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The Koup Fencing Project: Community-led Job Creation in the Karoo

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The Koup Fencing Project: Community-led Job Creation in the Karoo

Abstract

This paper discusses a community-led fencing project in the Koup, an arid predominantly sheep farming district in the South African Karoo. It highlights the role of supportive government officials in sourcing funding and the importance of committed individuals in overcoming collective action problems amongst participating farmers. The project had a strong empowerment dimension in that fencing team leaders were drawn from the ranks of unemployed people in Laingsburg town and they were responsible for recruitment into the project and for the day to day management of the work. Comparative analysis of the socio-economic position of the fence workers with data from the 2011 population census of coloured people living in Laingsburg town suggests that the fence workers were relatively poor and that the project was appropriately targeted for a poverty alleviation programme. This was in part because workers were required to camp on farms for two weeks at a time, thereby resulting in the project automatically selecting for those most committed to earning additional income. The study revealed that the fencing workers identified themselves as general agricultural workers but had skills and experience from other sectors including construction and services. Urban-based agricultural workers have lived in Laingsburg for at least three decades i.e. before the shift of workers off farms that took place across South Africa after 1990. The study sheds light on this long-standing, but under-studied dimension of urban poverty and on the diverse strategies (including reliance on government grants) that people use to combat it in the Karoo.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses a community-led fencing project in the Koup, an arid predominantly sheep farming district of the South African Karoo. It highlights the challenges, notably with respect to funding and collective action problems, that inevitably accompany district-level endeavours of this kind. Our study shows that it was successful also as a poverty-relief employment generation programme in that it selected for relatively poor people living in Laingsburg town and substantially improved their household per capita income.

By examining the life and employment histories of a sub-sample of workers on the fencing project, our mixed methods study also deepens our understanding of the relationship between skills, connections and poverty in South Africa. The standard

analysis of South African poverty is that poor people are those without employment networks, living in rural areas and with limited skills and experience (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). Our qualitative study of a sub-sample of the fencing workers indicates that they had a range of skills and experience and used Laingsburg town as a base for migrating between jobs, mostly in agriculture. And, in contrast to studies emphasizing the particular vulnerability of agricultural workers who have been pushed off farms and into towns (see Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Ewert and Du Toit, 2005; Atkinson, 2007) we show that the ranks of the Laingsburg poor include those who were born in towns and have been casual agricultural workers all their lives.

Most work on agricultural employment in the Western Cape has been conducted on the fruit industry (e.g. Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Kritzinger *et al*., 2004; Ewert and Du Toit, 2005; Conradie, 2007; Theron, 2012). Some work highlights the tradition of workers moving between farms in the arid Karoo (De Jongh and Steyn, 1994; De Jongh, 2002; Atkinson, 2007) and recent literature highlights the negative impact on total agricultural employment of the shift to game farming in the area (Brandt and Spierenburg, 2014). Our study is the only one to our knowledge that sheds light on the socio-economic status and employment histories of agricultural workers living in a Karoo town.

The paper begins with an introduction to the Koup fencing project, drawing potential lessons with regard to government funding and the efforts necessary for resolving collective action problems. We then turn to a discussion of the fencing workers, arguing on the basis of comparative data from the 2011 census that the project selected for relatively poor people. We then explore some of the life and employment histories of the fence workers which highlight strong social and economic connections to the Karoo, and Laingsburg town in particular.

2. The Koup fencing project[1]

The Koup fencing project was conceived of in 2010 by Lukas Botes, the chairman of the local farmer organisation, and Piet Gouws, a sheep farmer and a local church leader. Frustrated by the growing problem of jackal predation in the Karoo (see Nattrass and Conradie, 2013), they decided to apply to the government for assistance to build and repair jackal-proof fencing in their district: an 80,000 hectare collection of 19 farms along the banks of the Dwyka river known as the Koup. It was the start of a process that grew to encompass a research dimension, and which resulted in a project closely aligned with the empowerment and employment creation priorities of post-apartheid South Africa.

[1] This discussion is based on interviews with Francis Steyn, Piet Gouws, Lukas Botes and Phyllis Pienaar.

During apartheid, substantial assistance was provided to white commercial farmers in the form of cheap loans and agricultural subsidies, including for fencing. The previous (apartheid) department of Soil Conservation and Technical Services operated a scheme whereby (white) farmers could apply to government for subsidies for fencing, erosion control and irrigation systems. Individual farmers would approach local government officials with a plan, and if this was approved, an agreed subsidy would be paid out to the farmer after inspection of the completed work. With the transition to democracy, this scheme was phased out in favour of area-wide, community-driven projects and support for emerging farmers (coloured and African farmers who had been disadvantaged by apartheid, for example). Soil Conservation and Technical Services was transformed into LandCare, a division within the Department of Agriculture to promote conservation and social transformation as well as soil protection and the removal of alien vegetation.

Botes and Gouws developed their idea for a fencing project after learning from Francis Steyn (head of LandCare Western Cape) about a government funded area-wide fencing project in Rietbron, a Karoo farming district to the east of the Koup. They became aware of this at one of the early meetings of the Western Cape Predator Management Forum, a multi-stakeholder initiative comprising environmentalists, academics, farmers and animal rights activists. Discussions with Francis Steyn and Prof Beatrice Conradie (an agricultural economist working on the problems of predator management for farmers) at the meeting encouraged them to set up their own area-wide fencing initiative. They developed a plan to ensure that the 19 farms were surrounded by a jackal proof fence (i.e. a wire mesh fence packed with rocks at the base) and then to repair the boundary fences between farms. However, their original application, which included contractor-supplied fencing as well as helicopter hunting operations against jackals, was unsuccessful. This was partly due to their lack of experience in fund-raising (both are working sheep farmers), but also because their proposal did not sufficiently reflect the post-apartheid priority of promoting community empowerment and job creation. Their vision of eliminating jackals and to create a 'sheep reserve' also did not align with post-apartheid environmental policy which emphasises sustainable environmental management and protection of wildlife.

