

Chapter 3

Death of a Market: Social Grant Pay Points and their Effect on Food Inequality, Farmer Opportunities and Communities in KwaZulu-Natal

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Introduction

Mr Ndlovu is a rural and old-aged small-scale farmer who gets his pension at a local community hall. He is a small-scale farmer who uses the group of pensioners at his local community hall to sell his surplus maize and other crops to that he cultivates. One day Mr Ndlovu was expecting to go and sell his surplus maize and receive his pension at the local community hall, only to find that the cash van was not at the site. He was been advised that, from now on, he must collect his pension money at any of the nearest major supermarkets. This is because the government has decided it will change the system through which Mr Ndlovu receives his pension. However, Mr Ndlovu lives a far distance from the supermarkets where he must collect his pension. Mr Ndlovu now needs to request assistance with transport fare and at the same time, he cannot sell his surplus crops because there is no longer a market that used to support him by buying his maize and other crops. Mr Ndlovu and his community have been robbed of an opportunity to grow their businesses and extend their social ties by giving out credits. Together with other small-scale farmers, he saw this market as a viable element to sell his produce and other consumable items. Local food cultures included unconventional fresh produce that involved amadumbe (a type of root vegetable), corn and beans, when prepared together, called umngqusho. Moreover, this market also played a critical role in introducing imfino, a wild leafy vegetable to the locals.

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The above analogy seeks to provide a brief explanation in lay terms of the negative impact the alteration of dispersing social grants from local community venues to big supermarkets had on both the recipients and the small-scale farmers who sold in this market. Additional income from social grants has a positive impact on economic activities by easing the rural household's financial constraints (Sinyolo, Mudhara and Wale 2016) and compelling them to shop at big supermarkets. This is ironic since cash transfers are a policy instrument aimed at building household resilience

in terms of access to food. Social grants' intended and unintended impact on different outcomes have been investigated at length in South Africa (Sinyolo et al. 2016). Moreover, Sinyolo et al. (2016) argue that cash transfers lead to dependency and a culture of entitlement among recipients. Other studies suggest that cash transfers discourage participation and investment in agricultural production activities through increased reliance on purchasing food in markets, and not from urban areas (Kajiita and Kang'ethe 2016). Moreover, critics argue that social grants create dependency and therefore, do not promote sustainable growth and development of recipients (Sinyolo et al. 2017; Tshuma 2012).

Moreover, this market was created by local people without external intervention, and to an extent, it involved "unconventional" fresh produce, which formed part of the local food culture, explaining why some of this produce escaped the attention of supermarkets, at least initially. This local food culture included unconventional fresh produce which involved *amadumbe* (a type of root vegetable), corn, and beans that, when prepared together, is called *umngqusho*. Moreover, this market also played a critical role in introducing *imfino*, a wild leafy vegetable to the locals. Ntuli (2019) also talks about its importance in terms of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. It is essential to note that in these markets, locals were very happy to share stories of their favourite dishes and how they went about preparing them.

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Mncube (2022) argues that smallholder farmers need more than access to land for them to farm efficiently, therefore, access to markets for smallholder farmers is key to their survival. Although many of these smallholder farmers utilise communal lands in rural areas, 49.9 per cent of smallholder farmers farm their land in tribal authority land, while 1.8 per cent of the households rent out their land (Aliber and Hall 2012). This chapter focusses on three critical aspects of a community's control over food resources and access concerning identity-making: the political economy of food within the context of an increasingly corporatist and pro-corporate state, the squeezing out of the informal food production and selling sector; the impact of social grants, especially *impesheni* (a pension pay point where pensioners gathered to receive their social grant, and subsequently create a niche market to trade among themselves and their communities), on rural livelihoods, social and cultural norms and identity making among food growers and buyers.

