
Dispossession by Plantation: Community Struggles in South Africa's Western Cape Province

Introduction

South Africa's historical legacy of 'race'-based land dispossession means indigenous African communities living in and around monoculture tree plantations have long faced economic marginalization and social disadvantage. Despite South Africa's transition to democracy and land reform programme, the legacy of land dispossession continues to shape rural poverty and economic inequality (1). Communities in the Western Cape province not only face this legacy but also uncertainty surrounding new afforestation initiatives. These communities affected by industrial tree plantations confront a web of interconnected impacts as a result of the unequal land distribution and the monocultures—poverty, land tenure insecurity, environmental issues, and governance failures. Yet, they also demonstrate resilience through collective responses and mobilization in the face of these difficulties.

Forestry communities: dispossession old and new

South Africa's legacy of land dispossession and displacement is particularly evident among communities living in areas of industrial tree plantations (referred to as forestry communities in South Africa). In the Western Cape, forestry communities experienced the effective privatization of state plantations from the early 2000s, followed by the state reversing course and proposing the replanting of timber plantations for pulp, paper and sawmilling. Their experiences illustrate some of the ecological, economic, and political dynamics of the industrial plantation model. While threats to community rights and livelihoods are common globally, evidence from the Western Cape shows how these issues manifest in distinct local ways and evolve over time.

Forestry plantations and the context of the Western Cape

South Africa is an ecologically diverse country, ranging from the subtropical eastern seaboard to the central plateau of the interior, and arid, desert-like landscapes in the west. Its temperate indigenous forests are species-rich but cover only a single-digit percentage of the country's land area. In South Africa, monocultural tree plantations are generally referred to as 'forests', which has long obscured the manifold negative impacts caused by monoculture tree plantations. These tree plantations extend in a fragmented arc, from the northern part of the country along the eastern seaboard into the winter-rainfall Mediterranean-climate region of the Western Cape.

The Western Cape is climatically and historically distinct. Since the mid-1600s, descendants of European settlers have dominated commercial agriculture in the region. Like much of the country, the Western Cape experienced large-scale land dispossession during the colonial and apartheid eras, severely restricting access to land for indigenous and 'mixed race' people. Today, the region is known for its export-oriented wine and deciduous fruit industries, while its metropolitan center of Cape Town attracts global tourism.

The Western Capes' mountainous areas include scattered commercial forestry plantations, primarily of non-native species such as pine, eucalyptus, and wattle (acacia). In more than a dozen of these plantations, historically disadvantaged communities live on state-owned land, previously leased to private timber companies, such as MTO (Mountain to Ocean). South Africa's small pockets of indigenous forests are largely uninhabited. Instead, it is the communities living and working in monocultural plantations that are at the forefront of self-described 'forestry' struggles in the country.

Forestry communities' vulnerability and marginalization

Communities living inside tree plantations in South Africa, particularly in the Western Cape, face precarious living conditions and insecure land tenure. These communities have limited economic opportunities and lack access to basic state services and infrastructure. The state and timber companies frequently deny communities access to surrounding plantations to obtain fuelwood, building materials, and medicinal plants. As a result, these rural communities are increasingly disconnected from traditional land-based livelihoods, including small-scale farming, grazing, and foraging, further inhibiting their ability to sustain themselves. Despite nearly three decades of land reform in South Africa, poverty and tenure insecurity remain widespread.

Additionally, communities inside these tree plantations face ongoing and emerging long-term consequences of living surrounded by plantations:

- **Environmental degradation**

Poverty and economic marginalization intersect with environmental threats. Monoculture plantations across South Africa contribute to soil depletion, water shortages, and biodiversity loss. In the Western Cape, tree plantations are particularly vulnerable to wildfires, which are exacerbated by the drought-prone climate and the unsustainable nature of monoculture tree planting, especially amid patterns of climate change. For instance, in 2017, a devastating fire ripped through the community of Hawequa outside the town of Paarl. The community evacuated their homes for a week, while the Pine plantation burned, destroying homes and gardens.

- **Weak governance and state coordination**

Efforts to improve the conditions of communities inside these tree plantations have been hindered by weak governance and poor coordination within the South African state. This has stalled efforts to formalize land tenure arrangements and provide essential services. As these settlements often straddle the physical and jurisdictional boundaries of various government agencies, they are negatively impacted by poor coordination within the state.

Like many forestry communities globally, those in the Western Cape have frequently been excluded from decision-making processes related to land use, forest management, and plantation redevelopment. These issues are also strongly gendered, as the commercial forestry sector has historically been male-dominated, and women's traditional roles—such as gathering firewood and medicinal plants—are often undervalued by policymakers. Women, however, play a significant role within these communities by providing on issues in the community and on spiritual matters.

- **The emerging threat of afforestation**

In the Western Cape, the state withdrew from the forestry sector two decades ago, only to reverse this decision within a decade amidst subsequent shortages of timber for sawmilling. The state has proposed 'recommissioning' (i.e. re-establish) tree plantations through leases to private concession companies. However, forestry communities have been excluded from decision-making regarding this policy shift. Plans for new afforestation raise concerns about a new wave of dispossession, economic

marginalization, and tenure insecurity. The replanting of monoculture tree plantations threatens to further displace local communities, undermine potential livelihoods, and foreclose opportunities for more socially and environmentally sustainable forms of agroforestry.

Community responses and mobilization

Civil society organizations like the Surplus People Project (SPP) have mobilized communities in the Western Cape. With SPP's support, these geographically dispersed communities formed the Forestry Community Forum (FCF) in 2011 to advocate for their collective interests. In late 2024, the FCF hosted a "Knowledge Fair" to share experiences, discuss their struggles, and plan advocacy efforts with the state and other stakeholders. This initiative highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the legacy of marginalization.

The approach is multifaceted, addressing interconnected challenges:

- **Improved services and infrastructure**

Ensuring access to essential services and infrastructure is crucial. Marginalization often leads to inadequate service provision.

- **Strengthening access to land**

Improving access to land and tenure security is essential for empowering forestry communities to manage their land sustainably and invest in long-term agricultural and community-based agroforestry practices

- **Skills development and economic opportunities**

Building skills and enhancing opportunities for sustainable livelihoods is key to breaking cycles of poverty.

- **Sustainable agroforestry practices**

Promoting agroforestry ensures the long-term health of both the land and the community, balancing ecological preservation with income generation.

- **Community participation in decision-making**

Increasing community involvement in governance allows forestry communities to influence policies on land use, environmental management, and resource allocation.

Overall, members of the FCF report that it has done well to bring together the relevant state and other role players to address the issues of the community.

This strategy addresses both immediate needs and long-term structural inequalities, empowering communities to take control of their development and challenge historical marginalization. The efforts of the FCF demonstrate the potential of bottom-up, community-driven initiatives to foster meaningful, sustainable change.

Surplus People Project

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(1) See article published in the WRM bulletin in 2015 about the Forestry Community Forum, [here](#)

