

The latest rescue plan for Africa is another Green Revolution. GRAIN, alongside a host of others, has written and commented extensively on the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA) and the impacts it will have on the continent.¹ In the meantime, this model of a Green Revolution has already been implemented for the past five years in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It provides us with a case study and an indication of the likely outcome of such an approach in other parts of Africa.

Lessons from a Green Revolution in South Africa

GRAIN

1 GRAIN Briefing, "A new green revolution for Africa?", December 2007.

grain.org/briefings/?id=205
See also K. Lobe, "A Green Revolution for Africa: Hope for Hungry Farmers", *ILEIA* 24.2, 2008.

<http://tinyurl.com/3r2y26>

2 Persistent poverty is a critical issue for Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular. It is vital to move beyond the livelihoods analyses of poverty and engage with the key structural conditions that perpetuate poverty. It is critical to understand the political economy of poverty, as well as the social and spatial formations that entrench the adverse terms on which the poor are forced to participate in the mainstream economy. See A. du Toit, *Chronic and Structural poverty in South Africa: challenges for action and research*, Bellville: University of the Western Cape, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 56, July 2005.

<http://tinyurl.com/3z26bh>

3 The Transkei and Ciskei, together with other homelands, were where the apartheid government forced the majority of the black population to live. After 1994, Transkei and Ciskei, together with the "white" part of the Eastern Cape, were amalgamated into one province, the Eastern Cape. But the division is as stark today as it was 14 years ago.

4 L. Khumalo, "Government plans to establish biofuels industry in Eastern Cape", South African government communication and information system, 8 March 2007.

Africa has a long history of colonialism and neo-colonialism that changed land ownership, and so destroyed vibrant agrarian communities and deepened structural poverty.² South Africa had its own brand of social and spatial engineering, which resulted in a form of land distribution more skewed than anywhere else in Africa. As a result, the Eastern Cape province is clearly divided between two agricultural realities – prosperous large-scale commercial farms and the former apartheid "homeland areas" of Transkei and Ciskei,³ where most land is owned on a communal basis and where 70 per cent of the rural population are considered food insecure. From the 1940s, apartheid planners intensified top-down experiments in social engineering among the communities in Transkei and Ciskei, causing a huge loss of land and livestock. At times, the local population resisted these initiatives: they saw them, correctly, as destroying their livelihoods and creating unequal wealth and power relations (see Box 1). Mostly, however, they were coerced into accepting them, either by violent means or by promises of wealth. When in 2002 the Eastern

Cape Department of Agriculture (ECDA) announced, as part of its Green Revolution strategy, a plan for a Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP) in the province, it promised that the outcome this time would be different. As the name implies, the aim is to increase food production hugely and rapidly, and so provide food security for the poor in rural areas. The ECDA also later earmarked an additional 500,000 hectares of fertile land to supply a multi-billion dollar biofuels industry as part of its "integrated agrarian transformation" plan.⁴ Both of these programmes are to be implemented principally on communal land.

The Green Revolution approach is always the same, and the MFPP exemplifies it. Initial subsidies and credit are made available so that farmers can buy into the project. The conditions include replacement of farmers' varieties with hybrids and GMOs, mandatory use of fertilisers and pesticides, the mechanisation of production, and the consolidation of land ownership. The outcome is predictable and widely documented. Once farmers are trapped in the system, the subsidies are

Box 1 Land use – strengthening the legacy of apartheid

Rural development and agrarian reform in Africa must be understood in the context of its colonial past, which radically reshaped societies and their land use. In the Eastern Cape, this means taking into account the “Betterment Scheme”, implemented with much community resistance in the 1940–1970 period. The Betterment Scheme was designed to transform the land use pattern by forcing people to relocate into villages and dividing the land into residential, grazing and arable units, reducing livestock numbers at the same time. This plan for rural apartheid was to some extent motivated by concern for soil conservation but the main intention was to gain more control over local populations.¹ Many communities resented the forcible manner in which this scheme was introduced and, in fact, it was only properly implemented where the government was able to coerce chiefs and headmen to help enforce and monitor it. This “corruption” of traditional leaders created immense social disruption and often provoked violence and faction fighting.²

