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The View from the Farm: Gendered Contradictions of the Measurement Imperative in Global Goals

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ABSTRACT *How do global development goals translate into local action? How do such goals support or undermine already existing efforts, at the local level, to build robust and sustainable communities? In this article we examine the experience of a women's cooperative vegetable farm in rural South Africa, considering the on-the-ground consequences of high-level planning for development and, in particular, the measurement and accountability demands associated with such initiatives. We focus on the broad aims of Sustainable Development Goals 2 (to end hunger) and 5 (to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment). We explore farmers' responses to external demands for measurement and accountability, some of which they are not well equipped to meet and others of which collide with their own priorities to support their households and wider community. We find a major problem of translation between global goals and the needs of people on the ground: far from resulting in material support for small-scale farmers, the daily burdens of the 'audit society' directly impede aims like ending hunger and achieving gender equality. The first section of the paper briefly canvasses recent efforts at global goal setting, considering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs in turn. The longer second section offers the case study of the women's farm, examining how the measurement demands related to global goals impact locally generated priorities.*

KEYWORDS: Capabilities, Gender, Human development, Human rights, Measurement, Sustainability, Global goals, SDG

Goal Setting

In recent years a growing emphasis on the effectiveness of development initiatives in accelerating progress toward global goals has dominated national and international agendas. Global goals are potentially powerful tools for mobilization of common and sustained effort, for measurability of otherwise abstract aims, and for accountability. Yet these laudable aims can have unfortunate, unforeseen, and even counter-productive implications at ground level (Fukuda-Parr 2014; Sexsmith and McMichael 2015). The kinds of instrumentalist approaches to global goals previously discussed in this journal (vol. 15 (2–3), 2014),

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coupled with growing demands to demonstrate accountability to tax-paying publics, helped to drive the push among governments and other actors for measurable actions and outcomes. The ensuing 'measurement obsession' (Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014) with quantification of results intensified in the wake of the financial crises of 2008, coinciding with and underwriting a return to top-down, instrumentalist approaches to development planning. The shift toward quantification has meant a dilution of support for human rights-based approaches, which tend to be harder to quantify (Fukuda-Parr, Yamin, and Greenstein 2014; Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010; Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014; Merry 2011). We identify the period of roughly 2000 to the present as the *measurement turn* in global development, a turn that affected many policy areas. We frame measurement broadly, to include the production and mobilizing of quantitative data, and focus on the everyday rituals of the 'audit society' (Buss 2015; Pérez Piñán 2015)—the array of reporting processes, monitoring systems, and paper trails that profoundly impacts people on the ground. We view measurement as a deeply social process involving individuals, communities, and institutions in complex social relationships while engaged (or ensnared) in the work of generating data.

The scope of the measurement turn is well illustrated in efforts toward gender equality and women's empowerment. Much attention has shifted toward easily quantifiable initiatives to 'invest in women and girls,' often motivated by economic growth and returns on investment at the expense of a human rights focus (Arutyunova and Clark 2013). The very concept of empowerment has been widely harnessed to the 'business case' for development within the existing economic, social, and gender order; in the words of Cornwall, empowerment has been 'eviscerated' of any impulse to structural transformation (Cornwall 2018, 2; Narayan 2005). Surprisingly, in light of unprecedented visibility of women and girls as agents of development, support for women's rights organizations is dismal and eroding. A 2016 OECD study demonstrated that while funding for 'gender equality' activities had reached an all-time high, most of the funds went to civil society organizations (CSOs) in donor countries and only 8% directly to CSOs in the Global South. Most revealingly, only 0.5% of OECD funds to promote gender equality went to groups identified as working for women's rights (OECD Gendernet 2016). This was a precipitous fall even from the 1.2% of OECD funds reaching such groups a few years earlier. Moreover, these figures draw heavily from the Gender Equality Policy marker, an index that captures donors' *intentions* to fund activities related to gender rather than completed actions: the data is likely overly optimistic.

Perils of Measurement—the MDGs

The process of translating global development goals and indicators to national and local realities raises many challenges. Among factors shaping the global/local divide are interference with local ownership of development agendas as a result of externally imposed 'universal' ones; the difficulty of producing data that account for diverse experiences (e.g., disaggregated by sex, gender, or ethnicity); the impossibility of quantifying results for intersecting issues that are hard to measure (e.g., gender-based violence and poverty); and the need for targeted resources to facilitate change in local institutions (Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014; Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014; Pérez Piñán 2015; Saith 2006). Insistence on *measurable* objectives and outcomes generates its own risks. As with the MDGs, the transformative potential of the new SDGs can easily be lost in quantification processes that distract human energy from meaningful action and impede progress toward social transformation (Saith 2006; UN 2016). Our South African case study illuminates such dangers.

