

Agri-villages: one step forward or two steps back?

A NEW term was introduced to farmers in Natal recently, and it is one which has aroused great emotions. The new term, "agri-villages", was presented to the Natal Agricultural Union (NAU) Congress in 1992. The section on agri-villages was the only resolution not passed by the congress. After its congress, the NAU commissioned a study to investigate implications of agri-villages in Natal. The high emotions aroused by agri-villages are easy to understand because the idea touches on one of the most sensitive issues facing farmworkers and farmers - housing for farmworkers.

IN the past, farmers have struggled for control of the workers on their farms. Their control was enforced through the various laws which made up apartheid South Africa. Through these laws, workers were either forced to remain on the farms where they lived or risk arrest if they moved to other areas in search of work. Workers on the farms were then "given" houses to live in.

This "free" part of farmworkers' wage has meant that the farmer could pay lower wages to the worker while also keeping

strict control on the workers. It has also meant that the workers never had the opportunity to invest in and buy their own houses. In effect, the opposite is happening. The "free" wage is buying the insecurity and possible eviction of workers from their houses by the farmer.

Until recent years, these houses were often mud huts with no running water or electricity and still today there are workers who live in these conditions.

Although housing standards may be improving in some areas, you would still struggle to find farms where services such as running water and electricity are a way of life for workers.

Tied housing

Besides poor housing standards and the lack of basic services, farmworkers face a more important issue around housing. Historically, the houses which farmworkers occupy have been tied to their employment on the farms. This has meant that workers are only assured of accommodation if they continue working on the farm. Because farmworkers have few other alternatives, farmers have often abused the link between housing and employment. For farmworkers, losing their jobs means losing their homes.

The situation for wives of farmworkers is even worse.



It often happens that, when the male breadwinner in the family dies, his widow and family are turned out of the house and forced to seek shelter elsewhere. Farmworkers who are too old to continue working face a similar fate.

Responsibility

Farmers often complain that industry does not provide its workers with housing and that therefore farmers should not be obliged to do so. While it may be true that employers in industry do not directly provide housing for workers, the cost of housing is implicit in industrial workers' wages. Industrial wages ensure that workers can afford accommodation and subsistence.

Farmers must accept that either they have the responsibility to provide housing or they have the responsibility to pay wages



that will enable farmworkers to afford their own housing.

The government must take similar responsibility. For many years, the government has been subsidising farmers for farmworker housing but this has failed to increase farmworkers' security. These subsidies have only increased the value of the land and assets owned by the farmer.

Agri-villages

The NAU have presented agri-villages as: "Plots of land laid out in the form of a rural village on a separate sub-division of land. The sub-division may accommodate the farmworkers of one or more farmers."

The NAU's motivation for the establishment of these villages is that they will provide workers with increased security of tenure and the ability to own their own homes, on the one hand. On the other hand,

such villages will also reduce the cost of providing services such as water and electricity.

Four options have been outlined for the establishment of agri-villages. The first of these involves buying or expropriating farmers' land to give or sell the land to farmworkers. The second option involves the government buying land and leasing houses on this land to farmworkers. The third and fourth options involve attaching areas earmarked for farmworker occupation to either an existing local authority or an existing tribal authority (in the case of Natal, this would be KwaZulu). Only one of these options involves farmworkers being able to buy their own homes when the agri-villages are established.

Agri-villages may be seen as an option to address the problems farmworkers face. However, there are many questions that need answering.

There is the danger that farmers may see such villages as compounds to house their workers. This would simply be a renewed attempt to entrench apartheid in rural areas. There is also the danger that agri-villages could affect land claims from particular farm communities, such as farm labour tenants.

Additional problems may arise around employment. Unless farmers accept that the employment contract is distinct from housing, access to housing in agri-villages will remain tied to employment on particular farms.

The issue of land is also important. While farmers resist the idea of people

living in agri-villages having access to land for agricultural use, workers want such access to graze cattle and cultivate crops.

Agri-villages can be a positive step in resolving the problems related to housing which farmworkers face if these villages directly address security of tenure. This means that workers must be able to invest in and own houses and land. Only in this way can agri-villages provide an acceptable solution to current problems.

Article by Dave Huesy of the Farmworkers Research and Resource Project (FRRP), an affiliate of the National Land Committee.

Debate takes off in Natal

DELEGATES from the NAU, NPA, Development Bank of South Africa, Institute of Natural Resources, Department of Regional and Land Affairs, KwaZulu Development Finance & Investment Corporation, KwaZulu government and others involved in rural work attended a workshop in March 1993 where the four models of agri-villages which were researched were discussed. From these discussions it seems that the agri-village concept needs more in-depth research and, most importantly, participation from farmworkers in the debate. The study on agri-villages is a step forward in stimulating debate. But agri-villages should be assessed in the context of new labour laws for farmworkers which are likely to significantly change their situation. The relevance of the agri-village concept might diminish once these take effect.

Article by Marc Schneider, AFRA.