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# The Covid pandemic, cultivation and livelihoods in South Africa's Eastern Cape

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## ABSTRACT

South African smallholders have disengaged from cultivation in recent decades despite the lack of alternative incomes. The Covid-19 pandemic led to further rises in poverty and food insecurity. Between March and May 2022, we asked respondents from all 104 households in one village in the Eastern Cape province about how the pandemic had impacted their lives, and their perspectives on and engagement in agriculture. The majority reported that school closures and loss of incomes had led to increased food insecurity. Overall the respondents did not report that the pandemic had had any significant positive or negative impact on cultivation. Material limitations (purchased seed, fertiliser, fencing and traction) were widely mentioned as hampering the possibility of cultivating land already before the pandemic. At the same time, many respondents expressed a love for farming. Future agricultural development support could be directed at promoting farming systems that are less dependent on external inputs and that can support rural livelihoods in the face of external shocks and crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## KEYWORDS

Deagrarianisation; Covid-19; livelihoods; Africa; agriculture

## 1. Introduction

Since democratisation, the South African government has made efforts to reduce rural poverty. Apart from the de-racialisation of the welfare system (Devereux 2021; Granlund and Hochfeld 2019), a core part of this effort has been directed at agricultural development, in particular through input support schemes aimed at revitalising the field cultivation of maize, South Africa's staple crop (Fischer 2022). However, despite government endeavours to revive smallholder field cultivation in the former homelands and boost crop yields through different forms of input support programmes, smallholders have continued to disengage from cultivating their land (Shackleton et al. 2019). In parallel with this disengagement in crop cultivation, inequality has deepened in the country and poverty was on the rise again even before Covid-19 struck (World Bank 2018). The pandemic led to further rises in both poverty and inequality in South Africa (Spaull et al. 2021). Several studies have concluded that the poorest and most vulnerable groups in the country, including rural residents and the previously disadvantaged, were particularly hard hit by the economic hardship and food insecurity following the country's lockdown, which was instigated by the government to limit the spread of the virus (Casale and Shepherd 2022; Chitiga et al. 2022; Schotte and Zizzamia 2023; Visagie and Turok 2021; Yu 2023).

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It is acknowledged that decades of enforced labour migration and systematic undermining of farming in the former homelands by colonial and apartheid regimes have had long-term and deeply rooted negative effects on smallholder farming that continue to impact rural livelihoods today, and that the input support programmes that have been rolled out in recent years have not yet managed to reverse this trend of declining engagement in cultivation (Fischer 2022; Hebinck, Fay, and Kondlo 2011; Shackleton et al. 2019). At the same time, smallholders have not abandoned farming completely and earlier studies have reported that many still express a passion for farming (Shackleton and Hebinck 2018). Studies also indicate that households that engage in some farming are better protected against food insecurity (Chakona and Shackleton 2018; Tibesigwa and Visser 2016; Van Averbeké and Khosa 2007). With this in mind, it is hard to envisage a situation where poor and food-insecure households that have land to cultivate, and have access to family labour, would not eventually make more use of their land if the circumstances were conducive to this. Indeed, the question of farmland abandonment in the former homelands has continued to engage researchers in the last few decades (Ferguson 2013; Jeske 2016; Shackleton et al. 2019). Nevertheless, there is as yet very limited discussion in the published literature about whether and how the pandemic affected smallholder farming.

This paper sets out to contribute to filling the gap in knowledge about how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted smallholder farming in South Africa's former homelands. Could the pandemic and the associated temporary lockdown in South Africa be the crisis to stimulate increased engagement in localised livelihood activities such as crop cultivation? Or are there other reasons that continue to hamper more significant engagement in field cultivation by the rural poor? We aimed to answer these questions through a short face-to-face survey of adults who have responsibility for household members in all (104) households in one village in the Eastern Cape, conducted during the first half of 2022, asking them about their experiences of the pandemic, its impact on crop cultivation and their thoughts about the future of cultivation.

### ***1.1 Covid, poverty and rural livelihoods in South Africa***

The first case of Covid-19 was detected in South Africa on 5 March 2020 (Carlitz and Makhura 2021). On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the outbreak as a pandemic (Jöbges et al. 2020) and four days later the South African government declared a state of disaster (Daniels and Casale 2022). A strict lockdown was imposed on 26 March and lasted for six weeks until it was lifted on 31 April 2020.

