

Chronic and structural poverty
in South Africa: challenges for
action and research

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Abstract

Ten years after liberation, the persistence of poverty is one of the most important and urgent problems facing South Africa. This paper reflects on some of the findings of research undertaken as part of the participation of the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, in the work of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC), situates it within the broader literature on poverty in South Africa, and considers some emergent challenges. Though PLAAS's survey, being only the first wave of a panel study, does not yet cast light on short term poverty dynamics, it illuminates key aspects of the structural conditions that underpin poverty that lasts for a long time: the close interactions between asset poverty, employment vulnerability and subjection to unequal social power relations. Coming to grips with these dynamics requires going beyond the limitations of conventional "sustainable livelihoods" analyses and functionalist analyses of South African labour markets. The paper argues for a re-engagement with the traditions of critical sociology, anthropology and the theoretical traditions that allow a closer exploration of the political economy of chronic poverty at micro and macro level.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2004 South African Sociological Association Conference in Bloemfontein, 28-30 June. It is based on data collected in terms of a partnership between PLAAS and Chronic Poverty Research Centre. For more information about the research of the CPRC, see www.chronicpoverty.org. The underlying arguments about the nature of structural and chronic poverty were further developed with the support of a visiting researcher grant at the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town. Many intellectual debts have been incurred, particularly to Philippa Bevan, Thomas Cousins, Colleen Crawford-Cousins, Cobus de Swardt, Mickey Chopra, David Hulme, Uma Kothari, Jeremy Seekings and Gina Ziervogel.

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1 Introduction

This paper is an attempt to reflect on aspects of ongoing research by the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape and the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) in Manchester on chronic poverty in South Africa, and to chart key themes and questions for further investigation. It surveys some of the key findings from PLAAS's research so far, and highlights some of the issues that arise in attempting to make sense of them. These findings cannot yet speak to poverty dynamics in the way that classical longitudinal studies do – that has to await further waves in a planned panel study as well as further qualitative work – but they can illuminate aspects of the *structural* poverty closely linked to chronic poverty dynamics.

This poses interesting and challenging conceptual questions, for an attempt to engage with the structural dimensions of poverty and chronic poverty requires close attention to the complexity and diversity of the social dynamics and power relations that underpin it. The “livelihoods framework” (Chambers and Conway 1991, Scoones 1998) which is becoming increasingly hegemonic in scholarship on poverty, particularly within those traditions informed by British development economics, can make a contribution to this exploration, but by itself it is not enough. Closer to home, another set of limitations that needs to be questioned is the re-emergence in Southern African analyses of poverty of an unquestioned analytical liberalism. Both these traditions tend to depoliticise the study of poverty, underemphasizing the persistence of racialised hierarchies and unequal social power relations within modern South African society.

This paper is thus also a call for a broadening of the conceptual and theoretical terrain of poverty studies: for an enlargement of what can be said about poverty, and specifically for a re-engagement with the complexities of antagonism, power, political economy and agency. In such an engagement, the theoretical traditions of critical sociology and anthropology provide the tools for exploring complex questions about the interrelations between poverty, power relations, vulnerability and agency.

2 Persistent poverty and inequality in South Africa

The research referred to in this paper is based on data collected as part of a process of collaboration with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC), a ‘development research centre’ funded by the British Department for International Development (DfID). The CPRC aims to deepen understanding and focus attention on the ‘chronic poor’, which it defines as those who experience poverty for extended periods of time or throughout their entire lives, whose children are also likely to remain poor, and who have benefited least or are likely to benefit least from economic growth and national and international development initiatives (CPRC 2004). The CPRC’s approach to chronic poverty has been fairly eclectic – it has not tried to develop an overarching and rigorous conceptualisation of chronic poverty, preferring to define it extensively and empirically, by reference to the very heterogeneous nature of the groupings that can be defined as chronically poor. It functions as a broad church bringing together a wide range of approaches and methodologies to the study of chronic poverty (e.g. Hulme, Moore and Shepherd 2001), but methodologically and theoretically it has tended to live close to the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon development studies, relying on econometric approaches and various versions of ‘livelihood’ analyses (Hulme and Shepherd 2003; CPRC 2004).

This concern with chronic and long-lasting poverty is clearly of key relevance to South Africa. Evidence seems to indicate that poverty is proving to be much more intractable than initially hoped. Most of the current debate about poverty trends in South Africa is focussed on the social surveys and censuses that have been put into the field since 1994 by Statistics South

Africa.¹ Here, some caution is obviously needed. Developing a national statistics service that can accurately deliver reliable data on changing social profiles for the country as a whole has been a difficult process. Not least of the problems has been the insufficiencies of earlier censuses, which mean that until the late 1990s, national surveys were not guided by any adequate national sampling frame. This has meant that data from Statistics South Africa's October Household Surveys and Household Income and Expenditure Surveys have had to be re-weighted, and sometimes conclusions from this data are sensitive to the re-weightings (Fedderke, Manga and Pirouz 2004).

The overall picture, however, is one that indicates that much less progress has been made with poverty reduction than was initially hoped. Gross national income per capita has declined between 1998 and 2002 in spite of positive economic growth (May 2004). While somewhere between 1.4 million and 2 million new jobs were created, even greater increases in labour supply mean that the overall unemployment rate also increased (Casale *et al* 2005). Real average remuneration rose, but this benefited mostly those in well-paid and skilled jobs, while unskilled employment declined (Seekings 2003, Seekings *et al* 2003). Indications are that during the second half of the 1990s, overall levels of gross income inequality may have increased (Leibbrandt and Woolard 2001, Seekings *et al* 2003), though some have argued that an analysis of expenditure data does not support this conclusion (Fedderke, Manga and Pirouz 2004).

Linked to deepening inequality was persistent poverty. An analysis of income and expenditure data between 1995 and 2002 suggests that the proportion of people living below the 1995 poverty rate of R 354 per adult equivalent per month declined marginally from 51% to 48%, but the actual number increased by more than a million, while the number living in extreme poverty – defined as a dollar a day at purchasing power parity – increased from 9.4% (3.7 million) to 10.5% (4.7 million) (UNDP 2003). An analysis of the 1999 October Household Survey and the 2002 Labour Force Survey suggests that the number of people whose expenditure fell below R800 increased in that period by about 4.2 million; while the number of new poor may be as much as a million more than the increase in the population (Meth and Dias 2003).

Considering a wide range of poverty lines and measures, the most optimistic interpretation of the data for South Africa is that poverty has remained stagnant. A less rosy scenario would be that poverty has deepened: that inequality has increased and that the benefits of growth have not reached the poorest of the poor (Whiteford and van Seventer 2000; Hoogeveen and Özler 2005).

Although the South African government has denied that these trends indicate any fundamental problem with its macroeconomic strategies, there has been an increasing recognition that more is required in order to address the problems of those excluded from the economy. Perhaps the most important development here has been the so called 'two economies' debate, and Mbeki's assertion that many people in South Africa are trapped in a 'third world economy', existing side by side with the modern 'first world economy' but structurally disconnected from it (Mbeki 2003, Hirsh 2003). In the context of the South African macro-economic policy debate, this intervention signals a significant shift, indicating an acknowledgement of the limitations of 'trickle down' models.

The persistence and possible worsening of poverty and inequality despite the best intentions of a democratic government raises important questions about existing policy frameworks. One important set of questions relates to national debates about growth and job creation. Are

¹ These include the October Household surveys (conducted every year between 1994 and 1999), the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (1995 and 2000), the Labour Force Surveys run twice yearly since 2000, and the Census 1996 and 2001.

the policies and frameworks government has created – for example, through the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy - appropriate? Some commentators have argued that government has been unduly cautious (Makgetla 2004). Other critics have blamed, not GEAR, but what they see as overly rigid labour market policies. While these policies have protected those on the inside of the economy, they have encouraged tendencies to capital intensity and have discouraged South African employers from taking on more workers (Bhorat and Cassim 2004).

A second set of debates relate to welfare and social policy. There is widespread agreement that South Africa's current welfare provision is inadequate, and that existing protection has to be broadened (Nattrass and Seekings 2001, Seekings 2002, Sogaula *et al* 2002, Committee of Inquiry 2002, Barrientos 2003, Nattrass 2004, Makino 2004). Proposals for a universal basic citizen's grant (the "Basic Income Grant" or BIG) have dominated the debate. Its proponents have argued that the BIG, far from creating unaffordable dependency is essential to any attempt to empower the poor, and can play a massive role in stimulating aggregate local demand.

These debates are politically charged and are often informed by widely divergent ideological and political worldviews and deeply differing underlying assumptions about the nature of poverty and its causes in modern South African society. For this reason, facts by themselves cannot decisively settle these differences; but a closer look at the dynamics, causes and drivers of poverty can help to inform debate. We need to know more about the underlying causes of poverty: the factors that drive it and those which maintain it. We need to know more about the ways in which poor people cope with poverty, and the strategies by which they try to escape – or ensure that their children escape. We need to be able to understand what shapes the success and the failure of these strategies. And beyond that, we need to know what poverty means, and to understand the daily lived reality often only hinted at by aggregate statistics. These kinds of information and evidence can then serve to inform appropriate policies intended to reduce poverty and to alleviate its impact.

