



Peasant Households: Neglected Engines of Global Growth

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INTRODUCTION

The historical significance of the socio-political changes in South Africa since 1994 cannot be disputed. The challenge is to place the redress agenda within a macro-framework geared to promote competitiveness that positions South Africa as a credible and valued player within the continent and globally. Of concern here is the plight of the rural poor and the neglect of rural space, viewed as central in redressing imbalances and competitiveness. This study posits that the marginalisation of the rural poor results from the deliberate, structural and systemic exclusion evident in previous regimes and perpetuated by the reigning neoliberal policies and the rural development paradigm. It provides an in-depth analysis of the rural poor's spiral of deprivation. The spiral is viewed to perpetuate "dependent survivalism" with reliance on unsustainable hand-outs and oppressive paternalistic relationships between those with, and those without resources. The argument is that the emergence of the poverty eradication agenda has not focused attention and effort on the treatment of the causes of poverty.

The study objective is to offer alternative approaches for addressing these structural constraints, enabling rural household participation in viable and sustainable rural economic development programmes. To this end transdisciplinary methods premised on the view of the household as the nucleus of sustainable development are used. The study challenges the general economic theory that limits a household to only a source of labour and capital, with emphasis on household consumption. It shifts focus from the consumptive "dependent survivalism" mode to households as owners of productive assets, producers and suppliers, termed the "productive perspective". To achieve this, an inclusive and sustainable development conceptual framework is proposed with an alternative rural development policy perspective. The framework emphasises the deployment of capital assets and rural economic development strategies based on the theory of value chains. The comparative analysis of marula commercialisation case studies is used to conceptualise the framework and formulate alternative approaches. Primary research focused on the Distell/MirmaAmarula Cream processing plant in Phalaborwa and the Marula Natural

Products initiative at Thulamahashe, Bushbuckridge, South Africa. The findings demonstrated that marula supplying households are value chain actors with an objective function to maximise benefits and participate in the mainstream economy, but are structurally constrained. The profiles of the marula suppliers indicate that the majority are women who as heads of households bear the brunt of unpaid labour and the burden of care. The case study exposed the failure of the local and global economic systems to afford them their deserved opportunities and benefits as value chain actors. The study thus proposes a sustainable benefit-maximising system that is rooted in the value chain-based re-organisation of production, emphasising mainstreaming through institutional and systems change. The role of the state is emphasised as central in creating an enabling environment with regulatory frameworks that ensure sustainable resource use and sharing in value created. The study calls for the courage to turn the 2008/9 global financial crisis into an inclusive and sustainable development agenda.

THE MARULA TRANSDISCIPLINARY CASE STUDY

South Africa pays social grants to over 15 million people annually, the majority of whom are the poorest of the poor in former rural homelands. It costs government R9 billion to administer these grants. Employment in agriculture has significantly reduced, with the agricultural commercial model of large scale farming, with increasing imports and capital intensive production no longer able to accommodate the majority of the peasant households. The question then is has the rural paradigm shifted more to a welfarist mode relying on trickle down handouts? Is this sustainable?

This study has uncovered an amazing case study of resilience and innovation. This is the story of Southern Africa's peasant households who, from time in memoriam, conserved Africa's hidden treasure – the indigenous marula tree – for the world's benefit. Marula grows prolifically in a belt that stretches across the lowveld; from Northern KwaZulu Natal, across Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West Province, as well as most parts of the Southern African region (Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia,

Swaziland, and Zimbabwe). It continues to grow wildly and is found across many of the poorest areas in Southern Africa.

Of interest here are the neglected and voiceless women-headed rural households who against all odds nurtured the valuable marula resource to sustain livelihoods. Through them new industries have emerged, drawing from every part of the tree. Currently the marula fruit is the main source of activity and income. The traditional marula beer, the famous Amarula Cream (liqueur), juice and jam are produced from the fruit pulp. The essential oils and cosmetics draw from the fruit's hard nut, the kernel. Herbal medicines/ pharmaceutical products are also used and sold (mainly informally) drawing from the bark and leaves. The marula fruit-based products are sold worldwide and gaining in popularity. Amarula Cream is sold in all continents (over 160 countries). The Body Shop as well has popularised the marula-based cosmetic ranges worldwide. These products from our rural villages are the centre of celebrities' toasts, pampering and powdering the who's who of Hollywood and Bollywood.