The Betterment Scheme eventually collapsed, as did the “Tractor Scheme” and others, and in their wake common property owners were left confused and unclear as to their land tenure situation, with a heavy loss of livestock and plant species essential for survival.³ There were often divisions between communities and their leadership. In places where the Betterment Scheme did not reach or where there was successful resistance, agricultural practices and land use are more intact and productivity is much higher.⁴

The land situation is complex and steeped in historical injustices. On the one hand, overcrowding and a lack of access to land is a major contributing factor to persistent poverty. Many people experience a land shortage in and around villages and say that their land is too small to grow what they need. After the forced relocation and disruption of land use, villages are now in many cases too far from the arable fields for people to be able to protect crops from livestock and theft. This is why the ECDA and foreign investors talk about “under-utilised land”. This communal land, although not always planted, is still highly valued by communities for many other uses – collecting thatch, medicinal plants, grazing and so on.⁵ The relationship between rural livelihoods and access to natural resources is very well documented, but it continues to be ignored by government policies. Instead, officials and investors lament that this “dead capital”⁶ is not being used for the benefit of society “at large” and are now targeting it for biofuels.⁷ It is clear that the thinking is not different from that which was dominant during the colonial heyday – Africa must sacrifice its “unproductive” use of land for the production of biofuels to export to Europe to benefit society “at large”.

- 1 F.T. Hendricks, “The Pillars of Apartheid: land tenure, rural planning and the chieftancy”, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1992, pp. 342–4.
- 2 A. Claasens, *It is not easy to challenge a chief: lessons from Rakgwadi*, PLAAS Research Report No. 9, 2001.
- 3 Z. Ntshona, *Valuing the commons: rural livelihoods and communal rangeland resources in the Maluti district, Eastern Cape*, PLAAS Research Report No. 13, 2002.
- 4 P. McAllister, “Maize yields in the Transkei: how productive is subsistence cultivation?”, quoted in S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000.
- 5 Thatch grass, for example, is and will remain a major source of income for rural communities in the Eastern Cape. See T. Kepe, *Waking up from the dream: the pitfalls of “fast-track” development on the Wild Coast*, PLAAS Research Report No. 8, 2001.
- 6 Term used by the CEO of the Southern Africa Biofuels Association, Andrew Maseneke, in a public debate in Cape Town, 27 August 2008.
- 7 Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, Bisho, Eastern Cape, July 2008.



withdrawn and farmers become indebted, creating the space for local elites to step in and gain land and power. Hey presto! A new customer base and market for GMOs, hybrids and agrochemicals is created. The scheme may come with slick propaganda about improving food security, but it hides the agony of debt, the continued loss of land, seed and communities, and the poisoning of people, soil and water.

The ECDA officials were inspired by a visit to soya fields in Argentina and Brazil.⁵ They came back enthused by the South American farmers’ apparent success, failing to notice the damage that

the stampede into soya monoculture has done to rural communities, particularly in Argentina.⁶ Convinced that the technology (minimum tillage plus GM crops and pesticides) would vitalise the rural economy, they decided to impose this approach on the Eastern Cape farmers.

The infrastructure for the new “production model” of agriculture was already in place. Extensive corporate lobbying over many years has ensured that policies and infrastructure favour agribusiness. These include pro-GMO legislation, strict intellectual property rights on seeds, free trade agreements and privatisation of resources and

⁵ Interview with John Allwood, technical manager, ECDA, May 2007.

Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, July 2008.

⁶ Miguel Altieri and Walter Pengue, “GM soybean: Latin America’s new coloniser”, *Seedling*, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/3v283q>



Photo: GRRAIN

Traditionally, sheep and cattle graze in maize fields after harvest. Introducing new chemicals brings risks, to humans and to animals. In Dellville Trust village, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser in a field.

7 Government policies are pro-business, with the assumption that the poor will be lifted by macro-economic growth. GEAR and AsGiSA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa), informed by initiatives such as NEPAD and CAADP (Comprehensive Africa, Agricultural Development Programme), are all based on the erroneous assumption that there is a positive link between globalisation and poverty alleviation. Given these global, regional and national policies, it is no surprise that in his 2007/8 budget vote speech, G Nkintini, the MEC for Agriculture, Eastern Cape, reported that the Department would intensify the implementation of the Green Revolution strategy in response to a "number of initiatives being formed on the international, regional and national levels." Budget vote speech 2007/8, Eastern Cape Legislature, Bisho, accessed 26 April 2007.