3 Researching chronic poverty

The CPRC's approach to chronic poverty is shaped by the broader intellectual tradition of British development economics, which has tended to be dominated by econometric approaches that have attempted to go beyond the limitations of static, once-off 'snapshots' by building a sequential picture of increases (or decreases) in welfare through subsequent 'observations' in a panel study (Baulch 1996; McKay and Lawson 2003; Baulch and Masset 2003). In South Africa, this kind of analysis of poverty dynamics was first made possible by the Kwazulu-Natal Income Dynamics (KIDS) study. For this study, 1200 African households in Kwazulu-Natal that had been surveyed in 1993 in terms of the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) under the leadership of the South African Labour Development Research Unit (SALDRU) were followed up and re-studied (Roberts 2000 ; Carter and May 2001, Leibbrandt and Woolard 2001).

Following KIDS, a number of longitudinal surveys have been initiated. One is the Centre for Social Science Research's Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS), which focuses on young adults in the greater Cape Town area;² another is PLAAS and the CPRC's livelihood panel study. The latter is concerned with broadening the regional focus of the KIDS study: though limited resources made it impossible to duplicate the KIDS study for the entire province, much can be learned by broadening the range of poverty scenes investigated. In South Africa, PLAAS's research on chronic poverty has focussed on bringing together quantitative and qualitative research on chronic poverty in three target sites, chosen to represent some of the typical

² For more information about CAPS, see http://www.ccsr.uct.ac.za/ssu_surveycaps.html.

'livelihood ecologies' of poverty in South Africa, and to look at urban rural linkages and migration dynamics very different from those that obtain in Kwazulu Natal.

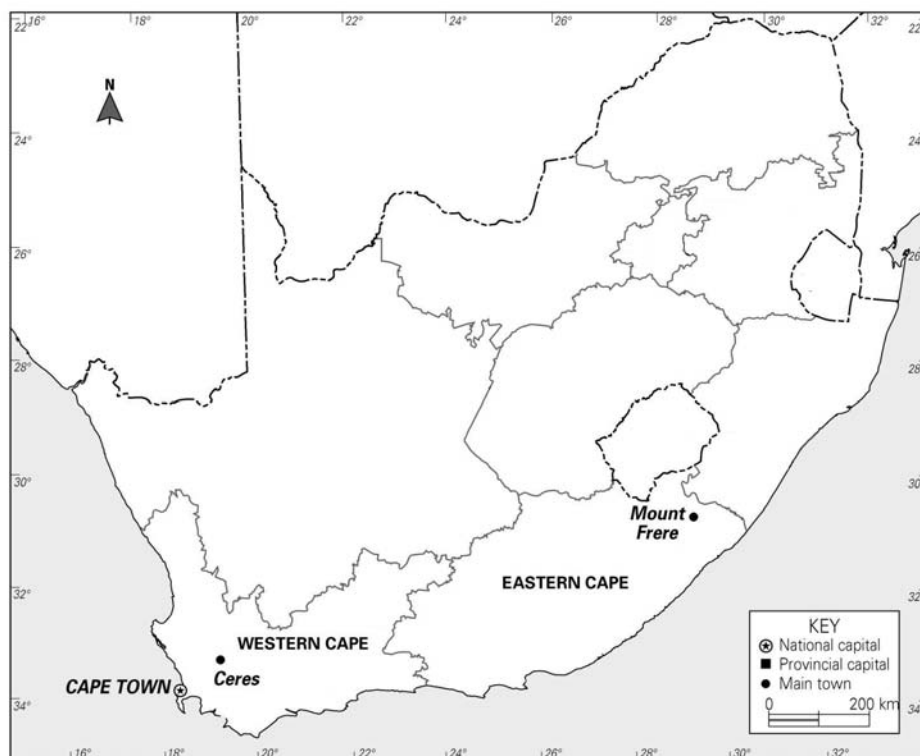
Three sites were chosen (see Figure 1):

1. The remote district of Mt Frere, a former homeland area in the Eastern Cape.
2. Three poor settlements (Bella Vista, Nduli and Op die Berg) in the rural farming town of Ceres, one of the centres of South Africa's highly industrialised deciduous fruit export industry.
3. The African townships of Khayelitsha and Nyanga East in metropolitan Cape Town.

An important component of the research has been the development of detailed panel data studies of poor people's livelihoods in these contexts. The first wave of this study was implemented in 2002: the survey (random samples of 733 households in Mt Frere and 625 in Cape Town, and a census of 540 households in four poor enumerator areas in Ceres,) went well beyond income and expenditure to explore a wide range of livelihood components including human capital, household assets, access to services, debts, vulnerability, geo-social integration, informal and formal social networks, and health issues. In Mount Frere and Khayelitsha this was followed up by more detailed surveys looking at day-to-day household food reserves. This data was supplemented in Ceres by a series of semi-structured follow-up interviews and life histories (e.g. Arnall *et al* 2004, Ally 2005).³

Secondly, PLAAS's work has focussed on taking the focus of chronic poverty studies beyond the focus on monetary fluctuations. One reason for this is the need to go beyond *income*

Figure 1: CPRC target sites in South Africa (map by John Hall)



³ Some of the insights, particularly on Mt Frere and Khayelitsha, have been shaped by ongoing qualitative work done by Andrew Skuse and Thomas Cousins as part of a DFID project on *Information society: emergent technologies and development communities in the South*, which is being

dynamics in the assessment of poverty, and to develop broader focus on multidimensional deprivation (Hulme and Shepherd 2003). Another is that the econometric exploration of the length of income poverty spells needs to be complemented by the underlying *structural* dimensions that render people vulnerable to being poor for 'long periods of time'. The problem with basing the definition of chronic poverty mainly on the distinction between '*chronic*' and '*transitory*' in sequential observations of income and expenditure is that it can lead the focus away from many of those who are likely to remain poor for long periods of time due to their 'structural' position – that is to say, the way they are positioned in society by their access to resources and the social power relations within which they exist - but whose incomes happen to be above the poverty line in one or more spells (Carter and May 2001, du Toit 2005). Addressing this problem requires an ontological rather than a measurement-based approach to defining chronic poverty (Bevan 2004). The CPRC-SA survey as it stands cannot yet cast light on income and poverty dynamics – that has to await the second wave of its study, planned for mid 2006 – but its focus on multidimensional deprivation allows for some initial identification of the various components of structural poverty. This paper seeks to synthesise some of the key findings thus far and to explore the implications both for practical policy and for further research.

4 Survey of poor and chronically poor livelihoods

We begin with a discussion of the most important patterns revealed in the livelihood profiles and subsequent studies in the target areas. This is a challenging task. In many ways the interpretations below are provisional, and delineate patterns and phenomena that require more investigation. Furthermore, the dynamics described here are in many ways irreducibly local in nature: although there are broadly recurring themes and patterns, the processes that cause and reproduce poverty always need to be understood with reference to the specific configurations of the political economies, local geographies and specific histories of the contexts in which they exist. Within the limitations of this paper, it will be impossible to do justice to the full complexity of these local dynamics. These are in any case described in more detail in separate publications (du Toit 2004b; De Swardt 2004a; De Swardt 2004b; Arnall *et al* ; Du Toit, Skuse and Cousins 2005; Ally 2005). Here, the aim is to identify some of the cross-cutting themes and patterns while not losing sight of local specificities.

4.1 Poverty, deprivation and unemployment

An initial exploration of some of the key indicators of deprivation presents a fairly straightforward picture of the extent and depth of poverty in the different sites (Table 1). All three places are marked by intense and widespread poverty (the low Gini coefficients partly reflect the large numbers of extremely poor people); but within that, 'monetary' poverty as well as reports of 'subjectively experienced' deprivation are clearly much more intense in Mount Frere than in Cape Town's African suburbs, while Ceres does significantly better than both.

This fairly straightforward ranking of regions in terms of the depth and prevalence of poverty conceals some important complexities. First, it obscures the underlying diversity and heterogeneity of the different 'poor' populations: poverty and deprivation in Cape Town's African townships, for instance, appears to differ significantly from suburb to suburb, while deprivation and monetary poverty in Nduli, the African settlement in Ceres, seems similar in depth and intensity to that experienced in Cape Town (see Table 2).

