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Crop Farming in Mpharane – Constraints and Opportunities for a More Market-Oriented Production

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Abstract

The distribution of wealth in South Africa is still 20 years after Apartheid highly uneven. Governmental initiatives such as land reforms and several agricultural development projects have failed in trying to reduce rural poverty and boost agricultural production in the former homelands. The main objective of this paper is to investigate why smallholders are primarily producing for subsistence and what the constraints and possibilities are for a more market-oriented production.

Empirical data have been gathered in Mpharane village in the former homeland placed in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. A range of methods has been used including questionnaires, qualitative interviews, informal conversations, GPS geo-referencing, observations, participatory rural appraisals (PRA) such as income ranking and seasonal calendars. Furthermore, three soil quality samples have been analysed.

The gathered data indicate that the majority of the villagers mainly rely on other incomes such as government pensions or non-farm employment in the cities rather than agriculture. The primary function of agriculture is subsistence; few households cultivated their outfields, whereas the majority had a vegetable garden contributing to the household consumption.

The last couple of years a decrease in the number of outfields cultivated has taken place. Many constraints were identified and these included growth conditions, climate shocks, access to land and lack of liquidity to pay for a tractor to plough the field.

Those who managed to farm did not produce a big enough yield to be able to sell on a regular basis, and sale therefore takes place merely in good years. All farmers were apprehensive about the risk of hail storms, floods and periods with drought which make people in the village hesitant to invest in farming, since such shocks can threaten the household's survival. Therefore, only a minority in Mpharane base their entire livelihood on agricultural activities; rather it is common that people engage in several livelihood activities in order to decrease their vulnerability to risks.

Keywords: Livelihood diversification, market-oriented production, small-holder farming, South Africa, subsistence farming