During the period of strict lockdown, people were essentially confined to their houses. Social gatherings were prohibited with some exceptions, such as pandemic-adapted and significantly scaled-down funerals. Only what were classed as "essential services" were permitted to stay open. Schools and daycare facilities were closed, as well as the vast majority of workplaces and private businesses (Carlitz and Makhura 2021). Schools were completely closed until 8 June 2020 and several partial and complete closures occurred later (Dubey et al. 2022). On 5 April 2022, just over two years since it was imposed, the national state of disaster was finally lifted.

During the first six months of the pandemic, 2.2 million jobs were reportedly lost in the country as a whole (Devereux 2021). Overall, women, the poor, those with limited education and manual jobs were hardest hit (Arndt et al. 2020; Devereux 2021; Khambule 2022; Oyenubi 2023). Due to the difficulty of collecting accurate data on activities in the informal sector, it is expected that this figure underestimates losses of incomes in the large group of self-employed, including all those who make a living from their own informal business ventures that were widely reported to have been very hard hit by the lockdown (Mubangizi and Mubangizi 2021; Sinyolo et al. 2022; Wegerif 2022).

To mitigate the economic hardship resulting from lockdown, the government was quick to implement several Covid-19 relief payments. Between April 2020 and April 2021, all unemployed people over 18 who did not receive other social grants were eligible to receive a Covid-19 grant

of 350 rand per month (Francis, Valodia, and Webster 2020). Between April and December 2020, there was a temporary increase in the pre-existing social welfare grants, which reach almost one-third of the country's population every month (Spaull et al. 2021). There were also investments in emergency food parcels by the Department of Social Development, but these reached a very limited percentage of eligible recipients (Devereux 2021). The economic support to the private sector did not seem to have reached most informal businesses (Mubangizi and Mubangizi 2021; Sinyolo et al. 2022). Overall the Covid-19 relief payments reduced levels of food insecurity, but were insufficient to eliminate completely the increase in food insecurity resulting from the pandemic (Daniels and Casale 2022; Nwosu, Kollamparambil, and Oyenubi 2022).

The most commonly reported negative impact of the lockdown and resulting economic distress was increased food insecurity, particularly among already vulnerable groups and in rural areas (Arndt et al. 2020; De Groot and Lemanski 2021; Mbatha, Ndimande, and Tembe 2021; Nwosu, Kollamparambil, and Oyenubi 2022; Paganini et al. 2020; Patrick et al. 2021). Apart from the general impact of a loss of income on food insecurity, the school closures also had a significant negative impact on access to food as children missed out on school meals. The negative impact on food security of the school closures lasted much longer than the time for which schools were actually closed as there was a high rate of school drop-outs and school meals resumed at a slow rate (Shepherd and Mohohlwane 2022).

## ***1.2 Deagrarianisation in the Eastern Cape Province***

The Eastern Cape province includes the former homeland areas of Ciskei and Transkei and is home to the majority of South Africa's isiXhosa-speaking population. The province has been the focus of a number of studies published in the past 20 years that have mapped and aimed to explain the decline of cultivation (Andrew and Fox 2004; Fay 2009; Hajdu 2006; Hebinck, Fay, and Kondlo 2011; Hebinck and Lent 2007; Shackleton et al. 2019; Shackleton and Hebinck 2018). The studies are in agreement that this decline in cultivation is occurring despite households being unsuccessful in replacing the income and time invested in agriculture with other income-generating activities, leading to food insecurity and a deepening of rural poverty (Hajdu, Neves, and Granlund 2020).