There is a dearth of literature that interrogates the relationships between social grants and smallholder farming and how the informal economy has sustained numerous smallholder farmers

in community-based social grant pay points. Sinyolo et al. (2016) have written on the issue of social grants and smallholder farming in South Africa and the numerous impacts both these phenomena present in mainly rural communities. Contrary to this, other studies counter-argue and focus on social grants and how they lead to a culture of dependency. In their article, *“It’s Not Enough” Local Experiences of Social Grants, Economic Precarity, and Health Inequity in Mpumalanga, South Africa*, Winchester, King and Rishworth (2021) discuss how social grants affect the relations of distribution, rooted in practices of sharing and dependence.

Moreover, Ferguson and Li (2018) question the issue of whether the recipients of social transfers express a sense of entitlement or are plagued by connotations of dependence and shame linked to moralised ideas of the virtue of work and the shame of “idleness” and “handouts”. Mtshali (2018) provides a different outlook on the culture of depending on social grants, particularly the old age grant, where the author argues that pensioners rely on the social welfare programme due to the inability to continue working. Furthermore, Mtshali (2018) argues that the high poverty levels for those who are already on pension could indicate that South Africans do not rely on personal investments such as private pensions, they rather depend on social assistance from the government.

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Four dimensions of food security are: 1) availability, where food is produced locally and imported from abroad; 2) access, where food can reach the consumer (transportation infrastructure) and the latter has enough money to purchase. Peng, Dernini and Berry (2018) argue that such physical and economic accessibility is added to socio-cultural access to ensure that the food is culturally accepted and that social protection nets exist to help the less fortunate. The third dimension is, the utilisation of food, where:

the individual must be able to eat adequate amounts both in quantity and quality in order to live a healthy and full life to realize his or her potential. Food and water must be safe and clean, and thus adequate water and sanitation are also involved at this level. A person must also be physically healthy to be able to digest and utilize the food consumed. (Peng et al. 2018: 2 and 4)

The fourth dimension is the stability of both the availability and access to food. While these dimensions are interlinked and equally imperative, this chapter seeks to expansively deal with food accessibility within the context of rural livelihood to examine the impact thereafter, of the

termination of the market which ensured food accessibility to rural communities.

The importance of food security, particularly in rural areas, should also be examined critically within the scope of nutrition security. Govender et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence on how the majority of poor and rural South Africans rely on social grants and cannot afford a balanced diet. Subsequently, a balanced diet ensures that communities do not suffer from health conditions that may include obesity and undernutrition. Masuku and Bhengu (2021) argue that indigenous and locally grown foods are perceived as healthy foods, since they contribute to good immunity in the human body. Faber et al. (2010: 37) examined 'African leafy greens' as potentially significant sources of micronutrients missing from many South African diets. All these vegetables were commonly consumed in all areas, however, more so in rural settings.

50 A mixed method approach was utilised to analyse the impact of how an informal market that existed in parallel with the formal agricultural markets, was demolished when more than a decade ago, national government through the Department of Social Development, introduced a new payment method by allowing pensioners to receive their social grants at big corporate companies (Mail & Guardian 2012). Richmond, a town in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, was purposely selected due to it being purely rural, and most of the households were involved in the market either as farmers, middlemen or buyers of food. The primary data was collected through a qualitative design interviewing smallholder farmers and those referred to as middlemen. Thus far, a total number of fifteen participants were interviewed. Key themes emerging across all interviews and discussions were that the cash transfer and the market that was created at the cash transfer pay points were useful in obtaining food.

Theoretical framework

Popular economies provide critical aspects on modification of literature on informality by showing links between the formal and informal economies. According to Hull and James (2012), the concept of popular economies recognises the legacy in South Africa based on popular culture, which describes a world of new identities and activities. Furthermore, the concept of diverse economies can be interlinked with popular economies to properly contextualise how *impesheni* operated on the informality of the South African economy.

Blumberg et al. (2020) critically discuss and assess major theoretical approaches deployed in the study of alternative food networks. Within the context of rural South Africa, particularly the smallholder farmers who provided alternative ways of producing their crops, the analysis of their work includes economic, cultural and agroecological practices that create different farming styles (Blumberg et al. 2020). Historical narratives connect the past, present and future of an organisation (Foster et al. 2017). However, to properly contextualise *impesheni*, the historical narratives connect the past, present and future of this market, which was systematically demolished by the current administration.

