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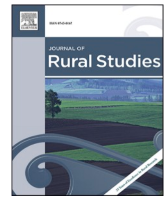

Rendering smallholders social: Taking a social relations approach to understanding the persistence of smallholders in the rural Global South

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on 36 studies in 19 countries and three continents, conducted over forty years, this paper revisits the question of how and why smallholders – and smallholdings – persist in the Global South even under conditions of rapid social and economic transformation. The paper argues that a significant part of the answer to this question can be found by taking a social relational approach: by 'rendering' the smallholder social. We identify five social themes that have resonance notwithstanding very different historical inheritances, environmental conditions, political contexts, and economic and developmental situations. Smallholder households feed a significant population of the world, educate the next generation, care for the sick and support those in need, cushion workers when economies contract and jobs evaporate, create communities, underpin national growth, and manage the land. Bringing these roles and qualities into view makes clear that smallholders, far from being relict survivors are critical actors in contemporary rural and urban transformations.

1. Introduction

Why do smallholders and smallholder farming remain such abiding features of the rural Global South? In an earlier paper in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, this question was posed for East and Southeast Asia (Rigg et al., 2016). Here we return to the question but address it by privileging one explanatory entry point, namely that of social relations. While we narrow our object of attention to the 'social', we widen the geographical scope of the discussion, drawing on case material from across the Global South.

The fourteen authors of this paper draw on rural development research undertaken in 36 different studies over four decades across 19 countries on three continents – Africa, Asia and Latin America.[1] These studies have been mainly ethnographic in character, focusing on understanding the dynamic situations of rural residents who in different ways 'get by' in a world where they characteristically come last and benefit least. From different disciplinary vantage points we have, over these years, researched a variety of often profound changes in rural livelihoods, farming and the countryside, many of which are place and country specific. That said – and these are general statements that we complicate later in the paper – we identify amidst these currents of change five interlocking pieces of the rural transformation puzzle that have seemingly endured: an attachment to land and landscape beyond its production potential; the value accorded to farming as an activity; the role of rural communities as places of – and for – care work; the rural as a buffer during time of personal and systemic crisis; and the potential to live well, or at least to cope better, in the countryside.

Development policies not infrequently aim explicitly or implicitly to turn farming from a way of life into a business. Much of life and living has become commoditized, and farming and agriculture are regarded through the same lens. This is one reason why the continuing, recalcitrant presence of semi-subsistence or own-account agriculture in an increasingly commercialized landscape of life and living appears so 'out of place' for many of those agencies seeking to modernize farming. These agencies – like the World Bank and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – are large and reflect and pursue numerous, sometimes seemingly inconsistent, policy positions. For the FAO, for instance, smallholders are in some documents lauded as innovative and

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productive, and key for sustaining food production and delivering food security, especially in Africa and Asia (FAO, 2012); in others, by contrast, there is an expressed concern that that small farm size is hindering productivity gains and increasing food insecurity and poverty (FAO, 2015: 35; World Bank 2017)'. In terms of profit-and-loss accounting and labour productivity, such small farms may indeed be unprofitable – and seemingly ripe for reform. But to understand why farmland (however small) as a resource and agriculture as an activity are valued by so many households across a variety of country contexts and field sites, it is necessary to view farming not just as an economic activity, but also as a social one where value may be ascribed in other ways.

Rather than being significantly reduced by processes of capitalist development and market integration, the five elements we identify in this paper have endured across much of the Global South. For some scholars and policy makers this is historically (see Bezemer and Hazell, 2006: 2) and theoretically (see Eastwood et al., 2010: 3323) surprising. *Why* villages, smallholder households and farming continue to be such features in the rural Global South, and *how* they continue against a backdrop of thorough-going change, are the central concerns of this paper. Addressing these two questions also has implications for analyzing agrarian change and for rural development policy making.

The continuity and valency of smallholders and smallholder farming have been noted in other studies (e.g.X van der Ploeg, 2010; Collier and Dercon, 2014; Rigg et al., 2016; Bernstein et al., 2018; Yamauchi, 2021). Attention has been paid, variously, to matters of: political economy and the policies that support or impede smallholder farming (Huang, 1973; Hazell, 2021: 35, Ma et al., 2022: 128; Djurfeldt et al., 2011); the viability and efficiency of smallholder farming when considering environmental costs and contexts (Netting, 1993); the inverse relationship between farm size and yield (FAO, 2015); the scope for changing diets to drive high value crop production on small(er) farms (Hazell, 2021:35); the precarious work emblematic of late capitalism and how this sustains or disrupts semi-subsistence farm activities (Berry, 1993; Bryceson, 1996; Havnevik et al., 2007; Rigg, 2019: 29–30); the unacknowledged and unpaid agricultural labour of women and elderly household members that sustains smallholder farms (Leder, 2022, 2024; Leder et al., 2024 Slavchevska et al., 2016); the specific agro-ecological and geographical conditions that limit or obstruct the amalgamation of farms, notably in fragmented, wet rice growing areas (Ahn, 2005: 76; Bray, 1986: 55–61); and historical (including colonial) inheritances that leave their mark in the contemporary countryside (Bray et al., 2023; Beinart, 1992). These matters are all germane, in different ways, to understanding agrarian conditions in our field locations.

In privileging social relations, we are not suggesting that scholars have hitherto overlooked the social – there is a rich literature on the topic, as discussed further below. In this paper we advance the debate in two key ways. First, we draw on a set of studies from across the Global South, enabling us to move beyond the area-specific and idiosyncratic. We build a broad case for the need to pay attention to the ways social relations play a role in explaining smallholder persistence. Second, we view social relations as intimately connected to economic relations and, therefore, to matters of economic development. Far from impeding modernization, the social relations that sustain smallholder farming underpin capitalist growth and sustain urban centres and non-farm sectors of the economy. In short, smallholders and smallholder farming make possible capitalist transformation. Thus, when the social is excised from policy, a central component explaining patterns of development is removed with it.

To take forward our argument, we 'render social' smallholders' presence in the rural Global South, to highlight our intention to view and interpret smallholders' presence in the plural countrysides of the Global South through the lens of social relations. We use 'rendering social' as shorthand for a broad understanding of the social-relational, including cultural and emotional dimensions, close to the 'sociality' of Long and Moore (2012: 41).[2] Importantly, we are not suggesting that social relations and their influence are similar and shared across countries and contexts, nor that they are always positive for all smallholders. They can be disempowering and exploitative, especially for women, minorities and the poor, corrosive and deleterious to people's interests, perpetuating various forms of inequality and inequity (Mosse, 2018). Indeed, the fact that certain groups have more power and the social differentiation this creates may be key to upholding social relations that have both positive and negative effects, making it difficult to disentangle effects and predict outcomes of changing relations. Whether broadly positive or negative, in each instance, albeit in subtly different ways, we find a key part of the explanation for the continuity of smallholders and smallholder farming to lie in the web of social relations. It is these social relations that make farming possible and living in the countryside desirable and meaningful, or in some cases the least disagreeable option. Illuminating these matters helps to resolve the puzzle of smallholders' continuing presence, challenges theorisations of agrarian transition based on the historical experience of the Global North, and sheds light on why agricultural and rural development policies often lose traction in the fields and villages of the Global South.

Rather than single case studies, this paper draws on a varied body of research over several decades in Africa, Asia and Latin America (see Supplementary Table 1), where rural areas have been studied using a wide variety of methods, from in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews to quantitative surveys. Some of these studies compared many different villages and countries, while others were longitudinal, stretching up to 25 years in time. There are also important differences between our sites in terms of agro-ecological conditions, cultural contexts, historical inheritances, and agrarian political economies. But amidst all these differences, the rural smallholding as a social unit, embedded in a rural community, casts its explanatory shadow over much more than just the smallholder household as a space of production and reproduction. The rural smallholding and community are the starting points from which members engage with non-farm work, sometimes in distant places; a 'home' they retreat to, especially during times of crisis and at key junctures in the life course, such as weddings, funerals and for raising children; a site of care work for young and old; and a domain that gives sustenance and emotional meaning to lives across generations. Evidently, there is a wider political economy to social relations. Macro political and economic forces and structures leave their mark, sometimes indelibly so, on micro social systems and processes (see Mosse, 2010). Nonetheless, we use our research across multiple countries and sites to make the case for the power of the social life and relations of rural households to explain their continuity in the contemporary agrarian world, and in this way render the smallholder social.

2. Smallholders and smallholder farming: theory, policy, and practice

A conservative estimate from 2021 is that there are 608 million farms in the world (Lowder et al., 2021: 3; and see Lowder et al., 2019). Some 84 per cent of these farms – 510 million – are less than 2 ha in area, and if

[1] Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brazil, Chile, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Myanmar, Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, and Vietnam.

[2] Long and Moore (2012: 41) view "… sociality as a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are coproductive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it".

farms of between 2 ha and 5 ha are added to the figure the proportion rises to 94 per cent.[3] Not only are such small farms numerous, they are also significant, with those under the 2 ha threshold contributing to the livelihoods of over 2 billion people and meeting the food needs of 80 per cent of the populations of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Gomez y Paloma et al., 2021). Finally, these small(er) farms have proven resilient in the face of change, as we have noted. Notwithstanding urbanisation, changes in the global and national economies, and heightened levels of mobility – all factors seen as contributory to the farm-size transition – farmland is not becoming significantly more concentrated in many countries in the rural Global South. Indeed, it has been suggested that a 'reverse' transition is underway, in which farms are becoming smaller and more numerous over time (Hazell, 2021; Hazell and Rahman, 2014b). The smallholder thus seems to have persisted in the rural Global South, at least to date, at a scale that has not been the case in the Global North.