Studies (including our own work) reporting on the decline in field cultivation in the Eastern Cape repeatedly mention a number of contemporary factors highlighted by smallholders as being important for this decline. These include damaged fencing around field areas leading to increased damage to crops by livestock, shifting livelihood priorities among young people, and increasing dependency on purchasing seed and other inputs (de la Hey and Beinart 2017; Hebinck, Mtati, and Shackleton 2018; Marshak et al. 2021; Shackleton et al. 2019). To understand this contemporary situation, we need to look at history. Colonial and apartheid regimes significantly restricted access to land, and destroyed material and social investments in cultivation in the homeland areas to ensure cheap labour in the mines and on settler farms (Bundy 1988; Hendricks 1990; Wolpe 1972). Over time, cultivation came to be considered locally primarily as a backup strategy, providing a limited share of the food needed by families who mainly relied on remittances from urban workers. The migrant labour system also led to agricultural deskilling, as the migrant labourer spent limited time observing the landscape, crops and animals, and women, disabled and elderly family members had to divide their time between farming and all the other household chores (Marshak et al. 2021). Crop cultivation in the homelands was further undermined by the betterment, a villagisation programme initiated in 1936 and continuing during the apartheid years, which aimed to reduce degradation in the overcrowded homelands by reorganising settlement and cultivation. Instead of reversing degradation, research on this topic shows how the relocation of households and cultivated lands led households to lose years of investments in soil improvements, moved fields further away from households, and undermined reciprocal relations in farming (de Wet and McAllister 1983; McAllister 1986, 1989, 1991).

The labour constraints resulting from the migrant labour system led to cultivation being dependent on investments made by the migrant worker, while betterment reorganisations, which often meant households were located further away from fields, in many cases made cultivation more dependent on government support for ploughing. The rise in unemployment in the mining industry since the 1980s and the continued difficulties with finding urban jobs in recent decades have not resulted in households intensifying their cultivation. Instead, young people continue to migrate in the hope of urban employment, and able-bodied men who fail to provide for their family through urban jobs rarely choose to reinvest their time in farming (Bank 2001; Bank and Hart 2019; Hajdu, Neves, and Granlund 2020; Ngonini 2007). This situation has sometimes been referred to as jobless deagrarianisation (Kroll 2021). Importantly, despite the diminishing role of cultivation in household income or food security, several studies, including our own for the village reported on here, show that farming remains culturally important to people and that many rural residents, despite only planting their garden, still identify and are identified by their peers as farmers (Fischer 2022; Hebinck, Mtati, and Shackleton 2018; Johnsson 2020).

## 2. Case study context

The study area in focus for this article is a village of 104 households in Ingquza Hill Municipality in the Eastern Cape province. Fischer and Mnuakwa have studied farming and livelihoods in this village for the past 17 years through multiple social science methods that are described in more detail in Fischer (2022). The village has two schools and a clinic and is located about 40 min' taxi drive to the nearest small town. The village was reorganised during betterment; houses are arranged in a grid pattern and each household has a small homegarden. The majority (77%) of the households also have a field of about 0.5 ha located in field areas outside residential areas at a distance ranging from a couple of hundred metres to a couple of kilometres away from their homesteads. The majority of households derive some income from the informal sector, e.g., through small informal and often localised businesses in construction or retail, and most (83% according to the household survey in 2008) also have access to at least one monthly social grant (most commonly a childcare grant or pension) (Fischer and Hajdu 2015).

Previous research undertaken by us has shown that all the households in the village engage in some crop cultivation, most commonly in household gardens. However, farming is rarely the main livelihood, and in the majority of households it only contributes a small share of household food (Fischer and Hajdu 2015). Our previous research in the area has revealed that field cultivation has declined steadily in recent decades. In 2008, 50% of households planted their fields, described by the respondents as a significant decline compared with the past. In 2019, only 15 fields were planted in the studied village, and some households cultivated more than one of these fields, meaning that fewer than 14% of households cultivated a field (15/104 households). At the same time, all the households still plant their gardens, most commonly with maize and vegetables, and even if this produce contributes a very small portion of household food, it remains important, not least for cultural reasons (Fischer 2022). In parallel with the decline in field cultivation, our research also indicates that reliance on local maize varieties (locally referred to as Xhosa maize) has declined. Based on a household survey, interviews and participant observation up to 2008, we concluded that a minimum of 76% of households planted locally recycled maize (Fischer and Hajdu 2015). Data collected in 2012 indicated that less than 50% of the maize seed planted was recycled (Iversen et al. 2014). Interviews in 2014, 2019 and 2020 indicate that this figure has declined further, although we do not have data to quantify this indication. We have concluded in previous research that the decline in the availability of local seed has been stimulated by a series of government-funded agricultural development interventions that have aimed to make smallholders replace local seed with hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seed, but also by the fact that fewer households plant their fields, which means that less seed is harvested every year and thus less seed is available to actually recycle and share (Fischer 2022).

