

Evictions from farms

The experiences of NGOs and unions dealing with farm dwellers along with various reports confirm that almost all of the three million black farm dwellers, whether working or not, live in poverty and many face human rights abuses including evictions. **Marc Wegerif** outlines the key findings of a National Evictions Survey, which has for the first time quantified the number of people evicted from farms.

The National Evictions Survey, carried out by Social Surveys and the Nkuzi Development Association (Nkuzi), represents the largest study of forced removals in the rural areas of South Africa since the Surplus Peoples Project of the mid 1980s documented apartheid era forced removals. Since September 2004 Social Surveys field teams have done scoping exercises in 300 settlements and door-to-door surveying in 75. Interviews were carried out in more than 8 000 households. In depth interviews revealed more detail of the nature of evictions and the impact on affected families. Interviews were also carried out with farmers from some areas where a high number of evictions were found. These interviews provided farmers' perspectives and more insight into why evictions may be happening.



	Farm dwellers evicted
1984 to end 1993	737,114
1994 to end 2004	942,303
Total	1,679,417

The survey found that almost 4.2 million people have moved off farms in the 21 years from 1984 to 2004, of which 460 000 found accommodation on other farms. Thus a total of over 3.7 million people have permanently

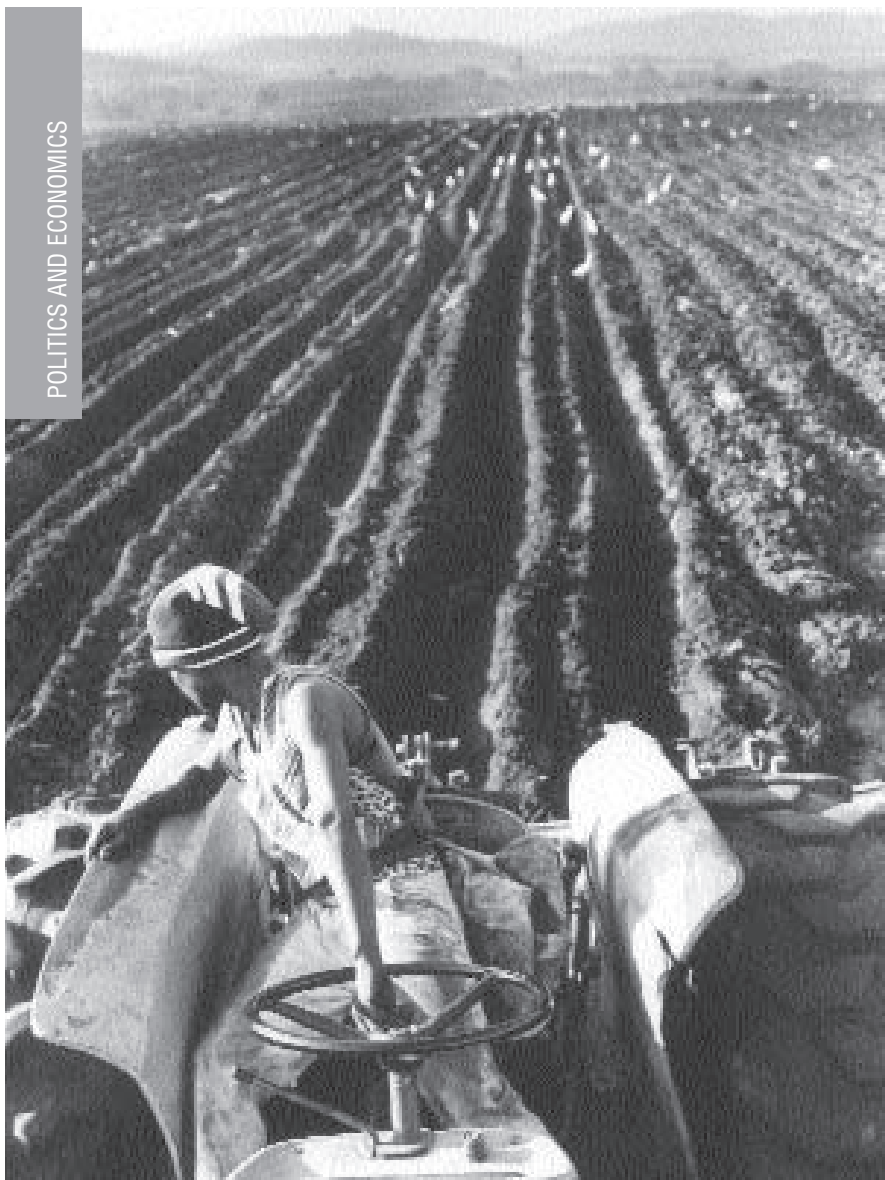
moved off farms. Some of those who left farms did so out of their own choice while just under 1.7 million were evicted; forced against their will to leave their land and homes.

The two years when the highest number of evictions occurred were 1984 and 1992. This seems to correspond with periods of severe drought. The next highest number of evictions was in 2003 when the sectoral

determination for agriculture came into effect with amongst other things the setting of a minimum wage on farms.

