

# Reflection

## A reflection on the land question, country and city

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### **From the city to the country**

In the mid 1980s, the late Thomas Matsetela and Moses Molepo helped me to see South African cities as most South Africans did then: not as places-in-themselves from which all the world could be surveyed, but as places to be approached *from* the countryside. It would be nice to think that Raymond Williams's wonderful *The Country and the City* (1973) had already opened my thinking in this way. But to deepen my grasp of the perspective, I spent substantial time over the decade from 1984 to 1994 in the countryside. I initiated small research projects that explored continuing profound ties between city life and country places, some of which informed a series of articles published between 1987 and 1992. At the same time I remained fundamentally interested in cities, and my thinking about the land question reflects this commitment, then and now.

One of the articles was published in *Transformation* 11 (Gcabashe and Mabin 1990) and resulted from the rather obvious tie between listening to people in and about land, about the countryside and its future, and the emerging prospects of 'rural' land reform. Two decades later, what has changed? I am not a specialist in the field of rural land and I refer readers who share this apparent disability to the work *inter alia* of Ramutsindela (2001), James (2007), Ntsebeza and Hall (2007), Walker (2008), Cousins (2009a, 2009b), Hall et al (2009) and for a short recent piece, Cousins and Hall (2010). Whilst others are better placed to enter the terrain of assessing what has happened, history is always contested. Within this terrain, of course we reflect on what has happened since 1990. My view is close to that summarised by Deborah James (2007: 252):

Land reform in SA has been an enterprise riddled with contradictions. Grand ambitions were laid out but few have so far been realized. Since those to whom land was given back or newly transferred were often those with least motivation or ability to use it, much of it has lain fallow. Worse still, where funds have been, almost literally, 'ploughed' into the land, these have failed to yield any harvest other than disappointment and frustration ... Failures are generally taken as further indication of the urgent need to accelerate the process, rather than of its perhaps being misconceived in the first place.

The explanation which James advances puts the emphasis on institutional, political, personal and policy process matters. Indeed, her book explores the property and power questions which help to explain why land reform policies have not worked out as intended. These are all significant. But it seems there are larger issues and in this reflection piece, I intend somewhat provocatively to explore them, and to relate them to my own central interest, which is that of city futures.

My starting points are the three arguments advanced in the 1990 *Transformation* paper, which seem to me to remain cogent today:

1. Evil is certainly but not only due to apartheid
2. Land questions are not simple
3. Happy policy outcomes mean a need to know much better than we do.

After returning to each theme in the light of the present, the present paper moves to reconnecting the issues with the cities – an essay in trying to arrive in the city from the countryside, thinking through some of the consequences of that trajectory.

### **Not all due to apartheid**

South African land reform discussion hinges on apartheid for at least two reasons. One, racist state allocation of land use and ownership, and similarly state contributions to accumulation, have been central to the construction of apartheid; two, the notion of 'post-apartheid' society usually involves a sense of reconstruction without the limits imposed by apartheid. Unfortunately this focus on apartheid proceeds without much attention falling on just what it would mean to end apartheid in rural South Africa ... (Gcabashe and Mabin 1990: 59)

It is not terribly helpful to proceed from the notion, as almost every text on the subject does, that 'The issue of land is a critical one in post-Apartheid South Africa [because of h]istorically skewed land distribution patterns'

(Brown-Luthango 2010). Indeed, land is distributed in skewed ways and held in peculiar forms all over the world and the results in rapidly changing places are extraordinary – including in China where the state is perhaps relying on ‘the role of incomplete rural property rights in the migration decisions of rural households ... tenure insecurity reduces migration’ (Mullana et al 2011).