Our previous research has also established that identifying oneself as a farmer, and being identified as a skilled farmer by one's peers, is not related to planting the field. For decades, many who were considered passionate and skilled farmers by their peers had only cultivated their gardens (Fischer 2022; Fischer and Hajdu 2015). As all the respondents in the study have access to some land and do engage in cultivation, we refer to them here as smallholders.

### 3. Material and methods

We designed a short questionnaire survey that was administered by Mnukwa to all 104 households in one village in Ingquza Hill Municipality in the Eastern Cape from the beginning of March to the end of May 2022. The survey was administered in the form of a short interview in isiXhosa with an adult member of the household. Mnukwa has been working with Fischer in the village since 2006 and is well known by local residents. Mnukwa noted down the responses by hand on printed surveys. Translated into English, the survey questions were as follows:

- (1) How has the two years of the Covid pandemic affected your life in this family (e.g., the disease, lockdowns etc.) and how have these affected your possibilities of making a living?
- (2) Please list three things that have been the most important effects of the Covid pandemic on your family.
- (3) Has the Covid pandemic made you change livelihood strategies (i.e., has it made you change your ways of trying to make a living? Are you doing more or less of some things?)? Please explain why.
- (4) People are planting less in the fields now than in the past. What comments do you have to make on this? Is it good? Is it bad? And what are the reasons for this, in your opinion?
- (5) Has your opinion/view of cultivation changed as a result of the Covid pandemic?
- (6) What do you think will happen with cultivation in the village if you think 10 years ahead?

Before commencing the survey, the village chief was informed and agreed to the survey study being undertaken in the village. All the respondents gave oral consent to participating in the study before the interview commenced, were informed about the purpose of the study and were asked if they were willing to respond to some questions about their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on livelihoods and cultivation. All the respondents were informed that they could refrain from answering any or all of the questions without giving a reason. We did not ask for or record any names or other information about the respondents' identities. With the respondents' permission, we recorded their age and gender.

All the survey responses in isiXhosa were translated and noted down in English during the interview by Mnukwa. Responses were typed into Excel and analysed further quantitatively by Bengtsson under the supervision of Fischer. In total, 40 men (38%) and 64 women (62%) born between 1930 and 1990 responded to the survey. Quotations in the text are based on the English translations of the isiXhosa answers.

The answers to open-ended questions 1 and 3–6 were typed into NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Themes were identified inductively by Fischer and Bengtsson based on the recorded responses.

Question 2 allowed each of the 104 respondents to specify the three most important effects that the pandemic had on their family. After excluding four respondents who declared in question 1 that their respective families had not been affected by the Covid pandemic at all, 100 respondents answered question 2. This resulted in 300 responses, including one response each from two respondents recorded as 0, meaning that the respondent in these cases did not have three different issues to list. All the responses were thematically classified into categories of similar answers. Eight categories were identified (Box 1). If each respondent mentioned issues that were classed into three different categories, this would mean that if a category received 1/3 of responses, each respondent

had mentioned that category once. On 18 occasions the inductive categorisation meant that more than one answer by one respondent was classed in the same category. Separate answers given by respondents that ended up in the same category included “we had to wear masks” and “we had to sanitise”, “we could not go to church” and “we could not practise our religion”, as well as “sickness” and “death”.

**Box 1. Description of the content of each category of responses to survey question 2 regarding the most important effects on the household of the Covid-19 pandemic (frequency of response in brackets).**