Scholars write, variously, of smallholders, small farms and family farms. What constitutes 'small' will necessarily vary across contexts depending, not least, on the productivity of the land. In this paper, we use the term 'smallholder' not as a one-size-fits-all category but as a broader term that also pays attention to farming for household subsistence (with more or less being sold), the role of family labour in agriculture, and reciprocal relations with neighbours and kin that contribute to smallholder survival. We use smallholder, rather than small-scale farmer, to capture this broader understanding, beyond farm size (see Bernstein et al., 2018: 707; Spoor, 2015). We also use the term smallholder because, and increasingly in some countries, these households may not farm at all either directly (through their own labour) or even indirectly (through the labour of others), and in that sense are not small-scale farmers even though they have access to land. Their land may be idle, even abandoned for the longer term.[4] *In toto*, smallholders embody some but not necessarily all of the following characteristics. They are households with a rural base; situated socially within a community; own or have access to modest areas of land in local terms; deploy mostly family labour in managing that land; and where land is farmed, this is undertaken with an important subsistence element.

Notwithstanding global forces and national policies which run against their survival, "small farms are proving to be surprisingly resilient", as Hazell and Rahman (2014b) write. This 'surprise' arises, in no small part, from the expectation that historical agrarian transitions in the rural Global North will be repeated in the rural Global South. But given the very different global conditions (unequal trade relations, patterns of investment, labour availability, and the effects of climate change, for instance) under which development transitions have been occurring in the countries of the rural Global South, there is good reason to think that agrarian transition pathway(s) will be markedly different too (Arnold and Campbell, 2018: 184).

Along with these more theoretical reflections on the shape and direction of the agrarian transition are policy considerations – namely, and contentiously, that a 'scale issue' (Cramb, 2020:427; and see Hazell and Rahman, 2014a, 2014b; World Bank, 2007) is emerging. For some scholars, development agencies and governments, farms have become, economically-speaking, 'too' small.[5] In the interests of agricultural modernization, global and national food security, economic growth and poverty reduction, there are compelling reasons – it is argued by some authors – for encouraging larger farms to emerge (e.g. Otsuka et al., 2016 for Asia; Collier and Dercon, 2014 for Africa). At the same time, there are other prominent scholars who argue the reverse, lauding the productivity of smallholders (e.g. Hazell 2021: 29 and 30). What all these sweeping analyses of the smallholder miss, arguably, is the place-specificity of smallholder persistence, something that is impossible to grasp through a distanced enquiry. In his essay 'The prejudice against country people', Wendell Berry writes:

> The unacknowledged question beneath the dismissal of agrarian small farmer is this: What is the best way to farm – not anywhere or everywhere, but in every one of the earth's fragile localities? What is the best way to farm *this* farm? In *this* ecosystem? For *this* farmer? For *this* community? For *these* consumers? For the next seven generations? (Berry 2017: 207 [emphases in original]).

This paper does not engage directly with this debate over the respective merits of supporting smallholder versus promoting larger farms, although it is germane to that debate. Rather, we are interested in adding a dimension to the debate on *why* smallholders persist that has to an extent been lacking. The various explanatory factors noted in the introduction are often powerful and have continuing salience, but they are mostly productivist. The social relations that we place centre stage are taken in such analyses as social and cultural context, mere backdrop. The enduring presence – whether that is described as persistence in the face of countervailing forces or continuity in the light of enduring conditions – of smallholders necessitates consideration of social relations, conditions and forces as much as the interlinked but so far more thoroughly investigated economic, environmental and political processes that shape change in the agrarian worlds of the Global South. By rendering smallholders social, we open up a complementary window of explanation into their survival through successive eras of development transformation. We also argue that development transformation itself owes a good deal to the presence and operation of such social relations.

3. Rendering social

When development 'renders technical' (Li, 2007) complex social and environmental realities with the aim of applying technical solutions to neatly bounded problems, it creates a generalised and de-politicized view. The result is that understanding is partial, and puzzling counterpoints become exceptional or simply erroneous. For Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020: 1, and see Gibson, 2002), after listing all the ways that taking a capitalist viewpoint disregards the diversity of activities that constitute the world, state that "there is something going on with the representation of economies that allows for certain activities to be highlighted and thus valued, and others to be made less visible". In proposing to 'render social' the worlds of smallholders we embrace this contention. We are by no means the first to explore the 'social' worlds of farming and rural living, or to note that the economic and political are always social too. Prominent scholars of smallholder systems including Robert McC Netting (Netting, 1968, and see Wilk and Stone, 1998) have described these in great detail and pointed out social and cultural similarities across countries and continents. A wealth of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities across disciplines including anthropology, geography and sociology, and interdisciplinary fields such as development studies, agrarian studies and political ecology, has also focused on the social aspects of farming. Not infrequently, however, these have focused on one or a few cases or specific issues. More specialized sub-fields that focus on challenging orthodoxies and examining social relations have eventually developed, and feminist scholars particularly have pioneered a focus on social relations in e.g. feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Elmhirst 2011; Nightingale 2006; Leder et al., 2024, Leder 2024) and feminist economy (Agarwal 2000; Folbre, 2009; Gibson-Graham, 2006). These insights have often received little attention and gained little traction in the more

[3] Taking the family farm (rather than the smallholder) as their unit of analysis, Graeub et al. (2016) estimate that in 2010 these numbered some 500 million, comprising 98% of all farms and managing 53% of agricultural land.

[4] In Flores in Eastern Indonesia, farmers refer to idle land as *tidur* or 'sleeping' and land unused longer term as *kosong* or 'empty' (Clendenning, 2020).

[5] Cramb (2020: 248) writes: "… it seems that governments [in the Lower Mekong Basin in Southeast Asia] are … increasingly concerned about the persistence of small rice farms and are looking for ways to encourage larger and more efficient operational units …"

economic-inflected and policy-focused rural development literature. Reports continue to argue that for scale economies in farming to be achieved against a backdrop of industrialization, "land [in Asia] *must* be transferred from the smallholder farmers to the larger farmers" (Yamauchi, 2021:2 [emphasis added]) and in this way discount those factors that lie beyond and outside matters of economy, productivity and profit.

A thorough analysis of a broad range of social-relational factors is thus commonly omitted when it comes to proposed changes and development interventions affecting rural smallholders in the Global South. In calling to 'render' these analyses 'social', we point not to a single analytical or theoretical entry point to provide a framework for interpretation. Rather, we acknowledge a broad range of contributions from across the constellation of the critical social sciences that, variously, focus on issues of social differentiation, power relations, cultural change and relational networks. We argue that there is neither a requirement to develop a new analytical framework or to privilege one of several competing extant frameworks. The need, rather, is to fully acknowledge the key contribution that critical social sciences can make through illuminating social relational aspects that, we argue, are often central to understanding rural development issues. Making proper use of these existing analytical frameworks and combining them where possible to get a fuller picture, should be an essential part of any analysis of rural smallholders, their conditions and prospects, without which it is impossible to draw relevant conclusions about rural development and agricultural change.

Rendering social offers a lens through which issues that may seem puzzling are made intelligible. Social relations and alternative economies are placed centre stage, rather than underplayed as mere contextual frame or background noise. Here we start from – and with – these social relations, seeing them as moulding rather than marginal, the rule rather than the exception. In this way, the continuing salience and value of land, the countryside, rural living, and farming across the rural Global South become, we will show and argue, meaningful. To be clear, however, our argument is *not* that these social matters somehow drown out the economic ones; indeed, they often grease the wheels of capitalist expansion and growth. Workers are paid wages less than the costs of their reproduction; care is shouldered in the countryside rather than burdening urban centres; and rural settlements become shock absorbers at times of crisis, for instance. The real surprise, perhaps, is not that smallholders persist over development time, but that the value of their persistence – not least in economic terms – seems to have been overlooked by governments and policy makers in the rush to forge their vision of a modern countryside of large, efficient and productive farms (Yamauchi, 2021).

4. Field sites and methodologies

To flesh out and substantiate our argument the paper draws on studies with smallholder farmers undertaken by the authors in 19 countries since the early 1980s (Supplementary Table 1 and Fig. 1). These cover Africa, Asia and Latin America, and range from low-income to upper middle-income countries. The studies were not undertaken with the intention of drawing them together in the manner we do here, and the conceptual frames and methodological approaches they employ therefore inevitably vary. That said, the studies generally involved deep immersion in particular places often over many months, using a range of mixed methods (surveys, interviews and ethnographic and participatory activities) and working closely with local communities, scholars and other stakeholders. Some studies are more large-scale and aggregate survey or economic data from many countries – these countries are not included in our 19 countries marked on the map, but are listed in Supplementary Table 1.

Our cases are highly varied, from swidden farming in the Peruvian Amazon to livestock management in the dry miombo woodlands of Tanzania, from intensive lowland wet rice farming in Thailand and Vietnam to dwindling kitchen gardening in South Africa's former homelands. Furthermore, these cases are embedded in very different national development contexts. There is not space in the main paper to recount the details of each country and field site. But Supplementary Table 1 provides background information on projects and countries and references to publications from the supporting studies with further details on methods and results. In addition, where we draw on data or interviews from these studies, basic supporting background information is provided.

