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***Informal Social Protection
in Post-Apartheid Migrant Networks:
Vulnerability, Social Networks and Reciprocal
Exchange in the Eastern and Western Cape,
South Africa***

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Abstract

This paper considers the dynamics of informal social protection in the context of chronic poverty and vulnerability in post-apartheid migrant networks. It argues that in poor and marginalised households in South Africa, the indirect impacts of social grants cannot be adequately understood by focusing simply on either individual or household decision making. Instead, the paper concentrates on the central role of the elaborate and spatially extended network of reciprocal exchange within the informal social protection systems. These networks link rural and urban households, and enable hybrid livelihood profiles to evolve that bridge rural and urban as well as formal and informal economic activities. These depend crucially on elaborate and gendered 'care chains' involving not only monetary remittances, but also paid and unpaid care work and household reproductive labour. The arrangements help the poor to survive, alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability by allowing costs and resources, opportunities and shocks to be shared and redistributed. At the same time, these strategies have limitations, and are structured by deeply entrenched power relations pivoting on gender, age, status and other markers of exclusion. They may also increase the vulnerability of some individuals. This highlights the importance of the formal social protection system existing alongside the informal systems.

Keywords: Structural poverty, Social policy, Informal social protection, Vulnerability, Social capital, Migrancy, South Africa

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1 Introduction

This paper describes aspects of the systems and arrangements of informal social protection (see Bracking and Sachikonye, 2006) that exist among marginalised and poor African households in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and in the rural Eastern Cape. As such, along with its companion paper (du Toit and Neves, 2008), this study aims to provide social context for the debate on social protection and self-employment at the margins of the South African economy. In response to the persistent chronic poverty and deepening inequality in post-apartheid South Africa, official policy has focused on two sets of intervention measures: first, the extension and broadening of South Africa's formal social protection system, principally through the roll-out of non-contributory pensions and child grants – and second, increasing employment both within the formal sector and in the so-called 'second economy' (Ardington and Lund, 1995; Barrientos and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2003; Duflo 2003, Barrientos, 2004; Goldblatt, 2005). While there has been broad agreement on the importance of both these directions, their relationship to one another and the trade-offs between them are less clear. How does access to grants affect economic behaviour? On the one hand, increased spending on social grants has been seen in Keynesian terms as a stimulus to growth, increasing the buying power of the poorest strata in society, or as promoting household cohesion and micro-enterprise formation (Lund, 2002). On the other hand, doubts have been voiced about the 'incentives' being created by cash transfers. Within the African National Congress (ANC), in popular discourse, and within government, there is often talk about the dangers that social grants may create a 'dependency' on such allowances or a disincentive to seeking jobs or informal self-employment (Makino, 2004). Concerns are sometimes expressed about the possibility that grants could 'crowd out' private remittances, and that this may reduce the effectiveness of social spending (Cox and Jimenex, 1990; Jensen, 2003). Other dialogue focuses on the desirability or otherwise of sophisticated forms of targeting or conditionality.

A key difficulty in these debates has been the contested nature of the evidence itself. Although researchers and policymakers have at their disposal abundant quantitative data on household income, spending and remittances, their interpretation depends on underlying assumptions about how individuals and 'households' make decisions, weigh alternatives, and rank preferences. For example, Lund, among others, criticises the analyses purporting to show that access to social grants discourages job-seeking by male household members (Bertrand, Mullainathan and Miller, 2003). Such analyses, they point out, ignores the central role played by migrancy and absent household members. If migrancy and absent household members are factored in, the same data can be shown to indicate that access to grants acts as encouragement to job-seeking behaviour by female household members (Posel, Fairburn and Lund, 2006; Posel, 2003). Even the best income and expenditure data need to be historically and socially situated, and the analysis to be guided by an understanding of the social dynamics and relationships that shape poor people's choices and responses.

This paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of these issues. Rather than concentrate narrowly on the specific ways in which income from social grants is spent, or on trying to model more expansively the direct impact of access to social allowance, the study seeks to evaluate the South African government's social protection programme. The paper describes some of the key features of the underlying systems, relationships and processes whereby marginalised poor black people try to ameliorate poverty and manage vulnerability – with *or* without grants. It is of course well-known that mutual aid, remittances, and support in-kind within and between households are a vital part of the informal social safety net in South Africa. This paper tries to examine in more detail how these processes function, and to highlight some of their implications. Another paper (du Toit and Neves, 2008) analyses how grants are used within the context of these strategies and arrangements.

The paper starts by describing what can be learned from the insights gleaned during a period of qualitative research in two particular contexts of vulnerability in South Africa: persistent poverty and marginality. The research is based on case studies conducted in rural villages near Mount Frere in the remote Eastern Cape and in African townships on the outskirts of greater Cape Town.¹ It attempts to make a contribution to what can be learned from quantitative studies by capitalising on the ability of qualitative analysis to cast light on the meaningful and relational dynamics of social process. Unlike econometric efforts to model 'behaviour', such research involves an attempt to review the experiences of poor people, and the discursive manner in which they themselves give meaning to and react to their circumstances.

The research project selected a group of households from the first and fifth expenditure quintiles of a quantitative livelihood survey of households conducted in 2002 in rural Eastern Cape and in Cape Town's African suburbs. As the dataset on which this paper is based consisted of 48 detailed case studies, a 'medium n' research design was chosen in order to be able to analyse this relatively large qualitative dataset (Davis, 2006). 'Medium n' is a term developed to denote qualitative research processes that involve a greater number of cases than those of traditional, in-depth anthropology, but which still fall far short of the sample sizes of quantitative large-n studies. In such studies, the key strategy for understanding the pattern relies on developing methods of clustering cases.

This preserves the nuance and contextual specificity of the qualitative data, which might otherwise be lost within a comparatively large qualitative dataset. This particular effort consisted of writing up the 48 case studies in detail, and analysing them theoretically according to criteria outlined in the theoretical literature on impoverished livelihoods. The cases were then grouped both in terms of their similarities and differences. These

¹ For a detailed description of the research method and key findings, see du Toit and Neves (2006).

groupings were then used heuristically to rank household case studies and develop typologies. During the second phase, selected households within these groupings were re-visited and investigated in greater detail. Finally, focus-group discussions were conducted to check the insights and interpretations that emerged.

Such an understanding is necessarily partial and limited. For one, the account given here cannot pretend to be an insider's perspective of the key cultural dynamics and processes at play. It is essentially the work of white researchers, who (even with the help of skilled and patient interpreters and fieldworkers) are outsiders to the cultural life described here. For another, the insights from the case studies cannot be universally generalised. They do not constitute invariant 'models' of household or individual decision making that could be applied irrespective of context. In fact, this paper does not even claim that the insights can in any sense be generalised to all poor people in South Africa. Rather, they concern just one element of the social jigsaw puzzle that constitutes society in South Africa – i.e., the patterns found in the responses of households existing at the urban and rural extremes along the routes and circuits created by the migrant system that developed between the Eastern Cape and Cape Town.

At the same time, what we are describing here is not merely a singularity. After all, migrancy has played a major part in South African history, and has decisively shaped both urban and rural settlements throughout the country. Many of the patterns and strategies depicted here will find echoes and resemblances elsewhere. A better understanding of informal social protection systems in South Africa will require more research elsewhere and will, no doubt, highlight both the similarities and differences.

After a brief discussion of the context of poverty and marginality in post-apartheid migrant networks, the paper provides an account of the key aspects of the social arrangements and survival strategies of one woman, Vuyiswa Magadla, head of one of the case-study households in PLAAS/CPRC's 2006 research. This is followed by a brief description of how this case study exemplifies and illustrates some of the more general features of the informal social protection system upon which she and others like her rely on. We then consider in more detail how social grants are used in the context of these responses and strategies, and we close with some reflections on the implications for research and policymaking.

2 Poverty and marginalisation in post-apartheid migrant networks

2.1 Structural poverty and hybrid livelihood formations

This paper is based on a research project that focused on individuals and households in several rural villages within the Alfred Nzo District Municipality (surrounding Mount Frere) in the former Transkei homeland, and in sites B and C in Khayelitsha, Greater Cape Town. Although geographically distant, these two sites are, of course, intimately connected. Above all, they constitute, respectively, the rural and urban poles of the

migrant routes created by the development and the crises of the migrant labour system that grew up during the heyday of apartheid. Migrant labour linked urban and rural communities in complex ways (Wolpe, 1972; Callinicos, 1988). Many of these have persisted and mutated even after the end of influx control and the demise of the formal institutions of labour migrancy. Livelihoods in Mount Frere are still profoundly shaped by close ties to urban locales (du Toit and Neves, 2007), while Khayelitsha, with a population that has moved to Cape Town only in the last 20 years, has strong links to the Eastern Cape's rural hinterlands.

