Why have South African smallholders largely withdrawn from arable production and what are the implications for land reform?\(^1\)

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Land reform policy in South Africa since 1994 has tended to make the assumption that if land were made available to smallholders and communities, it would be used productively. The ANC government, faced with widespread poverty and unemployment in rural areas, has presented smallholder agriculture as a means through which livelihoods may be improved, employment increased and food security enhanced.

A good deal of evidence, however, suggests that smallholders in the former homelands of South Africa, where African communities continued to hold land, have largely withdrawn from arable production. This is quite widely accepted in academic literature, and government policy has to some degree recognised the problem. We discuss some of the reasons for this withdrawal because any reversal of this trend will depend on understanding its causes. The movement away from arable production appears to run contrary to the underlying expectation of land reform. It is ironic that at the moment when land reform was being launched, smallholder cultivation was contracting. Does this also undermine arguments for smallholder agriculture as a base for land reform?

Our focus is largely on the Eastern Cape, where we have recently researched this issue. The decline of African smallholder production has been a significant strand in South African historiography and social science since Bundy’s *Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* published in 1979.\(^2\) He placed the fall in the early decades of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century and saw it primarily as a result of external forces: the appropriation of land for large and increasingly commercially run farms, as well as segregationist public policy epitomised by the Natives Land Act of 1913.\(^3\) Although not immediately implemented, the Act hamstrung purchase of land on a racial basis. Dominant white interests, particularly the mining industry, wished to see black South Africans consigned to the proletariat; migrant labour became entrenched and contributed to the demise of the peasantry.

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\(^1\) A detailed case study that expands on the arguments here will be published in the *Journal of*


Some have argued that Bundy exaggerated the scale of African peasant production in the 19th century Eastern Cape. ⁴ Beinart’s research in Mpondoland suggested, on the contrary, that it was sustained for a longer period. The Mpondo lost little of the land that they actually occupied and their territory fell into the reserved area of the Transkei Territories – the largest contiguous zone occupied by Africans under communal tenure. Per capita crop production in Mpondoland probably reached its peak in the 1930s and total crop production probably continued to rise until the 1960s and possibly later.⁵ Cattle numbers increased until the early 1930s and then – after a brief respite from drought at that time – stabilised somewhat up to the 1960s. Wages from migrant labour were invested into equipment and cattle. Women were responsible for much of the arable production and the work of children was also important. Families were generally large enough to cope without younger men. Migrancy and smallholder production were not inversely related and expanded simultaneously from annexation in the 1890s to the 1960s.

These historical arguments agreed with anthropological studies in Transkei districts that also emphasised resilience rather than decline in rural production.⁶ MacAllister, working in coastal Transkei villages in the 1980s, pointed to relatively healthy smallholder cultivation with a good deal of collective labour. It is worth noting, however, that his and similar studies referenced wetter, more traditionalist parts of the coastal Transkei, while the key Eastern Cape reference points for the decline of the peasantry tended to be drier Ciskei districts, which were colonised earlier and where access to land was more restricted.

Since the 1990s however, most researchers have found decline rather than resilience. Commenting on his fieldwork in Sekhukhuneland/Lebowa in the late 1980s, Peter Delius noted that “every year, good or bad, substantial areas of land lay fallow”.⁷ Lungisile Ntsebeza argued in 1995 that most rural people were no longer interested in farming because they viewed it as “hard and risky” and would prefer to be “fully proletarianised”, earning wages.⁸ It

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was no longer appropriate to associate “rural” with “agrarian”, and agricultural development did not seem to offer the great majority of rural people means to improve their livelihoods. Deborah Bryceson included South African examples in her broader project on de-agrarianisation.  

9 Flora Hajdu surveyed Cutwini village in Mpondoland around 2002 and calculated that only 3% of household income came from arable produce (and another 8% from livestock).  

10 This may have been underestimated. While only 9% of households said they grew no maize, 71% produced less than 25% of their household requirements, and 93% produced less than 50%.