Table 1: Aspects of poverty and deprivation in the research sites

	Mt Frere	Cape Town Urban	Ceres
Monetary poverty (mean expenditure per adult equivalent per month) ⁴	R 164.55	R 252.10	R 399.47
Households with expenditure below R 560 per adult equivalent ⁵	96%	63%	80%
Households with expenditure below R 280 per adult equivalent	85%	49%	49%
Gini Coefficient for household expenditure	0.40	0.43	0.41
Households with food expenditure more than 40%	93%	94%	90%
Households reported as 'often' experiencing:			
<i>Going without sufficient food</i>	23%	31%	17%
<i>Going without medical care</i>	16%	12%	8%
<i>Going without clean drinking water</i>	40%	9%	6%
<i>Going without sufficient fuel for heating or cooking</i>	5%	20%	15%
<i>Going without sufficient shelter</i>	13%	38%	12%
<i>Feeling unsafe due to crime</i>	2%	9%	13%

Table 2: Some key poverty indicators for Cape Town and Ceres, broken down by sub-site

	Expenditure per a.e. per month	'Often' went without sufficient food	'Often' went without sufficient fuel	'Often' went without sufficient shelter
Urban Cape Town				
Browns Farm	R 174.51	35%	20%	46%
Village 4	R 191.62	64%	45%	55%
Lusaka	R 220.01	36%	36%	36%
KTC	R 226.88	25%	25%	50%
Site C	R 229.88	30%	24%	38%
Site B	R 242.70	32%	17%	27%
Barcelona	R 273.05	43%	23%	50%
Town 2	R 273.90	28%	14%	38%
Samora Machel	R 294.25	24%	20%	39%
Village 2	R 309.67	20%	25%	15%
New Cross Roads	R 318.01	14%	9%	14%
Ceres				
Nduli Mooiblom	R 272.42	36%	29%	33%
Nduli hostels	R 289.42	19%	23%	33%
Bella Vista	R 391.76	15%	17%	1%
Op die Berg	R 520.27	4%	1%	1%

⁴ For calculating child-adult equivalencies and scale economies, see Leibbrandt and Woolard 2001. The child-adult equivalence was taken as 0.5, and the factor for economies of scale was 0.9.

⁵ R 354 at 1995 values.

Second, these indicators of deprivation and poverty reflect situations that are themselves the outcomes of the complex local interplay of the underlying factors that enable (or undermine) livelihood activities and coping strategies. These dynamics relate to and are shaped by the political economy of poverty and livelihoods: the local configuration of asset distribution and social power relations that make up the context within which people make their living. Some aspects of these local formations of power are cross-cutting, and relate to the larger structural and political context of South African society and economy, but these broader patterns and dynamics are always locally mediated.

On the whole, and at the broadest level, the most obvious and evident dimension of poverty revealed in the livelihood profiles is the depth of deprivation of key economic resources. This is a picture already familiar in the literature on poverty in modern-day South Africa:

- Firstly, as noted, livelihoods are characterised by significant asset poverty (see also Carter and May 1998, Carter and May 2001): households have low rates of access to productive resources, including the resources that would allow effective household-level food production.
- Secondly, partly because of the lack of access to the resources for food production and partly because of the high levels of monetization and integration into the broader economy, livelihood strategies are characterised by a high degree of cash-dependency.
- Thirdly, asset poverty and cash dependency become particularly serious in the light of low levels of education and the failure of the formal economy to produce sustained unskilled employment opportunities. Much more needs to be known about education levels (unfortunately the data in the PLAAS survey does not make the vital distinction between those who made it to St. 9 (Grade 11) and those who completed Grade 12. It is clear though that employment levels very low, but the unskilled jobs there are pay quite poorly, and employment, once gained, often seems insecure.

These patterns could be found with various degrees of intensity in Mount Frere, Ceres and Khayelitsha (see Table 3).

Table 3: Access to land, unemployment and food insecurity in the three target sites

	Mount Frere (N=733)	Cape Town (n=625)	Ceres (n=540)
Percentage of households with access to land for food gardening	87%	-	11%
Percentage of households owning livestock	83%	13%	1%
Percentage of households reporting cash income from land-based production	6%	3%	1%
Households with food expenditure more than 40% of total	93%	94%	90%
Percentage of households containing a member with St. 9 or 10 educational attainment	33%	48%	33%
Percentage of adults with paid work	23%	36%	59%
Percentage of households where no adults have paid work	40%	28%	16%
Percentage of individuals in permanent employment	14%	22%	26%
Percentage of households reporting loss of income by breadwinner in previous year	27%	32%	25%
Contribution of grants to income in grant-receiving households	79%	56%	54%
Percentage of households reporting going hungry in previous year	83%	80%	70%

So far so good: everything in this survey mirrors and repeats the patterns already found in many other studies of poverty and inequality in South Africa. The challenge, however, is to develop a closer understanding of the local political economy of poverty in each of these sites. This requires setting these data in the context of the highly distinctive local processes that give each area its own 'livelihood ecology'. These local livelihood ecologies need to be investigated in their own right (see du Toit 2004b, Du Toit Skuse and Cousins 2005) . At most, it is possible to sketch key features in the broadest possible way.

In Mount Frere, for instance, the survey seemed to find higher levels of access to land. Severe biophysical constraints, lack of infrastructural investment (more than 61% of respondents relied on streams or ponds for water) changing intra-household power relations and the poor returns on agricultural labour meant that access to land did not enable poor people to meet any but a fraction of their food needs through own production (for the broader literature on de-agrarianisation see e.g. Bryceson 1997). Agriculture plays a vital but supplementary role in a layered, informal 'relational economy' structured by complex relationships of kinship, patronage and exchange, and which has taken shape around the spatial networks, flows, and connections created by more than a century of migration and capital penetration (du Toit, Skuse and Cousins 2005). A key question for research is to tease out how this relational economy is affected by the impact on migration patterns and household accumulation strategies of the downturn in the mining economy, and the highly variable *gendered* ways in which this has affected different groupings in rural Transkei society.

In Ceres, economic stress and deprivation is caused by very different dynamics. Here, the agrarian economy is highly productive – but ownership of that economy is concentrated in the hands of a small, landed white elite knit closely together through kinship, economic alliances, and political affiliation. This concentration of economic power and close social integration has enabled tight political and social control – a control only partially interrupted and diluted by democratic transition (du Toit 2004b). The integration of the agrarian economy into global markets has coincided with the increasing buyer-drivenness of the commodity chain in fresh fruit (Barrientos 2000, 2001; Raikes and Gibbon, 2000). Producers have experienced growing pressures on margins as well as higher levels of risk; partly in response to this, the fruit industry has seen an uneven but significant trend towards casualisation and externalisation (du Toit and Ally 2004; Barrientos and Kritzinger 2004; see also Simbi and Aliber 2000). Many workers previously given some protection by the implicit moral economy of racialised farm paternalism now find themselves having to make a living in informal settlements or RDP slums in rural areas. Though the agrarian economy still creates jobs, these are often seasonal and insecure (du Toit 2004b).

In Cape Town's African suburbs, poverty is locally shaped not by agrarian underdevelopment or by agro-industrial rationalisation but by the racial and spatial geo-politics of the post-industrial metropolitan labour market. Clearly migrancy stemming from the collapse of the homeland economy is one part of the picture; another is the development path of Cape Town's economy, which has heavily emphasised high-skilled manufacturing and the service sector. The continued spatialisation of life and work according to clearly marked and yet thoroughly naturalised divisions (Robins 2002, Grunebaum and Henry 2003) further perpetuate the chasm between insiders and outsiders, relegating the chronic poor to unsafe and crime-ridden peri-urban racial ghettos. In the survey, 46% of those who have already been living at their present address for more than five years were said *only* to be able to speak Xhosa – a powerful indication of the social and cultural isolation of Khayelitsha from the rest of Cape Town (it is also interesting to note that 18% of those who were reported to have no English had passed Standard 8 (Grade 10) or higher.). In Cape Town - still one of the more white-dominated urban economies in South Africa - recent migrants who are unable to speak English or Afrikaans, and who are unconnected to the personal and informal networks on which access to unskilled jobs often seem to depend, are at a massive

disadvantage. An in-depth understanding of poverty therefore depends on tracing in more detail the way in which race interacts with spatial integration and disconnection.

4.2 'Social capital' and its limitations

These relatively familiar patterns of *economic* deprivation, stress and vulnerability are central to structural poverty, but they are only part of the story. Economic vulnerability feeds into – and its other impacts are often amplified or exacerbated – by the vulnerable, stressed, power-laden and conflictual nature of the underlying social networks on which individuals and groups rely for identity, survival and dignity. Although informal and formal social networks and connections and the practices that sustain them – the phenomena that are nowadays typically and rather imprecisely referred to as 'social capital' – do play a vital role in cushioning the impact of poverty-related shocks and stresses, their contribution is limited and ambiguous.

Some of this is evident from the survey data. The utility of 'social capital' is limited by the scarcity of resources that can be redistributed and shared by way of these social networks. Dependency ratios are very high; low rates of access to employment and low income from wages and grants mean that the resources that can be redistributed between individuals and groups are very limited.