The change of moving from pay points to supermarkets (which are situated far from the rural areas), resulted in pensioners being forced to collect their social grants at the supermarkets instead of the market which they had relied on for many years and which was predominantly close to where they lived. This study, therefore, seeks to provide a fresher look at social grants and the incentives generated in the market at social grant pay points. It seeks to provide empirical evidence as to how social grants, particularly old age grants, sought to provide, among other things, vibrant informal markets where smallholder farmers would utilise those markets to sell their produce.

The political economy of food

A global context

Food systems are at the centre of the conversation regarding food politics and the political economy of food. This is mainly because despite that these food systems have developed over the past 50 years; they have not been sustainable. De Schutter (2017) maintains this justification by arguing that the health and environmental impact, as well as the failure to reduce rural poverty in developing countries and the power imbalances in food chains, are a concern to a growing number of activists. This encompasses all food system activities; the interrelationships of components and actors, and the institutions that regulate those activities, components and actors (Anderson and Leach 2019).

Paarlberg (2010) argues that there is a distinctive feature that distinguishes, for example, between the social contestation about food and state authority. Paarlberg (2010) further argues that civilians disagree over the wisdom of eating junk food, which is not food politics. The underlying meaning of this is that Paarlberg (2010) raises this issue not only in terms of food politics, but also based on the

issue of health. However, if these civilians organise and take political action to impose (or block) new governmental regulations on junk food—for example, prohibiting certain foods in public-school cafeterias—that is food politics (Paarlberg 2010) within the context of food consumption.

The South African crisis

Previous research in South Africa has documented the tendency for relatively minor policy changes concerning the food supply. Even in response to the significant food security and nutrition crisis engendered by the global food price increases of 2007-2009, the South African food policy focussed on household food access rather than changes to the food supply (Kirsten 2012; Watson 2017). Within the context of the political economy of food in South Africa, the informal market, including the demolished market of *impesheni*, is treated as secondary in policy and is often considered a backward system in need of modernisation.

52 Most people access food from both the formal and informal systems, therefore, these are complementary rather than exclusive (Crush and Frayne 2010). However, the lack of resources in rural areas makes it difficult for communities to have the luxury to choose their sources of accessibility when it comes to food. Therefore, informal markets become their direct and only hope to access food. Although, Aliber and Mdoda (2015: 30) argue that the 'relatively high density of informal and independent food retail channels contribute to a field of choice' to rural consumers. One critical question which should be engaged in this regard, is the intention to demolish the *impesheni* market where smallholder farmers sold their products, and their businesses thrived. Not only did their businesses thrive, the social ties that were created in the market also kept and encouraged social cohesion among farmers, community members and those who worked as middlemen in the market.

Impesheni and food provisioning in rural communities

Despite supermarket penetration, African Food Security Urban Network data indicates that the urban poor and rural communities continue to choose to source their food in the informal sector, likely due to factors such as spatial accessibility, access to credit, appropriate quantities and price (Skinner and Haysom 2016). This can only be overcome by long-term structural changes in the society and economy of South Africa (Lahiff 1997). Small markets are continuously enabled to

ensure food provisioning to community members by smallholder farmers who are still subjected to decades of exclusion from formal sectors of the South African economy.

Rural crop production plays a major role in alleviating food shortages in most developing countries. According to Mujuru and Obi (2020), rural development should be at the core of the government agenda, since most households still derive livelihoods from agriculture and in most cases, on smallholder plots. The state of rural farming is appalling and repels youth participation. In most cases, young people are discouraged from owning land and other agricultural resources. This was evident in the *impesheni* market where smallholder farmers were the older generation and young people assisted as middlemen. Operating similarly to street vendors, smallholder farmers who sold crops at the market ensured food security and food access to various families who were food insecure, through credit, locally grown products and the accessibility of nutritious crops and vegetables.