The measurement pitfalls of the MDGs have been widely analyzed. With respect to the target to halve hunger by 2015 (MDG 1 Target 1C), Pogge provides a startling exposé of the statistical manipulations involved in bringing the world closer to achievement of this goal. The details are too complex to rehearse; the basic story is that the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)'s announcement in 2015 that the target had been nearly reached entailed a major alteration of the definition of hunger just three years before the deadline—a major shift in goalposts 22 years into the 25-year mandate of the MDGs (FAO, IFAD and WFP 2015, 50; Pogge 2016). The recalibration delivered results overnight: rather than the 9% increase in undernourishment between 1990 and 2010 reported under the old method, FAO could now report a 13% drop. Pogge contends that the narrow parameters of the new definition may undercount the undernourished by as much as one half or two thirds (Pogge 2016, 12–13). Revised hunger numbers may 'vindicate the grand neo-liberal globalization project' (16) in statistical terms, but the reality on the ground is less impressive.

Battersby discredits the MDG food and nutrition targets from another angle. Their focus on hunger, she argues, 'hollowed out' earlier analyses of structural causes of malnutrition, and cleared the way for a productivist, technical agenda favouring large-scale food production and nutrition supplementation programmes (Battersby 2017, 119). An emphasis on 'trade, aid, and growth lobbies' (121), with their large-scale and private-sector driven initiatives, has meant an expansion of unsustainable agricultural practices and globalized markets in food, at the expense of locally focussed, sustainable farming (Battersby 2017; McMichael and Schneider 2011). The MDGs' market-centrism has fed an 'indicator-led' approach to development. As Fukuda-Parr and Orr explain, MDG indicators, meant to index complex concepts and challenges, were translated into targets: the aim became fulfilment of targets in themselves. This approach resulted in the rise of 'quick-fix solutions' that may serve indicators but sacrifice deeper, more dynamic development priorities like capacity development and participation—priorities essential to the achievement of locally meaningful food security (Fukuda-Parr and Orr 2014, 156).

The SDGs

The SDGs emerged from a more democratic and inclusive process of consultation than the MDGs. They hold human rights in view and speak the bracing language of eradication rather than reduction of poverty and hunger. The SDGs respond explicitly to many critiques of the MDGs, not least those around food. A dedicated food-focussed objective, SDG 2, calls for an end to hunger, achievement of food security and improved nutrition, and promotion of sustainable agriculture. Yet as Battersby and other commentators point out, the new agenda is framed in the shadow of the 'knowledge effect' of the MDGs, the measurement imperative, and the market (Battersby 2017, 117; Fukuda-Parr 2014, 125; Merry 2011, 592). To take one example, the SDG hunger goal continues to frame food insecurity as mainly a problem of scarcity and its solutions as production related. This view is part of what Prato (2017, 42) calls the 'grand narrative' of productivism, which seeks to increase productivity through agribusiness (despite the fact that most of the world's food is grown by small-scale farmers), looks for technical solutions to challenges like malnourishment and climate change, and is rooted in the progressivist assumption that most farmers are destined to leave the land and become urban wage workers (SDG 2; Battersby 2017; De Schutter 2014; Fukuda-Parr and Orr 2014; Gibson-Graham 2006; Li 2007).

The SDG hunger goal appears to speak in two voices: one focuses on enhancing the agricultural productivity of women and Indigenous people—a laudable aim, yet one portrayed

as linked tightly to financial services and market opportunities; the other is a call for sustainable food production systems and resilient practices, yet with an emphasis on technological inputs. In this way, SDG 2 reveals itself in its fragility. Its contradictory investments (market versus rights) seem irreconcilable. This incongruence stands out in the context of measuring results, since rights-based approaches are relatively new and have not been put to the test in the large-scale commercial scenarios of food production that principally serve GDP. In Battersby's view the global policy framework for dealing with food insecurity remains 'entrenched in rural, productionist discourses' and overlooks the deepening of urban malnutrition (Battersby 2017, 122, 124). We share her concern with the lack of attention to food access and nutrition shortfalls—key elements of the right to food—but we note that rural people are affected alongside urban dwellers by the global nutrition transition and its complex burden of under- and over-nutrition, processed food replacing fresh, and micronutrient deficiencies.

