led to the transfer of responsibility to the local community, who in 1992, established the Seymour Development Forum in an effort to restore the town's economy, create employment and improve overall socio-economic conditions (Eglin, pers. comm., 1994; Corplan, 1995; Kota, pers. comm., 1995). In contrast with both Hertzog and Zamukphila, there has been a high degree of external involvement and support given to the Seymour Development Forum.

5.3.2. The development initiative

To the credit of the Forum and its able leaders, they recognised that they personally lacked the necessary skills to run a development organization, to access funding and, more importantly, to undertake development projects. They therefore approached Corplan, a community orientated NGO based in the nearby city of East London and requested their assistance. Corplan agreed to offer support in the form of helping the community access funding, the training of community-leaders in various development skills and the allocation of extension staff, on a part-time basis, to assist the residents of Seymour (Matomela, pers. comm., 1996). Core funding was sourced from British and Dutch donor agencies and was used to run the development organization, to train support staff and community trainers, to support small businesses and to fund projects. Key projects embarked on included:

- community gardens in which access was granted to the 60 poorest families in the community to grow food,

- support for small businesses
- the encouragement of periodic markets in the town as foci of economic and social activity in the community, and
- the most prominent being the restoration of an abandoned factory in the town centre, using local labour, for use as a base for small businesses, a village market and a number of offices (Corplan, 1995; Sono, pers. comm., 1995; Matomela, pers. comm., 1996).

These various endeavours have involved several hundred local residents on a part-time basis, and have improved food production in the area and enhanced community well being. On the downside, most of the small businesses have been unable to survive in the absence of viable markets and a shortage of locally available skills (Corplan, 1995). The project has survived largely because of the goodwill of the donors, the positive support of Corplan and the leadership ability within the community. Even though it is impossible to escape the reality of 'dependent development' which exists, given the area's desperate legacy and the disempowerment under apartheid, external support and guidance played a critical role, one which is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. It is to the credit of the donors that they have generously supported the scheme with the view that it will become self-sustaining through time. What this case-study reveals is the desire of the local residents to become self-reliant, but in order to do so their leaders correctly realised the vitally important role which external facilitation and support could play in order to help them attain that ideal. In many ways, Seymour is a more likely role-model for the hundreds of disempowered communities in the country, unlike independent initiatives such as those at Hertzog and Upsher.

5.4. The Mansomani initiative: success with outside help

5.4.1. Background to the initiative

In certain instances, such as is illustrated in the case-studies of Seymour and this one at Mansomani in KwaZulu-Natal, external agencies can play a positive developmental role. However, when striving for self-reliance, a community can become drawn into a dependent relationship with an external agency. One of the more noteworthy initiatives in this category is that of Mansomani on the banks of the Umvoti River in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in the former KwaZulu Homeland (Fig. 3). Interestingly, unlike the case of Hertzog, the area was never white-owned, neither does a system of freehold tenure prevail. Instead, it consists of land held through tribal/communal tenure under the headmanship of a local chief (Botha, pers. comm., 1997). In the area's favour is the fact that it is well-watered and has fertile valley soils. South Africa is one of the world's largest sugar producers and exporters, and a high percentage of the crop is sourced from the coastal plains of this province. In addition to large-scale commercial farming, sugar cane has been grown by both Indian and Black smallholders in this area for generations. In a national context, this is probably the prime example of smallholder commercial production in the country.