The role of *impesheni* and rural livelihood: Exploring some social ties and norms

There is a distinct system that always binds communities together through social, cultural and religious interactions among individuals. Manyelo, Van Averkeke and Hebink (2014) rigorously argue that some farmers and traders had developed relationships of trust, which made special arrangements possible. For example, farmers would allow certain traders to enter their plots and harvest produce in their absence (Manyelo et al. 2014). This is a clear indication of how social bonds and trust among the key players of informal markets are created and upheld through generations.

The social interactions went beyond whether one is a farmer or a middleman, the level of trust that was demonstrated by the key players in this market is evident (Manyelo et al. 2014). Manyelo et al. (2014) argue that after the harvesting of produce by non-farmers, these traders would wait for the farmer to come and charge them. The advantage of being allowed to harvest produce in the absence of the plot holder was that produce could be secured before the arrival of other groups.

Alternative means to access markets are continuously being created. Manyelo et al. (2014) state that even though farmers did not have access to markets, historically, they would visit neighbouring villages to sell their produce door-to-door and would be received warmly by homesteaders. Every seller in the market aimed to establish a loyal customer base.

Creating “loyalty” was pursued by extending “special treatment” which included giving extra produce free of charge, reducing the price of produce, allowing customers to buy on credit and customers referred to other sellers when items requested by a customer were out of stock. Therefore, according to Pienaar and Traub (2015), livelihood diversification amongst smallholder households and farmers is often based on a variety of factors and conditions which make a classification on a single indicator problematic.

The pivotal role of women: From planting to produce

Societal and cultural norms normally grant women the responsibility to ensure that members of their households receive sufficient food. McKenna (2014) emphasises that in developing countries, women make an essential contribution to agricultural initiatives as farmers and workers, to ensure the accessibility of food for their households. Women are the main smallholder farm producers of food that is consumed within the country and this has led to the empowerment of most women. Mpanza and Mbatha (2021) argue that support for women as smallholder farmers is very important to achieve food security at the household and global level through the introduction of national development programmes.

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It is likely that in the poor communities in South Africa, social grants play a pivotal role in eliminating poverty at the household level (J. Dubihlela and D. Dubihlela 2014). Despite women’s integral role in agriculture, they operate on an uneven playing field and are five times less likely to own land than men (Muzari 2016). Because of women’s dominant presence in all aspects of smallholder production, ensuring policy priorities to consider their needs and socio-economic conditions is imperative (Sibanda and Mwamakamba 2012). However, the role of women in terms of improving food security is not well recognised, especially in policymaking and resource allocation.

Identified through produce: Identity-making of smallholder farmers in *impesheni*

The relationship between individuals and their communities through the sense of community and participation (Mannarini and Fedi 2009) is sometimes referred to as feelings of belonging, influence within the group, fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connection. The smallholder

farmers who produced and sold food as crops identified themselves as distinct from each other through the type of crops and vegetables each farmer produced and that reflected how small and rural businesses sustained themselves. To examine how small-scale farmers perceive or form communities requires a closer look at the role small-scale farmers play in promoting the increasingly influential notion of local food systems and the way the local food movement interacts with local economies (Iles, Ma and Erwin 2020). Wittman, Beckie and Hergesheimer (2012) argue that local food systems, including alternative food networks, may function as part of a “social” economy, since they foster local circulations of economic value and they help address social needs, such as the desire for consumers to obtain fresh produce and to have a connection with farmers.

Understanding identity and community as essential components of the social activity of small-scale farming, requires an understanding of the motivations of small-scale farmers and the associated decision-making processes. According to McGuire (2015), identity is a set of meanings characterising an individual as unique and as holding a specific role in a group or within society. Although farmers and other middlemen may be found selling the very same produce on the day of the market, this was a very rare sight. This market was a quality-driven movement that focussed on values, relationships and methods surrounding the production, distribution and consumption of food for the entire community. Therefore, Iles et al. (2020) argue that within this context, cooperation amongst small-scale farmers contributes to a sense of belonging and the formation of a small-scale farmer identity, as well as the overall benefit to the farmers.

The social situation is not the only place where farmer identities are verified or changed, in some instances, like farmers who produced and sold food at *impesheni*, the type of food that each farmer grew played a pivotal role in determining the identity of the farmer. McGuire (2015) theorises that the biophysical environment can impact how a particular identity moves up or down in the hierarchy and influences farmer management decisions that contribute to soil erosion and water pollution.

