



Paul Weinberg.

a binding kind of wealth

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Through thoughtful involvement and reflection, the Black Sash's Transvaal Rural Action Committee is achieving transformed understandings of the relationship between people and the land their families have tilled for generations. In this summary of her key conference paper, Aninka Claassens shares her insights on the motivation of these peasant farmers, and the self-questioning role of fieldworkers.

The Black Sash's Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC) has been working with African people who live on white-owned farms in the South-Eastern Transvaal area. Most of these people find their way to us via legal clinics operating in Driefontein and Amsterdam. These

are black villages which managed to win reprieves from removal after years of struggle.

The going wage for farmworkers in this area is about R30 per month. In a few cases people earn a bit more. In others they earn no cash wages at all. These workers live on the farm under a

system known as 'labour tenancy'. This is a system whereby a member of the family works for alternate periods of six months or a year in exchange for being allowed to keep cattle and plough fields. Typically people have large homesteads which they build from wattle and daub. It is quite common for there to be up to ten buildings in a homestead and an extended family of twenty people.

Most of the people who come to the legal clinics come because they are threatened with eviction from the farms. Eviction is often very violent. People may be given virtually no notice and then find their cattle impounded and their houses burnt down or demolished.

Again and again people take a militant stand in resisting eviction. They stay on the farms notwithstanding trespass fines and the fact that farmers may have destroyed their fields or houses. If they are finally physically evicted they often return to the same farm or land adjoining it. Because the white farmers are often tenants themselves, and the farms in the area change hands frequently, it is quite common that the farmer who evicted them will move on after a few years and the African family that has lived on that land for generations will return and re-establish itself.

At first we found it very puzzling that people should be so determined to remain in a way of life which is utterly exploitative. But over time we began to realise that these farm dwellers have a lot in common with people in the reprieved 'black spots' and locations.

This common identity springs from a shared purpose: to remain in occupation of the land which has been their historical home for generations.

In the case of the farm dwellers there are particular elements to this determination. One is the often expressed outrage that the terms by which they have lived (and suffered) are so easily flouted by the white farmers who take overnight action to evict large families and destroy the houses, stock and fields that have been accumulated over generations.

Another is that people's livelihood is not derived primarily from wages, but from their own farming activities on the land and from support by family members who work outside the farm. Thus the battles they fight are not about increased wages or shorter working hours, but about numbers of cattle allowed, and security on the land. In many cases the black tenant families employ other people to fulfil their labour requirements for the farmer. In some cases the tenants have become independent contractors and business people either on the farms or elsewhere. To the extent that people are not strictly 'employees' they have maintained an independent attitude which seems to be a component in their determination to remain on the land.

The fact that there are areas where African farm dwellers still manage to subsist as farmers

is amazing in view of the state's attempts to stamp out all forms of black tenant farming in the white rural areas and to turn all blacks in these areas into conventional wage labourers.

There is an ideological element to this process. As long ago as the turn of the century, Cecil John Rhodes spelt out clearly that blacks would never be resigned to the status of servants while they had alternative ways of living. This refrain has been echoed by the government in all the decades since then and especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when a series of laws and physical blitzes were implemented to wipe out labour tenancy. Notwithstanding these government efforts, various forms of black subsistence farming still exist in areas of South Africa.

The work that we have been doing with people in these areas is limited, but it indicates that the solution to their problems cannot be found primarily within improved conditions of employment but in increased security of tenure on the land.

The agricultural skill and love of the land which these people possess points to a viable potential for productive small-scale farming. At present the laws of the land prohibit this, but the *de facto* situation is one where black families have held on to their ancestral land against all odds, and there is a steady stream of whites leaving farming in this area.

Our work at present is to assist the farm dwellers in their battle to assert their rights to an agricultural way of life which is secure and independent and not necessarily limited to being the servant of a white baas. This support work is a joint endeavour undertaken by the Driefontein and Amsterdam committees, TRAC and the Legal Resources Centre. There is at present a relatively wide space for legal test cases because of the hiatus in laws affecting farm workers.

Our work is based on the principle of supporting the choices of our clients who are mostly individual families, but sometimes also groups of villagers from forest estates. At times it has been very difficult to get a wider perspective of the overall direction of this work and we have felt that we are propping up an archaic feudal system.

But we have slowly been educated to realise that people's choices to stay on the farms do not spring from an acceptance of the terms of labour tenancy and a satisfaction with 'wages' of R30 or nothing, but from a determination to keep access to the farming land which they have occupied for generations.

No doubt some people have made this choice because of the lack of alternatives and they may decide to move away as other alternatives become viable (for example with the abolition of influx control, or the acquisition of education). But there are people whose determination can only be understood in terms of a century long battle to be independent producers on the land.