Environment and development in the former South African bantustans

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Introduction

South Africa’s first fully democratic elections of 1994 were typified by a wave of optimism that its social and spatial history would be transformed to redress the inequities of the apartheid era. The rigid imposition of apartheid spatial planning deeply scarred South Africa’s rural spaces, particularly those set aside for the majority African population. This was evident in the bantustans, or homelands, which were geographic territories utilized to segregate the population by the national government. Through an elaborate system of racial classification, the bantustans became pivotal to grand apartheid’s vision of separate development and, as such, had significant impacts upon social and ecological landscapes. Although the bantustan system was abolished prior to the democratic transition, a sizable body of academic scholarship has asserted that this geography has left a lasting imprint upon rural areas (Levin and Weiner 1997; Weiner et al. 1997; Ramutsindela and Simon 1999; Ntsebeza 2000; Ramutsindela 2001; Ramutsindela and Donaldson 2001). Levin and Weiner (1997, 6) represented this view shortly after the democratic elections by provocatively asserting: ‘South Africa’s former homelands – four “independent states” and six “self-governing territories” – have now been officially reincorporated, but they continue to exist de facto. For most people living in these grand apartheid territories, political freedom has not changed their dire economic circumstances. They remain bantustans’. Similarly, Ramutsindela (2001, 180) argued that the bantustans ‘had tremendous impact upon identity constructions, the socialization of people into space and the persistence of traditional authorities. All these have a direct bearing on the transformation to a non-racial and democratic South Africa’.

The intention of this special edition is to present case studies from the former South African bantustans to examine how these geographies remain relevant in the contemporary era. Although it is increasingly common to assert the importance of the legacy of the bantustans to current issues, ranging from land reform, rural development, agrarian change and environmental degradation, the specific links between these processes and spaces have been under explored. The contributors to this volume work to address this oversight by presenting detailed research from the former bantustans of Lebowa, Gazankulu and KaNgwane to understand the trajectories of social and environmental change that accompanied the democratic transition. The papers in this special issue cover a diverse set of conceptual questions and methodological approaches; however, they share a commitment to examining livelihood systems, development processes, and environmental change within these territories. While it is readily apparent that the geography of the bantustans remains persistent, it is also clear from these papers that there are political, economic and spatial transformations occurring that have implications for the future of rural change and development. This special issue contributes to understanding these changes by assessing how new opportunities and systems are shaping and reshaping environmental and development processes in the post-apartheid era.

Segregation and development in colonial and apartheid South Africa

The utilization of space by the apartheid state (1948–94) to segregate and control the African population was deeply rooted in South Africa’s colonial period (1652–1948). Specifically, a series of legislative acts enforced racial segregation while
empowering traditional authorities in ways that directly impacted livelihood systems and rural development. One example of this was the 1894 Glen Grey Act. This legislation moved land ownership within the Glen Grey magisterial district in the Cape from a communal to an individual tenure system while placing the chiefdom at the centre of land allocation. This became a model for future land reallocation schemes by reinforcing colonial perceptions about individual property rights while vesting power for its distribution with the tribal authority (Ntsebeza 2000). The use of traditional authorities coincided with efforts by the colonial system to segregate the population through the use of the native reserves that were created by the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the Natives Trust and Land Act of 1936. The native reserves laid the groundwork for political and economic segregation during apartheid by establishing territories for the African population, while designating tribal authorities as the prevailing governance institution (Ntsebeza 2000; King 2005). The Natives Land Act was particularly important in enforcing control over land allocation through the designation of the permission to occupy (PTO) system. The PTO system empowered tribal authorities to demarcate arable fields, residential plots, and communal grazing areas (Rangan and Gilmartin 2002). PTOs were distributed to residents as land title but were often exploited by traditional and colonial authorities (Claassens 2000; Ntsebeza 2000).

