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Jobs, water or conservation? Deconstructing the Green Economy in South Africa's Working For Water Programme

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Abstract

South Africa's Working for Water (WfW) programme launched in 1995 has received national and international acclaim for its attention to clearing alien species and providing employment among historically disadvantaged communities. In recent years, the Green Economy narrative has pervaded the national policy agenda, with the WfW programme being showcased as a symbol of Green Economy praxis. The paper considers recent developments in WfW and whether its objectives have been achieved in light of tensions and constraints associated with the macro-policy environment. Drawing upon evidence from field-based research in Western Cape Province, the experience of the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI) is examined, in which a number of stakeholders including private landowners, community members and local government bodies are collaborating in a landscape management initiative. Despite some worthwhile benefits, ABI has suffered from some problems and contradictions. In the future such projects need to have stronger environmental objectives, but in reality these are likely to be constrained by neo-liberal thinking at national and supra-national levels.

Keywords

Working for WaterSouth AfricaAlien species clearanceGreen EconomyEmploymentAgulhas Biodiversity Initiative

1. Introduction

"Landowners who have not managed invasive alien plants on their properties must be held accountable for that impact on the fires that have ravaged areas around Somerset West... (W)e know that invasive plants such as pines, wattles and gums, can burn with an intensity tenfold that of the indigenous plants they displace. We also know that every single one of the eighty structures that burned in the January 2000 fires on Table Mountain was surrounded by invasive plants. We know that largely because of the efforts of the Ukuvaka Campaign, the Working for Water programme,

and land owners, to clear invasive plants in the intervening years only 8 structures were burned in the March 2015 fires on Table Mountain. Even so, seven of the eight structures were surrounded by invasive plants."

Dr Guy Preston, Deputy Director-general in the Western Cape Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, quoted in a statement released during an outbreak of wildfires in the Western Cape in January 2017,

source: https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/somersetwest_fire.

Dr Preston's statement draws attention to the imperative to tackle the ongoing problems caused by the presence of alien invasive vegetation within the South African landscape. These problems include increasing the hazard from wild *veld* fires, and substantial negative impacts upon ecosystem services, most especially water availability. This paper explores the trajectory of the government's flagship 'Working for Water' (WfW) programme which was launched in 1995 with the dual aims of removing invasive vegetation and creating jobs, particularly within historically disadvantaged communities. While the South African state's economic and spatial interventions over the last 20 years have been somewhat lacklustre, seldom having generated significant economic changes and often having not been pursued for significant lengths of time, the same cannot be said about this initiative (Nel et al., 2009; Habib, 2013; Johnson, 2015). While it has not been without its challenges, twenty-one years later WfW is still being pursued with considerable vigour. Indeed, in 2001 the South African Department of Finance described the WfW programme as, 'the most effective and efficient poverty relief instrument of government' (Binns et al., 2001, 341).

Over twenty-one years the programme has undergone different iterations as the political and economic context has shifted and as differing policy discourses have gained traction at both global and national levels. The influence of 'developmental state' approaches are readily apparent through the forms of state management and welfarism inherent in the programme. Whilst notions of privatization, partnership formation and the neoliberalisation of nature linked to New Right thinking also find their way into the programme's practices. Since 2009 the 'Green Economy' narrative has emerged as a powerful rhetorical element of South African policy making, with the WfW programme being showcased as a symbol of Green Economy praxis (Death, 2015).

In this paper we provide an evaluation of the WfW programme, with a particular focus upon the 2012-16 phase, during which significant changes were implemented regarding the institutional arrangements for delivering the programme. Our evaluation considers the extent to which the programme is meeting its own objectives and also reviews the tensions between these objectives. We then move on to consider the ways in which the programme has been constrained by tensions within the macro-policy environment, most specifically between the strictures of neoliberal inspired economic management and more developmental strategies. Practices associated with the Green Economy are intertwined within these grand narratives and, as a result, become compromised. We argue that more radical and empirically informed policy approaches are required if environmental, social and economic imperatives are to be met. Given South Africa's growing concerns about

climate change and ongoing socio-economic disparities, it is vital that attention is given to the implementation of genuinely transformative policies.