Table 4: Membership of organizations in the research sites

	Mt Frere	Cape Town Urban	Ceres
Median Dependency Ratio ⁶	0.200	0.333	0.400
Informants reporting 'no-one to turn to' in time of need	0	6%	3%
Households receiving gifts of food or money in previous month	20%	10%	12%
Percentage of households containing members of...			
Church	80%	54%	78%
Funeral association	71%	58%	27%
Stokvel/Umgalelo ⁷	3%	1%	1%
Groceries group ⁸	18%	7%	2%
School committee	12%	4%	5%
Community Credit Association	8%	3%	1%

⁶ Ratio of income providers (grant holders plus adults with any kind of paid work) to total number of household members. The ratio for Ceres is quite high because of the large number of one-person households in the old African hostels.

⁷ Colloquial name for informal community savings associations.

⁸ A group for collective or bulk buying of groceries and staples.

Formal organisational life seems in some cases thin, and often appears fragile and subject to conflict. Rates of membership of formal organizations other than churches – particularly co-operative organizations – seem low, particularly in the urbanised contexts of Ceres and urban Cape Town (see Table 4). It seems the social upheaval that stems from migrancy – both from the Eastern to the Western Cape and from farm to town – plays a role in weakening certain kinds of social bonds through distance and displacement. In urban Cape Town particularly, community relationships seem as much characterised by conflict as by co-operation and trust. In 2001 murders accounted for a 133 and 120 deaths per 100 000 persons in Nyanga and Khayelitsha respectively (as opposed to 35 for Cape Town's wealthy southern suburbs (Scott *et al* 2001). Some 27 % of male mortality in Khayelitsha is attributable to homicide, while the same figure is 9% in the South Peninsula (Groenewald *et al* 2001).

But the problems go deeper than this. Part of the problem lies in the slipperiness of the concept itself, and the differing perspectives from which it is often approached (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Often it is simply a vague term (Ben Fine (2003) calls it 'plump and benevolent') for all the 'good things' that are imagined to exist within cohesive communities. At best, it is a rather imprecise term referring in part to social relations between individuals and within and between groups. A complicating factor is that the way in which these social relations work is also shaped by the underlying meaning-giving and meaningful practices, norms and ideologies that inform them, regulate them, and that shape the manner in which they allow for the distribution of resources. When considering these phenomena, therefore, the key question about them is not simply who has access to how much 'social capital' but rather its nature and configurations, and on the very specific content of these underlying cultural, ideological and discursive forms.

The character of the social power relations and the distribution of resources within them will have crucial implications for poor people. For instance, in contexts of generalised poverty, where claims on resources are largely not made of more wealthy patrons or benefactors, but circulate among the members of poor communities, whatever resources and income accrues to any individual is likely soon to be subject to counter-claims. As Fadeela Ally notes in her study of care chains and child care in Ceres (Ally 2005) a favour secured is also often a debt owed. As much as it is a buffer against shocks, the networks, practices and cultures that allow for these claims can therefore function as a brake to accumulation. This is likely to reduce the scope for the kinds of savings or investments that could lead to sustained escape from poverty.

As important are the underlying codes, cultural formations and meaningful practices that shape and regulate the use, distribution of and access to 'social capital'. These can work to marginalize and exclude people. In Ceres, the deeply embedded local discourses and practices of racial paternalism that structure the 'moral community' between white and coloured people (du Toit 1998) tends to construct African workers as outsiders: African workers' informal support networks are not plugged into the social relations of traditional farm paternalism in the same way that coloured workers' are (Arnall *et al* 2004). Another example lies in the highly gendered ways in which these sustaining social networks operate. In Ceres, Khayelitsha and in Mount Frere, the invisible and unpaid labour necessary for household reproduction is almost entirely done by women and girl children (du Toit 2004b). Research in Ceres indicates that 'care chains' and informal community networks that sustain households are almost exclusively worked by women (Ally 2005). While others benefit from the 'social capital' created by the willingness of women to conform to their expected gender roles, these social roles and the sanctions (including violence) that enforce them are also part of what keeps those women trapped in poverty.

4.3 Power relations and conflict

The stressed, conflictual, and under-resourced nature of the social networks that sustain community life and that could cushion people against particular blows and shocks also needs to be linked to their power-laden and unequal nature. The issue is not simply that social networks are inadequate, overburdened, stretched or subject to conflict, but also that poor people are vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by those who are more powerful. In Mount Frere, for instance, a crucial role is played by a local rural elite – if that's an appropriate term for such a precariously positioned layer – principally defined through its access to positions in the public service (Skuse Cousins and du Toit forthcoming). Members of this elite are able to position themselves as gatekeepers to resources, institutions and other avenues to entitlement for those poorer than themselves, and to use this as a vehicle for seeking rents and income.

In Ceres, the local relationships between the poor and the powerful are shaped largely by the nature of racial farm paternalism and the ways in which it is being restructured. It should be quite obvious that insecurity of seasonal labour in the fruit industry and the insufficiency of incomes are both very much shaped by the broader power relationships – not only between landless workers and white owners, but also between those owners and the supermarkets and category managers on whom they ultimately depend (Raikes and Gibbon 2000, du Toit 2002 Barrientos 2000, 2001). What may be less obvious is the ways in which casualisation and externalisation have added an important new dynamic to these processes. Much work still remains to be done on comparing the welfare of ex-farm dwellers with those remaining on farms. And certainly it should be said that in some ways those with farm work are often better off than those without, if only because the alternative to farm work is often simply unemployment. Still, it seems that farm workers' journey from farm to town has not involved a shift from 'subject' to citizen. Often, their powerlessness, vulnerability, lack of income and need for credit mean that they simply end up exchanging one patron (the paternalist white farmer) for another (gangsters, labour brokers and credit racketeers) (du Toit and Ally 2004, du Toit 2004b).

These power relations are only imperfectly captured in present-day development studies literature. The notion of a 'Faustian bargain' in which poor people opt for dependency in exchange for 'security', choosing 'risk management in the present' above investment in the future (Wood 2003) does not capture the desperation, opacity and complexity of these choices, slippery slopes and *faits accomplis*. For one thing, Doctor Faust in the story was in a position to make a choice. For poor people, dependency very often was never a choice, and subjection to exploitative relationships may *worsen*, not achieve, security (du Toit 1993). It is worth remembering that a significant proportion of respondents in indebted households in the PLAAS study (23% in Ceres, 33% in Urban Cape Town and 67% in Mount Frere) reported that they had gotten into debt *to buy food*.

5 Aspects of structural poverty

5.1 Chronic poverty and structural poverty

So far, this account has concentrated on some of the key patterns that emerge from an overview of the livelihood profiles surveyed in the PLAAS research; it has also highlighted some of the key features of the local political economies and social power relations within which these livelihoods are pursued. But analysis needs to go further: besides describing and accounting for chronic poverty, we need to theorise it, and to develop strong conceptual frameworks that allow us to understand how poverty and inequality are perpetuated.

The first point relates to poverty and chronic poverty itself. Earlier scholars of chronic poverty in South Africa have tended to argue that, contrary to experience elsewhere, chronic poverty and severe poverty do not necessarily overlap (Aliber 2001:13). This seems to be because a large proportion of movement in and out of poverty are essentially linked to earning volatility (Cichello *et al* 2003): an analysis of the KIDS data has shown that though demographic events (changes in household size, etc) do play a significant role in mobility, changes in income account for the majority of households that fell below or moved above the poverty line (Leibbrandt and Woolard 2001). The high dependency of poor people in South Africa on paid employment, it has been argued, mean that even severely poor people can become 'non-poor', as the jargon has it, when they manage to get access to a job (Aliber 2001).

Of course, if poverty is defined mostly in terms of access to income, then poverty assessments in a country like South Africa, which is characterised by high levels of de-agrarianisation, will be very sensitive to changes in employment status. But in the absence of an awareness of the other important factors that impact on welfare and well-being, particularly over time, the argument is in danger of becoming circular. Looking at poverty multidimensionally and structurally, a much more complex picture emerges. The overall situation of the poor people surveyed in the three research areas is determined by interactions between asset poverty, cash dependency, labour market marginality and the thinness of social capital. *Ceteris paribus*, a brief spell of employment may make an important and temporary contribution, but calling a household 'non-poor' because they have a handhold on a job that temporarily raises their income above the food poverty line is to misunderstand their poverty.