Marula escaped colonialism as it was never industrialised into orderly and machined plantations and processing plants. This has ensured that recent commercialisation has at the centre of the value chain – the peasant households. Despite low educational levels they build on traditional knowledge and social networks for seed nurturing, harvesting, home production and supply. Household production creates space for the involvement of the whole family in different marula activities. This view is well captured by Mrs. Mabuyi, a widow and pensioner who is one of the marula suppliers residing in Bushbuckridge, a former homeland area in South Africa. She relates to the focus group fond memories of traditional practices related to marula

Marula is a tree for Kings. It is a symbol for strength, fertility and resilience. It was not just about people drinking it to be drunk. It was brewed to thank ancestors for our life, celebrating with our families and neighbours and thanking Induna for taking care of us and the land.

Mrs Mabuyi is the chairperson of a Marula Committee in her area. She and her fellow marula household producers and suppliers have progressed to reliance on marula as their income-generating activity. Theirs is beyond just survival as they have invested in market intelligence, selling to diverse processors while also introducing diverse by-products for local demand. They plant new marula trees and work together to conserve the trees in their homesteads, communal, and protected areas. These women harvest marula fruit in February and March of every year for local and global benefit. Mrs Mabuyi explains

We look after the trees, we harvest them, use wheelbarrows to transport marula to our households and collection point. We clean and sort the fruit. We crack the kernels to produce the nuts

for oil in our homes with family members. Some transport the harvest to the factory themselves. Others use the factory transport from collection point. We also collectively hire bakkies to take fruit to the collection point and factory. As committees we organize campaigns to stop people from chopping down trees.

This story highlights the pre-industrial traditional production systems that are still prevalent in rural South Africa typical of traditional peasant economies. The use of the term "peasant" is deliberate to emphasise the inequalities and dualism still pervasive in South Africa's middle income economy. Of concern to the thesis is State intervention – rural development policies and programmes that mainly focus on survivalism and cash grants, disregarding the productive and entrepreneurial potential of rural households. Rural development is regarded as a welfare function and not an economic opportunity for all. This approach has exposed the peasant households to exploitative and paternalistic business relations. They absorb many production costs and associated risks that are not compensated for or rewarded by the buyers. They witness their buyers grow while they struggle to survive. The result is deepening rural poverty despite escalating expenditure on rural development by government.

What do we do? I ask Mrs. Mabuyi. She sighs, not from relief, but from collecting her thoughts to find an adequate explanation that can pierce through what she calls "the thick skull of the enlightened". She starts by emphasizing

We are not voiceless, you people just do not want to hear us. The white people made a mix masala putting all of us Shangaan, Pedi and Swazi together in Bushbuckridge. We have been moved from pillar to post, we have changed izinduna, municipalities and provinces. When we get excited that at last we are getting water and electricity so that we can generate more income, it does not work most of the time. We have to struggle on poor roads, be nice to izinduna and officials to access protected areas for marula harvest. We smile because we have NGOs and donors who finally hear us and work with us, things start going down there's no money again. Our sons lose jobs in mines, come back sick for us to care for them, our grandchildren in the cities cannot find jobs, we have to send them money every month to survive and hope that they can find a job. I put all my energies on marula because I see an opportunity to generate an income now and leave a legacy for future generations. We need help to generate income. I hope my participation in this meeting will help sort out this problem.

This story demonstrates a problem of rural development policy and institutional failure. When rural municipalities like Bushbuckridge have to depend on operational grants to survive with poor capacity to deliver, enhancing the productive capabilities of the citizenry beyond cash grants becomes difficult. The slowness in land reform and inefficiency in natural resource management

complicates this even further. Most importantly this story shows the failure of the local and global economic systems to afford peasant households their deserved opportunities and benefits as value chain actors in the marulacommercialisation chain. Central to the problem is the economic model on which rural economic development strategies are based, that is, the focus of the firm or factory as a production centre disregarding the productive function of the household. This draws from economic theories that treat households only as providers of labour and beneficiaries of wages, as well as the 'consumption base'.

