

2. A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF FARM-WORKERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA SINCE THE EARLY 1990's : Presented by Prof Lloyd Sachikonye (UZ)

The paper gives in detail the role of farm workers in the Southern African region touching on all the themes of the conference that included.

- The Question of Rights;
- Land Reform And Its Impact On Farm Workers
- Poverty Trends Amongst Farm Workers
- The Impact of The HIV/AIDS Pandemic On Farm-Workers
- Globalisation and Farm-Workers and
- Role of National Unions, NGOs And Advocacy Groups

Prof Sachikonye, started his presentation by congratulating the FCTZ for organizing such a conference with the stated aims and objectives of the conference since the issue of land reform was pertinent and appropriate based on the developments in the region.

The paper acknowledges the fact that farm-workers constitute the largest proportion of workers in the national formal sectors throughout the region. The agricultural sector, is one of the most vital sectors in the SADC region in terms of food production and export earnings. Despite the size and the strategic position of the farm-workers as a workforce, they experience the poorest working conditions as well as social and political exclusion. The majority of the workers throughout the region are vulnerable to poverty exclusion and insecurity.

The presentation also observed that the plight of farm-workers in the region is as a result of the historical imbalances experienced during the settler colonialism and apartheid. The presentation went on to observe that since the new governments came into power in the region, no concrete efforts have been made in terms of ensuring that the plight of the farm-workers is corrected in light of their contribution to the region's fiscus. The presentation also drew participants to the issue of land reform and redistribution and the extent to which the farm-workers in the region had benefited.

THE QUESTION OF RIGHTS

The paper further discusses issues relating to the question of farm-workers rights, highlighting the various legislation that had been put in place since colonialism governing the relationship between the farm owner and the farm-worker and how the new governments in the region have sought to improve these relations through the enactment of new legislation that seek to empower the farm-workers. The paper however notes that despite the existence of a number of very progressive and protective legislation, the implementation of the legislation was problematic and in some cases non-existent.

The paper notes that there has been selective implementation of some laws as well as resistance by some employers to enforce and adhere to what the laws demand. In terms of tenure security legislation, despite its existence in some SADC states, some farmers refused to build or maintain new or additional houses for farm-workers. The protection of farm-workers rights in most of the countries has become weaker and enforcement agencies have not been able to rise to the occasion. Human security and rights of farm-workers are flouted upon through out the region as can be seen from the land reform programs being implemented in Zimbabwe and will be implemented in countries such as Namibia and South Africa.

ISSUES OF CITIZENSHIP AND GENDER

Prof Sachikonye noted that Citizenship and Gender equity rights have been difficult to attain in most of the countries in the region especially in countries that historically imported labor such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. Farm-workers who have lived in these countries for generations from countries such as Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia are denied citizenship rights. These farm-workers have no social security or medical assistance and in most cases, they return to their original countries as destitutes.

LAND REFORM AND ITS IMPACT ON FARM WORKERS

The paper gives an overview of historical imbalances regarding land ownership in the region and how the countries in the region have sought to correct these imbalances. The paper also acknowledges that land reform has been moving at a slow pace due to financial constraints and other legislative inhibitions. Prof Sachikonye further notes that the farm-workers have not been considered in a systematic manner in the land reform programs that have been undertaken in most of the SADC region. This is despite the fact that in some countries such as Zimbabwe, a draft Land Policy Document of 1999 recognises the right of farm-workers to land both in terms of residential and for resettlement.

The same scenario is found in countries such as Namibia. In terms of ownership, 52 % of agricultural land is owned by about 4 200 large-scale farmers on freehold title basis. The land reform process began in 1990 and by early 2001 only about 97 farms had been acquired for redistribution. Less than 7 000 families had been resettled since Namibia's independence in 1990. The pace of resettlement is very slow and the Namibia National Development Plan 2000 – 2005 envisages the resettlement of only 180 families over the planned period. The land redistributed to date has mainly been for the landless (excluding farm-workers) and displaced people and ex-soldiers.

In South Africa, land reform has not proceeded in a significant manner since independence in 1994 and there is not much to indicate that the farm-workers rights are guaranteed when the land reform takes off. The aim of the land redistribution in South Africa was to target about 30% of white owned land within five years. This period was extended to 15 years. To date only about 1 million hectares have been redistributed. An encouraging feature however is the existence of the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA) of 1997, which seeks to promote security of tenure and to protect farm-workers from unfair and arbitrary eviction. By 1999 about 714 000 hectares had been redistributed mainly to the urban-based, and not to many farm-workers.

POVERTY TRENDS AMONGST FARM-WORKERS

The presentation noted that the working conditions of farm-workers in the SADC region were poor. The wage conditions are low in all countries. Poor wages lead to poverty. The farm-workers in the region live in perpetual indebtedness to their employers for goods bought from the farm stores.

