Chapter 6: Ruth First in the Twenty-First Century: Activist Research in the Age of Climate Change

Janet Cherry

Introduction

In this chapter, I draw lessons both from Ruth First's scholarship and from her lived experience as an activist-scholar in Mozambique in the 1980s and reflect on Saleem Badat's earlier chapters on activist research. I relate activist research and the role of universities in Southern Africa to the need for a regional strategy for sustainable development in the context of the transition from fossil fuels in the twenty-first century. I draw key lessons for the practice of research, bridging the gap between grassroots empirical research and state policy formulation and implementation; as well as suggesting directions for the content of such research. This is both at the micro or local level, where I advocate cooperative and transformative approaches to the building of a sustainable economy, and at the macro, sub-regional level where integrated, decentralised and sustainable use of resources, as well as both old and new technologies to build a more just economy, are explored.

Through this exploration, four types of activist scholarship are identified. The first is the critical scholarship of the left, which becomes activist scholarship when it is in direct support of popular movements. The second is critical scholarship in support of the state in development of policy; this becomes activist scholarship when it reflects the voice of the "grassroots" in asserting a progressive policy agenda. The third is participatory research at grassroots level, which empowers the participants, and which can inform both policy and/or popular movements. The last type of activist scholarship is participatory action research, which intervenes to challenge power relations and empower the participants to explore alternatives. The third and fourth types of activist scholarship are illustrated with examples from Southern Africa. These are not distinct or mutually exclusive categories of research, and there are overlaps between them, especially between the second and third types; yet the typology may be useful in indicating that the scholarship which empowers those who are the least powerful in our society, is the activist scholarship that has the greatest transformative potential.

Climate change and the sub-regional context [1]

The Southern African region has borders; however, nature does not acknowledge these borders. All human societies in the region are dependent on what nature provides. The food-energy-water nexus in the region exists within the global political economy, within a global system of production and within a global food system. This global system has, over the past two hundred years, resulted in climate change which is having, and is going to have, a particularly harsh impact on this region. Ruth First, working as an activist scholar in Mozambique forty years ago, held this understanding of the regional political economy at the centre of her work. As her friend, comrade and colleague, Bridget O'Laughlin (2014: 30) wrote:

> she thought and worked with (and drummed into us) the concept of a Southern Africa as regional "system" historically forged by a distinctive form of capitalist production grounded in migrant labour, concentration of capital in South Africa and racialised political dualism. She knew that most South Africans and Mozambicans did not think about the region in this way, but part of her mission was to explain why an enduring revolutionary project depended on their doing so.

This chapter takes as a starting point the sub-regional context, as well as the global context of climate change. By the sub-region I refer specifically to South Africa, Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Research conducted over the past decade in this sub-regional context is explored, reflecting on what Ruth First was doing in relation to training researchers and in relation to policy research and the question of "what she would do now", in changed circumstances. The assumptions made are that there is an overriding imperative to respond to the challenge of climate change. This response is determined both by the position of these countries in the rapidly decarbonising global economy, and by the need for resilience to the climate shocks which the sub-region is already experiencing. Within this context, the focus is on the poorest residents of the poorest countries in the region. How can they participate in the

1 This chapter is based on research conducted by students in the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, as well as action research projects which I have led over the past decade. The detail of each of these research projects is published elsewhere, however, the overall topic of scholarship in the context of climate change in the sub-region was first presented at a seminar at the Rhodes University Institute of Social and Economic Research on 16 March 2012, entitled *'Africa Burning: Southern African livelihood strategies in the context of climate change*'. A decade later, as part of a sabbatical research project on 'Emancipatory scholarship, climate change and sustainable development alternatives in Sub Saharan Africa', I travelled to Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi, visiting research projects and institutions and presented *'Emancipatory scholarship, climate change and sustainable development policy in Southern Africa: Towards a regional approach'* (Guest lecturer at Malawi University of Science and Technology, 20 September 2022; Guest lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 29 September 2022). I draw on these unpublished lectures in this chapter, as well as on my field visits in 2022, on the findings of the research projects and on related secondary sources.

transition from fossil fuel? What is the potential for them to benefit from this transition, rather than be victims of it?

Mozambique and Malawi are among the poorest countries in the world, measured in terms of GDP per capita; Zimbabwe is not faring much better, despite the enormous wealth generated from the sale of gold and diamonds over the past decade. South Africa remains the regional hegemon, the only economy with a strong industrial base, an agricultural sector producing a surplus for export, and an economy that despite chronic unemployment and drastic inequality, is large enough to absorb millions of economic migrants from Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (The Global Economy 2023).[2] I argue that a dual strategy is needed: an integrated approach to the transition which builds on mineral resources for development of new "green" industries, and simultaneously the building of decentralised, democratised, resilient and sustainable agriculture, food, water and energy systems. I explore how to engage in the creation of such an integrated regional strategy through critical and activist scholarship.