8 "The Gini coefficient for the African population has risen from 0.62 in 1991 to 0.72 in 2001. This level of inequality is comparable with the most unequal societies in the world." C. Schwabe, *Fact Sheet: Poverty in South Africa*, Human Sciences Research Council, 26 July 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/47zftx>

9 Interview with John Allwood, technical manager, ECDA, May 2007.

10 See A. du Toit and D. Neves, *In search of South Africa's Second Economy*, Bellville and Manchester: University of the Western Cape and University of Manchester, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 102, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/3nnev3>

public research institutions. The next step was to use government pro-poor projects to provide the public funding to create a new customer base for international agribusiness.

This model flows from the neo-liberal economic policies adopted by South Africa's post-apartheid government, with their emphasis on export-based agriculture and macro-economic growth. All these policies have hugely benefited multinational agrochemical companies but have not helped South Africa's smallholder farmers and rural communities.⁷ Even though they were supposed to redress the injustices of South Africa's past, these free-market agricultural and economic policies have, on the contrary, reinforced earlier inequalities. The poverty gap has widened and wealth has become further concentrated in the hands of a small elite – now black and white – making the terms by which the poor engage in the economy even more inequitable.⁸

The Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP)

The Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP), also named *Siyakhula* ("we grow"), was introduced in 2002 under the Provincial Growth and Development Programme. It was presented as a "flagship programme" within the government's Green Revolution strategy and its objective was to "unlock the agricultural potential in underdeveloped areas" in the province. Another "cornerstone poverty eradication programme" along the same lines was the *Siyazondla* ("we feed ourselves") communal gardening programme. The ECDA believes that, if farmers adopt these new technologies, the province can increase its maize production and become self-sufficient by the end of the 5-year project. The aim of the MFPP is to get a critical mass of rural households (200,000)

self-sufficient in carbohydrates and proteins by the end of the programme.⁹

Given its ambitious targets for "social mobilisation", the plan is highly simplistic, patronising and staggeringly top-down, with no evidence of consultation with the farmers who are to be mobilised. All the rhetoric is there. There are "public-private partnerships" between government, agribusiness and local contractors (with taxpayers providing the money and the private sector skimming off the profits). "Food security" is to be achieved by subsidising fertilisers, pesticides and seeds (both hybrids and GM seeds) and by consolidating and mechanising the land. The requirement for "sustainability" is covered by the plan to phase out the subsidies. The plan does not take into account the large body of recent research that is critical of such a narrow technical approach, and recommends that pro-poor policies should address structural imbalances, be based on the realities of rural people and support their fragile social and economic networks.¹⁰ These networks play a vital role in community resilience, and the immediate impact of the MFPP was to disrupt existing community structures and practices by imposing a technical approach that favours some while excluding others.

Even though the MFPP is supposed to be reducing social inequalities, it has become clear that the programme is not for everyone. The selection criteria are specific and demanding. Only villages with the best farming potential have been selected; this alone guarantees an unrepresentative outcome. The mean annual rainfall must be at least 500 mm, falling between 1 November and 30 April, or there must be reliable irrigation. The soils must have a rooting depth of 600 mm and a slope not exceeding 6 per cent. Only plots of land that are at least 50 hectares in size are accepted, so the project relies on community cooperation and the agglomeration of communal plots into larger fields. This means coercing the whole village into participating. Another condition is that the farmers must be prepared to use the minimum tillage farming technique and to employ herbicides. Farmers are advised not to intercrop with beans and/or pumpkins, as they traditionally do.

The first year the farmers get their seed, fertilisers and pesticides for free, with the government providing finance through Uvimba Bank.¹¹ In the second year the farmers have to start paying back the government subsidy, and by the fifth year they have to bear the full cost. Farmers are responsible for harvesting and marketing their crops. As part of the mechanisation drive, the government provides