- 1. Schooling** (25.6% of responses, mentioned by the majority of respondents) Includes answers referring to schools being closed during lockdown and children receiving a poor education during that time. Some answers indicate that this led to increased household expenses due to missed school lunches.
- 2. Church** (17.8% of responses, mentioned by about half of all respondents) Includes answers about not being able to attend church and practise religion.
- 3. Social gatherings/ceremonies** (16.2% of responses, mentioned by about half of all respondents) Includes answers about not being able to attend funerals, not being able to say goodbye and bury a relative with dignity, not being able to perform traditional ceremonies, not being able to gather as a family and having to cancel weddings.
- 4. Sickness/death** (13.8%) Includes answers about the informant or a close relative falling ill or losing a loved one due to the disease. A couple of informants referred to the high death rate globally.
- 5. Loss of job/income** (11.8%) Refers to the informant himself or herself losing their job or source of income, or their adult children and/or household breadwinner losing their job or source of income. The category also includes more general comments about the increased lack of job opportunities or being unable to carry out their business in any way. In some answers, stress is also mentioned in relation to unemployment.
- 6. Daily life/restrictions** (9.8%) Revolves around the change in lifestyle caused by Covid, such as using masks and sanitiser and being unable to travel.
- 7. Economic hardship** (4.7%) Refers to constraints on household finances that are not directly related to a loss of employment. The category includes answers about losing a breadwinner, high food prices, the need to buy more groceries during lockdown (as everyone in the family ate at home), hunger and poverty in general.
- 8. Farming** (0.3%, i.e., one response) Refers to Covid’s impact on farming.

The survey responses were analysed in light of 17 years’ experience of participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions and surveys performed by Fischer and Mnu kwa, including a household survey in 2008 in the studied village and neighbouring villages. These data are described in more detail in Jacobson (2013) and Fischer (2022). Where relevant for the analysis, these data are presented in the results.

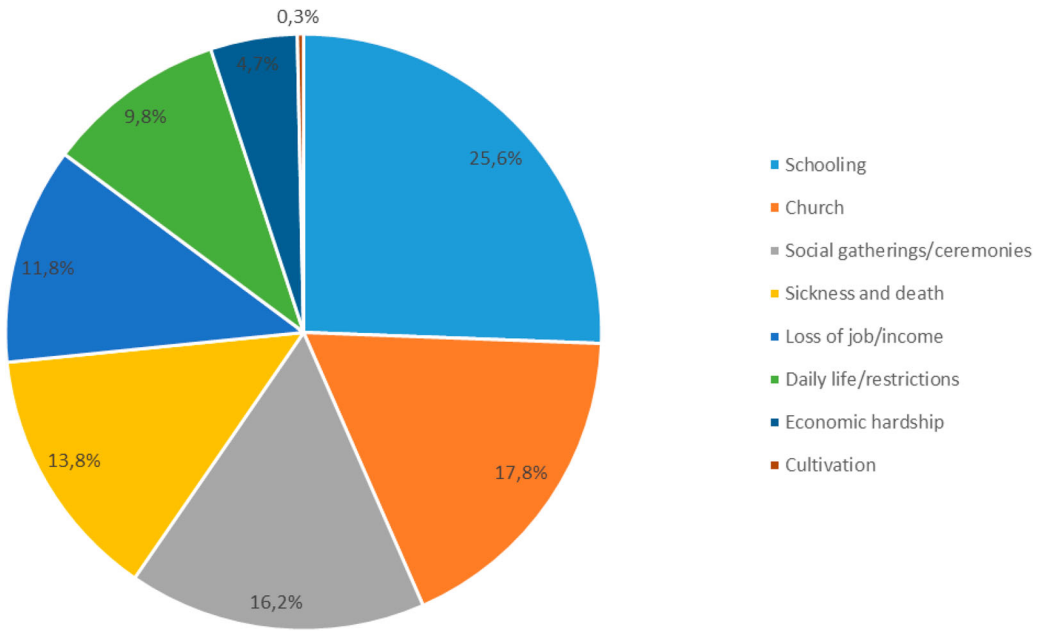
## 4. Results

### 4.1 Experiences of the Covid pandemic and its impact on people’s lives and livelihoods

In the open question (1) about how people had been affected by the pandemic, the most common responses concerned school closures (35 answers), loss of jobs and income in the family (31 answers), and the inability to have social gatherings, including going to church and performing decent funerals (30 responses). Other common responses concerned experiences of illness and death, being scared about the virus and being stressed about the pandemic. All these responses were also reflected in the responses to question 2, where respondents were asked to list the three most important impacts that the pandemic had had on their family. Only one person mentioned cultivation as something that had been significantly affected by the pandemic.