This point is obviously linked to ongoing debates about the nature of poverty and the relation between monetary and 'capability' poverty (see du Toit 2005). It is also linked to a subtle ambiguity in the concept of chronic poverty itself. In the discourse of the CPRC, for instance, the term is used in two closely linked yet quite distinct senses. On the one hand, drawing on the literature on poverty spells, it is often defined in terms of its difference from *transitory* poverty – a difference that pivots on the length, regularity and recurrence of poverty spells. But the term is also used to denote poverty of long duration more generally, with a focus not on transitions above and below the poverty line as observed in regular panel studies, but to individuals' and households' long term livelihood careers. Though these two definitions may empirically overlap to some extent, they focus on very different things. In particular, understanding why poor people stay poor for long periods of time requires a close look at the underlying *structural* dimensions that may undermine people's attempts to escape poverty (Carter and May 2001, Adato, Carter and May 2004, Bevan 2004, du Toit 2005). This is a key point. In many cases, particularly in the vulnerable insecure low-skill labour market, brief spells of improved income should not be seen as changing people's structural poverty status. Though an increase of a few hundred Rand probably does improve welfare, people can hardly be said to have escaped poverty if the ways in which they are positioned in society by their access to resources and their insertion into social relations have not been changed.

Here, it is insightful to comment on the concept of vulnerability. This term, which is often used rather fast and loose in the literature, needs to be used with some care. Vulnerability cannot simply be understood, as econometric studies sometimes do (e.g. Borat *et al* 2001), in terms of poverty-sensitive segmentation of the labour market in order to identify who is 'vulnerable to poverty'. Such an approach is highly non-dynamic and misses the *longitudinal* and *temporal* aspects of vulnerability, reducing it simply to the likelihood of someone being in a particular income segment at a particular moment. A much more rigorous approach comes from the literature on natural hazards and epidemiology.⁹ Scholars drawing on these traditions argue that vulnerability needs to be understood as a condition of exposure and

⁹ The arguments set out here have been strongly influenced by discussions with Gina Ziervogel and Emma Archer.

sensitivity to shocks and stresses - it characterises those who are 'at the tipping point,' where a small push can cause an irreversible or hard-to-recover-from decline in welfare (Devereux 2002, Alwang *et al* 2001). Furthermore, vulnerability is best conceptualised as a property of *systems* or *networks*, not individuals (thus even when we are speaking about vulnerable groups, we are really saying something about the systems upon which they depend). Finally it is a complex judgement about the *sensitivity* of those networks to particular impacts and their *resilience* or the ability to recover (for a broader survey of the literature on vulnerability see du Toit and Ziervogel 2004).

These issues are central to the understanding of chronic poverty, taken in its broader sense of 'poverty of long duration'. Structural poverty is crucially shaped - and is likely to be maintained - by the interactions between asset poverty, cash hunger, job insecurity and unemployment, the 'thin-ness', limited nature, and ambiguity of 'social capital' and their subjection to exploitative power relations. These interactions renders sustained escape from poverty quite unlikely (Carter and May 2001; Adato, Carter and May 2004).

5.2 Social exclusion and adverse incorporation: beyond the 'two economies'

But poverty is not something that is only perpetuated by the processes and dynamics that can be grasped at the micro-level of individual or household level resources or strategies. These processes are themselves sustained and perpetuated by the broader and thoroughly historical systems of social relations in which they are embedded. Much work has of course been done on this in South Africa, and in the concluding sections of this paper, some comments will be offered on the limited ways in which this work has been used in debates on poverty. For the moment, it will be enough to say that it is not adequate simply to characterise chronic poverty or inequality as 'largely a legacy of apartheid and past race-based policies' (Leibbrandt *et al* 2001:205) – as if those policies can be understood separately from the processes of economic development within which they were so profoundly intertwined.

Neither is it enough to conceptualise the situation of the chronic poor in terms of 'social exclusion.' This notion has been touted as an important aid to understanding the disempowering and marginalizing effects of poverty not only in the highly industrialised countries where the concept was first used, but also increasingly with reference to poverty in 'developing countries' (De Haan 1998, De Haan and Maxwell 1998). These arguments are considered in another paper (du Toit 2004a); here, all that will be said is that though the notion of social exclusion may function as a suggestive *metaphor*, and focussed attention on the connections between poverty and discriminatory, conflictual or power-laden social processes, it also carries significant dangers. This is partly because it is not a coherent analytical term, but largely a *policy* buzzword culled from European debates about the welfare state (Silver 1994). Part of its success and attraction seems to lie in its very lack of any coherent meaning or conceptual rigour, and its availability for appropriation by both centre-left and right (du Toit 2004a). More to the point, this conceptual baggage brings a real risk of oversimplification. The complex and dynamic processes of marginalization that form such an important dimension of chronic poverty require us to go beyond the simplistic dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion and the assumption that inclusion is necessarily beneficial; often the problem is not that poor people have simply been excluded from particular institutions, resources or larger processes, but that they have been *included* on inequitable or invidious terms (Apthorpe 1999, Bracking 2003, Murray 2001).

These general comments clearly pertain fairly directly to what has become known in South Africa as the "two economies" debate – the argument, advanced in August 2003 by President Mbeki, that the persistence of poverty in South Africa is due to the "structural disconnection" between the "first world economy" and a "third world" economy (Hirsch n.d.; Mbeki 2003). This argument represents an important advance and opportunity, insofar as it represents

Government recognition of the limitations of trickle-down approaches to poverty. But, as Webster has pointed out, powerful and suggestive as the metaphor of a separate “third world economy” is, it is not a helpful way to understand the very complex actual relationships that persist between the highly developed ‘core’ of the South African economy and its underdeveloped and impoverished periphery (Webster 2004). Shack dwellers in Khayelitsha, seasonal farm workers in Ceres, and villagers in Mount Frere cannot be meaningfully described as being ‘excluded’ from the South African economy; their impoverishment, on the contrary, is directly related to the dynamics of 150 or more years of forcible *incorporation* into the South African economy and racialised capitalism. Indeed, it may well be that many of the obstacles to accumulation from below among poor people are linked very closely to the *depth* of corporate penetration of the South African economy as a whole, which can be argued significantly to reduce the scope for accumulation from below by small, micro and medium enterprises.

A rather more sophisticated analysis is advanced by Seekings, Nattrass and Leibbrandt, who have argued that democracy and growth in South Africa have benefited not the rural poor and marginalized landless workers, but the urban insiders: petty civil servants and the core working class that constitute the ANC’s most powerful and well organised constituencies. Thus, the Apartheid wedge between white and black has been recycled into a divide between insiders and outsiders (Nattrass and Seekings 2001, Nattrass 2004). Though it is probably an exaggeration to say that South Africa has experienced jobless growth (Bhorat and Cassim 2004) that growth has largely benefited those who could enter skilled and better-paid employment (Seekings 2003, Bhorat *et al* 2001). While there have been more well-paid jobs this trend has gone hand in hand with an emphasis on increasing productivity, restructuring, externalisation and downsizing. Government industrial strategy has focussed on shifting the economy to a more skill-intensive growth path - and the biggest losers have been the unemployed, unskilled workers, and those who have not been able to gain or hold on to employment have not benefited (Seekings 2003, Leibbrandt, Nattrass and Seekings 2003, Nattrass 2004). Partly as a result of these dynamics, the number of poor people in South Africa has increased by at least two million (Meth and Dias 2004).

Ultimately, however, Nattrass, Seekings and Leibbrandt still tend to emphasise how the functioning of the labour market has been distorted by sectional interests, and stress the role of labour market rigidity (Nattrass and Seekings 2001) and trade union wage demands (Nattrass 2004) as obstacles to labour-intensive job creation. It is an open question, however, how much of capital-intensity and employers’ increasing aversion to employing cheap labour can simply be ascribed to these ‘policy distortions’ and ‘labour market inefficiencies’. Those factors are likely to be only part of the story. Firstly, the role of the structure of the Apartheid economy and the extreme nature of South African inequality in impeding growth should also be recognised (Makgetla 2004; see also May, Carter and Padayachee 2004). Secondly, the argument about rigidity and inefficiency seems rather decontextualised in the light of the deeply racialised and authoritarian history of South African capitalism, state formation and modernisation. The landless unemployed, the marginal working class, workers and employers do not encounter each other as abstract *homo economicus* but as individuals and groups drawing in all their decision-making on cultural repertoires, political and ideological resources, frameworks of identity and assumptions thoroughly structured by more than 300 years of violent, racist, exploitative and brutalising history. *Both* trade unions’ proclivity for highly adversarial styles of organization *and* employers’ reluctance to take on unskilled workers (especially when those workers are black, have rights and make demands) need to be understood against the broader background of the South African addiction to cheap, docile labour without rights. This is a legacy that is as yet only imperfectly understood; but it is clear that it can neither be wished away nor left out of analysis.

Chronic poverty in South Africa is not a residue, the by-product of incomplete growth and modernisation, and the chronic poor are not simply those 'left behind' or 'not reached' by growth, or excluded by too-rigid labour laws. They are also the human wreckage cast aside along the path taken in the development of racialised capitalism, authoritarian state formation and top-down modernisation. These processes pushed people off the land and shook them out of the moral economies of pre-colonial existence to be made available as cheap labour, only for them to be abandoned after the 1970s by an economy running out of steam and apparently increasingly allergic to employing unskilled black workers - particularly, it must be said, if those workers had rights. The processes of impoverishment and marginalization that this entailed are fairly well understood; what needs to be explored in much more detail are the consequences of the way these processes destroyed and reconstituted the social bonds and networks that could serve to ameliorate the impact of poverty and deprivation.

