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## South Africa: Women forestry workers under outsourcing schemes

A recent study carried out in the South African tree plantation sector analyses the impacts of outsourcing on forestry --mostly women-- workers. The report points out that outsourcing in the forestry industry is in line with global business trends and serves to increase flexible employment terms for the benefit of the industry. Outsourcing also saves on cost of capital equipment and fixed costs associated with full-time employees, and avoids having to deal with labour legislation brought in by the Government.

In South Africa, the forestry sector employs thousands of contract workers, the majority of whom are poor black rural women with few alternative sources of income. A group of women working for forestry harvesting contractors on company owned plantations in KwaMbonambi were interviewed to assess the extent to which contract jobs in forestry contribute to poverty reduction.

The interview took place in the plantation company's "forest" village, where they were accommodated. The village comprises solidly built brick houses and communal cooking and washing facilities, set in well maintained and attractive grounds. However, inside these houses you get a feeling that it is more of a sleeping than living space, as the only items you find inside is mattresses or pieces of cardboard on the floor with a blanket or cloth to cover them. It seems that home to these women is where their children are back in the rural village with their extended family. Children are allowed to visit but not live in the village. All the women are single, aged between 19-40 years, with an average of four children each. They are the sole breadwinners providing support for their children and other members of the extended family back in the rural areas.

The women are all "strippers"; their job is to strip the bark off felled trees. Stripping is physically demanding and carries a high risk of injury. They begin work at six in the morning, and return at around three or four in the afternoon. The daily wage rate currently is at R42.50, but from this R6.50 is deducted for housing, leaving a daily rate of R36.00. To earn the day wage, they must complete their task, which is to strip 35 trees. If they do not complete their task, it is carried over to the next day. Most of the women said they do not complete their tasks and they use the four Saturdays in the months to do so. At month end, their salary slips reflect the day-equivalent of work done, rather than the actual number of days worked. The women interviewed said they earn between R500 and R700 per month. After buying provisions for the family, there is very little left over to buy food or clothing for themselves. Most rely on credit from the local general dealer to feed themselves. They eat only one cooked meal a day, at night.

Monthly expenses include a basic food list, transport home at month end, transport to school for their children, other expenses are annual school fees and school uniforms. The women spend an average of 60% of their earnings on food, approximately R400 per month.

The women are not union members and there are no worker representation structures in place. They do not have access to pension funds, credit or medical care. If they fall ill, they need to produce a doctor's certificate to access paid sick leave. A visit to the doctor costs R100, which most are unable to afford. If they are injured on duty the contractor pays a limited number of leave days and thereafter

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the injured worker must rely on payout from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. If a worker is consistently underperforming and falling considerably behind in tasks, or is absent from work for a week, s/he is dismissed. Dismissed workers are given 10 days to vacate their accommodation. With HIV/Aids infections rates running at an estimated 45% amongst forestry workers, a distressing picture emerges of scores of penniless, ill, and malnourished workers being sent back to die in rural areas, without any benefits from their years of employment.

Prior to outsourcing, the majority of forestry workers belonged to recognised trade unions which were responsible for taking up workers grievances', ensuring compensation for injuries on duty, and engaged in annual wage negotiations. The shift to outsourcing effectively destroyed forestry trade unions. When workers were retrenched, unions lost members, membership fees declined, and unions became more and more cash strapped. Contract workers are much more difficult to organise than full- time employees, as they are scattered amongst many employees, many of whom have no fixed workplace.

Forestry labour today is disempowered and demoralised. Workers have no channels for raising concerns or for redress. They have no channels for collective bargaining regarding wage levels or conditions of service. The only power they have is their labour. They can work and be paid for the work they do, or they can leave and rejoin the pool of unemployed.

The study concluded that the forestry industry is not able to lift the vast majority of forestry workers, mainly women, out of chronic poverty, or prevent them from falling further into poverty. Incomes are insecure and inadequate, there are no financial safety nets in the form of health insurance or pensions, and workers are exposed to risk of permanent injury that could further impair their ability to secure a livelihood in future.

Excerpted and adapted from: "What role for forestry in reducing poverty in South Africa? Case studies of contractors in the forestry sector", Jeanette Clarke and Moenieba Isaacs, May 2004, [http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica/Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica/Final_Report.pdf)  
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