The inductive classification of the answers to question 2 resulted in seven partly overlapping categories representing common responses: schooling, loss of job/income, daily life restrictions, sickness and death, limitations on social gatherings and ceremonies, limitations on visiting church, and economic hardship. To these we added cultivation as its own category as we were specifically interested in detecting comments related to cultivation. As displayed in Figure 1, the lack of access to education during lockdown was the most commonly experienced effect of Covid-19 according to the responses (confirmed by the open responses to question 1). The second most commonly experienced effect of Covid-19 was the inability to attend church and practise their religion, closely followed by the restrictions on social gatherings and ceremonies. If we pool the answers concerning





**Figure 1.** Most commonly experienced effects of Covid-19.

attending church with social gatherings/ceremonies, the answers in this group become by far the most common concern.

It is not possible to know exactly how the respondents interpreted the relationship between question 1 and question 2; some might have chosen to emphasise different things in response to question 2 than to question 1, and some just emphasised the same issues. Nevertheless, what we can say from analysing the answers to questions 1 and 2 together is that school closures, the loss of jobs, and the inability or limitations to attend church, perform funerals and arrange other forms of social gatherings were issues that were widely experienced as severe negative impacts of the pandemic. Xhosa funerals are an activity that engages not only the family, but the wider community as well (Bank and Sharpley 2020). Due to strong urban-rural ties, family members commonly come from distant urban areas to attend rural funerals. In recent decades, capitalism has infiltrated funerals just like other parts of life, and funerals have become increasingly expensive, with the money spent to an extent taken to represent the care for the diseased. The significant cost of funerals was clear from the household survey in 2008 when paying for “funeral insurance” (monthly savings to accumulate money for future funerals) was ranked the second most significant monthly household expense by 37% of all households (with 15% of the households ranking funeral insurance as the most significant monthly household expense).

The following quotations encompass the experience of the pandemic expressed by many of the respondents:

We lost our mother because of this pandemic. Children had a very poor education. We were denied our rights to go to church and we had to use masks and sanitise.

I was very sick, it was a very hard time of our lives; we couldn't perform traditional ceremonies.

We lost our businesses and we were struggling financially. Children were not allowed to go to school and only limited numbers of people were allowed to attend family gatherings and funerals.

It is clear that the emotional distress caused by the pandemic was significant – both the stress of not being able to provide for their families, but also due to concern about the virus. Illness, including



weeks of hospitalisation as well as concern about illness, were mentioned by 21 respondents, and 17 respondents mentioned having experienced a death in their close family (as the responses are the result of an open-ended question, this frequency does not tell us how many more of the respondents had experienced death but did not mention it). Eleven respondents explicitly stated that the pandemic had made them scared, as exemplified by this respondent: “I was very scared because of this Covid; I even got sick. My veins hurt since then because of stress.”

The school closures, which meant that children did not get school meals, combined with the loss of income made it difficult for many household heads to ensure that there was enough food on the table. Several respondents explicitly mentioned that they could not buy enough food and/or that family members had to go hungry. Comments such as “We lost our jobs, we couldn’t afford to buy food” and “We were really struggling, we were very hungry” were very common among the responses. Frequently the increased food insecurity was connected with not being able to afford to buy food and not being able to travel to town to buy food, which indicates the centrality of purchased food for food security. [Box 1](#) describes the types of answers classified under each category in question 2.

In question 3 of the survey, respondents were asked: “Has the Covid pandemic made you change livelihood strategies (i.e., has it made you change your ways of trying to make a living? Are you doing more or less of some things)? Explain why”. The responses to this question mainly reiterated the responses to questions one and two. Rather than mentioning changes in livelihood strategies, the respondents mostly repeated the challenges faced due to school closures and lost income opportunities, and that the pandemic restricted their possibilities of living as they are used to, burying their dead and going to church. Probing this question further or asking the question differently might have triggered responses that more clearly addressed whether the respondent had actively changed livelihood strategies or not. From the responses given, we are unable to draw any conclusions about whether or not that was the case. We can however conclude that the responses to question 3 give further support to the conclusion based on analysing the responses to questions 1 and 2: that school closures, the loss of jobs and the inability or limitations to attend church, perform funerals and arrange other forms of social gatherings were perceived as severe negative effects of the pandemic. There were also repeated references in the responses to question 3 about “following the president’s order” to limit the spread of the virus. Two respondents mentioned in response to question 3 that the pandemic had negatively affected their cultivation, which leads us to the next theme.