The appalling evils of apartheid certainly contributed to excluding a lot of people from land holding benefits, but most of them were already, or would in any event have ended up being, excluded through processes well known around the world. It’s a platitude, but most people in the world today descend within a single-digit number of generations from families who have been excluded from land occupation and benefits: including, quite probably, most of the people reading this paper, although some may be sufficiently bourgeois or landed gentry by class that they might be in a position to make choices not open to the rest. My first reflection, therefore, is that a key reason why land reform in South Africa is largely a failure – a strong term – is that it flies in the face of something very, very large indeed – something one could briefly describe as the global development of capitalism based fundamentally on primitive accumulation in rural space. The cardinal text perhaps remains Karl Marx’s chapter on ‘the Secret of Primitive Accumulation’ in the first volume of *Capital*. Fortunately it does not seem that the kind of primitive accumulation that has killed millions in recent decades in the Congo will be repeated; colonial armies roaming the landscape are presumably a thing of the nineteenth century in South Africa although their heritage resounded through much of the twentieth and continues to haunt today.

Of course everywhere there are specificities, and perhaps South Africa, to abuse the language, is especially unique. The point for land reform is that getting people ‘back to the land’ flies in the face not only of what people’s capacities may be (and sometimes what people want), but in the long view struggles against very big forces: market logics for commodities produced on the land come to mind, not to mention the long running river of the development of capitalism in the global countryside and its consequences for separation of people from land as a means (or factor if you like) of production. Apartheid is formally over, but the separation of people from the land continues apace.

### **Land questions are not simple**

In our 1990 paper it was the ‘rural’ land question that predominated. And the question was shown to be not very simple at all. None of the received

categories so often used to discuss land questions are fixed and stable. Amongst other things just the notions of ‘reserves’ and ‘bantustans’ are very fuzzy concepts. There are ‘many lands’ in South Africa, Ruth Hall commented on an earlier version of the present paper. And everywhere land, property and related power are social questions, intersecting with every other facet of social change.

The silence in the SA land question literature on the complexity of property relations follow from its exclusive concern with white state efforts to constrain Africans’ land access; the results include misunderstanding of that process as part of a failure to pose the land question in anything approaching its full complexity. (Gcabashe and Mabin 1990:71)

What has happened to ‘rural’ South Africa since 1990? Or 1994? A vast question concerning the lives of many millions. But some trends can be identified.

Since 1994, perhaps the most notable trend has been the large-scale movement of black people off farms owned by others (mainly whites).<sup>1</sup> A ... study by the Nkuzi Development Association and Social Surveys (Wegerif et al 2005) found that some 2.4 million people were displaced from farms between 1994 and the end of 2004 of whom 942,303 were evicted. The remainder left of their own accord, but often as a consequence of difficult conditions on the farm (see also Atkinson 2007). Ironically, numbers displaced were higher than in the 1984-1993 period when some 737,114 black people were evicted from farms and a total of 1.8 million were displaced. While some workers moved to other farms, some 3.7 million of those displaced and 1.6 million of those evicted between 1984 and 2004 moved off farms altogether. ... [T]he scale of displacement is open to debate ... Nevertheless, the scale of evictions and displacement is enormous, and the numbers involved are even higher than the 1.1 million black people who were forcibly removed from white farms between 1960 and 1983, at the height of apartheid. (Todes et al 2010: 337)

I’ve spent much less time in recent years than I did around the time the 1990 paper was written, talking to people in ‘rural’ South Africa (some of the work I have done was reported in Klein and Mabin 1998, Mabin 2002, though not published in academic form). But I will hazard some observations informed by occasional experience and recent literature.

There are indeed places where subsistence and even peasant agriculture continues, not all of them as remote as the Mhinga district in northeastern

Limpopo, blessed with water, useable soils and relatively robust social institutions as well as access to tourist money from the traffic which passes to and from the Kruger National Park and private game reserves. For the apparent vast majority in areas with traditional authorities and mixed forms of (communal and other) land holding, though, life is not like that. It appears that dependence on urban incomes from relatives who move back and forth and around, as well as social grants and sometimes new infrastructure (RDP houses, water pipes) form a critical element of economic and social survival for most. This is not to deny that livestock form an element too. In much of what is termed ‘rural areas’, most of the population is in ‘closer settlements’ that are essentially towns whose economies revolve around public funds and remittances and (some, limited) production from the land. And almost all of the population are, or are closely linked to, people moving for longer or shorter periods, around and between various spaces.