In the Eastern Cape many African smallholders previously cultivated both gardens next to their homesteads, and bigger fields that were usually further away. Maura Andrew, around 1990, found that fields were being abandoned and most people were concentrating on garden plots next to their homesteads.  

11 Siyabu Manona recorded in 2005 that only 12% of fields were being used in villages he surveyed in Flagstaff district, Mpondoland.  

Mfono et al. estimated that by 2008, in the Eastern Cape as a whole, “71% of those with access to [arable] land did not use it for production”.

Our recent research has been in a village called Mbotyi on the coast near Lusikisiki in Mpondoland in the former Transkei. Even here, where the rainfall is high at over 1000 mm a year and there is plenty of land available for arable production, the fields have largely been abandoned. Cultivation has stopped in a fertile alluvial valley of about 50 ha – perhaps 80 ha or more if the slopes around it are included – where many of the old established village families have arable plots. In 2008, when we first visited, one field, of about 2 ha, with maize, pumpkins and a little dagga was being worked, and in 2011/2012 a few small patches. In March 2014 we found a small increase, with three substantial fields of about 2 ha each and about 10 other small areas being cultivated. The maize crop in most of the latter had failed because of a dry summer.

This trend is not entirely uniform and it cannot be established quantitatively because the South African state no longer collects adequate statistics on

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African production or livestock holdings. Despite the weight of evidence, however, we agree with those who caution against a linear view of decline, and question the idea that individuals or communities have become completely proletarianised and are fixed forever in a certain class position. Descriptively they are, in a sense, still smallholders or potential smallholders – as well as many other things – in that many have access to land.

A broader view of southern Africa should also caution against linear views of decline. Insofar as the concept of “deagrarianisation” means that a smaller proportion of the total population engages in agriculture, and a smaller proportion of national economies and household incomes derive from agriculture, then it has strong purchase. But if it is taken to imply an overall decline in agricultural production then it is not convincing. Parts of southern Africa have experienced growth in agricultural production in the last decade. Malawi is a key example where, after regular famines between 2002 and 2006, maize production – mostly driven by smallholders – more than doubled between 2006 and 2011.14 This was largely in response to state investment in starter packs of seed and fertiliser, as well as generally good prices. The pattern was replicated less dramatically in other countries, notably Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania.

While the withdrawal by smallholders in South Africa has been widely noted, explanations are less certain and it is difficult to rank the causes, which can differ between regions and villages. Our analysis places at its centre a shortage of labour for agricultural purposes, despite high unemployment. We will examine first some other explanations.

1. Lack of land was central to arguments about peasant decline and this, together with the prohibition on the purchase of private land by Africans, undoubtedly played a part over the long term. The position has now changed somewhat. Of course many people in the former homelands do not have access to arable land. The vast majority have residential plots, some of sufficient size for substantial gardens. But there is also disused arable land available in the former homelands. Much of it belongs to specific families. In addition, perhaps 7% of agricultural land has been transferred in land reform schemes and additional private areas have been purchased since the prohibition on black landownership outside the homelands was lifted in 1991. Average arable fields in the customary tenure areas of South Africa are small, perhaps around 1 ha per household, but access is differential and larger areas can be negotiated.15 In Mbotyi and other parts of the coastal

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Transkei, it is quite possible to gain access to 2 ha in addition to the smaller garden areas. The abandonment of fields in a sense confirms the availability of land. On the eastern seaboard of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal rainfall is usually sufficient for dryland agriculture and some land is available on irrigation projects.

We do not know how much of the land acquired through land reform is cultivated and suspect that most has probably been used for livestock rather than arable production. In some recent years Malawian farmers produced over three million tonnes of maize – 25-30% of the whole of South African production, including commercial farms – on an area that is the same as the former homelands, with roughly the same population density.

