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Conditions on farms:

A draft paper
(Desktop Study)

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1. INTRODUCTION – THE STATUS OF FARM WORKERS

Getting access to farms is one of the key obstacles in assessing the needs of farm workers throughout the country.

Various sources indicate that agricultural workers are worse off than those in every other sector of the economy. Most workers on farms receive low wages, poor housing facilities, access to education is difficult or non-existent, and health indicators are substandard.

In terms of social circumstances, farm workers and dwellers continue to be dependent on farmers for employment, accommodation and transport. Most importantly, farm workers and their households experience great difficulties in accessing social services. This marginalisation places farm workers in a particularly vulnerable position and exposes them to human rights violations and abuse.

This report aims to highlight some of the challenges experienced by farm workers in the Western Cape, in both their living and working conditions.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

2.1 Economic and employment factors

Many sources indicate that there are vast wage differences between male and female employees. In addition to this there is also remarkably less job security for women than there is for men, as women are often employed on a contract or seasonal basis. This fact contributes to the low quality of life which consists of aspects such as¹:

- few life chances with regard to finding betterment for themselves and their children
- relatively poor living conditions and a lack of good recreational alternatives
- a feeling of political, social and occupational disempowerment.

¹ Schotte, BRJ (February 1996) "Farm workers and alcohol use or misuse"

In many instances wage deductions are also made where electricity, sanitation and water services are provided, leading to a further feeling of disempowerment and dependency among farm workers.

2.2 The Status of women on farms

Gender imbalances invariably also impact on the job security and quality of life of women on farms. Common complaints from women farm workers include: lower wages for women compared to men; no independent employment contracts for married women, whose security of employment and housing therefore is dependent on husbands; no housing for single women; and no paid maternity leave.

Women on farms are in most cases not skilled enough to do any other kind of work, lack opportunities for alternative jobs; are fearful to take the risk of leaving the farm; or could not think of leaving the farm because it was their home. Leaving the farm would also impact on the security of the women and their families, as many of them have no alternative to their life on their farm.

2.3 Tenure and Evictions

Security of tenure is a vital issue for farm workers and dwellers. They often have nowhere else to go. In many cases, evictions are carried out not by the direct use of the law or the application of force, but through the creation of conditions that cause farm residents to leave their homes "voluntarily." These methods include the cutting off of water or other services, the closure of schools or clinics, or the denial of grazing or cultivation rights. In many instances basic hygiene suffers, with adverse health consequences.

Many a time farmers also have their employees sign a contract of labour stipulating that when labour is terminated, the right to housing is also terminated. And in most cases there is no alternative accommodation available for them. Although ESTA is in place, landowners still find ways to circumvent it by intimidating and victimizing workers to leave the farm. In many cases farmers/landowners insist that once children finish school or reach the age of 18, they are compelled to work on the farm or forfeit their right to live with their parents on the farm.

2.4 Poverty

High levels of poverty in rural areas often result in people being unable to buy the necessary food to feed their families. Children especially suffer greatly as they do not always get the necessary foodstuffs needed for their development. Often, due to a lack of transport, farm-workers have no alternative but to buy food from farm shops. In many cases, prices of basic goods are inflated or farm-workers are not told the price of goods and a lump sum is deducted from their wages at the end of the week. This contributes to a cycle of debt and leads to “food insecurity” for children and adults alike.

2.5 The Dop System

The most enduring legacy of a widely prevalent “Dop System” is widespread abuse of alcohol in farms. In the Western Cape, it is estimated that alcohol abuse accounts for up to 60% of violent incidences resulting in trauma.

The issue of violence seems to have a direct correlation with alcohol abuse. In a study done in the Stellenbosch, Klapmuts, Kuils River and Somerset West area it was found that 11% out of a sample of 264 respondents were abused either by their spouse, fiancé or boyfriend who abuses alcohol. Alcohol related abuse brings about a high percentage of trauma reported to rural hospitals, amounting to approximately 60% of patients received at these institutions².

