Challenging the Globalised Agro-Food Complex:
Farming Cooperatives and the Emerging Solidarity Economy Alternative in
South Africa

Vishwas Satgar¹

Introduction

In the global South 850 million people remain food insecure, that is, unable to meet daily food requirements. Meanwhile global food value chains are increasingly controlled by a few transnational corporations. The food production and consumption pattern engendered by the globalised agro-food complex is worsening food insecurity and ultimately increasing hunger among millions of people. Post-apartheid South Africa has not escaped this pattern of development. Actually, the neoliberalisation of the post-apartheid political economy has deepened the externalisation of South African agriculture from an internationalised agro-food complex to a globalised model, exacerbating food insecurity. This chapter highlights how the apartheid era agro-food complex was restructured and globalised. It points to the neoliberal reforms that have shaped the pattern of development of the agro-food complex, which historically was mainly structured around ‘white controlled cooperatives’, but has been locked into the search for ‘competitive advantage’ as opposed to meeting people’s needs.

This chapter also highlights how the globalised agro-food complex has increased food insecurity in South Africa. It shows this with regard to import-export patterns, Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) production, food inequality engendered through the wheat-to-bread value chain, and the nutritional deficiency facing poor households. While there is clear evidence demonstrating increasing food insecurity among growing numbers of households, there are also important forms of resistance from these very same households. This chapter provides a mere glimpse of some of the solidarity economy practices emerging to challenge the globalised agro-food complex from below, in poor rural and urban communities. The solidarity economy is introduced as a new transformative activist current emerging within the rural Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative and the urban Mathomo Mayo Organic Agricultural Cooperative. Finally, in

¹ Dr. Vishwas Satgar has been engaged with cooperative development in post-apartheid South Africa for 11 years, as a founder of the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC). He currently manages the Solidarity Economy Program of the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC) and lectures on global and African political economy at the University of Witwatersrand, International Relations Department. This chapter draws on COPAC’s research, cooperative development practice and a presentation made to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Food Security workshop held in Johannesburg during 2010. This contribution will be published as a chapter in a book on the Solidarity Economy co-edited by Immanuel Ness and Josè Macdonald.
From Apartheid to Afro-Neoliberalism in South African Agriculture

Afrikaner nationalism positioned the apartheid state as a vehicle of racial exclusion and exploitation of the majority in order to secure resources, social mobility and development for a minority. Land dispossession as one of many means of forced proletarianisation of the black majority began before the 1948 rise of the National Party, the main proponent of Afrikanerdom and apartheid state development. A process of dispossession took root since the 1870s and in the 20th century the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts reduced the African majority to ownership of only 13% of the land. This process limited African ownership of land and had a twofold consequence. First, it destroyed successful African farming. Second, it forced the African majority into a process of proletarianisation, such that income earned from wage labour on the mines, farms and factories became a necessity to support a subsistence way of existence in what were called ‘reserves’ and later homelands under National Party rule. In turn subsistence farming in homelands was also considered necessary to subsidise the cost of labour.²

As observed by Feinstein (2005: 60-62), the capitalist agro-food complex in South Africa did not develop rapidly or in a straight line. He points out that as dispossession occurred, different forms of labour relations emerged underpinning white controlled agriculture. This varied in different regions of the country and included rent tenancy, labour tenancy, share cropping and cheap wage labour. The latter became the main form of labour to buttress the modern and commercial agro-food complex built under National Party rule. In 1948 and despite the lacklustre performance of white commercial agriculture, the victorious National Party, “raised the maize price, increased agricultural subsidies and protections, and tightened controls over farm workers” (Lipton, 2007: 66). Through the 1960s and 1970s, the National Party supported a big push to modernise the agro-food complex (Feinstein, 2005: 193-200). It maintained import-substitution protections, provided cheap loans, flood and drought relief, rebates on fuel, subsidies for fertilisers, reduced railway rates, strengthened the system of agricultural marketing boards which provided a subsidy to white farms, while controlling market supply and artificially maintaining high prices for even basic food items. Agricultural production processes, transport and marketing were also mechanised. Capital investments increased and labour intensity declined during the 1970s.

