

PLAAS 2021-2022

Strategic and Reflective Report



Not many people know this, but when PLAAS was founded, one of the options considered for our logo was an image of a dung beetle — that humble creature of the African veld which is so essential to its ecological health. In the event, we did not go that route. We chose an image of a woman ploughing, highlighting the often ignored but central role of women's labour in the farming systems of this continent.

But the dung beetle still remains a potent symbol. Its endless labour of transforming animal waste into nutrient gold can be taken as a symbol of the humble yet essential work of critical thought. For us, critical inquiry is not a form of reason that stands on high, deploying pure concepts to interpret the world. Rather, we see it as an ordinary part of everyday life: holding difficult realities, deep divisions, charged emotions and dreams of change in a reflective space where they can be transformed into workable insights, realistic alternatives and concrete plans.

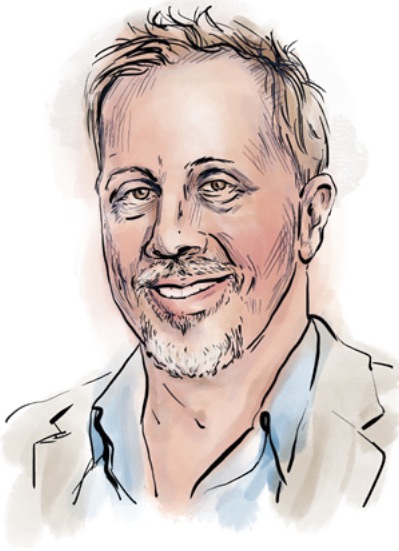
This is the work of action-oriented reflective deliberation in times of flux. While unpredictable forms of change engulf our continent, we will continue like the humble dung beetle, doing the thinking and reflective work from which we hope a fertile and nourishing future can emerge for all those who live on this land.”



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Introduction



Director's note - Treading a new path

This biennial report offers an account of PLAAS during a time of challenge and transition. If 2020 was the Year of the Pandemic, then 2021-2022 ushered in the Years of the New (ab)Normal. In 2020, attention was almost exclusively focused on dealing with the threat of the SARS-Covid-19 virus and on grappling with the impacts of the often inappropriate, heavy-handed and authoritarian nature of the regulatory response to it. In other words, the goal was to survive and to make sense of the swiftly changing social reality unfolding around us, hoping that, someday, normalcy would return.

But as the virus mutated through successive waves, it became more and more clear that there would be no return to the pre-pandemic world. Neither would there be much “building back better” – the formulation used for the hope that the challenge of responding to the virus could liberate energies to create a fairer, more democratic, more inclusive society. Instead, the pandemic seemed to inaugurate a new phase in world history – one in which the optimistic dreams of inclusive growth, international co-operation and solidarity captured in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) gave way to the unstable, unpredictable and cynical realities of the “polycrisis” – a world of multipolar geopolitical competition, state capture, and permanent emergency.

For an organisation such as PLAAS, this new world posed significant challenges. Many of the enduring features that had characterised the world of policy-oriented social science research since the establishment of the institute in 1995 were no longer in place. Donor agendas were changing. Political contention was on the rise. Issues that had been central to South Africa's national debate only a few years before (remember expropriation without compensation?) were quietly shelved when they no longer served politicians' agendas, and new concerns (loadshedding, Ukraine) dominated the headlines. The threats to the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people in Southern Africa remained as serious as ever: they had, in fact, increased. But the space for evidence-based policy deliberation and even for public democratic sense-making seemed to be diminishing. How was a small, university-based research institute such as PLAAS to negotiate these challenges?

In this biennial report, covering the crucial years of 2021 to 2022, an account is provided of our efforts to do so. As you will see, we responded by doubling down on our core activities – undertaking rigorous social science research, postgraduate teaching and training, and vigorous public and policy engagement – while at the same time reassessing our agenda, fine-tuning our theory of change, and reassessing our core research priorities. Publications and policy briefs were produced; conferences and webinars were convened; and learning and teaching was provided. And amid all this, time was taken to reassess our institute's idea of ourselves, our conception of our work, and the nature of our collaborations.

The hope is that you will find this report helpful, useful and informative – and that you will walk with PLAAS in the coming years along the new path we are charting.

Highlights



6 books published

9 book chapters



15 Peer reviewed journal articles

4 in depth research reports

6 policy briefs

4 op-eds published



2 documentary films

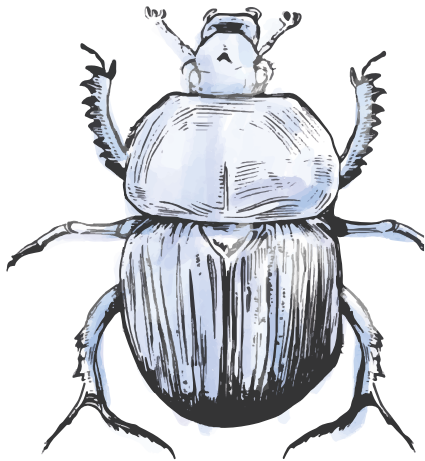
20 interviews in the electronic media



69 presentations at workshops, conferences
symposiums and seminars

36 presentations and submissions to policymaking
and other consultative processes

4 Conferences convened



Strategic Overview

PLAAS in a changing world

PLAAS's core identity as a research institute is built around a fundamental piece of organisational DNA: the notion that lasting and equitable social change can only be achieved on the basis of a clear, accurate and informed analysis of social dynamics and processes. This means that our organisational strategy has always had to be based, first and foremost, on a coherent and shared understanding of the political economy of the world in which we operate. Before we can do research, it is necessary to understand what is going on. What are the most important forms of social change that are unfolding? What are the opportunities and the risks? As the pandemic receded, we therefore tried to make sense of the rapidly changing context in which we found ourselves.