The native reserves and empowerment of traditional authorities during the colonial period facilitated the apartheid era construction of separate spaces. The bantustans expanded upon the native reserves to forcibly segregate the African population. The bantustans were justified by apartheid ideologues on the belief that these territories better represented African cultural systems. African populations were viewed as tribal and culturally distinct, which necessitated their separation to develop independently of the white state. Several key legislative acts following the 1948 elections facilitated the construction of the bantustan apparatus. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 established tribal, regional and territorial authorities based on ‘traditional methods of tribal government’ that were later regarded as ‘national structures’ (Malan and Hattingh 1976, 8). This was followed by the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959 that gave explicit recognition to eight ‘black national units’. The White Paper that accompanied the Act indicated a national commitment to the movement of these units towards self-governing status (Malan and Hattingh 1976). This demonstrated the intention of the apartheid government towards ‘separate development’, whereby the bantustans would eventually become independent through the realization of their distinctive development path. Jones (1999) explains that the Bantu Self-Government Act provided the framework for the bantustans by reinforcing territorial division and empowerment of the chieftaincy. As Jones (1999, 583) states, ‘By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the maintenance of white supremacy was bound up with conferring a semblance of viability upon these peripheral regions. This strategy was promoted on the basis of economic development and also, importantly, the construction of ethnic and political identities within the homelands’.

National views of the bantustans as legitimate cultural constructions were represented in state documents at the time, which demonstrated a paternalistic view of African cultural systems that simultaneously understood them as nascent states. While not all of its recommendations were enacted, the Tomlinson Commission Report (1955) was instrumental in apartheid spatial policy by articulating the need for racial segregation and separate development. The Report (1955, 101) indicated that ‘Our legislative policy, therefore, attempts to bring about territorial separation – or a large measure of it – and thus also (territorial) separateness as regards political and social development’. Separate development was predicated on the establishment of separate territory, the creation of individual and communal development opportunities, self-government, and economic opportunity (Tomlinson Commission Report 1955). Subsequent documents further reinforced the perceived cultural and economic advantages of racial segregation. Much of the justification was framed in blatantly paternalistic language, in which African under-development was seen largely as the consequence of cultural differences rather than national policies. Africans were presented as tribally based, subsistence oriented and either unwilling or unable to absorb the Western value system (Tomlinson Commission Report 1955; South Africa Department of Information 1967; South Africa Information Service 1973; Malan and Hattingh 1976). These supposedly inherent cultural differences placed the government in a position of trusteeship to facilitate separate development. As the State Department of Information explained:

History placed the White nation of the Republic in a position of guardianship over these Black peoples. The present government faced up to the many obligations that this relationship entailed, including not only the moral obligation to respect and conserve the ethnic integrity of each group, but also the difficult task of preparing each nation for ultimate self-determination. These obligations still form the basic tenets of the government’s separate development policy, in terms
of which the main Black peoples are treated by the White nation as potential independent nations, embryonic ethno-political communities already far advanced along the road to self determination.

State Department of Information (1974, 26)

Similarly, the South Africa Information Service (1973, 30) stated, ‘Each of the different black nations in South Africa, we believe, should have the opportunity to exercise its basic right to determine for itself its own future. Nothing should prevent each of these black nations from becoming independent in the fullest sense’. The national government therefore utilized specific discourses of development and cultural identity to justify the apartheid system.

As apartheid policies became more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, the national government concentrated on moving the bantustans towards independence (see Figure 1). The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 provided homeland citizenship regardless of whether it was desired or not. Four homelands, Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei, were eventually granted independence by the apartheid government, although none were internationally recognized. The remaining six were given self-governing status. With the expansion of racial segregation in the 1960s and 1970s, the bantustans became the central location for large segments of the African population. It is estimated that during apartheid roughly 3.5 million people were relocated (Unterhalter 1987), and from 1960 to 1980 the proportion of the total black population living in the bantustans increased from 39 to 53% (Platzky and Walker 1985). Wotshela (2004) indicates that relocation occurred primarily through farm removals, although bantustan consolidation, urban removal, and betterment programmes also played a role in forced resettlement.