After receiving further advice from Steyn, Conradie and subsequently also from Phyllis Pienaar (the LandCare district manager for the Karoo), they transformed their proposal into an area-wide plan in which the fencing project was reconceptualised as a community-led job creation scheme framed as a jackal control (rather than eradication) effort and as a means of facilitating sustainable agricultural livelihoods and wildlife stewardship.[2] Their fencing strategy, however, remained controversial with some environmentalists who argued (at Predator Management Forum meetings) that it would undermine biodiversity by restricting animal movement across the

[2] Interview with Francis Steyn (1 Sept 2014), Lukas Botes (18 Aug 2014), and Piet Gouws and Phyllis Pienaar (19 Aug 2014).

landscape. The farmers countered that once the jackals were under control, holes would inevitably arise (from porcupines and aardvark digging under fences) and hence wild animals would be able to move again. Others argued that given the current use of poison and trapping to control jackals, a fence might actually improve biodiversity.[3]

The transformation of the fencing proposal into an income-creation and empowerment programme was facilitated by an already-existing initiative in the Koup to assist farmworkers. Botes's wife, Jacolise, had conducted research on the social needs of farmworkers in the Koup (Botes, 2011) and had started an NGO called AgriReap, which *inter alia* runs the 'farmworker of the year' competition in the district. After funding was obtained for the project from government in 2011, AgriReap became the vehicle for handling certain aspects of the project such as managing the finances, registering workers with the Unemployment Insurance Fund and assisting them to open bank accounts.

Workers were divided into teams of six, and depending on work and available funding, between four and five teams were in the field at any one time. Team leaders were responsible for managing the day-to-day fencing work and for ensuring that sufficient food was purchased to enable the teams to camp for two weeks at a time on remote farmlands. Wages were set at the same hourly rate as the legislated minimum wage in agriculture (which is also the minimum wage for government employment projects in the area), with team leaders earning an additional 30%.

Steyn and Pienaar cobbled together start-up funding for the Koup project in 2011/12 from funds left over from the old apartheid fencing subsidy scheme (R66,860 for wage costs) and from a budget surplus in engineering services[4] (R250,000 for materials). The following year they leveraged R500,000 for the cost of materials from the national fencing program and successfully applied for R400,000 from the national Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP)[5] to cover wage costs. As of mid-2014, 238 kilometres of fencing had been completed, providing 6,038 person days of employment.[6]

The Koup project was made possible by the support and innovative funding strategies of Steyn and Pienaar who were skilled at writing the proposals and reports required by national incentive funding schemes designed to encourage job creation, economic transformation and community empowerment, notably the EPWP and the Department of Agriculture's Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP)[7]. But

[3] Whether the fence will have a net positive or negative benefit on wildlife remains to be seen and is currently being researched.
[4] Engineering services and LandCare are both units falling under Sustainable Resource Management in the Department of Agriculture.
[5] Information about the EPWP can be obtained from: http://www.epwp.gov.za/
[6] Information provided by Phyllis Pienaar (personal communication, 12 Sept 2014).
[7] Information about CASP is available on:

relying on such incentive funds brought with it further operational challenges as the state sought to achieve an appropriate balance between its objectives and the spread of projects competing for funding. In some cases this resulted in severe funding shortfalls for the Koup project. Notably, in 2013/14 Steyn and Pienaar had expected to receive a grant of R5 million from the EPWP for job creation projects in the Karoo (of which the Koup fencing project was one). Their project had been approved, but when the money was actually transferred, only R500,000 was made available to them. That year, the Koup fencing project had to rely on a minimalist budget of R60,000 for wages and R40,000 for materials from LandCare's internal project funding (the Department's Equitable Share Programme). This meant that the fencing teams had limited work that year.

The South African national government seeks to influence the type of projects being funded through their incentive programmes in order to spread the benefits of project funding over a wider range of participants. This was evident in the funding of the fencing project. For example, in 2014/15 Steyn and Pienaar were able to allocate R800,000 for wage costs to the project from a larger CASP grant where this was made conditional on the construction of fencing (free of charge) on the lands of two emerging farmers in the district, and around the common lands used by subsistence farmers in Merweville and Leeu Gamka (small Karoo towns).[8]

The history of funding for the Koup fencing project highlights the centrally important role of innovative and supportive government officials like Steyn and Pienaar. The Koup farmers were fortunate in being able to work with officials who could successfully navigate the South African government's often complicated and multi-level incentive-based funding for community-led job-creation projects. The experience also shows that national government can be successful in inserting a broader transformation agenda into projects through the incentive based funding that prioritised community-led projects, and by requiring that government money also be spent on emerging and subsistence farmers. The down-side of such incentive funding, however, is that it injects significant uncertainty in the process in that funding varies significantly from year to year.

The Koup fencing project, of course, also relied on the dedicated efforts and energy of participating farmers, especially those who took leadership roles. There are always 'collective action problems' in area-wide initiatives of this kind as individual farmers have an incentive to shirk and free-ride on the efforts of others. Collective action problems can be overcome in a range of ways, such as social incentives (peer pressure exercised through meetings, church groups or subtle shaming through gossip of those not pulling their weight), restricting benefits where possible to contributing members and by relying on the efforts of individuals where such individuals have an

http://www.nda.agric.za/doaDev/topMenu/DoAProgrammes/CASP.htm

[8] Information about the budget was provided by Phyllis Peinaar, interviewed 19 August 2014 in Beaufort West.

incentive to drive the project forward even in the presence of free-riding (Olson, 1965). All three mechanisms were evident in the Koup.[9]

The Koup fencing project provides fences for individual farmers, thereby benefiting them directly, but because it sought to enclose an 80,000 hectare district, it potentially provided benefits (fewer jackals) for all those within the area whether the boundary fence was on their farm or not. The jackal-proof fence is thus in part a 'public good' in that some can benefit without having to pay the costs. The project also renovated many farm fences within the enclosed area, a process that brought with it inevitable challenges of trying to ensure that farmers on both sides of the fence contributed to the construction/renovation. Government funding covered the costs of labour and wire fencing, but farmers were expected to contribute 'droppers' (metal fence posts) and to lend a tractor and trailer to the fencing team to help them collect the rocks they needed to pack along the base of the fence to render it 'jackal proof' (see Figure 1). Disputes arose over who should provide droppers (and how many), who should lend a tractor and trailer to the team, and who should be checking the quality of the fence work. Some farmers provided insufficient or inferior (wooden) droppers thereby compromising the quality of the fence or refused to lend the project a tractor and trailer, thereby making the work harder, longer and slowing down progress across the district.

Such problems were addressed mainly through moral suasion (for example, Gouws would talk the issue over with relevant farmers on a Sunday after church). The fact that all the farmers were white, Afrikaans speaking and most were from families who had farmed in the area for generations, made this kind of moral suasion easier. But this did not eradicate the problem of shirking. Gouws at times resorted to threatening to take fencing teams off farms where insufficient assistance was being provided. However, as the vision for an area-wide jackal-proof fence required an area-wide approach, this threat did not carry much weight and some shirking farmers effectively got away with it by relying on others to provide the resources.