Turning now to the experience of women at a cooperative community farm in Limpopo Province, South Africa, we consider the following questions: How does the measurement imperative help or hinder the achievement of SDGs to end hunger and promote women's rights at the local level? How do women small-scale farmers experience the impulse to measurement in its protean forms? What are the implications for the day-to-day practice of farming, for the farm's social and community objectives beyond production, and for the farmers' ability to access resources and support? We consider these questions in light of the insights of scholars working with the concept of collective capabilities. Ibrahim defines these as capabilities[1] that people gain 'by virtue of [their] membership in a collectivity that helps [them] achieve the life [they] want to live' (Ibrahim 2006, 398). Such capabilities emerge through collective action, which 'generate[s] a collective capability to achieve objectives and states of being that individuals cannot reach alone' (Ballet, Dubois, and Mahieu 2007, 198; Boni, Millán Franco, and Millán Franco 2018; Elson, Fukuda-Parr, and Vizard 2012; Evans 2002; Ibrahim 2006, 2017; Kabeer 2003; Pelenc, Brazile, and Ceruti 2015; Rauschmayer, Bauler, and Schäpke 2015). Ibrahim identifies the '3 Cs' necessary for successful grassroots social innovation: conscientization, conciliation, and collaboration (Ibrahim 2017). These three elements, characterized below, broadly inform our analysis of the experience of the women's farm.[2]

Case Study: The View from the Farm

Starting from the premise 'one finger cannot feed us,' several dozen women in the village of Jomela came together to establish Hleketani Community Garden in 1992 (Vibert 2016).[3] The farm is a product of *conscientization*, the first of Ibrahim's (2017) '3 Cs.' The very name the women gave to the farm, *hleketani* ('thinking' in xiTsonga), speaks to the process of deliberative and transformative aspiration entailed in its founding. Context both demanded and supported innovation. Not only was South Africa caught up in the economic and political turmoil of the transition to democratic rule, but much of Southern Africa was in the grip of an historic drought. Many households around Jomela were suffering from malnutrition. The decision to farm as a team, requiring *conciliation* of individual and communal aims, was a political act and an act of social innovation. Women joined together, across kin and social divides, to mount a collective response to deepening poverty, insecurity, and inequality in the countryside (Aliber 2015; Houghton Budd, Naastepad, and van Beers 2014; Ibrahim 2017; James 2015; Scoones et al. 2018; Sharaunga, Mudhara, and Bogale 2019; Vibert 2016). While the women certainly sought to improve the food and nutritional security of individual households, from the outset they articulated wider social goals to 'conquer poverty' and 'feed the big community.' Although produce

goes first to sale (most of it in the local economy), much goes to donation through community channels. Regular donations are made to people in early stages of antiretroviral or other medical treatment needing good nutrition; to families hosting funerals; and to community members expressing need. Farmers take home 'seconds,' blemished vegetables, twice a week. The farm's goal of empowering women is clear in the fact that it is a women's farm (all activities, from planting to distribution, are carried out by women), and in assertions that 'we wanted to show the men that we've got power … [and] can stand on our own.' While collaboration by women in work groups for tasks like collecting water or preparing food for funerals is customary practice (Junod 1913), the farmers insist it is innovative for women to come together beyond kin groups and across generations to grow food collaboratively (Vibert 2016). As farmer Daina Mahlaule puts it, '[i]t is not the traditional rule or the law [that] forced us to come here and work. It's we who gave ourselves as a gift to the community.'

If drought, poverty, and a desire for empowerment demanded collective action, sustaining the farm has required resources. Here *collaboration* with state and civil society entities —Ibrahim's third C—comes into play. As the discussion below illustrates, it is at this level that the farmers, like many grassroots initiatives, experience the most obstacles. The decision to farm collectively was partly strategic, aimed at accessing support that the provincial Department of Agriculture for some years had been targeting to black group farms (Aliber and Hart 2009). The department provided a borehole well while the *hosi*, the local customary leader, leased the group a 6-hectare plot of communal territory on the edge of the village, where the women knew there to be an abundant source of groundwater. Irrigation is a critical innovation in this semi-arid region, and sets the community garden apart from rain-dependent home gardens by making year-round production possible and enabling the women to produce crops even in increasingly frequent drought. From the start, an extension worker (agricultural outreach educator employed by the province) visited regularly to teach the women to grow exotic vegetables; over the years their extension officer has facilitated access to inputs ranging from agrochemicals (discussed below) to infrastructure and training.