In South Africa, it is estimated that farm-dwellers make up over 50% of about 14 million South Africans who live in abject poverty. Farm workers earnings are between R350 and R590 per

month. Housing, health and schooling conditions of farm-workers were not adequate. In 1194, 34% of black male workers and 29% black female workers had no formal education.

In Zimbabwe, the farm-workers experiences are move severe due to mainly the current macro-economic crisis that has lead to deeper poverty levels. Poverty was more prevalent in rural areas where 75 per cent of households were poor and on large-scale farms nearly 60 per cent of households experienced poverty. Provision of education and health facilities were also very poor in the farming areas. Due to meager wages, farm-workers cannot afford the increased medical fees at local clinics. This has lead to the call for farm health centres. However, the issue still under debate is who should fund these health centres? Should it be the farmer or the government or both? These were some of the issues the conference was challenged to debate and offer recommendations.

THE IMPACT OF THE HIV-AIDS PANDEMIC ON FARM WORKERS

The presentation gave an overview of the impact of HIV/AIDS in the region and how this has affected farm-workers. The presentation noted that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst the adult population ranges from about 14 per cent in Mozambique to about 36 per cent in Botswana. HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is estimated at about 20 per cent in Namibia and South Africa and about 25% in Zimbabwe.

Given the closed and isolated nature of farm communities they are more vulnerable to the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic especially in light of the fact that education for behaviour change are scarce or non-existent in these communities.

The challenge for the conference was to discuss and debate on how best to tackle the issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in farm communities. The effects of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst farm workers were bound to affect productivity trends within the farming sector. The pandemic would lead to the massive loss of skilled labor and loss of income and breadwinners and an increase in orphans

The conference was urged to proffer new ideas for integrated all embracing program that would seek to eradicate poverty within farm communities and empower farm workers so that they participate equally and proudly in the development of the SADC economies.

GLOBALISATION AND FARM-WORKERS

Prof Sachikonye noted that globalisation had involved the integration of markets through production, investment and trade. The Agriculture sector has not been spared by globalisation. Southern African countries have been woven into the web of globalisation and have become exporters of many agricultural products. The buyers who include rich multi-national corporations usually determine the pricing of the commodities. Farm workers find themselves marginalised in the determination of the prices. Thus, globalisation has to a large extent worsened the working conditions of the farm-workers. When prices plummet, farmers cushion themselves by among others the reduction of wages for the farm-workers. However, when prices rise, the same does not apply to the wages of the farm workers.

The conference was urged to discuss the effects of globalisation on wage conditions of farm-workers and to come up with strategies on how farm worker Unions can ensure that the effects of globalisation do not further marginalise and disadvantage the farm-workers.

ROLE OF NATIONAL UNIONS, NGOs AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

The presentation noted that the role of trade unions in the farming sectors for the benefit of the farm-workers has historically been slow. Due to the geography characterizing the farming communities, logistics have proved difficult and mobilization of farm workers has proved difficult. This experience is shared by most countries in the SADC region. Attitudes of farm owners also sometimes inhibit trade unionism on farms as they are viewed as private property. Despite the handicaps, farm-worker unions have become visible especially in the post-independence era in the region. Labour friendly legislation in Zimbabwe (1980) and Namibia and South Africa in the 1990s has provided unions with a framework to mobilise farm-workers and to engage in collective bargain with farmer organisations

Despite these developments, the farm-worker unions are usually under-funded as they rely on contributions of the farm-workers who are in turn very lowly paid and sometimes unable to contribute their membership fees to the unions. Lack of adequate funds would also affect the advocacy activities of the unions.

The conference participants were challenged to map strategies on how best the unions could widen their advocacy activities with different government departments and more outreach programs to build awareness among farm-workers on issues related to their rights. The conference was urged to map out strategies on building a sense of purpose and partnership between the farmers and the farm-workers where there was open sharing of information especially on inputs and outputs of production and profit sharing. The Unions on the other hand should engage themselves in research and networking and become the custodians of data on issues affecting farm workers.

Capacity building within the farm-workers unions was identified as critical. The Professor argues that without clear knowledge base on issues affecting the farm-workers and their communities, the unions would not be able to knowledgeably engage with the policy makers. Strengthening of workers committees and how they relate to management on farms was also an issue that the conference should debate and strategize on.

Issues Arising From the Presentation

Some participants sought clarification on the following:

- Regional networking and information sharing between and among organizations and farm unions – how effective this would be at national level without regional protocols that would bind states. These issues arose in light of the fact that issues relating to safety of farm farm-workers were being flouted in other countries. For example pesticides banned in one country would be dumped in another endangering the lives of the farm-workers.
- The second issue raised in discussion is the inability or the limited capacity of independent states to address the issues surrounding citizenship and identity of farm workers.
- A third concern was the general lack of accurate data to support the issues raised in regards to farm workers. For example, as much as it is known that HIV/AIDs is an issue in the farm worker community, there are no figures to support the above assertion. It was agreed that organizations working in the sector have to address the above information gap.