Despite attempts to end the system, and in violation of international norms, some wine farms of the Western Cape still issue part payment of wages to their workers in wine, contributing to the chronic alcoholism prevalent in the wine-producing areas. Also, some farm owners sell wine on credit to their farm workers, promoting a cycle of debt for farm workers who return a percentage of their wages to their employers as payment for the wine debt.

² South African Medical Journal, Sept.1998, Vol. 88, No. 9.)

2.6 Access to Government Services

In many instances workers living in rural or agricultural communities do not have adequate access to basic primary health care facilities. Children need to be immunized and have regular check-ups during their developmental years and this is often lacking for children in farming communities. Many farm-workers indicate that they are unwilling to take a half-day off to attend to health concerns as they will lose much-needed wages. There are also reports of farm-workers being denied access to health care by farmers and in some cases emergency health care services are up to 25kms away.

In addition to difficulty in accessing health services, farm-workers and their children are also often denied access to other government services. They are often not informed of services which are available and which will benefit them.

In some cases farm-workers are denied the right to access social services, i.e. social security or access to social workers. They are also denied access to the justice system. The greatest problem therefore becomes the lack of access to general information on issues pertaining to their lives.

Discussions with persons working in the NGO sector³ also revealed a number of problems experienced by farm workers in terms of access to social services:

Problems related to social security grants:

- Waiting period for Child Support Grant is too long
- Application forms for grants are complicated (especially since many farm workers are illiterate and have to rely on the farmer for assistance)
- The announcement regarding the phasing in of ages for the CSG has caused confusion
- In terms of access to the Old Age Grant: it is difficult for elderly people to get to district offices
- Means test is problematic – especially with regard to seasonal workers
- Farm worker parents often use grant money to pay school fees, thus there is a cycle of funds from Department of Social Services and Poverty Alleviation to Department of Education.

³ Deena Bosch – Women on Farms Project
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Problems related to services:

- Service delivery and attitudes of some staff need to be addressed.
- Difficulty is experienced in getting officials to visit farms
- Operating hours of district offices should be reconsidered. Offices should possibly be open on a Saturday to be more accessible to people who work throughout the week.
- Health and Social Services should team up on mobile clinics to be more accessible

2.7. Access to Amenities

In some cases, the farm-worker and the farm-worker child are denied access to amenities which will contribute to their human and social development. They sometimes do not have access to sporting and leisure facilities needed for their physical development and growth. Aside from school, there are often no real opportunities for them to expand their minds, as they do not have easy access to libraries or other facilities which will enhance their intellectual development. There are also cases where workers and their children are not allowed access to church or are not allowed to have clergy from their church visit them. All these factors have a negative impact on the overall development of children on farms.

3. THE STATUS OF CHILDREN ON FARMS

3.1 *Child abuse and neglect on farms*

Children on farms are among the most vulnerable persons in our society. Their extreme vulnerability and marginalisation exposes them to a great number of social ills and health risks that place them at a great developmental disadvantage.

Child abuse and neglect on farms does not only take on a physical or sexual form as we often so easily conclude. It also manifests in:

- ***Exposure to pesticides***
- ***Exposure to alcohol (through foetal alcohol syndrome) and alcohol abuse / consumption***
- ***Exploitation through child labour***
- ***Lack of access to basic health services***
- ***Lack of access to educational facilities***
- ***Poverty (malnutrition, access to shelter & clothing)***
- ***Lack of access to amenities (sporting facilities, libraries, etc.)***

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN in 1989 spells out the basic human rights to which children everywhere are entitled:

- ***The right to survival***
- ***The right to the development of their full physical and mental potential***
- ***The right to protection from influences that are harmful to their development, and***
- ***The right to participation in family, cultural and social life.***

Being among the most marginalized persons in our society, children on farms often suffer from poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases and unequal access to education and other services. They are deprived of the basic rights we take for granted.

Although farm-worker organizations and other stakeholders are trying hard to work toward change and an improvement in the quality of life of farm-workers, especially the lives of children, the patriarchal system on many farms hampers possible progress. The fate of the farm-worker child often rests with the owner.