6 Addressing Chronic Poverty

If chronic poverty is to be understood not only in terms of asset deprivation and lack of access to jobs, but also in terms of deeply entrenched dynamics of vulnerability, marginalization and powerlessness very particular challenges follow for poverty alleviation, pro-poor governance etc.. At present, there seems to be a consensus that these rely on no single 'magic bullet' (job creation, welfare expansion, land reform) but on a combination of a number of interlocking measures. But the structural aspects of poverty described here indicate that more is needed. Above all, interventions are needed (from citizens as well as from the state) to address vulnerability (reduce levels of risk and increase the capacity to recover from shocks) and to address disempowerment (create access to resources and promote self-organization). These are complex issues, and the present paper is probably not a suitable place to tangle with the significant technical complexities involved. Here, I offer a few general remarks.

6.1 Poverty monitoring, targeting and social protection

One important set of implications relates to the need for poverty monitoring and social protection to become more sensitive to the dynamics of chronic poverty, vulnerability and disempowerment. If policy is to support reduction of vulnerability and disempowerment, one important implication is that there is a need to think very carefully about targeting. Linking access to social protection – whether in the form of grants, indigent support or public works - very tightly to income e.g. through periodic means testing is a problematic approach. Temporary access to precarious sources of monetary income should not be the occasion for cutting off access to grants – particularly not when we bear in mind the significant costs involved in applying and re-applying for social assistance.

More generally, poverty monitoring should become much more focussed on assessing *vulnerability*. This poses significant challenges. For one thing, it will require going beyond poverty assessments focussing on income and expenditure levels. Some challenges may be relatively straightforward to meet – it should not be too hard, for example, to include assessments of the variability, seasonality and insecurity of income in national household income and expenditure surveys. Others will be rather more difficult. Vulnerability cannot be measured (Ellis 2003); and many of its key determinants cannot be quantified but require careful *qualitative* assessment (Du Toit and Ziervogel 2004). This is a particular challenge for governments, which tend to rely on simplifying, regularising and uniform optics when trying to 'read' society (Scott 1998). Though it is in principle possible to call for the blind spots involved in 'seeing like a state' to be corrected by ways of incorporating local, institutional and experiential ways of knowing (*ibid.*), this is rather more easily said than done (Du Toit and Ziervogel 2004).

6.2 Growth, job-creation and the labour market

The second set of challenges relate to the central issue of employment. Given the major role played by the formal labour market in the profile of poverty and inequality in South Africa (Bhorat *et al* 2001), there is a central emphasis on job creation and growth in the alleviation of poverty. It is however important to understand the very real limitations faced by any attempt to eradicate poverty through job creation. For one thing, there are very real structural constraints on the number of unskilled jobs that can be created in the South African economy in the first place (Makgetla 2004; Natrass 2004). For another, much depends on the nature of those jobs. It is probably dangerous to equate access to a job – any job - with an escape from poverty.

For this reason there are grounds for caution around Natrass and Seekings' assertion (Natrass and Seekings 2001) that large-scale creation of low-wage, flexible jobs could significantly eradicate poverty. It may be true that insecure income is better than nothing, but it may not facilitate the kinds of investment or the kinds of strategies that allow long-term and sustained escape from poverty (for an exploration of these issues, see Adato, May and Carter 2004). More than 90% of households with wage earners (and 88% of households with *permanent* wage earners!) in PLAAS's 2002 study of Cape Town's African poor lived below the food poverty line (at that time of R560 per adult equivalent per month). In Ceres, access to low waged - and for all intents and purposes, unregulated - harvesting jobs in the fruit sector, raised incomes while still allowing significant amounts of food insecurity (Du Toit 2004b). Such jobs may very well fail to reduce (and may even exacerbate) vulnerability. It appears that chronic poverty - and in particular, those aspects of chronic poverty that are closely linked to structural poverty - is related not simply to the scarcity of employment or to low levels of income, but also to the fragility and impermanence of employment at the very bottom end of the labour market (Leibbrandt, Natrass and Seekings 2003). Even now, however, it is clear that job creation strategies should go hand in hand with measures aimed at reducing risk and bringing some measure of income stability to the poor. For this reason, the broad agreement on the need to tighten the loose weave of social protection in South Africa is of crucial importance.

6.3 Empowerment, participation and conflict

I have argued above that the most fateful aspect of long – term poverty is its *disabling* dynamic, the way in which it saps the ability of individuals and groups of people to constitute themselves effectively as agents. As important as reducing the levels of risk and vulnerability among poor people is the challenge of encouraging processes of self-organization and empowerment. The South African Government has recognised the importance of this in its emphasis on partnership, and on ensuring participation. But participation has often been based on simplistic assumptions about buy-in - and by a tendency to treat the poor as if they are homogenous (Kothari 2001, Eyben 2003, Vaughan 2003). One of the most important issues in supporting the agency of poor people is how to deal creatively and realistically with the gender, racial and class conflicts that exist *within* poor communities and households – and how to ensure that the benefits accruing from development and black empowerment are not captured by often predatory local elites.

This should also be factored into debates about social protection. Though, considered in isolation, the broadening of access to social protection will increase general income levels, and may make a difference to money-metric assessments of poverty, the actual impact of such a rollout is likely to be highly mediated by the dynamics of local class relations and the relationship between poor people and their local elites. In contexts like the rural Transkei, where the food economy is highly penetrated by supermarket networks, and where access to communication and transport is simultaneously so vital and so monopolized by a fragile local elite, the supposed multiplier effects are likely to be low. Whether the broadening of access

to social protection is achieved through a BIG or through other means, this will have to be complemented by strategies that ensure that local entrepreneurship is configured to recycle money locally.

6.4 HIV/AIDS, waste life and forgotten lives

The most serious question, however, is the ability and scope for a social contract that includes the forgotten and marginalized chronic poor. Mark Duffield, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Zygmunt Bauman (2004), has argued that modern sovereignty and development policy have involved the development of differential ways of valuing life, where the mandate to protect and develop lives exists alongside processes of exclusion that define other lives as expendable - as those who can be killed without committing homicide (Duffield 2004:5). In South Africa, this issue has been raised in chilling form by Nicoli Nattrass, who has warned of the implications of the economic and political marginality of the chronic poor: a social policy geared only at promoting growth and sensitive only to the concerns of those who are not politically and economically disenfranchised could easily lead to a political calculation that prolonging the lives of the unemployed is not a political priority. Statistically speaking, after all, every HIV/AIDS death among the chronically poor would lead to a proportional increase in per capita income (Nattrass 2004). Such a scenario, Nattrass argues, can be avoided – but addressing HIV/AIDS and poverty (e.g. through HAART and through a more encompassing social protection policy) will lead to increased demands on the fiscus – and the question is what the scope is for a social accord in terms of which those who have benefited from South African growth will be prepared to tolerate increased levels of taxation.

7 Limits and challenges

Thus far, this paper has reflected on the livelihood surveys and follow-up research done in the course of PLAAS's chronic poverty research, and has explored some of the ways in which the findings of this research may lead to an understanding of the nature and causes of chronic poverty and the implications for policy. This research has raised a number of questions – questions not only about aspects of chronic poverty that need to be researched, but also about the methodological resources and theoretical frameworks that can be used to guide such research. These questions relate, ultimately, to the issue of the nature, scope and contribution of a *critical sociology* (as distinct from an *economics*) of chronic poverty.

It is significant that this question needs to be asked at all. It arises from a growing sense that much of the literature on poverty and chronic poverty is marked by a kind of blindness to 'the social' (and particularly to social *relations*) to history, and to politics: an economism and a reductionism that impoverishes debate. There are many strands to this. One strand relates to the development of South African scholarly debates since the early 1990s. Another strand relates to some of the key features of the frameworks of development studies in general - and the CPRC's conceptualisation of chronic poverty itself. The final sections of this paper consider some of these lacunae and propose some possible directions and conceptual reference points for a critical sociology of chronic poverty in South Africa.

7.1 Reductionism and functionalism

Perhaps one place to start is with a moment of reflection about the arguments about the relationships between poor livelihoods and the broader historical processes of capitalist development and Apartheid set out above. It is hard to explore these issues without an unsettling sense of repeating what has been said many times before, and of stating what seems to be so obvious as hardly to need any repetition. Arguments about the complex relationships between inequality, racial discrimination, economic growth, and what used, in

an earlier age, to be called capitalist accumulation, were after all, for a time, part of the stock in trade of South African social studies. One might think it is not necessary to belabour, once again, the point that it is necessary to be aware of these connections. Yet, it seems that some repetition is perhaps needed.

