
Access to land as a buffer against extreme poverty: Land redistribution and social reproduction in South Africa

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Résumé

Current debates on the expropriation of agricultural land without compensation in South Africa miss the impacts of improved access to land on the livelihoods of the few former farm workers that have become beneficiaries of land reform since 1994. This paper examines the experiences of former farm workers who became owners of Weltevrede Farm, a 2 949 hectare property, in the eastern Free State province, that was subdivided into portions of between 98 and 115 hectares, and then redistributed to 18 households from 1997 onwards. The paper presents data on current levels of farm production, as one component of wider social reproduction strategies. Findings suggest that these households have few prospects for successful "accumulation from below" in agriculture. Access to a variety of sources of off-farm income, conditioned by levels of education, were found to be key, but not absolute, determinants of the scale of the benefits derived from access to land. Arable land rental income is also an important factor, as are investments in herds of cattle and sheep, but these benefits are deeply conditioned by farm size. The paper argues that improved access to land is not an end in itself without access to other off-farm capital resources, as well as state support, but land is an important buffer against extreme poverty on the part of the poorest of land beneficiaries, given high levels of unemployment in the wider South African economy. The paper also provides key lessons about the subdivision of agricultural land in ecological zones not suited for subdivision.

Mots-Clés: Land expropriation, subdivision, farm workers, redistribution, social reproduction

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