What Ruth First did

> In this regard it continues to bear emphasising that Ruth First was a brilliant social scientist – albeit a revolutionary social scientist (and, again, she would have made no real distinction between the two, between her roles as revolutionary and as social scientist). For, as a social scientist, she knew that there was no substitute for clear thinking and hard work – for a genuine science. (Saul 2014a: 121)

Reflecting on the work of the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CES) (Centre for African Studies) in the 1980s, through CEA (1982) and others who worked with Ruth First in Mozambique in the context of the transition to socialism, there are lessons to be drawn in the context of the twenty-first century, where we face a different transition: the transition from fossil fuel. This transition involves a fundamental change in production systems, which were the primary concern of the CAS when Ruth First served as research director. Badat notes Ruth First's innovative intervention in creating an:

> interdisciplinary postgraduate course in development 'on issues of socialist transition in Mozambique within the context of southern Africa,' with the curriculum built 'around the teaching of research by doing collective work' and aimed at both cultivating graduates and

2 Poorest countries, GDP per capita PPP, 2023: Mozambique US$1494, Malawi US$1683, Zimbabwe US$3515, South Africa US$14284

> producing research. (Wuyts 2014: 71 as cited in Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume)

The CEA (1982: 31) emphasised 'the unity of research with teaching and the application of research' and did this through 'field studies on production; a focus on the problem of transforming of production systems'. The same review of the work of the CAS described their work as 'field studies on how state farms and agricultural producer co-operatives, growing and consolidating together, could be the basis for transforming family agriculture' and emphasised that 'in all of these studies the research was concerned to show that the process of transition must be studied as a whole'—and linked to policy formulation and implementation. As the CAS researchers emphasised:

> The purpose of the Centre is thus to provide information on the present conditions of production in order to permit that concrete measures be devised to implement general strategy ... Thus the aim of the CEA has not been to produce a series of definitive research studies but rather to make social research an acceptable step in the formulation and implementation of policy (CEA 1982: 35).

Mark Wuyts, a colleague of First's at the CEA, explained the relationship between research and policy:

> Applied research must enter into the domain of contested views about how to define a problem or look for its solution.' Very much in issue was 'the role of research in a process of transition: whether it involved passive execution or implementation of policy or instead active and critical engagement with policy'. (Wuyts 2014: 62, as cited in Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume)

Ruth First, as an activist scholar, was concerned primarily to contributing effectively to the transformation of society; the critical yet supportive nature of the empirical research and its application as policy was an ongoing tension:

> There is the difficulty of moving from a work experience which makes critique and opposition the most important role of the radical researcher to one in which analysis is critical in form, because it operates within a perspective of social transformation, but has to confront actual problems of that transformation. (CEA 1982: 35)

Badat's chapters on Ruth First emphasise the exploration of 'the connections between activist research

and the development of political programmes, manifestos, plans, strategies, policies and tactics (PSPs, in short)' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). While all such research must be critical—'if all activist research is or should be critical research, critical research, while valuable, is not activist research' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume)—it is not necessarily autonomous. Yet the question of autonomy of the activist scholar can only be resolved in specific context:

> I have suggested that it is perfectly possible for activist researchers to balance 'commitment' and autonomy when it comes to certain kinds of PSP research and when they are not especially concerned whether their research finds favour or not or is used or not. In any event, the task becomes 'impossible' only when activist researchers are and seek to remain active members of movements (as First did). (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume)

Some of the tensions between critical research, autonomy and activism are explored in the examples below. What are the concerns of activist research? Badat notes, quoting Isaacman (2003: 4), that at the core of the agenda of activist research are two 'major initiatives': to 'render audible the voices and concerns of the powerless' and to 'support their struggles aimed at ending exploitative practices and dismantling institutions of oppression' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume).

How is this to be done? The research should not only be critical, it should be empirically rigorous and clearly communicated (Hale 2017: 13 as cited in Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Badat notes that activist researchers, by definition, do not restrict themselves 'entirely to the academic terrain' but instead 'orient themselves to larger, wider and more diverse publics'. This 'engagement beyond the boundary of the university with the wider public and the communication and shaping of ideas and thinking is integral to the public good function and responsibility of the university' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Using the above criteria, four types of scholarship—two of which may be defined as activist scholarship but in a narrower definition—in the context of the transition from fossil fuel in the sub-region are identified here.

The first, is the critical scholarship of the 'left' outside of the state: those who, following First, as 'the foremost scholarly critic of the failures of national liberation' (Williams et al. 2014: 9) are profoundly disillusioned with the development path, severely critical of the governing parties and their policies and providing clear warnings of the dangers of continued resource exploitation. Their activist scholarship takes the form of criticism and sometimes of engagement with social movements to contest policy.