The farmers differed in terms of how involved they were prepared to be with the fencing teams. While some embraced the empowerment dimension, others were annoyed by the hassle of having the teams on their land and some would have preferred to have done the work themselves with a direct subsidy. Fortunately the quality of the fencing was good, and sceptical farmers mostly reconciled themselves with the project. Problems arose, however, from time to time - for example, complaints about theft of fencing materials and substance abuse, a long standing problem amongst farmworkers (see Atkinson, 2007 and Botes, 2011).

[9] This analysis is drawn from interviews conducted with Lukas Botes (30 July, 18 August), Piet Gouws (30 and 31 July, 18 and 19 August), Phyllis Pienaar 19 August, Helene Coetzee (20 August) and Francis Steyn (1 September 2014).

Source: (top left) LandCare, Western Cape; (top right and bottom) Nicoli Nattrass.

Figure 1: Workers packing rocks along the base of a jackal proof fence (top left); collecting rocks (top right); and meeting with Piet Gouws and Josef Le Roes (a Koup farmer) at a fence team camp site on Le Roes's farm.

Farmers were collectively responsible for transporting the workers into town after their two week camping stints on farms, but in the end the bulk of the responsibility fell on the shoulders of Gouws and to a lesser extent his neighbours, Jan du Toit and Ferdie Botes. Gouws was provided with a small stipend which contributed to, but did not fully cover, his transport costs. Helene Coetzee of AgriReap also dedicated a greater than expected share of her time to managing wage payments and the food orders of the individual teams. Gouws and Coetzee thus functioned as project champions, ensuring that it operated on a day to day basis even as this made additional demands on their time. Without them, the project probably would have

collapsed under the weight of collective action problems, as had occurred in Rietbron.

The Rietbron project was a fencing project funded through the roads department. It was not set up as a job-creation project and it did not have any empowerment or transformation agenda. It was community-led only to the extent that it involved participating farmers who had to liaise with contractors and execute quality control. But the initiative lacked the social cohesion of the Koup fencing project and was plagued by managerial and quality control problems. The project was eventually cancelled. Ironically, this project, which had inspired Gouws and Botes to try something similar in the Koup, became a source of funding for the Koup fencing project as R92,500 of Rietbron's unused budget was made available to the Koup to contribute to wage payments in 2012/13.

The Koup fencing project succeeded where the Rietbron project failed by having project champions who were genuinely inspired by its dual function of improving agricultural infrastructure and creating jobs. It is also likely that social cohesion was supported through Gouws's role as a church leader and Botes's role as chairman of the local farmer organisation. The fact that Botes' wife (unfortunately now deceased) had been involved in social upliftment of farmworkers prior to the project no doubt made the transition to an empowerment programme easier.

Also important, though was the momentum provided to this community-level project through the interest generated by the inclusion of a research component focussing on the issue of jackal ecology, sheep predation, economic sustainability and wildlife diversity. As discussed below, by involving social scientists and ecologists from the University of Cape Town, Botes and Gouws were able to expand their area-wide fencing project into a site for the study of biodiversity on sheep farms and the relationship between ecology, predation, farming practices and stock losses in the area. This, in turn, generated interest and further momentum for the area-wide fencing initiative.

Research in the Koup was facilitated by Beatrice Conradie, who met Botes and Gouws after presenting her work on the relationship between jackal control and stock losses at the same Predator Management Forum meeting attended by Francis Steyn. Conradie acknowledged the farmers' concerns about jackal predation but pointed out that old hunting club data suggested that killing jackals might be leading to greater rather than reduced stock losses in subsequent years (see Conradie and Piesse, 2013). This result resonated with the argument made by some ecologists that predators respond to persecution by increasing the size of litters and allowing beta females to breed (see review in Nattrass and Conradie, 2013). The farmers, however, argued that jackal numbers were out of control in the district because the number of active farmers had declined, wild life reserves had grown and fences were in need of repair. Conradie invited Botes and Gouws to the University of Cape Town where an ambitious multi-disciplinary research project including socio-economic surveys of

farmers and ecological research including the use of trail cameras (and subsequently also the radio-collaring of predators) was devised.

Source: (Left) LandCare Western Cape; (Top Right) Nicoli Nattrass; (Bottom Right) Marine Drouilly

Figure 2: (Left) Lukas Botes (left), Piet Gouws (right) and Marine Drouilly with scat samples in a shed on Gouws's farm; (Top Right) Beatrice Conradie and Francis Steyn discussing preliminary research results on a bakkie bonnet, Laingsburg; and an image of a jackal from a trail camera.

Research in the Koup (and subsequently also in a nearby nature reserve) began in 2012, supported by funding raised from the University of Cape Town (for equipment and the socio-economic study) and the Nedbank Green Trust/World Wildlife Fund. Marine Drouilly, a Phd student under the primary supervision of Prof Justin O'Riain, was responsible for setting up the cameras, collecting predator scat (dung) for analysis (Figure 2) and radio-collaring predators. This required additional co-ordination work on the part of Botes to obtain the necessary permission from farmers to collect this data. He also made repeated requests to farmers to donate predator carcasses to the research project (for DNA analysis) and to avoid illegal trapping that could jeopardise the research. Gouws provided accommodation for researchers in a cottage on his farm, turning it into something of a research and social centre for the project. This helped consolidate Gouws' central role and to encourage him to

maintain his efforts to build social solidarity around the fencing project. Feedback meetings where Drouilly presented preliminary results and progress reports to the farmers generated a lot of interest and provided an opportunity for Gouws and Botes to keep momentum going for the fencing effort.

Conradie supplemented the ecological study with an economic survey of the farmers. Her preliminary results pointed to a lack of knowledge on the part of the farmers as to how many of their sheep fell pregnant – and hence to the unreliability of data on jackal-related stock losses. Her work generated momentum for a further intervention in the Koup: to provide subsidised scanning services to farmers to check which ewes were pregnant. This was managed by a local farmer (Ferdie Botes) who was also very supportive of the ecology study. As the Koup fencing project expanded into a broader area-wide planning effect, LandCare Western Cape agreed to conduct a vegetation assessment in the area to help explore how much of the problem faced by farmers was related to grazing quality.

The Koup area-wide planning process is now regarded as something of a gold standard by LandCare Western Cape,[10] It was able to address and transcend collective action problems through the efforts of committed individuals and social solidarity was enhanced through the interest generated by the unique landscape-level exploration into the economics, ecology and sociology of predation problems in the Karoo. All of this helped foster the 'buy-in' needed to ensure that farmers took the necessary 'ownership' of the project. Other area-wide initiatives are being set up with the assistance of LandCare Western Cape, but whether they will succeed in the same way as the Koup is an open question. Such social conditions and motivating factors as evident in the Koup are not easily replicated.

