Doreen Atkinson’s book on the fate of farm workers and dwellers in South Africa is a highly relevant and very welcome publication. Among the poor, marginalised groups in South Africa, this one has received the least attention from policy-makers so far, and it is precisely to the latter that Atkinson addresses her work. One can only hope that the public debate on the plight of farm workers and dwellers that briefly erupted in South Africa following the murder of Eugene Terreblanche will trigger a more enduring interest in the issue among policy-makers at different levels of government.

Doreen Atkinson starts her book with a detailed historical overview of the changing position of farm workers and dwellers in the South African rural economy, introducing also briefly the concurrent academic debates. She shows how the availability of labour – for farming and other sectors of the South African economy – was a problem for the colonial government as well as during the early stages of apartheid. Through land alienations and increasingly strict controls on the movements of black and coloured people successive governments sought to solve the labour shortage. Farmers’ attempts to secure labour while keeping labour costs low, however, resulted in the emergence of a group of ‘squatters’ and labour/rent paying tenants, who, though stripped of ownership, still had access to land for production. Even when tenancy was outlawed under apartheid, many farmers and landowners continued the system. This situation also laid the basis for the allocation of areas for cultivation and grazing to farm workers, which in turn, according to Atkinson, influences present debates on land reforms in South Africa. Paradoxically, at the time when the creation of a class of near landless,
super-exploitable labourers finally was completed – in the late 1960s, early 1970s – government subsidies for white farmers to modernise and mechanise their farms resulted in labour becoming increasingly obsolete. After 1994, this situation was exacerbated, when under the new democratic dispensation the South African rural economy was increasingly deregulated. Facing stiff international competition, many farmers went bankrupt, resulting in a further decline of employment opportunities for farm workers.

It is against this historical background and present-day context that Atkinson provides a detailed analysis of the current position of farm workers and dwellers in the arid southern part of the Free State and the Karoo, focusing on their livelihood strategies, public policy concerning farm workers and dwellers and possible policy options.

One of Atkinson’s main arguments is that the timing of measures to improve tenure security such as the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA), and the extension of labour legislation to the farming sector to improve wages and working conditions, was wrong, as they occurred in what she refers to as a policy vacuum (2007:125). The restructuring of local government, the re-demarcation of districts originally meant to integrate the rural and the urban, led, according to Atkinson, to an urban bias (2007: 160-2). Urban problems, augmented by the influx of migrants from the rural areas – including farm workers who lost their jobs – receive most attention and resources. Responsibilities concerning service delivery in commercial farming areas are unclear: who should provide what on what is mainly private property? As a result, service delivery on farms has deteriorated, especially after the dissolution of the Transitional Local Councils responsible for commercial farming areas in 2000. The extension of labour legislation to the farming areas, including stipulations concerning minimum wages, resulted in many farmers discontinuing, or asking payments for services provided to their resident workers such as housing, water, and grazing. The threats of land claims by farm workers and dwellers led many farmers to seek their removal from their farms – ironically, often through ESTA which allows for legal evictions of those who cannot prove longstanding ties to the farms, as has also been documented by NGOs such as AFRA and ECARP. Casualisation of labour on the farms is a related trend that has also been analysed by other scholars such as Du Toit and Ewert.

These trends result, Atkinson argues, in the erosion of paternalistic relations between farmers and farm workers/dwellers. Despite the fact that these relations were highly unequal, some of the aspects of these
relationships, such as the moral obligation to provide some services and land for grazing and gardens, rendered living on farms more attractive than living in urban townships. With the deterioration of services on the farms, townships become more attractive, resulting in an increase in urban migration. Furthermore, Atkinson maintains that these paternalistic relations might form the basis for improvement of the lives of farm workers and dwellers. Improvements in earnings do not result from tightening the labour market (through eg minimum wages), but from investments in human capital (2007: 240). Farmers could play an important role in this, and, according to Atkinson, in a more supportive policy environment, they would be certainly willing to do so (2007: 247). Furthermore, farmers could assist in making land reforms more successful, especially by assisting ex-farm workers and dwellers who managed to obtain land. Atkinson suggests that land reform should focus on those areas closest to towns and cities, where markets are readily available. Farmers can assist through training and mentoring, or by organising outgrower schemes; Atkinson provides several successful examples. Farmers’ assistance is needed, she argues, since government agricultural extensions services have deteriorated.