2. Methodology

Our analysis is based upon a substantial review of various technical evaluation reports as well as two periods of fieldwork. We originally undertook secondary and primary data collection into the programme's implementation in selected case-study areas in 2000-01, as part of a broader overview of poverty relief interventions at the time. In 2016, we undertook further empirical investigations, during which we conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders in the Western Cape including: officers within the Department of Environmental Affairs, local government officers, NGO staff involved in co-ordinating alien clearing, landowners, conservancy managers, sub-contractors and their staff. In addition, we visited sites undergoing alien clearing. This primary data collection has been supplemented by a thorough review of a range of secondary resources which provide insights into the trajectory of the Working for Water Programme, its evolution as a form of policy and evaluations of specific outcomes. These resources include grey materials, working papers, government policy documents and academic research papers.

2.1. Shades of green infiltrate South Africa's political economy

The African National Congress (ANC) was elected in the country's first free and fair democratic elections in 1994 and immediately embarked upon a policy programme heavily influenced by the developmental state narrative. This approach found particular expression within the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which focused upon rectifying the stark socio-economic divisions inherited from the apartheid regime ([Marais, 2011](#)). However, there soon followed a sharp turn to the right, which manifested itself in the introduction of the neo-liberal inspired 'Growth, Employment and Redistribution' (GEAR) programme in 1996, which led to the sidelining of the RDP as the flagship programme for delivering development. Instead, tight macro-economic policies were favoured which, it was claimed, would stimulate transformation and development via increased economic growth. The government's environmental credentials were limited as growth was predicated upon mass exploitation of natural resources.

The well documented global dominance of neo-liberalism has been the subject of considerable debate and contestation, whilst its ability to meaningfully and universally improve human well-being has been heavily critiqued ([Maharaj et al., 2010](#); [Bond and Ruiters, 2016](#)). Analyses of the role that the state has played in steering national economic development in SE Asia, and more recent praxis in Latin America and Africa has triggered a renaissance in state-led interventions, which steer development and ensures welfare delivery, albeit in the context of a neo-liberal framework ([Edigheji, 2010](#)). While in South Africa, debates over the role of the state have increased significantly in recent years, as the failings of GEAR, including low growth, entrenched high unemployment and increasing inequality, have resulted in increasing social and political pressure. These challenges have created a space for the notion of the 'developmental state' to re-emerge within policy discourse ([Turok, 2010](#); [Gilder and McClelland, 2015](#)). The pre-eminent role of the state in challenging social deprivations is made evident in the 2011 National Development Plan (NDP) document: 'a developmental state tackles the root causes of poverty and inequality. A South

African developmental state will intervene to support and guide development so that benefits accrue across society (especially to the poor)', ([NPC, 2011](#), 44). The tenets of the developmental state paradigm are also engrained in the 2010 National Growth Path document in which spatial interventions, rural development and job creation feature prominently, ([EDD, 2010](#)). Indeed, Public Works programmes have been a consistent feature of post-apartheid policy praxis, with a dedicated national government department overseeing the creation of a range of low-skilled labour intensive activities which, though seldom leading to permanent job creation, do spread some welfare benefits to the most marginalised communities.

The concept of the Green Economy has entered global discourse within the last decade with strong backing from the United Nations Environment Programme ([Cook et al., 2012](#)). Pursuing Green Economy strategies is consistent with the Rio +20 themes of striving to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection and poverty alleviation ([UNDP, 2012](#)). Proponents of the concept seek to promote sustainable development, but acknowledge the need to work within the context of the market ([ILO, 2013](#)). Key elements include encouraging participation, addressing gender inequality, and adopting people-centred approaches to alleviate poverty and improve livelihoods ([Hlahla et al., 2015](#)). It can be regarded as a response to the problems of unsustainable development, which require new growth models that improve well-being and equity whilst reducing risks. According to some analysts, the emphasis on the economy is a decisive aspect of the concept, 'by focusing on economic activity in support of broader Sustainable Development goals, the Green Economy can be viewed as offering a more precise discussion that has the potential to reinvigorate the meaning and political momentum behind Sustainable Development', ([Lamphere et al., 2015](#): 103).

However, the Green Economy is by no means a homogenous concept, but can be practised in different ways that, to varying degrees, challenge or remain subservient to underlying ideologically driven structures ([Cook et al., 2012](#); [Death, 2015](#); [Gibb and O'Neil, 2016](#)). Following [Lamphere et al. \(2015\)](#) 'green growth' is the dominant form of Green Economy touted in policy literatures, which prioritises the maintenance of economic growth trajectories through the incorporation of (apparently) environmentally friendly innovations and in some cases promotion of job creation via Green Keynesianism ([Gibb and O'Neil, 2016](#)). The concept is deployed in other ways too. For example, transformative approaches explicitly focus upon improvements in social justice through green strategies ([Death, 2014](#); [Ferguson, 2015](#)). In contrast, a fundamental re-structuring of economic, social and environmental relationships, such that ecological limits are given primacy, is central to the green revolution variant of the Green Economy ([Death, 2015](#)).