The women's conviction that they must act in *xilo xinwe*—as one unit, pooling efforts and resources to achieve their aims—has informed them at every turn. Collaborative farming is not without challenges, but the major obstacles facing the farm lie in the realm of collaboration with the state, CSOs, and other agencies. Such agencies have provided essential assistance over the years, but on balance their demands more often thwart than support the women's objectives.

Profit First

Many of the tensions between sustainable and community-oriented goals and those of the market are revealed in the relationship between the farmers at Hleketani Garden and their extension officer from the Department of Agriculture, William Mabundza. Such tensions may be seen as a microcosm of broader contradictions inherent in rural development under the measurement turn. In general the women see Mr. Mabundza as their ally; their main point of contact with state agencies, he has assisted them since they founded the farm. Yet at times their goals are distinctly at odds with his. Among the extension officer's roles is to ensure the farmers receive periodic education in various facets of farming. In May 2017, for instance, two farmers were taken for an afternoon of training in bookkeeping and marketing. Mr. Mabundza explains that the objective was to learn to record 'anything that's bought or sold: the purpose is that they must be able to check if they're making a profit or not.' Profit, in the view of the ministry and its field agents, is the purpose of farming;

farming is a commercial enterprise (Aliber and Hall 2012). Mr. Mabundza says farmers must be prepared to 'change strategy' if not realizing a profit.

Mr. Mabundza reviews the farm's records 'every month, every month.' The women record details salient to them, including attendance and reasons for absence, but it is the financial records that interest the extension officer. The farmers' response to his emphasis on profit is mixed. On the one hand, they have dutifully organized themselves into production teams of four or five in an effort to encourage friendly competition and maximize production. A representative from each team keeps a record of sales and expenses across the week and turns over the numbers to farmer-secretary Josephine Mathebula, who enters details into a school notebook. On every visit Mr. Mabundza provides a pep talk urging teams to increase production. The women support this goal, but they also seek to moderate expectations. At a May 2017 meeting attended by Elizabeth, farmers explained that some teams were missing a member due to personal or family illness, and that one farmer was now too old to work long hours. Mr. Mabundza is not impressed by such 'excuses'—household and personal realities that define the lives of women in this resource-poor community. The extension officer's narrow focus on yield and apparent blindness to gender roles and personal circumstances are day-to-day tools of a top-down, productivist approach to development. In this approach the women are principally instruments of production rather than rights holders or collective agents of social change.

The women, on the other hand, emphasize deeper, human-centered development aims, stressing that their first priority is not profit but the needs of the community. 'We are working here for the big community,' says Daina Mahlaule, 68. Looking back on 25 years of vegetable production in the face of erratic rainfall and increasingly devastating droughts, she emphasizes the farm's contributions: 'Our people are being saved, their lives are being saved.' Retired farmer Florah Mashele, 87, explains that she worked at the farm for some 20 years 'not for the sake of [financial] benefit or the sake of my health. It's for the community. We are supporting a very big community.' Such place-based, collectively-oriented discourse defies an empowerment 'brand' (Leary 2018, 76) that marks the SDGs and that emphasizes, for instance, individual land tenure and entrepreneurship over collective forms (SDG 2, target 2.3; SDG 5, target 5A). There are also generational cleavages in this discourse. The farmer most in step with the state's commercial imperative is one of the younger farmers, Rosina Masangu, 56. She portrays herself as something of a maverick among Hleketani farmers, and notes her frustration with the farm's halting progress. 'I have another vision of the farm,' Mhani (Mother) Masangu explains. 'My dream is to see the big trucks from Spar, Pick N Pay, Fruit and Veg, [and] from Johannesburg City Market, coming here to buy tomatoes, spinach, beetroot and other crops.' Yet even Mhani Masangu's dream of linkages with national supermarket chains is leavened by a sense of social obligation. She is proud of the farm's assistance, in the form of free vegetable baskets to the most vulnerable community members, and determined that her generation of farmers demonstrate the value of farming to younger women. Aware of the importance of long-term sustainability, the key is showing younger women that farming can provide a livelihood. 'If we work hard and come back home with … some money each month, I think [the young women] should like to join us … If we were working hard and going home with something, we could attract them.'

If SDGs 2 and 5 seek to end hunger and empower women, can these goals embrace local imperatives like assisting the vulnerable? As Leary emphasizes, there is often a fundamental disjuncture between local morality and the principles of measurement: accountability 'encodes the fiction that moral obligations can be measured, calculated, and, of course, valued financially' (2018, 24). The gulf is wide between Hleketani farmers' social goals and those of the agencies of rural development.