Some of these issues are explored in more detail below. At this point, we shall merely note that poverty, vulnerability and marginality in both of these sites are shaped in particular by the process of 'jobless de-agrarianisation' (Bryceson, 1996; Bryceson and Jamal, 1997; du Toit and Neves, 2007). On the one hand, smallholder agriculture in the Eastern Cape has been in long-term decline, driven (among other things) by a long history of official neglect and underdevelopment and the hollowing-out of the social arrangements and relationships that underpinned small farming systems (Heron, 1991; Andrews and Fox, 2004, Bank and Minkley, 2005). On the other hand, declining livelihoods from land-based activities have not been replaced by income from non-farm employment. The end of industrial decentralisation policies of the apartheid-era has seen the departure of local light manufacturing jobs (Nel and Temple, 1992). Further afield, job-shedding in the mining and manufacturing sectors means that those continuing to migrate to urban areas – or those who have already migrated, but choose to remain there – are facing radically reduced job prospects. This has also meant that income from remittances and the prospects of rural investment by returning migrants have dwindled (Seekings, Graaff and Joubert, 1990; Bekker, 2001; Bank and Minkley, 2005). In both the rural Eastern Cape and in Khayelitsha, those affected by landlessness and the vulnerability of land-based livelihoods are caught in the same quandary. Monetisation, modernisation and integration with the South African economy make the access to steady cash income increasingly important, but the formal employment opportunities that would constitute the best chance of achieving such an income have become more elusive. In this context, access to social grants – a pension, a disability grant, or some form of child grant – is often the only source of any kind of regular and predictable income. Large numbers of the working-aged poor, however, have no such sources, and rely on the insecure existence of 'survivalist improvisation', the tiny rewards from self-employment in the heavily overtraded 'informal sector' (Skinner, 2006).

Since late 2003, the prominent concern for the 'second economy' has focused attention on the need for a better understanding of the structural and chronic poverty and the dynamics that marginalise many South Africans. Elsewhere, the authors argue that these forms of marginalisation, if characterised as the result of being simply 'disconnected' from mainstream economy, are perhaps not fully understood (du Toit and Neves, 2007). Poverty and marginalisation often result from adverse or disadvantageous forms of incorporation. For one thing, they are often the result of exploitative, unequal

power relations in the heart of the 'formal' economy. For another, the livelihood activities pursued by poor, marginalised people do not exist in a separate realm that is disconnected from the mainstream economy. Instead, the informal sector exists closely beside, and is intricately entangled with, the formal. More often than not, households and individuals operate by combining hybrid livelihoods in which formal and informal activities complement, subsidise or otherwise support each other (du Toit and Neves, 2007).

2.2 Surviving in urban Cape Town

How do the individuals faced with these circumstances deal with the realities of poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability? What are the strategies and responses open to them? Next, using urban and rural case studies, we examine some of these questions, and begin with the extended, in-depth description of the circumstances of Vuyiswa Magadla, a female shackdweller from Site C, Khayelitsha.

Vuyiswa Magadla

*Vuyiswa Magadla² lived in a tiny shack off the road in M*** crescent, in Site C, Khayelitsha, on the outskirts of greater Cape Town. Her front door does not face the street, and could only be reached by finding one's way between the street frontage homes and through the narrow alleyways that branch between the shacks behind them. Her home was in a sandy little alleyway among other shacks and garden fences, set well back from the road. Instead of sitting in the middle of its plot, the way many Khayelitsha shacks do, it appeared to mimic an Eastern Cape compound, in that there was a collection of buildings, facing each other around a tiny central courtyard. There was a small structure on the left with a carefully locked door (this belonged to Nolusindiso, Vuyiswa's elder sister's daughter); directly opposite the gate was the main structure, built of ancient wooden beams and rusted corrugated iron. The little patch of ground between the huts was uneven, shaped into little hills and dales, and covered with ancient, weathered carpet – testimony to the residents' ceaseless battle against the inexorable stormwater and ever present sand. The kitchen was threadbare and damp, the concrete floor covered with ancient linoleum; and wrinkled paper on the walls carefully glued in place with flour porridge. Sparsely furnished, a weathered plain wood bench stood along one wall; tiny little stool along another; there was also a table with a paraffin stove and an ancient kitchen dresser with dented but meticulously clean pots and pans. Through the kitchen door, one glimpsed into a dark, empty lounge with a fireplace, unused even on cold days.*

*Vuyiswa was a diminutive, wizened woman with what appeared to be cataracts in her eyes. She moved slowly and seemed guarded and reserved but as time passed, what strikes the visitor is that this reserved manner did not seem to flow from timidity but from a carefully cultivated comportment. Although poor, Vuyiswa had what in Xhosa is known as **isidima** – esteem or dignity – and this was evident both in her careful, traditional dress and in her almost*

² Informants participated in our research on the condition of anonymity. Names and other details which can be used to identify the participants have been changed.

Vuyiswa Magadla (cont'd)

courtly insistence on formalities. On most winter days, Vuyiswa and her kin sat in the sun outside the house to escape the cold and damp within.

Vuyiswa and her neighbours have been living together in this densely populated corner of Khayelitsha, just metres away from the N2 highway, since they were relocated here by the apartheid state in the aftermath of the 'Windhoek' troubles over 20 years ago. In 2006, when the research team visited her, the household consisted of the widowed Vuyiswa, aged 60; Nolusindiso, her elder sister Nombeko's 37-year old daughter, who worked as a domestic worker for two wealthy households in far-off Constantia; Nolusindiso's infant daughter, Thandiwe, and Vuyiswa's grandchild Noluntu, aged 20. In addition to these core residents, there was also a shifting number of other visitors, in fact, so much so that an intermittent visitor was easily confused. For example: Thembeke, Vuyiswa's elder sister (and Nolusindiso's mother) was listed as a 'permanent household member in the 2002 survey. But even though Thembeke regularly visited Vuyiswa for extended periods (partly for medical care in the Western Cape hospitals, which she trusted more than those in the Eastern Cape), her real home, and where she collected her pension, was in fact in Krancolo in the Eastern Cape, where she (nominally) took care of Nolusindiso's other children, Zandile (13) and Siphso (6). 'Nominally', because it was apparent that young Zandile, in fact, looked after Siphso and her grandmother. In addition to her pension, Zandile's father (whom Nolusindiso never married) paid R300 in maintenance on Nolusindiso's behalf to Thembeke to help her care for the children.

*Also present in the Eastern Cape household was Nomsa, Vuyiswa's daughter (and Noluntu's mother), who was recently widowed, and living in Qumbu with her other daughters, Lindiwe and Thandiwe. At the time of the team's visit, Welile, Nomsa's son was also living in the Eastern Cape, going to school there and visiting his mother during the holidays. Later in the year Lindiwe and Thandiwe, in turn, visited the shack in M*** street for their holidays – and were very helpful in piecing together aspects of the household's Eastern Cape network (see map below).*

Vuyiswa had come to Cape Town in 1979, shortly after the death of her husband. Initially she stayed in the house of her brother Madoda Simani and survived for a while doing domestic work in Cape Town's coloured suburbs. This was a period of hardship. She seemed to suffer from racism by her employers, and the job involved a lot of ironing, causing lower back pain. She lost the job after an extended visit to the Eastern Cape, but subsequently found employment as a domestic worker in Newlands. At some point during this period she moved into her present shack in Site C. In 1989 she broke her leg after falling downstairs, was unable to work, and lost her job. For a while she sold 'smilies' (cooked sheep's heads): difficult and unpleasant work. She switched to selling fruit and vegetables; her brother Madoda gave her R100 for starting the business. According to Vuyiswa, the money was not a loan but a gift given in gratitude for the times she had helped him many years ago, buying him shoes when he had no money, and paying a village tax on his behalf.