Total factor productivity increased mainly for export products like wine, fresh fruit and vegetables. Pesticides for weed and pest control, chemical fertilisers, high yielding seed technologies, improved irrigation, greater state supported research all came to be used. South Africa was having its own ‘green revolution’ during apartheid. The sum effect of this was to widen the gap between the capitalist and white controlled agro-food complex, on the one side, and subsistence black farming on the other. The latter was not given

² This perspective has been argued by Harold Wolpe, a famous South African sociologist, through his thesis on the articulation of urban and rural modes of production.
infrastructure, financial, technical and other necessary supports. Black farming degenerated and became low yield, part-time and unproductive. At the same time, black particularly African consumers where carrying the burden of high priced food items, while earning relatively low incomes.

The white cooperative movement was a key pillar of this racist nation building project and the increasingly monopolised agro-food complex. It received a great deal of policy, regulatory and financial support. The role of accessible development finance through the land bank, tax exemptions and agricultural training support were all crucial to buttress this white agricultural cooperative movement (Roberts, 2009:1-4). With this wide ambit of policy and regulatory support white agriculture developed large primary and secondary cooperatives with high turnover volumes and asset bases.

Indeed, white cooperatives were a big part of the foundation of agricultural production in South Africa. The numbers illustrate the story. By the early 1990s, 250 white agricultural co-operatives had approximately 142,000 members, total assets of R12.7 billion, turnover of R22.5 billion and annual pre-tax profits of more than R500 million (Amin and Bernstein, 1995). In addition, agricultural co-operatives handled all exports of citrus and deciduous fruit, processed the entire wool clip, and marketed 90% of dried fruit. On the input side, they provided and/or financed 90% of fertiliser, 85% of fuel, 65% of chemicals, and a significant proportion of the machinery and implements used by white farmers. They also provided 25% of credit used by white farmers (Amin and Bernstein, 1995: 5). At the heart of this white owned agro-food complex were eleven summer grain co-operatives. The two largest summer grain co-operatives, OTK and SWK, had annual turnovers of R2.374 billion and R2.22 billion respectively, which compares favourably with South Africa’s largest food corporations such as Imperial Cold Storage with an annual turnover of R2.4 billion and Rainbow Chickens with a turnover of R1.5 billion in 1993.

While these agricultural enterprises were identified as cooperatives, in a strict sense they were not. Actually these agricultural cooperatives were for whites only which in itself was contrary to internationally recognised principles and values of cooperatives. In addition, these cooperatives have over the past few decades taken on managerial centred practices and have been operating like typical capitalist businesses, while member control has been diminishing. This has been further exacerbated with the shift in the post-apartheid context from an internationalised agro-food complex to a globalised one was facilitated by the neoliberalisation of South Africa’s political economy. While the neoliberalisation of South Africa has its origins in the apartheid era, the African National Congress (ANC) led government deepened this process and gave neoliberalisation an African voice. In many ways, neoliberalisation took on African characteristics, as “Afro-
neoliberalism”, as it was articulated in South Africa’s first democratic budget in 1994 and later in the infamous Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic strategy in 1996 (Satgar, 2008).

The Afro-neoliberal shift engineered by the ANC government adjusted and globalised the entire South African economy, including the white controlled agro-food complex. While it might have been assumed that exposing white agriculture to the winds of global competition would loosen monopoly ownership and create the conditions for deracialising the agro-food complex, this did not occur. South Africa’s ruling ANC government very early on embraced a market centered approach to agriculture informed by the World Bank, which primarily ensured export revenues were maintained through the white controlled agro-food complex. South Africa’s Afro-neoliberal framework reshaped the accumulation dynamics of the agro-food complex through liberalisation, deregulation and competitiveness. The agro-food complex and its value chains were restructured according to the imperatives of transnationalising a competitive domestic capitalism.

First, the 1996 Marketing of Agricultural Products Act, No. 47 unleashed a process of liberalisation and deregulation. Through this Act the producer controlled agriculture marketing boards were all dismantled. The state’s role in agriculture was completely rolled back and pricing of agricultural products has been left to the market mechanism. Second, trade liberalisation has also been a crucial driver of change. A trade liberalisation program in which quantitative trade restrictions on agricultural products were converted to tariffs and which were simultaneously reduced. In other words, import protections were circuitously removed. Finally, the Competition Commission has played a major role in trying to prevent collusive behaviour and abuse of market power in the agro-food complex value chains (Roberts, 2009). However, the Competition Commission’s efficacy is severely limited because it has minimal power of enforcement.