Box 2 Snapshot of the impact of MFPP on a village: Dellville Trust

Four villages in the Cala area of the Eastern Cape have participated in the MFPP, complying with government criteria of a high rainfall area and accessibility. One of these villages is Dellville Trust, consisting of 24 families. Each household had to make available to the scheme 3.5ha of their fields, which could then be consolidated into 70ha, making mechanisation easier. With a loan from the Uvimba Bank, the local *Nkosi* (Chief), Mr M Zengetwa, bought a R1.2 million tractor and other equipment so that he could be a contractor. He is the chief of seven villages in the area, farms on 395ha of his own land and owns 300 head of cattle.¹ After two failed harvests, some members in the community wanted to withdraw but he would not let them, because he had to pay off his tractor. "If you go under, I go under," he told them. Instead, he suggested that the farmers use their social benefits to pay their debt, or take out a loan from MAFISA.²

The way people in this village see it is that the government has asked to "borrow their fields for five years". One woman farmer said "It does not feel like my field any more. I used to go there every day, but now I hardly ever do." The MFPP caused conflict within this community: people differed over the use of a contractor; some people wanted to get out and others not; and there was resistance to implementing minimum tillage. Mrs Dyanti, a widow, was very distressed, because she didn't have a pension and feared having to sell her livestock to pay her debt. "I cannot sleep and haven't even told my children about it." Moreover, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser left in one of the fields.³

The Chief felt that "the government wants to help the farmers of the Eastern Cape but that they are not ready to be helped." He was also quite clear that the project could only work for bigger farmers, saying that "small farmers will not be successful and will 'die' after the 5 years are over." The Department of Agriculture finally withdrew the village from the MFPP but in a way that has made the people feel that it was their fault the programme failed. The only farmer to make money was one who doubled up as a contractor on his own and other farmers' land.⁴

1 Interview with Chief Zengetwa, Dellville Trust, May 2007.

2 Micro Agricultural Finance Institutions of South Africa, another government project giving credit to micro-enterprises in rural areas.

3 Interview with villagers by Tim Wigley, July 2008.

4 Interview with Mr Mdaka, Elliot district, September 2007.

loans to contractors to buy equipment and pays them to prepare and plant the fields. These contractors can also participate as farmers, and most of them take advantage of this opportunity. From the beginning MFPP's intention has been to make an impact quickly: by the end of 2007, 421 projects, reaching 15,099 households and covering more than 50,000 hectares of land, had been approved. Partly because of its scope, the programme is officially viewed as a great success. The Minister of Agriculture announced that, in view of the programme's achievements,¹² it would be increasing its budget from US\$13 million in 2007/8 to US\$ 27million for 2008/9.¹³

On the ground, another story

Experience on the ground, however, is entirely different. Over the past year, GRAIN has interviewed farmers and researchers involved in the MFPP and found little evidence of success.¹⁴ Even officials in the ECDA have acknowledged the difficulties and failures of the programme, blaming the farmers for their "lack of understanding and commitment". They also admit that there is a lot of political pressure to deliver. This helps to explain

the gap between what the ECDA says publicly and what is really happening in communities.

In reality, the first two years of the MFPP were an absolute disaster. As hundreds of farmers had failed to pay back their debts, Uvimba Bank decided in 2005 to undertake an audit. They discovered that inputs had arrived up to two months late, so crops had been sown late and had failed. There was evidence of corruption rife among contractors. Chemicals were not being applied correctly. Seeds had been planted on land that did not fulfil the criteria. Communities did not agree about land rights. Minimum tillage was poorly understood and managed. Inputs were being sold on to third parties. A white farmer, paid to mentor a community near Mbizana, acknowledged that the cost of the inputs was just too high for small farmers, and there was no way that they could ever become independent. He said that he had been "tempted to tell farmers to just buy food with the money" as their losses would be less than growing the food themselves with the MFPP.

The programme was revised a number of times in response to the failures. In the process, government



11 Uvimba Bank was formed by the government and makes credit available for rural development and agriculture.

12 Budget vote speech 2007/8 delivered by MEC Mr G Nkwinti for Department of Agriculture, Eastern Cape Legislature, Bisho.

13 Increased from ZAR90 million to ZAR188 million.

14 With grateful acknowledgement to Tim Wigley for his interpretation and guidance in the field.

15 It is estimated that 12 million South Africans receive social grants. See also M. Appel, *Social grants making an impact*, SouthAfrica.info, 7 April 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3fno44>

16 S. Perret et al., *Activity systems and livelihoods in the Eastern Cape Province rural areas*, Department of Agricultural Economics Extension and Rural Development Working Paper, 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/4x2muf>

17 M. Samson et al., *Social Grants, South Africa*, London: Overseas Development Institute, Inter-Regional Inequality Facility Policy Brief 1, 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/4n7qb2>

18 In an interview in September 2007 with an extension officer in Cala, it was clear that where farmers had a surplus, they had problems with storage and marketing.