In this regard, there seemed to be significant grounds for optimism. For several years, it had already been clear that the neat and tidy world of neoliberal planning was being upended – and the pandemic seemed to be accelerating the process. Traditional economic ideas were being re-evaluated like never before. Quantitative easing and fiscal stimuli had not only become part of the usual toolkit of macro-economic planning, but they were also being used in unprecedented ways. Neo-Keynesianism was suddenly the new orthodoxy. Concepts like state-funded innovation (Mazzucato) and wealth taxes (Piketty) were being seriously discussed in the mainstream discourse. In South Africa, universal basic income was suddenly back on the policy agenda, and some saw the introduction of the Social Relief of Distress grant under Covid-19 as a sign of things to come. There seemed to be conceptual space for innovative visions of action and intervention that would have been unthinkable a decade or two before.

On a closer reading, however, the situation seems rather less rosy. On a global scale, the era of unchecked globalisation is ending – but it is making way for something more sinister. The financial crisis of 2008, growing evidence of ecosystem crises, potential trade wars, strains within the EU, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all challenged the notion of perpetual global economic growth. The climate crisis has been especially daunting, bringing with it the slowly dawning realisation that there simply isn't enough planet to support limitless growth. But this has not led to more progressive ideals. Instead of “degrowth” or “doughnut economics”, a dangerous new politics of resource capture in a shrinking and unstable world has emerged. This is likely to intensify “green”, “ocean” and land-grabbing, which PLAAS has been studying for the past decade. It seems that the collapse of the dream of globalisation is not leading to a new space for emancipatory political sovereignty, but rather a return to an older geopolitics of “spheres of influence” – and an increase in illicit, unregulated, invisible offshore financial flows beyond government control.

Connected to this is a significant challenge to the functioning and legitimacy of the global governance systems that have been established since World War II. The power of depopulated mega-companies, utilising the internet to escape competition policies, is on the rise. There has also been a surge in right-wing, neofascist, chauvinistic anti-liberal politics that exploit essentialist narratives of

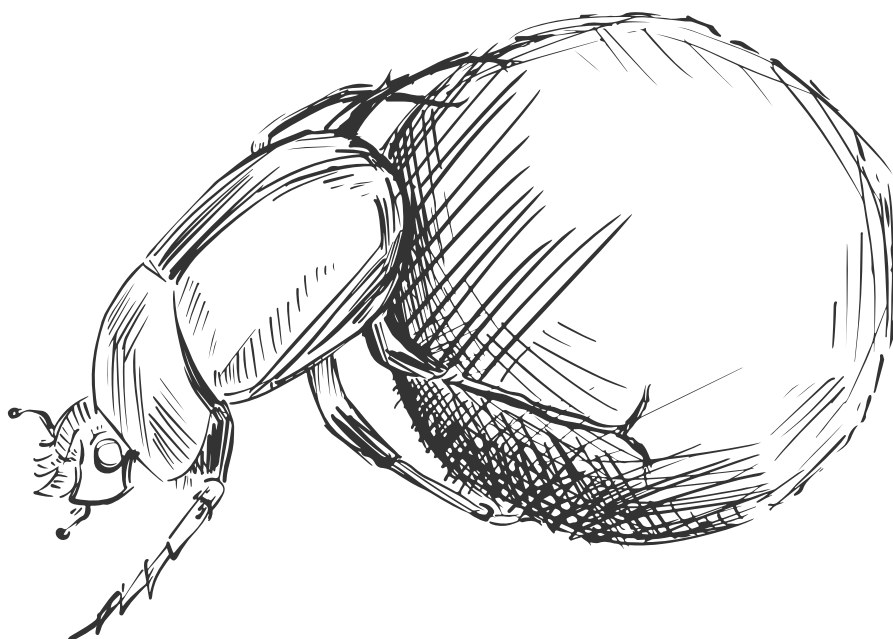
identity and belonging to undermine present-day political structures. The hyper-political anti-politics that emerges from these trends questions the narrow technocratic pragmatism of neoliberal management without necessarily leading to more democratic or open-ended political engagement. Instead, the ideas of “fake news”, science denialism, and conspiracy theories are being used to dismantle the possibility of democratic political deliberation based on shared standards of truth. Additionally, in many parts of the world, state institutions are being hollowed out and repurposed for the objectives of organised crime and state capture.