For white agricultural cooperatives the neoliberalisation of the agricultural sector under the ANC government has exacerbated the tendency towards degeneration and away from the cooperative model. Two trends have come to the fore as the government has adjusted the national agro-food complex through liberalisation, deregulation and the pursuit of competitive advantage.

---

4 Jara (2010/2011) in his Masters thesis documents this evolution in ANC agricultural policy thinking by tracking the policy shifts within its think tank the Land and Agricultural Policy Center (LAPC) in the early 1990s. He shows how it became a mouthpiece for the World Bank and managed a World Bank financed research agenda.

5 There is an important literature that documents the restructuring and globalisation of South Africa’s agro-food complex. This chapter draws on Roberts (2009), Jara (2010/2011), and Greenburg (2010).

6 However, the Act also provides for the National Agricultural Marketing Council which advises the Minister on agricultural marketing.
The first important trend emerging from these shifts in government policy is that fewer so-called ‘white agricultural cooperatives’ have consolidated control of key parts of South Africa’s globalised agro-food complex. By 2005 just 78 (rather than 250 in the early 1990s) white farming and agricultural processing cooperatives (i.e. fruit and vegetables, livestock, grain and oil seeds, meat, timber, tobacco and wine) were responsible for producing a turnover of R6.7 billion, had assets valued at R5.4 billion and membership of 203,207.7 The structural power of these ‘white agricultural cooperatives’ (or perhaps more aptly monopoly businesses) has been increased due to neoliberalisation. The above table also illustrates that the structural power of these cooperatives has not changed in 2010. In terms of the value of cooperative production, agriculture is still at the top in South Africa and a closer look confirms that it is the white monopoly businesses in agriculture, merely legally referred to as cooperatives, that dominate.8

The second important trend resulting from neoliberalisation is the conversion of many of these ‘white agricultural cooperatives’ into private or public companies.9 A very recent and iconic example of this is one of South Africa’s oldest white farming cooperatives, the

---

8 Interview Rector Rapoo, Registrar of Co-operatives, Department of Trade and Industry, Pretoria 21/10/2010.
9 Interview Rector Rapoo, Registrar of Co-operatives, Department of Trade and Industry, Pretoria 21/10/2010. Interview Jeff Ndumo, Chief Director Cooperatives Unit, Department of Trade and Industry, Pretoria 21/10/2010.
National Cooperative Dairies (NCD), formed in 1898. The NCD evolved from its first initiative of running a butter making factory at the beginning of the 20th century to now being poised to be either the first or second largest milk producer and supplier in the country. This growth in NCD is driven by its globalisation strategy. Initially this required abandoning its cooperative identity and becoming a private company in 2003. This was linked to joint ventures with Danone (in which it purchased a 45% share) and Fonterra a New Zealand based agricultural cooperative primarily to ensure the marketing of bulk dairy ingredients and the supply of food service products to various quick service restaurants throughout the Southern African region. Currently, the NCD is poised to be listed as a public company on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE), Africa’s most globalised stock exchange. It is about to globalise its share and ownership structure as it seeks to secure R500 million in capital on the JSE. This move is meant to capitalise the company so that it can reposition itself in the globalised agro-food complex and increase its market share in the Fast Food Consumer Market (FFCM) by linking with Mass Mart and Shoprite. These are leading South African retail chains that have a broad economic footprint on the African continent. In short, NCD the public company is about to further globalise its operations on the African continent through these relationships. This is not unique for the globalised agro-food complex in South Africa. Actually, exports of the finest wines, fruits and vegetables from South Africa, as far a field as Europe, is a well established international trade practice but has become even more important for South Africa’s competitive advantage and export orientation due to Afro-neoliberalism.

Consequences of South Africa’s Globalised Agro-Food Complex

With the loss of food sovereignty South Africa’s globalised and fossil based agro-processing food industry has had devastating consequences. On the production side South Africa has regressed from being a net exporter of food to being a net importer. In 2008 South Africa imported food to the value of R34 billion while it exported farm products worth R33.7 billion. At the same time, maize production, which provides maize meal an important staple in the South Africa diet, has also become implicated in genetically modified organism (GMO) experiments. Currently, 70% of South African maize is GMO. It is argued that this technology will increase yields and quality. However, the human and biodiversity consequences are completely ignored. Another crucial aspect of South Africa’s agro-food complex is its fossil fuel dependence. South Africa’s entire production and exchange food infrastructure has added to carbon emissions and global warming. Through input production and sourcing, farming, processing and transportation (domestic and for exports) agricultures carbon foot print stands at 9% of total green house gas emissions in South Africa. This adds to South Africa’s already high green house gas emissions, which are the highest in Africa and 14th in the world. The negative feedback effect of this is reflected in current climate change scenarios which predict changing weather patterns that could make agriculture completely unviable in many parts of the country, particularly on the Western region of the country.