All of these patterns have been in place for a long time – evictions in earlier periods of commercialisation and in particular ‘native affairs commissioners’, bantustan governments and ‘development corporations’ saw to that (Mabin 1991). Undoubtedly, since democracy, public investment and social grants have made life more liveable for a lot of people in these zones. Large local and district municipalities which supposedly erase old reserve boundaries since 2000, intended in large measure to bring ‘development’ to ‘unserved’ and often ‘rural’ areas, appear to be largely dysfunctional in various regions. Yet there are many state apparatuses at all scales which continue the distribution and investment processes. That is much of what rural development seems to mean over recent decades, despite more minor existence of some other forms. Social differentiation of course is encouraged by flows of funds even when they are not captured by a ‘legitimate’ or illegitimate accumulating class. Gender, generational, health and ethical transformations are apparent (Cross 2001, Steinberg 2009) but do not equate to achieving traditional left ideas of ‘progress’, ‘better’ or ‘decent’ lives. And just as isolated farms owned by black communities reflected some of these patterns before they became ‘black spots’ and were extinguished, some land claims result in resemblance too (as many stories in Walker et al 2011 reveal).

A renewed capitalisation of the countryside is underway at the same time in places where market-oriented farming has continued or started afresh – or even anew. It is a capitalisation both within a global theatre and a local scene, and relates to new as well as old forms of accumulation, both primitive

and sophisticated. It is related also to tectonic shifts in mining and manufacturing production and employment (Leger and Nicol 2011) as well as financial, political and social shifts. It reproduces the local as a situation of insecurity and uncertainty even as it has continued to supply food to South Africans, raw materials to some industries, and all sorts of exports. Much increased mechanisation (machinery at a grand new scale, diesel and electric powered irrigation, parallel measures for livestock) in the shrinking numbers of often corporate-operated farms of expanding average size, is a facet sometimes best observed from the air to grasp a picture quite different from a generation back. Capitalisation works in areas where soils, water and maintenance for machinery are available as well as money, and means that in many respects farms are run from towns.

Private land use decisions in market context probably leave more land fallow than for decades. There seem to be much steeper gradients between Von Thünen-type rings of land rents and capital investments around central places (cf typical economic geography textbooks). Extensive pastoral spaces further away from centralities seem to fade into newer built environments for transitory livestock, which consume energy and involve a lot of road transport. On occasion centrality leads to extraordinary conversions of what was high-value rural land into spectacular new built environments for people: Gateway/Umhlanga Ridge on former sugar plantation land on the north side of Ethekekwini/Durban is one very large example and many more can be found.

In areas more marginal for crops and even for livestock, the only way in which many large land accumulators feel sure of reasonable returns is through turning a remarkable amount of South Africa into private game reserves and game farms. It is not only Richard Branson and his 15,000 or more hectares of Limpopo that demonstrate this point. Sheep become a rarity in a country where 50 years ago they greatly outnumbered people. Apart from fencing, that 150 year long element of capitalisation in the South African countryside (Dubow 1982, Mabin 1984), the elements of these shifts are essentially not very 'rural' in most senses of the term. Not unrelated but looking rather different at first take, are intensification of irrigation, the abandonment of marginal areas, and the corporatisation of a great deal of food production across the country – something which has gone on for ages, but is at a new pace. These are the forms of production and associated marketing with which settlers on successful land claims and small holders must compete to survive, unless they enjoy continued subsidy.

The consequence is one not only of massive displacement and eviction of farm residents but of metropolitan concentration too. This concentration works in numerous ways. In their new bases in small-town (Aberdeen, Bothaville, Cathcart, Dundee, Ermelo ...<sup>2</sup>) township backyards, RDP housing projects and shack settlements beyond them, former farm residents wait for daily, short term and seasonal recruitment into temporary farm work. They also send family members away from sometimes crippled local economies to seek money and commodities in much bigger cities. They sometimes return. When managers of game farms drive not to the nearby town, not to the old regional centre like Queenstown, but exclusively to the three or four largest cities in the country to purchase provisions, or for that matter to pick up their imported foods and equipment, the knell sounds for commerce in smaller places.

