

Livelihoods (un)employment and social safety nets: reflections from recent studies in KwaZulu-Natal

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Discussants: Andre Du Toit, PLAAS, UWC Alan Hirsch, the Presidency

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Acknowledgements

In this presentation Francie Lund draws on two recent research studies in KwaZulu-Natal. The first, the Socio-Economic Study of the Persistence of Poverty and Inequality (SEPPI), was done in 2001 by the School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal in collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the Catholic University of Peru and the University of Madison Wisconsin, and was funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The qualitative component of the research in South Africa was done by Francie Lund, Michelle Adato (IFPRI), and Phakama Mhlongo (the latter is present today), assisted in the field by Mamazi Mkhize, Sibongile Maimane, and Zweni Sibiya. The second, the Risk and Vulnerability in Employment Study (RVE) was done in 2003 by Francie Lund and Sibongile Mkhize at the School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Cally Ardington, of the Statistics Department at the University of Cape Town. It was funded by the Mellon Foundation Node on Poverty and Inequality and was done in association with the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies in KwaZulu-Natal.

This presentation considers some methodological and substantive issues in the fields of livelihoods, unemployment and social safety nets in South Africa. Using information from two recent studies in KwaZulu-Natal it considers the different kinds of information that different methodologies yield, and it asks how confident we really are about our knowledge. The intention is not to advocate a particular approach or method, but to look at how quantitative and qualitative methods reflect on each other and how they can be used to improve each other. The intention is to emphasise the importance of different kinds of economic activity; to attempt to understand what is happening with people who work but who do not appear in official figures; and to look at ways to support people who are being missed at present by government programmes to support small and medium enterprises.

The focus on informal activities comes from earlier research and activity focused on the impact of state pensions on patterns of poverty and inequality, and their role in livelihood production. Through this Francie Lund became interested in the role of pensions in enterprise creation. At the same time she became involved in the network called Women in Informal Employment, Globalising and Organising (WIEGO), an international network that looks at the increasing role of informal employment in economies worldwide. In addition to looking at broad economic data, she began looking at the dynamics of small enterprises in household poverty and at well-being.

The informal economy is not only a Third World phenomenon. Worldwide much more work is non-standard or atypical. About 12% of new employment in the United States falls into this category and is done under contract. Women do the vast majority of this work. Typically this work carries increased insecurity and risk. A 2002 publication by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) gives comparative figures for India, Mexico and South Africa. Based on the best data available the study shows that informal employment in the non-agricultural sector is 83%, 55% and 28% for the three countries respectively. Including agriculture the figures are 92%, 63% and 34%. It shows that the South African figures are still relatively low. The new theoretical framework is trying to move away from the dichotomy of a formal sector and an informal sector. The studies accept the permanence of the informal economy and try to look at the whole continuum of employment from formal to informal, and the links between them.

We know that some of the data in South African survey work is problematic on the extent to which people are using land for their own consumption, and the extent to which pensions and grants are pooled and used for household expenses. In general, income is probably poorly reported, as it is all over the world. Illegal work is not reported at all, and in KwaZulu-Natal not capturing the economic activity around dagga, for example, means missing a large part of the picture.

This presentation focuses on the extent to which work and employment are reported in different types of surveys. There has been a huge growth worldwide of informal employment, and a change in the nature of work, more of which is erratic, and takes place in brief episodes. Typically we go to the household head and ask him or her to report on the income of other household members. It is highly likely that in the case of informal work the household head is not able to report accurately, particularly on the income of other household members, and certainly not on benefits obtained through work. In this presentation we will be looking at two surveys in which a triangulation of results obtained using different methods – quantitative and qualitative – was possible.

Most people are aware of the 1993 Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) survey done by SALDRU and the 1998 KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamics Study (KIDS) survey. The PSLSD went into nearly 9 000 households covering all provinces and all four 'race groups'. In 1998 KIDS went back to the African and Indian households in KwaZulu-Natal covered by SALDRU, retrospectively setting up a longitudinal study. The third wave of KIDS is in the field at present (July 2004). In 2001 Francie Lund was part of a research collaboration in which there was an opportunity to go back to a sub-sample of the households surveyed by KIDS in 1998. Using different methods the Socio-Economic Study of the Persistence of Poverty and Inequality (SEPPI) tried to find out in more depth what had been happening in these households between 1993 and 1998. This presented a fine opportunity to look at how different methods generate different results.