The paper grew out of discussions we had in 2022-23 in the Rural Development in the Global South research group at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, together with our visiting Professor Jonathan Rigg. Through a series of workshops and discussions over nine months we drew our different studies and experiences together and distilled out the five themes and sub-themes listed in Table 1. These studies (listed in more detail in Supplementary Table 1) have been used

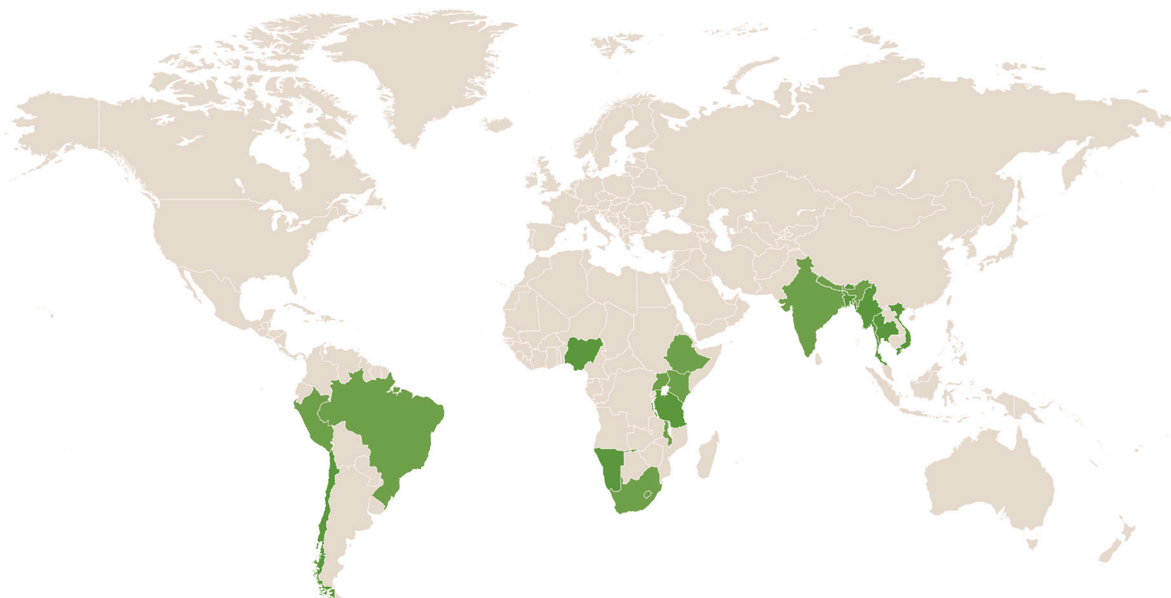

Fig. 1. The paper draws on thirty-six studies from 19 countries[1] on three continents.

Table 1
Entry points for rendering smallholders social.

Themes	Sub-themes	Examples and manifestations
The social values of land and landscape	Inter-generational obligations	'Stickiness' of land in different access and ownership contexts; obligation to pass land to descendants
	Emotional attachment to land	Land's affectual qualities; significance of ancestral lands; land as a grave site of ancestors; gendered affective value of land; the status bestowed by land ownership
	'Inertia'	Place of land in inter-locking livelihoods; farming as habitual; limits to farm 'exit'
The social values of farming	Social value of farming as an activity	Farming as character building; farming as drudgery; farming as freedom from paid work
	Social value of home-grown food	Quality of home-grown food and traditional varieties; food sharing, gifting and social ties; revival in home-grown food
	Social value of farming for the future	Keeping farming alive for the next generation; leaving open the option of farming
Caring in the countryside	Care work	Caring for children and the elderly; links between gendered rural care work and urban production work
	Collective labour	Reciprocal labour exchange; collective labour arrangements
The countryside as a buffer in times of crisis	Personal and idiosyncratic events and crises	Injury, illness, childbirth, redundancy, migration failure
	Systemic crises	Aids, Covid-19, economic crises
Living well, living frugally in the rural	The social and cultural significance of the rural home	Feelings of home; safety and security for children; the rural as a place to retire well; cultivating and maintaining cultural roots
	The rural relational safety net	Living frugally but securely; the community ethic; receiving help when needed;

to substantiate and exemplify the different points made in the following sections. As scholars, we position ourselves rather differently. That said, we all tend to use qualitative, ethnographic methods; we fall broadly within the frame of political ecology and critical agrarian and development studies; and we situate our work within rural settlements where we engage closely and often long term with rural households. There was considerable variation of emphasis and opinion, reflecting differences in our studies, methods and field sites as well as, importantly, in our theoretical positions and how we approached the social and relational. Notwithstanding these regional, methodological and theoretical differences, however, this paper reflects a consensus among us that social relations occupied a central explanatory position in each of our cases.

5. Rendering smallholders social

In this section we present the five interwoven themes we have identified, break them down into sub-themes and exemplify each with reference to our work across 19 countries over four decades. The five themes identified are: (i) the value of land beyond its economic contribution to livelihoods; (ii) the continuing role and significance of subsistence agricultural production in households that, in other respects, seem thoroughly commoditized; (iii) the place of the rural as a site of – and for – reproductive labour and care; (iv) the rural as a retreat or redoubt during times of crisis; and (v) rural areas as places offering intimacy with and proximity to cultural roots and social networks and therefore providing more safety, not least for the raising of children (Table 1). We use these themes to make a case for the power of the social not as exceptional or unusual but as normal in the shaping of the rural and, by implication, also the urban. The rural functions and looks the way it does due to these social relations. Moreover, the power of the social importantly crosscuts a variety of contexts and conditions. In their detail, each case reveals a different constellation of social factors, but we draw these together to make a broader case for viewing the social as instrumental in making and shaping the rural Global South.

5.1. *The social values of land and landscape*

> "When we see untilled fields, let us not be so quick to say that the land is 'unused'. When we see a smallholding, let us be careful about dismissing it as 'not viable' when we have not yet asked 'Viable for what?'" (Ferguson, 2013:169)

Land values were increasing in many of our field sites, especially for the best or the best situated (e.g. close to a road) land. Some investment in and retention of land was very likely to have been speculative. But it was also evident that land and the 'value' attached to land could not be reduced to its rate of market exchange or sheer productive potential alone, as Ferguson suggests in the extract that opens this section. Land's importance lay in more than its role as a production reserve or safety net, let alone in its stored economic value. We see this extra-economic and extra-productive role encompassing three social relational fields: i) an inter-generational obligation which supersedes the role and value of land in the here-and-now, stretching land back in time to forebears or ancestors and forward to descendants and inheritors; (ii) the sense of attachment not just to land in general as a production resource, but to a particular piece of land in emotional and identity terms: '*this* land belongs to me, and I am attached and committed to it'; and (iii) because of a degree of apparent 'inertia' made inevitable by a lack of alternative livelihood pathways, particularly for older rural residents with low levels of formal education or training. (This third field is linked to a later point about land as a safety net.)

Until quite recently in many of our research sites, land access was secured either through forest clearance (e.g. Peru), through usufruct rights of access and retention, or through various (often strongly gendered) community determined norms often mediated by villages heads or chiefs. Even when land titling had occurred, there was often a strong sense that present day owners – or occupiers – did not have the right to sell their land because it was not truly theirs to sell.[6] They were bound by social relational responsibilities such that it was their duty and obligation to pass the land to the next generation, as they had received it from their forebears (albeit these obligations may only have included some of the next generation, e.g. the eldest child, or male descendants). A 77-year-old farmer in Northeast Thailand coming to the end of his working life owned a valuable parcel of land ripe for resort development on the banks of the Mekong. "I won't sell" he said, because "I want to keep [the land] for my children", adding that "Money is easily gone, but land lasts".[7] Similarly, a 32-year old former factory worker who returned to her village in Northeast Thailand to take care of her increasingly infirm father also discounted the possibility of selling the land she was soon to inherit: "It's our parents' treasure", she exclaimed, "to sell is not right!".[8]

There is a tension between inherited community and family attachments and responsibilities linked to land and the growing commodification of the land resource (German, 2022). The formalization of land ownership through land titling makes it alienable, creating the opportunity for households to sell their land in an emergency. In many of our studies such crisis sales were, in retrospect and the long term, viewed as misguided. When land is sold, it is lost forever.

Land that had been cleared in a land frontier or purchased was

[6] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b interviews, Engström-a, interviews.
[7] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b interview.
[8] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b interview.

sometimes held more loosely than land that had been inherited in a settled agricultural landscape, which can be especially 'sticky' having accrued social relational significance. In the Brazilian Amazon where smallholders often lead a migratory life, clearing and cultivating land for a couple of years before moving on to a new patch of forest, land is not viewed in the same way as in neighboring areas where smallholders have developed stronger emotional attachments to their land, and organized themselves in functional associations and cooperatives.[9]

Having benefited from the generosity of earlier generations, it was incumbent on current occupiers to be equally generous to their (legitimate) descendants. Parents speculated that their children and grandchildren would need the land when they were too old to work in cities[10] In Nepal, a 51-year-old Dalit man commented on why he keeps his land saying "I feel that all of my kids are facing a hard time. They are not fully settled into a single job".[11] In such instances, land access (ownership and usufruct rights) took on a meaning that stretched across time, connecting the generations. In this regard, it is also important to note that access to land is not evenly distributed across social groups and that some may not easily or automatically inherit land, based on gender or order in the sibling hierarchy.

Smallholders often had an emotional attachment to their land – as people more generally had to places and their home environments. These attachments to land cannot be computed from land's economic exchange value, or even from its function as a safety net (Hebinck and Shackleton, 2018; Masterson, 2016). Land has economic effects; but land is also emotionally affectual and culturally resonant. Rural places may serve as places of belonging, indeed the image of building a house in one's rural home where you will eventually retire may be what gives meaning to daily struggles in urban areas.[12]

This attachment to land, in the generic sense of having access to *some* land and the particular sense of having access to *this* land, is coupled with a regard for the quality of landscape. Land was seen as needing to look 'right', and to be cared for (see also Masterson, 2016). When land was not cultivated, and allowed to become messy and unkempt, there was private guilt, even public shame. Interviews with labour-short migrant households in Nepal kept returning to the issue of how their idle/uncultivated land – known as *bajho* or *bajho-jamin* – was an embarrassment. In one instance, a family was struggling to keep their land in a good state with two sons working abroad and daughters-in-law living in nearby towns in order to give their children access to a better education – but the father of the house (in his 50s) still remarked "how can I leave the land *bajho* [idle] and what will the neighbours and relatives feel about us?".[13]

In Namibia, many migrate from rural areas in the north to seek employment further south, but remain closely connected to their home village. A migrant woman in her 40s living in a peri-urban informal settlement in Otjiwarongo and working in the charcoal industry spoke of the unbreakable ancestral ties that would ultimately call her back to the familial land later in life:

> "I will someday move back to [the village], after my mother passes away … I will feel bad about the fact that I am no longer earning any salary, but the homestead could never be sold or given away. If I were to stay here … the elders would reject me because I refused my duty to care for the homestead … None of those relatives would support me if I have problems. If I cut myself off from the homestead, then I am also cutting myself off from that support net. Even though I enjoy the lifestyle here, I would feel that I am doing a good thing by returning to the village, because it's where I come from. So, I will feel good knowing that I am doing things the way that they are supposed to be done."[14]

Tracing the effects of land requires, once more, that a line be drawn back through time. Land harbours memories; it may also contain the bones or ashes of ancestors or memorials to their lives. In the former apartheid-era Transkei homeland of what is now part of the Eastern Cape province in South Africa, many smallholders were forcibly moved and resettled during the 'Betterment' villagisation scheme, from the 1930s to the 1980s. The many disruptive effects of the forced resettlements under Betterment included the separation of households from the graves of their ancestors. The considerable resistance this generated came not only from the denial of access to land in a generic sense, as a livelihood resource, which could be replaced (although only with the hard work to break new land). The separation here was from particular plots of irreplaceable land, imbued with cultural value and emotional attachment.[15] This deep attachment to village land as the resting place of one's ancestors and perhaps also parents extends to a desire to one day be buried alongside them. This influenced the decisions of migrant workers in Namibia, who said that it was important to move back to the village in their old age in order to spare their families the expense and inconvenience of shipping their body home for burial.[16]

Sometimes village residence becomes a measure of belonging and membership, such that absence erodes the rights that come with membership. A Tamang man in Nepal, for instance, expressed his frustration in an interview in 2018 at having his name removed from the membership list of the Community Forest Use Group (CFUG) because of his absence from the village for some 20 years. He explained that his mother was getting older and only as a member of the CFUG could he access the village cremation ground situated within the community forest, and thereby give his mother a dignified funeral.[17] This example illuminates how village membership and the community rights that come with such membership can be eroded by absence, and the need to guard and protect user rights and entitlements to natural resources. In Malawi, a farmer also talked about the importance of making, staking, and maintaining a presence on the land to protect one's rights: "You have to look after your land attentively and show that you actively use it. You cannot leave your land for long, unless you have someone you trust who can take care of your land while you're elsewhere.[18]

Even migrants to the Global North, accessing all the associated securities of working and living there, sometimes retain a strong attachment to their rural 'homes' after decades of absence. One of the co-authors of this article (Chiwona-Karltun) belongs to the Malawian diaspora but has bought land and grows commercial crops in Malawi, activities generally synonymous with men in that area, which she feels accords her a special status in Malawi. Migrants may not afford to buy and own land in their new countries of residence, but they may seek to become landowners and people of substance in their countries of origin. Those who departed, seemingly permanently, were thus sometimes inclined to re-establish a presence in the places they had not fully left behind. This had implications for those who remained, as land inflation driven by migrant remittances put land out of their reach (see Davis and Lopez-Carr, 2014).

Sometimes, farmers' continuing commitment to farming and

[9] See Supplemantary Table 1, Bartholdson and Marquardt, interviews, see also Bartholdson et al., 2021.

[10] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b.

[11] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-c interviews.

[12] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-c interviews, key informant discussions, Hajdu et al., 2020; Khatri & Marquardt-b, interviews; Marquardt-d interviews.

[13] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-b interviews; see also Khatri et al., 2017.

[14] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.

[15] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a interviews, see also Fischer et al., 2024.

[16] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.

[17] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-a interviews.

[18] Quote from a MSc study supervised by author Chiwona-Karltun: Broms, Gustav, 2020. Materialisation of emergent farmers in a Malawian context: a privileged class positioning in agricultural transformation. Avancerad nivå, A2E. Uppsala: SLU, Institutionen för stad och land.

associated attachment to land, even when farming was loss-making, appeared as resistance to change, or inertia. This plays to the view of some mainstream development organisations that smallholder agriculture is unproductive and inefficient, and its continuation a product of entrenched tendencies (see World Bank, 2007: 29). Such a view, however, ignores the limited availability of alternatives to farming as well as the place of farming as one component of interlocking livelihoods. Along with farming's complementary role in livelihoods that straddle home and away, farm and non-farm, and subsistence and cash, are tendencies that speak to the role of habit and the place of identity in maintaining – rather than transforming – the status quo.

A female farmer in the village of Ban Lao in Northeast Thailand, said: "We are rice farmers, and it is the only job we can do now. I don't know what else I could do!" She then applied the same logic to the wider community: "[Ban Lao] is still a rice farming village. Once a rice farmer, always one, no matter whether you earn money in other ways. … It's a tie to [our] roots." (Rigg, 2019: 232–233). Similarly, a male farmer from the mid-hills in Nepal said: "People will need the land in the future when they return here [from their migrant sojourns]", explaining "What would they otherwise do?".[19] Of course, many in the countryside build futures and shape livelihoods that take their lives and living away from farming and the rural. But for others this was not possible, or even desirable. The logic of interlocking livelihoods rests on understanding the combination or nexus of land-based activities with various forms of self-employment or paid work in other sectors and spaces. Attachment to land and farming may be explained as 'once a farmer, always one, no matter what', but saying this was only made possible by the place of the land resource in systems of interlocking livelihoods. Not only was land held close, no matter how small its area, but this land was often cultivated in a particular manner, to meet subsistence needs (see below). Furthermore, it is important to note that land that was seemingly 'under-producing' had future productive value; it was not just a case of keeping land looking right. For instance, land that was fairly continuously cultivated, even at a low intensity and 'with the left hand', was much easier to clear for future use. Land that was idle for several years and where weeds and bushes had time to establish themselves presented a considerable future challenge.[20] It also created problems for neighbours who continued to farm.

5.2. *The social values of farming*

While the first theme focused on the value of land beyond its economic value, this second theme concerns itself with the social values of the act of farming, as a specific type of activity with strong cultural roots stretching across generations, as well as an activity resulting in produce that is non-fungible, having the unique trait of being the result of a farmer's own labour. The social relational value of farming falls into three overlapping areas: (i) the value of farming as an activity; (ii) the value of the products of such farming; and (iii) the inter-generational transmission of the social value of farming for the future.

Farming as an activity was valued in many of our areas in a different way than other livelihood activities, especially wage labour, or 'work'. While waged work was much sought-after and almost everywhere a necessity, farming was a form of self-employment where people sometimes said it felt good just to work for yourself and be your own boss.[21] Working in your own garden and fields could be done at a pace and time that suited the household members, close to the comforts of home. It was sometimes viewed almost as a recreational activity, rehabilitation for those suffering from illness or educational for children. When a 35-year-old man cultivating land on the banks of the Mekong and doing other jobs was asked to compare between his farm and non-farm work, he admitted that farming was physically hard "but if we do it earnestly, it's better than being an employee". He continued: "We're self-employed and our own boss and free to work at any time … no body complains [if you are late] or reprimands you. … It's fun for me!"[22] Cultivating the home garden was also an activity that was comparatively easy to combine with other livelihood activities and household chores. This was an important reason for the persistence of home garden cultivation, while more distant fields were largely fallow, in our South African cases.[23]

It is important to note that farming for 'fun' often has an important cash and material component: it is not a game. A 53-year-old swidden farmer in quite a remote Amazon village said that he "earns as much as or better than a teacher with my products", selling cacao and plantain and given the low living costs.[24] Tree crops, which were becoming more common across several of our field sites, were attractive for farmers who wished to use their land – and be seen to be using their land.[25] In a Chilean community, the selection of trees and modes of farming (in this case agroforestry trees and agroecological farming) was a form of resistance to the monocultures of pine of eucalyptus that were expanding in the area. Farming was a political statement of resistance and contributed to strengthening socio-political relations in the area.[26]

Food from one's own land, cultivated with one's own hands, had a significance beyond the security it bestowed, and the products of one's own farming a special status.[27] Home-grown food was sometimes viewed as tasting better, and to be healthier and safer (see below). Our Peru research revealed several traditional crops that were simply unavailable in the market.[28] Local varieties of staple crops (like the case of 'Xhosa maize' in the Eastern Cape, South Africa[29]) were often seen as valuable due to their superior storage qualities, better suitability to home processing and tolerance to weather and local ecologies (see also e.g. Fischer et al., 2022; Stone and Glover, 2017; Teeken et al., 2012). Being able to grow the foods you prefer to eat or to cook for your family, was highlighted by a landless Ugandan woman as the main reason she prioritized buying land: "when I have money I will buy land to grow that which I want."[30] Gifts of cooked dishes made with home-grown food likewise had a special place. They were gifted at festivals and ceremonies, shared during important family meals, and given to urban based kin to reinforce relations across space (see Scülfort, 2022).

In some cases, the provenance of home-grown food was also seen as a safer option compared to buying food. This was prevalent in Vietnam, where food tainting scandals in China made rural people in provinces around Hanoi suspicious of food purchased from the market. Some of these stories may have been fanciful, but they played a role in keeping own-account farming attractive even while returns were squeezed. A 48 year-old female farmer in a commune around 40 km from Hanoi, explained that farmers in the commune "still keep growing rice so that

[19] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-b interviews.

[20] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-f, interviews; Khatri & Marquardt-b interviews.

[21] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-a, interviews; Marquardt a, d interviews.

[22] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b, key informant interview.

[23] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-c, interviews, survey results, see also Hajdu et al., 2020; Fischer-a, interviews, survey results; see also Fischer, 2013 and Fischer and Hajdu, 2015.

[24] See Supplementary Table, Marquardt-d interviews.

[25] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-b, interviews, observations.

[26] See Supplementary Table 1, Alarcón-c, interviews.

[27] McElwee writes of farmer decision making in Vietnam: "peasants in Nghệ Tĩnh still make seemingly 'irrational,' uneconomical decisions about what crops to plant based not on the prices for the crops or their productivity but on what they like to eat and what they have historically grown" (Mcelwee 2007: 58).