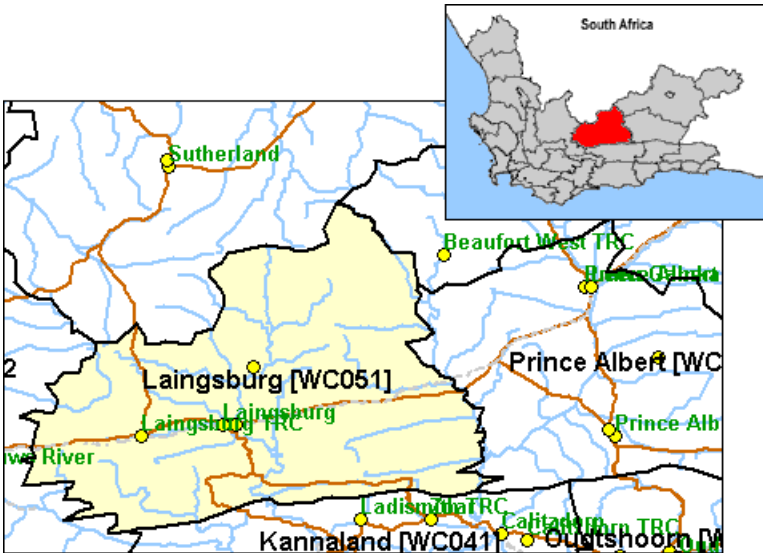
The idea of community-based /led and participatory development has been popular in international development circles since the 2000s (Yusuf, 2009: 34-5) and is evident also in post-apartheid thinking about job creation schemes. The EPWP encourages community participation and local 'ownership' of projects and the predominantly rural Community Based Public Works Program requires it (Adato *et al.*, 2005). The Koup fencing project was 'community-led' in two senses. It was in the first instance a project led by a community of farmers, but it was also community-led in so far as team leaders had responsibilities and the authority to hire team members. Yet the power of the team leaders was inevitably subordinate to that of the Koup farmers and in this regard the project reflected the paternalistic relations that characterise farmer-farmworker relationships in the Karoo (Atkinson, 2007; Botes, 2010). Even so, the project had genuinely transformative dimensions not only through job creation, but through the learning process the farmers themselves went through.

[10] Francis Steyn regularly talks about the project on public platforms and in August 2014 nominated it for a possible prize in a Southern African LandCare competition.

The following section looks more specifically at how the fencing project impacted the economic position of participating workers.

3. The Fence Workers within the Socio-Economic Context of Coloured Urban Dwellers in Laingsburg

The Koup fencing project employed between 24 and 30 workers grouped in teams of six. There was some attrition out of the project as a result of retirements, firing and resignations and the number of months worked per year fluctuated depending on the availability of funding. In 2013, during an off period, fifteen fence workers were interviewed about their socio-economic status and employment histories.[11] We use this information, supplemented with data collected from the 24 fence workers employed as of August 2014, to locate the fencing workers within the socio-economic context of coloured residents of Laingsburg town.



Source: Laingsburg Municipality, 2012: 5

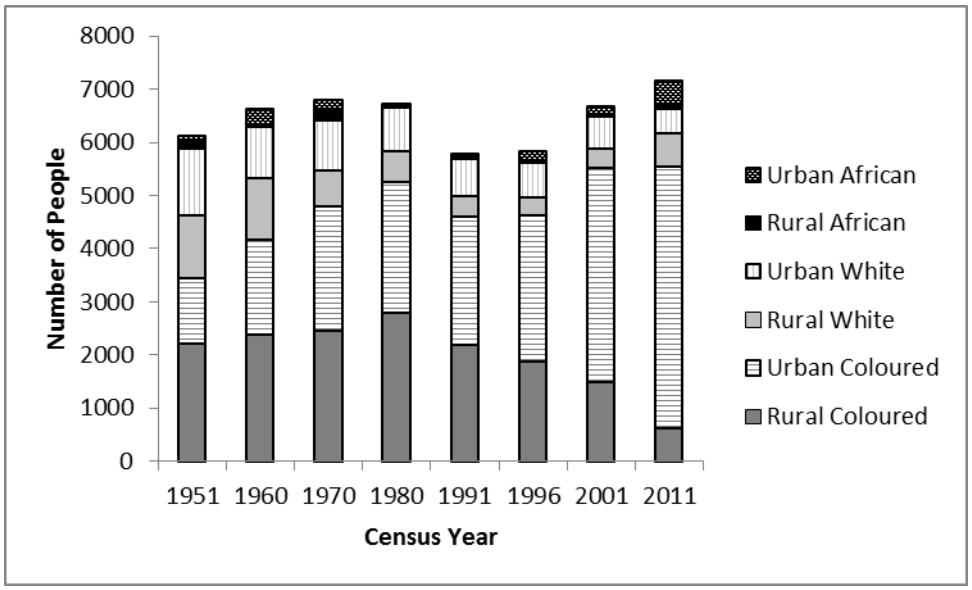
Figure 3: Laingsburg

Laingsburg town is a small agricultural centre straddling the border between the winter and summer rainfall region of the Karoo. The municipality, which extends beyond the town to cover about 8,800 square kilometres of farmland, has an average population density of one person per square kilometre (Laingsburg Municipality, 2006: 15). The regional economy is driven by agriculture and services: In 2009, 22%

[11] The qualitative research was conducted at the Laingsburg Flood Museum during an all-day workshop lead by Inge Conradie with the assistance of Annabelle Wienand and under the supervision of Beatrice Conradie and Nicoli Nattrass. The workers were given lunch and tea as well as a grocery hamper and a water bottle. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Cape Town and all participants signed consent forms.

of value-added in the Laingsburg district economy was generated by agriculture, 35% by finance insurance and real estate business and 19% in community, social and personal services (Laingsburg Municipality, 2012: 10). Figure 3 shows the location of Laingsburg magisterial district within the Western Cape, as well as the position of the town. The Koup district lies on the North-West side of Laingsburg.

Laingsburg comprises mostly coloured (mixed race) people. Figure 4 shows that there has long been a significant coloured urban population in Laingsburg, and that this population has grown as the rural population in the district declined. Such decline is partly a reflection of the wider South African agricultural trend of decreasing on-farm employment: on-farm employment shrunk from 1,185,000 in 1990 to 774,000 in 2007, and casual employment as a percentage of total employment in agriculture rose from 33% to 42% between 1996 and 2007 (Statistics South Africa, 2000; 2007). This has been attributed mostly to changes in labour regulation and related wage pressure in the post-apartheid period as well to evictions by farmers fearful that workers would obtain tenure rights in the post-apartheid period (Simbi and Aliber, 2000; Atkinson, 2007: 84; Sparrow *et al.*, 2008; Bhorat *et al.*, 2013). In the Karoo, reductions in farm employment was further exacerbated by declining numbers of sheep farms and a rise in game farming which is less labour-intensive and hence requires fewer workers (Laingsburg Municipality, 2006: 18).