There was much debate regarding the bantustans within academic research during apartheid. As some authors suggested, the bantustans were never intended as separate nations but as a supply of cheap labour for urban and peri-urban centres (Legassick 1974 1975; Legassick and Wolpe 1976). Pickles (1991) argues that the bantustans served a critical function to the operations of apartheid, and, as such, viewing them as a distinct periphery missed their degree of integration with the urban centres. Similarly, Pickles and Weiner asserted:

![Figure 1 The South African bantustans](image-url)

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Apartheid ideology and the institutions of regional development have fostered the notion of a dual economy – one first world, industrial, and dynamic, the other third world, agrarian, and static. As the revisionist histories of the 1970s and the new social histories of rural South Africa have shown, the South African space economy is a highly integrated industrial economy in which underdeveloped rural areas are embedded, albeit in regionally specific ways.

Pickles and Weiner (1991, 16)

Processes of economic development continued to deteriorate within the bantustans in the 1980s. The supply of cheap labour in these territories exceeded the demand, which was intensified by influx control and forced removals that were intended to keep rural residents out of the urban centres (Pickles 1991). Declines in the national economy and costs associated with maintaining the bantustans placed additional pressure upon the apartheid system and revealed the contradictions inherent to separate development. These pressures contributed to the eventual erosion of support for apartheid policies and the reincorporation of the bantustans prior to the 1994 democratic elections.

The bantustans in the new South Africa

Contemporary research on South Africa has detailed the various changes that have occurred in the former bantustans, including the opportunities for land reform and rural development, environmental change, and the effects of macro-economic policies (Levin and Weiner 1997; Weiner et al. 1997; Bond 2000; Ntsebeza 2000; Ramutsindela 2001; Ramutsindela and Donaldson 2001; Hart 2002; McCusker 2002 2004; Rangan and Gilmartin 2002; Slater 2002; King 2005 2006). Three themes of this research are particularly relevant to this special issue on environment and development within the former bantustans. Firstly, the macro-scale economic transition from apartheid to neoliberalism has increasingly attracted scholars, as the national government replaced the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) with the neoliberal Growth, Employment, and Redistribution programme (GEAR). Several authors recount how neoliberalization became the currency of the African National Congress (ANC) government that translated into direct impacts within urban and rural environments (Bond 2000; Hart 2002; Ntsebeza 2002; Peet 2002; Tsheola 2002; Magubane 2004). The transformation of fundamental economic guiding principles away from socialism, while beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bond 2000), was fully implemented in 1996 when the government announced its commitment to GEAR. Reform in the former bantustans would have to wait for the long-promised redistribution through growth scenario to unfold. In the meantime, it has been argued that reform projects were unable to gain a foothold in an unreformed and sometimes hostile meso-economic environment (McCusker 2002 2004).

Secondly, assessments of livelihood systems and chronic poverty continue to attract significant attention to the household-level effects of economic change in rural areas and in burgeoning urban townships (Carter and May 1999 2001; Murray 2000; Motloung and Mears 2002; Serumaga-Zake and Naudé 2002; Aliber 2003). Several authors have commented on local diversification within the former bantustans through livelihood production systems (Francis 2002; McCusker 2002; Slater 2002; King 2006), governance institutions (King 2005), and/or gender (Bob 2001; Rangan and Gilmartin 2002). Shackleton et al. (2001, 582) explained the important link between livelihoods and ‘land-based strategies’, especially given that earlier research has ‘overlooked the direct-use value derived by most households from a large number of products resulting from land-based livelihood activities’ (see also Dowie et al. 2000; Shackleton et al. 2000). These studies demonstrate that households continue to employ a diverse range of livelihood systems that shape political, economic and environmental landscapes in rural and urban areas. Additionally, they reveal significant diversification at regional, community and household scales that are often the product of apartheid spatial planning. Greater attention to livelihood systems within the former bantustans is needed, therefore, to understand properly the trajectories of land reform, development, and environmental change in the post-apartheid era.

