

Poverty and capabilities among farm workers in South Africa

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Abstract

In everyday language we all have some understanding of poverty, and of what it means to be poor. However, when it comes to the scientific measurement of poverty, what is implicit in everyday language has to be made explicit. The capability model of Amartya Sen provides an appropriate conceptual framework for such measurement. It is clear from their rhetoric and from the kinds of policy instruments for poverty alleviation that they endorse that the major development agencies and aid donors support such a multivariate interpretation of poverty. However at the methodological level there is still a tendency to measure poverty indirectly in terms of private current incomes (or private consumption expenditures). The ready availability of income data and of statistical techniques to calculate poverty lines, minimum living levels and poverty head count ratios has encouraged the institutional acceptance of this incongruence. Analysts in South Africa have not fared any better, and most of the empirical work on poverty measurement has also utilised the indirect poverty line method.

One of the purposes of this paper is to illustrate how the concept of capabilities can be accounted for in the measurement of poverty to ensure a more policy relevant understanding of the plight of the poor. To this end, the concept will be applied to the situation of farm workers on commercial farms in South Africa. Data from Census 96, the Agricultural Survey of 1996, the more recent October Household Surveys and the National Food Consumption Survey are analysed to shed more light on the absolute and relative poverty levels of farm workers.

The empirical part of the analysis starts with an exposition of the long-term trends in farm sector employment, in the skills composition of the farm labour force and in the demographic profile of farm workers. This is followed by an illustration of farm worker capabilities in terms of their nutritional status, their access to housing and household services, and their education and literacy levels.

The results show that farm workers, while technically part of the formally employed labour force of South Africa, enjoy relatively good housing conditions, yet share many economic characteristics of unemployed people living in the peri-urban areas of the country and are, in nutritional terms, less well off than even the rural unemployed.