[28] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt a, b, c d interviews, FGD and observations.

[29] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a, interviews, see also Fischer, 2021.

[30] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley, interview. See also Varley, 2021.

they have 'clean' [unadulterated] rice, which is grown by themselves, to eat … to protect their health".[31] Respondents in the commune spoke of the purity of their home-grown rice, explaining that they knew exactly where it was from and how it was cultivated. In a similar way, the swidden farmers in the Peruvian Amazon preferred to eat their own crops as they knew they were pesticide free.[32] In some places there has been a movement 'back' towards previously used varieties and crops. In Malawi cassava used to be seen as a poor person's food – 'cassava nurtures the disadvantaged' (*chigawo chilera walanda*) was a common expression – and policies have been focused on supporting maize production, but it has transformed to a crop no longer associated with poverty or backwardness[33]

The issue of the future of farming as an activity transmitted intergenerationally is a third sub-theme in this section. A 54-year-old swidden farmer in Peru with around 80 ha of land, of which only 5 ha was in production, reflected on his role as a custodian not just of the land as a resource but of farming as an activity and a lifestyle:

"I have five grandchildren, they are still growing and they still don't think about what they would like to do [in the future]. We as elders, parents, grandparents are thinking about them. Maybe my grandson is going to want to do this (farming)…. If a family member comes [to me], I can facilitate [their farming]: 'make your field, I have a *machu purma* (old growth fallow) there, do it' …".[34]

Even though our research showed that children learn farming also from friends, neighbours and distant relatives and thus are not always dependent on parents to teach them farming skills,[35] learning how to farm from the older generation was an important part of intergenerational knowledge transfer and social learning.[36] Complaints by older generations that the younger generations were less interested in farming was, however, a common refrain in many of our sites.[37] A 63-year-old female farmer in Thailand wistfully reflected on the different generations' engagement with farming: "When my sons were growing up [they worked] in the rice fields when we were working there. But today [my grandchildren] just watch their phones, staying at home all day".[38] The same form of complaint was raised several times by older smallholders in rural Brazil while young people often declared that they would not like to become farmers like their parents. The youngsters both stated that farming was "boring" and that it was physically too onerous.[39] When farming is actively avoided by young people, it makes the intergenerational transmission of farming and related knowledge all the more difficult, and may be a cause of smallholder persistence diminishing in the end.

That said, we also observed tendencies that as young people transitioned to adulthood and then to parenthood they came increasingly to recognize the value of farming, just as the elderly farmer in Peru above suspected. In Malawi, life histories of young people showed that they had tried their luck at finding work in town or self-employment but often had failed to progress in their lives, and ended up returning to the village with a newfound appreciation of farming. In one village in southern Malawi, young people in their 20s had formed a youth group and rented land together to farm – an activity that was going comparatively well and of which they were very proud.[40] Even teenagers expressed an understanding that the knowledge of farming might prove valuable in later life. During an informal discussion in South Africa teenagers said they were currently not interested in farming, but expected this to change as they grew older. As one teenage girl said: "When we are older, we will want to farm".[41]

5.3. Caring in the countryside

Rural areas and natal villages play an important role in terms of care work and reproductive labour. While this has been acknowledged since the 1970s (e.g. Wolpe, 1972 for South Africa), gendered care work as well as collective labour arrangements are still often overlooked in literature discussing smallholder persistence in economic terms. Methodologically, it is challenging to study spatially dispersed people and activities, where working in one area is made possible by care work in another, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles away. And conceptually, scholarship is poorly placed to integrate activities such as unpaid reproductive work and collective labour which do not fit economic frames of production often used to assess and explain agrarian change.[42] One attempt to achieve this is Leder's (2024) work on translocal social relations where the care (and other) work of women and the elderly is networked to – and with – distant migrants. Leder et al. (2024) demonstrate the linkages between rural out-migration and the continued functionality of natural resource governance due to the important mediating role of gender and social relations which sustain farmer-managed irrigation systems in Nepal. As Shah and Lerche (2020: 728) argue in the case of India, there is a need "to explore the invisible spatial processes of migrant labour exploitation … and the extraction of surplus value from labour taking place both at the site of production and through the invisible economies of care spanning spatiotemporally divided households".

Building on such scholarship, here we make the point that the smallholder household is as much a unit of social reproduction, as it is a unit of economic production, not least in the setting of multi-sited livelihoods. Reproductive labour, and especially care for children and the sick or elderly, is intimately – functionally *and* relationally – linked to 'productive' household members who are engaged in non-farm and off-farm work, often far from home. With this in mind, to understand rural places it can be more appropriate to view them as circuits of care, than as circuits of work. Taking a socially relational and geographically expansive view of work and care helps reveal these intersections. Caring and being cared for is experienced at different points along the life course, and for some care is received or delivered throughout their lives. Just as women's reproductive work is often a foundation for the productive work of men, the ability of rural areas to care for workers is central for the wider economy across the Global South. Rural informal care work is propping up the formal economy through filling the roles that the absence of the state leaves in rural and migrant lives.

Patterns of care are also shaped by the national policy environment. In China and Vietnam, household registration systems (the *hukou* and *hộ khẩu* systems respectively) mean that natal households are often fixed in space, notwithstanding rising mobility; children, husbands and wives

[31] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b, interview, cited in Nguyen et al., 2020: 92.

[32] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-a, d, interviews.

[33] See Supplementary Table 1 Chiwona-Karltun, cited in Chiwona-Karltun et al., (1998) and Chiwona-Karltun & Bergman-Lodin, interviews, survey results, see also Haggblade et al., 2012.

[34] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-d, interview.

[35] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-b, interviews, photovoice discussions, group discussions, see also Ansell et al., 2016.

[36] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-b, interviews, group discussions, Hajdu-d, interviews; Varley, interviews; Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interviews.

[37] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-a, c, interviews, informal discussions; Rigg-b, interviews; Fischer-; Marquardt-d, Khatri-Marquardt – c, b interviews, FGD.

[38] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b, interview.

[39] See Supplementary Table 1, Bartholdson and Marquardt, interviews, see also Bartholdson et al., 2021.

[40] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-d, key informant interviews, field walk, see also Hajdu et al., 2024.

[41] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a interview, see also in Fischer et al. (2024

[42] Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) to some extent addresses this 'gap', although "analytically and spatially, this research still predominantly focuses on the place of destination for international migrants" (Shah and Lerche, 2020: 721).

have to be 'left behind' when someone leaves for work. Locke et al. (2012:20) quote one of their respondents – Linh – in Vietnam saying: "'If I want to provide for them [my children], I have to migrate. But when I migrate, I cannot take care of them.'" This was taken one step further in the institutionalised migrant labour system in South Africa during apartheid, which forced workers to leave their families in the rural 'homelands', designated to be separate countries. This freed apartheid South Africa from the burden of institutional care and support for labour. Workers would return home for leave, if they fell ill or were injured, and when they had reached retirement age. Support for the labourer's family – for the schooling of children, for elderly care and for hospital treatment – also became a burden for the homelands (Fischer, 2022; McAllister, 1992). Thus, the relationship between the homeland-household and the urban labourer was built on mutual dependence, where the homeland family relied on the labourer's wages to purchase food and agricultural inputs, as land was (purposefully designed to be) too limited to provide full subsistence. The persistence of this relationship is indicated by how rural South African smallholders were very hard hit by the Covid-19 lock downs as a consequence of the high reliance on urban linkages for rural livelihoods (Fischer et al., in press).

Today, the young in South Africa continue to migrate in search for work, but jobs are few and hard to get, leading to a situation where the rural family often bears the burden of providing for young children and the elderly while the working-age generation, struggling to find employment, fail to financially support this care work. In 2008, an elderly woman from a rural household classed as 'very poor' in the local participatory wealth ranking explained that she lived with her four grandchildren, including one mentally disabled grandson who needed close care and support. Her two daughters were in Durban looking for work, unsuccessfully, and they had kept their child grants (monthly grants provided to all caretakers of underage children in South Africa) to pay for their urban life while job hunting.[43] In interviews in Namibia, parents living in peri-urban areas doing factory work admitted that leaving children in the rural areas was more affordable – there they could depend on both their cash support as well as farm-grown produce and receive care from extended family in the village.[44] In instances such as this, the geographically distributed work/care circuit may be disrupted, a situation becoming increasingly common given the precarities of work in the modern economy.

Relationships of care also evolve through the life course and over development time. In an indigenous village in the Peruvian Amazon, a single mother recounted[45] how when she became pregnant but could not marry the father, she decided to return to her rural home to seek help with childcare. "When the baby is older", she said, "I want to go back (to Lima) and work […] I want to go with my son …". But she also admitted that "it is complicated" to bring him, while she was also "not sure [if] I can leave him here, [as] my mother is not the same as before." As a result, she was considering finding work closer to the village so she could return home at the weekend. This woman left home to earn, and returned for the care and support that her natal village could provide when her circumstances changed. Her ability to re-engage with work in Lima, however, was compromised by another circuit of care: for her mother. The rural gives during times of need but can also take, and there is a mutuality in the choreography of give-and-take social relations over the life course.

Similar to the views described above about the foods grown at home, care given in one's rural home can also be seen as a special kind of care not possible elsewhere. A migrant Namibian woman, after two miscarriages, began returning to her home village at the end of each pregnancy so that she could receive traditional herbal medicines for healthy childbirth. Ritual dictated that these herbs had to be administered in the village, and thus this woman repeated the journey home to the countryside for the birth of her four children.[46] In a similar example, one of our respondents in South Africa described how she had to go and stay in her mother-in-law's rural household for some weeks with her baby who had experienced possible epileptic seizures, as it was hoped that the evil spirit would be scared away when the baby was returned to the rural home.[47]

The absence of some household members can lead to changing burdens and distributions of work, as well as of care responsibilities. In many of our sites, women and elderly household members told stories of feeling abandoned by absent migrant labourers and working very hard to keep the rural household running. In Nepal, a very poor woman was explaining how she was struggling to plough the family's land herself (usually regarded as a man's work) in the absence of both her husband and her brother who were working in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while at the same time taking care of her elderly father in law and two disabled sons.[48] Another very poor Sherpa woman was supporting a sick son while her six daughters were absent in Kathmandu. She was disappointed that they were not sending any money and was worried how it would be when they married and moved in with their husbands' families.[49] Nevertheless, the return of long-absent migrants may not be a purely happy moment for their stay-at-home rural relatives. Male returnees may expect to take control of land and land management and resume their roles as household heads, sometimes, for example, dispossessing elderly female relatives of the land they have been working for years (Bryceson, 2019).

