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Understanding community perspectives on small-scale farming interventions in Thaba Nchu: A thematic analysis

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Abstract

Small-scale farming continues to be promoted in South Africa’s rural development agenda as a mechanism for improving livelihoods, particularly in historically marginalised former homelands. Yet, community-level insights into how these interventions are experienced and interpreted remain limited. This study investigates the perspectives of small-scale farming households in the trust lands of Thaba Nchu to explore how local actors perceive the challenges and opportunities associated with agricultural interventions. Using qualitative data from in-depth interviews with participants in two farming communities in the Thaba Nchu Trust Lands, the study applies a thematic analysis to highlight the underlying social and governance dynamics shaping intervention outcomes. Participants consistently identified three key challenges. First, disputes over community leadership - rooted in long-standing ethnic divisions - have weakened trust and cooperation, undermining the collective capacity needed for successful implementation. Second, poor management of common property resources, especially grazing land and water infrastructure, has contributed to conflict and resource degradation. Third, flawed processes in identifying and targeting intervention beneficiaries have resulted in the marginalisation of active and committed farmers in favour of politically connected individuals. Despite these barriers, participants also pointed to meaningful opportunities. Notably, they emphasised the value of targeted support distinguishing between livestock and crop farming, recognising their differing resource and infrastructure needs. In addition, improved market access - through infrastructure investment, cooperative support, and buyer linkages - was critical for small-scale farming enterprises’ long-term sustainability. The study underscores the importance of governance-sensitive, socially grounded approaches to rural development by foregrounding community narratives. It argues that effective intervention in places like Thaba Nchu requires understanding local power dynamics, inclusive beneficiary selection, and differentiated support strategies. These findings contribute to broader debates on smallholder agriculture and rural transformation in Southern Africa.

Keywords: Agricultural intervention, community governance, rural development, small-scale farming, social dynamics, Thaba Nchu, trust lands