Vuyiswa Magadla (cont'd)

In about 2000 she was diagnosed with diabetes and was awarded a disability grant. She has been living in her shack ever since with her sister's daughter Nolusindiso, using her disability grant to supplement Nolusindiso's income – and using R300-400 from the grant to help keep her business by buying fresh vegetables. She could not sell the products from her own place, as it was not situated on the road, so she used her brother Madoda's house. One of the advantages of the business was that it was not too demanding on her injured leg, and she can work sitting down. Though she had trouble seeing, she could see well enough to count the change. She did rather well out of the fruit and vegetable business, reporting that she made more money than what the white family in Newlands had paid her. She also helped out her brother's wife, Nombula, with the dressmaking business the sister-in-law operated from a stall near Site C terminus. Nombula's husband, Madoda, had moved to the Eastern Cape some time ago, and whenever Nombula left to spend some time there, Vuyiswa minded the business.

*Another important source of income in 2006 was Nolusindiso's wages as a domestic worker. Nolusindiso never married, and had initially planned to visit Cape Town only for a short while (her daughter Zandile had been ill and she had come to see the Cape Town doctors, apparently sharing her mother's prejudices against Eastern Cape medics). She, too, stayed with the extended family (in this case, another sister of Vuyiswa's called Sinomvuyo). She had better luck with employment than Vuyiswa and soon found work as a domestic in wealthy, white Constantia. In 2006 she was bringing home in the region of R1200 per month. Thandiwe added pressure on the household income, so that often there was no extra money left to buy fruit and vegetables for resale. Furthermore, caring for Thandiwe while Nolusindiso worked as a domestic worker was also more demanding in terms of time, and Vuyiswa was unable to keep her business going. Also at this time her daughter Nomsa's husband died. At the time of research team's visit, Vuyiswa was managing to save (reportedly) between R300-400 a month from her disability grant towards Nomsa's **izila** (coming out of mourning) ceremony. Nolusindiso was covering the bulk of domestic expenses, buying groceries from the Somalian-run shop down the road while Vuyiswa contributed by taking care of Thandiwe and covering the 'small things' – beef stock, soup, extra paraffin, and train tickets for her granddaughter Noluntu, who was going to school in Langa. Vuyiswa hoped that she would be able to return to the fruit and vegetables business once Thandiwe was a little bigger. She said that she planned to keep the business small, because if it got too big, it would attract the attention of the **tsotsis** (gangsters). Crucial to Vuyiswa and Nolusindiso's survival was their link to a broader social network. Some of this network was relatively easy to identify: her shack was visited by a steady trickle of visitors, most of them family. Her brother's sister-in-law (in other words, Nombula's sister) Unathi was a particularly regular visitor. Often these visits were the occasion only for conversation and gossip, but a social map of Vuyiswa's household and the households it depended on reveals that these familial links were also channels of significant other resources (see map below). A look at the network formed by these ties reveals an important fact: that Vuyiswa's household, although constituting a relatively independent unit in one sense, was also part of a larger group of individuals and households connected through ties of kinship, friendship, and alliance to that of her brother, Madoda Simani (see Figure 1).*

Vuyiswa Magadla (cont'd)

Although Madoda was living in the Eastern Cape at the time of the research, tending to his cattle and his compound, he played a central role in this larger network. As Nolusindiso explained, he was 'the only man', so he was supposed to look after all women in his 'own' family as well as those in his wife's family. Madoda was a formidable but rather shadowy Figure, and not much about his past was uncovered by the research team; partly because key moments in his life were passed over in silence by his relatives. It was fairly clear that he had spent time working on the mines in the 1970s before being injured in an accident that cost him his toes on one foot. After spending some time in the Eastern Cape recovering, he migrated to Cape Town to work in a cement factory. It may be that he had spent some time in prison (when the team eventually visited him in the Eastern Cape, his arms bore the tattoos typical of Cape Town's 'numbers' gangs. This, and the tough, streetwise hauteur with which he received the team seemed to suggest that he had spent at least part of his life as a 'tsotsi'. But none of this was mentioned by his wife Nolusapho or his sister, both of whom painted him as a paragon of respectability and virtue.

Certainly it was clear that Madoda's shack in Site B had played a key role as an urban 'beachhead' for kin, clan members and other villagers seeking to migrate. According to his wife, at one stage there were 14 different people all living in the tiny property. It was also clear that his injury did not cripple the household financially. A key role here was played by Nombula and her sisters, who had started their own dressmaking business. It was this dressmaking business that the women credited for the fact that when Madoda's shack burned down in 1998, the household was able to recover relatively quickly.

*Dressmaking was not the only activity in Madoda's Cape Town household. His eldest son was also establishing himself in business: he was the owner, among other things, of a prominent container-based business perched on the side of T*** crescent road not far from Vuyiswa's home – a blue container prominently signposted as "S*** Internet Café". (The team had in fact already visited it, wanting to see who was making use of internet services in impoverished Khayelitsha. The business name proved to be rather misleading, though; as was explained by the young employee hired to run the place, once it had had an internet connection but this lost money because the dialup connection was expensive and the customers too few. Although the business had kept its 21st century name, it now sold hair extensions and shampoo.) Another important connection, but one which Vuyiswa did not reveal until well into the research process, was her relationship with Andile Mathole, her boyfriend, a grizzled shebeen owner who lived down the road from her, and with whom she freely shared resources and money.*

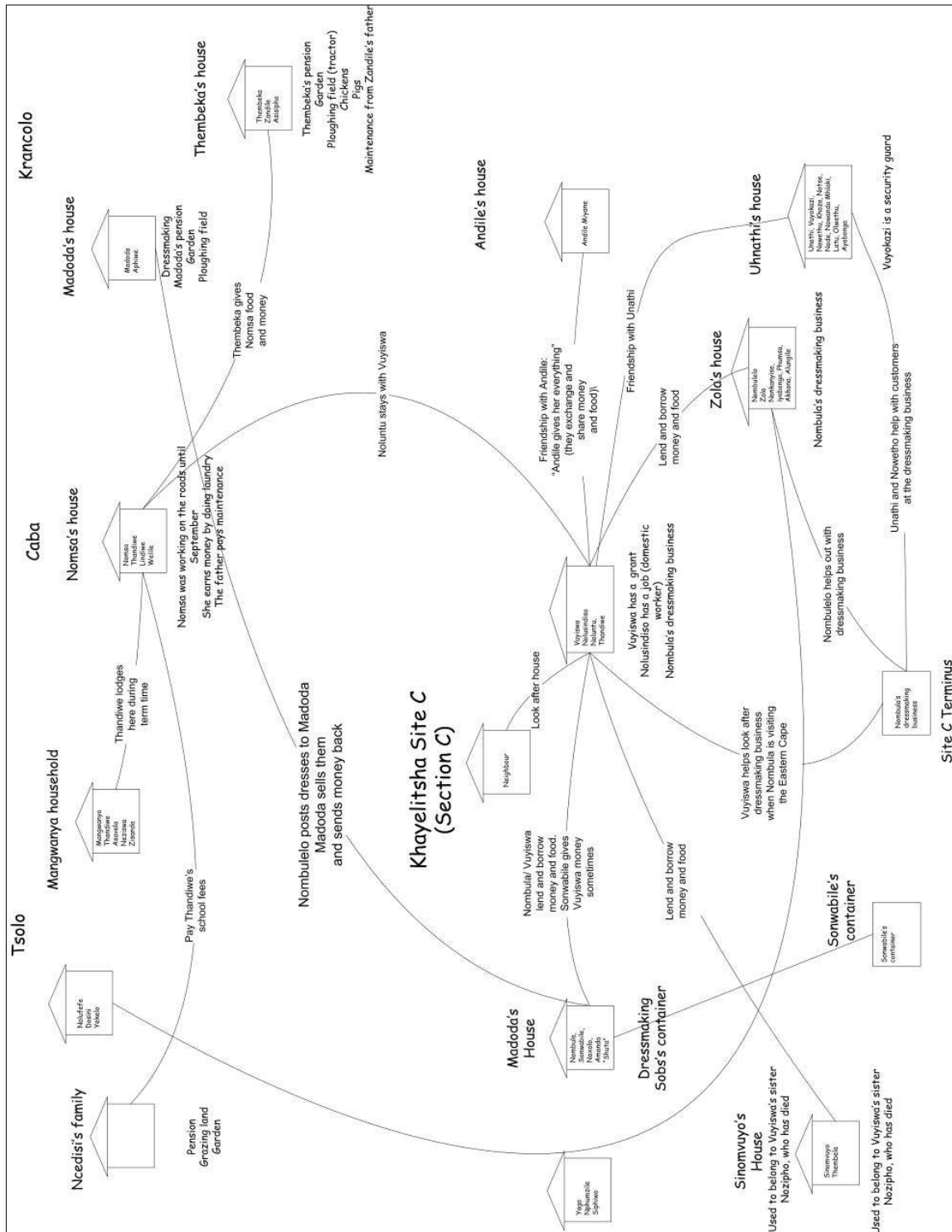
Without these links, Vuyiswa's household would have been a lot worse off. It was clear that they were substantially cushioned, and poverty significantly reduced by the fact that they were a part of this spatially extended and tightly-knit kinship network. But at the same time, one should not make the mistake of assuming these as only harmonious relationships. In some ways, Vuyiswa's position was relatively precarious. The situation encountered by the researchers was merely the outcome of a long and complex 'past story' relating to Vuyiswa's life before she came to Cape Town. She did not share much of this story with the team, but the death of her husband in 1983, when she was still relatively young was a major blow. In