Source: South African Statistics (Population Census, various years)

Figure 4: Population in Laingsburg (town and rural area)

As can be seen in Figure 4, the white population in Laingsburg district (both urban and rural) has declined significantly since 1950. This reflects the economic pressures on sheep farming in particular and the steady decline of this sector. As Nattrass and Conradie (2013) have shown, the real income of sheep farmers in South Africa is similar to what it was a century earlier. Total agricultural factor productivity has

fallen in the Central Karoo over the past fifty years, with Laingsburg recording the lowest productivity in the region (Conradie *et al.*, 2009; 2013).

Table 1: A Socio-Economic Profile of Laingsburg Town (2011)

	Coloured	**White**	**Black**
Total population	4,922	454	446
Strict unemployment rate (i.e. active jobseekers only)	30%	6%	14%
Broad unemployment rate (i.e. including non-active job seekers)	36%	8%	15%
Average household size	3.9	2.1	2.3
% with annual household income below R19,600 (2011 prices)	35%	16%	25%
% with annual household income below R76,400 (2011 prices)	82%	49%	73%
Dependency ratio (dependents per earner)	3.9	2.5	2.5
% household heads without matric	86%	38%	74%
% households with a pit latrine	13%	0%	7%
% households with piped water within the house	64%	100%	74%

Source: 2011 Population Census, Statistics South Africa.

As shown in Table 1, coloured residents of Laingsburg town in 2011 were substantially worse off in terms of unemployment rates, [12] dependency ratios, access to water and sanitation and educational achievement than the small numbers of white and (to a lesser extent) black people in the town. Table 2 sketches the socio-economic profile of the 15 fencing workers interviewed in 2013 and for the 24 fencing workers who were participating in the project as of August 2014.[13] Comparative data from the 2011 census is provided for the coloured population in Laingsburg and all income data is in 2013 prices.

Table 2 suggests that the fence workers were typically worse off than other coloured people in Laingsburg town in that they had lower levels of education and lived in larger households. Excluding fencing income, their households fell mostly into the lower bands of the per capita household income distribution. Access to the fencing work assisted their households considerably, accounting for an average of 43% of household income for the sample of 15 workers interviewed in 2013, and 40% of household income for the 24 fence workers in 2014. As can be seen in Table 2, after accounting for earnings from the fencing project, the percentage of fencing workers living in the poorest income category dropped from over a third to under a tenth. This shows the extent to which access to low paying jobs such as those provided by the fencing project can improve both the absolute and relative socio-economic position of those fortunate enough to obtain them.

[12] According to the Laingsburg Municipality, unemployment was artificially low in 2011 because of an electrification project and that it rose significantly the following year (Laingsburg Municipality, 2012: 8-9).

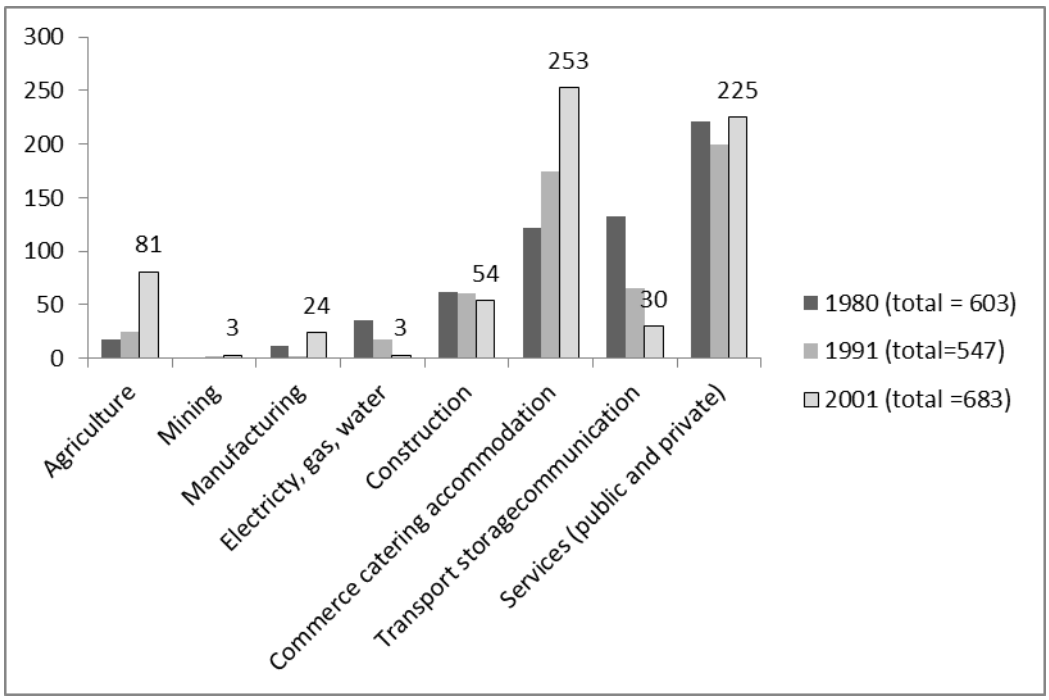
[13] Data for the 24 fencing workers was provided by Helene Coetzee (AgriReap). As of August 2014 only four teams of six workers were working.

Table 2: The Fence workers and Coloured People in Laingsburg Town

	Fence Workers 2014	**Fence Worker Sample 2013**	**2011 Census**
Number of households	24	15	1204
Average household size	6.6	7.9	3.9
Education			
None	4%	27%	15%
Incomplete schooling	92%	73%	69%
Matric	4%	0%	12%
Post school qualification	0%	0%	5%
Annual per capita household income (2013 prices) (for fence workers before including fencing wages)			
<R5,612	42%	47%	35%
R5,613-R10,937	54%	33%	23%
R10,938-R21,875	4%	20%	23%
>R21,875	0%	0%	19%
Annual per capita household income (2013 prices) (for fence workers including fencing wages)			
<R5,612	4%	7%	35%
R5,613-R10,937	67%	33%	23%
R10,938-R21,875	25%	60%	23%
>R21,875	4%	0%	19%

Note: For the census data, education is for the household head and the average household size for coloured households of 3.9 is assumed to hold across the income distribution.
Source: 2011 census, data collected by Inge Conradie for 15 fence workers in 2013, and data provided by Helen Coetzee for 24 fencing workers in 2014.