One of the most serious challenges affecting the livelihoods and well-being of poor and vulnerable populations globally is the gendered and uneven impacts of climate change and ecosystem crises. Poor people not only bear the brunt of these crises but also disproportionately suffer from the regulatory and political responses to them. Mainstream decarbonisation proposals often adversely affect the poor and working class. Attempts to reshape climate-change politics look likely to entrench North-South inequalities instead of alleviating them. The politics of agricultural policy change will likely be fiercely contested in the coming years, with different decarbonisation models competing for dominance. Unfortunately, these models may prioritise first-world consumers and agri-business over small farmers and be informed by assumptions about the farming systems in the global north rather than by African realities.

But one of the most dangerous dynamics is related to the politics of biodiversity and ecosystem management. The discourse of ecosystem crisis can fuel right-wing environmental policies, legitimising new dispossession and “green grabs” under the guise of preserving wilderness and biodiversity.

In addition to these challenges, the restructuring of agro-food systems and livelihoods, which researchers at PLAAS have extensively documented, continues. These processes often weaken and marginalise the livelihood strategies of poor and vulnerable populations. Transnational corporate players are jockeying to position themselves in African agro-food networks to their own advantage. Early signs suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends, further marginalising small farmers and traders while allowing corporate value chains to consolidate and extend their reach. These dynamics are reinforced by the prevailing dominance of inappropriate models of high-modernist development and economic progress, which overlook the economic rationality and vital importance of informal systems of provisioning and social reproduction. If unchallenged, these politics will likely continue to promote jobless de-agrarianisation and reinforce agrarian dualism patterns in the southern African region.

At the same time, adverse incorporation and agrarian dualism extends beyond rural landscapes and agrarian livelihoods. De-agrarianisation and agro-food restructuring are part of more extensive processes reshaping the



relationship between urban and rural spaces throughout southern Africa. These tendencies are most pronounced in South Africa, where land dispossession and agricultural concentration have long perpetuated extreme patterns of jobless de-agrarianisation. Rural and urban poverty are intertwined, and the livelihood strategies of the landless and land-poor span the rural-urban divide.

Another significant dynamic emerging across the region involves new investment and movement patterns, with “reverse migration” and the resettlement of members of the urban working and middle class in the countryside playing a critical role. While these rural landscapes and settlement patterns offer new livelihood opportunities and local (often non-agricultural) sources of investment, they also pose significant challenges. The development of “off-grid cities” and new forms of rural settlement is at the core of new and worrying regulatory and fiscal exit trends, depriving municipal governments of income while imposing new burdens on rural local governments. Moreover, such resettlement can drive rapid commodification, privatisation, and resource grabbing in already vulnerable and contested areas. Recent research has highlighted how these developments influence new forms of tenure and land governance across the region, with both positive and negative effects.

The transformations, at both urban and rural levels, are happening amid a crisis in the functionality and coherence of the state. This crisis takes different forms in different countries. In South Africa, for instance, there is a growing crisis of ungovernability within the government. This issue is not just about corruption; it stems from poorly conceived “neoliberal” public management reforms, centralised statism, neo-patrimonial politics and cadre placement. These phenomena, exacerbated by the development of a “contract state” under which almost 40% of government expenditure is outsourced, have blurred basic relationships of authority and political accountability within the apparatus of government. In addition, historical compromises between the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and vested interests have perpetuated a politics of bifurcated rule,

In South Africa, there is a growing crisis of ungovernability within the government.

maintaining Apartheid-like patterns under democracy. The state has failed to fully incorporate former homeland residents into post-Apartheid South Africa’s constitutional order, potentially rolling back gains and depriving millions of their constitutional rights as citizens.

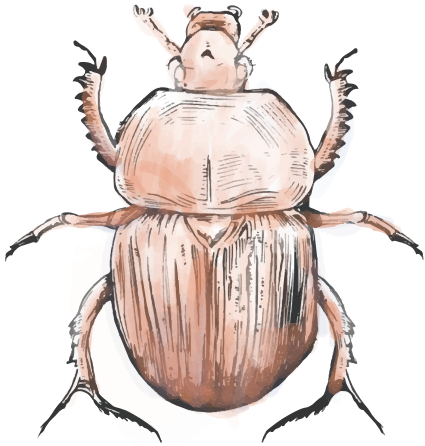
Equally important is the general shift in the political landscape. South Africa, for instance, grapples with the rise of populism and state capture, threatening democratic institutions. Dysfunctions within the operations of state are equally concerning. Formal political discussions are drifting away from the pulse of the town square, undermining the policy process and democratic nature of debates.

Disturbingly, there has been a rise in harmful identity politics, which are expressed through xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism, particularly in South Africa. This trend not only endangers vulnerable communities but also corrodes university institutions, eroding the space for diversity and regional perspectives.

Lastly, universities and research institutions find themselves in precarious positions. Over the past few decades, they have faced instrumentalist funding models, managerial “audit” cultures, and anti-intellectual mobilisation in civil society. These threats severely undermine the foundations that allowed independent critical intellectual and political practice, especially within the humanities and social science departments. At PLAAS, young researchers particularly feel the brunt of these pressures.

Perilous waters indeed! In the following pages we provide you with an overview of how we have endeavoured to navigate them.





