

The rural poverty trap: which way out for South Africa?

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ABSTRACT

Revolutionary movements in South Africa and elsewhere in the world were founded on the need to remove political systems that were considered as the root cause of poverty and suppression. Today, South Africa is a sovereign state and poverty remains. As much as poverty was part of the Liberation Movement agenda, it may be considered as a trap in South Africa where the gap between the rich and the poor remains very wide. The xenophobic attacks in May 2008 have been attributed to poverty. The discourse of rural development centres on fighting rural poverty. However, there is no commonly shared definition of both rural development and rural poverty. To further complicate the discourse, there is no consensus on how to measure both phenomena. Fighting rural poverty demands wisdom for it involves the commitment of scarce economic and non economic resources in an environment that is beset with class struggle. The question is- which way out of the poverty trap? The paper recommends agro-based solutions among other measures.

Key Concepts: Rural development, Rural Poverty, Agrarian reform

INTRODUCTION

Rural development is a discipline which has since arisen as a distinct area of policy research following its recognition by the World Bank, FAO, ILO and UNDP as a medium for addressing poverty and social inequalities. However, there is no universally accepted definition of rural development (Gabriel 1988). Despite the differences in the definitions of rural development, social theorists, planners and policy makers tend to concur on its major goal. The goal is to eradicate rural poverty (Ellis, 2000; Bernstein, Crow and Johnson, 1992; Chambers and Conway, 1992). The MDG of halving poverty by 2015 is in line with that of rural development. The differences in perceptions of rural development give rise to competing schools of thought about how social policy can reduce rural poverty. Rural poverty is an elusive concept because communities that label themselves as poor may change the label when confronted with others who may have even far less.

This paper examines the efficacy of agriculture in addressing rural poverty in South

Africa. Despite its being the most developed economy in Africa, South Africa has high economic disparities between the urban and the rural areas. Approximately 65% of South Africans live in rural areas. Of the rural residents, 72% live under abject poverty of less than US\$1 per day (Ntsebeza and Hall 2007). Poverty may be one of the major reasons for the liberation struggles in Africa. Poverty is a trap for it may trigger social and political instability in South Africa where the disparity between the rich and the poor is very high (Ntebeza and Hall 2007). The challenge is to reduce poverty in South Africa.

DEFINING RURAL POVERTY

The way people think, act and define poverty is influenced by their individual perceptions, conviction and experiences. The Medieval Christianity regarded charity as a right of the poor. Charity giving was also an important Christian responsibility of the affluent. Poverty was considered as a deprivation that was caused by factors that operated from outside the poor (Feagen, 1975). On the other hand, the early