2. Land in the former homelands was and is largely held in forms of communal or customary tenure modified by many proclamations. This guaranteed residential sites although the legal status of this land and of the arable plots is not entirely certain. In some parts of the country certificates called PTOs (permission to occupy) were issued by the state on the basis of land proclamations but this has largely ceased. In practice families have strong rights to their residential and arable sites. Beyond the residential and arable plots most land in the former homelands is commonage available for grazing.

The system of tenure does not preclude cultivation. Much of the original expansion of peasant production in South Africa was achieved on land held in these customary forms of tenure; similarly Malawi’s recent boom has also not required privatisation. However, while landholders can fence their gardens, the system of landholding makes it more difficult to fence fields or to accumulate larger areas of land. Customary forms of tenure inhibit the capacity to borrow against land because lenders require the land as surety. This land is not alienable. Microlending presents an alternative in which property is not required as surety, and the 2004 Constitutional Court case of Jaftha vs Schoeman suggests that residential property cannot be appropriated for small debts because of the constitutional right to housing.

Land acquired through land reform is usually held within Communal Property Associations (CPAs). These have the same benefits, providing some access to land for a large number of families, but also lead to the same disadvantages for individual families in that they are managed collectively. Customary tenure and CPAs therefore create some problems and tenure upgrading, which is specified in the constitution, remains an urgent task. But perhaps the patterns of land use (see below) as much as the form of ownership itself inhibits investment.

3. Environmental issues, such as declining soil fertility, were frequently cited in the earlier decades of the 20th century in explaining low crop yields in the
communal areas. This was related to a lack of rotation and limited use of manure or fertiliser. Low yields may have contributed to a withdrawal from cropping – one of many risks faced by smallholders – in some areas. But arable lands in some areas have now been rested and it is possible to fertilise. Climate change is undoubtedly having an effect on more marginal arable land and may also be leading to more unpredictable rainfall. However, climate change has not yet reduced South Africa’s total maize production. Over the last ten years (2007-2016), South Africa produced an annual average of over 12 million metric tonnes compared with nine million in the previous decade (1997-2006). Climate change is not yet the major factor affecting either large scale or smallholder maize production.

4. The lack of a marketing organisation that reaches into the African occupied areas and a lack of infrastructure, roads and transport, were also often mentioned in discussions about smallholder problems. In earlier years, up to the 1960s, traders in the network of stores across the former Transkei sometimes bought produce. From the 1970s this network was nationalised and then reallocated to smaller-scale African traders who seldom had sufficient capital to continue such practices. The costs of inputs are also often higher for smallholders who do not have easy access to agricultural wholesalers. (They do not, however, have to pay for land).

Difficulty accessing markets is probably not a major dis-incentive for smallholders in the Eastern Cape. Firstly, the great majority produce far less than is needed for their own subsistence so increases could be absorbed by consumption. There is also local demand for crops and vegetables. In cases where surpluses are available, such as prickly pear in season, women pickers arrange for bakkies to transport them to the best picking sites and they sell fruit on the streets. Ben Cousins has illustrated how bakkie drivers service vegetable growers on an irrigation scheme in KwaZulu-Natal.

5. Spatial issues and security can be significant problems. The policy of Betterment, or rehabilitation, was imposed on many of the former homelands areas between the 1940s and 1980s. In this system, families were moved from their former scattered settlements into villages. Residential plots were often restricted to half or a quarter of a hectare, intended to be large enough for dwellings, livestock kraals and a garden. Sometimes people lost arable land but many retained it. However, the arable fields were demarcated separately, usually in a block, at some distance from the homesteads on land regarded as most suitable for cultivation. Thus it was not easy for families to

expand their arable production immediately around their homesteads – in other words to consolidate a family-controlled farm around them. While the original Betterment plans included fences around the arable plots, as well as fenced pasturages, these were not fully implemented and most of the fences were cut or poorly maintained.

People now find that fields are too far away and they cannot protect their crops against livestock or theft. Many of those who wish to maintain some production focus on the gardens adjacent to their village homes. Some of those who wish to expand are spatially trapped.