Theory of change

How PLAAS 'sparks' change

PLAAS's theory of change is a high-level description of how the institute sees its work making a difference. It is a framework that grounds the institute's work in reality, bringing coherence to its activities and enabling strategic choices about where to initiate work.

It is important to understand that as a research organisation, PLAAS does not achieve impact directly or on its own. It achieves impact indirectly, by shaping how other social actors understand and think about their social reality. PLAAS's work is about using the insights arising from research and rigorous analysis to interrogate, contest and reframe the dominant narratives that shape policy and strategy.

Another core insight is that the institute's research is not only about creating "knowledge products". Rather, formal knowledge production – bringing out research reports, peer reviewed journal articles, or policy briefs – is part of a bigger process in which the researchers work with other social actors to co-create new understandings by coming together in processes of critical reflection on reality and practice. Critical reflection allows the "spark" of realisation through which new insights and courses of action can emerge, both inside PLAAS and in collaboration with the institute's partners.

Throughout PLAAS's existence, its work has been guided by a clear sense of core priorities. It seeks to deepen awareness, among key social actors and in public space, of the persistence of injustice and poverty in the world, the need for political action to promote access to land and natural resources, and the central place of evidence-based social critique in the processes and practices of democratic and agrarian change. The aim is to challenge dominant narratives about the nature and direction of agrarian change; the causes and cures of poverty and inequality; the role and importance of access to land and natural resources; and the role of government and governing institutions. To do this, the institute shares evidence and analysis that can support its partners with critical, creative and practical deliberation to map out emancipatory futures and strategies for social action. PLAAS works to nurture the capacity for engaged scholarship, reflective practice, and critical social activism.

The institute's theory of change is also informed by an understanding of its social and institutional context. First, it is rooted within the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and is aligned with UWC's core historical mission as a site of socially engaged scholarship. Second, it is rooted in Southern Africa. The institute's social justice agenda has, from the beginning, connected it to networks and audiences far beyond UWC's immediate surrounds. It works continentally across Africa to support equitable change and to develop African scholarship.

PLAAS's work involves five different interconnected elements:

1. At the core of its work is research. This encompasses a wide range of activities, from "traditional academic" scholarship (for example, the production of journal articles) to participatory action research guided by the priorities of social partners.

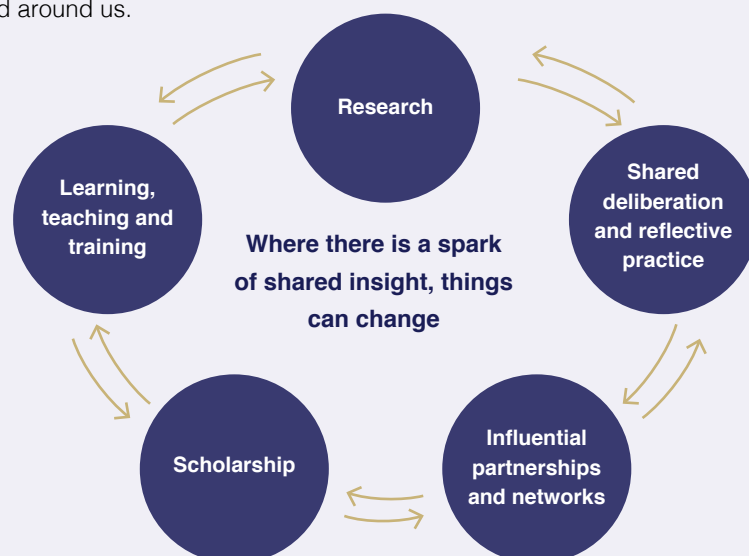
2. Closely connected to this is engagement with different audiences, ranging from academics, policy decision-makers, civil society activists, and media to other regional and global institutions. Through this work, PLAAS creates spaces and platforms for dialogue, debate, discussion and reflection.
3. On the basis of both research and engagement, another core activity is teaching and training. Again, this involves a wide range of participants and includes academic degrees offered to postgraduate students, credited and uncredited short courses, and training interventions aimed at policy-makers, civil-society activists and practitioners.
4. Closely related but distinct is the institute's work aimed at developing PLAAS's own scholarship. One of the organisation's core commitments is to contribute to the development of the next generation of scholars, and this shapes how career pathing and internal conversations are undertaken at PLAAS. This internal scholarly work, sustained through internal conversations/processes, strengthens the external scholarly work.
5. Finally, the institute seeks to develop influential and impactful partnerships, collaborating with other organisations and institutions to influence and realise impact.