#### ***4.2 Views on the changing role of cultivation and the pandemic***

In question 4, we took as our starting point the fact of the decline of field cultivation in the village (described in the section “Case study context”) and asked: “People are planting less in the fields now than in the past. What comments do you have to make on this? Is it good? Is it bad? And what are the reasons in your opinion?” The majority of respondents (76) said that they thought it was bad that people no longer planted their fields, while 18 people commented that it was good that people had stopped planting. The common motivation for the latter answer was that it was a good choice to stop planting the field as it was the pragmatic thing to do when people lacked support and access to the resources needed. Repeatedly the reason given for abandoning field cultivation, regardless of whether they thought abandoning cultivation was good or bad, was the lack of access to or affordability of inputs and lack of government support (30 respondents). More specifically, responses frequently concerned the unaffordability of fertiliser and seed, as well as the unaffordability and/or lack of government support concerning traction and fencing, and the fact that few people today have livestock (for traction). Mention of these constraints was repeated in response to other questions. The only other explicit reason given for abandoning field cultivation was that people had lost interest in cultivation, were unwilling or were “lazy” (18 responses). The remaining respondents did not give a reason. The most common comment by far about the effects of abandoned field cultivation was that it increased poverty and food insecurity (49 of the

**Table 1.** Responses regarding if the Covid-19 pandemic impacted opinions about cultivation grouped in emerging themes.

Emerging themes level 1	The pandemic did not impact engagement in/ perspective on cultivation (96 responses)			The pandemic impacted engagement in/ perspective on cultivation (8 responses)	
Emerging themes level 2	We are not cultivating for material reasons unrelated to Covid (46 responses)	We love cultivation and this perspective has not changed because of Covid (32 responses)	Neutral or mixed answers (e.g., we love cultivation but we are materially constrained and it is not due to Covid) (18 responses)	Covid increased material constraints and made it more difficult to cultivate (7)	Covid made us think more positively about cultivation (1)
Material (M) or ideational (I) response	M	I	M + I	M	I

104 open responses; no one mentioned any other effect of abandoning cultivation; instead the remaining 55 responses made no mention of an effect). The quotations below exemplify the common connection made between declining field cultivation and increased poverty and food insecurity:

It's bad because we're very hungry now that we're planting less in fields. Earlier we used to plant everything in fields and there was no hunger like now.

People no longer use maize from the fields. They're buying everything, even though we're not financially stable. We're forced to buy [food] since we're not planting the fields; it is very bad.

Responses to question 5 ("Has your opinion/view on cultivation changed as a result of the Covid pandemic?") can be grouped into two levels (Table 1). There are two notable findings here: firstly, the majority of respondents (96) did not consider the pandemic to have had an important effect on cultivation; secondly, all the responses concerning the decline in cultivation referred to material constraints, whereas all the comments that express hope for cultivation expressed this in ideational terms. Overall, this most often means that these two types of responses do not contradict each other, but rather emphasise different aspects. This is well exemplified by the following quotation from one of the mixed answers: "Covid hasn't changed our opinion about cultivation. We still love cultivation. It's just that we're not financially stable enough to buy [live]stock to continue cultivation, it's very expensive".

With regards to what respondents thought would happen to cultivation in these villages in future (question 6), the responses were mixed, with respondents believing that the rate of cultivation would decline further (47), that cultivation would continue (30) or mixed, unsure responses (27).

## 5. Discussion

South Africa has been commended internationally for its swift and comprehensive reaction to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the virus spread more quickly in South African than anywhere else on the continent, while the lockdown measures have been shown to have had significant negative economic and psychosocial effects, increased rural poverty, and deepened already significant inequalities (Carlitz and Makhura 2021; De Groot and Lemanski 2021; Ntuli and Kwenda 2023; Oyenubi 2023; Shepherd 2022; Simon and Khambule 2022). The results presented here report on a survey of one village in the Eastern Cape, performed right at the end of two years of restrictions imposed to control the global Covid-19 pandemic. While limited in scope and time, we believe that the survey gives important insights to people's experiences of the pandemic and the associated government restrictions at a point in time when the pandemic was still very close in memory and embodied experience. Our findings show how school closures, loss of incomes and the restrictions on social gatherings, including funerals, together were experienced locally as the most severe direct

