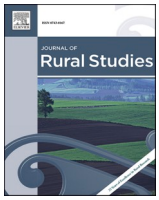
Journal of Rural Studies 106 (2024) 103200

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud



Social drivers and differentiated effects of deagrarianisation: A longitudinal study of smallholder farming in South Africa's Eastern Cape province

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Africa
Agriculture
Deagrarianisation
Habermas
Lifeworld

ABSTRACT

South Africa's smallholders have progressively become disengaged from farming despite their lack of alternative livelihood options, resulting in the deepening of rural poverty. Farming's reduced role in rural livelihoods represents a wider trend of deagrarianisation seen across contexts and geographies. While most literature on deagrarianisation focuses on its economic dimensions, this paper places the social and cultural dimensions of farming at the centre of its analysis to understand why smallholders are becoming less engaged in agriculture. Drawing on Habermas's concept of the colonisation of the lifeworld and on ethnographic fieldwork in four villages in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, we show how local social cohesion in farming has been undermined by a series of oppressive state policies. Recent agricultural development interventions have not managed to break with this trend, but instead continue to undermine social cohesion and reciprocity. The impacts of this loss of social cohesion in farming have been most severe for the poorest households who seldom plant their fields today. Based on our findings, we suggest that agricultural development programmes should aim to build on smallholders' appreciation of agriculture, their remaining connections to the land and their sense of solidarity, rather than focusing exclusively on stimulating the development of individual entrepreneurs.

1. Introduction

South African smallholders have increasingly become disengaged from farming in recent decades, despite the lack of other livelihood opportunities and in parallel with the deepening of rural poverty (Hajdu et al., 2020; Shackleton et al., 2019; World Bank, 2018). The deagrarianisation found in South African smallholder communities is part of a wider phenomenon described across geographies. Globally we see how the growing dominance of powerful agricultural input suppliers and supermarkets, and an intense competition for land, make smaller farms to go out of business, leading to an upscaling of farm units and an increased industrialisation of agriculture (Hebinck, 2018). Focusing on Africa, Bryceson (1996: 99) describes deagrarianisation as a trend emerging mainly after the 1960s and the independence of many African countries, and involving:

> "*a diminishing degree of rural household food and basic needs self-sufficiency, a decline in agricultural labour relative to non-agricultural labour in rural households and in total national labour expenditure, a decrease in agricultural output per capita in the national economy relative to non-agricultural output, and a shrinking proportion of the total population residing in rural areas*".

As we will describe in this paper, the situation with a diminishing role of farming for rural livelihoods in the South African smallholder context, displays some similarities, but also important differences with what Hebinck (2018) and Bryceson (1996) describe. Here, smallholder farming households who persevered despite being undermined by oppressive governments for over a century, who continue to have access to land, and who to a very limited extent are integrated into (and thus only to a limited extent affected by) agricultural markets beyond the local community are now disengaging from farming. Our previous research has indicated that the comparatively better off smallholder households (most of who would still be counted as poor by national measures) abandoned field cultivation because of access to other more attractive livelihood options, whereas the poorest households failed to

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103200
Received 17 May 2023; Received in revised form 9 January 2024; Accepted 12 January 2024
Available online 20 January 2024

cultivate their fields out of distress (Fischer and Hajdu, 2015).

While deagrarianisation in the South African smallholder context clearly seems to have negative economic and food security impacts, particularly on the poorest households, it also seems from our previous research that standard economic explanations are insufficient for understanding why fields are increasingly unplanted (Fischer and Hajdu, 2015). We suggest therefore that it is relevant to move beyond a focus on economic factors alone to understand what is happening. Indeed, farming is not only an economic− but also a social and cultural activity (Rose et al., 2018). The social dimensions of deagrarianisation however remain little explored (Bilewicz and Bukraba-Rylska, 2021). As such, the dual aims driving this paper are 1) to contribute new knowledge about the reasons for, and differentiated impacts of, deagrarianisation among South African smallholder households and 2) to show how attention to the social and cultural role of farming can bring new understanding about important factors impacting deagrarianisation.

To conceptualise the differentiated and changing role of farming, we draw on Habermas's (1985) concepts of lifeworld and the colonisation of the lifeworld to analyse wealth-differentiated data from a longitudinal study of farming and livelihoods in four villages in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. The lifeworld can be conceptualised as people's lived and shared experiences, constructed through activities that build social cohesion and mutual understanding. In his critique of modern society, Habermas suggests that 'colonisation of the lifeworld' happens when new situations, resulting from the growth and modernisation of society, cannot be meaningfully taken up in the lifeworld, but instead damage such mutual understanding and social cohesion (Habermas, 1985). Drawing on this conceptualisation, we pay particular attention to the role that diminished social cohesion and mutual understanding within the sphere of farming plays in the reduced investment and engagement in farming.

In the next section (2), we contextualise the study by providing some background to the historical factors that have undermined smallholder farming in South Africa and by summarising current knowledge on contemporary trends in deagrarianisation in the Eastern Cape Province. Section 3 outlines our analytical framework and section 4 describes our approach and methods. Section 5 begins with describing the current situation in the study site with regard to rural livelihoods and farming (Section 5.1). This is followed by Sections 5.2 to 5.5 where we draw on our own data and other published research to outline, in chronological order, how the social and cultural role of farming has shifted over time, the key factors that we identify in driving this shift, and the locally differentiated effects. Section 6 summarises key findings and we also provide some concluding remarks, based on the findings from this paper, regarding what might be needed from policy interventions in the region if the aim is to reduce poverty through supporting agricultural production.

2. Deagrarianisation in South Africa

Deagrarianisation in South Africa's smallholder communities started already during the colonial era (Bundy, 1988; Hebinck and Van Averbeke, 2007). Colonial and apartheid economies were built on a system of exploiting Black labour through an intricate system of accumulation by dispossession that served the purpose of eliminating what in many instances had been a competitive smallholder sector in the 19th century. Two policy interventions with significant negative impact on smallholder agriculture are central to this paper and we therefore describe these in some more detail: the establishment of the homelands (and the subsequent 'independence' of some of these), and the so-called betterment planning process.

The Transkei homeland, where the villages described in this paper are located, is today part of the Eastern Cape province. It was together with neighbouring Ciskei home to South Africa's isi-Xhosa speaking population. Access to land in Transkei and other homelands was limited to the extent that it was impossible to survive on farming alone. The purpose of this was to force able-bodied men and women to take up underpaid work in the mines and on settler farms. However, the squeezing of people and livestock into the homelands led to such severe poverty and land degradation that the colonial government felt impelled to act. The Betterment reorganisation was initiated in 1936 and continued during apartheid. It focused on changing rural settlement patterns and farming practices with a view to reducing land degradation and increasing government control over land use in the homelands. Previously spread-out settlements were reorganised into nucleated villages with houses and home gardens. Individual fields were grouped into field areas outside residential areas with the purpose of facilitating mechanisation and benefits of scale through communal ploughing (De Wet, 1990; McAllister, 1991). Sometimes there was also enforced culling of livestock (McAllister, 1989). Several authors testify to the disruptive impacts of betterment in terms of lost agricultural land, destroyed homesteads and disrupted social ties (de Wet, 1991; de Wet and McAllister, 1983; McAllister, 1986).