10 The story of NCD’s expansion and conversion to listed public company is contained in a full page article in South Africa’s leading weekend newspaper the Sunday Times, in its Business Times section, November 28, 2010, p.7.
Linked to the fossil based, GMO and globalised production side is increasing food prices. South Africa imports 1.4 million tons of wheat per year. This input has had price increasing effects on the wheat-to-bread value chain in South Africa. As wheat prices have escalated due to supply-side factors in globalised markets, this has been transmitted as higher prices to local consumers. Moreover, as Jacklyn Cock argues ‘bread has material and symbolic value in the South African context because it is the staple food of working class communities’. Cock (2009) further points out that the political economy of the wheat-to-bread value chain has led to the concentration of ownership and control in both local wheat production and in milling/bread production. On the milling/bread production side she points to the control of five monopolies: Pioneer Foods, Tiger Brands, Premier Foods, Genfoods and Foodcorp. These bread producing monopolies have colluded to push up prices and have been fined by the Competition Commission on numerous occasions, but this has not stemmed profiteering from bread.

The profiteering from bread has placed a major stress on working class families. In a survey conducted of 40 households in the working class community of Pimville, Soweto, it was found that 60% of monthly income was spent on food and 31% of this was spent on bread alone (Joynt, 2010:34). In a qualitative study of the same community it was found that the general increase in food prices has led to widespread hunger (Joynt, 2010). This is directly linked to a new practice of “shoplifting” in which people enter supermarkets and consume food. This practice has been covered in leading South African newspapers and has also informed tactics by the Unemployed Peoples Movement (UPM). While this has led to arrests of UPM leaders, the tactic has exposed the desperate struggles by South Africans to meet their staple needs and fight hunger.

At the same time food inequality engendered by the globalised fossil based agro-food complex has led to another challenge for the politics of food sovereignty. On the consumption side, both nutritional deficiency and obesity are crucial challenges among all population sectors, but most worryingly among children in South Africa (Chopra et al, 2009). According to Chopra et al (2009:6-9 ) stunting and underweight are the most common nutritional disorders amongst children in South Africa, with stunting at 18% for children between 1 to 9 years old and underweight national prevalence at 9.3 %. In terms of obesity, “the highest prevalence of overweight and obese children was in the age group one to three years old (19.3 % ) and those living in urban formal areas (15%)” (Chopra et al, 2009:8-9).

**Mapping Solidarity Economy Food Cooperatives**

Due to the high levels of unemployment and deepening food insecurity in poor communities, food production initiatives are proliferating. Food gardens, food projects, food associations and various other efforts have come to the fore. Moreover, within

---

11 This statement was made by Jacklyn Cock, an environmental justice activist, on various public platforms.
12 South Africa had a 40% unemployment rate before the recession hit. During the global recession one million jobs have been lost.
agriculture and food production the state has made a conscious effort to promote the cooperative form amongst emergent black farmers. The general experience of state-led cooperative development has been dismal. Top down state-led cooperative development has undermined cooperative development both at a movement level and at the grassroots level. At the movement level, South Africa has been through two phases of top down cooperative movement building since 1996. Both have failed dramatically. In the second phase, between 2000 – 2003 the national Department of Trade and Industry locked the National Cooperative Association of South Africa (NCASA) into a partnership agreement to set up Cooperative Development Centres (CDCs). After five years, not a single CDC was developed, NCASA was declared insolvent and millions of Rands went unaccounted for. With the benefit of hindsight and research it is clear that bureaucratic state control of finance tried to define a role for NCASA beyond its capacities (Satgar and Williams, forthcoming). This of course does not take away from the serious internal weaknesses within NCASA which contributed to its failure. A third phase of cooperative movement building has begun with the state still in the driving seat.