Cases of physical and sexual abuse against children, although not widely reported due to parents fearing for loss of their jobs, do occur. And because of the implications that could follow from reporting such cases or confronting the farmer, both parent and child feel powerless and the situation continues. It is therefore a difficult task trying to find information on the occurrence of such cases as they are not always reported.

3.2 Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome is a permanent condition that ranges from intellectual disability and behavioural problems to more serious brain damage, physical deformities and stunted growth. It is largely a consequence of the “dop system.”

A 1997 study⁴ in the wine-growing area of Wellington showed almost 5% of schoolchildren in the area had full-blown FAS, while a repeat of the study at the same schools in 1999 indicates that the figure had increased to 11%. While in 1997 there were 48 incidences per 1000 children, by 1999 this figure had escalated to 75 per 1000 children. Also, DOPSTOP, an NGO dealing with issues of alcohol abuse and the “dop system”, reported that in the Stellenbosch area it was not unusual to find children as young as 8 or 9 coming to school drunk. This is a direct effect of the social ills to which many children on farms are exposed.

3.3. Health concerns: exposure to pesticides

Young children, especially those living on farms, are exposed to pesticides prenatally and after birth. Children living in agricultural areas may be exposed to higher pesticide levels than other children as pesticides may be tracked into their homes by household members, by drift from nearby applications, by breast milk from their farm worker mother or by playing in treated fields. Often also, children manage to get hold of empty pesticide containers and transport liquids or foodstuffs in them, which then become contaminated.

According to statistics⁵, approximately 150 cases of acute pesticide poisoning are reported to health authorities annually. It should be noted though that there appears to be considerable under-reporting of pesticide poisoning cases.

Although there is pesticide legislation in place, there are specific policy issues that are relevant to children:⁶

⁴ Dispatch Online, April 2000

⁵ Pesticides & Children's health in South Africa

⁶ Pesticides & Children's health in South Africa
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- a. *No reference is made to children and their specific vulnerability to pesticides. They are vulnerable to exposure due to physiological susceptibility (small body size and developing brains) and their exposure patterns (pre-birth, hand-mouth behaviour, and drinking pesticides from unmarked containers).*
- b. *Toxicological and environmental pesticide risk assessments used to register pesticides in South Africa are based on data from tests conducted on adult males in developed countries. This data is therefore difficult to extrapolate to children, who are often undernourished in developing countries.*

3.4. Child labour

Studies indicate that there are 3 forms of child labour in the wine and grape industries in the Western Cape⁷:

- i. remunerated work of African children
- ii. unremunerated work of coloured children, and
- iii. migrant child labour

Much African labour is used as surplus labour during the harvest season and it is here where many African children are employed on an illegal basis and also remunerated.

Often contracts for coloured workers are based on the premise that employed men will provide the extra, and mostly unpaid labour through their wives and children. Often coloured children living with their families on farms do not earn their own wages and their labour is considered as an extension of their other non-productive household chores. Children from the age of approximately five years old are expected to work after school, on Saturdays and during their school holidays. Yet this work is not regarded as productive labour, but rather help, socialization or play. Many children are also forced to work to supplement the income of the family.

Migrant child workers are the most vulnerable class of child workers as they travel far from home, and therefore have no protection in the face of exploitation. There are reportedly many

⁷ Child Labour in the Western Cape wine & export grape industries
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cases in the Western Cape where migrant children have had to remain on farms to work themselves out of debt.

3.5. Access to education

Many children on farms have little or no direct access to educational facilities. They have to travel long distances to public schools or farm-schools on neighbouring farms.

There is also little or no access to Early Childhood Development facilities that are especially vital to these marginalized children. Also in many cases, parents are not able to afford school fees, uniforms, stationery, etc. and thus remove their children from school.

Major concerns regarding farm schools are:

- they tend to be small with very few learners,
- most farm schools are primary schools, and
- teachers are often forced to teach more than one grade at once.

These factors leads one to question the quality of education at farm schools and whether or not they contribute to the cycle of poverty and illiteracy found on many farms. Without greater access or “upgrading” of current farm schools it is unlikely that children will have any exposure to alternate occupational and economic opportunities.

Historically, because the farm school remained the property of the farm owner, not the government, the farmer was empowered to close it at any time.

