

# Farm work: Lifeline of Napier and its residents

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## INTRODUCTION

Farm work employs a significant portion of residents of the informal settlement. According to the enumeration carried out in 2019, 40 per cent of people in the settlement are engaged in farm work and 17 per cent in gardens. As we spoke to individuals and families and walked around the settlement, this was evident. Everyone knew someone or knew someone who knew someone who worked on a farm. Every time we entered a house, we found some members of the family had experience of working on the farm. Several times a day, a pick-up truck or bakkie comes to drop off or pick up labourers, and collects cleaned, arranged flowers. Farm work is not just done on farms, but also happens in the settlement, as well as in sheds in the vicinity. If you walk around in the middle of the day,

you may see people cleaning and arranging flowers. When we visited, we saw residents working with light pink coloured, almost glass-like flowers. Flowers are an integral part of the settlement landscape. They are beautiful and stand out against the coloured metal sheets of the houses and the sky.

The stories of farm work, and of families for whom farm work is an important source of income, should be told and heard. While the settlement relies on farm work, the farms also rely on the people in the settlement. Residents are resourceful, as they piece together work, move across borders, and work together to support their families. The stories of some of these residents presented here speak for themselves.

## MOSES CHIRWA

Moses Chirwa sat on a bench clutching a bouquet of flowers in each hand. He told us they were called filicoma flowers. Moses was in the middle of his workday in Napier's informal settlement when we met him. He was cleaning and cutting the flowers that he had collected from a farm earlier that day. Moses is a short, stocky man who talks very fast. Laughing, he said, "Please come after..." While we stood there we noticed a bakkie driving around and later found this had been his boss about to arrive to collect the flowers. Moses was on a deadline to clean and bundle them before he arrived. Moses usually works in the settlement, but sometimes, if there are more flowers, he does his work at a nearby canteen. This job is not permanent, but "piece" or target work. He is paid by the jobs he completes, rather than hourly. Moses joined his brother in Napier two years ago, after searching for work in Cape Town with no success. His brother is also a farmworker. Moses is using the money he earns to build his own house in Malawi, and to support his family who stays there.



## SIYAVUYA BLOM, SAKHILE MLATI, AND NOKUZOLA MONICA KEPA

As we entered the house to interview Siyavuya, we quickly realized that her whole family was involved in farm work and that this was probably the case for many others in the settlement. For Siyavuya, her cousin Sakhile, and her mother Nokuzola, farm work is often seasonal, depending on the produce. In 2015, Nokuzola worked for six months picking figs. Siyavuya and Sakhile both worked at Vierfontein Farm, with blueberries, raspberries and grapes for wine. Vierfontein doesn't make the wine on the farm. They ship most of their grape harvest to other places for wine production.

Siyavuya started working as a seasonal worker harvesting blueberries in 2017, but then changed to raspberries in 2018. She would like to continue working on the farm, but there are no jobs at the moment. She says, "Sometimes they say it's full. They don't need people at that time and you have to come back". When there was work available, she found out about it from others in the settlement who already worked there. A typical day of work included: cleaning around the plants, checking and fixing the irrigation system if necessary. They began their day at 6:45am when the lorry picked them up and arrived at the farm at 7am. She said it really depends on the boss you have. She described unfair treatment by one boss saying, "If I'm working, the coloured lady would not do as much work as I do." Overall, she enjoyed the work due to the experience it gave her in agriculture.

Her cousin, Sakhile was working at Vierfontein as well, mostly with grapes. He was previously employed in construction, which he enjoyed more. Sakhile mentioned that women typically pick, plant, clean around the plants and maintain the grapes, while men typically build and maintain tunnels (greenhouses). But, if there's wind or they need extra hands to hold the tunnels down, they might call the women. Nokuzola also described his work as physically very hard. The women had to move heavy stones so that the men could build the tunnels. When speaking about his work on the farm, Sakhile said, "If you are exploited, you are exploited. It doesn't matter your gender...As I'm standing there on that lorry, when anything that is happening there, there is no man or woman who will say they feel safe like that. When it comes to rain or anything that comes with the weather, I have to be given rain suits or whatever. In most cases, I was exploited. I don't think I was more safe because I'm a man".