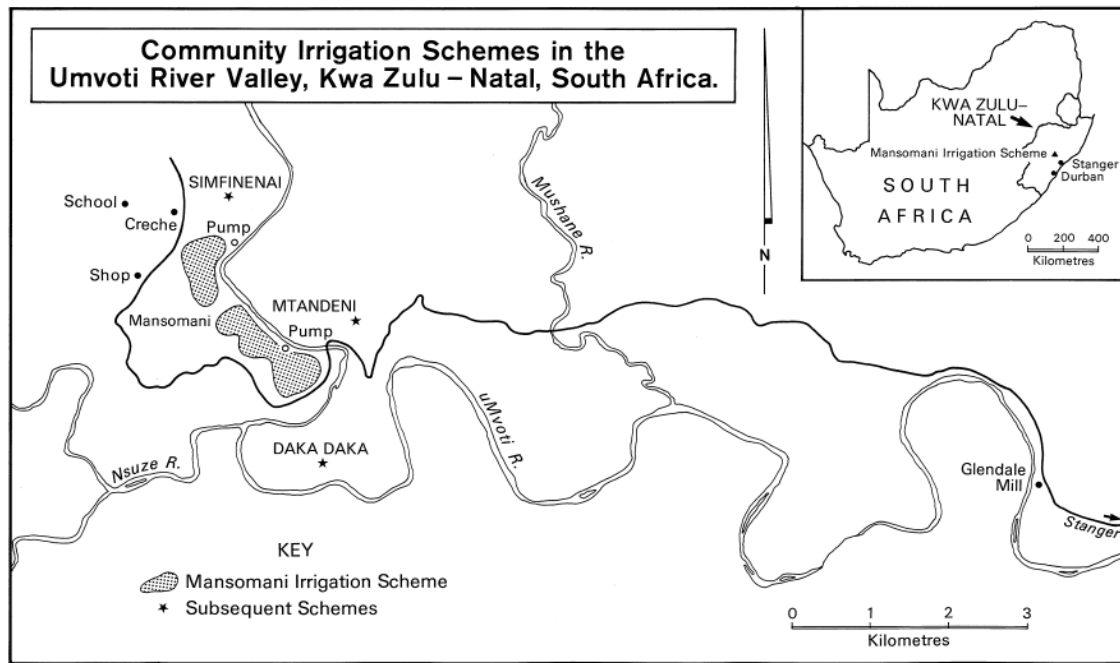


Fig. 3. The Mansomani Scheme.

The large sugar conglomerates have developed a sophisticated and long established supply network from both large and small sugar-cane contract farmers in the province, which though generating income, also leads to dependency (McIntosh and Vaughan, 1996). The use of almost all available commercial land means that agri-business is anxious to gain inroads into ecologically suitable lands held under tribal tenure. Because of the inflexibility of the tribal tenure system and the distrust of chiefs, there are, however, only limited cases where this has actually happened. The case of Mansomani is one in which a community, which possesses access to their land under communal tenure, has entered into a business contract to sell sugar cane to a nearby sugar mill in return for extension support and a guaranteed market. This initiative has been recognised as “a remarkable paradigm of local economic development” in the KwaZulu-Natal context (McIntosh and Vaughan, 1996 p. 102). Mansomani therefore differs considerably from Hertzog and Zamukphila, in that whereas the latter two have communities which are struggling to enter a business dominated market, in Mansomani the community have land and produce to offer to a key agro-industry which is unable to access sufficient resources on a commercial basis (Khuzwayo, pers. comm., 1997). This business relationship in the province is somewhat unusual in the country.

5.4.2. The development initiative

In the case of Mansomani, a gifted community leader, Victoria Khuzwayo, was able to mobilise community support successfully for her development proposals. In addition, this local champion won the support of the chief and hence gained access to land. She also helped to forge the business link with the local sugar-mill (Botha, pers. comm., 1997).

This all took place despite generations of discrimination against Blacks and Black women in particular, who were denied opportunities in a society dominated by racial and gender prejudice.

In 1982 the local chief granted 65, mainly women, farmers the right to clear some 200 h of bush. Following an agreement with the local sugar mill, with whose help the area was converted to irrigated sugar-cane fields, the small farmers secured a reliable market for their output. In addition, the mill also installed two pumping stations and employs a permanent staff to maintain the irrigation system. Farming is undertaken on a communal basis with the mill supplying extension services and cane cuttings for new plants (Mxeke, pers. comm., 1997). The Sugar Association has also assisted through the provision of development advice and support (Botha, pers. comm., 1997). The community produces over 18,000 t of cane annually. The clear gains to the community are obvious, albeit that they have no choice over what they grow. Tangible benefits have clearly been attained by the community. In addition to what, for many families, have been the first significant incomes which they have earned, the community has been able to build a meeting hall, a school, a crèche and a brick-making plant with its profits. There have been very significant improvements in the overall quality of life in the district and the success of the project has given people a notable sense of self-achievement (Khuzwayo, pers. comm., 1997). On the down-side, the community is locked into a dependent relationship with the mill and the bulk of production activities are focused almost exclusively upon a single crop.