Thirdly, land use change has been less well defined and less frequently identified as a key issue, but is poised to become more pressing as competing interests continue to stake claims to the productive resources throughout South Africa. Often framed under the rubric of environmental management, land use change remains an important political, economic, and environmental issue. Studies on migration patterns and livelihood systems demonstrate that rural populations are coalescing around service delivery points. Access to various environmental resources, including land for farming and communal areas that are the locations for critical resources, is under negotiation between the traditional authorities and municipalities (Claassen 2000; Ntsebeza 2000; King 2005). The democratic transition has presented an opportunity as well for various institutions to reconceptualize development in ways that advance their particular agendas. These shifts demonstrate that attention to

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Why the bantustans again?

The papers in this special issue address a variety of topics within the former bantustans that cut across social, political, economic and environmental processes. Drawn from these case studies, we suggest that several themes are evident that warrant continued attention. Firstly, regardless of the location of research, the contributors demonstrate the persistence of the bantustans in post-apartheid South Africa. In his paper, King argues that the framing of the bantustans by the apartheid government, through developmental and cultural discourses, has continued in the post-apartheid era. The former KaNgwane bantustan is being reconceptualised through a neoliberal tourist discourse that structures the opportunities available to rural populations. As King demonstrates, these discourses are often disconnected from contemporary livelihood and environmental systems within the rural areas, and are therefore limited in the opportunities they generate for local residents. In a similar vein, Ramutsindela examines two central state policies, land reform and boundary demarcation, and argues that the ways they have unfolded, following the democratic elections, reproduces the geography of the bantustans. Ramutsindela asserts that the 2004 Communal Land Rights Act, for example, reinforces the settlement patterns of the former bantustans, while also strengthening the power of tribal authorities to allocate and register land rights in communal areas.

Secondly, several of the papers show the increasing spatial concentration and differentiation in both the former bantustans and townships. Just over 30 years ago, Michael Lipton (1977) provoked discussion about urban bias in Third World development by arguing that state development policy was routinely oriented toward urban areas to the detriment of rural spaces. In effect, the poverty in rural areas was not an innate condition attributable to some series of flaws in rural society, but rather a systemic bias against rural areas. McCusker and Ramudzuli argue that the emphasis upon service delivery, such as electrification or housing development, may be unintentionally replicating the geographies of apartheid. At the same time that people are locating near distribution points for basic services, they argue that the isolated become even more disempowered. This places additional burdens on government to provide effective services, and further isolates those households still dependent to some degree on agricultural and land-based livelihoods. Household and group interviews amongst people living in the former bantustans demonstrate the degree to which individual fortunes are placed in the urban and peri-urban areas. In their paper, McCusker and Ramudzuli call for a rural development programme that develops rural areas rather than concentrating people into ‘growth poles of poverty’. Although drawing upon research completed in different areas, Giannecchini, Twine and Vogel complete a detailed historical analysis of three rural villages and show that livelihoods are highly diversified and potentially insecure due to social-ecological erosion. Their paper offers a cautionary note that the interactions between biophysical and socio-economic changes need to be understood properly to engage in successful development and sustainable resource management in rural South Africa.

Thirdly, the papers reveal intense economic and environmental differentiation under neoliberalism in South Africa. While the new urban elite has benefited from market-led transformation, there is also a rural elite formation that is successfully accessing resources and opportunities presented by the democratic transition. In some rural areas, this has been prompted by the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development Programme (LRAD), which is intended to promote farmer settlement through the land reform programme. The role of land in livelihood systems is intensely debated (e.g. Jacobs et al. 2003; Hall 2004), but what is clear is that, for many rural people, their livelihood systems are just as vulnerable under neoliberalism as they were under apartheid. The papers in this special issue demonstrate that, given these shifts, there remains a continued need to interrogate social differentiation to understand the realities of local livelihood and environmental systems within the former bantustans.

It is apparent that these concerns cannot be addressed by one issue of a journal, but we plant them as guides for future discourse on South Africa’s separate spaces. We fear that the dissolution of the bantustans has left many commentators with the impression that the problems created by their construction have been solved. While the borders have been erased, we can only hope that the residual impacts of these spaces are recognized and that they call us to continue collective action against the lingering injustices of apartheid.

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