The table shows the findings on poverty in the KIDS study (May et al, 2000). While 47% had not been poor in either 1993 or 1998, 22% had been poor in both periods, and more households (19%) had experienced a decrease in their level of material well being, than the 11%, which had experienced an improvement.

1998 1993	Poor	Not poor
Poor	Chronic poor 22%	Getting ahead 11%
Not poor	Falling behind 19%	Never poor 47%

The SEPPI sites were selected to cover rural, urban and metropolitan areas in seven sites around the province. At each site researchers chose two households representing each of the four situations in the matrix. Researchers asked about a range of things including household structure, work and employment, finance, credit, debt, spending on children's education and membership of organisations. Here we concentrate on the work and employment aspects of the study.

Researchers spent a total of about five hours with each household, and tried to mitigate the extractive nature of research by making appointments beforehand, providing refreshments, giving a gift to the households, acknowledging the time commitment they were making, and leaving behind in the community a 'Very Useful Information Package' with information such as how to access social services, scholarships, government departments and NGOs.

A key research tool in the household interview was a 2x1 metre piece of brown paper with a timeline from 1990 to 2001 marked along the top. The 1993 and 1998 studies were marked on the timeline. A card for each household member was placed on the paper and someone was asked to relate what each person had done from 1990 through to 2001. From the record of household events and summarised employment histories, researchers then asked for three more detailed stories about employment – about getting work, making work, and losing work. The timeline helped people to remember, encouraged involvement, provided continuity between sessions and helped to include new people as they came into the discussion. It also helped the researchers to keep track of people in the households and to manage the information.

One person, Violin, told us a story about her employment. The 1993 PSLDS survey recorded her as 58, widowed, unemployed and not engaged in any economic activity. In 1998 the KIDS survey recorded her as 63, widowed, unemployed and receiving a non-contributory state old age pension. She was again marked as not being engaged in any economic activity. In 2001, SEPPI recorded the following story:

- In the dry winter months, she is a specialist mud plasterer of houses. She tells no one of the unique recipe for sand-cement mix that is her speciality.
- She employs a young man to drive the span of donkeys to get river sand for the plaster mix.
- For many years she has sewn and sold dresses ('pinafores') with a machine bought for her by her late husband.
- She uses her state pension money to buy the bolts of material (she used husband's pension money for this before he died).
- She sews in the summer months, employing other women to help her when she gets a big order.
- She employs a woman to work her fields, on-and-off in winter while she plasters, but nearly every day in summer.

- Neighbours helped her build her 3-roomed house she paid them with dresses.
- She also collects and sells firewood, sometimes paying someone cash to help with chopping, other times making an 'ilimo' (traditional work group) she then brews Zulu beer as payment.

She is not rich but there are clear seasonal patterns of economic activity. She is a quite substantial employer of other people and she employs people to cover for her in the fields and at home. Interestingly she pays people in cash and in kind. This kind of information comes out naturally when researchers tell people that they are interested in their story, display real interest and allow people the time to tell their story. It comes from setting up a different kind of relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Some of the employment is missed in larger surveys because it falls outside the timeframe of the surveys – people are typically asked to report on work in the last month, or three months, for example. Changing patterns of informality mean that people are engaged in intermittent work, often for brief episodes.

The study threw up many interesting questions about what work was being missed, and also about the extreme insecurity attached to many kinds of formal work. A further study, called Risk and Vulnerability in Employment (RVE), was consequently undertaken, this time in collaboration with the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies in KwaZulu-Natal. This looks at formal and informal work and tries to understand more about the actual nature of risks people face in different types of employment, as well as access to formal and informal financial institutions. The data from this study have only just been cleaned, and no reports on findings are yet available.

The SEPPI study influenced the design of RVE in key ways: one was the need to interview working people directly, and the second was to move even further away from the simple dichotomy of 'formal work' and 'informal work', and to use a more complex definition of status of work as a key variable. Work is divided into three categories: self-employed, either on own account or employing others; dependent producers; and different kinds of wage employees – formal, informal, domestic or casual workers. The intention is to put together an index of vulnerability and insecurity using the information gained in the one-hour interviews. The interviews were supplemented with work focused focus group discussions, key informant interviews covering informal and formal associations, and interviews with bank officials.