The success of the scheme has encouraged the three neighbouring communities of Simfinenai, Mtandeni and Daka Daka, to follow Mansomani's example, transforming a large section of the Umvoti valley from bush to highly productive cane-fields with the help of the sugar industry (see Fig. 3). Other communities from elsewhere in the province have journeyed to Mansomani to learn from the example which has been set. Despite the occasional vagaries of drought and price fluctuations, the Mansomani initiative appears to have gone from strength to strength over the last 17 years. The leadership structure is intact, tangible gains have been made in terms of income and community facilities, loans have been repaid and the guaranteed market access has ensured the project's on-going success (Khuzwayo, pers. comm., 1997). The Mansomani example provides a clear testimony of the valuable role of continuing external support.

6. Conclusion

Desperate economic circumstances, such as those which prevail in the over-crowded and frequently environmentally degraded former Homelands of South Africa, can help to catalyse attempts at economic self-reliance, particularly now that apartheid has been abolished. Self-reliance in rural areas is critical, but is unlikely to promote mass improvements in welfare levels, outside communities possessing particular environmental advantages and/or human skills. Whilst Stock (1995) points out that community self-reliance can generally only achieve small, sporadic victories, the initiatives considered in this paper have undoubtedly made a significant contribution to job creation and poverty alleviation in the communities where they are located. This suggests that the picture might not be so bleak as might at first appear.

Although there are broad similarities between the different communities in terms of their experience of disempowerment, and also their attempts to strive for self-reliance, clear differences also exist. Key points of comparison include the fact that, in all cases, community-based strategies, motivated by prevailing economic crises and the presence of talented leaders have helped to catalyse the projects. In Hertzog and Mansomani, an inherited irrigation infrastructure and the established practice of smallholder sugar-cane farming, have, respectively, contributed to the success of each project, but have also ensured a significant degree of uniqueness. In the case of Hertzog and Zamukphila, the communities have struggled to compete on an open market as independent farmers using effectively freehold land, whilst in Mansomani, the community has been more successful by allying with an agro-industry in a defined contractual relationship. In Seymour and Mansomani, the important role which external agencies can play was recognised and many important advantages have resulted from the flow of funds, the supply of advice and the accessing of the market. In Zamukphila and Hertzog, the absence of enduring external linkages has undoubtedly impacted on their ability to farm and to access external markets. The critical role played by external agencies in certain of the initiatives endorses the arguments of Scott Fosler (1991), Sengenberger (1993) and Simon (1992), that top-down and bottom-up development initiatives need to complement each other in order to achieve tangible progress in communities.

Government plans to encourage community development and small-scale Black farmers (RSA, 1995) might well succeed initially, but could easily founder when emerging entrepreneurs and farmers try to sell their produce in a market geared towards organized farming and big-business interests. Extension support, advice and assistance with marketing are clearly essential to the success of emerging initiatives as the various experiences detailed above indicate. A key role exists for NGOs (as in Seymour), private business (as in Mansomani) or government to provide the vitally necessary facilitation and support to establish initiatives and assist them on the path towards sustainability.

What this study reveals is that there is scope for community and business organizations to co-operate to the mutual benefit of both parties. However, on a negative note, and as the Hertzog experience illustrates, if a community is unable to penetrate the commercial market or find a market ally, it is unlikely to prosper in a commercial environment which is dominated by big business. Extension support and the provision of infrastructure have proved vital to the success of Mansomani. In the absence of comparable support in Hertzog, the resultant equipment shortages and the limited knowledge of farming are reflected in the variable quality of the produce.

If a community does not have access to a defined resource such as land, or does not produce a particular crop for which a niche market exists, there is little room for what, in relative terms, would otherwise be marginal level participation in the commercial market. The Hertzog community is indicative of such a scenario, and this is one which many other community initiatives might face, in offering relative low volume output, of variable quality, at relatively high prices. As a result, the scope for self-reliance strategies in the Homeland areas does not appear to be overly optimistic. If the commercial market is difficult to penetrate for community-based agriculture, such initiatives that do exist have little scope to go beyond meeting the subsistence needs of the areas in which they

operate. Unless market shares are legislated, or business adopts a defined policy of buying from community farmers, emerging Black commercial farmers in the former Homelands are probably going to remain in a marginalised position. The legacy of disempowerment and discrimination induced by apartheid is so profound that rural self-reliance strategies will struggle to make tangible progress until historical backlogs in terms of training, access to land and infrastructure provision can be addressed and adequate levels of on-going support provided. External agencies have a vital role to play in this regard, providing that their intervention is timely, sensitive to local needs and aspirations, and does not lead to dependency

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