Vuyiswa Magadla (cont'd)

marrying him, she had in effect left her own family and had no real claim to their support. As his widow, she was expected to continue living in his compound and raise his children. It appears that her relationship with his family went sour, and that there was a sustained campaign of attrition against her on the part of a 'jealous' aunt that made her life steadily more difficult. She attributed her survival during this difficult time to her friendship with Nombula, her brother's wife, and Nombula's sister Unathi, who interceded on her behalf with Madoda and entreated him to take her back in the family fold. In Xhosa culture, there is no strong moral obligation for an elder brother to accept a sister back into the family once she has married, but apparently Unathi succeeded. Much of the configuration of Vuyiswa's social network and obligations in 2006 seemed to be shaped by her relative powerlessness and indebtedness to Unathi and Madoda.

Similarly, although there was a strongly element of cooperation within the domestic arrangements in Vuyiswa's household, there were also limits to what was shared. The threadbare interior of Vuyisewa's house contrasted sharply with what was behind Nolusindo's carefully locked door. Nolu's tiny room contained a glossy, fake pine veneer wall unit displaying a hi-fi and small television, (all new) as well as a sturdy bed with a brightly coloured modern duvet. Vuyiswa did have access to the room, and was allowed to watch TV or listen to the radio (as long, Nolusindiso said, as she did not touch her cosmetics!)... but even so it was obvious that Nolusindiso's income was far from distributed evenly among the household members. Her contribution was limited to groceries and daily running costs, and Vuyiswa was not able to use that income to accumulate household durables for her rooms. In fact, Nolusindiso confessed to the team that she would have much rather stayed on her own. She could not buy any more things because her little shack was too small, and convenient as Vuyiswa's child care duties were, Thandiwe would soon be old enough to be sent to a crèche. Nolusindiso had not moved out because of the location: were she to move, she would have had to relocate to the newly settled Enkanini or Kuyasa, the most far-flung settlements in greater Khayelitsha, making it inconvenient and expensive to travel regularly to Constantia.

Figure 1. A schematic map of some of Vuyiswa's most important connections



3 Social networks and informal social protection

The case described above is unique and singular. But, as any student of South African anthropology and qualitative sociology will recognise, it also highlights many aspects of the life of poor people in post-apartheid migrant networks. Next, we explore some of the more salient themes and link the observations from this particular case study to those noted in the rest of the study and in the broader anthropological and sociological literature.

3.1 Fluid households and 'rhizomic' networks

The first notable feature of the case study is, in a sense, the fluid, porous and open-textured nature of Vuyiswa's household. Both the 'livelihoods framework' currently still dominant in development studies and the econometric models of individual and household decision making used by econometricians often assume that the household is a stable, bounded and coherent entity. However, what emerges here is a more complex picture. Some of these dimensions would, of course, exist in any household. As Pip Bevan points out, the household, instead of being perceived as a 'unit of analysis', should perhaps be characterised as a 'small open system' (Bevan, 2004): coherent but porous. And as feminist analysts often point out, who benefits within a household is not the outcome of a process of 'altruistic' maximisation of all members, as economists like to refer to it, but more likely the outcome of unequal and often gendered intra-household power relations (Sagner and Mtati, 1999; Posel, 2001).

More specifically, Vuyiswa's household illustrates a well-known feature that has long been recognised in South African anthropology – the fluidity, porosity and spatially 'stretched' nature of African households within the context of post-apartheid migrant networks (see e.g., Ross, 1996; Spiegel, 1996; Spiegel and Mehlwana, 1997; Robins, 2002; Ngwane, 2003; Ross, 2003; Russel, 2004; Inder and Maitra, 2004). A comparison of the same household based on the team's findings during the 2006 visit with the 2002 quantitative survey record is instructive. Not only is the overall composition of Vuyiswa's household quite different, but even some of the similarities in membership between 2002 and 2006 mask intervening flux. Thembeke, for instance, was a resident during the 2002 survey as well, and was listed – quite correctly, given how household membership was formally defined – as a member at the time. Had the 2005 visit used the same questionnaire, the resulting record would have suggested all too easily that she was a permanent member, instead of a regular visitor with a rural base.³ This degree of flux was typical in many households in the CPRC/PLAAS study. Of the 48 households visited in 2005, no change in membership was apparent in only two; and

³ See Du Toit and Neves (2006) for a detailed description of the differences between the 2002 survey and the 2006 qualitative case study with respect of household composition.

changes due exclusively to births and deaths were noted in only three of the remaining 46 cases.

This fluidity in household composition is tied to three very important additional features. The first is the contested nature of household membership and the high stakes regarding relevant decisions. In circumstances where stable income and resources are so scarce and fragile, survival often depends on one's ability to attach oneself to a household with access to resources. Decisions about staying within a household or leaving it (or allowing others to join or to depart) are not simply governed by the 'perceived norms of consanguinity, cultural codes of domesticity or a normalised narrative of life cycle'. Rather, these are the result of intimate and often fraught politics.

The second is the relative porosity of households with respect to resources, flows and claims. Although the concept of the household as a unit of economic consumption is not entirely meaningless, it is clear that for the purposes of day-to-day resource sharing, Vuyiswa's household did constitute, to some extent, a coherent and somewhat distinct 'unit'. It is also evident that many people *other than* the household's core members can make major claims on, or benefit in significant ways, from household resources. At the same time, there are important resources and benefits that are *not* shared between household members. Vuyiswa's household, instead of being perceived as an entity that was highly bounded as far as resource flows were concerned, should be conceptualised, as Russel (2004) points out, as a series of concentric circles, with major claims and counter-claims being entertained at times by quite distant members.

The third is the highly spatially extended nature of the links and resource flows thus created. Present-day research on migrant livelihoods challenges the idea that with the end of formal influx control, the 'stretched' household systems that had evolved during the apartheid era would disappear and make way for a complete urban transition of households developing according to the western nuclear family model. Unaccompanied male circular migration may have declined, but other forms of migration continue, and are becoming more complex, diverse and may even have intensified (Lurie et al., 1997; Posel, 2003; Posel and Casale, 2003; Collinson et al., 2003; Posel, Fairburn and Lund, 2006; Statistics South Africa, 2006; for a discussion of some of these patterns in Zimbabwe, also see Potts, 2000).

The case studies examined by PLAAS and CPRC during 2005-06 highlight some dimensions of the networks and resource flows that have evolved. For many, 'circular migration' was still an option, with urban employment prominent as the strategy for securing income that could be re-invested in a respectable rural homestead. Obviously there were also many who are not involved in circular migration – the urbanites with no intention of returning to the rural areas, or rural dwellers who cannot envisage leaving. But even households not involved in circular migration continued to remit significant sums to the rural hinterlands in order to support relatives or help them deal with specific

emergencies or needs (as with Vuyiswa's daughter's *izila* ceremony). In the 2006 study, 11 out of 24 rural households reported having a member who received remittances (du Toit and Neves, 2006). In some instances, resources flowed in unexpected directions, with the old supporting the young, or rural households supporting urban members. Sometimes, urban and rural outposts played complementary roles in the spatially extended but economically integrated 'distribution' of livelihood activities. And quite aside from job-seeking migration, people travelled for many other reasons such as maintaining relations with relatives, to take care of property and investments that would otherwise be abandoned, to take care of (or be taken care of) by elderly relatives, and to avail themselves of medical care (visiting doctors and hospitals in the Western Cape, or traditional healers in Mount Frere, a Baca region famous for the potency of its *sangomas*). Given the great distance between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, there was a surprisingly high volume of traffic between the two locales.