Village settlements certainly facilitate services such as electricity as well as access to schools, clinics and spaza shops. Those on the village edges, whose land abuts pasturage, can sometimes expand their sites but these spatial problems are challenging. Resettling the areas demarcated as arable lands and dividing them into farms may be one solution but this will affect the land rights of other families with arable plots.

6. In Mbotyi, where we conducted detailed interviews, many people spoke of the difficulty with protecting crops against livestock. Cattle and goats are still seen as valuable investments. The costs of keeping livestock, while they are not insignificant, are lower than those for cultivation. While veterinary medicines are needed, grazing is free and fodder is not generally used. Prices for slaughter animals are good (more than R1,000 for goats and R6,000 for cattle); the commercial and cultural value of livestock is generally perceived as higher than arable land; and the risks lower. But livestock is no longer carefully herded. Young boys are at school and owners have to look after the animals themselves. Protecting crops against livestock is a major headache and there is little fencing except sometimes around gardens. In Mbotyi, where the old fields are adjacent to forests, bush pigs were also blamed for the withdrawal from fields. The only solution was to fence the whole of the arable area, a collective endeavour which people felt they could not afford.

7. In their detailed discussion of two villages in the former Ciskei, Hebinck and Lent note that smallholders are concerned about the risks involved in crop production.18 Most people see the costs of seed, fertiliser, ploughing and equipment to be prohibitive. Few still have ox teams for ploughing or access to tractors. The expense of buying or hiring such equipment is a dis-incentive given the amount of land available to individual families and the risk that crops will fail. Some homeland governments invested in tractors for ploughing on smallholder plots and similar thinking lies behind the recent Massive Food Production scheme in the Eastern Cape.19 This has entailed a

18 Paul Hebinck and Peter C. Lent (eds.), Livelihoods and Landscapes: The People of Guquka and Koloni and Their Resources (Brill, Leiden, 2007)
19 Manona, ‘Smallholder Agriculture’.
significant state subsidy but has not proved sustainable. Cooperatives, which operated in some areas in the past do not seem to have survived to meet the need for ploughing. Some rural villages, assisted by animal health technicians, maintain cooperative dipping of livestock against ticks. Yet many stockowners in both the North West and Eastern Cape find it difficult to resolve the problems of collaboration.20

Maize prices do not seem to have a major effect on smallholder engagement, at least in the short term. They peaked in 2012/2013 but we did not find much evidence of expansion of production. Perhaps high prices in 2015/2016 coupled with forecasts of better rain will have an effect. [No new data available as yet.]

8. Lack of family labour is a central problem for most smallholders, despite high levels of unemployment in rural villages. We should look briefly at the historical background. Labour migration is often cited as a major factor in the decline of rural production. Yet in some areas at least there was a positive, not inverse, correlation between external earnings and smallholder agriculture – for example in Lesotho from about the 1860s to the 1920s, and in Mpondoland from the 1890s to the 1960s. As noted families were generally large enough to meet agricultural labour demands and women did much of the cultivation.

In the last few decades, however, this relationship seems to have changed. Historians have suggested that African smallholder and tenant family heads have been losing control of family labour over the long term.21 Families have gradually declined in size. In South Africa, as in Africa as a whole, population increased quickly between about 1960 and 1990 and birth rates were especially high in the rural areas. Women faced increasing burdens of childcare and domestic duties that, coupled with smaller homesteads, triggered a real crunch on women’s labour time. For some households this was exacerbated by poverty, and, from the 1980s, by the effects of HIV/Aids. These are significant structural reasons for women withdrawing their labour.

At the same time more options were opening for work in the cities and in the informal sector. Withdrawal of women’s labour was both a symptom of pressure on poorer households and a choice by women with more agency.

