RURAL POVERTY & UNEMPLOYMENT

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Official statistics documenting unemployment and poverty in rural South Africa are notoriously inaccurate and frequently reflect unrealistically low levels. If these critical issues are not correctly quantified and identified, it becomes almost impossible for development planners to formulate appropriate strategies to overcome them successfully.

In this case study of the Dumisa area, situated south of Durban in KwaZulu, Zamakhosi Mpanza uses expanded concepts and definitions to examine the widespread unemployment and poverty that plague this typical rural community. Her analysis clearly reveals the inadequacies of existing terminology and the practical need for their revision.

Rural poverty and unemployment are critical issues in Southern Africa that constitute a formidable challenge to development strategists. This is not only because these socio-economic problems in themselves are widespread and severe. The very terms and concepts used by analysts to identify and quantify poverty and unemployment are often inadequate, which in turn produces a seriously distorted picture of the real crisis experienced in many rural areas.

To formulate strategies for promoting efficient labour utilisation and combating poverty, one must firstly undertake a detailed examination of the actual problems encountered. The Dumisa area of southern KwaZulu is in many ways a typical underdeveloped rural community of Southern Africa. As a case study, it illustrates the pervasive conditions of high levels of poverty and unemployment.
Typical Features

Dumisa is characterised by several features typical of similar, underdeveloped rural communities:

- There is a preponderence of females over males.
- Relatively low levels of education are found. This is a serious obstacle for those seeking formal employment, who can only obtain lower income jobs, and are more vulnerable to unemployment in times of recession.
- Large numbers of people (mostly women and children) are dependent on the small number of adults who earn a regular income.
- There is a high rate of migration among the younger members of the community, particularly males. The resultant absence of able-bodied adults tends to have an adverse effect on rural development, and places greater pressure on the remaining women and children to seek employment.
- Households are characterised by a prevalence of proxy heads, in most cases female, who are largely over 50 years old.
- Land supply is inadequate for the agricultural needs of the resident population. Although most Dumisa households have access to land, it is unequally distributed, with plot sizes ranging from two to ten acres.

Other factors hindering small-scale rural development in Dumisa include the dependence on climatic conditions (the area has been severely affected by the drought), lack of access to basic agricultural equipment like ploughs and planters, and traditional institutional arrangements.

Income and Employment

In South Africa's rural areas, the 'monetarisation' of the economy has been experienced at household level as a growing need for cash income. This has led to an increase in market-oriented activities, which can be divided into three main categories. Firstly, there is large-scale migration to wage employment outside rural areas, including daily commuters. Contract migrants from the Dumisa area tend to send money back to their rural homes fairly regularly, but remittances are not high enough to make much difference to the standard of living of the average household. Also, in real terms, migrants' remittances decline over time because of rampant inflation.

Secondly, casual and wage labour opportunities are obtained locally. Casual labour is particularly important to groups excluded from the formal labour market such as children, the unskilled and illiterate, people without legal permits to

INDICATORS OF POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT
A Survey of Dumisa, KwaZulu

- **HOUSEHOLD SIZE**
  7.76 Persons

- **SEX RATIO**
  54% Female
  46% Male

- **DEPENDENCY RATIO**
  Each adult receiving a regular income has 4 dependants

- **INCOME**
  20% Earn a regular income
  6% Receive pensions
  Average migrant remittance is R37, received monthly

- **EMPLOYMENT**
  60% of men and 11% of women work as migrants
  4% of resident adults are involved in casual labour
  14% of adults are unemployed

- **AGRICULTURE**
  90% of households have access to land
  Average size of plot is 1.92 acres
  Land is primarily used for cultivation, but after harvest serves as a common area for grazing
  Maize and beans are the most popular crops
  Mean average harvest is 2.6 bags of maize and 1.25 bags of beans
  4% sell part of what they produce
  Mean income from sales is R128 per family per season
  44.5% of households have no livestock
The limited local production of commodities such as handcrafts is declining in the face of competition with factory produced goods. The majority of casual labourers at Dumisa are female, which illustrates the demands made on rural women to bring home wages for the survival of their household. Women seek employment in urban areas, and women with household and childbearing responsibilities. At Dumisa, however, only four percent of resident adults were involved in casual labour. The majority in this category are female (60.7 percent), which illustrates the latent demands made on rural women for the survival of their households. It seems such labour output is increasingly perceived by many to be of little value, as it provides limited employment opportunities for low wages.