In these patterns of mobility, a key role is played by the gendered arrangements around care work and household reproductive labour. These are often disregarded or devalued in the accounts of poor people's livelihoods (see e.g., Bozalek, 1999, Sevenhuijsen et al., 2003, Hunter, 2006). But this omission clearly weakens the analysis. Decisions relating to economic activity, resource flows and allocation of resources cannot be understood if care work and household reproductive labour are not recognised as value creation in their own right. Furthermore, care-work arrangements become particularly crucial in the context of migrancy, when distant households become intimately linked through exchanges centred around children, the sick, the disabled or the elderly, or when younger family members are posted to rural areas to care for elderly relatives. These arrangements are well captured by Hochschild's concept of a 'care chain' – a series of spatial links based on paid or unpaid care work, as given in his famous example:⁴

an older daughter from a poor family [...] cares for her siblings while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a migrating nanny who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country' (Hochschild, 2000: 131).

In the context of the rural Eastern Cape where tenure rights are secured through usage and community recognition instead of through formal titles, similar arrangements also revolve around the care and maintenance of, and claims to, rural property.

Care chains and care networks are important not only because of the linkages created between households and the resource flows these often induced, but also because they quite literally involve the distribution of people in these networks: children and young women are 'posted' back and forth between rural and urban areas. Children are sent to

⁴ See also Yeates (2005).

the rural communities to be cared for by family members, or sent to stay with city relatives, often for schooling purposes. In addition, a part of the economic significance of these exchanges for the 'sending' or 'receiving' households lies in the fact that from a relatively early age children (particularly girls) are also units of instrumental value. They play an important role as providers of labour. Thus, attention to these care chains not only promotes an understanding of the ties and flows between households, but also highlights the social value created by the different forms of labour and exchange that is often ignored. Attention to care chains within these networks makes visible the powerful role of social relations constructed around gender, age and status.

The result is a spatial configuration of livelihoods that cannot be captured within the concept of a unidirectional flow. Neither is migration simply 'circular' – rural and urban factors both continue to play important roles in the complex, de-centred, many-rooted, spatially extended survival strategies. As a result, both contexts continue to be linked by divergent and overlapping routes, networks and pathways. While a wide range of different migration paths is possible at the individual level, migration at the supra-household level has created an elaborate network that links individuals and households together across vast distances.

3.2 Rural/urban flows and connections

Rural/urban flows and connections are highly diverse and complex. Four micro-case studies illustrate some of the diversity of possible permutations and configurations.

A: Nontuthuzelo Mbada: Going hungry to build the homestead

Nontuthuzelo Mbada was a woman in her early thirties who, unlike many of her contemporaries in Khayelitsha, still wore the German print skirt and headcloth of the respectable married Xhosa matron. When the research team visited her in 2005, her dwelling – a wood, plastic and corrugated iron shack in Site B – was ramshackle and bare, devoid of the usual accoutrements (wall units, lounge suites, electronic consumerware, porcelain dolls and other decorations) that signal that its residents have been able to do more than just survive. In the CPRC 2002 survey, the household – Nontuthuzelo, her husband Xolile, and their three children – was reported to fall into the poorest expenditure quintile in Khayelitsha. Xolile had 'formal' employment of sorts, working for a company that built swimming pools, but the work was very seasonal. While in summer months he could bring in R1600 a month, winters could be lean: in the month prior to the 2002 survey, their income was reportedly only R400, and they reported having had to go without food due to lack of money for two months in the previous year. Interestingly they did not see themselves as excessively poor: according to their subjective poverty assessment, they merely 'sometimes did not have enough.' Interviewed again in 2005, Nontuthuzelo confirmed this picture of want. Xolile's salary was barely enough for them to eat on. She said that she could see the 'gap' was caused by the fact that she did not receive child grants: the children had no socks, nor underclothes.

This bare-boned urban existence, however, was only one aspect of Nontuthuzelo and Xolile's

Nontuthuzelo Mbada (cont'd)

life. At the time of the interview, she was spending extended periods at Xolile's compound in his village, going back there not only in December but also throughout the year. In fact, in 2004 she spent the entire year there, which was why her children were living without grants. The one grant she had been receiving lapsed in her absence. Nontuthuzelo said she preferred to stay in the Eastern Cape, where her life seemed to be busy and full of significance. They were building their own house there, so she helped out, making mud bricks herself, employing a builder, or at times also employing others to make mud bricks. They were spending a lot of money on the house, including cement plastering inside and out. At the time of the interview, they had not yet furnished it but were planning to get new furniture in the near future. Nontuthuzelo preferred living in the Eastern Cape also because she apparently had more status there. They had grazing land, a garden plot and cattle, and she got on well with her family. In contrast, her existence in Khayelitsha was limited: there was nothing to do except to 'stay around the house'. She had never been beyond Khayelitsha, and in fact hardly seemed to have ventured even outside Site B. She got on well with her neighbours, chatting with them and lending or borrowing small food items, but had no important friends.

Nontuthuzelo may have had some aspirations of her own. Towards the end of the interview she indicated that she did have some dreams of starting a small business of her own in the Western Cape. But these seemed to remain unexplored. For the most part, she perceived her identity to be that of a dutiful Xhosa wife, scrimping, saving and leading a humble inconspicuous life in town so as to enable a rural life of substance and respectability in the distant, uncertain future.

**B: Phumzile Cekiso's dressmaking business:
A 'spatially distributed' cottage industry**

Phumzile Cekiso was one of the better-off individuals in the study sample of households, reporting a monthly income of almost R4000 in 2002. Originally from a small village near Inqamakwe, he had worked as a machine operator in a coal mine near Witbank until 1987 when he was fired and sent back to the Eastern Cape. He did not stay there long: during the 2005 interview, he said it was not easy living in the Eastern Cape after Johannesburg. In his words 'your mind is broader and you "see things"'. Moving to Cape Town, he initially worked as a security guard, and then, after a brief period of self-employment, worked in a plastics factory, where he had been ever since. Shortly before the 2005 interview, the factory had been making workers redundant. Phumzile reported that he was, in fact, working on half time, and lamented about the financial hardship this created. Although the deductions from his wages were the same, the salary had been halved, so his income had diminished substantially.

To make ends meet, Phumzile was selling dresses. He knew how to sew – his sister had taught him in Johannesburg. Initially, early on in the interview, Phumzile was reticent about the dressmaking, and indeed was a lethargic interviewee, lounging in his easy chair, casually

Phumzile Cekiso (cont'd)

answering questions. He emphasised how little money he had and what a big blow the half-time work was, and merely stated that he did some sewing when he got the chance. At the same time it was clear that he did not consider himself poor, and that, like Nontuthuzelo's husband in the case study above, he and his family were investing significant amounts in building their Eastern Cape homestead: paying for brick-making (he had instructed a builder to construct a 'beautiful house' there), and planning to increase his herds. As he spoke about these plans, he became visibly more animated, gesturing intensely as he described how his dressmaking business worked – a business that relied implicitly on the spatial connections created through migrancy.

At the time of the interview, his wife, Babalwa and several of his children were in the Eastern Cape looking after the property. It was his wife who maintained the homestead and supervised the building there. So essential was her presence in the Eastern Cape that when she came to visit, she and her Cape Town-based daughter would 'swap' places, with the daughter returning to the homestead so that her mother could visit town. Babalwa also played an important role in the dressmaking business, collecting orders from Eastern Cape women for dresses. These paid half the money as deposit, which Babalwa put into their joint bank account. Phumzile used the money to buy material in Cape Town and spent his evenings sewing. He estimated that when there was demand, he could make 15 dresses a week. These he posted back to Babalwa, who sold them at R180 per dress. At the end of the interview, he told the team that he wished the factory would make up their minds about his retrenchment, so that he would be able to use redundancy package to start a business: he had been thinking of getting a large paraffin tank and selling paraffin, and he would be able to devote more time to his dressmaking.

C: Kwanele Ngubane: Using savings to support urban relatives

Kwanele Ngubane was a tall, dignified patriarch who had spent most of his working life in solid industrial employment in the industrial heartland of Gauteng. His comparatively well-paid job not only enabled him to invest considerably in his prosperous rural homestead, but also made it possible for some of his children to stay with him and further their education in Gauteng. At the time of the research team's visit in 2005, 55-year old Kwanele Ngubane had recently been retrenched, but continued to support 13 dependants. These included his wife, two adult brothers, five children and a grandchild at the rural Transkei homestead, along with four children living in urban centres.