## GIFT MUNDALA

Gift wasn't always a farmer and it wasn't his choice to do farm work in South Africa. Back in Malawi, he was a businessman, selling clothes, but, he told us, "I cannot do business here, it's not my country." Later he reiterated, "This is not my place. I cannot have a choice to work in a good place." Gift works at a flower farm cleaning and cutting flowers. He has been a farmworker for three years now in Napier and previously in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. He came to Napier because his friend invited him to come for work.

At first, he lived far away, and had to travel a long distance for work. Gift works on the farm, sometimes a full day but sometimes just four to five hours depending on the job he's busy with and how fast he works. This is a "piece" job meaning it's not permanent, and Gift says, it can feel insecure. He is paid in cash on Fridays, although the pay is not enough for his family. In this job he does feel respected, but he tells us that, on the farm in Khayelitsha, he didn't feel respected as a foreigner. They were given either no time for breaks, or just five to ten minutes. At the farm in Napier, they will even take workers to the hospital if they're sick.

Gift and his wife work on the same farm. He's happy to have work to support his family, but he hopes someday to go back to Malawi and continue his business. He misses his family back at home.



Sakhile described how the lorry was often unsafe because they crammed too many people into one vehicle and people had to stand. Siyavuya added that sometimes they had to walk because the lorries were too full or they didn't send them to pick up the workers. Other challenges included working in poor weather conditions and sometimes being forced to come in to work when sick or injured.

Each of them mentioned payment as an issue. They were paid into their bank accounts, either on the 25th or the last day of the month. The payments varied from R18.00 to R30.00 per hour, but they all mentioned it wasn't enough and should be R30.00 or more in order to support a family. In addition, sometimes, the farm would change the payment date so that people had to stay in the job longer to receive pay. This kept people from leaving the job early.

It's hard to find work in Napier. There used to be more jobs on milk farms, but more people are coming to this area now and jobs are scarce. Sakhile said, "I would have enjoyed working for the farm work if it wasn't for the way of the treatment". Also, he said, if the pay was better "You can enjoy your physical work but mentally not." He added that farm work doesn't leave you much time with your family. Sometimes you leave home at 6:30am and get home at 6pm and get to spend only three hours with the family. Sakhile concluded by saying, "They don't want [us] to speak up. If you're going to speak up, then you're going to get fired...Most of the people are desperate for work around here".

Siyavuya hopes her son can go to school and get a good job. Currently, the family is doing odd jobs to make ends meet. They also provide childcare for other farmworkers' children.

#### MEMORY SALIMA

Memory was sitting in her yard cleaning flowers when we first met her. She works in the settlement, cleaning and cutting flowers. In the morning, she and other farm workers go to the farm to pick up the flowers and bring them back to the settlement. She usually starts her day at 5 or 6am, when the bakkie picks her up, although the times are not strict. She has only been in Napier for a few months and came here to join her sister. She left four children back in Malawi and she works to send money back home for her children. In Malawi, she was also a farmer, planting vegetables, potatoes, bananas, and sugar cane. She hopes to go back someday.

#### BUYISWA MAYILA

In 2019, Buyiswa Mayaila started working at the Vierfontein Farm as a grape and berry picker. She heard about the job from a friend in settlement who is currently working on the farm as well. When Buyiswa went for the job interview, she wore her uniform from the previous farm she had worked at, De Kock Akker farm, where she had planted and harvested onions. Getting the job was easy, Buyiswa did not need any sort of qualification, all she needed was her ID document. Buyiswa's daughter, Nolokulu is also currently employed on the same farm.

Despite having obtained the job easily, being happy that she is employed, and being respected by her boss because she "does her job correctly", Buyiswa faces many challenges daily. Employment on the farm has always been seasonal for her; even after a year of working on the farm she has still not received an offer for a permanent post. Besides picking fruit, at times her job requires her to carry crates from one plot to another. Being outside, one of Buyiswa's biggest fears is being attacked by snakes. Also transportation to and from work can be challenging, the bakkie is reliable in the morning, but in the evening sometimes it doesn't come and Buyiswa and other employees have to walk back to the settlement after a long day of work. Since working on the farms, Buyiswa has always earned R18.00 per hour; an amount that has not been enough to support her family. Buyiswa has a son who is still attending school and a grandchild who attends day-care. Besides food and electricity for the house, these are extra expenses which need to be covered.