19 The contradictions are staggering: on the one hand, with the approval of international business and governments, the MFPP, at the sweep of a pen, virtually wipes out agricultural biodiversity in the Eastern Cape; on the other hand, the same interests support the building of a seed vault near the North Pole specifically to ensure that the seeds constituting such biodiversity are preserved for future generations. See GRAIN, *Svalbard seed vault: not everyone is celebrating*, 2008. www.grain.org/nfg/?id=557

20 Communication from Tim Wigley, after an interview with Chief Zengezwa, Dellville Trust, July 2008.

21 K. Darmgaard Hansen, "The Massive Food Production Scheme, Eastern Cape – Design, Extension Approach and Scope for Adoption of Minimum Tillage", Master's thesis (AD 03010), Department of Plant and Soil Science, Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University (KVL), Denmark, 2006.

22 NGOs in KwaZulu Natal also experience how the Department of Agriculture makes funding for smallholder farmers conditional on them creating new community structures, such as cooperatives, and the use of GMO seeds. See K. Palitza, "Small Farmers Pushed to Plant GM Seed", Inter-Press Service, 21 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4k7dhc>

officials seemed to forget who the programme was meant to benefit. They blamed farmers for being "opportunistic" and argued that social grants (that is, welfare benefits) were one of the reasons farmers were not "committed" to farming. It is true that South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa where there is an extensive social welfare system¹⁵ and that an estimated 75 per cent of the Eastern Cape rural population are on benefits (two-thirds of them women). Rural households in South Africa thus rely on a wide range of livelihood strategies, of which agriculture is just one. The situation is diverse: for many people, agriculture and access to natural resources still make an important contribution to livelihoods, food security and social networks.¹⁶ The suggestion that social grants are to "blame" for the failures is not supported by evidence. The evidence suggests that those households with access to land and to alternative sources of income are the ones with the resilience that enables them to participate in this kind of project.¹⁷ The very poor and the land-poor families are consistently excluded.

The MFPP has also created dependency on an unreliable and opportunistic private sector, ineffective government and fickle international markets. The programme is inflexible, and over the timeframe of this project the price of inputs rose exponentially, exposing farmers to even more risk. Storage and market access were not addressed by the project, and farmers reported that this was a big issue for them.¹⁸ In many cases the price they got for their product on the local market was lower than that paid for traditional maize, which is still preferred for eating.

While it is clear that MFPP, the Green Revolution of the Eastern Cape, has been singularly unsuccessful in relieving poverty or integrating farmers in the market, it has, however, had a series of other long-term consequences.

a) Destruction of agro-biodiversity and knowledge

One of the most serious impacts of the MFPP, which features in none of the plans or evaluations, has been the loss of traditional seed.¹⁹ Over the years agricultural policies have eroded South African farmers' capacity to conserve and enhance their own seeds but, despite this, many smallholders have still managed to use and save traditional seeds. In interviews, farmers clearly expressed their preference for these seeds. One chief said that he plants one hectare of his 40-hectare maize fields with traditional seed, while planting the rest with MFPP seeds. He and his family consume the maize from the traditional seed, while selling the harvest from the MFPP seeds.²⁰

Farmers in the programme hope in the future to recover the traditional seeds they have lost from families in other villages that have not participated in the MFPP. They say that, apart from their preferred taste and health benefits, crops from traditional seeds have two key advantages: they are very well adapted to the environment, particularly to the acidic soils which dominate the region; and they are reliable. There are recorded incidences where the MFPP seeds did not grow properly, while traditional seeds in adjacent plots, in the same soil, fared well.²¹

b) Creating a market for GMOs²²

South African farmers have been growing GM crops for 10 years, but the technology has not reached smallholder farmers because of the cost. The MFPP presents the ideal opportunity for companies to get the government to subsidise the introduction of GM crops, and they have not hesitated to target the decision makers: government officials, chiefs and mentors. Chiefs in the Flagstaff district attended a two-day conference at which Monsanto introduced its Bt maize²³ (the advertising campaign for which was called *iyasihluthisa*, which means "it fills your stomachs").²⁴ The chiefs, who were told that yields would increase up to 133 percent,²⁵ are now coercing their communities to plant it.²⁶ And the farmers planting Roundup Ready maize²⁷ and Bt maize are not aware that they are planting something different. They have not been told about the need to plant buffer zones, the possibility of contamination and insect and weed resistance, the