Counting 'Work'

For Mhani Masangu, as for the extension officer, 'work' principally means production for sale. Mr. Mabundza's visits to the farm tailed off when production fell as a result of repeated thefts of irrigation infrastructure, followed by the onset of drought, from late 2013 until 2015. During that period, with the women limited to rainy-season crops of maize and groundnuts for home use, Mr. Mabundza rarely appeared. As Josephine Mathebula (at 52 one of the youngest farmers) explains, 'he likes hard workers. He might not visit for two months if we're not working.' Now that irrigation is restored and the farmers are 'working hard'—meaning regularly selling produce—he visits weekly. Visits timed to coincide with successful production, rather than farmer need, speak to the state's emphasis on material measures of development rather than social sustainability or a human right to food. When the community was at its lowest, faced with drought and theft, the state turned away. When the farmers demonstrated their resilience by adapting their planting to difficult circumstances, the state took no notice. Such activities, apparently, do not count. State intervention came in the form of neglect.[4]

Mr. Mabundza's movements mirror those of the larger extension system. Figures from 2009 indicate that while only a small proportion of 'commercially oriented' farmers in South Africa receive any training or extension (10.6% had visits from officers), a miniscule proportion (1.8%) of farmers growing for own use ('subsistence' farmers) receive such visits. In the same year 0.9% of commercially-oriented farmers received farming support grants, while 0.2% of subsistence farmers did so. In all, only one-third of commercially-oriented farmers and less than 13% of subsistence farmers received *any* kind of state support (Aliber 2015; Aliber and Hall 2012). More recent figures indicate that delivery problems persist. The Ilima/Letsema fund, a key initiative of government to support small-scale farmers to increase their food production, in 2017 reported an ongoing serious shortage of field staff to work with farmers and slow delivery of grants among many problems facing the programme. The main concern of commentators reviewing the programme appeared not to be food security, but the failure of the national Department of Agriculture's Comprehensive Agricultural Support Program (under which Ilima/Letsema falls) to lead farmers to commercialization (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017). Aliber and Hall (2012) argue that government departments charged with supporting farmers make ineffective use of the resources at their disposal (e.g., spending far more on office-based salaries than on workers in the field); do not understand their clients (e.g., they have no idea how many farmers there are); and prioritize financial management over broad impact. Across the board, South Africa has substantially increased spending on agriculture in the democratic era—yet a large proportion of expenditure is on land reform and salaries, and at only 3% of government spending, support for agriculture lags far behind the African Union's 10% recommendation (Aliber and Hall 2012). In short, the government of South Africa exhibits a 'deep-seated ambivalence' for the small-scale farming sector (Aliber 2015, 178).

The extension officer's narrow conception of work as focussed on profit articulates closely with the broader societal and intellectual failure to recognize *as work* women's labour in the realm of social reproduction, particularly unpaid care and provisioning work—unless formally paid (Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka 2014; Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2007; Waring 1988). The women's most basic daily activities subvert this characterization. Hard work is at the centre of their identities, with 'ploughing,' encompassing all phases of cultivation, at the symbolic core (Gengenbach 1998; Vibert 2016; Vibert and Welsh 2017). Most of the farmers are also mothers, grandmothers, and perform an array of other income-generating activities, from craft work to brick-making to micro-savings groups. They describe a work day that begins at four in the morning with prayers and

home chores, followed by getting children off to school and coming to the farm for several hours of weeding, watering, harvesting, or planting. Queried about the gruelling schedule, Sophie Ngobeni remarked that 'there are no good things coming out of sleep.'

Farm work produces a wide range of social values, including the community support noted above. In addition, vegetables have been known to serve formal political purposes. When villagers went on strike in September 2017 to protest municipal water failures, pressure was placed on the farmers to abandon the field and join the action. Fearing crop failure if they did so, the women's solution was in keeping with their social regimen: they gave the strikers free vegetables, a contribution to political activism that made them proud. While they accede to the extension officer's demand to maximize output by forming production teams and extending irrigation infrastructure, for the farmers the material and social goals of farming are completely imbricated. Their caring and political work may reduce the figure in the revenue column of their ledger, but it contributes in myriad ways to the sustainability of the farm and the community. Unfortunately the ledger—measurement tool *par excellence*—cannot capture such aims.