Buyiswa says, "You have to like everything you do on the farm – as what the boss tells you". While she doesn't mind the work, it's not what she wants for her children and her grandchildren. She has bigger hopes for them, but she can't make those choices for them.



## SIBONGISENI SOKHETYE

Sibongiseni Sokhetye moved from the Eastern Cape to Napier in 1999 and has worked at the Koonpoort Vineyards for the past six years. When he arrived in the settlement, his neighbour told him that the farm he was working on was employing new people. The very next day, Sibongiseni went to the farm and was offered a job there. When he started, the job was on a contract basis for three months; after this Sibongiseni was offered a permanent job. Sibongiseni works mostly with grapes and occasionally with flowers. His wife works with him on the same farm picking grapes.

Sibongiseni's daily routine starts at 4am when he wakes up to get ready for work. At 5am he makes his way to the pick-up point where he meets the bakkie. At 6am he arrives at the farm after having picked up other employees in the community. By 7am employees are assigned their tasks for the day, for example having to pick nine crates of grapes. Once the task is complete, the day's work is complete. From February to April each year it is grape-picking season and for the rest of the year the farm prepares for the next harvest with the laying of pipes and cleaning. Farm work has never been Sibongiseni's first choice of job, but under the circumstances, it was the easiest one to get in order to earn a salary to provide for his family.

Although finding farm work has been easy, there are many daily challenges which surround the working environment on the farm. Being from the Eastern Cape and not speaking Afrikaans, Sibongiseni had to learn to speak it. He has only received a R30.00 increase in his salary per year for the six years he has worked on the farm. Sibongiseni has felt on many occasions, like leaving the job. However, there is no "back-up" plan once he does. The salary he earns is currently supporting his three children back home in the Eastern Cape, as well as one child who lives with him and his wife in the settlement.

## KEY FINDINGS

A history of the settlement shows many generations of spatially stretched families. Many young people had parents who came to Napier for work, while they stayed in Eastern Cape with their grandparents until they were older. Others came to Napier alone and left their parents in the Eastern Cape. For the Malawians we spoke to, some had to leave their children in Malawi. Their economic situation required this separation, in order for them to get jobs or to go to school. Family played a big role in the stories we heard. The money generated from farm work would go towards their children. Many people spoke about hoping for other possibilities and more choices for their children.

## Payment for hard labour

People who work daily on farms are trying to make a living for their family – whether the family stay in the settlement or back home in the Eastern Cape or even Malawi. According to individuals who shared their experiences, there are different forms of payment for farm work. Some were paid on a weekly basis, some on a monthly basis, some in physical cash and others by bank cheque. Nonetheless, everyone raised concerns over the low payment associated with farm work. Some also highlighted the issue of irregularity of payments.

## Work insecurities

Working on a farm in Napier, it appears, involves working just for the moment, for, at any point in time, you could lose that job. The seasonality of farm jobs was dependent on the fruits in season at that time and, more specifically, what was planted and produced during that time, whether it was barley, wheat or hops, for instance.

## Hopes and aspirations

It is evident that, despite the harshness of working conditions, workers feel their work is not done in vain. Their true sense of security lies within the happiness of their family. Many of the farm workers place their happiness in their children's futures.

‘Enduring harsh working conditions is something that has become a norm. When I sat down and listened to these stories of farm work and people's daily work struggles, I began to appreciate what people do for their families. Going to the shop now, taking a punnet of grapes, berries or even milk, after listening to people's experiences of work made me realize that there is a story behind this item on the shelves – a story of a mother, a father, a brother or sister who wakes up early in the morning, who works so hard, for a minimum wage, to provide for their family.’

Research Essay excerpt, Bronwin Du Preez