Why is this so? One of the most disquieting ironies about the field of poverty studies in South Africa is the return to centrality and hegemony of an essentially liberal framework of analysis. This framework divorces an understanding of the origins and legacy of the practices and policies of institutionalised racism from an account of the economic formations with the development of which they were so intimately entangled. The triumph – or should it be called the belated re-emergence - of liberalism in the analysis of South African inequality is one of the more interesting ironies of the intellectual history of South African social thought. For it does not seem to be the case that the arguments and analyses about the nature of South Africa's racial, social and economic formations developed in the course of two decades of radical and revisionist historiography have been refuted; if anything, a later generation of post-colonial and post-structuralist writers have built on and deepened those analyses. But these sophisticated modes of social analysis have for the most part been relegated to the sidelines. Other than criticisms of GEAR and South Africa's macroeconomic policy framework from the political left – criticisms that have at times attained a depressingly routine character - these more radical analyses have tended to be confined to largely academic debates, and have tended to be marginalized in the discussion of policy. Much of the present-day poverty literature proceeds simply by leaving aside the troubling questions raised by the sociological, anthropological and social-historical literature that flowed out of the revisionism of the 1980s, either disregarding it altogether or (which is even more troubling), citing seminal works without appearing to appreciate their import.¹⁰

This is not to diminish the very real insights that have been offered by econometric studies of poverty and development in South Africa in the last ten years. A huge contribution has been made by the quantitative rigour of recent analyses on class stratification (Natrass and Seekings 2001, Seekings 2003a, Seekings 2003b, Seekings *et al* 2003), labour market segmentation (Bhorat *et al* 2001) poverty trends (Meth and Dias 2004) and chronic poverty (Roberts 2000, Carter and May, 2001, Cichello *et al* 2003, Adato Carter and May 2004) that have resulted from ten years of applied economics.

Yet at times, econometric work on poverty can still display a vitiating reductionism — or (which is the same thing in a different guise) a dichotomy between, on the one hand, a normative, abstract, idealised and functionalist notion of markets and economies conceptualised independently of their social conditions of possibility, and on the other, the actual way (power-laden, structured by social antagonism, identity, culture, history and politics) in which those markets function.

Consider one leading study, in which Leibbrandt *et al*, for example, blame racially based inequality on “malfunctioning labour markets”(Leibbrandt, van der Berg and Bhorat 2001:1), and describe the problem of inequality and poverty in South Africa as a result of the fact that “Society is highly inefficient in converting economic resources into equitable social welfare outcomes” (*ibid.*). Seductive and appealing as these metaphors might be (surely it would be good if labour markets could ‘function’ to significantly reduce unemployment, or if society was ‘efficient’ in ensuring equitable welfare outcomes!) they are not very helpful. Firstly, they tend to be rather naive about the persistence, mutability *and modernity* of the processes they tend to conceive of as ‘anachronisms’ (Leibbrandt, van der Berg and Bhorat 2001:7); and secondly they are often blind to the extent to which labour markets and economic growth

¹⁰ An early, and significant example, was the 1993 World Bank intervention on options for South African agriculture, which copiously cited the classics of radical historiography as authorities for an essentially liberal analysis of South African agrarian development.

depend on and themselves perpetuate the processes that underpin inequality and poverty. It is admirable, for example, that Bhorat *et al* argue that economic planning should be aimed at 'narrowing inequality and breaking down the barriers that exclude people from participating in the economy on the grounds of race, gender and location' (Bhorat *et al* 2001:21) – but this aim seems to ignore the reality that many of the poor *are* 'participating in the economy, and that the labour markets that they do participate in can worsen their poverty and vulnerability. It underestimates, in other words, the extent to which the *normal* functioning of that economy perpetuates the racialised, gendered and spatial inequalities bequeathed by 300 years of colonial settlement, slavery, formal *and* informal racism and patriarchy.

Important contributions have been made which redress this balance to some extent. The work of Carter, May, Roberts, Seekings, Meth and Natrass have all been informed by an insistence on the centrality of inequality, and a lively and admirable awareness of the role played in the creation of poverty by the history of Apartheid, white domination and forced removals in South Africa. This is important. But it is possible to go so much further: particularly if analysis is to be able to illuminate, not simply the extent and nature of existing problems, but also the scope and possibility for agency, change and transformation. Understanding the scope for change requires an engagement, not only with distributions and trends, but with ways in which structure provides the conditions of possibility for *agency*. Inequality, for instance, needs to be framed not simply as a problem of *distribution*, but with reference to the structured dynamics of power and power relations. Class, race and gender should be appreciated, not as givens, but with careful attention to the implications of the ways in which these are being negotiated and re-negotiated. Above all, these phenomena cannot be understood without an engagement with social relationality and social meaning (see for example Long 2001). An approach is necessary, in other words, which does not only chart the broad outlines and features of the structure of South African society, but also the ways in which people are enabled to make sense of their situations – as individuals, as groups, as officebearers and officials – in order to act upon them.

7.2 Chronic poverty and “the chronic poor”

The reductionist and decontextualised ways of thinking about the causes of inequality and poverty are not only a feature of South African debates about poverty. Similar problems also play a major role in much development thinking more broadly; and indeed, in much of the current discussion on chronic poverty itself. Much energy, for example, has been spent in the work of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre to determine whether and to what extent 'the chronic poor' are different from 'the transitory poor', upon the assumption that such a differentiation is essential to any attempt to go beyond conceptualising the poor as a homogenous group (Hulme and Shepherd 2003). This has led to the development of a typology that distinguishes not only between 'the chronic poor' (those who are poor for more than five years) and 'the transient poor' (those who are poor for less), but which also makes distinctions between 'the always poor', 'the usually poor' and even – a particularly unlovely term – 'the churning poor' (*ibid.*).

There are a number of difficulties here (for a more detailed discussion, see Bevan 2004, du Toit 2005). For one thing, the notion that chronic poverty should refer to any spell extending beyond five years really is not convincing, and ignores the fact that many individuals and households who have climbed out of poverty have taken significant periods of time – often decades, and usually generations – to do so. Secondly, though there is a need to go beyond homogenising and un-disaggregated references to “the poor”, this is not adequately achieved by distinguishing between poor people according to whether they are usually poor, rarely poor, or poor all the time (du Toit 2005). A chronically poor farm worker in Ceres, a chronically poor pensioner in Mount Frere and a chronically poor backyard shack dweller in Khayelitsha obviously have some key issues (marginality, disempowerment, deprivation) in common. But the actual dynamics that make their poverty chronic and the particular factors

that determine their chances of escape from poverty may well differ widely. In fact, their livelihood situations are much more likely to show significant commonalities with those of a “*transitorily* poor” Ceres farm worker, Mount Frere pensioner or backyard shack dweller, respectively. And many of the key differences that make for chronic as opposed to transitory poverty are likely not to be fundamental or systematic, but to be differences of degree and the results of the complex interplay or local dynamism of the factors that impact upon them.

This does *not* mean chronic poverty is not ‘different’, or that it does not merit focussed policy attention, or that social dynamics of chronic poverty and poverty traps don’t deserve careful attention in their own right. It simply means that the significance of chronic poverty and its distinctiveness as a research concept does not necessarily need to be validated through references to the supposed characteristics of “the chronic poor” as a group. The specificity of chronic poverty and ‘the chronic poor’ are much more likely to be grasped by reference to the complex processes that cause poverty, maintain it, and undermine the prospects of escape from it. The corollary of this is that the proper object of study for those interested in chronic poverty is not so much ‘the chronic poor’ but *the chronicity in poverty* – the trajectories whereby people enter into and escape from poverty are as important as understanding the life histories of those who have remained there. This requires us to go beyond the dislocating abstractions so common in development-speak at present (“households” “capitals” “vulnerability context”) which all assume that strategies can be adequately ‘modelled’ with these basic elements – and to take a much less abstract, much more concrete approach, to the real, social world in which people – individually and in groups – make their decisions, enter into conflict, or make or break alliances.

7.3 Beyond the livelihoods framework

This last point needs to be elaborated. Some key conceptual challenges arise from some of the more general features of the discourse of development and the discipline of development studies that dominates much of discussion of poverty and chronic poverty. Much has been written already about the ‘technicism’ of development discourse, its limited engagement with complex power relations and social antagonism, its blindness to history and its continuities with colonial practice (Eyben 2003, Cooke 2003). For the purposes of this paper, comments will be directed at the livelihoods framework.