Contradictions of Record Keeping

The extension officer allows that the farmers' commitment to community objectives affects how he reads their income figures. Their practice of donating vegetables and directing them to farmers' household uses is 'very good,' he says. Yet his assessment is instrumentalist and does not encompass the kind of human–centered, local sustainability the famers work toward. Donations motivate the community 'to be part of the police,' he notes, explaining that people who receive gifts of vegetables will be more inclined to keep an eye out for thieves or troublemakers. Community service acquires meaning, then, when harnessed to economic outcomes and rendered measurable in material terms.

Careful record keeping is central to success in applications for assistance from the agriculture department. Mr. Mabundza explains that Ilima/Letsema grants go to farms that are 'doing very well,' meaning they have 'good profit, [and] their records are clean': crop yield, profit, and disciplined record keeping enumerating that profit are the performance measures of note. Assistance, when granted, comes in the form of inputs prioritized by the agriculture department. These are generally conventional—and not always sustainable—inputs 'like fertilizers, chemicals, and then seeds. We don't give money.' Farmers point out that the most effective fertilizer is chicken manure, which they source from small-scale chicken growers in the village. They accept synthetic inputs because these are what the ministry offers, not because such materials are in keeping with their knowledge of sustainable, place-based farming practice. The women are well aware of the potential health and soil-degradation effects of long-term use of synthetic inputs. The agriculture department's enthusiasm for these inputs is rooted, in part, in the demands of national and international suppliers for ever-expanding markets for their products regardless of local cultural knowledge about nutrition and sustainable practices (Klein 2014; McMichael and Schneider 2011; Patel 2007).

The particular requirements of record keeping and measurement can be major impediments to farmers' access to assistance. The Letsema application, for instance, requires an up-to-date business plan; a constitution; proof of water rights; a permission to occupy certificate (indicating permission to occupy communal land, granted by the traditional leader in return for a small annual payment); a tax clearance form; and banking details. Department staff assist farmers with drawing up a business plan, listing their needs (in line with available materials) in detail: types and quantities of fertilizer, chemicals and so on. The business plan is updated each year in what might be read as another expression of top-down

management. Mr. Mabundza describes it as a dynamic process of envisioning needs and planning. 'In fact it's a map for them—to direct them what to do, when to do.' The business plan is also meant as a tool for accessing bank loans and funding from other institutions—although the women have never applied for a bank loan because South African interest and service charges are notoriously high.

The women vividly recall demands made of them when they received a rare cash grant from the Department of Social Development more than a decade ago. 'They told us this money is not for stipends or salaries, it's for materials. … They were very strict.' Part of the regimen was the need to produce a sales receipt as well as cancelled cheque for every purchase. Banks often dissuade small enterprises like the women's farm from holding chequing accounts, in light of high service fees. The farmers followed this advice and closed their chequing account two years ago—only to be told by social workers that they must open a new one in order to access grants requiring cheques as proof of purchase. They obliged, incurring a new round of service charges. As Mphephu Mtsenga explains, agencies like Social Development track expenditures minutely and 'do not want us to be left with any change and to use it for something else'—the assumption being, she assumes, that recipients cannot be trusted to properly shepherd resources. The department checked the farm's books regularly, a process the women experienced as 'control' and that entailed 'a full-time job' for one or two farmers who had to collect quotations, write and collect cancelled cheques, and marshal receipts. Since that instance a decade ago, state support has come in the form of material inputs rather than money.

Burdens of Accountability

The requirement that applicants produce competitive quotations for each item they propose to purchase is an especially onerous element of accountability in the use of grant funds. Evelyn Nkuna and Rosina Masangu report that they spent nearly three weeks in 2015 going 'up and down, up and down' to gather three competitive quotations for each item sought through a National Lotteries Commission grant application. The process posed many challenges, including that some businesses were unwilling to provide quotations without payment. The cost of repeated trips on public transit from farm to two towns to gather price data exceeded 1500 rand (US$125)—money ill spent, given that the lottery commission did not so much as acknowledge receipt of the application. A further 2000 rand (US$165) was paid to an accountant to perform an audit of two years of financial records, a requirement of most applications to businesses. This seems a clear case of the brunt of the accountability burden being borne by the grassroots organization, not the state or parastatal actor, a tendency recently highlighted by Kabeer (2018).