impacts of the pandemic. This is in line with previous findings about the experience of the pandemic among the South African rural poor (Arndt et al. 2020; Bank and Sharpley 2020; Daniels and Casale 2022; Mubangizi and Mubangizi 2021). It was widely reported by the respondents in our study that the school closures and loss of income led to greater food insecurity. This also supports other findings from South Africa (Arndt et al. 2020; De Groot and Lemanski 2021; Mbatha, Ndimande, and Tembe 2021; Nwosu, Kollamparambil, and Oyenubi 2022; Paganini et al. 2020; Patrick et al. 2021). Indeed, food insecurity is reported to have risen across Africa during the pandemic (Balgah et al. 2023).

With regard to the impact of the pandemic on cultivation, the findings show that respondents hardly ever mentioned cultivation spontaneously as an activity that was affected by the pandemic. The lack of spontaneous mention of cultivation could be interpreted as a result of cultivation not being a practice that was particularly affected by the pandemic. This interpretation is supported by our analysis of the responses to questions 4–6 where respondents identified the decline in field cultivation as something that had started before the pandemic and was not generally impacted by the pandemic. Our results show that the majority (96 out of the 104) of respondents reported that the pandemic had not had any impact on their engagement in cultivation, but that the decline in cultivation was due to other material reasons unrelated to the pandemic.

It might also be noted that other studies in this and other villages have reported that cultivation is not a key contributor to household livelihoods (Fischer and Hajdu 2015; Hajdu, Neves, and Granlund 2020). Thus the fact that cultivation was rarely mentioned spontaneously might also be a result of the severe negative effects of lost income opportunities through the informal sector being much more pressing for rural households, and that in contrast to church visits for example, practising cultivation was not hindered by the government in the studied village. However, we might also note that the majority of respondents in this study considered that the reduced engagement in cultivation seen in the last few decades has increased household food insecurity. Also, as noted in this study, cultivation is not merely an economic endeavour, and the frequent responses about a love of cultivation indicate the importance of cultivation beyond its role in food production and a love of farming.

The responses from the smallholders in this study show that it is largely envisaged as impossible to boost cultivation in the fields without an income and/or much more significant government support. This finding corresponds with other research from the village (Fischer 2022) and the wider region (de la Hey and Beinart 2017; Marshak et al. 2021). The survey responses presented here show that households are dependent on purchasing seed and fertiliser and on paying for traction due to the lack of local livestock. Research from the wider region suggests that these specific constraints pose challenges to cultivation for smallholders in the region more generally (de la Hey and Beinart 2017; Marshak et al. 2021). Access to purchased seed and fertiliser and paying for a tractor owner to plough the field (as there are no tractors and too few cattle in the village) would have been even more limited than otherwise during the pandemic due to limitations on movement. As we have shown in previous work, the increased reliance on purchasing inputs in the village over the past 15 years had indeed made it more difficult for many of the households, in particular the poorest ones, to continue cultivation (Fischer 2022).

Previous research has highlighted the possibility of low-input agroecological methods and support for gardening (Fay 2013; Marshak et al. 2021) (rather than only field cultivation, which has been the focus of many recent development interventions) to facilitate a role for cultivation as a backup to paid employment and other business ventures. Long-term support for low-input farming, building on local resources and the revitalisation of local agricultural skills (Kroll 2021; Marshak et al. 2021) would make agriculture less dependent on monetary investments, and consequently less sensitive to fluctuations and shocks in the wider economy, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This would support the development of a local agriculture that could provide resilience and food security. The increased food insecurity resulting from the pandemic, in combination with ongoing jobless deagrarianisation, makes such efforts more important than ever.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated poverty and food insecurity among already vulnerable rural poor households. Available fallow land and household labour were not put to use by households who found themselves increasingly food insecure during the pandemic. The reasons for this are not primarily a lack of will or interest in cultivation, but rather a negative path dependency of smallholder cultivation relying on purchased inputs and agricultural policies that have as yet further stimulated input dependency, and being unable to reverse the trend of deagrarianisation. Policy investments in agricultural advice, with the purpose of rebuilding agricultural skills, and support to low-input farming, including gardening, could be an important strategy for making agriculture the backup strategy that it has the potential to be. The land and labour are there, but appropriate support is currently lacking.

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