Photo: Tim Wigley

Owing to lack of information, some farmers participating in the MFPP initially stored inputs, including bags of poison-covered seed and pesticides, in their kitchens.

health risks, and so forth. Moreover, the farmers gain nothing from planting Bt maize apart from a bigger bill: in 2008 the Agricultural Research Council found that the African stalk borer has built up resistance to Bt maize in South Africa.²⁸

c) *Reduction in nutritional value and productivity*

Traditionally farmers intercrop maize with pumpkins and beans. When farmers plant hybrid seeds or GMOs, and use chemicals, intercropping with these food crops is not possible. In addition, farmers say that the timing of these seeds is not compatible with planting traditional winter crops, so the planting of oats during the winter months as fodder for sheep has had to be stopped. As a result, the total nutritional value of the crops harvested on the farmers' land and the total output have both declined, and additional food and fodder have had to be bought.

A fundamental flaw in the MFPP is that it seriously underestimated the efficacy of the traditional production systems, even though recent studies have shown that in these "the ratio of output value to input costs actually indicates a very efficient system."²⁹ There are several reasons why this is so: fields often are irregular in shape, so it is difficult to calculate yields; farmers usually practise mixed farming, but studies record the harvest from only the main crop, disregarding other crops, fruit and wild foods, even though these may represent half of the total value of the produce; and yield estimates do not capture either the early harvesting of green maize, substandard produce (even though it is always used in some way by the farmers) or the good quality produce kept for seed.³⁰

d) *Poisoning of soils*

MFPP officials recommend that farmers use chemical fertilisers rather than animal manure, and farmers are now expressing concern about the quality of their soil, as they can see that the fertilisers harden and "poison" their soils. They were given little advice about the dangers of pesticides and the best way to use fertilisers. At one homestead, the chemicals were stored in the kitchen (see picture opposite). In another community, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser.

When a farmer was asked why he was continuing with the "modern" methods if they brought no benefit, he replied: "I am hopeful that if conditions are favourable I will become a big man." Women farmers tend to be more realistic, saying that they want to go back to the traditional way of farming because it gave them more security and better quality food for their families. Even so, they are often forced to participate in such schemes because

of social pressure, along with more overt political pressures.

e) *The disempowerment of local farmers*

Perhaps the greatest failure of the MFPP was that it was no different from previous top-down government interventions and was never "owned" by the local farmers. Government officials imposed a complete change in agricultural practices on communal farmers. Some of the officials were quite clear about what they were doing: they were demanding a "change of mindset" and were attempting to "convince people to do things they do not understand".³¹ Financial pressure was used to push through change: when farmers had been unable to pay back the percentage of their debt required by the programme schedule, the officials changed the rules so that the farmers were required to pay a deposit up front before receiving the inputs. The aim was to teach the farmers to "take responsibility". In practice, this narrowed down participation to households with other sources of cash, such as social grants.

Government officials have a strangely distorted view of the unequal power relationships inherent in the project. They say that government "took a risk" in helping these farmers and that the farmers are "using political pressure" to avoid paying their debts. They clearly cannot conceive of the risk that a community, or an individual farmer, has to take when they participate: apart from dealing with inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, they must also now implement foreign technologies and alien farming systems; they are told to let go of their seed and their knowledge; they must take on debts; and they must expose themselves, their livestock and their soil to damaging chemicals. Why did farmers feel they had no choice but to participate? This can only be understood in the cultural context of the chiefs having a lot of power, in addition to a political context, in which there is little room to challenge the ANC government. One farmer commented: "the government is farming on behalf of farmers and when the five years is over I will go back to the way I farmed before." This was seen as a government project, and government was responsible for the results. The farmers had no option but to sit it out.

If not the farmers, who benefits?