A close reading of the lottery application episode lays bare the intersecting exclusions experienced by many small-scale farmers in the quest for support. Gender, class, race, language, age, education and spatial location all play roles in marginalizing the women of Hleketani Garden. On top of the travel time and money consumed by the process were many hours spent consulting with two local high-school teachers who regularly help the women fill out forms. None of the farmers has English skills adequate to the task of completing formal applications. As Mhani Masangu explains,

> The English is deep … We can read. But most forms have English that we cannot understand. … [T]here are two teachers who can help us with the forms. When we go to the others they say 'yoh yoh yoh, this is too much, this is beyond our knowledge. Please go to these [teachers].' There's only two teachers who understand the form English. High school teachers. There's only two who can help.

If funding applications are beyond the competence of the few high-school graduates at the farm—and beyond that of local high school teachers—one wonders how small-scale farmers are ever expected to access support. Lack of alignment between institutional expectations and local capacity and experience in applying for complex grants clearly stands between deserving community projects and the resources they need to flourish. Rather than developing capacity or tailoring processes to the relevant clientele, these bureaucratic processes shine a harsh and demoralizing light on that lack of alignment. In the end the application for lottery funds consumed much of a month, two or three women 'often coming home late' after sitting long evenings with the teachers to craft responses to the form's questions. 'The time was wasted,' Mhani Nkuna concludes. 'We didn't get a response.'

'They don't Want Us to apply'

The farmers' motivation to gain government support was stymied for several years by their inability to access their registration as a non-profit organization. They gained formal registration in about 2005; they then lost the certificate and were unable to retrieve their registration number from the national Social Development office in Pretoria, despite repeated phone calls and a personal visit to the office 400 kilometres away. Far from getting help, Mhani Masangu recounts that '[w]e got a letter from Pretoria saying your certificate was issued and sent. If you haven't received it, it's not our fault.' Sara Mookamedi believes the problem was that the women did not have money to bribe officials. 'If you go with a bribe, your paperwork gets done within a minute and you come home with a certificate.' In 2015 farmers took the advice of social workers to apply for a new registration number under a made-up organization name; they finally received non-profit registration. In the years they did without the number they continued applying for grants, but there was 'always a space that needed a registration number and we did not have [it].' For Mhani Mookamedi, these trials and lack of assistance are evidence that 'they don't want us to apply.' Government and non-governmental agencies, the women believe, are not committed to supporting poorly resourced small-scale farmers like them.

Surprisingly, the farmers do not give in to frustration. As Mhani Masangu puts it, 'we're going to keep on applying … We have to spend money in order to get money.' At the same time, they are cognizant of time lost to farming as they traipse about the countryside to generate a paper trail. If not researching and filling out applications, 'we will spend the time at the garden.' The daily rituals of the 'audit society' (Buss 2015) are at play in painstaking fashion, to the disservice of community members striving for the right to food and women's empowerment. Emphasis on profit over all else; forms that speak an inaccessible language; costly demands for duplicate cheques, competitive quotations, and elusive government documentation; insensitivity to gender roles and to circumstances of resource scarcity and spatial location: in all these ways the state and development agencies repeatedly undermine the sustainability- and community-oriented goals of the women. The reductionist and distortionary indicator framework—made manifest through a wide range of measurement and other bureaucratic demands—directly detracts from the farmers' goals and undermines the very human dimensions the SDGs aim to elevate. Without a recalibration in favour of these dimensions—entailing an explicit rejoinder to productivist and bureaucratic agendas—the internal contradictions of the SDGs may be their undoing.

Better Days

Farmers wax nostalgic for the early 2000s, preceding the financial crisis, when they received substantial external support without having to leap seemingly insurmountable

hurdles. At that time they came to believe they were 'about to conquer poverty,' in the words of Mhani Mtsenga. This was the period (2002) when the country's Integrated Food Security Strategy was introduced (Aliber 2015), in the midst of a subsistence crisis touched off by skyrocketing food prices. Food security was, at least on paper, prioritized by national government and efforts were made to coordinate initiatives between levels of government, the private sector, and CSOs (Drimie 2015). In 2002–2003 the provincial minister of agriculture brought representatives of Finland's Department for International Development Cooperation to the farm. FINNIDA provided water-conserving drip irrigation, solar pumps, and shelter structures. Successes followed, as Mhani Mtsenga explains:

> After the drip irrigation and the solar panels, we entered the competitions. We won position one, we got a certificate including money. After the competition we started sending our products to City Deep [Market] in Johannesburg and the market in Pretoria. … I still remember everything.