In 1976, Transkei was designated an independent state by South Africa (in total four of the homelands were designated independent states, but they were never recognised as such by the international community). Black South Africans with linguistic connections to the Transkei lost their South African citizenship and were forced to relocate to the new 'country', resulting in further crowding, while labour migration into South Africa and the mines continued to be the main way for rural households to make a living. As we will see, the period under the Transkei government both included the continuation of apartheid policies (such as the forced designation of field areas in the studied villages, section 5.3) and efforts to improve rural livelihoods through agricultural support programmes (section 5.5).

In sum, the long duration and comprehensiveness of colonial and apartheid oppression led to a situation in which rural families in the homelands on the eve of democracy relied on farming for their livelihoods far less than smallholders in other African countries (Fischer, 2022). In the past two decades of democracy, the state has made efforts to mitigate rural poverty and revive smallholder agriculture. Despite these efforts the role of agriculture for rural livelihoods has continued to decline, and it seems the rate of decline as even increased in recent decades (Jacobson, 2013; Shackleton et al., 2019; Fischer, 2022).

Several publications have described and aimed to explain the deagrarianisation seen in the past few decades the Eastern Cape province. While there are also indications that livestock numbers are in decline (Shackleton and Ntshudu, 2023), most previous studies have focused on the decline in field cultivation. These studies provide a consensual picture of widespread disengagement in field cultivation in this region in recent decades. Several factors are repeatedly mentioned as being central in influencing the decision not to plant fields. These include damaged fencing around the field areas leading to crops being destroyed by livestock, reduced access to labour, seed, livestock for ploughing and other inputs, and new aspirations among young people (Bank, 2001; de la Hey and Beinart, 2017; Hebinck and Lent, 2007; Shackleton et al., 2019). Notably, lack access to land is not central in these explanations. Studies that explore more deeply the reasons behind disengagement in field cultivation instead widely acknowledge the negative effects of the homeland system and the reorganisation of homesteads and fields during betterment (Bundy, 1988; De Wet, 1990; de Wet and McAllister, 1983). Changing power relations in the household resulting from retrenchments in the mining industry and from women being more likely to receive welfare payments (such as child support grants) have also been described as more recent changes that are having a negative impact on farming. Migrant labour investments in farm assets have largely been replaced by other household investments, with new relations of reciprocity developing that are unrelated to farming (de la Hey and Beinart, 2017; Granlund and Hochfeld, 2019).

3. Analytical framework: deagrarianisation as colonisation of the lifeworld

We structure our analysis around the concepts of the lifeworld and colonisation of the lifeworld. Analytically, this draws attention to how farming is constructed as a taken-for-granted activity (Husserl, 1970) and how some dimensions of this taken-for-grantedness fall apart as a result of colonisation of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1985). Habermas has concentrated much of his work on the communicative dimension of the lifeworld (analysed through a focus on speech). Our use of Habermas's work is closer to the wider cultural analysis that is characteristic of his writings on the lifeworld and system.

The lifeworld as people's lived experiences and communicative action is socially constructed through activities that build mutual understanding through cultural, social and personal spheres. This happens through cultural reproduction, coordinating action that ensures solidarity, and through socialisation that forms personal identities. New situations are taken up into the existing conditions by being embedded in these symbolic structures of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1985).

The 'system' represents the dimensions of the world that are governed by strategic action and steered by "*delinguistified media of communication such as money and power*" (Habermas, 1985: 184). Importantly, the fact that systems are governed by strategic action should not be taken to mean that systems are created intentionally by certain actors acting strategically towards achieving this goal. Rather, Habermas suggests that as societies grow and differentiate, it is inevitable that social relations become (partly) governed by a functional logic and strategic action. Power is operationalised through standardised laws, which together with monetary transactions make governing less dependent on mutual understanding and communicative action. This can happen in ways that work with or undermine (colonise) the lifeworld. In essence, colonisation of the lifeworld can be understood as a situation in which system logics take over the lifeworld in a way that undermines solidarity, meaning-making and mutual understanding. It will lead actors to question what is accepted as valid and legitimate knowledge and actions, and a decreased mutual understanding and solidarity among members (Edwards, 2008; Habermas, 1985). This can be manifested as a discrepancy between the expectations people have of each other in a society and actual practices, which leads to a loss of social cohesion and mutual trust (Houtepen and Meulen, 2000).

Habermas's work was developed in, and has most often been employed, in the global North. The colonisation thesis thus has little to do with colonialism per se. However, in the context of South Africa, our analysis reveals how colonisation of the lifeworld of farming is entangled with the country's colonial legacy. In this case, it was not just any modern legal and monetary systems that impacted peoples' lifeworld, but rather systems that were, in many respects, specifically built on the oppression of the colonised people. At the same time, analysing our data through the lens of the colonisation of the lifeworld, facilitated attention to the continuities between the colonial past and the present. As indicated in the introduction to this article, the shifting government intentions from undermining (in the past) to supporting (in the present) smallholder agriculture, have not led to the intended re-agrarianisation. Our analytical attention to the colonisation of the lifeworld helps reveal how there is, in fact, a continuity in how seemingly very different systems of governance have undermined local social cohesion and mutual understanding in farming.

In this context, it also seems relevant to make mention of the recent explosion of works on decolonising research and development practice (Chilisa et al., 2016; Ibrahima and Mattaini, 2019; Rubis, 2020; Tuhiwai, 1999)– referring to approaches in research and development that aim to serve to break with colonial pasts by centring indigenous ways of knowing and relating. While we do not engage in depth with that body of work here, we suggest that Habermas's lens of colonisation of the lifeworld provides a theoretical approach to draw attention to how local systems of understanding and being are impacted by different systems of governance. As such it also provides a starting point for suggestions about how to reverse negative effects of particular forms of governance, by paying attention to the lifeworld of local people. We will come back to this in the conclusions.

4. Approach and methods

The study area comprises four villages located in the same administrative area, in the OR Tambo district of the Eastern Cape, in South Africa's former Transkei homeland (Fig. 1). These villages (numbered village 1–4 in this paper) are located one after the other along a road, and are in many ways treated by residents as one community. The chief of the administrative area resides in village 2. Households are located in a grid pattern in nucleated villages, with fields and communal grazing lands outside residential areas (Fig. 1).

