Forestry Community Forum: Community mobilisation in plantation forestry

The Forestry Community Forum is an organisation of dwellers and labour tenants residing in plantation forestry / worker villages in the Boland region of the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The overall goal is to achieve land reform and local economic opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Constituted in 2011, when villagers started to organise and mobilise, the Forum has a total of fourteen participating villages. Its mission is to organize and mobilize villagers for fairness, equality, redress and transformation of the tree monoculture plantations sector that continue to benefit a few at the cost of villagers, i.e. tenants and workers.

Background

Tree plantation workers have been historically accommodated in workers' villages within plantations, because plantations are often located far away from residential areas and because of the need to have workers onsite to fight fires. Many plantation worker villages were established during the 1960s and 1970s in the Western Cape Province, which became the permanent home for generations of families with current or historical ties to employment in the plantation sector. In the past, the villages of plantation workers commonly had family housing, communal kitchens with cooked meals provided twice a day, clinics, schools, crèches and recreational facilities.

During the 1990s, the condition of these villages, the standard of services, and provision of amenities began to decline. Meals were phased out and clinics were closed. The shift away from direct employment to the use of contractors had a major impact on the villages. Entire villages or portions of them are now leased to Plantation contractors, who are expected to maintain the villages themselves. In many instances, this has led to a deterioration of the local infrastructure and services.

All the villages in the tree plantations in the Cape used to be on State Forest land and under the authority of the forestry department. After the first phase of restructuring the department, villages began to split and now they fall under a number of different management authorities. The composition of residents also changed over the years, whereas former villages comprised inter-generational close-knit communities as a result of their remote location and historical ties with employment in the plantation companies, today these workers comprise probably a minority, the remainder being families and descendants of former plantation workers, retirees, and private tenants.

Some of the contextual factors that are impacting villagers include:

- legacies of apartheid and lack of redress;
- impact of restructuring, privatization and unilateral exit-strategies in the tree plantation sector on dwellers in the communities inside the plantation areas;
- land use planning continues to be unilateral and based on race and class. Planning frameworks frequently lack proper community participation and consultation and is affected by how the poor is perceived and treated;

- lack of a political will and impact of party politics at the grassroots level;
- lack of information and transparency on the restructuring and privatisation in the tree plantation sector that continue to be centralized and elusive. Communities need this information to understand their local context, i.e. institutional arrangements, responsibilities, plans, etc. Should they take initiative for their own development, this information is crucial. Communities continue to grapple with a range of questions as restructuring affects them directly.

Concerns articulated by villages' residents

There are many concerns and challenges that villagers in the plantation areas experience. These include the lack of secure land tenure. Residents do not own land or houses. Even though the government promised these rights to residents when the villages were established, in some cases residents are evicted and/or threatened. As they do not have alternative land, they rely on government support and intervention. Wooden houses deteriorate fast when they are not maintained and, in some instances, they are becoming dangerous to live in. Residents are willing and want to care for the unmaintained houses should they be upgraded and transferred to them. Besides, service provision is poor and in some cases absent. Residents are being referred from one government department to the next. Some households pay enormous electricity rates. Additional fuel and food hikes add an extra burden that contributes to deepening poverty and social degradation. Water quality is poor and residents fear the outbreak of water bourn deceases.

Moreover, many workers have been retrenched with the restructuring programme of the tree plantation sector. Today, many are unemployed despite having the skills, knowledge, experience and physical ability to work. Much of the work – in the plantation, conservation and fire protection activities, etc. – is performed through contractual agreements. Local communities generally do not benefit through these mechanisms as they do not have access to information nor do they have the means (resources) to do the work.

Local government institutions do not integrate plantation worker communities in their planning frameworks and villages are generally referred to other government departments and agencies. This continues to marginalise and discriminate against these communities. Programmes such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) for economic development, which include community plantations, participatory management of plantations and community based natural resource management, are not benefiting communities. Despite an extensive government awareness and information programme, these economic opportunities continue to evade local communities.

Community organisation and mobilization

Residents in the forestry worker villages of the Western Cape Province have joined forces and have mobilised for government intervention and support in response to their increased vulnerability brought about by privatization and the exit-strategy in the plantation forestry sector. A list of concerns and demands has already been communicated to different government departments during demonstrations and stakeholder meetings. The demands include the participation of forestry dwellers in all decision-making that affects them; no evictions; information, transparency and access to tendering process; access to and ownership of sufficient land for household food production; quality and affordable services provision; etc.

A leader represents residents in each of the villages and a strong women leadership component exists. The Forum has its own Constitution that guides decision making and operations and it is

driving and coordinating its own initiatives and activities. Many of the Forum's affiliated villages have also joined forces with the Right to Agrarian Reform for Food Sovereignty Campaign: a social movement aimed to develop a critical mass for mobilization and pushing government reforms.

The Forum proposes that the approach for dealing with tree plantation villages must be done through an integrated planning of all involved agencies and with a lead agency to coordinate, implement and monitor activities. The process must be community driven, with real community participation in the decision-making, and with a holistic approach – considering the diverse needs (livelihoods) of local communities, i.e. tenure insecurities, housing, income, transport, education, income generation, skills and knowledge given the historical context.

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