Recruitment into the work teams was managed primarily by the team leaders as part of the empowerment and community-led dimension of the project. But a possible downside of this was that it introduced an inevitable selection bias as team leaders were likely to select people they knew, who had useful skills etc. – and these people were not necessarily the poorest people. However, as indicated in Table 2, it appears that better-off participants were not systematically selected for. Indeed, the project appears to have selected mostly for people in poor households. According to the 2011 population census, 58% of coloured households had an annual per capita household income of less than R10,938 whereas 80% and 96% of the fencing workers interviewed in 2013 and 2014 respectively fell into this category prior to receiving wages from the fencing project (Table 2).



Source: 1980, 1991 and 2011 Population Census, Statistics South Africa.

Figure 5: Sectoral Distribution of Coloured Workers in Laingsburg Town

How did the fencing project succeed in selecting for relatively poor people? Discussions with team leaders about selection[14] revealed two important factors. The first was that the fencing project was particularly challenging for workers because it involved living out on the land for two weeks at a time, budgeting for food, cooking communally and sharing a tent with five other men. Such physical hardship resulted in only those who really wanted the work signing up for it. A second factor selecting for relatively poor people was the role of suggestions and recommendations to team leaders from AgriReap and local community members to consider particularly needy people. Team leaders ultimately decided who to employ (and there is evidence that family members and friends were hired), but they also took these external suggestions into account.

What the project did select for, of course, were workers experienced in agricultural work. Figure 5 shows that according to the 2001 census (the most recent data available for industry breakdown of employment) there were 81 coloured workers in Laingsburg town classified as being employed in agriculture (i.e. 12% of total employment). This category of employment has clearly grown since 1980, suggesting that some of these workers might have been pushed off farms as full-time on-farm employment contracted over time. Interestingly, none of the 15 fencing workers fell into this category. Twelve had been born in Laingsburg and the other three had been born in other Karoo towns (Sutherland, Victoria West and Murraysburg). Although

[14] Discussions were held by Nicoli Nattrass and Piet Gouws with team leaders and workers on 19 August 2014.

all had experience working on farms, none had ever been long-term live-in on-farm workers. And, although they self-identify as 'agricultural workers', their employment histories reveal that they have skills and experience in other sectors too, notably services and construction (see Table 3).

4. Life Histories and Employment Trajectories

Given the fragile economic base of Laingsburg, the fact that significant (and increasing) numbers of coloured people are opting to stay in the town poses something of a puzzle. Are people staying because they lack the skills, connections and aptitude to leave – or are they staying because they choose to? If the former, then one would expect poor people like the fence workers to have few skills and connections. If the latter, then the question arises as to why this is the case. According to the Laingsburg Municipality, the problem of poverty in Laingsburg is driven to a large extent by a lack of skills and that many people in the town are simply 'unemployable' (2006: 18) and that those who do have the skills tend to leave the town, remitting little if any income back to the area (2006: 19). Our qualitative study suggests that this is a rather blunt reading of the situation and that the evidence from the lives of our qualitative sample of fence workers indicates that a more nuanced interpretation is needed.

Source: Nicoli Nattrass

Figure 6: Inge Conradie and Fence Project Workers in Laingsburg, June 2013

We employed mapping techniques (see ASRU, 2007) to explore the life histories (journey maps) and employment trajectories (work maps) of 15 fence workers

interviewed in June 2013. Our results show that these relatively poor workers had an unexpectedly wide range of skills and experience (see Table 3) – even though they self-identified as "algemene plaas werkers" (general farm workers). Most had learned their skills initially from a father figure and then acquired further experience and skills as they migrated from job to job. Most started with Karoo farm work (working with sheep and fixing fences) and then branched out into construction jobs in the area, gardening work in town and agricultural work in other districts.

Table 3: Selected Work Histories

Respondent (age)	**Important Jobs**	**Education**	**Monthly household income (% from grants)**	**PWP earnings as % of household income**
8 (59 years)	Municipal employee (32 years) Fence building	None	R4,310 (41% from grants)	59%
13 (67 years)	Learned as a child to shear sheep Laingsburg Cooperative (19 years) Picked apples in Ceres (21 years) ESKOM in Sedgefield (6 years)	None	R5,536 (5% from grants)	76%
11 (19 years)	Fence building (4 years) Building Driver for firewood, harvesting (3 years) Farm work	Grade 9	R6,150 (59% from grants)	41%
3 (26 years)	Irrigator on vegetable seed farm (1 year) Paving sidewalk at school Disability pension from age 21	Grade 10	R7,001 (25% from grants)	36%
7 (38 years)	2004: Picked apples in Ceres (3 months) 2005 -2008: Mostly building work interspersed with some tractor driving 2009-2011: Casual work doing laundry and gardening 2012: Koup fence project	Grade 10	R3,886 (7% from grants)	66%

Source: Data collected by Inge Coetzee

Respondent 13 was the oldest fence worker (he actually retired from the fencing team in 2014). He was born in Laingsburg in 1946 and grew up on a farm where his father taught him how to shear sheep. When he was 17, the household moved to Laingsburg

town where he started working at the Farmers' Cooperative as general worker. This job did not last and before long he found himself back in agricultural work. At the age of 21 he took up seasonal work, picking fruit in the Ceres area. In the early 1970s, he took a job with the electricity supplier ESKOM that took him to Sedgefield for three years and seven months where he assisted with the planting of poles and installing electric lines. At the end of the ESKOM contract, he returned to Laingsburg taking up sheep shearing followed by fencing work on a game farm. He lives with his sister in Laingsburg and his other siblings live and work on farms in the area.

All of respondent 13's jobs were short-term casual work, some of them seasonal, like shearing and fruit picking, whilst others were ad hoc opportunities like building work and the Koup fencing project. Most of these jobs were obtained through networks, for example the job on the game farm was facilitated by his brother, who is a permanent worker there, and his position as team leader was facilitated through his connection with Piet Gouws. Social and economic networks thus appear to play an important role in how casual agricultural workers acquire work.

Short-term migration out of the Karoo, especially to the fruit farms of the Boland, appears to be common, even something of a rite of passage. One of the fence workers told us 'daar is altyd werk in die Boland en die Boland betaal meer' (there is always work in the Boland and the Boland pays more). But while they believed that short term migration to the Boland was beneficial in terms of gaining experience and additional skills, the younger ones worried that this option was closing – especially after the violent farm-worker protests in the Western Cape in 2012. There was general concern in the group that they might be attacked by local Boland workers accusing them of taking their jobs.