Our analysis brings together several sources of data collected by Fischer and Johnson and a research assistant, Nomahlubi Mnukwa between 2006 and 2022 on several short visits, and during two longer stays: a five-month stay by Fischer in 2008 and a two-month stay by the Johnson in 2020. These data have been analysed from other perspectives and published previously (Jacobson, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Fischer and Hajdu, 2015; Fischer, 2022; Fischer et al., 2023), but they have not been combined before with the aim of offering a deeper understanding of the changing social and cultural dimensions of farming, and the differentiated effects of these changes, as is done in the present paper. The methods included participant observation, a wealth-ranking activity, two household surveys (performed 2008 and 2022), focus group discussions and individual interviews.

To grasp local perceptions of social stratification and be able to analyse how social positioning affected the possibility of planting a field, a wealth-ranking activity modified from Pretty et al. (1995) was performed in villages 1, 2 and 3 in 2008. Locally relevant wealth classifications were discussed, and each household was classified according to this local standard by four social classes: rich, middle, poor and very poor. A household's classification was assigned by a qualitative assessment of its combined assets, household history and social relations.

A household survey was conducted with all households in villages 1, 2 and 3 during 2008 to provide data on labour availability in the household, access to land and livestock, incomes in the form of employment, own business and social grants, and key household expenditure including investments made in livestock and cultivation. The survey data and wealth ranking data were combined to allow wealth differentiated analysis of livelihoods and farming in the three villages.

To deepen understanding of different households' experiences of poverty and its impact on agriculture, the heads of 11 households in village 2 were approached for repeated interviews between 2008 and 2019. The households were selected through multivariate statistical processing of data on household and farming characteristics from the household survey and the wealth ranking given to the household in the participatory wealth-ranking activity, with the aim of capturing the variety of smallholders in different poverty groups (described in detail in Jacobson, 2013). Of the 11 households, four were classed as 'very poor', two as 'poor', three as 'middle' and two as 'rich' in 2008. Seven were headed by a woman and four by a man. In 2020, Johnson conducted interviews with households that were perceived by their neighbours as being engaged farmers in villages 2, 3 and 4 with the aim of understanding why these farmers continue farming, as well as the key constraints they face. The interviewed farmers included a combination of those who actively cultivated both fields and home gardens (20) and those who only planted their home garden (16).

All the interviews were simultaneously translated between isi-Xhosa and English. The English parts of the interviews were transcribed. For a subsection of the interviews, the isi-Xhosa parts of the interviews were translated and transcribed to confirm the quality of the original translation. All the quotations in the text are based on the English translations. Interviews and field notes were analysed in an iterative process

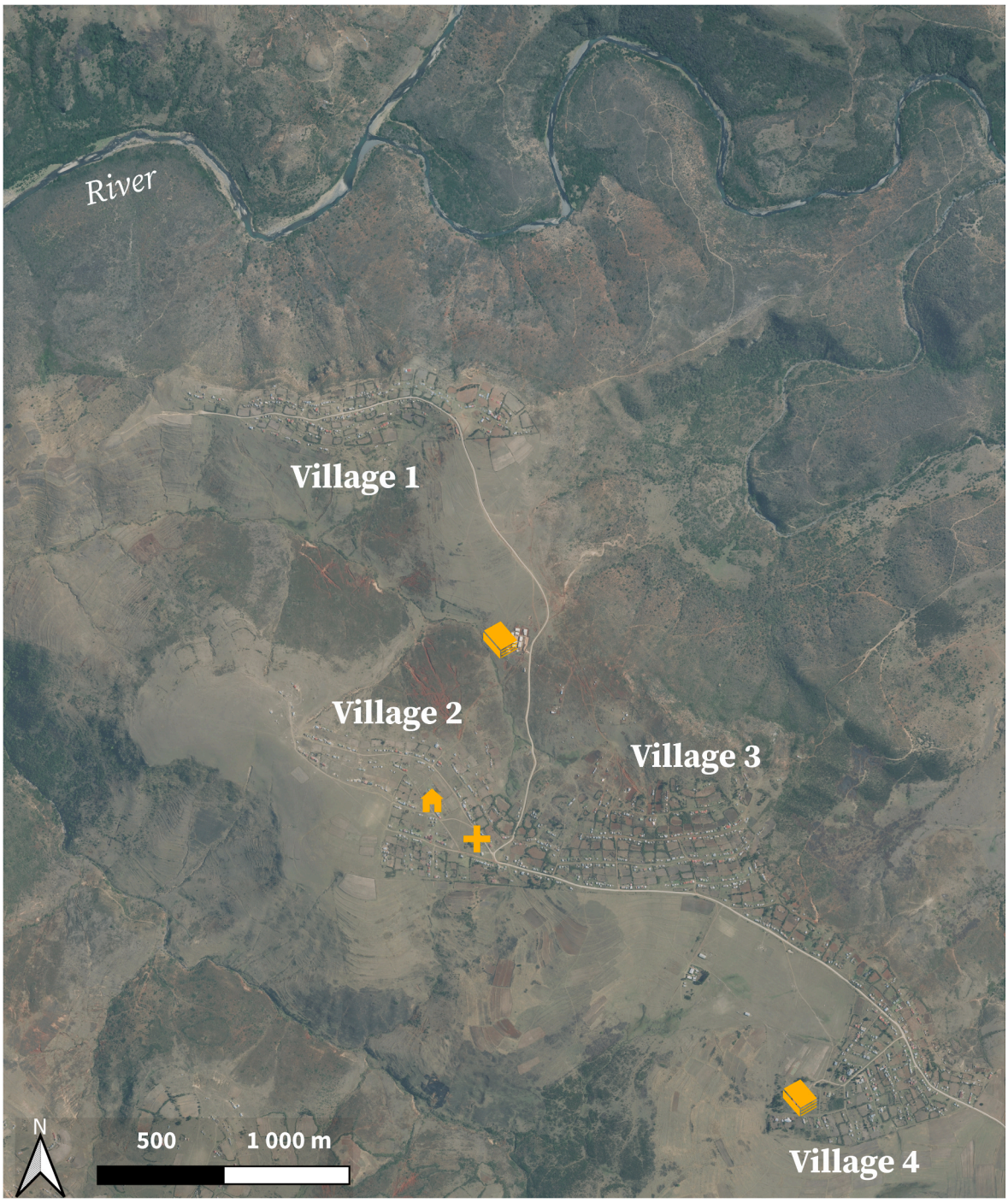

Fig. 1. Spatial layout of the four study villages. Icons in yellow indicate the household of the chief (house icon), the clinic (cross) and the two schools (book icons). Background aerial imagery taken in 2019, retrieved from the South African CDNGI Geospatial Portal. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

where themes were created both inductively from the data and deductively, drawing concepts relating to the theorisation of lifeworld and system. Secondary literature complemented fieldwork material to outline the wider historical, political and economic changes influencing the lifeworld, as well as to compare and contrast the situation in the studied villages with findings from other studies relating to different villages in the Eastern Cape. The household survey and wealth ranking were subjected to descriptive analysis in SPSS for the purpose of analysing differentiated possibilities and limitations in agriculture. The quantitative data were subsequently used to enrich the qualitative analysis of lifeworld and system.