Atkinson concludes that ‘farmers should concentrate on farming, and government agencies should focus on housing and social services’ (2007: 89). There is a need for a coherent, integrated rural development policy. Municipalities should enlist the assistance of NGOs – which need more government funding according to Atkinson – schools, churches and farmers to provide better services to farm workers and dwellers, using a participative approach to determine farm workers’ needs, which may differ from area to area. Such an approach is not without problems, though, as a legacy of exploitation, repression and little education results in farm workers and dwellers having difficulties in expressing their needs – as an analysis of an intensive counselling programme demonstrates.

Doreen Atkinson uses her research findings to develop possible solutions to the many problems farm workers and dwellers are experiencing, which is highly commendable. Her suggestions are supported by richly detailed empirical data – though perhaps an ‘executive summary’ for policy-makers could have been useful. She puts quite some faith in the cooperative behaviour of farmers, while assigning a rather heavy burden to (local) government. Many of her plans make sense, but the question remains whether government has the capacity and/or the resources to implement them; even with the assistance of the partners mentioned above.
The assumed cooperation by farmers may also be a bit problematic, given that occasionally Atkinson admits that many of them remain ‘untransformed’ (2007: 161). Experiences with partnerships between farmers and land reform beneficiaries in Limpopo Province (see the work of Derman and Hellum) have not all worked out well; the bankruptcy of one of the most prominent partner, SAFM, has been widely attributed to dodgy channeling of funding to subsidiary companies to the detriment of the land reform beneficiaries. Yet, like the farm workers and dwellers, farmers are not a homogeneous group either. Atkinson distinguishes between those who see the farm as a community and those who consider the farm a business, and between labour intensive crop production and extensive animal husbandry. There is also a need to look closer at emerging patterns of socio-economic differentiation among farmers: some are struggling, while others manage to increase their scale of operation which may cause further problems for service delivery to farm workers. One could indeed question whether it is possible to both radically deregularise the agricultural sector – while many European and American farmers still benefit from subsidies and protection – and at the same time expect the sector to improve its treatment of workers across the whole of the sector. On the other hand, the difference between farmers’ incomes and farm workers’ remunerations in South Africa is still among the highest in the world (see www.ilo.org). Farmers need to understand that farm workers’ and dwellers’ interests at least partly overlap with their own, but it is difficult to break the vicious circle of low wages and levels of education and low productivity.

Atkinson argues that the debate about farm workers and dwellers should not be about their land or residential rights on farms: ‘Insisting on artificial ESTA-type rights is counterproductive in that it foments resentment and law evasion amongst precisely that constituency that is most required to stimulate the rural economy – the commercial farmers’ (2007: 89). However, here she may need to be reminded of her own statement that it is ‘….. dangerous to generalise about farm workers’ and farmers’ needs’ (2007:132). A research project on the impact of conversions to wildlife-based production on farm dwellers the reviewer is conducting together with partners from the Universities of Cape Town and the Free State, begins to reveal that farm dwellers’ attachments to the farms and their desire to own land differ strongly between the research sites. In the arid parts of the Eastern Cape, farm dwellers have often moved with farmers when the latter had to relocate as a result of droughts; few appear to consider the farm as their home. In
KwaZulu-Natal, on the other hand, especially in the thornveldt, farm dwellers often have a long history with the farms they are residing on, frequently spanning several generations. Here, the farms are considered home, and many more tenant claims have been lodged.

The Zimbabwe doom scenario evoked by Atkinson – which in fact had little to do with a desire to redress a racially skewed land distribution and more with a corrupt and power-hungry clique benefiting from chaos to protect their own interests and control – should not only serve to warn the South African government to be careful with land reforms, it should also caution white farmers that a more cooperative attitude is needed to prevent the issue from becoming a smouldering fire that may eventually flare up.