The narrative: Meet the market and the farmers

The role of social grants in rural communities

The modification of the social grant payment system had unforeseen consequences on an important rural market. Cash transfers are a policy instrument aimed at building household resiliency in terms of access to food in multiple facets. This can be achieved in numerous ways, including, but not limited to, facilitating changes in productive activities by relaxing liquidity constraints, improving human capital and improving the ability to respond to and cope with exogenous shocks (Natali et al. 2016). Moreover, the aim of cash transfers can aim to engage households in more potentially profitable activities. Even in other African countries where social grants, especially old-age pensions, are effective, Gronbach (2020: 1) argues that payments are increasingly delivered through private financial institutions, citing that 'although states continue to play a pivotal role in terms of oversight, administration, and coordination'.

56 Impact of policy change on subsistence farmer access to markets and rural people's foodscapes

The onslaught of globalisation and liberalisation has made the African economy more integrated with the global economy. Beri, Mhonyera and Nubong (2022) provide evidence in this regard, citing that the direct effects that were evident were in higher lending costs and other impairments due to strict credit policies in advanced economies. Moreover, Hlatshwayo et al. (2022) argue that access to markets in developing countries is becoming more difficult and is therefore, becoming a central focus to governments and development practitioners in the developing world. Sikwela (2013) argues that in most African countries, it is not the policy as such, but the budgetary, technical and administrative implementation of the specific policies that enable smallholder farmers to fit in these markets and generate profits from their crop sales. Therefore, these factors seek to scrutinise how the South African government handled the transition of social grant pay points to allow pensioners to withdraw their pensions in retail supermarkets. In terms of budget, technicality and the administrative implementation of the specific policies, the South African government sought to minimise costs as well as the number of cash vans to visit local community venues and decided to allow the large corporations (supermarkets) to administer the process of handling the cash transfers to pensioners.

Addressing gender inequality through rural foodscapes and foodways

Women in rural subsistence farming and in food production have been fighting to not be kept on the side-lines of the debate regarding foodscapes. Adema (2006) defines foodscapes as a representation of the full scope of the food environment of a given place when the environment is considered to have both multisensory tangible and material aspects, which are touch, scent and taste. Moreover, intangible essence can also be included which can evoke affective responses, generate and stimulate memory and spark the imagination. Gender is a significant variable since it gives a common understanding of what is variably affected by any social or economic phenomenon in each community within the Richmond area. Belasco (2008) presents supporting evidence in relation to the importance of why gender is considered a significant variable, particularly in rural areas. The author argues that food preparation and consumption have long been associated with a women's world, and has thus, been accorded less respect and attention than male activities. Furthermore, Beardsworth et al. (2002) highlight the significance of gendered roles being increasingly scrutinised during the 1990s. Subsequently, age is often associated with experience, and elderly farmers are usually considered more experienced (Khapayi and Celliers 2016).

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Strategies to improve smallholder market access

The activities that usually occurred at the social grant pay points market included bringing together different types of sellers in a single market where not only farmers sold their produce, but also those who sold items such as clothing, handmade beads, and other products which could be sold at an informal market. For the benefit of this chapter, however, the questions served as a base to gather accurate and relevant data regarding the study. The semi-structured questions included a brief description of the market by the participant of the *impesheni* market, looking at how they were first introduced to this market to comprehend the inception of the market, the processes they went through to participate, the relationship they had with their buyers in the case of farmers and most importantly, the motive behind participating in this market. A female smallholder farmer reported that:

'I can describe this market as a "community-based initiative" that sustained various social relations among those who participated in it, whether as a seller or a buyer. I used to sell my sweet potatoes, amadumbe, and maize which I planted with my children.'