The fence workers articulated a strong sense of belonging in the Karoo, and a love for the serenity of the life-style and the arid beauty of the place. They contrasted the relative safety of Laingsburg with Cape Town. A man who had worked in Cape Town for five years summed up their opinion of nicely: 'Die Kaap is mooi om na te kyk, maar raak al meer gevaarlik' (Cape Town is pretty to look at but it is getting more and more dangerous). All said that they appreciated the opportunity to do building work when it was offered.

The strong social connection to Laingsburg town is probably reinforced by the availability of shelter and government grants during periods of unemployment. As can be seen in Table 3, government grants (old age pension, disability grants and child support grants) make up a significant portion of total household income for many of these men's families. All the fence workers agreed that government grants play an important role in their livelihood strategies, even during times of employment. None of them were able to save significantly during periods of employment in order to finance consumption in periods of unemployment. Savings was limited to endowment polices (in the case of the older men) which paid out a sum of money to the household in the event of death.

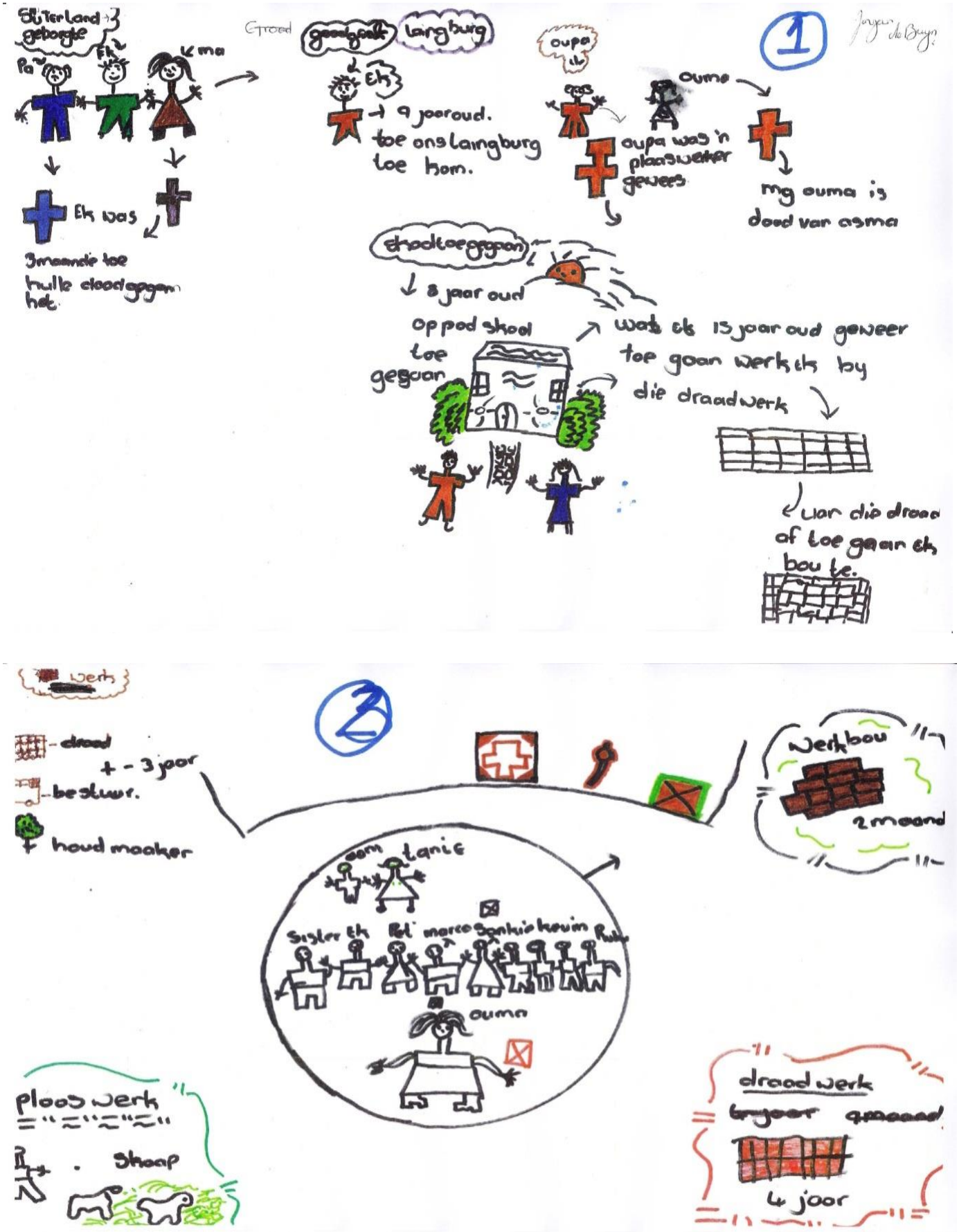


Figure 7: Respondent 11's Journey map (above) and work map (below)

Figure 7 displays the maps created by respondent 11, one of the younger fence workers. Born in Sutherland (a Karoo town 120km way) he moved to Laingsburg with his grandparents at the age of 9, with whom he had been living since his parents died in a car accident six years earlier. Two years later his grandmother passed away and he moved in with his aunt and other grandmother, also living in Laingsburg. He quit school at the age of 15 to seek work. His first job was erecting fences on the farms around Laingsburg, after which he took up building jobs. While preferring the latter, he takes any job he can get, a testament to the financial pressure faced by the household. He and his aunt are the only bread-winners for a household of 12 people which is otherwise entirely dependent on government grants.

Figure 8 displays the maps drawn by respondent 3, a man aged 26 who has lived in Laingsburg with his mother and grandparents his whole life. He was a long-distance runner at school, even travelling to Port Elizabeth to compete in a race. He has a child aged six living with her mother in another household in Laingsburg. Perhaps in contrast to his own failed relationship with the mother of his child, he emphasised in his map that both his parents and grandparents were happy couples. Note that his map provides a fuller and more dynamic understanding of household structure than the typical 'household roster' in a quantitative survey instrument.