The second, is those who conduct critical scholarship with or for the state; some, like Rob Davies, did both in more than one state in the region. This includes those engaged in "evidence-based" policy research, drawing on the work of economists to test the viability of particular development policies for

national governments or regional institutions, in this case the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This category includes scholars based at universities in the region and elsewhere in the world who adopt a "progressive" scholarship in the sense that the unstated intention is to assist in formulation of policies which will, if not end exploitation and oppression, at least build a more just and sustainable society.

The third and fourth types of scholarship are the subject of the research projects working with the grassroots. One involves empirical field research with the poorest residents of the region, analysing livelihoods, production systems and labour migration from the bottom up. The other aims at the more radical goal of interventions to change power relations at local level, and possibly even production systems at regional level. These are the activist-scholar projects described below. First, we assess the profoundly divergent scholarship of the first two types.

Divergent scholarship of the sub-region since Ruth First

John Saul's 2014 book *A Flawed Freedom: Rethinking Southern African Liberation* is dedicated to 'Ruth First, activist, scholar and friend, a martyr in the struggle to achieve freedom in her own country.' A decade into the twenty-first century, Saul painted a grim picture of Mozambique and the subversion of the socialist transition that First was engaged in in the early 1980s, referring to the 'cruel inequality between elite and mass' (Saul 2011: 97).

Noting that 'mega projects in the extractive sector' are one pillar of Mozambique's development strategy, Saul (2011)agrees with Joseph Hanlon's critique of the role of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in creating a new elite; what Hanlon (2021) terms an oligarchy operating within a 'mafia, resource-curse state'. Much of the critical scholarship of the region in the past decade has reflected a profound disillusionment with the development path followed, and a harsh critique of both states and institutions of regional cooperation, notably the SADC.

Hanlon and others have termed the new elites in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, oligarchs, analysing the often-corrupt patronage systems that have emerged, linked not only to global companies and extraction of mineral resources, but to foreign aid and IFIs. Hanlon noted that when Guebuza became president of Mozambique in 2004, he had become rich:

> in part by using his role as transport minister to gain key contracts ... He used his tenure (as president) to restructure the Frelimo party into a much more tightly organised patronage system. Government contracts and civil service jobs depended not just on membership but working for the party – and the oligarchs. (Hanlon 2021: 403)

In addition to criticism of Southern African governments, much critical research has focused on the political economy of the region and the situation of the countries in the global capitalist economy (Vieira et al. 1992); the dependence of the sub-regional economies on "extractivism", economies based on mining and fossil fuel extraction, the repatriation of profit and the unequal terms of trade faced by countries of the region (Bond 2006; Toussaint et al. 2019). The new journal *Feminist Africa* published an edition in 2021 on *'Extractivism, Resistance, Alternatives'*, and scholars including Samantha Hargreaves and Isabel Casimiro have built a network of feminist and environmentalist scholars in Southern Africa. A recent study of "green extractivism" in Mozambique (Bruna 2022) warns us of the dangers of the link between extractivism and the transition from fossil fuel; asking the critical question: who benefits?

In some cases, this critical scholarship translates into activist scholarship: researching and providing support for social movements including anti-extractives movements such as the Amadiba Crisis Committee, Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA), WoMin (Women in Mining Affected Communities) and others. An article outlining the latter organisation (Mapondera and Hargreaves 2021: 139) succinctly summarises the critique, recounting the experiences of women and noting that 'These are snippets of stories addressing the experience of millions of women across Africa who carry the externalised costs of a development paradigm founded on the large-scale exploitation of natural resources. This extractivist model has been privileged as the development pathway out of poverty for many countries in Africa'.

Badat points out that 'the use, for example, of oral histories and neglected written materials of social movements, grassroots organisations and coalitions are important antidotes to simple and unnuanced master narratives' (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume). While this is important, the involvement of grassroots organisations and movements in the research process takes this one step further: how do such organisations change the master narrative through their actions?

Other activist-scholars focus on the transition from fossil fuel through the mobilisation of civil society and labour movements around the "just transition" agenda; in South Africa this takes the form of two civil society coalitions, the Climate Justice Charter movement and the Climate Justice Coalition, with the leading activist scholars along with Satgar (2019), being Lenferna (2024) and Williams and Satgar 2013,respectively, who fall into the first kind of scholarship and who in addition, are directly involved in the support of social movements and attempting to contest the state around policy directions. This research is self-defined as outside of the state and is usually 'against the state' (Van der Walt 2019), being highly critical of the ruling parties in the sub-region, in particular the ANC, Frelimo and ZANU-PF. The key lesson that Saul draws from the past few decades is instructive for activist scholars in the current context of climate crisis:

> In fact, the principal lesson to be learned from recent southern African history, including that of South Africa, is not so much 'what not to do' as it is the high cost to be paid for choosing 'not to dare' – not to dare to be self-reliant and economically imaginative and not to dare to be genuinely democratic and actively committed to the social and political empowerment of the people themselves. (Saul cited in Williams and Satgar 2013: 214)

We will return to this in the exploration of the kind of activist-scholar research that involves the "empowerment of the people themselves". But of those who worked with Ruth First in the context of the Mozambique transition to socialism, it is of interest to contrast the subsequent research roles and findings of John Saul, Bridget O'Laughlin and Rob Davies, among others. Rob Davies is perhaps the closest exponent of the second type of scholarship, those who conducted critical scholarship for or with the state, in both Mozambique and South Africa. Davies, who had studied at Sussex with Mike Morris in the 1970s as one of a group of structuralist Marxist scholars, moved to Mozambique and worked in the CEA for 11 years, from 1979 to 1990. Davies provided "critical support" through the CEA in order to contribute, as De Branganca and First directed, 'to the advance of national liberation in southern Africa in general, and to the building of socialism in Mozambique in particular' (Davies 2021: ll). Returning to South Africa in 1990, Davies became co-director of the Centre for Southern African Studies at the University of the Western Cape and began research for both the ANC and SADC on regional cooperation. His subsequent role as a politician was closely tied to his research on the political economy of the region, and he served in various capacities in the Trade and Industry portfolio from 1996, serving as Minister of Trade and Industry from 2009 to 2019.

Also in the second category are activist-scholars who work "outside but with the state", and who continue to work in research in Southern Africa particularly in the field of industrial policy and regional integration, such as Mike Morris and Paul Jourdan.[3] Morris et al. (2011) countered the resource-curse argument with evidence of the opportunities for sustainable industrial development in the context of transition from fossil fuel. Part of a research project called Making the Most of Commodities Programme (MMCP), they argued that commodity exports may be linked to development of manufacturing industries, and that the terms of trade as well as the pressure for decarbonisation were favourable for certain Southern African minerals production. Working from the assumption that economies that are dependent on commodity production 'must work within the given structure of the economy, to

3 Mike Morris is academic who was a labour organiser in Cape Town in the early 1980s; Paul Jourdan spent 18 years in exile in Mozambique and Zimbabwe before returning to South Africa in 1991. I doubt that either of them would classify themselves as 'activist scholars'.

transform it', they note that climate change will result in disruption of agricultural production systems; yet, there are prospects for diversification, through regional integration of value chains as well as through exports. Jourdan (2022) illustrates this with an analysis of green minerals and the value-chains for batteries, including lithium, lead-acid and vanadium batteries, and the stimulus provided by the imperative to adopt renewable energy technologies both in vehicles and in embedded generation of electricity.

Other research in the region in the tradition of Ruth First and the CAS is of migrant labour and rural livelihoods. This falls into the third type of activist-scholar: those who conduct detailed empirical research with the peasants and migrant workers of the region. As two such examples, Ruth Castel-Branco has conducted detailed field research on labour, cotton cultivation and cash transfers in Mozambique and anthropologist Lars Buur has conducted studies of the Mozambique sugar industry. Castel-Branco engages with the range of policy debates and proposals for a more just future in the region:

> 'In Southern Africa, proposals for 'post-work' utopias have ranged from repeasantisation, as the semi-proletariat seize control of the means of production through land occupations (Moyo and Yeros 2013); to democratic collectivisation, as producers co-construct solidarity economies based on cooperatives (Satgar 2007); to a radical politics of distribution anchored in new forms of political claim-making based on citizenship (Ferguson 2015)' (Castel-Branco 2021: 4)

> Other detailed progressive social policy research has related to cash transfers, the welfare state and the role of the state (Seekings 2015, re cash transfers and the welfare state; Van Niekerk 2013 on the social democratic welfare state); these fall into the category of critical research informing policy, as does Davies' research. Castel-Branco's thesis examines the 'potential of publicly funded cash transfers in advancing such a radical politics' (Castel-Branco 2021: 4) In Maputo, the Institute for Economic and Social Research (IESE) serves as a logical successor to Ruth First's CEA, with its focus on climate justice and the role of civil society in the energy transition. This involves the identification of challenges for citizen deliberation on the just transition in regions producing oil and gas, such as Cabo Delgado. This includes current use of participatory mechanisms in development planning, and the thorny question of how tax revenue from mega projects is used; as well as engagement on land use and the displacement of people by such projects and how compensation for such loss of land or livelihoods is allocated and used (IESE 2022). Such research may fall into the first or second type, depending on whether it is critical of the state, or assisting the state in developing policy.