Just one illustration of dramatic and accelerating changes in recent years can be seen in the graph below (Figure 1). The declining number of farm units, the rapidly growing size of units, is closely related to what I have noted above. In the context of an open economy likely to wither if closed off from the world, agricultural output is changing at an accelerating pace in South Africa (as in many other places) and its future is most uncertain. A future for a back to the land movement is, bluntly, bleak, though not necessarily for everyone.

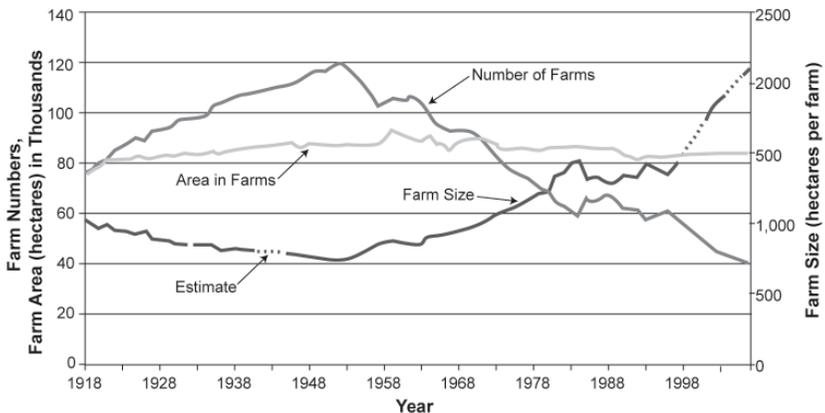


Figure One. Number, total area, and average size of farms, 1918-2007 (source: Liebenberg, Pardey, and Khan 2010)

[T]he country's agricultural exports and net trade balances have declined precipitously in more recent years. These trade trends are loosely

concordant with changes in the pattern of [multi-factor productivity or] MFP growth for South Africa, which grew at much slower rates in more recent years compared with earlier decades. The rate of growth in agricultural output has also slowed since the 1980s, largely as a result of a slowdown in the rate of growth in field crop production. Indeed, agricultural output growth in South Africa (and, for that matter, Southern Africa) has lagged behind the rest of Africa in recent decades, even though the country's agricultural productivity growth has historically outpaced production - the rate of MFP growth in South African agriculture lost considerable ground in recent years and is now well below the country's corresponding rate of population growth. The same holds true for Africa generally (at least for the land and labor productivity metrics presented here). These realities make it imperative to carefully and creatively, and with some urgency, rethink and revitalize those rural development options that promote long-term productivity growth, most notably investments in, and the incentive structures that affect, agricultural R&D. It will take time to turn around these poor productivity performances, and so the policy choices made now, as well as the details of their implementation over the next few years, will determine the destiny of the country's (and the continent's) agricultural sector for a significant share of the century that lies ahead. (Liebenberg and Pardey 2010: 404-406)

The bottom line is that around the world there is a strong correlation between the wealth needed to support a better life for all (even if some have a much better life than most others), and stable urban population majorities. A decent life in rural circumstances is possible and perhaps very desirable, but it is not possible for most.

If the idea of improving conditions of life on the land for a large portion of South Africans persists, the context in which it does so is not a healthy one for happy outcomes. I do not think it is too dramatic to say that beyond state redistribution of paltry sums to millions and handsome sums to reasonably large groups of retainers, including chiefs and local government functionaries, there is no decent future for much more than a handful of people in rural South Africa. That handful is very important too – but it does not mean that answers to the land question are really restitution, revised tenure and redistribution of holdings.