The so-called 'feminization of agriculture' highlights the increased agricultural labour burden women face in the absence of out-migrated men, creating a triple work-plus-care burden wherein new work (like ploughing) is added to the established work and care responsibilities of women (Leder, 2022). These changing intra-household labour arrangements are partly tackled through drawing on reciprocal collective labour sharing practices such as *parima* in Nepal, which build on social relations and trust. Such practices are sometimes decisive for the continuity and functionality of smallholder farming, especially in regard to irrigation management and that of natural resources more broadly. One woman described *parima* between herself and her neighbour as "I work for her today, she comes to help me tomorrow".[50]

Collective community work and labor exchange is present and continues in many rural areas, such as *choba choba* in the Peruvian Amazon[51] and *kaxkol* of the K'iche, Kuchubal of the Maya in Guatemala (Hernández Méndez and Victorino Ramírez, 2021)). Labour exchange is not necessarily directly reciprocal, as described in the Nepalese example above, but can be asymmetrical. In South Africa among the amaXhosa, *ilima* labour parties (common historically but less so today) are thrown by a household needing labour in exchange for food and drinks.[52] Of course, the quality of the food offered is assessed in these cases – in the case of the Peruvian *choba choba,* households set aside a share of their crops in order to support the work party. In Thailand, however, *long khaek* – reciprocal labour exchange – has mostly either disappeared or narrowed to the immediate family.[53] Paying relatives and neighbours to

[43] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a, interviews, wealth ranking, see also Fischer, 2013.
[44] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.
[45] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-d, interviews; Rigg-b, interviews.
[46] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.
[47] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a.
[48] See Supplementary Table 1 Khatri & Marquardt -b interviews.
[49] See Supplementary Table 1 Khatri & Marquardt -b interviews.
[50] See Supplementary Table 1, Leder-b, focus group discussion, see also Leder (2024).
[51] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-a, interviews, observations, see also Marquardt, 2008
[52] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-a, key informant discussions, Hajdu-e, informal discussions. See also Hajdu, 2006.
[53] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b. See also Rigg et al., 2004.

work on your field is a more monetized version of labour exchange, and in a very poor village in southern Malawi many respondents explained that they depended on such small local piece work, *ganyu,* during hard times.[54]

Migration patterns can however disrupt labour exchange - in the Brazilian Amazon, labor exchange among smallholders that relies on extended kinship and social trust among neighbours, called *mutirão*, is quite rare compared to the situation in the neighboring states. Migrants often do not stay long enough on one patch of land in the Amazon to develop social networks of trust with other smallholders that can be the basis for collective forms of labor exchange and support.[55]

We see academic debates regarding work and care, production and reproduction, and migration and the so-called 'left behind' becoming tangible across our field sites, doing much explanatory 'work' when it comes to interpretation. The integrative point is that rural areas and natal villages are places of (emergency) care not just at time of crisis when work dries up or economies fail (see below), but during normal economic times too. Rural areas and smallholder farming are thus not mere places and activities of escape when capitalism falters, but areas and activities that crucially underpin capitalist systems. In this way, reproductive labour is as productive as productive labour is reproductive, a point we return to in the conclusion as the threads of argument in the paper are drawn together.

5.4. The village and the countryside as a buffer in times of crisis

While rural areas are often places to leave – especially for the young and, in many regions, for men more than women – they are also places to return to at times of crisis and during certain stages in the life course. They offer a place of retreat when personal or systemic disaster strikes, and when other circumstances entice or require people to return, as exemplified in our section above. An important reason why land is held close, as discussed in the first section, is because rural areas can only effectively function as places of retreat if they are able to meet the existential as well as the emotional and care needs of returnees, and farmland is central in this effort. As such, rural areas operate as social safety nets and support systems, delivering emotional support and existential security. We distinguish here between i) idiosyncratic, usually personal crises or events (untoward and otherwise), and ii) broader systemic crises such as national and global economic downturns, political instability, or pandemics. In practice, for individual households these may overlap and also extend temporally into protracted crises as the acute becomes chronic.

In the cases of personal events, rural areas are places to return to for care and recuperation when injured or ill, laid off from precarious work, or when having a child – such as the case of the mother from an indigenous village in the Peruvian Amazon recounted in the last section. Some events represent a clear break, akin to a crisis with an emergency return to a rural home. But oftentimes, the sequence of events is more gradual and incremental, the metaphorical straw that breaks the camel's back; the balance between staying and returning tips towards the latter. This may be a failed migration sojourn where a secure job has not materialized, or an education ambition that cannot be successfully completed (see Clendenning, 2020), but the outcome is a return to the village and often to farming. Stories of this nature were common in life history interviews with young people from Peru,[56] Lesotho and Malawi.[57] Such cases began as narratives of failure but then sometimes led to a more enthusiastic (re-)engagement with cropping or livestock production, with the knowledge that schooling and working in town were not as easy as imagined when escaping village life. In South Africa, women in a focus group discussion in 2023 also complained that it was difficult to get jobs after they had started a family in the rural area and were stuck there, which meant that agriculture in large home gardens became the only option: "when we are over 35 [years old], we can no longer look – there are no job opportunities. The gardens are waiting for us then".[58]

In Thailand and Vietnam, even those with quite secure non-farm work would speak of the security that came from having land as a fall-back and safety net. A forty-year-old metal worker in Thailand explained: "[I keep my land but] just for a rainy day. If I fail in this job, then [at least] I still have my rice land to work".[59] Keeping land 'just in case' was noted in the first theme, but it can also be forward-looking, anticipatory and inter-generational.

Returning to the village, however, was not frictionless and without cost to a returnee's reputation. In Nigeria, focus group discussions in a rural area[60] revealed that a woman returning to her village was assumed to be lazy, not serious in her work, and a failure. Those who had become pregnant in the city were said to have 'run home to hide'. In Kenya,[61] men returning to their villages 'empty handed' after having lived in the city were in focus groups described as despicable and without respect. In such cases, villagers suspected that they had also run away from their jobs, even committed a crime. For returning women in Kenya, they were mocked and looked down upon if they have had only found a 'bad job' (e.g. as a domestic servant) but respected if they had secured a 'decent job' (e.g. as a teacher).[62] Villages – as social collectivities – can act as safety nets and places of welcome and solace at times of need; but they can also judge harshly.

Our studies[63] showed that even people who had successfully established themselves in an urban area with a relatively secure job and housing still kept their fields in the rural area. In rural communes around Hanoi in north Vietnam, many households were happy to let neighbours and relatives farm their land without any rental payment whatsoever; some of our respondents did not even know who was cultivating their land. Notwithstanding this insouciance, very few contemplated selling their land.[64] Women in Uganda taught their children agricultural skills just in case other employment and livelihood options failed – as they too often did. When asked why she felt it was so important that her children learned agricultural skills, one woman responded: "So that when they have grown up, they will not suffer without food. They will know that 'Even if I do not get this job, I can go and farm, and I will have food.'" Another woman stated that "I want my children to learn how to farm when they come home from school … In Uganda there are no jobs. If they do not get formal employment, they can farm".[65]

For rural households with precarious livelihoods, few savings, and in national contexts where the state provided little in the way of a safety net, having a rural retreat at times of personal or family crisis – whether due to the sudden rupture of an illness or injury or longer-term decline arising from a failure to secure decent and stable work – is something to be maintained and nurtured. At times, however, crises are systemic. They reach across countries and populations, affecting thousands, even millions: AIDS in Southern Africa during the 2000s, the Asian economic

[54] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-d, interviews, key informant discussions, See also Hajdu et al., 2024.

[55] See Supplementary Table 1, Bartholdson and Marquardt, interviews, see also Bartholdson et al., 2021.

[56] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt -a interviews; Marquardt-d interviews, discussed in Marquardt et al., 2019).

[57] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-d, described in Hajdu et al. (2024).

[58] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-a, focus group discussion in 2023.

[59] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-a; cited in Rigg 2020): 28.

[60] See Table 1, Bergman-Lodin-a, group discussions, field notes.

[61] See Table 1, Bergman-Lodin-a, group discussions, field notes.

[62] See Table 1, Bergman-Lodin-a, group discussions, field notes.

[63] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a informal discussions; Hajdu-a interviews, informal discussions; Hajdu-b, see also Hajdu, 2006; Hajdu et al., 2020; Khatri & Marquardt-a, b interviews; Marquardt-d.

[64] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-e.

[65] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley, interview, quoted in Varley (2021).

crisis of 1997–1998, the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-22, and the global economic crisis in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for example. In each instance, rural areas and return to farming played a crucial role in cushioning or protecting individuals and households, even communities. Such systemic crises can place enormous pressures on rural societies and areas that are characteristically ill-equipped and under-resourced. The absorption capacity, let along emotional generosity, of rural areas does have limits.