In the case of individual cooperatives, including agricultural cooperatives, the state has not done sufficient education on cooperative values and principles. Rather the state has preferred to finance cooperatives in the name of Black Economic Empowerment, which has led to rent-seeking and patronage based corruption. Organisationally these cooperatives lack basic skills and technically have not been capacitated with viable cooperative strategies. Many of these observations on cooperative weaknesses have been made by the government itself through the first ever government base-line study of cooperatives in South Africa. The 2009 study found that while the Registrar’s office officially had 22,030 active cooperatives on its list in 2009, only 2,644 were operational, confirming a survival rate of 12% for the country (DTI, 2010: 37).

An emerging alternative to the state led cooperative movement in South Africa is a grassroots solidarity economy movement. Such an alternative is grounded in the recognition that the crisis of capitalism is a systemic crisis expressing itself as a complete civilisational crisis (COPAC, 2010). This crisis is multi-faceted with economic, ecological, political and social dimensions. According to the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC) such a solidarity economy alternative can be defined as, “a collective humanist response and democratic alternative from below to the crisis we face. It draws on our common humanity as the basis for solidarity action. More concretely the solidarity economy is a voluntary process organised through collective struggle and conscious choice to establish a new pattern of democratic production, consumption and living that promotes the realisation of human needs and environmental justice” (COPAC, 2010:18). This is a working definition for the solidarity economy alternative emerging in the South African context. As a working definition it is tentative and will be elaborated from below through collective transformative activist practice.

Currently such a transformative practice is emerging as an activist trend and is beginning to inform research agenda’s around cooperative development. This is the case with the food cooperative case studies profiled in this chapter. These cooperatives are engaged with a solidarity economy lens in which the internal ownership and member control
characteristics are highlighted. Thus Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative is classified as a worker producer cooperative and Mathomo Mayo Organic Agricultural Cooperative is classified as a worker owned cooperative. In a worker producer cooperative worker owners control all decision-making and own crucial means of production, like land, necessary for the core operations of the cooperative. Other property of the cooperative is also collectively owned. Such cooperatives can employ workers but this cannot exceed more than 25% of the worker owners and these workers have to be provided with descent working conditions. On the other hand, in a worker owned cooperative worker owners control all operational, strategic and policy decisions and the property of the cooperative is either individually and collectively owned or just collectively owned. These cooperatives also institutionalise solidarity economy values and principles within the internal rules and operations of the cooperatives in different degrees and ways. This also requires a context specific and case by case understanding of cooperatives as solidarity economy enterprises. The second important characteristic of cooperatives in the solidarity economy is that they are not controlled by the state. They are independent food production cooperatives that engage the state when necessary on their terms and are not trapped in a state centred logic of development. In the following sections we explore two cases of food cooperatives pursuing a solidarity economy focus.

**Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative**

Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative is twenty years old. In 1980 it began as the Lowveld Agricultural Cooperative, but in 1982 it officially registered as the Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative. The cooperative is located in the northern part of rural South Africa in the province of Mpumalanga. Nestled in the beautiful rolling hills of Mpumalanga...
province approximately 40 kilometers north of the town of Graskop, the cooperative is located in the middle of the Matabidi village with its 65 members coming from the three villages surrounding the area. Defying the slow rhythm of the picturesque landscape, the cooperative bustles with activity and is a central institution in the village. While Kadishi Agricultural Cooperative’s core activity is agriculture, and it has registered a great deal of success in its agricultural activities, it also has diversified its activities to meet various needs of the village such as a grocery shop, petrol station, tyre repair center and fresh poultry shop. The cooperative is a solidarity economy enterprise meeting a host of basic needs of the community. However, the core operations of Kadishi cooperative relates to farming support and maize processing. Initially the cooperative started assisting local small scale farmers (160 farmers each owning a farm about 1 hectare in size) with the procurement of inputs for farming like seeds and fertilisers. The farmers mainly farmed beans, corn, and sorghum for subsistence and they realized that they could save transport costs and secure better prices if they bought inputs in bulk. Later, and with some government assistance, the cooperative has been able to buy important farming equipment (such as ten tractors and build a hangar to store the farming equipment). By 2008 it had expanded its agricultural activities to include plowing, preparing, and planting fields for farmers at a subsidized cost, churning the soil and pest control, purchasing the products from the harvest and selling to local markets, grinding corn into maize meal, and storing maize meal in a secure pest-free storage silo.