Nonetheless, and very unfortunately, what has happened has tended to support rather than deny what we wrote in 1990: 'Much of the academic debate has taken place in ways rather removed from the lives of rural South Africans.... Some, possibly many people in the semi-rural places of the

bantustans *at present* [1989-90] are little interested in returning to farm life ... of any kind' (Gcabashe and Mabin 1990: 65) and the conditions under which some have done so and others might be asked to do so, are not propitious.

### **Need to know much better**

Bethuel Setai wrote in 1979 'it is striking that despite the large number of rural Africans [in SA], very little is known or written about them' (Setai 1979: 72), and the point could be widened beyond the category he chose. To know, of course, requires us to conceptualise as well as to view the world through concepts. The categories we use have been poorly developed. As bad perhaps (in addition to apparently unreliable counting), is that the census is still not asking questions which get beyond the emptiness of the single household concept.

The growing interrelatedness of rural, urban and migrant economies is concealed or obscured by methods which still assume that every person has a single place and every household has a stable roster of resident members. Census methodology often assumes a degree of corporateness and boundedness that can no longer be justified in many regions of the world. We suggest that census methods can and should be adjusted, using ethnographic methodology, in order to describe and analyze this phenomenon, and to serve as a guide for more effective policy making ...

At the very local level, the miscounting of population with inappropriate household membership categories can lead to misallocation of resources ...

Residence and citizenship are complex and often dangerous legal and political issues ... This is yet another case where local realities often directly contradict the fiction of official counts ... and categories. (Wilk and Miller 1997: 68-9)

So we are neither conceptually equipped nor empirically informed to know much better today than 30 years ago. Let us assume that well intentioned, resourced research bodies will be able to shed more light and assist in developing successful strategies for the small numbers whose futures we may hope will be happy in rural and farming circumstances. Certainly efforts to inform these matters continue at PLAAS at the University of the Western Cape and elsewhere. The rest of the iceberg will be at least as hard to see clearly.

Land intersects with property and power to create geography. But, South Africa does not have much in the way of the disciplines of historical geography or contemporary human settlement geography, which might penetrate in creative and useful ways into these matters. Anthropologists and historians who have grappled with some of the issues for decades have made the most important contributions but I am sure they would be among the first to agree how much more thinking not to mention research is required.

South Africa has a large problem with the discussion of urban and rural – the concepts are extremely weak (see Sadike and Ramutsindela 2002). Certainly it has at times been useful to speak of ‘rural slums’ (Murray 1987). But provocative wordplay of ‘displaced urbanisation’ and the lacunae regarding forms like ‘closer settlements’ – a phrase I have had to use above for want of better - do not help take one much closer to concepts capable of handling the changing geography of the country. A much more acute and significant geography is not an easy field to construct and those who try are sometimes frustrated by selfish and careerist orientations of dominant people, in the typical fashion of academic hegemony. One looks to ‘exiled’ scholars in countries such as Canada and foreign scholars from Brazil or France or Tanzania, perhaps to lead.

As a result simplistic views persist, which lack both intellectual and political purchase: for example, the well-funded business aligned think tank, the Centre for Development and Enterprise stated the ‘most important but also most neglected social dynamic is urbanisation’ (CDE 2005:14). Scholarship requires something better. Yet even the best current work struggles to go further, often noting that ‘Circular migration continues to be an important way in which households in rural areas survive’ (Todes et al 2010: 331). The authors concerned would I am sure agree that each word here requires much more development in order to grasp the slippery reality.

Now it’s all very well to call for new and better concepts. This is what Caroline Kihato (2008) eloquently does in her piece in *The Endless City* – grappling with the same difficulties that confront scholarship in many African situations. My view is that to think the present geographical processes in South Africa, we probably have the concepts, but we simply fail to develop and apply them to South African trajectories partly because we blind ourselves in relation to the most emotive and politically charged issues. More careful application and development of concept would allow some necessary feinting in relation to dangerous terms like urban and rural, farm and town, and the lives of those who live across the apparent divides.