The RVE study wanted to interview about 300 working people directly. The Africa Centre provided the names of all those between the ages of 30 and 60 years resident in two urban wards at the time of the last demographic survey from its ACDIS database. This yielded about 3 400 people and from them they extracted a random sample of 600. Out of these 600, there were 291 people who were working and who were interviewed. Of these 82 were self-employed and 209 were waged employees. Of all of the women in the sample 52% were working compared to 42% of the men, showing that there are more women than men working in this area. As expected there were also more women who were self-employed than men. However, it was more difficult to secure interviews with men than with women, despite the team being able to interview in the evenings and at weekends.

The Africa Centre has undertaken two socio-economic surveys in the households in which these working people are resident, and hopefully it will be possible to link the information about individual workers from the RVE to this household information.

At least the following variables will be used in assessing the security status of work:

- Permanent work
- Written contract
- 13th cheque
- Medical aid
- Access to occupational pension/ provident fund
- Paid leave
- Sick leave
- How the job was obtained (formal job search or not)
- How paid cash or not
- Trade union membership
- Firm size: More than 5 employees

Data are still being analysed, but from a preliminary peek it looks as though the working conditions at the bottom end of waged employment are almost the same as those of the self-employed.

In closing her presentation Francie Lund drew attention to some key points. First, it is probably likely that knowledgeable household respondents are less likely to be able to report reliably on job characteristics of household members who are informally employed. If the RVE study can be linked to the Africa Centre household data there will be a rich opportunity to compare responses about work given by knowledgeable respondents with those given by workers themselves.

Second, there is the question of what gets defined as 'work'. There was a very interesting case in an urban research site in SEPPI where a man – a loquacious and generous informant – had reported very fully on economic activity involving things like his chicken enterprises and a range of other activities. In the course of the interview a car drove up and offloaded three hunting dogs worth about R1 800 each. The informant played an important part in a network of men who hunted, and sourced the hunting dogs from Pretoria and Bloemfontein. He had not thought of this as an economic activity but rather as a leisure pursuit.

Third, intermittent episodes of work are not captured by panel studies such as KIDS, which are five years apart. Many such episodes fall outside the time period specified in surveys ('Have you worked at all in the last month/ three months?')

Fourth, there is an important gender issue. In SEPPI it was difficult to get men's voices (as opposed to the conventional wisdom, which says that it is difficult to get women's voices) in the household interviews. In the RVE men were systematically more likely than women to be harder to get an interview with, even though they were resident and in the area.

Fifth, this research adds to the growing body of studies which show the important economic and employment creating roles played by state pensions and grants. On pension day it is not just old people going to buy goods. Pension day has become market day and everyone is there. In one place there were people who had come from Botswana and Swaziland to trade. There were thriving second hand stalls selling a range of goods. Francie Lund drove through one village with a sister from the clinic who had lived in the area for years. She identified the sources of income for all obviously wealthier houses as being either from a civil service job, or by starting small trading at the pension queue and growing the business from there.

Sixth, in the RVE there were many instances of self-employed people and waged workers having multiple death and funeral policies, but there were no instances of work related insurance at all. This needs to be picked up as a policy issue.

Seventh, Francie Lund expressed her concern that household surveys are not collecting sufficient information about migrant workers. We know that they have the highest levels of education but it is usual in surveys to ask only one question about them: Do they ever send any money? And that is about all that is ever known about them. It is assumed that large surveys will pick them up in town, although it is known that migrants are more likely to be living in informal settlements or in hostels, where residents may be under-counted in surveys.

Eighth, there is a lot of discussion at present about whether more studies of poverty are needed. This presentation suggests that there really are gaps in our knowledge and we could triangulate – using different methods – to get a better understanding of how to support poorer people better in the little businesses that they are trying to run. There is room for more work on this and it would be worth doing. But if we only go out to where poor people live and ask what they are doing there, the relationship between poverty and wealth, and poverty, wealth and apartheid spatial settlement, is missed. No amount of study about the dynamics of poverty that does not link back to chains of reproduction of wealth and poverty is going to reveal much more.