Kwanele's four children living away from home were geographically dispersed across the regional centres of Mthatha and Gauteng. Two sons were currently in matric schooling: one at a former religious school in Mtatha, the other in school in Sebokeng, living in a hostel. He had originally joined his father when Kwanele was still employed and resided in Sebokeng. A third son, also living in Sebokeng, had recently completed his N6 certificate in 'mechanics'

Kwanele Ngubane (cont'd)

(they were unsure precisely what the qualification was, but said it was comparable to the old 'fitter and turner' qualification) at Vaal Technikon and was seeking employment. To improve his employment prospects, he had further completed a code 10 driver's license. The fourth son was at 'Pretoria Technikon' (Tswane University of Technology), and was to have finished the 4-year long qualification course last year, but failed a subject and was repeating it. Having only a standard 6 level education themselves, his parents were unclear about his precise field of study, but thought it might be marketing or commerce related.

Although living in rural Transkei, engaging in agricultural production and living off the fixed income from his retrenchment package, Kwanele made monthly remittances to his sons, sending R650 to the son in Pretoria, R550 to the two sons in Sebokeng and R450 to the son in Mthatha, a total of R1650. This amount, however, represented the minimum needed for subsistence, and at times had to be augmented for specific expenses. For instance, Kwanele, sitting in his homestead in the deep rural Transkei, was utterly incredulous at the cost of the textbooks required by his Pretoria-based son. One book cost almost R500, 'net een boek!' ('only one book') he emphasised in Afrikaans. When asked why his children were being schooled in such dispersed locations (the boys in Sebokeng and Mthatha are both doing matric, for instance), Kwanele and his wife explained that the son in Sebokeng had been unable to enrol in Mthatha, adding in a somewhat bemused, tolerant way, that children always find good reasons as to why they ought to go to a particular school or tertiary education institution. Kwanele recalled that when the whole family gathered together at Christmas time in the village, there was often bantering competitiveness about who was going to the best school.

Finally, when asked about their expectations that their children would find good formal sector jobs (thereby justifying the substantial expenditure in education) despite the fact that their son with a N6 certification was unemployed, Kwanele and his wife said they were optimistic, stating that one cannot find a good job nowadays without a good education.

D: Chuma Mfako: Let down by her urban kin

Chuma Mfako was amongst the poorest and most marginalised households visited by the research team in the Eastern Cape. She and her three children lived in a 'location' (sub-village) of Phuzayo, a remote village in an area where the scrubby grassland of the main village faded into a more arid, less hospitable rocky landscape. Her home consisted of two small, sparsely furnished mud-block structures (huts for cooking and sleeping) on an unfenced plot of land, also housing the ruins of a collapsed rondavel. Chuma was only intermittent employed and received no remittances. Her sole source of regular income was the single child support grant, which she augmented with laborious and low paid informal work in the village. Interviewing her was difficult. Unlike most respondents in the study, who eventually warmed to relating their personal narratives, Chuma was a reticent interviewee. She seemed passive and laconic, and retained a distant, depressed, demeanour during the

Chuma Mfako (cont'd)

course of several visits.

Passiveness seemed to infuse other aspects of her life. When a tractor struck her hut, she obstinately waited for the owner of the tractor to repair the damages which she could have repaired herself, so that her livestock was eventually able to gain access and consume her entire supply of maize. Her indifference was reflected in her unwillingness undertake any preparations in anticipation of a Christmas family reunion. In view of the high value placed on kin solidarity and familial reciprocation in her village, this was highly unusual. However, her passiveness and resistance became more comprehensible in the light of the micropolitics of Chuma's history and her place within her kinship network.

The composition of the household living in Chuma's compound was fluid even by Eastern Cape standards. Chuma herself had not been living there when the household was surveyed in 2002, when the household was recorded as consisting only of Chuma's 3-year old daughter, a 15-year old nephew and 69-year old grandmother. The grandmother died later in 2002 and the nephew relocated to Cape Town soon after. The death of Chuma's stepmother in 2004 catalyzed Chuma's return to the village, along with her two other children.

Chuma's decision to return to the Eastern Cape was a reluctant one, and had reportedly been taken in Western Cape at a family gathering with her three half-brothers. Chuma was unwilling to return, finding village life difficult and tedious. But as she was already burdened with three young children and had slim prospects of urban employment or marriage, she had little bargaining power. Chuma's family assigned her the role of looking after the house to maintain the family's foothold in the village, and in return, her brothers were to remit money earned from their urban employment.

Over the course of several interviews with Chuma and her fellow villagers, two facts gradually became apparent: her 'brothers' were not strictly speaking her brothers, but cousins. And her 'brothers' had reneged on the agreement and were not making any remittances. It was unclear to what extent these two elements were intertwined: it is possible that Chuma's more distant kinship may well have undermined her claim to support.

The outcome of these negotiations was that Chuma was stuck in the Eastern Cape, and continued to perform a vital function for her half-brothers by exercising, on their behalf, their tenure in the village. Yet, marginalised and powerless within her family network, she has been unable to pressure for a stronger reciprocation claim. Although all three of her children would have been entitled to grants, two lacked the necessary documentation. She was forced to survive on the one grant as well as temporary, poorly paid physical work (making mud bricks, brewing beer, and doing domestic work), as well as on the patronage of the network of village-based benefactors.

Each of these stories exemplifies some of the divergent possibilities and patterns of urban–rural ties and links. The story of Nontuthuzelo Mbada, for instance, illustrates well

the unique, well-established long-term strategy typical among Eastern Cape migrants and rural people – i.e., ‘building the homestead’ (McAllister, 2001) by investing significant amounts in rural property in a distant location, and intermittently limiting consumption expenditure while staying in the city. Mbada’s story illustrates the very high rates of saving and investment that were made in 2006 even by households without very much spare income. The story also highlights why this strategy makes sense in the long run, as it represents an investment in rural respectability, status and *isidima* that would otherwise elude individuals such as Nontuthuzelo and Xolile in Cape Town. Finally, it also tells of some of the costs of this strategy. This was obvious from the hints that Nontuthuzelo’s adjustment to the role of respectful Xhosa wife may not have been that easy, nor the sacrifices small with respect to her massive investment to support her husband’s long-term economic project (foregone child grants, or the loss of her own personal ambitions).

In an important sense, Phumzile Cekiso’s household⁵ was not so much a ‘stretched’ entity as a ‘distributed’ one – a fairly integrated network in which both the Cape Town and the Eastern Cape nodes each play a vital economic role. This allowed Phumzile Cekiso to exploit the strategic advantage at each end (buying material cheap in Cape Town for re-sale in the Eastern Cape). Thus it would appear that the multinational and global corporations are not the only ones to deploy economic activities to their advantage in a larger distributed framework. Phumzile and his family members were able to use their rural/urban spatial connections to create a business that depended for its success at least partially on its ability to exploit space and distance. As Kwanele Ngubane’s story reveals, flows are not just unidirectional, from urban to rural.

Finally, Chuma’s story highlights the consequences of marginalisation and powerlessness within these networks. Her living in the remote rural Eastern Cape does not fit neatly into either the unidirectional or circular migrancy model. Instead, she ended up in the Eastern Cape because of the terms of agreement and arrangement made within the context of the spatially distributed kinship network of which she was a member. Personally Chuma had no strong ties to the village or the compound where she lived. But for a number of reasons – clearly because of her gendered status as an unemployed, unwed female household head with children, and quite possibly because of her marginal status as half-sister of the three brothers, none of whom were particularly interested in her welfare – she received the short-end of an unfair deal. Chuma ended up stranded in a remote village without regular income or strong allies, and without prospects of getting out.

Even recognition of the household as being ‘fluid’ or ‘stretched’ does not quite capture this level of complexity. Thomas Cousins proposes (du Toit, Skuse and Cousins, 2007)

⁵ See Madoda Simani’s story in Vuyiswa’s tale, who employed a very similar strategy (page 9).

that households in this context should be conceptualised as existing within a 'rhizomic' structure. In other words, households exist within a network that, similarly to a rhizome, does not have a single central tap-root or centre, but one which over time takes on a multi-nodal, multi-centred characteristics. Migrant links work in the same way to create a system of interconnected outposts where both urban and rural aspects play very different but equally important roles.