## From the country to the city

It's been fashionable over the last couple of years to go on and on about the 'tipping' of population towards 'urban' around the globe. 'Human society recently reached a historic watershed: more people today are living in cities than outside of them, a trend that is expected to continue' (advertisement for Burdett and Sujic 2008). Pause and reflect that rapid urbanisation in a geographical sense has been noted globally since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it will be plain that this is a long-term exercise. South Africa is no exception. For roughly 150 years the population has been increasingly – in a fluid fashion – concentrating in cities and towns. The story continues:

Since the ending of apartheid almost 8 million more people, almost the equivalent to the population of Gauteng, have become urban dwellers and this growth is set to continue. Correspondingly, the rate of increase of the rural population is slowing down ... A key question ... is whether or not the rural-urban linkages of past migrants<sup>3</sup> will be retained by future generations ... (Parnell and Crankshaw: forthcoming)

Castells (1973) in the course of his effort to pin down what urbanisation might be about, noted that urbanisation has two central poles of meaning – geographical and cultural. Both are enormously long term and indeed, contradictory. Debby Potts (2010) shows how 'concentration' is sometimes reversed in African contexts, despite a long term and very gradual growth of sole commitment to city lives. Particular political situations may entail cultural 'reversals' too, in which some 'urban' practices which seem well established reveal themselves as ephemeral. Such may be the case on the fringes of Accra or Kampala, or for that matter Tshwane, where intersections between 'traditional' and 'modern', 'customary' and 'market', 'state' and 'private' travel in diverse directions as land rapidly becomes occupied at 'urban' densities by people arriving from all directions. 'Dominant' forms are hard to discern. And in closely tied ways the question of concentration of population geographically is just as complicated. Matters of generation, gender, allegiance, and mobility are implicated. In consequence it is *not* the case that I am simply suggesting that because the future looks bleak for rural lives in South Africa, *therefore* there should simply be a recognition of urban growth and concentration on accommodating that. The cities, the view of the cities from the countryside, are far too complex for that. The CDE view sounds elegant:

In our view, the challenge facing the country now is to reconceptualise and modernise our understanding of land reform at the beginning of the

21st century. We need to redefine 'land reform' to take account of the realities of an urbanising, modernising, economy; make it consistent with our shared vision of where this society must go, and with other crucial dimensions of government policy; and ensure that it is a policy area with achievable goals, compatible with our developmental constraints. (CDE 2005:8)

It seems most unlikely that such an apparently rational (of course deeply sectional) path is likely to develop in the foreseeable future. In political terms South Africa is not just the cities. The notion that the country *must* have urban policy, urban commission, urban something, already feeble, sank in the wake of the Polokwane rupture in the ANC. That led to its disappearance from the Cabinet agenda.

The reality is that the ANC state is not much more interested than its predecessor, despite the abrogation of racially exclusive legislation and the absence of massive removal schemes, in the systematic urbanisation of the South African population in what used to be called an orderly way. (Freund 2010:296)

The predecessor regime had a broad plan – capitalise agriculture and dump or channel the unfortunate victims of primitive accumulation into bantustans or rural slums (Murray 1987) but also, importantly, accommodate workers in town with varying measures of control. But the present state's city priorities are unclear. Instead, there is a rising emphasis on something called 'rural development', one of five avowed present priorities. The New Growth Path (NGP) launched by government in November 2010 is partly built on the idea.

The analysis provided in the NGP documents is that

The poorest regions of the country, with the highest unemployment rates and most vulnerable workers, are the former Bantustan and commercial farming areas. ... the agricultural value chain offers major opportunities in these areas for employment creation through smallholder schemes and the processing and sale of agricultural products. Improvements in livelihoods for rural dwellers are possible by ... helping rural households increase production. ... the public sector and social economy, tourism and infrastructure, can also contribute ...