To visualise historical changes in the organisation of farming and settlement in the study area, we also made use of aerial photographs taken in 1948, 1966 and 2019, which were sourced from the South African CDNGI Geospatial Portal. Each of the photographs from the three different time periods cover slightly different parts of the study area. To be able to analyse land use change over time, we delineated an area that was jointly covered by all three time periods. This area encompassed the residential and field areas of the southern part of village 1, all of village 2 and 3, and the western part of village 4 (Fig. 2).

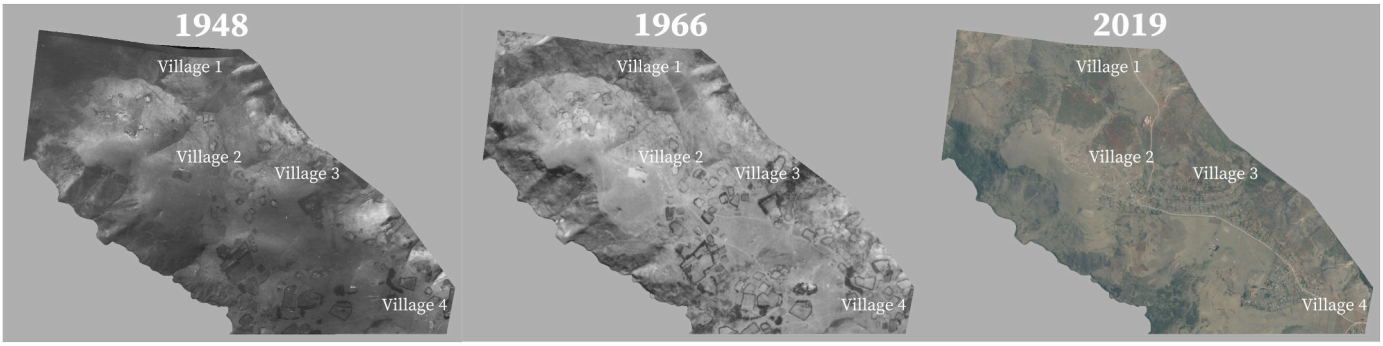

Fig. 2. Images detailing changes in the spatial organisation of households and farmland from 1948 to 1966 and then in 2019. Aerial images were retrieved from the South African CDNGI Geospatial Portal.

5. Understanding deagrarianisation through the lens of lifeworld and system

5.1. Farming, poverty and social differentiation today

Close to 80% of households in the wider district encompassing the study villages were classed as poor by national poverty measures in 2017 (Eastern Cape Socio Economic Consultative Council, 2017), but poverty is not evenly distributed. Pooling the wealth-ranking activity performed in 2008 for villages 1, 2 and 3, 41 households (16 %) were classified as 'rich', 52 (21 %) as 'middle', 55 (22 %) as 'poor' and 105 (42 %) as 'very poor'. A 'rich' household often had several cattle and/or a car and/or a household member with regular income and/or a prominent position in the village. Very poor households rarely had any cattle, had very low or no regular income, had household members who suffered from illnesses or disabilities, and they regularly struggled to make ends meet. Notably, access to land was not a wealth-distinguishing factor.

Land is communally owned and allocated by the chief. Despite the study area having been subjected to enforced land redistribution by past regimes, which severely limited access to land (see further in sections 2 and 5.3), land was not seen by informants as a constraining factor for engagement in cultivation (this is because other factors, as will be described in this paper, were considered more constraining) and the sense of secure ownership over one's small plot of land is strong. In 2008, 77% of study households had access to a field of about 0.5 ha. Less than a handful of households have up to three fields, made possible from previous polygyny (and the traditional rule of receiving one field per wife) or because of taking over fields from deceased or migrated family members. While the official rule is that the chief can reallocate unused farmland to a new user, this is not implemented in practice. In recent years, some new households have been allocated fields in the communal grazing lands, instead of the chief reallocating unused fields to these households. There are fewer livestock today (see section 5.4), resulting in less pressure on grazing lands, and few new households request a field, so this has happened largely without conflict. Wealthier households who would have the resources to upscale, did not express a wish to do so but rather invested in other income bringing activities.

Most households rely on a combination of self-employment (for example in the form of having a local shop, running an informal taxi business, or doing building and repair work for neighbours), and social grants (access to which has significantly expanded in the past two decades). Agricultural produce often only contributes a small share of the food consumed by the household and is rarely sold. The bulk of household food is generally purchased, which has become easier with the establishment of supermarkets in remote rural towns (Van Huylenbroeck and D'Haese, 2005; Weatherspoon and Reardon, 2003). Supermarkets are also more accessible since improvements were made to the road to the nearest town and the frequency of taxis from the study villages to the town increased.

Deagrarianisation in the villages is most strikingly clear in the increasing number of fallow fields, located outside the residential areas (Fig. 1). In 2008, 57 % (146/257) of households in villages 1,2 and 3 planted a field, and farmers talked about this representing a significant decline from the past. In 2019 only 15 fields were planted in village 2 with 104 households (we do not have numbers for the other villages but our own visual judgement in 2019 suggests a similar or larger decline in field cultivation in the other villages). The household survey from 2008 indicates that a slightly lower number of very poor households planted their fields relative to other wealth groups. Of the 257 households responding to the survey, 43 % of very poor households planted fields in 2008 compared with 65 %, 57 % and 52 % in the poor, middle and rich groups respectively. These numbers hide the fact that the very poor households often only planted a portion of their garden or field due to a lack of access to the necessary resources. Of the 15 fields planted in village 2 in 2019, none belonged to 'poor' or 'very poor' households, indicating that it has become more difficult for the poorest households to manage to plant the field over the years of our study.

Despite the limited contribution of own agricultural produce to household income and food, farming is, as we will describe in the following sections, a taken-for-granted part of rural life. This was most clearly seen in how small household gardens are planted in all households (a finding that corresponds with other studies from the region, e.g. Shackleton et al., 2019). In 2020, a single mother from a poor household stated: "*I do farming for the sake of my children, so they don't see other houses with maize and then we don't have it. Even if I'm tired I will do it.*" This quotation also exemplifies how the cultural dimension of farming is an important driver behind people farming. To understand how farming on the one hand has such limited role for household food or cash provision, but on the other hand continues to remain central in the rural lifeworld we must look to history.

5.2. Material ties to farming have weakened while ideational ties remain strong

From early in the 20th century until the end of apartheid, women, children, the disabled and elderly struggled to maintain farming in the homelands, while migrant labourers spent a significant share of their wages subsidising the farm output and investing in their rural homes as a pension security (Bank and Hart, 2019). For migrants, the rural home was however not only a place of economic security, but also a site of "*great cultural and emotional significance*" (Bank and Hart, 2019: 415). One dimension of surviving the oppressive migrant labour system was to build and nurture the rural home. As we will describe, our data suggests that material links between the urban and rural in terms of farm investments have largely been lost, but the cultural ties to rural life and to farming remain (this has also been shown by others: Bank, 2001; Bank and Hart, 2019; Njwambe et al., 2019).

