

The WIPHOLD project: How does this project stand up to sound development principles?

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The previous issue of *New Agenda* featured an interview with Gloria Serobe, executive director of the women's investment group WIPHOLD. She described the rural development project they had undertaken as part of their corporate social responsibility programme, in which impoverished rural communities were given the means to move from subsistence to commercial farming. We have received the following responses from others who are involved in rural development.

There is much to agree with in this project as described by Gloria Serobe. To my mind, the first and most important point is the focus on the rural areas, and, specifically, in the communally managed lands. When one talks about development needs in these areas, we would do well to keep reminding ourselves that the people who live there are suffused with human dignity, and will not co-operate if they are treated like children or worse – a mistake that is often made, and one that we thought belonged to the past.

So, as she says, rural development is “about all the normal things – health, education, food”. We would also do well to recall that agriculture is a potential source of nutrition, jobs and income for many rural people. There is an unfortunate habit among many rural development practitioners of saying that people don't produce much food in these areas, therefore agriculture is not important. What WIPHOLD has done is to ask people what they want, and it is interesting to hear that they started with fences, and for very compelling reasons. Of course, the provision of subsidised fencing is not new in South Africa; commercial farmers were subsidised for many years.

In the case of this community, once the fences were provided, the path to further developments was opened, and in their case that path leads to agriculture. So is it a good idea to subsidise crop farming on behalf of the people in the community?

First, one needs to ask if farming on a large scale is the best way to farm (and ploughing 1000 hectares is large-scale farming). Small-scale farming can work if a family has sufficient labour



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(and this has to be mostly adult men, because we would not want to propagate using child labour, and women already have enough work to do). Yet small-scale farming works best when higher-value crops are being produced and not so well with maize production.

Unfortunately, the poorest people in these poor communities are often the households with the most severe labour shortages. Their choice is far more difficult. If your land is too small to afford your own tractor, and you have a labour shortage (you can't afford hired labour and don't have a large enough family of working-age adults), then you can't farm unless you can mobilise your neighbours and jointly hire a tractor service.



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The same argument goes for the weeding. So there is nothing inherently wrong with hiring a mechanisation package for ploughing, weeding and harvesting, and it provides the community and individual households with a pathway to better food security and even, potentially, to greater economic wellbeing. However, the community leaders must be able to negotiate as equals with the service provider, because, as all commercial farmers know, the margin between success and failure is razor-thin, and you don't want the contractor to walk away with your profits.

What are the pitfalls? Too often projects of this nature wither away once the funding stops. So a lot of attention needs to be given to make the project sustainable. This means ensuring that there is a market for the surplus, and ensuring that



the necessary farmer support services (financial services, extension, infrastructure, security of tenure, etc.) are in place.

This, in turn, means that the state should buy in to such initiatives. I am intrigued that Ms Serobe is reluctant to point to the national government in the absence of buy-in from the community members themselves, and from the local authorities. Without this buy-in, the project would not be sustainable. With it, there is a better chance that the project could be replicated at scale throughout the rural areas of South Africa.