The 2008 Global Economic Crisis provided an opportunity for Green Economy thinking to be mainstreamed within South African government policy frameworks and narratives as a more developmental approach was taken to ameliorate increasingly concerning socio-economic indicators. As a response to the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the government announced an overall stimulus package valued at US\$7.5bn of which US\$0.8 billion was linked to activities with an explicitly environmental dimension ([UNEP, 2013](#)). At the same time, language derived from the Green Economy paradigm became more obvious in government rhetoric. At the 2010 Green Economy Summit in South Africa, a Green Economy Accord was agreed between government,

civil society organizations and representatives of the private sector to create Green Economy jobs with an investment of R66bn (US \$4.5bn) pledged by government. The National Growth Path (NGP) and the National Development Plan both emphasise the value of natural capital and the importance of seeking economic opportunities with a biodiversity basis. The NGP set the ambitious goal of creating 300,000 Green Economy jobs by 2020. In 2011, the state announced a national 'Green Fund' to invest R 800mn (US\$54mn) in green economy projects, primarily new energy projects over three years, including low carbon economy initiatives, natural resource management and ecosystem management ([Death, 2014](#)). This approach to Green Economy delivery is consistent with the green growth typology, as the primary emphasis is upon economic growth and job creation via environmentally friendly strategies ([Gibbs and O'Neil, 2016](#)).

It is within this contested and fluctuating context that the Working for Water programme has emerged and subsequently evolved in the last two decades. The Programme's resourcing, objectives and delivery structures have all shifted over time in response to paradigmatic influences in the overarching policy architecture outlined above. The next section begins by outlining the programme's development over time, highlighting the factors which drove the original formulation of the programme and evaluating the mechanisms through which the programme has been delivered. Then the impacts of the programme are assessed, with a focus upon the latest iteration which was implemented in 2012.

2.2. The imperative to restore ecosystem services: The initiation and trajectory of the Working for Water Programme

Alien vegetation became part of the South African landscape in the 17th Century as non-indigenous plants were brought into South Africa for purposes such as timber production, windbreaks and dune stabilisation. More than 8750 exotic trees, shrubs and herbaceous species have been introduced, of which 161 are considered to be seriously invasive ([Nyoka, 2003](#)). The latter includes species from the genera *Pinus*, *Hakea*, *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia*. Once established, these species have a propensity to spread rapidly as they do not have to confront the natural controls which exist in their original habitats. By the start of the 21st century it was estimated that more than 10 million hectares were inhabited by alien invasives, representing 8% of the national land area ([Buch and Dixon, 2009](#)).

The disruption caused to ecosystems by invasive species has become increasingly clear and well documented. Many of the alien species are highly successful at out-competing indigenous vegetation such as *fynbos*, which causes significant disruption to local ecosystems. The presence of alien invasives tends to alter natural fire regimes, for example, fire spreads very rapidly in alien dominated areas, which facilitates further infestation and increasingly poses threats to nearby human land uses. The annual value of ecosystem services to the country has been estimated at R 152bn (US \$10bn), with alien plant infestation causing an estimated loss of R 6.5billion (US\$441 million). The impacts upon water quality and water budgets in catchments inhabited by alien species are significant and highly problematic ([Chamier et al., 2012; Le Maitre et al., 2015](#)). In the 1990s ecologists were raising concerns that left untreated, streamflow could reduce between 21% and 50% ([Van Wilgen and Wannenburgh, 2016](#)) and national water runoff could be reduced by 7%. Around one third of total water use in Western Cape Province, which is a major centre for

commercial agriculture, is estimated to be consumed by alien invasives ([Binns et al., 2001](#); [Buch and Dixon, 2009](#); Department of Environmental Affairs official, 2016 pers comm.). Four of the country's main cities are estimated to be facing acute challenges in accessing sufficient water in the near future, with Cape Town's infrastructure already under severe strain ([Buch and Dixon, 2009](#); [Boraine et al., 2006](#)). These challenges are exacerbated by the uncertainties created by climate change, which observers believe is already having negative impacts upon water balances in the Western Cape.