Rural patriarchy did not dissolve but there has been a quiet withdrawal, sometimes a quiet rebellion, by women in relation to agricultural work. Child labour, which was also very significant for rural production, has moved to the margins because of education. Children and youths are not only less available for agricultural work, but also for herding and this is one reason livestock threatens crops. While communal consumption at weekend events is still ubiquitous, communal work parties, amalima in isiXhosa-speaking areas, are infrequent. People see farming as hard work, which they do not really want to do for free. It does not accord with their ideas of modernity and the benefits do not make it seem worthwhile.

Family labour is less available but the transition to wage labour has not generally been made. Potential employers do not feel it is worthwhile to pay or are reluctant to sell livestock for this purpose. We have some evidence of wage employment of herders, especially in the North West and Lesotho. But most potential employees have sufficient alternative sources of income to avoid such low-wage employment.

Judging by the housing stock money is still invested in the rural areas – not into arable production, but into homes, education, consumer goods and, to some degree, livestock. It appears that there is enough cash coming into the rural villages to mean that the great majority of households can purchase sufficient grain. Government grants and migrant earnings, as well as income from local piecework, informal sector activity, livestock, and dagga and other sources, all play a role. Even with recent increases in the cost of key staples, people perceive that it is easier to purchase grain than to engage in the demanding work of non-mechanised cultivation and home food-processing.

In the former Transkei, at least, many households supplement their food purchases with green maize, vegetables, imifino (wild greens) and medicinal plants on a small scale. But most staples – ground maize, white flour, white sugar, beans, sometimes bread and rice – are largely purchased. Rural people perceive this to minimise household risk, maximise return for labour expended and create space for leisure and social events. People in Mbotyi have not abandoned agriculture wholesale; rather they have responded to incentives and pressures by adjusting their livelihood activities in these ways.

Livestock attracts more investment, requires less labour and is valuable in the “cultural economy” – not least as slaughter animals in ceremonies rather than as multipurpose animals in a diversified peasant economy.

Land reform has largely been geared to political aims over the last couple of decades. This has brought some significant land transfers. But it is time to put production at the heart of thinking about land policy and land reform.
The state’s policy focus has partly been misplaced over the last two decades. Little innovative thinking and policy has been geared towards the areas where African people already hold land, or to newly acquired land. Post-transfer support has often been minimal. The relatively high price of food provides an opportunity.

Re-opening land restitution should not be a priority route because restitution does not prioritise production. The first wave of restitution was entirely justified but intended as a short-term process to address land confiscated during the apartheid era. The re-opening of land restitution in 2014, recently found to be unconstitutional, is unlikely to be the most effective route for land reform. President Zuma conceives that chiefs should play a central role but they have presided over agricultural decline. The South African rural areas were dominated for decades by white commercial farmers on the one hand and by chiefs and traditional authorities on the other. Space needs to be found for African farmers to develop through the redistribution programme that puts production at its heart.

Urgent assessment of the forms of smaller scale production that are succeeding is needed. Pilot projects in areas where African communities already hold land could include garden schemes, microfinance, diversification away from maize, water provision, technological innovation (especially for ploughing) and nutritional education. Working with large-scale commercial operations has brought some success, for example through outgrower schemes. Tenure and spatial issues remain important. Reorganisation of space in the former homelands, and on recently transferred land, so that individuals or family groups can control larger areas contiguous to their homes should be explored.

Some may argue that it is romantic to think of reviving smallholder agriculture when so many factors combine to undermine it. Larger scale, well-capitalised and sometimes corporate agriculture will likely remain the major element in future production and food security. Deracialisation of such enterprises is an important process.

But there is space for a range of enterprises on different scales. African smallholders will continue to command land in South Africa and, as land reform gathers pace, probably hold an increasing amount of land. It is important to think creatively around these holdings. Agricultural production at the Malawian level would bring significant additional income, development and economic activity to the rural areas. The state should not rush land reform and, together with NGOs and the private sector, should find ways to nurture and prioritise existing smallholder zones. The country simply cannot afford to undermine its productive agricultural base.