Finally, the research teams are also workers, and they are usually part-time employees. They need decent conditions of work, and a career path. They need to understand what the research is about, and why it may be important. They need to know that their safety is as much a priority in the research as is the collection of good data. And they need constant debriefing and support. And increasingly – in the face of AIDS – they may need counselling during and after the fieldwork.

Andre du Toit – discussant (PLAAS, University of the Western Cape)

This has been an exciting and in some ways frightening presentation, a little of the unvarnished truth from one corner of South Africa that raises all kinds of questions. There are three broad areas that I would like to raise that we could discuss along with other issues you care to raise.

The first is methodological. It is clear that even within the limitations of fairly quick quantitative surveys we can get much more interesting information by asking the right question. This has massive implications for Statistics South Africa. How do we know that we are accurately tracking economic activity in people's households? Why is it that these surveys seem to have done better at highlighting a range of informal and informalised employment that is otherwise invisible?

Vulnerability is the key issue here, the fragility and temporary nature of employment – the scanty nature of the safety networks that allow people to bounce back. We need to look at much more than people's income today and whether they are formally employed or not. We need a way to get a sense of people's vulnerability and to quantify it. We don't yet seem to have tools to do this.

We also need to know more about the changes in people's status. Periodic surveys give us good time-lapse photos but do not tell us what has happened in between. There are a whole lot of interesting methodological questions facing researchers here.

The second area is this section of our economy that we have been calling informal, and which is clearly a lot more complex than we have realised. On the one hand it makes a significant contribution to survival. On the other it is very marginalised, very vulnerable, very limited. We need to conceptualise better what it is, what the problems are, how it should be supported, how we evaluate our general assumptions about employment and unemployment, what we should be trying to do and how well we are doing it.

One particular area is what is now being called the two economies debate. The idea that South Africa has a first world economy and a third world economy existing alongside it but not connected to it. This research brings out the many rich connections between the formal and informal economies. It may even be – and there is the scary example of people selling pension plans to the poor – that one problem is that there is *too much* penetration of the informal economy by the formal economy. Something we are seeing in our work in the Eastern Cape is that there is a lot of informal economic activity but the people who are making the money are Vodacom, not those who are selling cell phone time. The problem may not be the lack of linkages between the first and third world economies but the nature of those linkages.

Another area is labour market regulation. On the one hand there is the argument that labour market regulation is driving casualisation and externalisation. On the other hand we see that protection is essential and that corporations are trying to squeeze as much money as they can out of people. There is a complex issue here that we have not come to terms with. Some argue that without regulation we would have lots of low paying jobs and this would impact on poverty. However, a survey by PLAAS in the townships around Cape Town showed that two thirds of breadwinners earned less than the poverty line. The argument about labour rigidity does not easily deal with the issue of the working poor.

The third issue is partly methodological. It is the one that I have the least answers for and it concerns me greatly. This is the issue about men. Are we dealing with the *absence* of men from households and from informal networks and support structures, or are we dealing with their *invisibility*? Is there a whole lot going on that we don't see. If so what is going on and why? In areas such as the last one mentioned in the presentation, with high levels of crime and anomie, high levels of disaffection, there is clearly something going wrong with households and structures in the community. When we look at gender there is something going on with masculinity that we do not really understand. This is a policy issue and a research issue.

Discussion

• Why was the RVE research done only in the urban area rather than the rural as well?

The resources were available to do the research only in the urban area. We were also not likely to find much employment in the rural areas that the urban areas draw their work force from. Therefore with limited resources it made sense to do the urban part only.

How is the index of vulnerability being developed? Is qualitative data being used to arrive at some sort of quantitative analysis?

The index is trying to do two things. It is trying to get an indication of formality in employment, which is not the same as vulnerability. More formality does not necessarily mean less vulnerability – the schoolteachers are the group who feel most vulnerable, because of all the theft and violence in and around schools. The people who felt safest were in formal commercial places of work like factories and shops. The index of formality looks at benefits, and will try to understand more about where the line is between formality and informality and what bridges it. If we are talking about entrepreneurial development we need to link the formal and informal and promote the links between them. Preliminary cluster analysis of the RVE data suggests that among those with waged employment there are three distinct groups ranging from the very secure to the insecure.