3.3 'Social capital' and reciprocal exchange

The case study descriptions here also illustrate a second theme which is central to understanding the process of the spatially extended networks mentioned above. This is the role of reciprocity and social exchange as a cushion against vulnerability and poverty. Consider again the story of Vuyiswa, recounted in the first case study. Although her household was quite poor in monetary terms, reciprocal arrangements with neighbours and kin-folk offered her a measure of security – helping, for example, to ensure access to food when she ran short of money, thus easing the harshest aspects of poverty. These forms of help are particularly difficult to quantify, and are often overlooked in income and expenditure surveys. Yet they make a real difference to a household's ability to survive on the fringes of the formal economy.

Economists try to understand these forms of mutual support by examining whether they involve 'self-interested' or 'altruistic' forms of behaviour, or alternatively, by assuming that some kind of socio-biological imperative is at work (Bowles and Posel, 2005). However, such approaches are of no help in trying to grasp the cultural or historical specificity of these practices, nor do they help explicate the micro politics of how they work in practice. A more productive approach starts with the recognition that these forms of help always involve an important inner logic of reciprocity. While Vuyiswa was able to rely on her network of friends and family for support, they also made claims on her and she was called upon to make quite significant investments or repayments, such as looking after her sister's daughter's child, for instance, and tending her sister-in-law's shop in her absence, or contributing towards her daughter's ceremony.

This is, of course, a well-known feature of life among the poor of South Africa. In recent years, 'social capital' has become the buzzword in development circles, to the extent that departments in the Western Cape provincial government are required to have 'social capital formation strategies' (City of Cape Town, 2005). But long before the concept of social capital was popular, anthropologists had noted the importance of social networks linked to cultural practices and of normative belief systems based on reciprocity and mutual aid (Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson, 1994; Spiegel and Mehlwana, 1997; see also Sagner, 2000). The anthropological literature seems to suggest that these practices are not as deeply embedded everywhere. Particularly in communities affected by displacement and fragmentation, people are less able to rely on social networks to cushion shocks and alleviate hardship (Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson, 1994). However, this was not the case in the communities studied for this research report. The Eastern

Cape rural villages examined within this research effort had not been hit hard by dispossession and re-location for several decades, and many of the households in Sites B and C in Khayelitsha had been at their present address for more than ten years, providing adequate time for close local social networks and ties to evolve. These linkages play a vital role in the strategies developed by people to combat poverty and vulnerability.

Understanding the process of reciprocal exchange is a complex issue. In the first instance, some general conceptual and theoretical issues are worth noting:

- First, it is important to go beyond the general tendency to see these forms of cooperation and mutual aid as inherent in a kind of 'generalised social trust' or connectivity, or as a concept that can be grasped by collecting indicators on the density of formal associational life. 'General trust' and associational life may be important, but the possibility of making the kind of claims and counterclaims considered here exists nowhere else except in specific social relationships. If reciprocal exchange and the ability to draw on and participate in these networks are to be considered as 'social capital', then it should be noted that it is a resource accruing to the *individual*, and is not equally available to everyone.
- Second, it needs to be borne in mind that the *forms* taken by reciprocal change are highly diverse and often locally specific. The case studies explored by the research team in 2006 exemplified this diversity (see du Toit and Neves, 2006). For example, individuals at times could give or receive quite substantial gifts, particularly within the context of a close kinship relation. But as anthropologists point out (see e.g., Mauss, 1990), although a gift is never a sale nor an *explicit* form of exchange, they almost always exist in the form of an obligation, duty or debt. In addition, social capital at times is used in the context of informal processes whereby goods (e.g., sugar, tea, flour, salt, matches, paraffin, candles, etc.) or services (e.g., laundry, childcare, maintenance, etc.) are explicitly exchanged. This exchange could be monetised (in that one family member would do a favour for another, and receive payment); or neighbourliness, for example, could be the basis of an agreement to 'borrow' – in other words, *buy* – electricity. Exchange could be a form of reciprocal lending or borrowing (food 'borrowed' on the understanding that a similar item would be 'lent' at some point in the future). Here, an explicit supposition may apply so that the item, or exactly the same amount of the same foodstuff, is returned. It is important to understand here is that these exchanges are not *simply* about trading different commodities of notionally equal value. Sometimes the pre-existing social relationship is the essential factor that enables the participants to enter into a loan or exchange arrangement in the first place, i.e., a prior existing relationship has to be in place before one has the grounds for entering into an exchange relationship. Understanding reciprocity

requires detailed knowledge of the implicit 'rules of the game' that govern reciprocity in each case.

- A third key point is the central role of wealth, social standing and status. As Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson (1996) and others illustrate, the nature of the exchanges – and the extent to which advantage accrues from these exchanges – is powerfully affected by class, wealth and status. This is one of the most important limitations of the ability of reciprocal-exchange practices to ameliorate poverty or vulnerability. Those without money or material resources of their own are at a serious disadvantage: in extreme cases, they are not even able to participate in reciprocal exchange. (Conversely, those who have accumulated significant resources, and who no longer need the insurance provided by these safety nets, may try to withdraw from the game altogether, either by moving out of poor areas or reorganising their relationships among more clientelist lines.) These resources are not necessarily purely material: in both Mount Frere and Khayelitsha, the ability to transact effectively in the social network also hinged crucially on one's *isidima*, one's dignity and good standing within the community. Respectability can be thought of as two intertwined dimensions, one's worthiness as the recipient of support and one's ability to reciprocate at some point in time.
- Fourth, an important role is played by the *nature* of the underlying social relationships themselves. In the 2006 study, the authors note that reciprocal exchanges take place in greatly diverse types of relationships: kinship, clan identity, shared village or regional identity, urban neighbourliness, friendship, client-patron relationships with employers, traditional authorities, and government officials, and membership of formal associations or entities. Each has its own significance: what can be achieved on the basis of one kind of relationship is not necessarily possible on the basis of another. In addition, the value and meaning of particular kinds of relationship depend on context: shared village backgrounds could form the basis for solidarity among urbanites dealing with the unfamiliarity of Khayelitsha, but this would not necessarily have much meaning back home. Similarly, connections based on family could be central for some, while for others, ties made on the basis of a modern and free association could mean more.
- Fifth, although financial resources and remittances clearly play a central role within these spatially extended networks of resource flows, monetary exchange is only part of the picture. For one, the exchanges are often hard (if not impossible!) to reduce to a purely monetary value. Gifts and favours, formal exchanges, family histories, financial, emotional and moral debts all have an impact in reciprocation practices, and balancing of the resulting obligations takes place according to calculations shaped by social norms and personal relations. For another, reciprocation extends well beyond the exchange of material resources or even services. One implication is that the decision to enter or exit the formal labour

market is not simply the classical economic choice between labour and leisure, to be made by an individual. Instead, there is also a very wide range of activities that involve neither formal nor informal employment, but which do constitute other, albeit less clearly monetised, forms of social value creation, exchange and reciprocation.

- Finally, these have to be recognised as *meaningful* relationships. Neither reciprocation itself nor the social relations within which it occurs are objectively extended. They are, instead, made up in part of the underlying practices of conveyed meaning, and frameworks of expectation and understanding. This means that social capital, to some extent, will always be socially and culturally specific. It is also strongly influenced by local history and contestations that have shaped the way in which people draw on and use culture and identity resources. It also means that these relationships are simply never extended objectively. They in turn are set up, renewed, and invested with meaning by the reciprocal practices themselves. This last point is important, given the changing nature of these relationships, and the ways in which they shift according to context and history.⁶

The above points are fairly general and conceptual, and have relevance for the study of social networks and reciprocity in various contexts. In addition, it is also important to bear in mind the specific structural and relational context of the kinds of households examined here. The precise structural context of a particular household unit has significant implications for reciprocity and mutual aid. The level of integration between urban and rural locales of impoverished houses can vary significantly. A key finding from an earlier research on which this work is based (du Toit and Neves, 2008) is that the quality of these relationships can be characterised in terms of a four-part typology (du Toit and Neves, 2008) within which households are grouped according to their links with the opposite location. They are as follows:

- A: Urban-connected rural households,
- B: Rural-connected urban households,
- C: Rural-disconnected urban households, and
- D: Urban-disconnected rural households.