Over the time of the MFPP implementation, maize prices have been very volatile, fluctuating between US\$65 and almost US\$260 per tonne, while input costs have risen exponentially, to US\$909 per hectare.³² Comparing figures over the project time is therefore difficult. In 2007, the farmers

23 A genetically modified form of maize that has had a gene inserted to make it resistant to the African stalk borer.

24 In a bizarre twist of "putting words in the mouth of farmers" the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) reported in February 2008 that Eastern Cape farmers are so happy with Bt maize that they call it *iyasihluthisa*, reminiscent of the way Makhathini cotton farmers were ruthlessly exploited by Monsanto to sell Bt cotton to the world. <http://tinyurl.com/4cssje>

25 E. Botha, "Chiefs to hear about GM crop benefits", *Daily Despatch*, 26 October 2004.

26 Discussion with Klara Jacobson, Swedish researcher working in Xhophozo village near Flagstaff, May 2008.

27 Maize that has had a gene inserted to make it resistant to Monsanto's herbicide Roundup.

28 "Stalkborer breaks Bt Armour", *Farmers Weekly*, March 2008.

29 P. McAllister, *Maize yields in the Transkei: how productive is subsistence cultivation?*, quoted in S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/3eu5ot>

30 Ibid.

31 Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, July 2008.

32 Exchange rate in August 2008: ZAR7.7 = US\$1.



Box 3 Another village is possible: Roma

By Tim Wigley

Near Cala, just down the hill not far from Dellville Trust is Roma Village, which was not part of the MFPP. Over the last five years the community has, instead, received training in natural farming methods, enhancing what it was doing anyway. Some farmers have been very pleased with the results they have achieved. For example, Mr and Mrs Tyandela have for the last five years achieved yields in excess of 4 tonnes of maize per hectare. Their results were so impressive that almost the entire village has stopped using chemical fertilisers and now uses animal manure to fertilise their land. In fact, the yields achieved by the Tyandelas exceeded those of Tiwana MFPP, which is considered one of the best of the MFPP results in the district. Today Mrs Tyandela trains her neighbours and other farmers in the area. This is real social mobilisation because these farmers are independent and self-sufficient. They know what they want and are able to say no. They can apply their knowledge and transfer this knowledge to build a strong community.

All the yields measured in Roma exceeded those achieved in another neighbouring village, Sifondile, which is taking part in the MFPP – and that is without taking into account the pumpkins and beans that are intercropped with the maize in Roma. In fact, this practice is a form of insurance because, when the maize yield is low because of adverse conditions, often one of these companion crops will do better than normal. In Sifondile village this practice was stopped with the introduction of MFPP because the herbicide used kills these crops. In previous years Sifondile village used to get a particularly good bean crop. A 2006 costing exercise to compare production costs for maize in these two villages showed that in Roma it cost 28 cents to produce one kilogram of maize and in Sifondile it cost 3.73 rands – thirteen times as much.

Some comments made by villagers in Roma:

- “We used to believe that if we did not use chemical fertilisers we would not get a crop so, if we had no money at planting time, we did not plant. Now we can plant without money.”
- “We used to think we could only plant our gardens in summer but now we have something green in our gardens throughout the year.”
- “Using manure on our land has improved the soil and it holds more moisture now than it did when we used chemical fertiliser. Whereas before, if we had a drought, the soil would get very hard and even crack, so when we ploughed it made big clods, now the soil stays soft and easy to work.”
- “We have noticed that food grown with manure tastes much better and is healthier too. We do not have to take our children to the clinic as often as before.”

Two events illustrate how aware people are of the advantages of using traditional seeds and organic methods.

- In 2007, Mr Tyandela took half a bag of the maize he had harvested and compared it with a full bag from the MFPP in Sifondile. His half bag was heavier than the full bag of MFPP maize.
- In 2008, the Department of Agriculture decided to support the community garden in Roma with chemical inputs, but when they delivered the fertiliser the community said they did not want it and sent it back. They prefer using manure in the garden because they know it does not destroy their soil.

interviewed had debts that varied between US\$ 640 and US\$ 7,272, with only the farmers who were also contractors having higher income than debt. The vast majority of farmers agreed that they were unable to repay their debts, despite the subsidy. Fallout rates have been extremely high, with a trend towards only individual farmers participating towards the end of the study period. Uvimba Bank has had to write off farmers' debts, and these farmers were taken out of the programme.

