

Community Resilience in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Are communities in the Eastern Cape resilient to climate change and déagrarianization? How does access to water fit into the equation? I spent the past summer investigating these questions for my preliminary dissertation research in the south-easternmost part of the African continent. In the intervening time I have learned how truly complex and deceptive a focus on two trends (decreased water access and increased dependency on households without strong agricultural skills) can be, and also how helpful participatory research can be when trying to tease apart problems at the community level.

The Eastern Cape is the epitome of many of the inequities evident in South Africa: it is home to a unique subtropical thicket biome, and yet much of its rural lands are considered degraded; it possesses active urban centers, and yet suffers from some of the country's worst levels of un- and underemployment; it stands adjacent to hundreds of kilometers of ocean and yet many of its municipalities suffer from depleted fresh water stocks. While the socio-ecological conditions of the province do not appear to be encouraging, how exactly communities are responding to stressors at the moment, and will continue to in the future, is not well understood.

I initially hoped to see how water access and governance could be understood in rural and semirural Eastern Cape communities using a coupled human-natural or socio-ecological framework in order to more fully understand various kinds of stressors. What I found after carrying out many interviews and questionnaires was that water access was only a minute concern for most households, and that even in a region of the world that is predicted to be



significantly affected by climate change, other worries were more pressing. Also, while the possibility of drought was on the minds of many in even the most rural communities I visited, people were far more concerned about disease and limited sources of household income.

Lack of water in the form of drought may be an underlying symptom of increased aridity in the region, and the changing nature of what it means to be engaging in “rural” work may also be present but not be central to the concerns of community members. In the end agrarian systems are perceived of very differently in this part of the world, so the question of how adaptive communities like the ones I looked at are appears to be tricky to answer but nonetheless important to explore. The next step in my research is to develop a participatory research index that can be used to gauge capabilities of dealing with future events, and in so doing bridge basic and applied

science in addressing what constitutes vulnerability, resilience and adaptation in a dynamic region in southern Africa.

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