The many thousands of people who came home to rural areas to be cared for while severely ill (and eventually to die) during the AIDS pandemic imposed significant burdens on receiving areas.[66] AIDS was a systemic crisis that transferred the medical costs (and significant physical and mental burden of caring for people who were initially slowly and painfully dying and later were long-term chronically ill) from urban to rural areas where care work was primarily delivered by rural women already living in poverty. Social networks were re-negotiated and expanded so as to encompass new needs for example a young, divorced woman with no land could move in with a neighbour who had fields but needed care and help with working the land. In one study, an 80-year-old man, chronically ill with AIDS explained that while he had no relatives nearby, his neighbours in the village transported him to the health centre when he needed treatment, and provided care, food and help with personal hygiene. He reflected: "helping my neighbour is like giving a loan, which will be repaid when I am in need. If you do not give [support] what will you do when it [a crisis] happens to you?".[67] People took comfort in such obligations of rural care and support; they knew they could return to their homes if they really needed help, even though this system had its holes, and increased the burden of care on often already stretched rural households.

The limits of rural household's potential to absorb homecomers was really tested during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led millions of migrant workers, domestic and international, to return to their rural homes within a very short time span. Nepal's COVID-19 Crisis Management Centre recorded the repatriation of 562,571 Nepalis by mid-September 2021; India's Vande Bharat Mission saw more than 9.6 million Indian citizens repatriated by the end of October 2021 (ADB, 2022: 69–71). The scale of return was such that sometimes rural communities found it hard to cope. A migrant returning home from Yangon to rural Myanmar quite early in the pandemic explained, regretfully, that "My family needs money and I cannot [now] help them because even for food I have to rely on them now". She continued: "I feel very useless to not be able to take care of them".[68] In Nepal, a survey revealed that land-poor farmers and people who relied on daily wage incomes and remittances experienced a shortage of food during the COVID-related restrictions. Furthermore, many farmers interviewed during the pandemic reported that they had finished the food savings and had to borrow money to meet increased family food needs as family members returned home during periods of lockdowns. As soon as they could, most migrants in Nepal sought ways to re-engage with their work in urban areas or abroad.[69]

Covid-19 lockdowns and other associated measures caused severe food security problems in many places (shown by e.g. Chiwona-Karltun et al. (2021) for 12 countries in Africa South of the Sahara). School closures in Malawi resulted in increased rural teenage pregnancies in part due to the food insecurity from having more mouths to feed leading to increased transactional sex, and 30% of 17–19 year-old girls did not return to schools when they were opened again (Kidman et al., 2022). In South Africa school closings have also been connected with increased food insecurity when children missed out on school meals. A woman in her forties from a rural South African village explained that "since children were not going to school we had to buy more groceries, which we couldn't afford because we were not working", sentiments expressed by many respondents in a study on the difficult effects of Covid in the rural areas[70]

The role of the rural as a retreat at times of personal difficulty, or as a redoubt when systemic crises make living and working in distant places difficult or impossible, are themes that resonated across our cases. This is not to suggest that the countryside always makes such accommodations smoothly, or that there are not important differences between sites in prevailing cultures of reciprocity. Returnees may be taunted, as the examples from Kenya and Nigeria reveal; and returnees embarrassed to find themselves relying on their natal households for sustenance, as the returning female migrant in Myanmar admitted.[71] Nonetheless, the ability of rural areas to act as safety nets at moments of personal tribulation and over longer periods – even eras – of crisis, and the sheer generosity of the rural that underpins this spirit of welcome and accommodation is oftentimes astonishing and reflects the power of social relational obligations. It is also worth recalling that the emotional and material capacity of rural areas to (re)absorb returnees occurs notwithstanding the countryside's relative poverty and under-provision.

5.5. *Living well, living frugally in the rural*

> "Everything is useful for me on my land, here I work, I have my crops, I have my cocoa, cane, banana, corn, pineapple, cassava … I have water on both sides. In the old forest there are *picuro* [a large rodent] and *sajino* [a type of wild boar], that's why I don't fell (trees) there, because there are fruits there that the animals come to eat. The monkeys come to my cocoa, here you can still hear macaws and parrots coming next to my cocoa field. It's a joy for me. I come alone and they [the monkeys] are shouting over there. I leave at 8 to go for a walk and find a *picuro*. I have planted beans around my field and the monkeys come to eat them. Here I hunt animals, there are trunks with fruits, in the stream I fish, that is my 'supermarket'. It has enormous wealth that will never end." (53 year-old male swidden farmer, Peru).[72]

A final theme we see in our material which resonates in the earlier sections, but merits further discussion, is how rural areas, and smallholder farming, offer opportunities for coping with hard times through living frugally, or even 'living well' and especially for raising children in a wholesome environment. The reasons for this environment being considered wholesome – and better than urban alternatives – are to a large extent social relational in character. We distinguish between two features in relation to this theme, both strongly connected to the relational properties of rural living: i) residing in a place viewed as 'home', close to one's social and cultural roots and ii) the security offered by social relations in rural areas. In writing this, and to return to a point made in the introduction, we are not ignoring the fact that social norms can reinforce and reproduce exclusions, perpetuate exploitation, and justify inequality. Rural areas also have their dark side, and for some the move away from the countryside is a liberation.

Rural communities come into their own most demonstrably as 'good' – as well as affordable – places to raise children. Rural areas are seen as safer for young people than urban areas where criminal activities are

[66] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-b.

[67] More about this study in Amurwon et al. (2017).

[68] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-c, interview, quoted in Suhardiman et al. (2021): 97.

[69] See Supplementary Table 1: Khatri & Marquardt – b survey, reported in Khatri et al. (2023.

[70] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer, interview, also discussed in Fischer et al., (2023).

[71] Linquist writes of the 'shame' (malu) or being a failed migrant in Batam, Indonesia. Rosa says: "… of course I feel *malu* [shame] when I think about what I am doing [working as a commercial sex worker] — though it has become easier — but it is nothing compared to the *malu* I would feel if I returned home with nothing [as a failed migrant]." (Lindquist, 2004:499).

[72] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-d, e, interviews.

common and the social controls of smaller, more intimate and coherent rural communities, absent. In group discussions in Kenyan villages, inhabitants worried that young men migrating to towns might become "involved in some atrocities" while women leaving for urban areas would be seduced by the city and "abandon their morality".[73] Women returning home pregnant were treated as evidence enough of the moral turpitude of the city and urban life. Migrant parents interviewed in a peri-urban area in Namibia also worried that if they kept their children with them to be raised in the informal settlements rather than leaving them in the village, they would be more likely to drop out of school and fall into petty crime or unplanned pregnancy.[74]

To set against the view, most often held by the older generation, that rural areas were safer and more appropriate places to raise children, and especially girls, than urban alternatives was the feeling, held most fervently by younger generations, that rural areas were boring, conservative and oppressive. With few opportunities beyond the hard work of farming, they were places to escape. An important aspect often noted by people considering whether to aim for a rural or urban life was that schooling, health facilities and other amenities were poorer and less accessible in rural areas. But in some places services and amenities had improved, rural-urban gaps narrowed, and it was possible to be urbane in the rural. New farming entrants as well as returnees were drawn to rural areas to escape the treadmill of city life and work and draw on the securities offered by the countryside. Their arrival brought infusions of wealth and human capital to the countryside but also spurred a rise in land values, squeezing out aspirant younger and poorer farmers, as noted earlier. Our studies revealed a mosaic of views regarding whether – and how – it was possible to live well in the countryside, even in the same places. This is to be expected: people are different, places are varied, and times and conditions change.

Smallholder farming and living in a rural area can be seen as a life for the poor, something for the uneducated, those lacking ambition, or as a refuge for villagers whose urban sojourns had failed. However, land and rural living was also equated with a sense of belonging, identity and connection to one's roots, a degree of security in a turbulent world, and a place where wealth generated elsewhere could be invested in socially productive ways. For reasons such as these, raising a family in a rural village can come to be seen as preferable to doing so in an urban area. A man in his 30s in Vietnam explained that he used to work in a car factory in Bangkok (Thailand), but moved back to his village to get married and raise a family. Working in a factory in Bangkok was no life, just work, and Bangkok was no place to raise a family, he said.[75]

Like so many of the issues explored in this paper, the concerns here are generational as well as gendered. Many respondents across our study areas described their connection with the countryside and farming changing over the life course: an ideal of living in the rural as a child, moving to urban areas to work and accumulate money, and then to retire and take up farming related businesses in their home village in later life. But this ideal notably leaves families divided and children separated from their parents. A Vietnamese man described how he had migrated to Hanoi in 1996 from a rural area around 150 km south of the city.[76] By the time he was interviewed 14 years later in 2010, he had established himself as a successful butcher, with a son at a private school and a daughter at university in the city. He had given up his land in the village,[77] but not his family house. Even this man, so evidently successful and embedded in the urban, continued to see the value and significance of the countryside and kept his rural home, as he put it, 'in his heart':

> "I love my homeland [*quê hu'o'ng*].[78] However, I do not love agricultural production. Agricultural production is a hard job … The homeland is where I was born. The homeland brought me up. The homeland is in my heart … The young and capable people should choose cities, the old should live in the countryside. When you are of working age, you should live in cities. When you retire you should live in the countryside."