This is a complex issue, not least because the framework has been used in very different ways and with varying degrees of sophistication. In the hands of skilful practitioners (e.g. Elizabeth Francis 2000), it can function as an important corrective to teleological or schematic analyses of the course of rural change. It has highlighted significant agency and resources of poor people themselves, and has encouraged forms of analysis that cut across sectoral divides and that connect micro-and macro-scales (Murray 2001). At the same time, there are important limits. Some of the dangers of livelihood analysis are closely related to an underlying political agenda, which relates to a de-emphasis of the role of the state and a desire to emphasise the ways in which the poor help themselves. This can at times encourage an “anthropology without politics” highly focussed on the micro-dynamics of household-level livelihood components at the expense of macro-economic and political processes and the reality of conflict, antagonism and social struggle (Murray 2001; Bracking 2003). While notions like ‘social’ and ‘human’ capital have some value, they often lack rigour: as Bridget O’Laughlin has pointed out practically any resource can now be incorporated into analysis by calling it a ‘capital’ (O’Laughlin 2004). Furthermore the enumeration and assessment of the ‘capitals’ of the poor often proceeds in the absence of an understanding of the underlying relational systems upon which they depend for their identity and value.

These limitations are especially evident when considering the complex role of formal and informal social networks in the livelihoods of poor people. The notion of social capital – particularly if it is understood as something that an individual or a group can possess in

greater or lesser abundance – is of ambiguous help here. Clearly the density of informal networks or of institutional affiliations does count for something. But even more important is the task of understanding their *quality*. The extent to which a group or individual can rely on ‘social capital’, and what such reliance enables depends very much on the nature of the social relationships in question are, how claims and counter-claims are made and negotiated, and the broader social, cultural, political and ideological traditions upon which such claims and negotiations draw. As the discussion earlier in this paper should make clear, much depends on who makes use of ‘social capital’ and how they use it.

As for social capital, so too for many of the other components of the ‘livelihoods framework’. Skilfully used, they can make for a multifaceted, finely grained and sophisticated analysis, aware of the complexities that inform livelihood strategies as well as the broader institutional and process factors that enable or undermine them. But the framework itself, being essentially a rough schema of the issues to take into consideration and the interactions to bear in mind, does not by itself offer guidance as to how the dynamics should be analysed. What makes for good livelihood analysis is often the ability to draw on other rich supplementary intellectual traditions – e.g. those of anthropology, human geography, qualitative sociology, social history, political economy, cultural studies or discourse analysis, to name but a few. Without the shaping influence of intellectual or theoretical traditions alive to the importance of relational, qualitative modes of understanding, livelihood analysis is all too likely to become informed by many of the reductionist and ahistorical habits of neo-classical economics, methodological individualism and rational choice theory.

8 Future research

Thus far this paper has argued that an in-depth understanding of the nature of structural poverty and its relationship to chronic poverty requires a re-engagement with intellectual and theoretical resources that have so far been rather more marginal within the fields of British development studies and South African poverty studies. This marginalization is not necessary; neither is the point to discard the very real and significant insights that have arisen from the scholarship that has been done. Rather, the point is to add further tools to the repertoire of Southern African poverty studies and development studies, to broaden the range of things that can be said and asked, and to link debates in the field of chronic poverty studies more solidly with other, already well established but often disregarded approaches.

Some aspects of this broadening are fairly straightforward, others less so. Five crucial themes can be identified that will be particularly important for the future development of work in the CPRC’s work in South Africa.

Firstly, the broad intellectual traditions of political economy can make a major contribution to the understanding of *determinants and implications of vulnerability*, and the implications for labour market and welfare strategy. How, for example, do issues like macro-economic strategy, labour market regulation, commodity chain restructuring, global-local contestation, and South African cultural traditions and racial ideologies about employment work to contribute to the fragility and vulnerability of employment at the margins of the South African economy? How are these factors impacted by the highly concentrated nature of the South African economy and the depth of corporate penetration? What is the nature and scope for informal economic activity, and what are the connections and linkages between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’? What are the different ways in which poor people respond to vulnerability, and what are the implications of these strategies for their chances of sustained escape from poverty?

Secondly much more work is needed to help us understand the *nature and dynamics of social capital* in contexts of marginality and poverty. This will require a confrontation with the

implications and the reverberations of authoritarian and violent course of the development of racial capitalism and the South African state, and the way this has destroyed the social bonds that sustained the moral economies of pre-capitalist societies. It will also require an engagement with social capital as a set of *meaningful* phenomena. Here, the questions, methods and analytical approaches of anthropology and qualitative sociology can be powerful. What are the consequences and implications of the way in which dispossession, proletarianisation, migrancy and labour market reform has disrupted gender ideologies and family structures, both in the former homelands and in peri-urban settlements? What has it meant for the cohesion of communities and the nature of authority within communities? What are the implications of the ways in which this history has shaped gender identities and gender roles? What are the links between the historical construction and rearticulation of South African masculinities, and patterns of gender violence, crime, illegality and insecurity in poor communities? How do these impact on the complex interactions between poverty, ill health and HIV/AIDS? And what are the implications and dynamics of continued local elite domination and local power struggles?

Thirdly, we need to understand in much more detail the ways in which the cultural and political legacies of Apartheid and other forms of racism continue to shape the broader environment within which individuals, households, groups and communities survive. Here, much can be learned from the approaches taken by postcolonial studies and the analysis of racial formations. How, for example, do the racialised identities, cultural frameworks and spatial formations of Apartheid shape the prospects of escape from poverty? What are the implications of the continued centrality of white cultural knowledge (and specifically the centrality of English as a language of power) for landless, poor, marginal African people's chances within the formal economy? What is the role played by the political geography of post-Apartheid town and city planning, and how are we to understand the causes and the consequences of the continuing existence of ghettos and slums that function as racialised spatial poverty traps?

Fourthly we also need better to understand nature of the state and the implications for addressing poverty, particularly if the South African state is understood to play a developmental role. Here much can be contributed by the frameworks and approaches developed by actor network theory as well as recent work on the ethnography of the state (Scott 1998, Crais 2002). What are the implications of the practices and institutions whereby poverty is governed, and the agency and power of poor people themselves? How does the state and its allies 'see poverty' – and what are they blind to? What are the underlying assumptions about the role of the state (or of the 'market' and 'civil society') that shape poverty reduction strategies? What do they enable, and what limits do they impose?

Finally, and perhaps most tantalisingly, we also need to come much more closely to grips with the interactions between poverty, vulnerability, and the construction of agency, both on individual and group level. Poor people have agency, but their agency is undermined through processes of poverty and vulnerability. These create a corrosive and dispiriting context that saps people's ability to make a lasting escape from poverty and undermines their ability to make use of whatever resources they do possess and also radically diminishes the circle of their impact on the world around them. One important way in which chronic poverty degrades people's ability to address their problems is through health (for a review of the linkages between poverty and child health, see Sanders and Chopra 2004; see also Godlonton and Keswell 2004 and Sogaula *et al* 2001). Access to resources and capitals clearly also play a key role in shaping what kind of agency is open to poor people (Carter and May 2001; Adato Carter and May 2004). But there also seems to be a crucial element contributed by the experience of poverty: and the ways in which people understand, make sense of, and take on their lived conditions. This requires going well beyond adding on 'participatory' exercises to conventional poverty measurement: rather, the challenge is to engage with the felt and meaningful reality of stress, hopelessness, anger and despair, and to exploring how the

socially mediated sense people make of their own suffering further shapes their ability to cope and their prospects of escape.

9 Conclusion

This, then, is the case for a fine-grained, critical sociology of chronic poverty: understanding chronic poverty requires coming to grips with the structural dynamics that create marginality, maintain vulnerability and undermine agency for poor people; and understanding these structural dynamics in turn requires an engagement with the meaningful complexities of social and power relations. It is in other words, also a case for crossing intellectual and disciplinary boundaries, for the health and vigour of such a sociology of chronic poverty is intimately connected to the health and vigour of the political economy, the social history, the political geography and the anthropology of chronic poverty.

But it goes beyond that: for if it is true that poverty studies need sociology, it is as true that sociology needs critical theory. In the long run – if the sociology of chronic poverty is to show its relevance – perhaps the most important challenge is the need to break down the compartmentalisation of social studies in South Africa in particular and development studies in general, which allow ‘poverty studies’ to proceed with little reference to the burgeoning work done by contemporary scholars on postcoloniality, racialisation, actor network theory and the like – while those who do draw on critical theory often are content to remain at the level of the conceptual and the schematic, without engaging with the significant empirical complexity and challenge involved in understanding the realities of inequality and poverty reduction in South Africa. The challenge is not only to develop modes of analysis that link quantitative and qualitative (Kothari and Hulme 2003), or to bridge the sterile opposition between macro-scale “structural” analyses and the nuanced exploration of agency on the ‘micro-scale’ (Long 2001). It is also to create space for searching debates that allow a qualitative sociology informed by critical theory and political economy to speak to some of the *technical* complexities raised for poverty reduction in South Africa – and to continue the conceptual battle in winning space for an awareness of the dynamics of conflict, inequality and social process within the rather depoliticised and technicist discourses of the major donor agencies (Eyben 2003). That will require not only good research and careful theorising, but also resourcefulness, flexibility, and the willingness to take intellectual and political risks.

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