

Smallholder crop farming is on the decline in South Africa. Why it matters

By [Charlie Shackleton](#)

4 Jul 2019

Over half a million households in South Africa's former homelands disengaged from farming between [2011 and 2016](#), according to [Statistics South Africa](#). This represents a loss of one in five crop farming households.



Children play in a cabbage patch near their home in Modderspruit, near Rustenburg, South Africa. EFE-EPA/Halden Krog

The former homelands were the ten areas demarcated under the previous apartheid system as places where indigenous, black South Africans were required to live, along [ethnic group lines](#). With little economic base and no government investment, underdevelopment and poverty were rife (and still are). Arable agriculture was thus an important livelihood activity of most households.

The high number of households abandoning crop farming is disquieting given the high levels of food insecurity and hunger in the country: one in five people are vulnerable to hunger, and about one-third of children in some provinces suffer [chronic malnutrition](#). Why would households disengage from field cropping in the face of such high levels of hunger and malnutrition?

We corroborated the picture painted by Statistics South Africa data in our recent [synthesis](#) of several studies over the last two decades. The synthesis covers 37 sites spread throughout six of the former homelands and used a wide range of different approaches. These included repeat ground, aerial or satellite images, household surveys, repeat visits to specific villages and oral narratives about farming and cultivation.

We focused on the former homelands because that is where most of the millions of smallholders live. They have experienced very little change in access to land or tenure security since the demise of apartheid.

Regardless of methods used and locations studied, results from most of the sites showed that the planting and cultivation of fields, typically areas larger than 0.5 hectares, has been abandoned on a large-scale. In some instances, this has been partially compensated for by the intensification of smaller scale home-gardening.

Such a decline in cropping makes rural households, most of whom are poor, more reliant on food purchases, and at the mercy of price hikes. Such food is often of a lower diversity and nutritional quality. Additionally, the decline undermines the household and national food security and self-sufficiency. While this dynamic is not unique to South Africa, it has received little attention in the national debates around land and about agriculture.

Why people abandon crop farming

The abandonment of crop farming fields isn't new. But some researchers have argued that it's accelerated in the last two decades. Irrespective, one wonders what might be the causes of such a loss of skills, knowledge, labour and land out of cropping.

The answer is that there is unlikely to be a single cause. The interplay of specific drivers behind the change varies from place to place, and from household to household, even in the same village.

Nonetheless, there are several, often interrelated, causes mentioned more often than others by rural villagers themselves. These include:

- Insufficient funds to buy inputs;
- Increasing incomes from other sources (mostly social grants), making it possible to buy food from shops;
- Environmental change such as climate change or declining soil fertility;
- Recurring damage to crops by livestock that is not herded because children are in school;
- Socio-cultural change, such as a decline in patriarchy, with many female-headed households, and youth who do not wish to follow in their father's footsteps.
- Aspirations for urban livelihoods leading to some young people not seeing a future in farming; and
- Inadequate direct and policy support from the government.

Understanding the relative contributions of these different causes can contribute towards more informed decision-making, at local and national levels.

Effects and implications

The effects and implications of the change are also worth examining. These span social, economic and ecological spheres.

Socially, there is loss of identity as farming communities. That's because more young people increasingly aspire to a future in less physically demanding, and more financially rewarding jobs. The decline of field cropping means that the people who used to work the fields (including household labour) are either now unemployed or have moved to other sectors.

Another consequence is that food security may be compromised. For example, Dr Gamuchirai Chakona, an environmental science researcher at Rhodes University, has found that farming households have [higher dietary diversity](#). And, Mike

Rogan, a professor of labour studies at Rhodes University, has reported that farming households experience less hunger, even though they may be [poorer in terms of income](#).

Economically, idle arable land in the context of a growing national population jeopardises national food security and requires increases in food imports.

Ecologically, there may be both pros and cons. Abandoned fields provide other products, such as firewood, that are useful to local communities or general society. Increased biodiversity in deactivated fields increases carbon absorption, and helps mitigate the effects of climate change. But such changes will also alter fire regimes and make some old fields susceptible to invasive species.

Intervention

Only a small proportion of households in the former homelands are [full-time farmers](#). This number is declining, as is the area of land being cultivated. Government support for cultivators in the communal areas is quite limited and focused on the small fraction that is capable of selling surplus produce to the formal market.

Policies and interventions that promote the value and image of agriculture, and which strive for food security for all are limited. On the other hand, having unused land means it could be reactivated as a safety net during adverse times, such as the loss of a job or loss of a breadwinner.

There is a clear need to understand this ongoing decline in crop farming. There is also a need to debate the implications for the use of the abandoned land. To find appropriate policy responses, such debates should take place across sectors and involve households, the villages, districts and country.

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