While the possibilities for urban employment are limited today, it is

clear from our interviews that remittances from migrant labour played an important part in supporting farming and continue to be viewed as key for farming today. Those that had continued farming fields between 2009 and 2019 described how this was made possible by having household members with previous employment in the mining industry or other more recent employment in urban areas. While young people today mostly strive for urban employment, they still often see themselves returning to rural areas when they are older. As expressed well by a teenage girl who we met outside the local clinic on a sunny day in May 2019: "*When we are older we will want to farm. When you are young you have a job so you don't have time to go to the garden*". Indeed, there are numerous examples of how urban South Africans still nurture the idea of the rural home (Njwambe et al., 2019). The flipside of this is greater psychological ill-being among those rural residents who fail, but still see it as their role to get an urban job to support their rural family. Others have described how retrenched mineworkers have failed to reorient labour capacity towards farming and thus lose their social standing in rural communities in the region (Ngonini, 2007).

At the same time, and in contrast to the past, those who manage to secure a job today are not legally tied to rural life in the same way as in the past (migrant labourers under apartheid were only allowed to stay in urban areas during periods of employment). Now those who manage to secure a job more commonly invest their money in assets other than farm equipment, such as a brick house, a television or a car (see also Jeske, 2016). There are also no strong indications that the welfare payments, which in many households have replaced previous incomes from migrant labour, are being invested in agriculture to any significant extent (Fischer and Hajdu, 2015; see also Hajdu et al., 2020). As one example of this, a middle-aged man we interviewed in 2019 had recently acquired a job as a nurse in a hospital in a nearby town. He had invested in a four-wheel drive vehicle for his trips to his rural home over the weekends. If this had been a generation earlier, he would probably have invested in cattle. Nevertheless, he still nurtured an idea about cultivating his mother's fields in the years ahead.

In sum, our findings suggest that farming remains culturally important to rural residents and to migrated relatives, but that it does not play a key role in most households' food security, with limited investments made in farming (see also Fischer, 2022). Many fields lie unploughed while their owners struggle to make ends meet. As we will describe in subsequent sections, we suggest that an important cause of the current situation is the combination of historical legal measures and more recent neoliberal reforms undermining the sociality of farming. We will show how it has become increasingly difficult to access the resources needed to farm through social ties, leading to farming being more dependent on money than in the past. This makes it particularly difficult for the poorest households to continue to farm.

5.3. Betterment and the reorganisation of fields undermines social cohesion in farming

According to elderly informants, betterment was initiated in the study villages in 1957. Fig. 2 compares images from the years 1948, 1966 and 2019. In the images from 1948 to 1966, dark squares and circles are clearly visible in the landscape. These are large bush-fenced home gardens of about 0.5 to 5 ha. The bush-fenced gardens increased in number and were condensed in the landscape between 1948 and 1966, but the clear grid pattern of houses with much smaller rectangular home gardens and distant fields that we see in the 2019 image was not yet in place in 1966. This suggests that betterment was initially resisted, following a pattern seen in many communities in the former Transkei (de Wet and McAllister, 1983). Respondents describe to us that the Transkei government allocated individual fields in fenced field areas outside residential areas in 1977 and it seems that it was only then that the full reorganisation according to the betterment planning was executed. The spatial layout of villages with houses in a grid pattern is clearly visible in the 2019 image (Fig. 2).

The forced relocation of households and fields meant that all residents lost years of material investments in their homesteads, including houses, soil improvements and bush fencing. Many respondents also testified to having less land as a result of the reorganisations. In 2022, an old man from village 2, when asked to describe betterment, told us: "*We were forced to move. Others were threatened with being buried alive if they refused to move. We were very sad because we didn't have money to build houses. We were very stressed and struggling at that time*."

Reiterating the emotional distress and also emphasising the loss of land and increased hardships resulting from the reorganisations, another elderly farmer from village 2 stated in an interview in 2022: "*We were angry because we loved our field areas. People were moved unwillingly. We were very sad about this, and we would like to go back to our old ways, because the land we are given now is too small for all of us. We are really struggling. After we were moved, there were many diseases and funerals and things are too expensive now*."

There are indications that more influential families in the villages were able to negotiate better sites for their households and fields during the betterment reorganisations, enabling the extension of gardens and a shorter distance between households and fields (Fig. 3). Other less fortunate families were given fields over a kilometre away. An old woman living alone with three children in a household classified as very poor described to us in 2008: "*My field is not planted this year. The field is down by the river, on the other side of the football field, and I no longer have the energy to go there. I used to plant in the field and it is so helpful because it could feed the family and also I could sell some*."

The tearing apart of neighbours and families as households were moved into grid-pattern villages also meant that the previous social organisation of agricultural work was disrupted. A specific example of this is the decline in communal work parties, which has been reported across communities in the Eastern Cape for several decades (Fay, 2003; Fischer and Hajdu, 2015; Shackleton et al., 2019). A widow in her seventies interviewed in 2020, who was passionate about her farming, said:

> "*In the olden days, before, it was easier for everyone to plant in the fields compared to these days. And people had cattle at that time. So, they would combine their cattle, and use neighbours to assist in the fields to do the farming. These days, people don't help each other, and one of the problems is that they no longer have cattle to do that.*"

Emphasising that having cattle is not enough if there is no social organisation, an elderly engaged farmer with nine head of cattle reported:

> "*The most challenging thing is […] it is only me and my son, we cannot do all that on our own, because the cattle need more people. Now you find that you will go to other people and ask them, but you still need more people. There are no people to assist, you see, you would have the equipment to plant but no labour.*"

These quotations also testify to the negative impact on cultivation of the decline in the number of cattle in the villages, which we elaborate on in the next section.