Other reasons for farm school closures are:

- inadequate learner numbers,
- educator resistance to teaching large numbers of learners per class, and
- official requests for closure from farm owners.

There is also much evidence to suggest that farm school children are exploited. Up until the late 80’s farmers were entitled to withdraw children from school to work on their farms. Although this is now illegal, the practice still continues. Farm schools are some of the most needy in the country considering their size, distribution and remoteness, along with indigence and social dislocation that characterize the communities they serve.

3.6. Case Studies:

The story of Thandiwe, a fourteen-year-old girl from Zwelethemba, an African township located in Worcester.

During her school holidays Thandiwe commutes sixty kilometres to De Doorns, a town that is at the heart of the export table grape industry in South Africa. At age ten she first went to work:

“I took some grapes, put them into a sack, and brought them into the open lorry. I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong. I wanted my parents to taste the grapes, so I cut a few bunches at the end of the day. The driver checked my bag and found the grapes. He was instructed by the farmer to fire me and everyone else in the lorry. We all lost our jobs. There were about fifty of us. We were lucky because it was only a week before school started. For the adults it must have been terrible. The next year I went to a different farm”.

Another young worker:

“We prepare food in the morning. We prepare dough in hot oil, vetkoek, bring juice that we dilute in one-litre bottles. We bring two litres for the whole day. The water on the farm is not nice. It tastes like chemicals, so we drink our own juice. The farmers do not provide food or drink. Sometimes we take water from home”.

In the Phillipi farming area between 1996 and 1999, there were 9 reports of dog attacks against farm workers

“...A 16-year-old girl was walking on a road alongside a farm when the farmer’s dogs charged at her. She ran away but the dogs caught up with her and started biting her. A male person who was standing on the premises of the farm where the dogs allegedly came from did not come to her assistance until another member of the community who knew the dogs chased the dogs away. As a result of the extent of injuries to her leg, it had to be amputated. Although the police in the area were informed of this, they did nothing, When inquiries were made a year later the police said that they were still waiting for medical records....”

4. CONCLUSION

Assessing the situation of farm workers and their households is complicated by a lack of reliable data regarding their circumstances. The availability of literature and documented research on the status of farm workers and dwellers is limited. However, it is clear that farm workers face extremely difficult circumstances which should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Exact interventions or perfect strategies are not yet known or developed, but there should now be a commitment to the development of these strategies and interventions.

Addressing the problems in our farming communities will require a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional approach. The eradication of problems will be dependant on all elements of the public service sector working together through research, education, health promotion, surveillance, regulation and advocacy, to empower a very marginalized group of people

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A literature search indicates limited current research regarding the situation of farm workers, in particular in terms of neglect and abuse of children. Also, research related to the situation of migrant and seasonal farm workers should be pursued as it has been identified by NGO's as a serious issue which affects many families. Further to this, research addressing the lack of literacy and numeracy skills among the farm-worker community should also be considered, as this is key to many of them being able to improve their lives.

6. RESOURCES

ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES:

Cape Times, September 10, 2003, "**Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Figures Climbing**", Lesley Byram

Dispatch Online, April 5, 2000, "**Alcohol damage to babies cost millions**" www.dispatch.co.za

iafrica.com, September 3, 2003, "**Farm report paints grim picture**" www.iafrica.com

REPORTS:

Clacherty, G, "**Report on a Children's Participation Process Towards a South African Child Labour Programme**"

DOPSTOP ASSOCIATION, (1999), "**A community diagnosis of Stellenbosch farm workers, with the focus on women**"

London, L, (1999), "**The Dop System, Alcohol Abuse and Social Control Amongst Farm Workers in South Africa: A Public Health Challenge**," Occupational and Environmental Health Research Unit, University of Cape Town

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Urban Health and Development Bulletin, Vol.4, No.2, June 2001, Hanna-Andrea Rother: "**Pesticides and Children's Health in South Africa: Research priorities emerging from policy consultations and a local case study**"

Urban Health and Development Bulletin, Vol.4, No.2, June 2001, Susan Levine, "**Child labour in the Western Cape wine and export grape industries**"

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