Following intensive lobbying from a coalition of experts, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry Kadar Asmal in 1994 recognised the seriousness of this challenge and the inability of the country to rely on infrastructure-based solutions in a country with diminishing water resources. He saw the opportunity to both increase water supply and create labour-intensive jobs through the removal of alien vegetation. The WfW programme was devised and, drawing on funds from the national Reconstruction and Development Programme with an initial grant of R 25 million (circa US \$ 2.5 m), the goal was set to clear 750,000 ha per year for 20 years from 1995. The programme's ability to rapidly turn financial investments into job creation meant that it was viewed favourably within government and so further commitments were made to expand the programme during the 1990s. Thus, the WfW programme was the frontrunner for a suite of 'Working for...' initiatives (Wetlands in 2000, Fire in 2003 and Land in 2010), which were added to the portfolio in subsequent years, generating a holistic strategy for restoring ecosystem services within water catchments and their landscapes ([DBSA, 2012](#)). The government's longstanding support for the programme is especially noteworthy, reflecting both its ability to create work and achieve important environmental outcomes. These programmes have been integrated at the national government level to ensure consistency and efficiency in their delivery.

Around eighty percent of funding for WfW has come via the Government's Poverty Relief budget, with the majority of the rest coming from the Department of Water and Forestry funds ([Ferraro, 2009](#)). The original objectives of the WfW programme were ambitious and encapsulated the full range of criteria which can be placed under the umbrella concept of sustainability: to improve water security, to promote equity, improve ecological integrity, to restore land potential, to promote ecologically sound use of natural resources and invest in the most marginalised people to promote empowerment ([WFWP, 2000a](#)). The labour dimension was clearly critical in government thinking given the entrenched high unemployment rate, low skills levels and the imperative for the nascent ANC administration to demonstrate its ability to make a difference in people's lives ([WFWP, 2000b](#)). Importantly, alien clearing is labour intensive work requiring high levels of manual labour. Additional goals included the provision of skills training; raising environmental awareness, and seeking to develop secondary industry based on harvested timber products ([Binns et al., 2001](#)).

Initial work was undertaken by labour teams employed on short-term contracts overseen by government staff. The objective was to ensure that as many unemployed people as possible accessed the work opportunities. Thus, daily wage rates were low, such that they would not be seen as a viable alternative for people already in work, hence the genuinely needy would be able to access work. Targets were identified for the recruitment of female, young (under 35) and disabled workers. Initially the project was based in six of the nine provinces with a total of ten

projects being implemented. Over time WfW grew to its present scale of more than 300 projects operating across the country and generally moving from short-term to longer-term labour contracts with community-based contractors now being in charge, but overseen by municipalities, conservancy groups and NGOs, as well as there being projects still directly overseen by the government. The engagement of what are normally private sector led conservancies groups in a welfarist programme, does raise concerns over the potential neoliberalisation of the programme and the direct benefits which private sector landowners may be deriving.

2.3. Post-2012 shifts in the delivery of WfW

The delivery strategy and language associated with WfW was adapted in 2012, partly due to the political pressure resulting from a rise in South Africa's headline unemployment rate to 25% ([DBSA, 2012](#)) and the entry of the Green Economy into policy discourse. A focus upon employment and environmental themes is evident in the revised Department of Environmental Affairs stated goals for the programme for 2012, namely;

- a) 'To contribute to sustainable development, livelihoods, green and inclusive economic growth, through facilitating skills development, employment creation and infrastructure development'.
- b) To 'restore and maintain vegetation structure and function in order to contribute to ecosystems services' (in [Van Wilgen et al., 2012a](#), 1).

Specific goals which were set in 2012 in relation to environmental challenges are outlined in [Fig. 1](#) below.

High Level Goal	Specific goals	Outputs	Activities
To prevent, contain and reduce the density and distribution of established, invasive alien species in order to reduce their negative effects on the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of the activities in priority water catchments by 2037. • Provide 10,000 full time equivalent jobs per annum • Yield 14 million m³ water per annum, enhance biodiversity and improve land productivity. • Reduce the spread by 10% per annum, and achieve the goal of containment and zero-spread by 2037. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 583,686 Ha of total area treated & to maintain cleared areas. • 1,711 Ha of Invasive alien plants treated in priority high altitude area. • 169,086 Ha of total area treated in top 20% of priority catchments. • Releases of biological control agents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable (standard) control of terrestrial invasive alien plants. • Sustainable control of non-plant invasive alien species. • Mass rearing, systematic release and monitoring of biological control agents. • Rapid response, eradicating alien species during early phase of establishment.

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Fig. 1. The Department of Environmental Affairs Strategic Goals for the Working for Water Programme.

Source: [Department of Environmental Affairs \(2012\)](#), [Treble \(2016\)](#).