What to research? Policy directions linked to climate crisis and activist scholarship

Given the urgent need for response to climate change, there are three broad directions for policy research. The first is energy policy and the potential for decentralised energy though renewables, given the natural advantage that Southern Africa has regarding sunlight, as well as significant wind and water resources. Second, this in turn is related to "green industrialisation", the use of carbon-free energy to industrialise. In the region, South Africa is heavily coal-dependent; in terms of its commitments to the global Conference of Parties (COP) process, it must engage in a transition away from fossil fuel; Mozambique has opted for a path of oil and gas extraction. While there is a strong argument—in line with the position taken by the climate justice movement that there should be a complete halt to new fossil fuel exploitation—there is an important distinction to be made between hard commodities (minerals) and energy commodities (coal, oil and gas). There is significant potential for "green industrialisation" using the minerals found in the region; the use of green minerals to develop renewable energy industry and value chains, for example, lithium-ion batteries (LIBs).

Decentralised energy through photovoltaic (PV) solar can also provide many advantages in development programmes in both urban and rural contexts, from mini-grids to provide electricity to remote villages and stimulate their economy, to embedded generation and grid-feed-in to provide sustainable electricity for national development. There is significant potential for linkages with government policies for low-cost housing, urban development, sustainable villages, internet access, health and education, using PV solar as illustrated by the Centre for Community Technology at Nelson Mandela University;[4] Similarly, PV solar can support social development policies, in particular cash transfers to rural areas to stimulate production for local markets; strong local economic development policies and support for rural agricultural hubs, providing access to technology, finance, banking and capital. Affordable clean energy for low-income households through PV solar is one of the obvious "quick wins". In the most transformative versions, as explored by the Transition Township project described below, the patterns of ownership and resource distribution in the society may be irrevocably altered by renewable energy: the kind of structural transformation in production relations that Ruth First was aiming for. Such an approach is not in conflict with the need for green industrialisation using the region's mineral resources to develop the renewable energy industry, as well as other industries, notably

4 The Centre for Community Technologies at Nelson Mandela University is engaged in software development for many such applications, for schools, clinics, waste recycling centres, etcetera.

transport, through electric vehicles and green hydrogen. A "green steel" industry is also potentially viable as part of an integrated and sustainable industrial development policy (Trollip et al. 2022).

The third, and related, direction for policy is food systems. Agriculture policy in the region must also be linked to climate change, both to climate threats and to the urgent need for transformation of food systems. Modern agriculture is heavily fossil-fuel dependent, and the systems of food storage and distribution are likewise. Woods et al. (2010: 1) argue that technology, renewable energy and changes in management 'will all play important roles in increasing the energy efficiency of agriculture and reducing its reliance on fossil resources'. The dominant policy focus on development of industrial agriculture and exploitation of other "soft commodities" for export is inappropriate for climate resilience and food sovereignty in the region as well as for preservation of global biodiversity and long-term food security. Industrial ocean fishing is particularly problematic, with regional restrictions on commercial fishing being necessary, however, difficult to enforce. Other "soft commodities" based on natural resources such as forestry must be treated with extreme caution and careful management, if allowed at all, given the risks of biodiversity loss and the role of forests in carbon capture. Commercial agriculture which is carbon intensive requires policies which restrict industrial animal production and the use of fossil-fuel based fertilisers; other aspects of the sub-regional food system, such as sugar cane, are also problematic. Policies which advocate their replacement with low-carbon and drought resilient alternatives suitable to the sub-region; diverse and nutritious, drought resistance crops are being supported by international NGOs and tested in some countries in the sub-region, but with little traction to date (Paul 2017). Given that large parts of the sub-region remain dependent on subsistence or household farming, which are most vulnerable to climate shocks, rather than move to capital-intensive, carbon-intensive industrial agriculture, it may be possible to transform small-scale farming and build sustainable local economies through the use of renewable energy and other appropriate technologies.

In terms of the "what to research", in the context of climate change and the imperative of a just transition from fossil-fuel dependency to a sustainable development path, it is imperative for engaged scholars and activist-academics to focus research and work on the following areas:

- Sustainable agriculture, sustainable marine resource use, coastal livelihoods and food sovereignty;
- Regional and local markets and value chains within the food and energy system;
- The political economy of energy and water, including decentralised solutions and decarbonisation of food systems;
- Technological innovation and indigenous knowledge systems in food production; sustainable meat and alternative protein sources; animal rights and food justice; nutrition and health; and

- Labour migration, employment and livelihoods in regional food systems.

The practice of activist-scholarship: Some examples

In terms of the "how to research", the just transition from fossil fuel demands engaged scholarship. This should involve grassroots research into the realities of life for most people of the region, avoiding the elite biases that Chambers (1997) pointed out. It should also involve transdisciplinary research that is rigorous, empirical and critical, and provides an integrated regional perspective. The provision of critical support to government departments at various levels, in the different countries of the region, through such research is an additional role for activist scholars.