The female farmer went on to specify and describe what would normally happen, particularly from the start of the day of the market, however, not placing much emphasis on the preparations to get to the market. This is what she had to say:

'I worked normally with my children to plough and harvest the produce; however, I had a helper who would assist in transporting our produce with a wheelbarrow to the market (about 1.5 km away from the homestead of the farmer). We had a very pleasant relationship as he would arrive early in the morning on the day of the market to ensure we got to the market before the old age pensioners and other farmers and sellers would come.'

58 The farmer specifies that her mother was the one who introduced her to this local market in the late 1990s. She specifies that her mother also sold some household accessories at this market to ensure that they had something to eat at the end of the day. This indicates how the systematic demolition of this market hurt generational teachings and economic endeavours. The intergenerational teachings of children by their parents, and the teachings of grandchildren by their grandparents, were discontinued in a manner that had a negative impact in terms of encouraging the children to plant for selling. Njobe and Kaaria (2015) note that it is well-acknowledged that women play a pivotal role in ensuring household food security, as they constitute approximately 60–70 per cent of smallholder farmers in developing countries.

Smallholder farmers, especially in less developed countries, have encountered several challenges in gaining access to markets (Van Tilburg and Van Schalkwyk 2012). Smallholder farmers who relied on the social grant pay point market are still producing food with little or no opportunities to sell their produce. This hurts the local economic development of the area, considering Richmond is predominately rural with agriculture being the primary economic activity of most of the population.

Local economic development

There is an urgent need to encourage rural smallholder farmers to shift their day-to-day agricultural activities to something more competitive and structured. Entrepreneurship still needs to be channelled and training is of paramount importance for rural smallholder farmers. Zaaier and Sara (1993) suggest that local economic development is essentially a process in which local governments and/or community-based groups manage their existing resources and enter partnership

arrangements with the private sector or with each other, to create new jobs and stimulate economic activity in an economic arena.

The demolition of the market these farmers relied on was a result of government restructuring the dispensing of social grants, particularly old age grants. This will ensure various opportunities are unlocked for the local economic development of rural communities, specifically Richmond with its various commercial and non-commercial farmlands. Manona (2005) argues that on the issue of marketing staple food such as maize, the low maize prices would have a positive impact from the consumers' point of view, while the same low prices bring to the fore the harsh realities of economic competitiveness for commercial farmers. Muzekenyi, Zuwarimwe and Beata (2019) state that entrepreneurial skills in rural farming have not been widely assessed and profiled to determine their importance among small-scale farmers, which has led to the need to further investigate small-scale farming entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

The ways in which small-scale farmers acquired the necessary information and assistance to start and maintain their farming operations, highlighted both the farmers' flexibility and commitment to making their products viable. However, according to James, Hendrickson and Howard (2012), these conventional ways of acquiring knowledge are different from the crop advisors and agri-business professionals that larger-scale farmers normally have access to and rely on. In essence, this was the symbolic and distinctive element that distinguished smallholder farmers who sold at *impesheni*, compared to other actors in the larger formal agricultural sector. Smallholder farmers play a pivotal role in ensuring food security in rural homesteads, through markets that they create for themselves. The destruction of the social grant pay-points market in rural Richmond had a significant impact on local economic development and food provisioning. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to support and cultivate new markets for smallholder farmers to encourage rapid market accessibility. The impact of the global and local political economy on food must still be thoroughly investigated within the context of rising food prices and the destruction of informal markets through unequal competition.

Furthermore, major challenges facing small-scale farmers in a rural setting have been addressed, however, the call for further vigorous intervention is fundamental to enable farmers to develop

their entrepreneurial skills within the midst of volatile market accessibility. Perhaps one of the major questions to ask is how much these farmers are producing which can be attributed to rural development. Did they produce enough for the current administration to properly recognise them and not demolish their market? Or is it all part of what has been referred to above as food politics through contesting state authorities regarding formal and informal markets of the economy? Much of the literature suggests that there is not sufficient evidence as to why the modification of cash transfers shifted from a single pay point to retail supermarkets. However, the hypothesis that this was mainly because of the safety and protection of old age pensioners, cannot be agreed upon. Therefore, calls for further investigation that provides a detailed approach regarding small-scale farming in rural areas and how to market accessibility, can be prioritised.

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