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Translocal lives: Gender and rural mobilities in South Africa

What you need to know:

Rural spaces in South Africa remain crucially important to the material, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of many South Africans, and many 'rural' lives have long been highly mobile and dynamic. Women in rural areas, in particular, provide diverse maintenance work that sustains translocal households – entities that sprawl across rural, peri-urban, and urban space.

What is this research about?

This analysis situates South African mobilities – the movement of people, ideas, and resources, especially by women – in the historical context of the past fifty years. The research explores the changing nature of economic, social, and cultural connections between rural and urban lives of Black South Africans through the lens of a village in a former 'homeland' in northeastern Limpopo Province, South Africa.

The researcher offers a qualitative and historical analysis of rural households, the lives of women who remain in or return to rural areas, and rural contributions to households and economies that span rural-urban space.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher examined the kinds of movement of people, ideas, and resources that support both rural and urban households in South Africa. They analyzed a case study focused on the households of farmers of the Hleketani Community Garden, a women's cooperative farm in South Africa.

The researcher, working with a South African collaborator, carried out interviews, informal conversations, and participatory action research with small-scale farmers and others. The researcher also collected and analyzed qualitative longitudinal data on household composition, movements of household members, employment and other income sources, remittances from urban relatives, income from familial and non-familial social networks, and expenditures.



Farmers Mthavini B (with grandson) and Rose Z harvest mustard greens for sale, Hleketani Community Garden (Photo credit: E. Vibert with permission from farmers).



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What did the researcher find?

The focus of the analysis is on those who remain principally rural yet maintain mobilities of diverse kinds. Rooted in the qualitative methods of oral history, social history, and gender history, the research provides an analysis of rural households, the lives of those who remain in or return to rural areas, and rural contributions within translocal households and economies.

Rural areas, including the former ‘homelands,’ remain important spaces of home and generate essential resources for many South Africans. The relationship between rural spaces and South Africa’s towns and cities is dynamic and multi-directional, to the point that many South African lives are best described as translocal.

This analysis demonstrates that rural women have long been mobile, and that their care work, grant incomes, and other productive labours play a primary role in lubricating and sustaining resource flows and relationships across households that are spread across rural and urban space. The lived experiences described reveal both the pressures and the potential of rural-urban translocalities.

In light of soaring unemployment and inequalities and deepening poverty, it is surely time the South African government recognises this rural dividend and invests meaningfully in dignified livelihoods in rural areas – including the small-scale farming that helps to support so many of the households and individuals discussed in the article.

How can you use this research?

This research provides an important analysis of South African mobilities, and the vital connections between rural and urban settings that help to support households, communities, and the wider economy.

The article provides context for policymakers and other stakeholders for developing policy initiatives aimed at supporting the rural poor to find dignified livelihoods in rural settings, if they so choose. It shows that such policy initiatives have the potential to improve lives far beyond rural areas.

About the researcher

Elizabeth Vibert is a UVic Associate Professor in the Department of History, and project director of [Four Stories About Food Sovereignty](#).

Four Stories About Food Sovereignty is a research network for small-scale producers to learn from each other, for researchers to learn from small-scale producers, and for the public to access information about food security and food justice issues in the era of climate crisis.

Keywords

Mobilities; rural-urban networks; translocal – households, relationships, economies, rural-urban; small-scale farming; gender; South Africa; Apartheid; post-Apartheid

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We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.