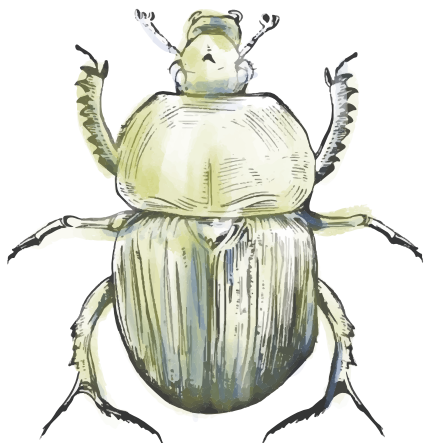
At the centre of this picture of how PLAAS works is the “spark” of collective reflection and agenda setting – the process of “reasoning together” about how to frame – and reframe – understandings of social reality and the process of change. In practice, this comes down to a commitment to using grounded, situated processes of critical reflection and deliberation to improve action for change. Critical reflection is a collaborative and creative process that is a core part of the institute's engagement with other social actors (whether they are students, policy-makers, practitioners or activists) and with one another. The approach has implications for how the processes of external engagement and communication are conceptualised; how external partnerships and alliances are structured; the institute's communication strategy; and the content and format of the teaching and learning activities that are undertaken. The approach also entails consciously creating internal spaces for pausing during and between projects to think and write together. Investing in and sustaining such organisational practices is essential to elevate PLAAS beyond being the sum of its academic role and project work, giving it a coherent identity as a long-term driver of change. This requires investing in the practical arrangements and skills required to sustain internal reflective conversations and processes about intersections across projects, and shifting the institute's currently somewhat fragmented organisational structure by anchoring these conversations within practical arrangements that can sustain processes of internal organisational learning and reflection.

Theory of change

PLAAS Vision: Social and political capacity for equitable change.

We work to advance social justice, foster equitable social change and nourish informed and democratic debate and practice in the world around us.





Postgraduate academic programme

PLAAS transitioned to a virtual ecosystem in 2021 and 2022, and most of the students have indicated that they prefer engaging in their academic programmes both in person and online. The hybrid approach has enabled them to spend more time focused on their studies and has cut travel costs.

Postgraduate diploma

Over the past two years, PLAAS registered 28 students for its postgraduate diploma; and 21 students graduated. The teaching and learning for this diploma were hosted via Zoom, making use of the university's learning management platform, leveraging university training on academic writing, and using the library. PLAAS also hosted its own training on the university's systems. The institute's team of internationally recognised lecturers continued to be creative in their teaching approaches, making use of videos, class debates and discussions with the aim of encouraging critical engagement on key issues and policies in southern Africa and promoting interventions based on students' professional experiences. The postgraduate diploma offers four modules on:

- Structural poverty and marginalised livelihoods of agro-food systems;
- The political economy of land and agrarian reform in southern Africa;
- The economics of farming and food systems; and
- Social and ecological dimensions of ecosystems management.

The course provides students with a solid theoretical background on issues of poverty, land and agrarian reform, ecosystem management and climate change.

Research programme

PLAAS continued to engage with its research students, supervising them individually in person and online and also hosting a range of postgraduate research workshops. These workshops fostered a sense of belonging among the students, enabled them to share experiences, and provided feedback on their efforts. In 2021 and 2022, four students were registered for Master's degrees and nine for PhDs. Four students graduated with Master's and two obtained PhDs.

Student	Programme	Thesis title
Mnqobi Ngubane	PhD	Investigating socio-spatial trajectories of class formation: Accumulation from below and above on “New Qwa Qwa farms” from the mid-1980s to 2016. <i>Supervised by Prof Ben Cousins</i>
Emmanuel Sulle	PhD by publications	The politics of inclusive business models in agricultural investments: The case of sugarcane production in Kilombero, Tanzania <i>Supervised by Prof Ruth Hall</i>
Prisca Mandimika	MPhil	Namibia's land redistribution programme: A case study of Steinhausen (Okarukambe) constituency in Omaheke region <i>Supervised by Prof Ruth Hall</i>
Camilla Thorogood	MPhil	Food provision challenges facing early childhood development centres in two Cape Town townships <i>Supervised by Prof Andries Du Toit</i>
Augustine Fosu	MPhil	Housing development and customary land tenure system in Ghana: A case study of peri-urban Kumasi <i>Supervised by Dr Farai Mtero</i>
Clemente Ntauazi	MPhil	The impact of large-scale land-based investments on food production systems: The case of Gurne District, Mozambique <i>Supervised by Prof Ruth Hall</i>

2021 academic year

Research methodology workshop (8 - 12 February 2021)

A week-long research methodology workshop was hosted by PLAAS supervisors and post-doctoral fellows. The student participants were encouraged to interact and share their experiences on selected topics, thereby encouraging peer learning. The workshop explored the relationship between research questions, theory and research design, and considered qualitative and quantitative research design.

2022 academic year

Prof Ruth Hall coordinated a series of postgraduate workshops from 8 to 25 February 2022; and Prof Andries Du Toit hosted a postgraduate writing workshop from 30 May to 2 June 2022.

Writing workshop (8 - 9 February 2022)

In conjunction with the Stellenbosch Writing Centre, Prof Ruth Hall convened a two-day workshop to take students through how to organise and produce a literature review, as well as on general writing skills for structuring, drafting and self-editing the text of a thesis. Students, who were invited to register for the workshop, were asked to bring some of their own written material, so that they could apply the principles being taught in a practical and useful way.