⁶ This is an area where researchers have to exercise caution in applying European or western assumptions about the biological nature of kinship. In the course of the PLAAS/CPRC project, researchers noted that kinship relations ascribed to relatives (mother, father, brother sister) often had very little to do with actual biological ties, but were related to the value and importance of these relationships for the recipient. For example, a particularly important half-brother would be called 'brother'; an older brother taking care of his sisters after the demise of the parents was known as 'father', and so on. In this context, researchers who attempt to ascribe remittance behaviour as driven by biological and genetic closeness are clearly on shaky ground.

Note that groups A and B are essentially the urban and rural polars of the single, overarching dynamics of interconnection. These two types predominated among the small number of case studies presented. However in considering the working of reciprocity within spatially extended livelihood systems, types C and D are of particular interest. Type C (rural-disconnected urban households) encompasses two subgroups: (i) urban households that have successfully made the transition and no longer rely on a rural base; and (ii) urban households that are relatively atomised and have lost (or given up) their right to claim rural-based resources or support. The fourth type of household is in a somewhat similar position. These rural households are unable to draw on urban-derived resources or support. These two group – the urban households that have failed to integrate successfully into urban economy, but that have also lost their rural links, and the rural households that had failed to establish urban ties or have lost them – were particularly vulnerable and prone to long-term poverty. As indicated by the empirical material presented here, the case study of Chuma Mfako is a clear example. Having little opportunity for rural subsistence, she was also bereft of support from her urban kin, and had very few resources of her own to bargain with. This means that she was also relatively marginalised with regard to reciprocal exchange and support. Although she was the recipient of her neighbours' largesse, she herself had little leverage. As a single, impoverished female household head with low status, voice or *isidima*, she had to accept what was being offered to her on their terms, not hers.

4 Informal social protection, rural–urban linkages, and hybrid livelihoods

So far, we have focused on two important and closely related dimensions of the livelihood strategies and social arrangements of the poor. These vulnerable Africans have faced a declining agrarian economy, and manufacturing and mining employment that underpinned the migrant labour system of the apartheid period. The collapse of the classical migrant labour system has not eliminated rural–urban migrancy, nor has it led to the consolidation of the stretched and fluid household characteristics of migrant livelihoods. Spatially extensive inter- and intra-household ties and flows have persisted well into the post-apartheid era. With a few selected case studies, we have sought to illustrate the role these links continue to play, as well as their diverse and complex configurations.

In particular, we have argued that understanding the phenomena requires a shift in how decision making at the household and individual level is perceived. First, we need to expand our list of what we might call intra-individual formations. In addition to 'household' and the rather ambiguous notion of 'community', we should also take in account the complex, spatially extended and many-centred networks created by household fluidity, inter-and intra- household flows, care chains and migration. Understanding the decisions of individuals and households goes beyond understanding just individual gain or loss, or inflows and outflows from particular households.

Furthermore, it is worth considering how these networks function in bridging distant places, households and individuals, how resources and costs are distributed and transmitted, and how the networks bring about both resources and constraints.

Second, we have argued that understanding these networks requires careful attention to the ideologies and practices of reciprocal exchange. As is widely acknowledged, these practices are a vital element of the strategy of marginalised and vulnerable people for ameliorating or dealing with the consequences of vulnerability. Reciprocal practices cannot be understood outside the context of the social relationship networks within which they exist. Conversely, these networks in turn are created and established through these practices. Understanding individual or household decisions is not simply a matter of understanding the underlying calculations regarding direct or expected loss or gain. Rather, they need to be understood in a longitudinal and transactional context. They often make sense only within the context of the complex history of debts, obligations, loyalties and links within which they arise.

Following Bracking and Sachikonye (2006), we argue that these two dimensions of social exchange shape the nature of what we may call 'informal social protection': how individuals, these households and networks use informal means to attempt to alleviate poverty and manage vulnerability. Vuyiswa's choices regarding who was to live with her, her economic activities, child care arrangements, grant expenditure, need to be viewed within a complex and multi-levelled context. All her decisions were part of the delicate and intimate politics of how she negotiated her relationship within the large, fluid, de-centred, spatially distributed network (see Figure 1). Appreciating Vuyiswa's situation implies that we grasp the workings of this large network, and how it enables resources, opportunities, shocks and costs to be shared.

How these two dimensions shape the nature of livelihoods, economic activity, and decisions about grant expenditure is the topic of subsequent research. We conclude this paper with three general points about their implications for marginalised, poor and vulnerable people.

- i. These networks and resource flows need to be understood as important channels of connectivity in the structure of South African society in general. Much of the debate on the nature of social exclusion in South Africa, as well as on the so-called 'second economy' is narrowly focused on formal economic links and flows between the mainstream economy and those relegated to the margins. Yet for many South Africans, their main or only link to the mainstream economy is replaced or mediated by these informal and often fragile ties. These play a key role in bridging urban and rural livelihoods, are central to the synergy individuals and households try to create in the hybrid livelihood strategies on which many depend for survival

- ii. These exchanges, networks and resource flows play a key role in alleviating the effects of poverty and managing vulnerability. They help households and household members to take advantage of opportunities and to diffuse risk across space. Ties to urban beneficiaries are a vital source of income for rural households in the context of ever-present monetisation and when living even in the countryside requires cash. For urban dwellers, the possibility of entitlements from rural households serves as a vital livelihood 'cushion', particularly if the rural kin have access to land or are able to care for children while parents seek employment in urban centres. The case studies demonstrate the enduring importance of these exchanges and their frequent spatial disbursement. The urban–rural divide also functions as a source of business opportunity (as for dressmaker Phumzile), a channel for return investment (Nothuthuzelo and Xolile), or the source of rural support for urban household members (Kwanele's remittance to his city-based sons). This spatial dispersal and the numerous livelihood-supporting activities it induces, diversifies livelihoods by simultaneously conferring opportunity and mitigating risk. These networks, therefore, extend the benefits from both formal employment and the state's social grants well beyond actual individual or household recipient. The ubiquity and persistence of these networks arguably make a major contribution to the survival of many households in the context of South Africa's extremely high rate of unemployment.
- iii. The existence of arrangements that provide a measure of informal social protection – or of arrangements that can assist those who have failed to find work and fallen through South Africa's social welfare net – is no cause for complacency. Just as people's ability to scrape a bare existence through 'survivalist improvisation' and informal self-employment does not mean that the informal sector is the answer to South Africa's unemployment problems, the existence of informal social protection strategies does not eliminate the need for significant, robust formal welfare provision. For one, as we show elsewhere (du Toit and Neves, 2008), significant complementarities exist between informal and formal forms of social protection. For another, informal social protection is, by its very nature, patchy, uneven, and can at times induce highly inequitable results. Much of this is the converse of the ability of these systems to redistribute resources and absorb costs; they have the capacity not only to allocate benefits but also to create hardships. There is no guarantee that the reciprocal exchanges made possible through these networks are equitable or fair.

The same fragility and vulnerability is also evident in Vuyiswa's story. At first glance, Vuyiswa seemed comfortable in her role as one of the female elders within this loosely organised kinship structure, but a closer look reveals that her position was rather fragile. The household arrangement of cooperation between her and her sister's daughter was limited and, to some extent, constituted a compromise forced on them by necessity. If she were not to assume the role of a gracious *gogo*

(grandmother), dignified but also knowing her place, if she were cantankerous and 'difficult', the fragile relationships on which she depended could have become strained. Her dignity seemed to be a personal attribute, but it was also a socially required role. It was no coincidence that she was initially so reluctant to reveal the existence of a boyfriend: it stemmed not only from personal reticence but also from the expectation that a woman with *isidima* was not expected to have such liaisons – or at least, not to flaunt them. To the team, Vuyiswa's graciousness and respectability seemed genuine, but at the same time, seemed clearly to be required of her by her marginal and vulnerable position as an elderly, partially disabled woman surviving within the delicate framework of a much more extensive kinship network.

This fragility is also apparent in Chuma Mfako's story. An advantage to one individual is often a disadvantage to another, and generally the burden falls on those on the losing side of highly unequal social power relations: those marginalised by patriarchal dialogue over gender roles; those with few limited resources to bargain with; the old, infirm, or sick, or those who are construed as 'outsiders' by the moral communities created through reciprocal exchange because race, language, or nationality.

Understanding the role of these spatially extended networks in the informal social protection strategies among vulnerable South Africans is important partly because these strategies provide the context for the formal system of social protection by government and the private sector. In particular, much can be learned by looking at how poor and vulnerable South Africans combine the formal and informal systems. These issues are discussed in a separate paper (du Toit and Neves, 2008).

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