Mrs Mabuyi's response to my question attests to the need for a transdisciplinary approach (across disciplines/sectors and spatial integration) proposed by the thesis. The value chain system is thus proposed to mainstream the peasant households and link global and local markets in ways that benefit the rural poor. According to Porter "value chain is a system of interdependent activities". The value chain system is characterised by interlinkages operating within an enabling and supportive environment. Its relevance here is the link of household production with factory processing and market infrastructure globally, driven by institutional and system change that recognises and rewards the peasant contribution. This recognition of peasants as value chain actors, and their households as production centres ensures the integration of poor village homesteads into the global market economy. It also creates space for the infusion of business models and practices with the rural people's way of life creating space for social enterprises and maximisation of benefits beyond the profit model.

Such an approach can assist to transform global market economies into inclusive and sustainable systems with institutions that accommodate peasant household producers trapped in pre-capitalist, traditional and subsistence activities.

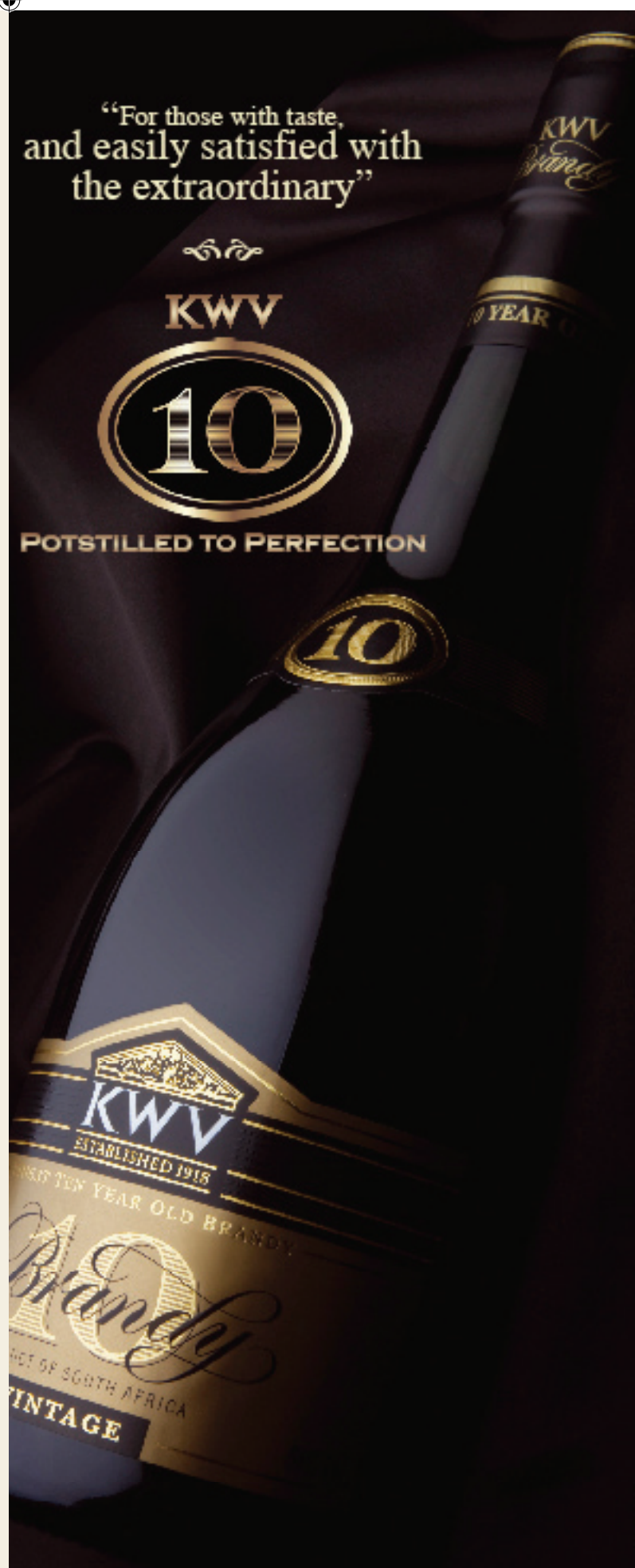
CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates that peasant households are not satisfied with reliance on unsustainable hand-outs and oppressive paternalistic relationships with buyers and established industries. The peasant households (owning potentially valuable natural resources, indigenous knowledge and labour), if adequately supported, can strategically use value chains to secure sustainable livelihoods and prosper as industry players in the mainstream global market economy.

NOTES

1. This short piece reflects part of the PhD thesis of the author entitled "Establishing viable and sustainable rural economic development programmes in a competitive global economy".

2. This case was presented at the "New Voices in Science", 2 December 2011 at the University of Stellenbosch



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