A clear example of success begetting success, this activity is seen by the women as proof of their capacity to flourish as farmers. 'We were not educated,' they say, 'but we were able to do all that. We were able to make 1000 or 2000 rand a day.' A gradual downturn in the farm's fortunes began around 2009, when thieves made off with the solar battery and other materials. It is likely no coincidence that the onset of a persistent theft problem came in the midst of a devastating global economic recession and food price hikes that generated political instability worldwide. In the global recession of 2008–2009 South Africa's GDP growth rate plunged, nearly half a million people lost their jobs, inflation hit 10%, and there was a widespread sense of declining economic wellbeing (Posel 2014; Woolard, Leibbrandt, and Daniels 2014). At the same time and highly relevant to poor South Africans came the progressive extension of social assistance to the poorest households: the expansion of the system of social grants has been the single biggest factor in poverty alleviation in the country, although it is noteworthy that there is no grant targeted at unemployed young men (Liebbrandt and Woolard 2010; Liebbrandt et al. 2017).

When thefts became persistent Hleketani farmers began to seek financial assistance to enable them to hire a nighttime security guard. Unfortunately the programmes they learned of did not permit payment of salaries. They could apply for all manner of in-kind support, from unwanted fertilizer and pesticides to unneeded buildings, but—other than the ill-fated lottery grant—they did not find funding sources that would allow paying a guard to keep these materials safe. In frustration, Mhani Mathebula remarks that government agencies 'are not helping anyone. … They're not giving us money. They just want our votes.' The view is shared. Kenyan scholar and activist Ruth Oniang'o recently noted that global food conferences and global goal commitments tend to produce little support for farmers on the ground. '[H]uge amounts of money are put forward. Yet, if you try to apply for that kind of funding, you don't get it. … [F]or those of us who work with farmers on the ground level, we aren't seeing resources. That's something I would really like to see—bringing it down to where it really matters' (quoted in Bryce 2017). In the past two years, modest cash donations from informal fundraising in Canada have enabled Hleketani farmers to hire a security guard. Theft ended when the guard arrived.

Conclusion

Our case study reveals how daily demands that community-oriented goals be harnessed or subordinated to those of the market and the state impede the realization of farmers' collective capabilities. Such demands drain precious time and energy away from the women's

initiatives to achieve their own vision of socially and ecologically sustainable development. We show in stark terms the failure of measurement demands by the state to reflect the human dimensions of community development, or to recognize the accomplishments of a collective enterprise that has been striving for years for sustainable food production to benefit 'the big community.' The case study underscores that measurement is not innocent: it is 'an instance of governance whereby ruling concerns are inserted into local practices and understandings through the use of mechanisms that purport to be technical and neutral but that are in fact political and interested' (Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010). Quite contrary to the aims of the SDGs, there is little attempt by the state to recognize or document women's 'empowerment' or the collective, multidimensional, and holistic work they carry out. Farmers' achievements that should count toward the realization of the SDGs on ending hunger and empowering women appear to be invisible to the state. The farmers' empowerment comes from their own collective action—from processes enabling social innovation through 'power within' and 'power with' (Ibrahim 2017; Kabeer 1999). Their power and autonomy manifest *despite* rather than because of the third C, collaboration with state and other funding agencies. The state's fixation on production and measurement throws up daily obstacles to the women's efforts to achieve, in concert with others, the things they define as valuable. Yet despite such obstacles, these women have sustained Hleketani Community Garden across nearly three decades, in line with their collective vision and in resistance to a global economy that fails to recognize them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Capabilities foster 'the opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings—what a person is able to do or be'; the substantive freedoms to live the kind of life one values (Sen 2005).
2. This analysis draws on more than 110 oral history interviews and conversations carried out by Elizabeth Vibert with 27 individual farmers as well as age cohorts at Hleketani Community Garden between 2012 and 2019. She also interviewed family members, the village head and *hosi*, youth farmers, and extension officer William Mabundza, and used participant observation and formal questionnaires. All attributed and unattributed comments are drawn from those interviews and conversations; recordings in the possession of EV. The research would not have been possible without the interpretation and research assistance of Basani Ngobeni. The 'live narrative' style is purposeful: the sequential, unfolding narrative brings to life the one-thing-after-another-ness of the experience of intersecting exclusions, in a context where economy is officially articulated in its instrumental mode and those who seek other values are pushed to the margins.
3. Some 80 women were involved the first year, a number that soon fell to 30 committed members. Two dozen women remain actively involved today. A pseudonym is used for the village to protect the community's privacy. Farmers request that their names be used, in standard oral history practice.
4. The farm might well have folded at this point, had modest cash donations from abroad not become available.

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