Kadishi is a member driven worker producer cooperative. Worker owners join the cooperative and become members after paying an annual membership fee. The assets of the cooperative are collectively owned and are indivisible. Worker owners own their own land but utilise support and other means of production collectively owned by the cooperative. Worker owners have rights to share in profits and losses, rights to information and rights to participate in decision making based on the one member one vote principle. Kadishi cooperative holds meetings with its membership at least three times a year according to the harvest cycle. A first meeting is called after planting begins in October to discuss the planting process and encourage farmers to plant their crops. In February the cooperative organizes a meeting with the community to discuss the issue of selling the crops to the cooperative. A final meeting is called in July after harvesting. The cooperative determines the price for the maize based on the industry’s standards. In addition, the cooperative hosts quarterly worker owner meetings to discuss all issues relevant to the cooperative.

Kadishi Cooperative has impacted on the community in a variety of ways. In the late 1990s many farmers in the area had stopped planting on their land. With the revival of the cooperative’s activities over the last ten years, however, the number of farmers planting on farms has dramatically increased. By 2007 all 160 farms in the area had planted some crops on their farms. One of the ways the cooperative has helped farmers begin planting is by subsidizing the planting process. Normally it costs between R800 and R1,000 to plant on one hectare of land (e.g. plow, prepare, and plant seeds). The cooperative raised funds from government and through its own savings provided planting successful cooperatives. In 2010 COPAC concluded a study on rural cooperatives in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa, many of which are worker producer agricultural cooperatives.
services (including the seeds) for R300 per farm. As a result, many farmers have started farming again.

Moreover, Kadishi pays farmers cash on delivery for maize. Paying farmers cash for their maize has encouraged farmers to sell their maize directly to the cooperative. Thus, the cooperative has directly impacted on household livelihoods and has introduced some financial stability into households. For example, farmers know that they can sell their maize directly to the cooperative for a set price as soon as they have harvested the maize and do not have to wait to sell it on the market. For many farmers the money they make from their maize has assisted in school fees for their children as well as other family needs. The fact that Kadishi has managed to pay cash for the maize before it sells it, is a further indicator of its success. It has managed its cash flow in such a way that has allowed it to pay for the maize months before it sells it.

With more farmers planting and selling their harvest to Kadishi, the cooperative has also increased its activities and surplus. Through storage, processing and sales of maize meal at reasonable prices to the local community the cooperative has impacted directly on household food security in many local villages. Kadishi is in the process of developing marketing strategies and developing a Kadishi brand, which it hopes will further increase its presence in the local market and contribute to food security.

**Mathomo Mayo Organic Agricultural Cooperative**

Mathomo Mayo Organic Agricultural Cooperative was established five years ago in Ivory Park township. It is part of the second wave of cooperatives that have blossomed within a township community at the heart of South Africa. Ivory Park is a township community approximately 30 kilometers northeast of Johannesburg. According to the 2001 National Census the total population of Ivory Park is estimated at 110 000, with approximately 36 464 households, and a significant number living in shacks and informal dwellings. Within this community at least 12 603 households do not have any income and it has an unemployment rate close to 40%. In many ways Ivory Park displays the typical characteristics of a South African township community. In this context hunger is a serious household and community challenge. It is also an expression of the crisis of social reproduction afflicting various working class and poor communities in contemporary South Africa.

However, since 1999 through the initiative of environmental justice activists involved with the EcoCity Trust an attempt was made to address the social crisis of this community by building an Eco-village and a local cooperative movement to meet local community needs. The local Eco-village has been the seedbed for cooperatives engaged in organic farming, clothes making, waste collection, paper making, bicycle refurbishment, youth awareness raising, construction and eco-village management. Many

---

18 All quantitative data related to Ivory Park in this section of the chapter is drawn from the 2001 national government census. This data is very dated and the unemployment trends for instance have probably increased given the increased job shedding in the South African economy.
of these cooperatives are self developing with strong subsistence orientations. Some of these cooperatives have also developed commercial strategies and are income generating. However, this history has not been without its failures. From the initial 12 organic farming cooperatives established in 2000 all failed due to a lack of access to water resources and inadequate capital. However, this did not deter local cooperative movement building, but instead the experience of utilising the cooperative solution to address local needs inspired the local community to continue experimenting with the local cooperative option. A tradition was engendered premised on an understanding that the utilisation of cooperative values and principles were central to bring about social transformation.