The documents go on to suggest – more or less in line with Freund's conclusion cited above – that

While urbanisation will continue, a significant share of the population will remain in rural areas, engaged in the rural economy. Government will step up its efforts to provide public infrastructure and housing in rural

areas, both to lower the costs of economic activity and to foster sustainable communities. Rural development programmes can achieve a measurable improvement in livelihoods for 500,000 households, as well as stimulating employment in other sectors.

As these optimistic projections are extended the numbers are vague:

The New Growth Path targets opportunities for 300,000 households in agricultural smallholder schemes plus 145,000 jobs in agroprocessing by 2020, while there is potential to upgrade conditions for 660,000 farmworkers.

Lists of actions are proposed:

Restructuring land reform to support smallholder schemes with comprehensive support around infrastructure, marketing, finance, extension services, etc.; upgrading employment in commercial agriculture especially through improved worker voice; measures to support growth in commercial farming and to help address price fluctuations in maize and wheat while supporting national food security; acceleration of land claims processes and better support to new farmers following land-claims settlements; programmes to ensure competitive pricing of inputs, especially fertiliser. (South Africa 2010:18-19)

An effective rural development strategy geared to improving livelihoods and employment on a large scale must ... Reprioritis[e] budgets for housing and social services to address rural backlogs, which requires ... addressing gross inequalities in municipal revenues; Support ... market and financial institutions, especially co-ops, that enable small producers to enter formal value chains and take advantage of economies of scale. (South Africa 2010:30)

Every one of these proposals is a matter of subsidising market participation or social support. Cost estimates are absent. Writing at a time of global anxiety about inability to emerge from a recession which has persisted for over two years it seems risky to assume the available of tax or other public funds to support such subsidies.

At the same time – and across supposed divides again – the social economy has shifted a great deal over the past two decades. The consequences are opaque. One analysis suggests the following:

In South Africa, the scale of government social grant transfers is impressive, with 12.4 million people (about a quarter of the population) receiving grants in 2007. Spending on social security, including these grants, constituted 4.6% of GDP in that year (Africa Research Institute:

2008). There is no doubt that this is having an impact on the country's population geography, as well as its positive impacts on livelihoods. However the effects are complicated. The pension, which was about twice the median per capita income in African households in the mid-1990s (Devereux: 2007), is nonetheless small compared to the costs of living in the large metropolitan areas, particularly in planned and formal settlements. It provides for far more consumption in areas where housing is much cheaper ... (Potts 2010: concluding chapter)

And some of those areas are indeed, what is called 'rural' in South Africa. So one real effect of 'rural development policy may turn out to be supporting continued 'rural' residence – more likely I suggest than actually increasing production except marginally on small pieces of land, although there is of course a large debate about smallholder agriculture and that would be a subject for a different article.

It appears that the New Growth Path adopts a position similar to that suggested by Ruth Hall in her contributions to *Another Countryside* (2009). She writes inter alia 'the small holding option requires a developmental state', for a 'major economic regeneration of rural areas' (2009:17,56). In my thinking therefore I am anxious that rural development means a return to the 'mixed agricultural economy' proposed in the ANC's 1989 formulations which seem rather inappropriate to the entirely different context globally and locally from that epoch (cf Mabin 1995). Quite apart from the question of whose pockets subsidies actually line, the huge scale of funds required to make all this a reality seems improbable of achievement, subject of course to other evidence.

Nic Borain (2010) remarked in a blog – a tendentious source I imagine – when the New Growth Path appeared, that 'the risks of failure are very high'. He meant this across all five priorities of government, including elusive 'job creation'. Such is especially the case in relation to rural development. Perverse outcomes are (or should be) well known. In the case of Zimbabwe, Sam Moyo (1990) wrote over 20 years ago that land reform can create the basis of more deeply persistent circular migration through guaranteeing multiple points of passage, rather than providing sustainable rural livelihoods. Here is a startling example of the contradictory effects of policy development that misconstrues its context, and in particular the nature of connections with cities. Moyo effectively directed attention to the need 'to link the rural and the urban in ways that have not yet been done' (Mamdani 1996:296).