Two types of activist research are explored here, illustrated with examples of research conducted in the identified countries over the past decade. These respond to the third and fourth types of activist scholarship outlined above, that is, grassroots empirical research (type 3) and action research which pilot alternatives (type 4). The first is "type 3", grassroots empirical research, and refers to the kind of field research which Ruth First carried out for training government officials in the CEA: detailed empirical research on the livelihoods and production systems of rural areas, with "ordinary people" as participants. In most cases they are subsistence farmers and female householders, which are not mutually exclusive categories. In the examples given, this research was carried out using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods, designed to empower the participants, drawing on their experience and knowledge of their own reality. Done properly, the research process itself can not only yield more accurate empirical data than conventional survey research, but can change power relations, as Chambers (1997) argues in his seminal book, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*. This book is used in the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha in teaching methodology and in training students for research. Many of the students in this master's programme are, like the CEA students, government officials in departments including rural development, agriculture, environment, local economic development or social development. As argued by the CEA (1982: 36): 'The research projects chosen involve fieldwork so that students can experience themselves how data is collected and organised and analysed. In part the fieldwork is of course also intended to put students and staff directly in touch with problems of transition at the base level.'

The examples provided below, conducted in the 2000s, some thirty years after the CEA wrote the above, are of the research practice of students in the Development Studies programme at Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha. The students employed PRA methods, conducting detailed research in the rural villages in the dry districts of Zimbabwe.

Participatory research in rural livelihoods research: Zimbabwe

The research of Julius Musevenzi (2012) and Admire Muzapi (2022) provide two examples that demonstrate the effective use of PRA in documenting rural livelihoods in dry districts of Zimbabwe. Musevenzi (2012) documented what he termed 'desperate diversification' of livelihoods during the worst period of economic collapse in Zimbabwe, over the decade from 2000-2010. Muzapi (2022) used participatory methods to engage rural women in documenting their changing roles in agricultural production between 2000 and 2019. As men left the villages in the context of drought to engage in migrancy and artisanal gold mining, women took on many of the traditional male roles in agriculture. Interventions to promote drought-resistant small grains, using conservation agriculture techniques, allowed for improvement of food security in some cases. The details of the findings of these scholars are not given here. What is highlighted is the methodology which involves the participation of the residents in a way that does not favour domination by the "big men" of the village. Musevenzi (2012) and Muzapi (2012) used daily time charts, livelihood ranking and scoring among other tools which allow for maximum participation as well as accuracy, and a gendered analysis in the case of Muzapi.

Action research in conservation agriculture: Malawi and Mozambique

The second kind of research is Participatory Action Research (PAR), premised on empowering communities at grassroots level to take action, and in the process changing power relations and testing alternative systems. Inspired by the experience and scholarship of Anisur Rahman in Bangladesh (Rahman 1992), scholars in the Department of Development Studies engaged in three PAR research interventions in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa, and worked with students in the sub-region engaged in such action research. Such projects typically involve partnerships with government at some level, and/or with NGOs engaged in the field, as well as organising and training community members to become researchers, designers and implementers of the intervention.

As most of the residents of rural areas of the region are subsistence farmers, the focus of much of this research is on sustainable farming, cultivation of food crops, and resilience in the context of drought. The PAR of John Mussa Paul (2017) in Malawi, working with NGOs in implementing a Farmer-Neighbourhood Model, was effective in empowering smallholder farmers and building solidarity as well as resilience to climate change, through using conservation agriculture methods such as minimum tillage.

In Mozambique, NGOs are similarly partnering with scholars and students from the polytechnics and with small farmers in central Mozambique, implementing climate-smart agriculture methods involving

one hundred "model farmers" in central Mozambique—Manica and Sofala provinces—where the RAMA-BC programme (Resilient Agriculture and Market Activities – Beira Corridor) is being implemented.[5]

Climate smart agriculture, using methods of conservation agriculture which are resilient to drought, involves minimum tillage and intercropping to ensure food production in areas where rain-fed agriculture is practiced. Testing the yield from intercropping is being done on nine farms, through having some fields as control sites (without intercropping) and some with intercropping. The "model farmer" model for promoting conservation agriculture is similar to the 'farmer neighbourhood model' implemented by Paul (2017:). In central Mozambique, the "multiplier model" is used, in this case with a farmer who was displaced from his family *machamba* by Cyclone Idai and was allocated land nearby. He is successfully farming this land as part of the multiplier model; the farmer grows four different kinds of sweet potatoes as well as fields of cassava. In addition to this farmer's fields there are several other farmers in the area who are engaged in this programme. The crops are planted as part of a plant multiplication programme, where the cassava stalks are sold back to the NGO and then distributed to other farmers in the area.