Thus five years later Mathomo Mayo Organic Agricultural was born as part of a second wave of cooperative movement building linked to the Ecovillage. Five unemployed women approached the EcoCity Trust requesting use of a large piece of land to start an organic garden to feed their families. Learning from the past, they felt that by neighbouring the Ecovillage they could source water directly from it. The EcoCity Trust agreed to give them access to the adjacent land and water. The women then formally registered their cooperative and started working on the land with resources they pooled amongst themselves.

The cooperative requires a once-off joining fee, which implies that ownership of assets is collective and indivisible. At the same time, worker owners have rights to share in profits and losses, rights to information and rights to participate in decision making through an equal distribution of power through the one person one vote principle. Due to the small size of the cooperative it works horizontally and meets collectively mainly to deal with operational decision making. From a solidarity economy perspective Mathomo Mayo is a worker owned cooperative.

Today Mathomo Mayo cooperative is a highly successful urban organic agricultural food producer. It has mastered organic farming and has a year-round crop of spinach, lettuce, cabbage, beetroot and herbs and grows seasonal vegetables such as tomatoes. It has set up a nursery where it nurtures its seedlings for year-round production. The cooperative has won numerous awards. It has also received grants from various institutions, which have enabled it to build a fence around its garden site, buy a tank for rain harvesting and sink their own borehole. The cooperative has a stable community market through sales directly off its garden site. It averages about 26 customers per day. The cooperative sells nutritious food cheaply, which has had a direct impact on the fight against hunger in households and the community. Moreover, the cooperative provides free food to its worker owners and their families.

19 As part of this second wave of cooperative development a chicken cooperative, old age feeding cooperative for pensioners has developed, a bakery cooperative, a sewing cooperative and another organic farming cooperative.

20 All empirical data about Mathomo Mayo cooperative has been obtained from a recent COPAC solidarity economy mapping enterprise survey. This is the first solidarity economy mapping survey conducted in South Africa. The survey will be published in 2011. The study of urban food cooperatives and projects is developing a rich literature. See Kalima (2005) and Wills et al (2009) for example.
Challenges Facing Solidarity Economy Food Alternatives

For solidarity economy food alternatives to prevail over the established agro-food complex various challenges have to be overcome. Overcoming these challenges will provide the necessary conditions for food cooperatives to emerge as part of a food sovereignty alternative within the solidarity economy and beyond. The first challenge that looms large in the South African context is building a bottom-up solidarity economy movement. Currently many of these alternative food initiatives are localised and isolated. A serious movement has to emerge to link these solidarity economy enterprises and facilitate the sharing of their experiences. This process has to be guided by a transformative activism that links the urban and rural, different kinds of worker farming cooperatives and engenders important networking capacities.

This brings to the fore the second important challenge around food alternatives to the agro-food complex. The role of knowledge is crucial in this struggle. Knowledge about this alternative and its importance for households and communities but also knowledge about how to develop these alternatives are crucial. Put differently, every solidarity economy enterprise in the alternative food economy has to become an agent to share this knowledge. Currently in Ivory Park township, the Mathomo Mayo Organic farming cooperative is emerging as a crucial alternative food economy facilitator. It is training others in the community who are interested in setting up their own organic farming cooperatives. Moreover, the Eco-village Solidarity Economy Education and Communication Cooperative, spearheading the solidarity economy process, has established a food sovereignty sub-committee which is bringing together all cooperatives involved in organic farming in Ivory Park township. It has also linked with organic farming projects outside the community. The next step envisaged by this cooperative is the development of a food sovereignty strategy for the entire community in order to eradicate hunger and ensure environmental justice. This will be guided by solidarity economy research mapping.

Finally, the emergence of a solidarity economy movement and successful solidarity economy food sovereignty alternatives have to be able to provide an effective counter-hegemonic challenge to the state and agro-food complex it supports. This would require a political project to ensure the socialisation and ecological restructuring of the existing agro-food complex. Such a political project can only emerge from below through grassroots struggles.
References


Joynt, K. 2010. “We really have to cut down on eating-Poverty and food prices” Labour Bulletin, Vol. 34:2, June/July.


