

Resilience and Social Networks in South Africa's Eastern Cape

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I am spending 2011-12 in South Africa exploring issues of climate change, disease and agrarian change in a post-COP 17 world. The annual climate change conference, held in fall of 2011 in Durban, has been frustratingly lead-footed, yet many calls for action at local and regional levels are being made in Africa, even if national and international bodies cannot agree upon a binding solution.

My own research focuses on this regional level in asking how resilient homesteads in South Africa's rural Eastern Cape province are to the effects of climate change and disease. I'm finding thus far that decreasing reliance upon natural resources appears to be the intervening variable in both cases, a fact that has dramatic policy implications, as well as consequences for the social composition of families and communities.

The Eastern Cape has seen its fair share of flux in recent times. Even after tremendous historical shifts nationally and regionally, the province continues to be the epitome of South African 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 homesteads 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.

Suffice it to say while the social-ecological conditions of the province do not appear to be encouraging, how communities respond to stressors at the moment, and



will continue to in the future, is no simple research subject.

I'm seeking to shed a little light on this complexity in part of the Eastern Cape known as the Wild Coast, largely through an investigation of the number and diversity of rural livelihood assets and whether those predict aspects of resilience to ongoing ecological and social change. I argue that resilient homesteads will demonstrate a high number and diversity of livelihood assets in response to recurrent and nonlinear changes (like climate-related events or disease occurrence) and that said homesteads will exhibit very tight, or cohesive, social networks—bonds that are important whether individuals are trading information, goods or services, or in some cases just money.

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 homestead exchanges, and PRA on possible future indicators for resilience (or lack thereof). I don't claim to have the oracular vision to unravel the past,

accurately assess the present, and then predict the future completely. As an isiXhosa phrase goes, *Akukho qili linokuzikhoth' emhlana* (there's nobody so smart he can lick his own back!). But I hypothesize that conditions here are shifting.

Some alterations I'm observing speak to all three temporal dimensions, and possibly to the future of rural South Africa at large. Notably, no matter how poor a homestead 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 African peasants on other parts of the continent. New kinds of interdependencies, especially in the form of debt and money-lending, are also apparent.

While conceived as research in basic science, I believe that my dissertation will uncover issues strongly relevant to natural resource and regional economic managers and policymakers, who might have had the tendency of thinking of rural peoples too simplistically.

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