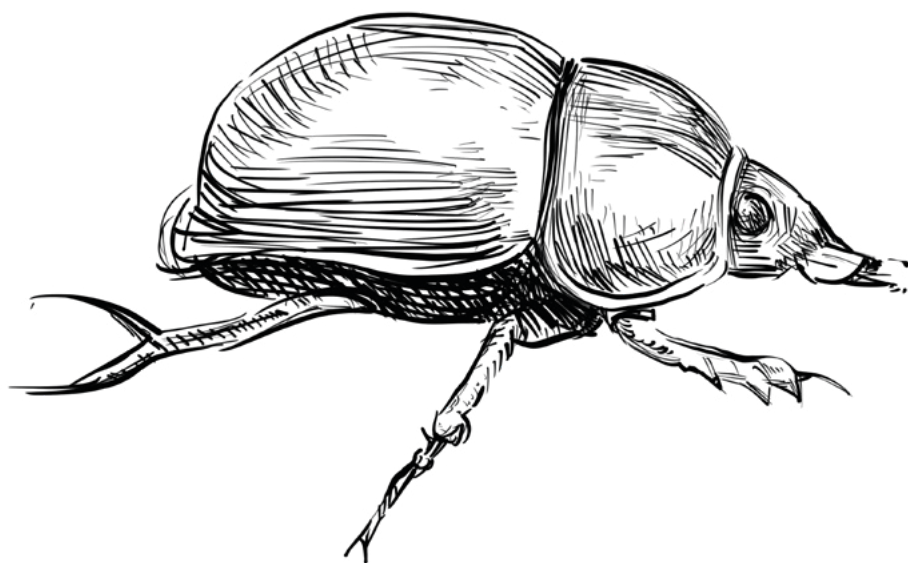
Fieldwork training (10 - 11 February 2022)

Most research students at PLAAS undertake field-based research, which requires a distinct skillset that is typically not taught at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. In response, Prof Moenieba Isaacs and Dr Phillan Zamchiya convened a two-day workshop on the topic, which covered a range of issues, including:

- Negotiating access and dealing with gatekeepers;
- Ethics and contracting with communities;
- Field experiences and tips for securing respondents;
- Safety and gender issues in research;
- Best practices in note-taking and record-keeping; and
- Innovative approaches to reporting back to respondents.

Postgraduate colloquium (14 - 16 February 2022)

Prof Andries du Toit and Prof Ruth Hall convened this three-day colloquium at which PLAAS postgraduate students who were at different stages in preparing their theses presented their work. Some of the students were at the write-up stage of their thesis; others were at the fieldwork/mid-research phase; and others still were at the proposal or early stage.



STIAS land conference (17 - 18 February 2022)

PLAAS students were invited to attend a conference on “Compensation through expropriation without compensation? Constitutional amendment, land reform and the future of redistributive justice in South Africa” convened by Prof Cheryl Walker and Dr Olaf Zenker of the University of Stellenbosch at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS).

Prof Ian Scoones visit (21 - 22 February 2022)

Prof Ian Scoones of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex visited PLAAS and presented a seminar, followed by interaction with PLAAS students – in particular those working on rural livelihoods, livestock and Zimbabwe.

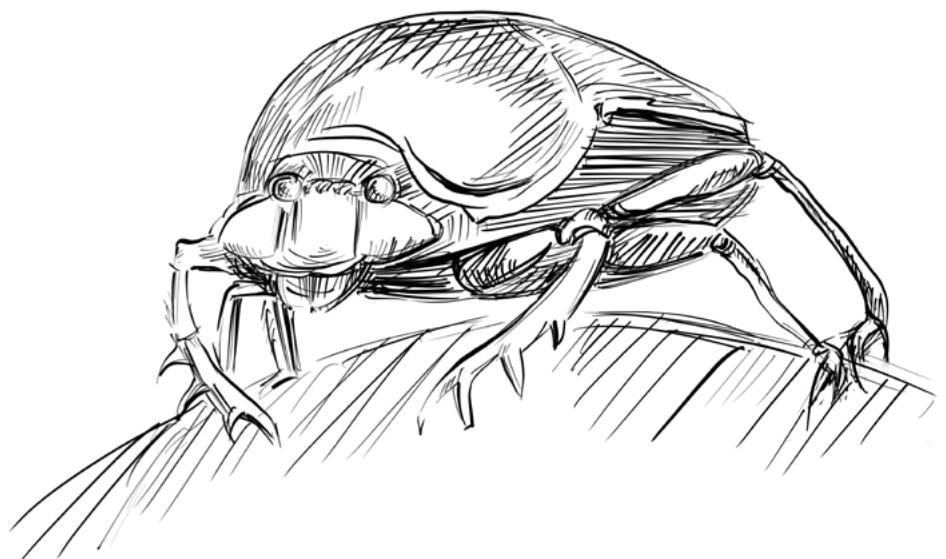
Land tenure conference (23 - 25 February 2022)

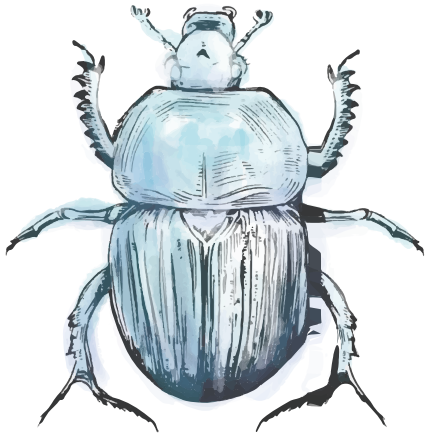
PLAAS students were invited to attend a conference on customary land tenure in the communal areas of South Africa which was convened by Prof Ruth Hall, Dr Phillan Zamchiya and Sienne Molepo of PLAAS in partnership with the Alliance for Rural Democracy; the Land and Accountability Research Centre at the University of Cape Town (UCT); the Society and Work Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits); and the Legal Resources Centre. The meeting sought to foreground the voices and struggles of people living in communal areas, as well as the voices of scholars from across the continent who located South African struggles for land rights within the broader African context.