Whilst waiting more development of such arguments, it is notable that the

NGP documents go on to indicate an underlying perspective which does link ‘rural’ to the cities.

Rural development will necessarily depend largely on links to the main urban areas. For instance, smallholder schemes in the Eastern Cape can produce for factories in Port Elizabeth or East London. (South Africa 2010:30)

In discussing papers for this issue of *Transformation* at Salt Rock in February 2011, Jacob Dlamini commented that ‘there is a purity which requires that some realities be ignored in order to imagine that the ideas can work or that some realities be suspended in order that policies can work out...’ A present danger is that rural development can mean intensifying subsidies for rural slum life, hopefully raising levels of living there, and shepherding continuing victims where possible into RDP-type housing, if they are fortunate, with social subsidies but little hope of anything much better, for most. Links between different spaces need to be very much better conceptualised and researched.

Is there a politically feasible alternative? Is an alternative to be found in manipulating urban land? Freund suggests ‘Surely, by far, the most important aspect of land reform policy ought to be the systematic making available of land for an incoming population through expansion on the edges of the city as it grows’ (2010:296). Just like the ‘rural’ situation, land questions in the city are too complex for simplicity. A land policy in any city has to relate to a profound understanding of cultural and social change if it is to engage at all successfully with improving peoples’ life chances. The stark emptiness of much of District 6, the odd history of Cato Manor, the vacant lots in Fietas/Pageview/Vrededorp, all demonstrate how difficult land proves to be, not least for reason of the limits of land restitution in relation to the kaleidoscopic world of tenancy (cf Parnell and Beavon 1996).

Certainly the dream of Tuscan hill towns as the model for what South African cities should look like, or perhaps of Japanese or Swedish or Dutch cities as the models, deserve to be dismissed entirely (except apparently by suburb developers who are adept at faking it). None of the South African context is remotely similar to any of these cases. A lot of effort has gone into policy discussion in these direction and yet ‘suburban’ expansion including RDP and shack suburbs, continues apparently inexorably at the edges. Political feasibility is one of the centres of explanation. This paper is not the place to take on these questions. Debate will continue whilst the actual meaning and results of rural development take shape and, this paper

suggests, people continue to leave the land and look and move towards cities in various patterns, posing acute questions of city futures.

## **Conclusions**

The same problem that stalked and limited preparations for land reform in rural South Africa, is the first issue which has to be addressed in thinking about urban presents and futures. ‘The enduring staying power of the status quo in ways other than those related to race’ (Freund 2010: 296) requires analyses superior to those we are used to. Whatever the depth of emotion it provokes and the reality of racial oppression in the lives of so many, apartheid is not the sole or perhaps even the main element in understanding why the rural situation or the cities have developed as they have, nor why they are developing in the ways that they are. On the contrary, markets and accumulation are much older and much more general and powerful elements in all of this. Not that the two are somehow separable. As with the ‘rural’ land question we wrote about in *Transformation* in 1990, there is much more (however incomplete) knowledge about urban apartheid than there is about ways in which urban economies work, and ways in which city society is shifting. There is a lot to do to set this into a different mould.

I do not subscribe to the fear that African (and perhaps other) cities will come to resemble Koolhaas’ images of Lagos (Koolhaas 2008) – a view undercut when better developed concepts, historical research and sympathy are applied (Fouchard 2010). Hope that they will be something else, and offer improving lives to huge numbers, is rooted in city histories and the spaces they provide for creativities. Many cities have shown that they can do much better than offer survival even through the most difficult histories – from Buenos Aires to Bangalore and from the worst of outcast London or the ruins of Warsaw to Dares Salaam and Kuala Lumpur. Cities are resilient, apparently. Certainly viewed from the countryside they are extraordinary. That is a perspective worth cultivating.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Notes

1. The meaning and usage of the colour terms could of course be explored.
2. These towns are now included in local municipalities called Camdeboo, Nala, Amahlati, Endumeni and Msukaligwa respectively.
3. Is there such a person as a past migrant?

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