• Given that those employed at the bottom end of waged employment appear almost as vulnerable as the self-employed are we talking about a spectrum rather than two categories? People in

waged work can be just as vulnerable as those in self employment. Entrepreneurs can sometimes have better control of income and employment than employees.

Vulnerability in employment does link to some extent with formality because things like unemployment insurance will help you over a shock but many people in formal waged employment do not have contracts at all.

What evidence is there of policies aimed at supporting small and medium enterprises being effective in changing the face of poverty? In most cases these enterprises only employ a few people and have a limited impact on the community.

Before going on to look at small enterprises and entrepreneurs I want to talk about the case of a man we will call Philip who lives in the Newcastle area and worked for Spoornet for 17 years. He was retrenched with a package of R17 000. He has an old age pension. His daughter is employed in a garment factory in Newcastle. When work is available she works seven days a week with no days off, and gets paid around R90 a week. She fell in the factory and had to go to hospital for two weeks. It was clearly a work related fall but the state old age pension paid for her transport to hospital, her treatment and medication. It seems that in some cases where there are no benefits and no de facto regulation the state is paying the costs of things like injuries at work. For those affected it is a blessing that there are things like the old age pension, which are being used in cases like this for occupational health and safety for younger people rather than to support the aged. But the state is substituting for the lack of employer contributions to occupational health and safety, and worker compensation.

In terms of support for small entrepreneurs the government department that we found to be most active is the provincial Department of Agriculture (DoA). It was not just doing agriculture and was not just doing rural things. It was working in urban areas as well. It was providing support for community gardens (many people did not like community gardens because they wanted to be engaged with as individuals, whereas the DoA will only engage with groups). It was also helping people to set up organisations and helping them to sell day old chicks and things like that. In the RVE study the Zululand Chamber of Business Foundation, which seems to be rather unique in South Africa as a corporate institution, really seems to be reaching more towards support for micro enterprises than SME policies in my experience. It is reaching out to individuals and helping people to become tour guides in the area, for example. But it just is difficult in practice to support very small enterprises when economic growth is slow.

Phakama Mhlongo adds: There were three reasons that seemed to contribute to the success of initiatives. Successful initiatives had been started by local people themselves. Second, most of the successful projects were initiated by women and by groups that had common interests. For example groups sets up by disabled people were very successful. And third, it made a big difference to one successful income-generating group assembling motor parts that the company they assembled for had export linkages to Taiwan.

Alan Hirsch – discussant (the Presidency)

When the presidency did a ten year report last year we found that we could not answer some important questions. Not about how many people are poor but about how people in poor communities make decisions. How they decide which child will go to school and for how long. How they decide where they are going to live. How they obtain the information that they use in making these kinds of decisions. What are the effects of various interventions on the way they make decisions? We talk about labour market flexibility issues but there is another important debate about

the impacts of social benefits. Do they help households to establish a base from which they can develop a sustainability strategy or do they discourage people from entering the labour market?

We do not understand how people make decisions and how interventions of various kinds influence the way that people make decisions. We are looking at how to use this kind of less quantitative, more story building kind of research to inform the quantitative information that we have.

The two economies concept is seen as a metaphor, a form of shorthand. It does not mean that there are two separate economies. It is a shorthand way of saying that there is a significant group of households that cannot be sustained through participation in the formal economy as entrepreneurs, or workers or by using assets available to them. These people may live in urban areas, in rural areas and rural towns, on farms and in the former bantustans. In some senses it is more a way of trying to describe a condition of life than something that is outside the formal economy.

Francie Lund: I hear what you say about the two economies being a metaphor and shorthand, but my approach, which is in the WIEGO framework, is to look at it as one economy. The only way to devise reasonable policies for people in informal activities is to think of them as people trying to make a living, just as you would think of other people trying to make a living. The concept of two economies breaks the idea of a continuum and of looking for linkages, which I think is our best chance for finding solutions.