Writing workshop (30 May - 2 June 2022)

Prof Andries Du Toit convened this workshop on the theme “Writing to make a difference: Tools for your postgraduate journey”. The workshop focused on understanding writing as a creative sense-making process and developing concrete ways to incorporate writing as a practice into the postgraduate journey. It was hosted online and in person so that all students could attend. The workshop aimed:

- To develop a shared understanding of writing as a creative process of sense-making, inside and outside academic life;
- To identify the sources of blockages, self-silencing, censorship and criticism in the writing process – and to explore ways of overcoming them;
- To introduce students to effective tools that will enable them to separate the writer in them from the internal editor;
- To examine the traditional approach to critiquing writing and its shortfalls, and to learn a new technique for peer feedback and response (the Dunlap method); and
- To identify ways of using writing as a reflexive, generative, sense-making practice in all stages of the postgraduate journey.





Training and continuing education

PLAAS offers two short courses:

- A course on the “Political economy of land governance in Africa”, which is convened with the Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (NELGA) under the leadership of Prof Ruth Hall and Prof Moenieba Isaacs; and
- A course on “Living Landscapes”, which is funded by the Oak Foundation and convened in collaboration with Wageningen University and UCT under the leadership of Prof Moenieba Isaacs.

Both these short courses, which are offered online and in-person, have fed into PLAAS’s postgraduate diploma, as well as Master’s and PhDs being undertaken by students across the continent.

Both courses are accredited and endorsed by UWC. Upon successful completion of each course and the assessments that are linked to these courses, participants receive a Certificate of Competence. If participants fail to achieve the appropriate standard, they are awarded a Certificate of Attendance.

Political economy of land governance in Africa

PLAAS has hosted five short courses with NELGA in the past five years, including one which was held virtually in 2021. A total of 183 land professionals across 36 African countries were trained prior to 2023. The training, which is supported by the African Union (AU), the United Nations Economic Commission for African (UNECA) Land Policy Centre, and the African Development Bank, aims to strengthen the curriculum on land governance in Africa.

The participants in the five-day short-course work in break-out groups led by facilitators but share lecturers and participate in plenary question-and-answer sessions and discussions. Participants are selected to ensure equitable gender representation and a spread of ages and sectoral interests from across the continent so that the discussions on land-governance issues feature multiple perspectives. The participants are typically professionals who are engaged in shaping land governance, as well as practitioners likely to derive significant benefits from attending the course.

A roster of leading academics and experts present and lecture during the course, including: Prof Kojo Amanor of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana; Prof Issa Shivji, Emeritus Professor at the School of Law, University of Dar es Salaam; Dr James Murombedzi of UNECA’s African Climate Policy Centre; Prof Patricia Kameri-Mbote of the International Environmental Law Research Centre; Prof Mamadou Goïta of the Institute for Research and Promotion of Alternatives in Development; Prof Yasmine Moataz Ahmed of the American University in Cairo; Prof Lyn Ossome of the Makerere Institute for Social Research; Prof Dzodzi Tsikata of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London; and Eileen Wakesho Mwangi of Namati.

The facilitators for the course are emerging academics and researchers engaged in the field of land administration in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe, most of whom are women.

The training, which includes in-depth analysis of country-specific land administration dynamics, adopts a pan-African focus in line with the goal of producing an activist cohort of practitioners capable of helping to implement and inform high-level policy deliberations undertaken at the AU. In particular, it has addressed current issues including women's land rights, climate change and natural resource access and management. It has also featured Africa-focused sessions on pre-colonial and colonial histories; the political economy of land on the continent; land-reform law and policy in southern, west, east and north Africa; rural and urban land administration; commodification of the commons; extractive industries and land rights; large-scale land acquisitions; and African and global land-policy guidelines.

Living Landscapes

The Living Landscapes short course was launched in 2022 with the aim of transforming conservation ideas and practices in southern Africa in biodiverse rural, urban, land and ocean spaces. Under the pilot phase, 17 professionals working in biodiversity conservation, natural resource management and governance across six African countries were trained.

The course has focused on training mid-career conservation professionals working at government institutions and practitioners working directly with communities. The training features lectures and presentations delivered by a number of leading experts in the field of conservation for social justice, including: Prof Moenieba Isaacs of PLAAS, Prof Bram Büscher of Wageningen University, Dr Lesley Green

of UCT, Mathew Bukhi Mabele of the University of Dodoma, Prof Frank Matose of UCT, Dr Lerato Thakholi of Wageningen University, Dr Laila Sandroni of the University of São Paulo, and Samantha Sithole of the University of Lausanne.