WHY EVICTIONS?

Trends in eviction numbers, along with information gathered from evictees and farmers, indicate that the cause of many evictions is economic pressure, sometimes exacerbated by droughts; trade liberalisation;



South African Farm Employment Trends

	1986	1991	1996	2002
Regular Employees	816 660	702 323	610 000	481 375
Casual Employees	534 781	413 239	304 000	459 445
Total Paid Employees	1 351 441	1 115 562	914 000	940 820

international competition; and new tenure and labour laws. It is clear that for farmers labour is one of the cost factors that can be squeezed; they make decisions in their best economic interests. This in an environment where low levels of education and unionisation combined with inadequate enforcement of labour and tenure laws results in farmworkers and farm dwellers being unable to effectively defend their interests. These factors and the resulting power relations are overlaid with racial

divisions and perceptions that are little changed since the end of apartheid. Super exploitation and a disregard for people's human dignity are the inevitable results.

Employment on farms has declined over the last decades in particular up to the mid 1990s. It is not surprising to find a correlation between continued downsizing of the work force and people leaving and being evicted from farms during this period. However, there are indications that from around 1996 onwards the total number of

people employed on farms has stabilised. Despite this evictions have continued unabated.

The enactment of new tenure and labour legislation has contributed to farmers changing their approach to employment and to people living on farms. Farmers interviewed spoke of their reluctance to employ people full time and to have people living on farms as they fear, or are trying to avoid, the requirements of both labour and tenure laws. Changes in employment patterns are reflected in the large decline in the number of regular and full-time workers on farms with an increase over the last few years in the number of casual employees. So while total farm employment numbers may have stabilised the nature of jobs is changing. We should be cautious about attributing these changes in employment practices entirely to new legislation as there are indications,

also from other sectors, that casualisation is a long term and ongoing trend. One of the effects of casualisation is the further marginalisation of women farmworkers.

Over two thirds of all evictions found were related to some kind of problem at work from wage disputes, to farms going bankrupt and workers being retrenched. Around 37% of all adult evictees did not work on the farms they were evicted from, but many were still affected by employment disputes often being evicted along with dismissed workers who in the eyes of the farmers were the primary occupiers, allowed on the land while they contributed to production.

A rather sad finding was that 28% of all those evicted for work related reasons were evicted due to the main breadwinner in the household passing away. These people, mostly women and children, were confronted with evictions from their homes and the loss of incomes and social networks at times of bereavement when they were probably least able to cope.

The continued departure of people from farms, whether voluntarily or through evictions, has major implications for



Type of settlement evictees now live in	% of evictees
Formalised township (mostly in poor sections)	48%
Informal settlements	30%
Former homeland villages	14%
Other	8%

development planning and service delivery. This could have serious implications for the farming sector in the future with few young people considering a return to farms as well as the growing impact of HIV/AIDS.

IMPLICATIONS OF EVICTIONS

Around 67% of evictees found themselves in urban centres, mostly in townships and informal settlements. In all places where evictees were found they continue to live in poverty, struggling to get any work at all and those who are working often only scrape an existence from piece jobs. There is also no evidence of any planning to accommodate evictees and others from farms or to assist

them as they try to establish themselves in new settlements.

Aside from the development implications evictions are clearly a human rights issue, an issue of justice as well as having serious political implications. The fact that so many people continue to be evicted from their homes and land has to be of grave concern. Clearly new legislation aimed to protect farm dwellers is having little impact with only 1% of the evictions found had involved a legal process. The limited achievements of the government's land reform programme are being completely undermined with almost 200 000 black households evicted from farms since 1994 compared to only 164 000 that have gained access to land or improved security of tenure through land reforms.

Many of those evicted were farmers in their own right with 44.8% of them having livestock of their own and 59.4% growing their own maize, while on the farm. Now less than 10% of the evicted households

have livestock and around 26% still grow maize, all on a much smaller scale than they did on the farm. Tragically black farmers are still being forced off the land and out of farming. These would appear to be prime candidates for land reforms yet very few are benefiting. Most evictees have no idea how they could benefit from land reform let alone where the nearest Department of Land Affairs office is.

The profile of evictees shows that 49% of them were children (under 16 years old) when they were evicted, 28% women and 23% men. These figures confirm the vulnerability of women and children and also indicate that a large number of evictees were living as families on the farms. A round 58% of the adults evicted had been living on the farm they were evicted from for more than ten years, further illustrating the settled nature of the majority of evicted households and the level of disruption that the evictions caused.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully the data gathered through this survey can stimulate more debate and research on the issue. There is a need to explore the implications of ongoing evictions that are displacing farmworkers, largely into urban centres, and also removing important remnants of a South African peasantry that despite all efforts of the apartheid and colonial regimes managed to cling to some land in 'white' areas.

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This is an edited version of an article written by Wegerif who is the programme manager: Policy and Research for Nkuzi Development Association.