A problem with the two economies idea can be that livelihood production is not seen as 'real work', and the 'real business' of economic growth is assumed to be going on somewhere else. If we think like that, we are getting off on the wrong foot. Our informal economic activity at present is lower than in other developing countries, but it is probably getting bigger. What this project is trying to do is to say that rather than see street traders as a problem, find people where they work and valorise that as work, and support them. And see informal employment as the link between poverty and development. Work does not appear anywhere in the Millennium Development Goals! We should take away the formal and informal divide and see it all as work. We should then also integrate into the analysis how women's caring work substitutes for the health services when hospitals say they are not going to take people dying of AIDS any more. If we get the conceptualisation right different sorts of policies might follow.

• Your research shows that different methodologies produce different results. From a research point of view how does one overcome this? Does it mean that you have to select the methodology to answer different questions? Then you also have to deal with resource constraints. How do you set up a research strategy to answer the right questions?

I would hesitate to try and present a firm point of view here. It seems that it is not possible to capture vulnerability and the changing nature of work in the large formal surveys done by Statistics South Africa, though the Time Use Survey may be the exception. It is difficult to get to the quite complex information presented here and perhaps we need a national qualitative survey to get to questions like the nature of work.

We should probably not use labour force statistics to get household survival information, mainly because of the time that is available to do these surveys, and the ways that questions are posed. It is possible of course to improve some of the labour force statistics, but they have already improved a lot. There are different purposes at work. The labour force statistics focus on how many people are working while household socio-economic information is looking at how people construct livelihoods. I think these have different emphases.

On methodology, accepting that funding for qualitative research may be difficult to access, developing a more qualitative tool for doing research on a large scale is possibly the way to go. It is expensive to do qualitative research; however when we compare the costs of SEPPI it does not seem to have cost a lot more, and research just is expensive. But we also need to make sure that we are getting the maximum from the quantitative data. One problem with the privatisation or marketisation of so much research is that people go on to the next research contract before they have trawled the newly-collected data to get everything possible from it.

On the question of incomes, in SEPPI we decided not to ask how much people earn. Asking in depth and with interest about how people are trying to make a living seems to sit uncomfortably with asking how much people earn; also, getting good income or expenditure figures takes a huge amount of time. The benefit of both these studies is the link to other quantitative data on the households in which these same individuals live. This left us free to focus on other things to do with work. In the RVE study we did ask about income at the end of the interview, and if people refused to give us a figure we asked if they would mind giving a range, a band, within which they fell.

• What research is there on pensions stimulating economic development and creating employment?

I have tried to summarise some of the research on pensions in Lund (2001). In South Africa we have a growing body of good research on how people get and spend grants, with the exception of the disability grant. This grant is experiencing a big uptake at present, partly due to HIV/AIDS but partly not, and we need to know more about it. In the case of old age pensions we know more is spent on the household if the pension goes to women. This is the same around the world. A lot of pension money is spent on health and education. We know that pension income that is pooled raises standards for all members of the household and that it raises standards higher if it goes through women rather than men.

We don't really know enough about the employment creating effects of welfare grants. It seems that different decisions are made about what to do with an old age pension that comes to an elderly person in the house, compared to a child support grant. We don't know enough to be able to say that if there were more grant money coming into the household it would have a greater employment creating effect or lead to more education.

How does this research compare to other research done by WIEGO in similar circumstances to those in South Africa. And does the existence of a welfare system in South Africa make the situation here different to other developing countries?

As an international network WIEGO is probably strongest in its comparisons with a range of Asian countries, especially India, and some countries in Latin America. And yes, the welfare system in South Africa makes a big difference. Peru is going into a situation where 70% of Peruvians of retirement age will have no pension systems and there is no state contributory system. This has to make a difference in the way people think about their security. The other big point of difference that I have learned is that in South Africa there is still faith that local government can do something to alleviate poverty and support local development. This is different from other countries represented in WIEGO like Argentina and Kenya where people have no belief that local government will do anything that is not corrupt or that is not wholly inefficient.

Closure: Andre Du Toit

We end with more questions than we started with – questions about social policy, labour market regulation and measurement of policy. Absolutely central to this is how people respond to their

situation, the choices they make, which we are starting to get a handle on, and we are learning more and more about how little we know. Behind the door are the big questions of political economy. What is the best metaphor through which we can think about the marginality or exclusion of those who seem to be on the outside: Knocking on the door, trying to get in?

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