

TREES, LAND AND LIVELIHOODS: Dynamics of production, differentiation and accumulation amongst smallholder tree-crop farmers in South Africa

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Problem definition

Against the backdrop of centuries of large-scale dispossession of land and livelihoods of black South Africans, the need to support the development of the 'missing middle' of small-scale farmers capable of producing a marketable surplus is critical to reconfiguring the dualistic and unequal agrarian structure. This remains a structural cause of rural poverty (Cousins 2007, Hall 2009). Subtropical tree crops such as macadamia and avocado have been identified by the state as key commodities to promote amongst smallholders based on their expected high growth and labour absorbing potential (NPC 2011). Despite the apparent potential of these commodities to build this 'missing middle', empirical studies have illustrated that the incorporation of small-scale farmers into commercial markets and global commodity chains can be linked to exclusionary practices and adverse incorporation due to unfavourable terms and conditions that govern these arrangements.

Research Question

How is the commodification of tree crops among smallholders (re)shaping rural livelihood trajectories, socio-economic differentiation, land access and food production?

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the Marxist tradition of agrarian political economy, and explores socio-economic differentiation and related trajectories of accumulation from a

class-analytic perspective (Bernstein 2010). This is complemented by the more actor-oriented approach that informs livelihood studies to explore production relations and how tree-crop production is embedded within alternative food networks, in particularly using the concept of 'nested markets' (van der Ploeg et al. 2014).

Methodology

This study uses a sequential mixed method design. Quantitative data in the form of an individual farmer survey (n=80) is followed by in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions. On-going participant observation and informal conversations provide an overarching ethnographic orientation for this study.

Results

Smallholder tree-crop farmers are highly differentiated based on their primary income source. Accumulation trajectories hinge on access to non-agricultural incomes, which in turn differentiates small-scale capitalists from the majority of smallholders who are petty commodity producers. Tree-crop commercialisation is driving the de-facto privatisation of customary land and stimulating a vibrant vernacular land market, making land access increasingly uneven based on market principles. Informal and formal local markets for cash crops provide a means for petty commodity producers to maintain access to high value tree-crops.

Expected Graduation December 2020