Respondent 3 and his mother were the only people employed in the household which was otherwise dependent on government grants. His uncle came to live with them after he was run over while working on a farm in the Grabouw area and now receives a disability grant which contributes significantly to household income. His oldest sister and her child also live with them. The sister works from time to time, but her most significant financial contribution is the government child grant she receives for her daughter. His other sister is still at school, which is paid for by her child support grant. The mother, who works as a domestic worker on a farm just outside Laingsburg (within easy commuting distance) is the primary breadwinner and has managed to get him temporary jobs on that farm from time to time. Respondent 3 actually gets a disability grant because of his severely crippled hand (injured in a window when he was 21). He can use it to balance items (like rocks) held in his other hand, but is incapable of co-ordinated manipulation (such as twisting and pulling fencing wire). Although disabled and limited in the jobs he can do, Respondent 3 nevertheless actively seeks work and takes advantage of opportunities such as that provided by the Koup fencing project.

Respondent 3 was the best writer in the group and spoke openly about his desire to open his own 'spaza shop', perhaps with a friend. He is determined to find a more consistent source of income for his family and his daughter – and in this sense was the only respondent who went beyond the general self-identification as an agricultural worker. Interestingly, none of the younger men felt that they were any worse off than their peers who had finished school, with one pointing out that 'Vandag word jy net groot as 'n skollie as jy nie vir jouself 'n doelwit stel nie' (Now a days you only grow up to be a thug if you do not set any goals for yourself), and the only way they can

achieve their goals for the future and sustain their families is through hard work. All of them expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work on the Koup fencing project and none of them complained about having to camp out on the land.

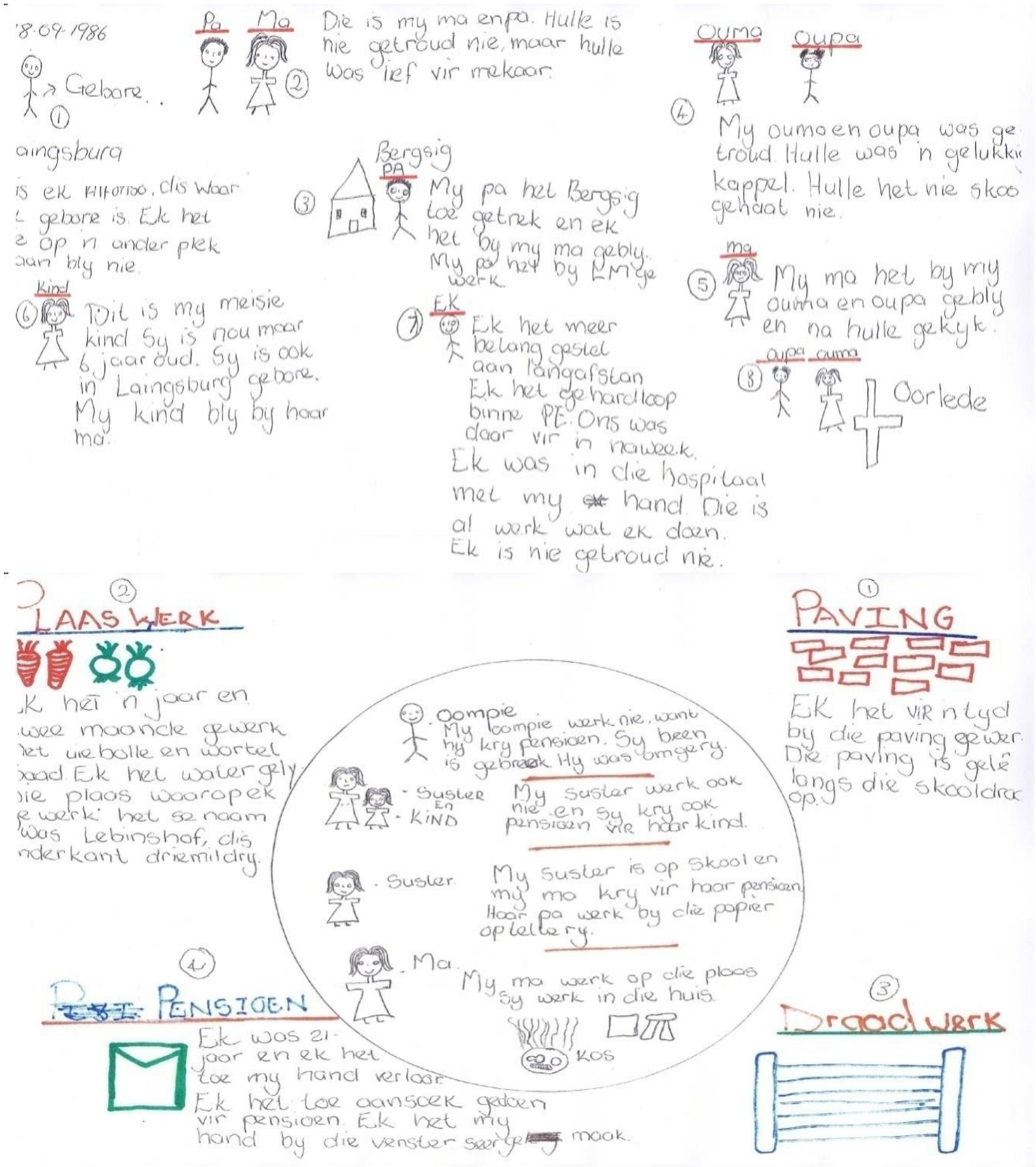


Figure 8: Respondent 3's journey map (above) and work map (below)

5. Conclusion

Our study shows that it is possible for government to facilitate and support community-led job-creation and empowerment projects that are transformative and poverty alleviating. However, collective action problems beset all area-wide initiatives. The analysis of the fencing project highlights the role of key supportive individuals in the community and in government and the additional momentum provided by subsequent research and related interventions. Such conditions are not easily replicated.

The socio-economic analysis of the fence workers cautions against sweeping characterisations of poor people in Laingsburg as unskilled, unconnected and unmotivated. The qualitative research shows that a combination of work opportunities, social connections, love for the area and government welfare payments contribute to maintaining at least some coloured people in Laingsburg even as economic opportunities are limited. It thus points to the need for local development initiatives that improve infrastructure whilst generating jobs.

Laingsburg is the smallest municipal district in South Africa. The N1 highway cuts through the middle of it, providing some economic opportunities (accommodation, petrol, etc.) but mostly serving as a reminder of how insignificant the town is to the wider economy. Yet Laingsburg and the broader Karoo region are an intrinsic part of the South African imaginary and cultural heritage. Many sheep farmers come from families dating back to the conquest of the dry interior and the tradition of itinerant coloured workers continues to this day. Yet as this study of the Koup fencing project shows, there is significant potential for transformation even in traditionally conservative areas and that incentive-based government funding can support empowerment and job creation. Such process are never easy, yet the experience of the Koup fencing project shows that it is possible, and that there are good reasons to support such initiatives.

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