

# Forced removals yet again

In Durban south, near the airport, big companies are again emerging as bullies.

**Zarina Moola** and **Fathima Paruk**

describe the imminent removal of Indian market gardeners who are being offered minimal compensation.



*Some of the fresh produce that is grown and sold to chain stores and street vendors*

occupied a portion of the Durban International Airport land for the past 17 years.

## MARKET GARDENS AND REMOVAL

The Durban International Airport is situated in an area that is known for its high density polluting industries such as Sapref, Engen and Mondi. With the construction of the new airport underway and the growing need for vacant land in this area for industrial expansion, the Airports Company of South Africa (ACSA) is considering selling the eastern precinct to surrounding industries such as Toyota and Shoprite. Part of this supposed vacant land is occupied by market gardeners who will be removed or relocated to a much smaller portion of land.

The market gardeners are an important, yet rarely acknowledged part of Durban's economy, as they provide fresh produce to Durban's shops and markets at low cost.

Market gardeners emerged during the late 19th century, as indentured labourers from India completed their labour contracts and were free to leave. Most Indians chose to remain in South Africa and using their experience of farming, soon became thriving small-scale farmers in and around Durban. The land in the south Durban area was favourable to the ex-indentured labourers since it was cheap as it was located outside the Durban borough boundaries.

The early market garden community was poor but rich in social and cultural ties. They faced many difficulties such as forced removals, droughts and floods yet the community survived these challenges. Their living conditions were rustic and poor but it was an appealing prospect as it brought quick cash returns.

The market gardeners brought many benefits to the people of

South Africa's economic system involves a reduced governmental role and increased private sector development. This has led to a more competitive environment and a massive growth in industrial developments. These developments are always viewed positively as they create jobs and increase the GDP of the country.

However, it is not realised that for some of these developments to occur, many people have to be removed from the land that they are occupying. These people are often poor and marginalised and lack the capacity and resources to put up a fight. One such community is the market gardeners who have



*The land that farmers have spent their life working on will now be developed*

Durban as they succeeded in lowering the prices of fresh produce that was originally supplied by white farmers.

All the farmers have been forcefully removed from their farms at least once. The majority of the farmers have been removed twice in their lifetimes. The farmers have never been compensated for their previous removals and face eviction once more. They had been a marginalised and vulnerable group in the past as they were unable to stand up to the apartheid government lacking the capacity, resources and legislation. This group of dispossessed farmers are once again vulnerable to forced removal, even under the new South African government.

#### MEANING OF LAND LOSS

The proposed development of the eastern precinct will directly affect the farmers, as most of the development will be on their land. The farmers have spent their lives working on the land to make it suitable for farming. They have contributed to digging drains, clearing the bush, installing irrigation systems and fertilising the land.

One of the farmers told us that, "these gardens mean everything to us; it is the only income for us and has been passed down to me from my mother. She has taught me everything I know." Removal will

also rob the farmers of the communities that have developed between each other over the years.

The ramifications of the farmers losing their land are many. It will mean losing their livelihoods and the vocation they know. It will mean over a hundred workers being out of a job. The vendors who buy their produce from the farmers will also be affected as they will have to purchase elsewhere, most likely for a higher price. The major chain stores will also have to purchase their vegetables from places out of Durban and the transport costs will inevitably raise prices.

There is a general consensus among the farmers that they were not fairly included in the decision-making process. To them it appeared that the decisions were made before they were notified.

ACSA is offering the farmers approximately 30 hectares in compensation for the 150 hectares that they currently occupy. This is impossible for 14 farmers to survive on. It is clear that their interests were not taken into account. The farmers feel that if they were offered a fair relocation contract, they would have genuinely considered it but no such contract was offered. The only offer that ACSA has made was to find the farmers new jobs in the 'proposed development'. This is ludicrous as most of the farmers are too old and

lack the skills required to be employed in industry.

The farmers on the airport land have formed an organisation called the Airport Farmers Association. They are affiliated to SDCEA (South Durban Community Environmental Alliance), which is an environmental justice movement assisting the community in South Durban.

Although a few meetings between ACSA and the farmers were organised, the farmers feel they are being unjustly dealt with. The lack of communication and understanding between both parties have left the farmers in a state of deadlock. ACSA remains silent.

The farmer's plight is very similar to many communities all over the world who are affected by neo-liberal economic policies. The promotion of privatisation, trade liberalisation and minimal state involvement of South Africa's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme is expected to increase economic growth and employment. However, this does not seem to be working well for the market gardeners. <sup>LB</sup>

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