

# Social Capital, Climate, and Agrarian Change in South Africa

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I recently returned from a year in South Africa, where I explored issues of social capital and climate and agrarian change. As I previously reported, the annual UN climate change conference (COP17) produced nothing of real consequence in the realm of climate change adaptation, the buzz phrase that incorporates everything from the future of food security, safe housing, and infectious diseases in (most prominently) the developing world. And yet I still persist in studying the phenomena, because the research and NGO communities are fully onboard with the idea that the stage must be set even if the big international players refuse to perform.

My own research focuses on a regional scale in asking how resilient are households in South Africa's rural Eastern Cape to the effects of climate change as demonstrated by their level of social capital and assets. I particularly focus on natural resources. The agrarian change question is huge, because I'm finding that decreased reliance upon natural resources appears to intervene, a fact that has dramatic policy implications, as well as consequences for the social composition

of families and communities.

The Eastern Cape of South Africa starkly epitomizes the country's inequality: it is home to many of the former "homelands," or Bantustans, of the apartheid era. Degraded land, high rates of HIV/AIDS, and vertiginous unemployment are all key features here. Most households in even the most rural parts of the Eastern Cape, where one might imagine subsistence agriculture to be the norm, survive off of government welfare grants or old-age pensions and very occasional remittance transfers. Clearly, how communities respond to stressors is no simple research subject.

I have been working in two parts of the Eastern Cape, in an area known as the Wild Coast and inland communities in the Baviaanskloof. My study has focused on measuring the number and diversity of rural livelihood assets, as well as social network capital, and whether those predict aspects of resilience to ongoing ecological and social change. I argue that resilient households will demonstrate a high number and diversity of livelihood assets in response to recurrent and non-linear changes (like climate-related events

or disease occurrence) and that they will exhibit very tight, or cohesive, social networks—bonds that are important whether individuals are trading information, goods or services.

My methods have included oral history interviews, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and action research, and most prominently social network analysis (SNA). These three approaches are meant to unpack the temporal dimensions of resilience: my oral histories focus on livelihood changes in the past, SNA on current developments in household exchanges, and PRA on possible future indicators for resilience (or lack thereof).

I have found that conditions in the study areas are shifting. No matter how poor a household may appear, it is almost universally dependent upon a government subsidy and fewer natural resources (including livestock and crops) than one might imagine for rural populations on other parts of the continent. New kinds of interdependencies, especially in the form of debt and money-lending, are also apparent. To be sure, this is basic and not applied research science, but I believe that my dissertation will continue to uncover issues strongly relevant to natural resource and regional economic managers and policymakers, who have had the tendency of stereotyping the rural poor.

Lastly, I am spending the 2012-13 academic year as a visiting scholar at Indiana University's Anthropological Center for Training and Research on Global Environmental Change (ACT). I look forward to cross-fertilizing knowledge with IU's scholars and will report back with lessons learnt upon my return to Gainesville.

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