Lastly, there is domestic labour within the household for the production of goods (e.g. handcrafts) for sale on the market, and other activities aimed at income generation such as hut building and trading. Local production of commodities is limited, and declining further as a result of an inability to compete with factory produced goods.

General Trends
The Dumisa case study shows that many more men than women are formally employed. In general, the ability of rural women to earn an income is severely constrained. They have limited access to land and other related resources, they often have limited control over their own labour and they are hampered by family/household responsibilities and socio-cultural restrictions. In other words, the family decides where they will work and at which jobs.

Nevertheless, in rural areas the wives and daughters of male migrants are becoming increasingly important in providing subsistence for the rest of the family. It is evident that growing rural poverty leads to an increased community acceptance of formal employment for women, which in turn boosts the number of women seeking such employment.

In the Dumisa area, agriculture provides very little income. It is largely subsistence-based and the land has a low agricultural potential, which is exacerbated by the lack of modern technological and agricultural methods (see data base). The rising cost of living and diminishing returns from subsistence farming means that state pensions, particularly old age pensions, have become an important source of...
household income.

At the same time, underemployment - defined as a situation where people, though employed, are still able to contribute even more to the output - is very high in Dumisa, particularly among men and younger community members (in the 20 to 40 year age bracket). Underemployment is probably largely the result of the area's apparent declining capacity to provide residents with effective economic alternatives, in conjunction with the lack of new local employment opportunities.

Dynamics of Labour

The overriding characteristic of labour in the rural areas can be described as 'poverty-in-employment', a term which refers to those who combine low average incomes with a considerable instability of income and employment. The rural labour force, through its composition and organisation, defies most tried and proven analytical approaches. The most problematic areas for the analyst are:

- The distinction between 'active' and 'inactive' economic activity

According to the current population survey (CPS), a person must have worked at least 35 hours in market-oriented activities in the week preceding the survey to be regarded as 'economically active'. In Dumisa, only 12 percent of the total labour force qualifies as economically active in terms of this definition.

Restricting the definitions of 'economic activity' conceptually shifts large numbers of potentially productive labour into the inappropriate categories of 'economically inactive or idle'. Instead, they should at least be viewed as 'structural, additional workers' - people who could be expected to work or attempt to get work, even if to supplement the uncertain or low earnings of other family members (were jobs available in the area).

- The concept of unemployment and its measurement

Unemployment rates are similarly affected by changes in the definition of the term. The CPS stipulates that, among other conditions, for people to be regarded as unemployed, they must actively have sought jobs in the preceding month, and be in a position to accept employment within one week if it were to become available.

It is often very difficult for rural jobseekers to fulfil these conditions. Although local employment opportunities are often inadequate, jobseekers claim, justifiably, that they cannot afford to travel considerable distances looking for prospective work further afield. Yet another condition mitigating against active job seeking is the fact that people become committed to other tasks they set themselves in the course of unemployment.

At Dumisa, despite the apparent apathy displayed by some people supposedly looking for employment, 68 percent of workseekers declared that they were 'desperate' for employment and would start a job 'immediately' if it were available. Most were also prepared to work anywhere in South Africa. Yet, because of material circumstances preventing them from actually seeking out such 'long-distance' opportunities, these people are not officially counted among the ranks of the unemployed.

Narrow Definitions

The effect of narrower definitions of unemployment is to artificially reduce the number of unemployed. These definitions do not take cognisance of the situation as it confronts rural communities and 'real' unemployment levels thus remain far higher than is likely to appear in official statistics. As Moll (1984) points out, without adequate indices, labour statistics are likely to give a distorted picture of the local demand for work and labour resources that are available for development.

To complicate the picture further, there are certain special features of rural labour. Firstly, in rural areas where jobs are scarce and the labour market fragmented, people tend to engage in more than one form of economic activity, and half-day work and piece jobs form an integral part of labour utilisation patterns.

Secondly, there are often large numbers of people in these areas who could be expected to become available for formal employment, and even development schemes, if certain enabling conditions were met, such as the creation of jobs near their homes.

To conclude, the definitions discussed here are dangerously restrictive and seriously distort the analyst's view of unemployment levels and labour trends in South Africa's rural areas. The case study of Dumisa clearly reveals the inadequacies of current official definitions of unemployment and economic activity, and gives some idea of the complexity of the issues facing development strategists. It is clear that until these terms are redefined to facilitate accurate identification of problems, strategies formulated to combat rural poverty and unemployment are unlikely to succeed.

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