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Title

**THE CHANGING WORKING CONDITIONS IN COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE
IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF HORTICULTURE IN GAUTENG.**

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Panel

Reconstructing labour (MECCI WG)

Abstract

With the aftermath of the horticultural farmworkers unrest in the Western Cape, there is a renewed interest in the following questions:

- 1) What does the future of commercial farming look like in South Africa?
- 2) Which policy recommendations can foster structural change in commercial farms?
- 3) How is the labour process going to be structured?
- 4) What is the role of labour in this change?

In dealing with the aforementioned questions, I draw on a survey of 600 farm workers in the Gauteng province; I present a summary of the findings of the questionnaire with the focus being on the horticultural farmworkers. In order to capture the experience of working life and the structure of production; I also undertook qualitative methods using in-depth interviews with 22 horticultural farmworkers and participant observation in 5 farms. In the findings, farmworkers used the metaphor of the “gate” as a symbol of the tight boundaries through which employers exercise their power over the entry and exit of employees on their private

property. The 5 farmers argued that given the pressures they face in supplying retailers and the National Fresh Produce Markets, as well as the rising costs of inputs, the only input they can cut on is labour. They go on to argue that they are for employment creation but they prefer a workforce that will not have employment benefits and if the workers complain about the working conditions they will either mechanize production or hire unregistered foreign migrants who have less bargaining power. I argue that this case study can help us understand the changing working conditions in commercial agriculture and why this is happening.

The question then becomes: “how can we improve the working conditions of workers and also facilitate horticultural upgrade?” I suggest that the work of Selwyn (2012) deals with how to improve the working conditions of farmworkers and also facilitate horticultural upgrade. Selwyn (2012) focuses on exporting horticultural farms in Brazil’s São Francisco Valley and argues that because of the pressures that the farmers face in ensuring that they upgrade their production and supply to the United Kingdom retailers all year round, they needed a permanent labour force which understood its structural power and had associational power. Selwyn’s approach does not see labour as a cost to development, but as an active agent in development. The conclusion of this paper is that for agricultural policy to be effective there is a need to shift to an alternative development path that calls for state intervention in the agricultural sector and has a clear vision of how the sector should grow. This strategy will address how workers are going to be empowered and how structural change in commercial farms will occur. However, the empowering of workers as I will show using Selwyn (2012), will occur through their own associational power and the contestation in the Western Cape indicates the evolution of workers power and how workers, despite being nonunionized, wanted an improvement on their working conditions.