Those young people with ambition may need to leave, but before they do they also need a thorough rural education. Again-and-again respondents would note the qualities imbued by a rural upbringing: learning from elders, and especially grandparents; self-sufficiency and the value of physical work, collecting water, tilling the land and herding cattle; the need to instill and nurture the values of the village so that they can be transmitted inter-generationally; to become accustomed to custom. Sometimes children raised in town are sent back to the village temporarily to acquire these values, qualities and skills and to come to know the village. In the South African family where one of us (Fischer) has stayed repeatedly since 2006, the elderly household head's different grandchildren were regularly sent to stay with them for longer or shorter periods in the rural homestead to get away from 'bad business' in town, and improve their character by engaging in household activities, farming and herding.[79] A migrant woman in Namibia expressed that: "My kids go on school holidays to [the village] so they can know back home. They must learn the culture from that side; to know the whole family … how to plough …. so they know their roots, where they are coming from. […] They can become lawyers or doctors but they still need to know how to farm so they can teach their grandchildren."[80]

There is a degree of rural romanticism in views of the countryside, especially from those who have successfully moved to urban areas, such as the case of the butcher in Hanoi quoted above. Rural departures are not usually reluctant moves, and the forces impelling the process and the enticements of urban areas far from inconsiderable. People may feel they have to leave because opportunities are lacking and returns to work are limited, education is poor and higher education absent. Some admit that there is little to do in their villages, and life can be stifling. These reasons to leave are being, as we note, addressed in some countries and areas as services and infrastructure improve, but nonetheless they remain pertinent and powerful. Often, secondary education in rural areas is characteristically poor and parents with ambitions for their children have little choice, as they see it, but to seek out urban opportunities. For example, a woman in Busoga, Uganda said "I want my children to study in boarding schools … Boarding pupils are always studying, even at night, but day pupils have to come back [home] and do some household chores. That is why children in boarding schools excel better than those in day [schools]." Even in expressing her desire to send her children away from their rural home for better education and opportunities, this woman also described agriculture as the means that might make such education possible, saying "It is through digging [i.e., farming] that I get money for educating my children." Still, these aspirations for children's education often reflect a level of dissatisfaction with rural life. As another woman in Busoga stated, "I want my children to study. They go to school and learn something. They get a job so they are not like me. [They are] better than me."[81] At the same time, not all children desire to pursue schooling – some are dedicated to the farm

[73] See Supplementary Table 1, Bergman-Lodin-a group discussions, field notes.

[74] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.

[75] See Supplementary Table 1, Beckman, interview.

[76] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-d, interview. See name Nguyen et al., 2012: 1120.

[77] Land is not 'owned' in Vietnam but accessed through long term Land Use Certificates (LUCs) that are allocated by communes authorities on the basis of rural (commune) residency.

[78] *Quê hu'o'ng* is variously translated as 'homeland', 'native place' and 'native land'. The French translation *pays natal* is closer to the Vietnamese.

[79] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a, informal discussions, observations.

[80] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.

[81] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley, interview, quoted in Varley (2021).

while others simply find school too hard.[82] being part of the tightly knit social networks of rural areas is seen as a reason for nurturing, belonging to and taking succour in the social relationships that build up a rural community. Only by being there can these safety nets be fully accessed.

A common refrain, especially among older generations, is that the countryside offers a better quality of life when resources are limited: it is possible to live well, but frugally. People point out that in a rural area you can always ask for the very basic necessities if you really need them from the people you know well, since you see them every day. Obligations arise from the intimacies that come from living in close proximity to one another, where problems are understood if not always shared, and where a neighbour's trials may come to stalk your door next month. This is some distance removed from the 'asocial' inequality of modern, urban living (Ferguson, 2015: 155–156). A modicum of shared poverty in rural areas, where poorer households have a voice and a claim, is often replaced in urban areas by the social dislocation of unequal accumulation. One woman in a South African rural village put it like this: "My neighbour sees me every day and she can hear me when I'm crying at night, so I have to turn to her when I have a problem".[83] While you may eat nicer food if you have been successful at finding work in an urban area, you also risk having no food at all if you have been unsuccessful. In Peru, farmers often remarked that in the town you had to pay for everything, 'even for the chilli peppers' as a way to describe how nothing was for free in the city, even those things that could be gathered *gratis* in rural areas.[84] The COVID-19 pandemic served to cement, for some, the value of a rural redoubt. A farmer in Peru said: "You [in the city] suffer because you have no land to plant. Here we have plenty of space to farm. We haven't felt the pandemic, it was kind of boring, but we've lived well on the farm".[85] Living in the village was also cheaper as a 58-year-old Nepalese man noted: "If I do a work for NPR 1500 at some (other) place, then the money would be less in comparison to my income of NPR 500 at my home (village). Look, these brothers come from far and even if they earn, they have to pay the rent and food."[86] Moreover, when you do fall on hard times in the city, you often suffer in solitude.

6. The social futures of the rural smallholder

The case we make in this paper is quite easy to state, namely that the abiding presence of smallholders in the rural Global South is fundamentally for social relational reasons. It is through 'rendering' the smallholder social, as we have done in the paper, that this becomes evident. Seeing the smallholder household not as a unit of economic activity, a collectivity of human capitals, or as a source of labour, but first and foremost as social and relational allows for a different perspective to emerge on why smallholders have endured through development time. Rather than being relict survivors of a peasant past, however, smallholders are thoroughly enmeshed in the modern world, underpinning capitalism through their rural reproductive work. These social relational reasons, therefore, do not stand separate from matters of political economy, they are just an overlooked part of the explanation. In calling for increased attention to social relational analyses of power relations, social differentiation and cultural change in understanding smallholder situations across the Global South, we are highlighting a tendency of agencies, governmental and multi-lateral, to sieve out such matters when rural research is turned into rural development policy. We do not propose how, specifically, the social should be inserted into policy making, but rather to highlight the need for this to occur.

By taking an expansive approach to rendering the smallholder social, the paper shows that the relational to which we refer is not static and space-bound but dynamic, trans-temporal and multi-sited. The social themes in Table 1 are responsive and continually in motion, not inherited features that resist the test of time. The relations of which we write stretch back in time, such that long-dead ancestors shape the present, and generations who have yet to become leave their anticipatory mark in the here-and-now. Finally, while we have focused our attention on the rural and the countryside, on villages, land and farming, the social relational attributes that we have identified are maintained and modified in other places and spaces too. They can be seen in the streets of Cape Town and Bangkok; the factories of peri-urban Hanoi and Otjiwarongo; and the migrant dormitories of Singapore and Qatar. Global householding (Douglass, 2014) wherein household members reside in more than one country originates from and is often anchored in rural spaces. The human dimensions of global urbanization processes owe a good deal to the rural concerns of this paper.

What, then, are the specifically social aspects that we see as being of relevance for smallholder futures across the Global South? In a world that is increasingly insecure, war-torn and marked by climate instability, we recognize that smallholder communities face serious challenges. While some rural areas face population growth further limiting land availability, other areas face depopulation and related problems of maintaining key rural amenities and livelihood activities. In rural Thailand, primary schools are being closed while in Nepal and Vietnam land is idle, even abandoned. Capitalist expansion claims the best lands and private investments, seen by international donors and local governments as important for job creation. This work, however, is often precarious and exploitative. Examples from our field studies abound, from expansion of private plantations in Chile[87] and wages that are below subsistence level in Thailand,[88] to stories of extreme exploitation in Malawi[89] and the ripple effects of apartheid in South Africa[90] and Namibia.[91] All these issues make it difficult for smallholders to maintain their rural households, which has knock-on effects for workers only loosely tied to the urban areas to which they have migrated and who are still in need of a stable rural base. Smallholders are likely to keep hold of their smallholdings as long as possible, but the price they pay may be increasingly high.

The abiding presence of smallholders and smallholdings across the Global South may be less due to the strengths of the rural and agriculture as it is to the failures and weaknesses of the urban and the non-farm. As discussed specifically in the section on care work, the fact that the state usually minimizes its responsibilities for caring for workers or their families makes care work in rural areas an essential component of household survival and economic growth. The failures of the broader 'development' project to create safe living conditions and decent returns to labour for all can be seen in the fields and villages of the Global South. The policy implications of this paper therefore point to the need to revive this project, securing some form of basic social protection that is independent of the goodwill of rural carers (also argued by e.g. Ferguson, 2015). In the words of Tania Li, who also shows that this is possible, we need 'make live' rather than 'let die' policies (Li, 2010).

This paper has focused on the enduring presence of smallholders in the rural Global South, seemingly against the theoretical and historical odds. But, as we have shown, taking a social relational perspective renders their presence fathomable. What we have not addressed thus far is the future of the smallholder. Does our evidence and argument indicate the long-term survival of smallholders across the Global South, or merely their delayed demise?

Smallholdings can play a key role in making livelihoods more secure

[82] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt -d interviews.
[83] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-a; cited also in Hajdu (2006): 116.
[84] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-a, b, d interviews.
[85] See Supplementary Table 1, Marquardt-d, interview.
[86] See Supplementary Table 1, Khatri & Marquardt-b interview.
[87] See Supplementary Table 1, Alarcón-a.
[88] See Supplementary Table 1, Rigg-b.
[89] See Supplementary Table 1, Hajdu-b, Hajdu-d.
[90] See Supplementary Table 1, Fischer-a, b, Fischer (2022), Fischer et al., 2024, and Hajdu-a, c, Hajdu et al., 2020b.
[91] See Supplementary Table 1, Varley & Bergman-Lodin, interview.

for those who are often the poorest in society. Also, as we have argued, they play a wider, often unacknowledged, role in underpinning the formal economy and providing a crucial safety net in times of systemic and personal crisis. It is the multiple failures of policies in other spaces, spheres and sectors that continue to make smallholdings such a vital component in many millions of households' livelihoods, in rural spaces and elsewhere. In this paper, we think beyond smallholders as inefficient farmers waiting to be modernized and restructured, their smallholdings amalgamated into larger and more rational units of production. Smallholder households – constituted disproportionally by women, children, youth and elderly – do not just feed a significant population of the world. They also educate the next generation, foster connections to the extended family and cultural heritage, care for the sick and support those in need, cushion workers when economies contract and jobs evaporate, create communities, underpin national growth, and manage the land. In these and other ways, smallholders leave a mark in everyone's lives. We also sense, however, that smallholder-based lives and livelihoods in the Global South are at a critical juncture, under threat in many different ways and for many different reasons. Recognising the social relational role of smallholders by taking our five dimensions into account for policy and practice provides a pathway to reevaluating their place in the countryside and in national economies.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Flora Hajdu: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jonathan Rigg:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Johanna Bergman-Lodin:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Klara Fischer:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Kristina Marquardt:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Dil Khatri:** Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Stephanie Leder:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Gwendolyn Varley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Linley Chiwona-Karltun:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Emil Sandström:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Örjan Bartholdson:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Linda Engström:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Malin Beckman:** Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Cristián Alarcón:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103432.

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