The programme was revised to ensure better debt repayment, so focus has shifted even further away

from the poorest towards the better-off farmers. Farmers now have to “take more responsibility” and put down a deposit of 25 per cent – this amounts to US\$ 230 per hectare.³³ There is also a stronger focus on a partnership between government and the private sector to force farmers to practise “better financial management”. The main beneficiary of the project is, of course, the private sector, particularly the seed and agrochemical companies, as the government is now subsidising the introduction of their expensive products to a new market of small farmers who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Most of the US\$ 60

³³ To put this into perspective: government grants for pensioners are US\$106 per month; the average income for 75% of the Eastern Cape population is less than US\$ 110 per month; in the rural areas it is even lower.

million plus of public money pumped into this scheme goes to them. South Africa's seed legislation also protects their interests and ensures that they get their royalties. As the companies are focused on short-term profit, the sustainability of this venture is not their concern.

Contractors require a special mention as they benefit from a four-fold subsidy. On the one hand, they are paid to plough and disk the land of participating farmers, regardless of the level of their skill; they are also participants, qualifying for the subsidy given to farmers; they are also paid if they work as a contractor on their own land; and they qualify for a soft loan from Uvimba Bank to buy implements such as tractors. In many cases they are to blame for failed crops, either because they were not experienced enough for the work or because they lacked commitment to the outcome of their work. This is a classic example of how local elites are well placed to access project funding and to pocket the benefits, creating greater disparities in the community.

Talk Left, Do Right³⁴

Despite all the disruptive land policies of the colonial and apartheid systems, access to land and natural resources still plays a significant role in the livelihoods and household economies of rural dwellers. Clearly, the Eastern Cape government has either not taken cognisance of, or chosen to ignore, the impressive literature that demonstrates this.³⁵ As a result, the MFPP focuses on "monetising" livelihoods and limits its concept of food security to the parameter of yield only. Those behind it have not tried to embrace any of the complex social and economic structures underpinning poverty. The programme does not build on local priorities and strengths; instead, it has increased vulnerability by eroding them.

The dominant paradigm behind MFPP is the idea that there are two parallel economies – the so-called "first" and "second" economies – and that the poor must be integrated into the "first". Poverty studies show that this is a false separation and that the poor are in fact integrated, but on such adverse terms that their poverty is deepening. By giving lip service to poverty alleviation and then not giving attention to structural conditions that hinder



Photo: GRAIN

Peach orchard and food gardens in Roma, Eastern Cape, where the villagers have stopped using chemical fertilisers.

and destroy people's efforts at making a living, these policies and programmes are predestined to have the opposite effect.³⁶ Poverty not only persists but is deepening in rural areas because of the inequalities and vulnerabilities created by attempts to integrate Africa's smallholder farmers into global capitalism and "free markets". Rather than pushing massive schemes that are risky and costly and create dependency on the volatile "first" economy, government officials in South Africa (and the rest of Africa) should be adopting policies based on the principles of local and national food sovereignty. These would entail agrarian reform based on local control over seed and seed diversity, low input agriculture, soil and water conservation strategies, access to land and natural resources, and support for local markets. In short, what is needed are government policies that focus on social needs, not integration into world markets.

Both MFPP and AGRA advocates reinforce the colonial image that African farmers are ignorant and unproductive and that local practices have nothing to contribute to livelihoods. What they really want is to create markets for GMOs and agro-chemicals, and ultimately to obtain access to land to grow lucrative global commodities. As the MFPP has shown, people and soils are impoverished in the process, and seeds, knowledge and the very concept of community are lost.

34 A term taken from S. Saul, "The Hares, the Hounds and the ANC", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25 No. 1, 2004. He writes about the inherent contradictions in the South African government which on the one hand bases its political relevance on "Third World" development rhetoric, but on the other hand presents itself as a "reliable client" to global capitalist interests, which are profoundly anti-poor. The MFPP and AGRA are doing the same.

35 The important contribution of so-called "under-utilised" communal lands to livelihoods has been widely recognised for many years now, but it is ignored because it does not fit into the market economy outlook. See, for example S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/3eu5ot>

36 A. du Toit and D. Neves, *In search of South Africa's Second Economy*, Bellville and Manchester: University of the Western Cape and University of Manchester, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 102, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/3nnev3>