Other research interventions involve a vermicompost experiment at the ISPM (Instituto Superior Politecnico de Manico). This experiment in agroecological farming methods has a group of students working on different aspects of the research. The scientific research is combined with local economy: the compost is used in food production; and a buy-back system for obtaining the waste is being established at the local fresh produce market.

Researchers from the University Zambeze, Beira, Mozambique, are conducting an experiment on movable kraals, using the manure to improve soil fertility and reduce the cost of fertiliser.

Participatory action research in urban townships: South Africa

In 1982 the CEA observed that 'these linkages of teaching and research, and between research and practice'—the kind of scholarship practiced in the CAS and described above—'are not necessarily easy to conceive, and they are even more difficult to maintain in practice' (CEA 1982: 36); and this is certainly our experience. Badat points out that: 'When activist research must advance PSPs framed by macro-political and economic orthodoxies that leave the structural bases of power and privilege largely untouched, as has been the case in post-1994 South Africa, dilemmas obviously arise.' (Chapter 3 in this volume)

In engaging with this dilemma, the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela

5 I am indebted to Nic Dexter from Land o Lakes, who, in April 2022, took me on a field visit to these projects and introduced me to the farmers and the students.

University, Gqeberha, has explored the piloting of alternative pathways, in partnership with both local government and civil society, in a model of activist scholarship using PAR methodology for piloting sustainable research interventions in both urban and rural communities.

Over the past decade, three such action research projects have been implemented in Nelson Mandela Bay. One such project is Participatory Design and Joint Action Projects for Sustainable Development (known as JAP). JAP is a DAAD-funded partnership with Wismar University, Germany, whereby students in development studies, architecture, human settlements and engineering exchange visits and participate in designing and building structures in South African townships. These structures include waste recycling facilities, spaza shops and food gardens, sometimes in combination.

The second such project was the Sustainable Settlement Pilot Project (SSPP), where the Development Studies Department of Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, partnered with the Department of Human Settlements in the Province of the Eastern Cape in South Africa to explore the in-situ development of an informal settlement in an environmentally sensitive coastal forest. Residents were involved as a community research team in testing appropriate technologies for building houses as well as service provision in the form of renewable energy, water capture and sewage management. The third project is the ongoing Transition Township project which involves Community Owned Renewable Energy (CORE), Community Owned Circular Economy (COCE) and food sovereignty, including permaculture and aquaponic systems in the urban township of Kwazakhele, Gqeberha.

Central to this participatory action research are cooperative relations of production, empowering residents of working-class townships both through the research process and through changing relations of production. Ruth First emphasised cooperatives in the context of rural Mozambique, while recognising the necessarily important role of the state in the transition to a more equitable economy. Hence, the Transition Township project aims to pilot new forms of production, both in terms of the technology used (renewable energy, aquaponics, recycling and 3-D printing) and in terms of the relations of production and ownership of the means of production (the establishment of neighbourhood cooperatives using sustainable production processes and equipment on public space). In this respect it reflects the understanding of the CEA, transposing the 'socialisation of the countryside' with the socialisation of the township economy, and the transition to socialism with the transition to a decarbonised economy. The fundamental concern is with 'not only the enlargement of the economic productive base, but the re-ordering of class relations, the process of transformation from old production forms to new' (CEA 1982: 32). This is the most radical form of activist scholarship, one which transforms relations of production and patterns of ownership.

The details of these action research projects are documented elsewhere (Brennan, Cherry and the

Kwazakhele Community Research Team 2019; Cherry and Prevost 2023), however, what is important here is the reflection on activist scholarship. There are two key points of analysis. The first is the relation of the researcher to "the community" or "the participants". Whether in an informal settlement, a village or a township, the participants are neither subjects nor beneficiaries. They are themselves researchers, decision-makers and participants in the planning, design and implementation of projects. Moreover, they are the owners of the outcome of the project, whether a recycling business or a cooperative, a housing settlement or a PV solar installation. There is always some level of organisation involved, whether there is broader mobilisation, whether the pilot is replicated as part of a movement—a cooperative movement, a food sovereignty movement, a just transition movement—is dependent on the second key point. This is the relation of the scholars, the community and the project to the state. When such innovative projects happen within an institution (the university in this case), the scholar retains autonomy; if it is conducted as an autonomous or self-sustaining community project, it has little hope of influencing policy or effecting widespread change in the economy. When it concerns local government or other government departments attempting to innovate in policy, the complexities and challenges are greater. As Badat notes, there is no guarantee that the results of such activist scholarship will be adopted by governments. 'Of course, that fact that activist research may be valuable for PSP development does not secure it influence in political movements, even when activist researchers are members of those same movements. Often, 'influence is long-term and indirect. It takes time for ideas ... to filter through.' (Friedman quoted in Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume)