5.4. Loss of cattle and retrenchments put already vulnerable households under increasing pressure

The decline in cattle numbers began already in the 19th century. The spread of cattle lung sickness (CBPP), which came to Africa with European colonisers' cattle, led to high mortalities in previously unaffected cattle populations. Deaths due to CBPP have also been interpreted as a stimulating factor for the 'Xhosa cattle killings' that began in 1856, which almost eradicated the cattle population in the Eastern Cape and led to widespread starvation (FAO-OIE, 2003). In the following years, rinderpest swept through the continent and also affected Xhosa cattle populations. The cattle deaths at the end of the 19th century and the resulting starvation of people have been described as decisive in

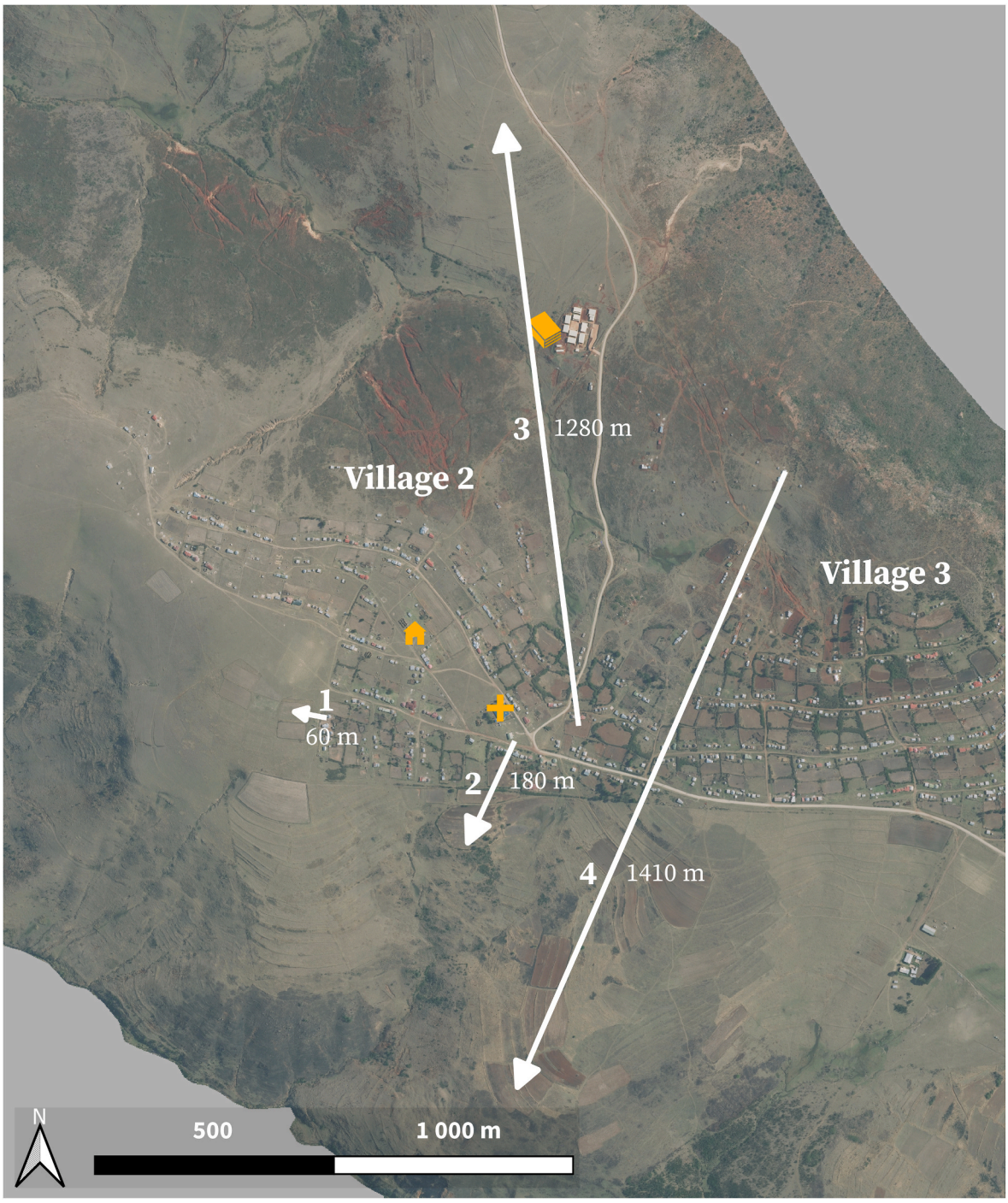

Fig. 3. Example of the varying distances between households and fields resulting from betterment reorganisations (white arrows). Background aerial image taken in 2019 retrieved from the South African CDNGI Geospatial Portal.

weakening rural populations and thereby enabling the colonial administration to establish the homeland areas and the enforced migrant labour system (van Onselen, 1972). Smallholders also describe a more recent reduction in cattle due to drought in the 1980s, but very little is said about this in the literature (although see Vetter et al., 2020). Exemplifying this, an elderly woman with whom we spoke about the past cattle deaths told us in 2022: "*There was a drought that made our land very dry and our plants faded away and the animals didn't have enough food to eat; that's how they died.*"

Personal communication with veterinary researchers and former district veterinary officers in the region confirm severe drought periods in the late 1970s and early 1980s that led to massive cattle deaths for both large farmers and smallholders in the region (personal communication Penrith, Bath and Fisher, February 2022). Household data from villages 1, 2 and 3 from 2008 suggest that 39 % (103/265) of households had cattle. Those (39%) households that had cattle on average had five cattle and this was described by respondents as very few compared to before the 1980s. Beinart (1992) describes how in the 1980s (after the drought years) about half of all households in the wider region encompassing the study villages owned cattle, with the average cattle owner having six head of cattle.

Apart from the drought-induced cattle deaths, the 1980s saw a

number of changes in the wider economy that made livelihoods in the study area more challenging. As Transkei was declared an independent state in 1976 large numbers of Africans were forcibly removed both from the mining districts and the white-owned farms. The droughts in the region stimulated the forced relocation of farm labourers as large farmers faced economic challenges (Vetter et al., 2020). From the 1980s, retrenchments in the mining industry also increased, and since then the importance of the mining industry as a source of employment for rural migrants has continued to decline (Bank and Minkley, 2005). In sum, this period has been identified as resulting on a significant decline in field farming in the former Transkei (Shackleton et al., 2019).

Informants repeatedly pointed to the loss of cattle in the 1980s as a key reason for not planting their fields anymore. Today, compared with the past, cattle owners are more reluctant to lend their cattle to others for ploughing. We understand this as having to do with a combination of the loss of reciprocal relationships in farming and the fact that there are fewer cattle to lend, meaning that those households with cattle are concerned that their cattle will be too exhausted if they plough several other households' fields. Some cattle owners had started charging for ploughing. However, those who charged for ploughing were reluctant to mention this to us, which indicates that it was not completely culturally acceptable to do so. For example, an elderly wealthy farmer with many cattle, who charges people money when he ploughs for them, said to us in 2019: "*If people are not farming, I cannot think of any other reason than laziness, because you can borrow cattle and equipment from someone else if you do not have your own*."

Also associated both with the fall in cattle and the earlier betterment planning were concerns that cattle are no longer being herded properly. When the field areas were established by the Transkei government in the late 1970s, they were fenced to protect the crops from grazing cattle. Today, these fences are damaged and have generally not been replaced, which means that untended cattle can enter field areas and damage crops. The experience with cattle damaging crops was common to people in all wealth groups. In 2008 an old lady from a household classed as rich told us that although they have four fields: "*This year we only planted one because people cannot herd their cattle and last year the cattle came into our fields and so we were discouraged from planting all fields this year*." While respondents with a more prominent standing described that a farmer whose cultivation is damaged by someone else's cattle can demand to be compensated for his loss, more vulnerable respondents were both unsure about whether this would still be possible today, and also testified to not being paid when damage was confirmed. Resenting the current difficulty with demanding payment for damaged crops, an elderly woman in a very poor household said in an interview in 2008 that: "*In the olden days people were strictly herding because if people let the animals go to the fields that person would be punished, so it was not common that the animals got into our fields*" (see box 1 for an expanded example of this).