Summarising the four types of activist-scholarship, there are distinct differences between them regarding both strategy and methodology. The first, the activist scholarship which provides the critical evaluation of existing systems, is in some cases, used by social movements, openly in opposition to the state in many cases, contesting policy and putting forward an alternative vision. The second is the type of activist-scholarship related to policy development, as in the case of research on the green mineral value chains and green iron. Such research may be commissioned by a government department or an international organisation such as the SADC or a UN agency. The intention is that it feeds directly into policy, in this case with the ultimate aim of promoting sustainable development in the region; yet this may then become a matter of political contestation, as in the case of energy policy in South Africa. While the scholar may not define him/herself as an 'activist scholar', and this type of scholarship does not meet the criterion of reflecting the voice of the voiceless, it is seen in this analysis as complementary to the third type of activist research, which is the empirical research conducted through participatory methods with most of citizens of the countries in the sub-region: these are the residents of villages in the poorest countries on the world, the residents of informal settlements on the fringes of big cities and the

unemployed residents of townships in the most unequal country in the world. The information gained from such research is essential in informing the policy decisions made by those reading the reports of the second type of scholar. The argument for localisation is not an argument against regional integration; localisation (not national-local as in "local content" being produced within national borders, but local as in "local economic development" [LED] at municipal or village level) may be complementary to regional industrial development and a strategy of using commodities produced in the region to develop the new sustainable industries based on "green minerals" and renewable energy.

The fourth type of activist scholar, arguably the most radical form of activist scholarship, is the one who intervenes to change power relations and structures of society through research, and who uses participatory action research to explore an alternative future, in the context of the meeting the challenges of the present.

Policy must be informed by global imperatives of climate, as well as by the realities experienced by the poorest citizens of the sub-region. Universities can play a role at both levels; which they do in scientific research (the uYilo eMobility programme for example), agricultural research (the Malawi polytechnic students as an example) and research informing economic and industrial policy (as illustrated by Morris, Trollip and others). The other two types of activist-scholar may conduct action-research or participatory research at grassroots level. In the case of participatory research (PRA for example), the method of research may be empowering to the participants, but may not lead to any significant change; it may be used simply to collect evidence (agricultural extension workers in the South African Department of Rural Development are trained in PRA methods, for example). In the case of PAR, as in the examples illustrated above, they would attempt to effect change through the research, to implement pilot projects to test new models of economy, urban design and farmer support. In this sense PAR is experimental research with human actors. It is differentiated from randomised trials (which also may be a very effective tool for policy evaluation) in that it aims to change power relations. Activist-scholars may work within social movements that represent these residents and may assist such movements to achieve their goals. Activist scholars may also work with NGOs or Quangos to develop or influence policy. And activist scholars may work directly with government, or across the boundaries of civil society and state, across the boundaries of "grassroots" and "blue sky" research, to find solutions to pressing problems.

Conclusion: What would Ruth First have done?

From the examples of activist scholarship above, there are a few lessons about the relationship of the university to the state, the relationship of activist-scholars to the state and scholar's role in the agenda for

sustainable development and social justice in the sub-region.

What would Ruth First have done? Given her legacy and her commitment, it can be assumed that First would have analysed the "big picture" as well as the grassroots experience of ordinary people in the poorest of countries. She would have considered the economic realities of global trade in the twenty-first century, but with the imperative of finding a just economic transition from fossil fuel. She would not have dismissed the analysis of the political economy and the power relations that govern the production and distribution of goods and services. SFirst would have centred her conclusions and policy recommendations using the empirical truths gained from research on the ground to argue for a more just and sustainable economy for the region.

On 14 April 2022, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation about the devastation of the floods on the coast of KZN and Eastern Cape: 'This disaster is part of climate change. It is telling us that climate change is serious. It is here. We can no longer postpone the measures we need to take to deal with climate change' (NPR 2022). There are alternatives that can be supported and tested and shared across the region to enable an answer to the challenges of food and energy security and climate shocks. Using our imagination, they can chart the way towards a just and sustainable future. As Ruth First noted, in another context, another century: 'A different force is stirring, among the secondary-school students, the urban unemployed, the surplus graduates of the indulged coastlines, the neglected and impoverished of the northern interiors.' (First 1970 cited in Pinnock 1997: 197)

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Land O Lakes, RAMA programme director.

Malawi: Malawi University of Science and Technology; Africa Green Economy

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Universidade de Zambeze, Faculty of Environmental and Natural Resources Engineering (FEARN) based in Chimoio, Manica

US AID Director for the Agriculture, Environment, and Business Office at USAID/Mozambique.

Zimbabwe: Midlands State University (Tukwi Magosi Research Institute; Dept of Development Studies); University of Zimbabwe