Many respondents connected the increase in 'sloppy herding practices' with the increase in school attendance, which began during the period of betterment, but was boosted further with democracy and the government roll-out of unconditional cash transfers that have more frequently been allocated to women (Granlund and Hochfeld, 2019). The fact that more children are in school meant that they could no longer be tasked with herding cattle. Our analysis also shows that today herding is rarely a priority investment for households. In the past, livestock owners often pooled their herds and took turns herding or jointly paid a herder. This practice has largely disappeared as numbers of cattle, and the centrality of cattle as a household investment, have declined. Often today, young unemployed male family members or relatives with no strong incentive to take care of the cattle might be told by older relatives to herd the cattle, but seemingly rarely take this task seriously. They were commonly seen pushing cattle around near residential and field areas, rather than moving them to more distant grazing lands.

The quotations above indicate the sense of frustration and hopelessness many smallholders feel about the fact that cattle are no longer herded properly, and, at the same time, a perplexity about why this is the case. When probing the cause of sloppy herding practices, respondents found it difficult to explain and mainly referred to young people being lazy or that people no longer care about herding. We interpret this as a loss of mutual understanding about what cattle keeping is about, which has resulted from evolving relations in farming over time caused by political and economic changes, combined with the significant reduction in the number of cattle, and the associated reduced centrality of cattle in the life cycle of households in the study area (e.g. people with money more rarely investing in cattle and bride prices less commonly being paid in cattle). It is currently difficult for smallholders to make sense of this new situation through the available stock of cultural knowledge, leading to expressions that individualise the problem of sloppy herding.

As a solution to the herding issue, some of the wealthier farmers chose to fence their own fields. In 2008 some farmers talked about fencing their fields, and in 2012 a couple of farmers had done so. In 2020 this number had increased to a handful of fields. It was exclusively households in 'middle' and 'rich' wealth groups, who owned cattle and could therefore plough their fields, who had fenced these. Apart from being a costly investment, fencing your field meant a definite end to taking part in the communal ploughing support that had intermittently been offered by the government since the end of the 1970s. As a result of the difficulty in ensuring ploughing through reciprocal relationships, many respondents reported that the government-sponsored assistance in the form of communal ploughing of fields was an essential component of being able to plant your field, which we describe in the section below.

5.5. *Agrarian interventions and increasing commodification continue the colonisation of the lifeworld of farming*

In sum earlier sections show how the social disruption and material loss caused by the forced reorganisation of households and fields in 1977, followed by droughts and retrenchments, made it difficult for many households to continue cultivating their fields. To address this, the Transkei government offered subsidised ploughing support to villages where fields had been grouped together (Nkuhlu, 1984). The ploughing support schemes made it easier for households that faced cattle and labour constraints to plant, while the government-funded fencing of field areas minimised the risk of cattle damaging crops (Jacobson, 2013). Nevertheless, as indicated by earlier sections, the agricultural development interventions by the Transkei government did not manage to reverse the already established trend of deagrarianisation caused by the combined effects of the homeland system, enforced migrant labour and betterment.

Since the end of apartheid, there has been a series of agriculture development programmes in the studied villages run by both the state and the private sector with the aim of reversing the trend of deagrarianisation (Johnson, 2020; Fischer, 2022). These programmes have all been built on two cornerstones: the introduction of "modern" hybrid or genetically modified (GM) maize seed and fertiliser, and an explicit effort to stimulate smallholders to commercialise their farming and think more like entrepreneurs. The ambition to stimulate an entrepreneurial mindset stems from an expressed need in the policy documents underpinning programmes to break with a 'dependency syndrome' that is cast as the primary reason for the lack of engagement in farming in the villages. The idea behind this is that an important reason why the agricultural development programmes of the Transkei government failed to stimulate increased engagement in agriculture was the unconditional nature of the support given. This idea is exemplified in the following quotation from one of the official documents from the Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture on the set-up of the Massive Food Production Programme than ran in the studied villages between 2003 and 2007:

> "*Too often, enthusiastic, sympathetic and well-intentioned Government grants have had a negative effect on the very entrepreneurs who should be enhanced; these grants tend to create a dependency syndrome, which is counterproductive to truly stimulating sustainable economic growth in rural communities. The conditional grants envisaged in this Massive Food Production intervention are designed to overcome the negative dependency by making grants provisional on the accomplishment of critical requirements that require the prior activity of the recipients.*" (ECDA, year unknown)

As indicated in the above quotation, two strategies have been employed to break with the dependency. The first is the inclusion of conditionality in programme terms, only allowing those smallholders who already planted their fields to participate in programmes. As a result, the poorest smallholders who, for the reasons described in this paper, were unable to plant their fields have been excluded from these programmes (Fischer and Hajdu, 2015).

The second cornerstone of recent agricultural development programmes is the introduction of 'modern' seed. Traditionally farmers in the studied villages have planted what they call 'Xhosa maize', which refers to a group of several distinct locally bred varieties of maize. These have by no means been kept isolated from other maize: Xhosa maize has been shared across large distances (Iversen et al., 2014) and commercial seed has on several occasions been introduced deliberately to the local seed pool (Fischer, 2022). Nevertheless, what distinguishes Xhosa maize is that it is well adapted to the local farming conditions, and people have a sense of ownership and control over these local varieties. Xhosa maize is stored from the previous harvest and planted again, shared with neighbours in need, and exchanged when people are curious about each other's varieties. In contrast, the hybrid and GM maize that have been introduced by the agricultural development programmes is surrounded by regulation that prevents both the sharing and recycling of seed (see more detail on this in Fischer, 2022). The significance of this to farmers in this study is indicated by how the maize supplied by these projects is being referred to locally as "Udlambuqe", which in isiXhosa means "the maize you eat until it's finished". In other words, it cannot be saved or shared. The introduction of seed surrounded by new regulations clearly undermines existing reciprocal relations on seed sharing, and makes farming increasingly dependent on monetary exchange (see also Fischer, 2022). Perhaps most importantly, the push for adoption of hybrid and GM seed which should not be shared and recycled, combined with less cultivation in the study villages overall, means that there is increasingly less seed to share, and suggests a downward spiral where yet more households fail to plant their fields because of a lack of access to recycled seed. As an old man from a poor household explained to us in 2008: "*We have planted a mix of Udlambuqe and Xhosa maize in the garden. Normally we plant Xhosa maize. But this year we ate too much of our maize, so we didn't have seeds left to plant the whole garden. I asked neighbours for seed, but not many neighbours plant Xhosa maize anymore, so I was given some Udlambuqe.*"

Similarly, while showing us her garden which she was very proud of, a middle-aged lady from a household classed as very poor said to us in 2008:

> "*I only managed to plant part of my garden because I couldn't afford to buy seed for the whole garden […] I used to plant Xhosa maize, Gebehlungulu and Ingoyi. Now I have no Xhosa maize left, so I have to buy seed. I could not afford to buy seed for the whole garden.*"

In 2008 approximately one fifth (46/257 households) of households purchased maize seed. Our interviews since then indicate that this share has since increased. Between 2012 and 2020 several smallholders talked about the increasing challenges of getting hold of local ('Xhosa') seed. At the same time, those who had seed still felt an obligation to share it with people in need, and some stated that although they would like to charge for giving seed when people asked, they felt it was difficult and not really appropriate to do so. These kinds of statements indicate to us that reciprocity related to sharing seed has so far remained quite strong and is one dimension of the lifeworld of farming that has been 'colonised' to a lesser degree than other aspects of farming described in this paper. What is also clear, however, is that recent agricultural programmes specifically undermine reciprocal relations with regard to seed.

Box 1 outlines a section of an interview with a middle-aged woman who failed to save Xhosa seed in 2008. The conversation shows how she connects the reduced possibility of saving seed with the fact that fewer people plant Xhosa maize today, cattle are damaging crops, and people overall care less about farming and about each other. As such, it is a good example of how the possibility to farm today is being undermined by a combination of changing material circumstances (fewer cattle and less local seed around) and loss of social cohesion in farming.

Box 1. A snippet of an interview in 2008 that Fischer conducted with a middle-aged woman from a household classed as poor who had failed to save any Xhosa seed that year (transcription based on the English translation).

6. Concluding discussion

The key components of deagrarianisation in the Eastern Cape are well described in previous literature and consist of a shift in household labour and monetary investments away from farming (de la Hey and Beinart, 2017; Hebinck and Lent, 2007; Hebinck et al., 2018; Shackleton et al., 2019). Through the lens of lifeworld and system, which places the social and cultural dimensions of farming at the centre of the analysis, our paper contributes a novel understanding of some of the underlying reasons for, and the persistence of, the deagrarianisation observed.

Through our focus on how wider political and economic changes have impacted the social and cultural role of farming, we are able to show that the democratic government's efforts to revive smallholder agriculture have been unable to break with past oppressive policies. Instead, while past policies systematically undermined smallholder farming, not only by limiting access to labour and land but also, as shown here, by disrupting social cohesion in farming, contemporary policies setting out to reverse this have instead continued to disrupt local social cohesion. Driven by a neoliberal agenda for agricultural and rural development, the push for individual wealth creation and the adoption of hybrid and GM seed that disrupt local systems of reciprocity, has contributed to a further disruption of social ties.

This loss of social cohesion in farming has not affected all households evenly. Wealthier households have to a larger extent been able to continue farming despite the loss of collaborative practices. A minority have managed to fence their fields to protect them from straying cattle, and some wealthier households have also appreciated the modern seed varieties promoted by agricultural programs, as they can afford to purchase seed yearly, and can provide the inputs needed to make these seeds grow well (see also Fischer, 2022). In contrast, the poorest households have been increasingly forced out of farming.

Importantly, the fact that social cohesion in farming has diminished over time does not mean that it has diminished in the community in general. Rather, while this paper centres on farming, interviews and observations over the past 17 years in the studied communities support findings from other studies in the region that suggest that relations of reciprocity have shifted to other spheres of social life (Granlund and Hochfeld, 2019). In terms of farming, our findings indicate that remnants of social cohesion are clearest in the continued sense of social obligation to share seed, but that this is increasingly difficult as local seed has been replaced by 'modern' varieties. We also show that culturally, farming is seen as an important part of rural life. A planted garden is considered central to a 'proper' household. Many young rural residents believe they will farm one day, and migrant residents are reluctant to give up their fields as they provide the option to farm in the future. These facts indicate a continued strong attachment to farming and to the land, as also indicated by others (Ferguson, 2013; Hajdu et al., 2020).

Box 1
A snippet of an interview in 2008 that author 1 held with a middle age woman from a household classed as poor, who failed to save any Xhosa seed that year (transcription based on English translation)

K: Ok, do you normally save seed?

N: Yes I normally save the Xhosa maize.

K: And does it often happen that you have no seeds left for planting?

N: I will always have the seeds. But this time I didn't. I mean since the fields are not fenced so this time I did not have the seeds. I could not manage to harvest.

K: So you don't have any seed this year because you didn't get enough harvest?

N: Yes.

K: So has it been like that before, or just this year?

N: In some years the animals eat it [the harvest] but this year it has been different, they ate a lot.

K: How come that they ate so much this year?

N: It's other people's animals that they are not herding them, so even during the night they are not taking the animals to the kraals, so they did the damage.

K: How come people are not herding their animals?

N: Ok I just don't know, maybe it's just the carelessness. The horses over there have eaten the other peoples' crops.

K: Has it been like this previously as well. Has this been a common problem for many years, or is it something new?

N: It has not been like this before, because people use to herd their animals, but this time they are not herding them.

K: Why do you think it's like that?

N: I don't know why they are doing this carelessness, because before people used to plant, the animals would only get in by mistake. But these days even if you catch the other people's animal in your field, the person would say, no he wouldn't want to pay. Instead of paying he will say to you that you should go and by a bus. That means I should give up farming, sell my cattle and then by a bus [i.e. a minibus taxi that can then give you income by transporting people to town instead of engaging in farming].

K: So you should use the money to drive a bus instead?

N: Exactly. So it is just the carelessness, they don't care about each other.

What would then be needed to reverse the current trend and in effect 'decolonise' the lifeworld of farming, opening the doors again for poorer households? Based on our findings we suggest that policies and interventions that aim to support a re-engagement in farming for the purpose of poverty reduction would benefit from allowing unconditional participation, promoting technologies and practices that build on and support the social cohesion found in rural communities, and that strengthen the remaining sense of importance of farming to rural residents. Low hanging fruit would be support to home gardening, which is still practiced by most residents, and the promotion of seed varieties that can be recycled and shared.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Klara Fischer: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Elin Johnson:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Vernon Visser:** Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Sheona Shackleton:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Nomahlubi Nmukwa for invaluable field work assistance and translation. Malin Bäckman and Brian Kuns provided detailed and helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Professor Mary-Louise Penrith, Professor Gareth Bath and Dr Alan Fisher provided crucial help on the connection between cattle deaths and drought in the 1980s. We also want to thank three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. The South Africa-Sweden University Forum (SASUF) funded parts of the fieldwork performed by Johnson and the aerial photograph analysis performed by Visser, and supported an exchange visit for Shackleton to work on the paper with Fischer in Sweden.

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