The course has been crafted to foster new ways of thinking about conservation, including through the adoption of a political-ecology approach; and to improve and enhance professional practices in the fields of biodiversity conservation and natural resource management and governance. In particular, the course has explored a number of themes, including: histories and paradigms of conservation in South(ern) Africa and globally; the nature of the current biodiversity crisis; the political ecology of conservation in relation to the extinction crisis and social justice; alternatives to mainstream conservation; and issues of rights, violence, law, gender, livelihoods and access in relation to conservation practices.

The week-long programme of interactive learning, presentations, debates and formal assessment comprises two morning lectures a day at which participants are encouraged to engage, debate and reflect on their own professional practices and understandings. It features working groups with facilitators to allow participants to interact and share experiences, and afternoon sessions that are set aside for reading and self-study before a final daily plenary session.

The programme also includes a fieldtrip to local community conservation sites, showing the difference between a well-managed urban conservation park and a poorly managed community-based conservation area and offering an opportunity to engage with relevant stakeholders in the city. The participants are required to write and present a report on this fieldwork as part of the assessment for the course.



Research



DST NRF Chair - Hybrid communications used to foster new generation of scholars

Professor Ruth Hall has been making a virtue of necessity over the past two years, deploying the new technologies that were increasingly used in response to lockdown conditions to promote greater participation in scholarship.

In particular, she leveraged online connectivity to support emerging scholars through networks of peers and senior academics, exposing these scholars to the demands of academic practice and fostering among them a culture of research that is responsive to needs on the ground.

“The shift during Covid towards flexible online engagements – and everybody becoming very familiar with that – was actually quite liberating,” Prof Hall says. “It provided us with a set of tools and methods with which we could overcome many of the things that had made our teaching and supervision work complex, slow and costly.”

In addition, Prof Hall played a leading role in convening two large “authentically hybrid” conferences on land, and on climate change and agrarian justice. A model of communication deploying online connectivity and in-person participation was forged for these events in an effort to promote more inclusive public scholarship.

Prof Hall says that the new method “democratised ways of communicating”, combining the conventional practice of an online international meeting featuring global experts with “a deep, grassroots, participatory approach” under which the proceedings were communicated in vernacular languages so that rural activists also could engage.

Deploying this model, a land conference considering issues of tenure and custom was organised in August 2022 by UWC in collaboration with think-tanks at other South African universities and a number of civil society organisations including, crucially, the Alliance for Rural Democracy, which is a social movement connecting communal areas of the country.

The meeting convened rural stakeholders at conference venues in Johannesburg, Durban and East London, and connected them via the internet to a large group of activists, academics, lawyers and experts from around the world, including Prof Hall, who has herself published extensively on land reform, tenure and governance in Africa.

Presentations were simultaneously translated into the vernacular at the venues and discussed in a workshop format, with the online participants contributing feedback, questions and responses.

“So, this was hybrid in a true sense of the word,” says Prof Hall. “It was hybrid across space; online and in person; across languages; and between technical, legal and academic expertise and everyday concepts.”

A particular advantage of the meeting’s hybrid nature was that it enabled the delivery of national and international support to communities who had been quite isolated in their land struggles.

“This really had the flavour of bringing the experiences of the whole continent to bear on the burning issues and connecting people across different rural struggles,” she says.

Building on the university’s new-found capacity for organising hybrid events, Prof Hall, in her capacity as the South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies and as editor of the Journal of Peasant Studies subsequently convened a four-day global conference on climate change and agrarian justice, which was attended by more than 2,000 participants from 80 countries and featured simultaneous interpretation into English, French, Spanish and Burmese.

Again, Prof Hall stresses the breadth of the engagement at the meeting and how this promoted support for local communities on the ground. “The plenaries included not just academics, but representatives of social movements and peasant movements talking not about climate change per se, but about the politics of the responses to climate change and ways in which these have taken forms that actually transfer the costs of mitigation to the global south and to agrarian communities.”

In addition to the huge events, Prof Hall has convened a number of major training events using online and hybrid models, including a continent-wide accredited short course for land professionals, activists and officials on the political economy of land, which is a PLAAS initiative; and a “write-shop” in support of critical agrarian studies and scholar activism under the auspices of the Journal of Peasant Studies. She says that the write-shop was mainly concerned with “what it means to be a scholar”, but also considered “different ways in which people can combine forms of scholarship and engagement with agrarian struggles and land issues at a more grassroots level”.

This ethos of engaged scholarship also informs her own practice mentoring and supporting the 16 or so PhD students whom she supervises as SARChI Chair. For example, in 2021, students at the institute learned about fieldwork in the most practical way possible: they were recruited to collect data for a project being coordinated by PLAAS on the impacts

of Covid-19 on African food systems. The result was on-the-ground findings indicating the value of local, short-value chains in promoting resilience and food security in times of crisis.

Prof Hall has also sought to promote a more engaged ethos through the establishment of a semi-structured programme under which her PhD students present to internal and external assessors at the culmination of each phase. “It’s a semi-public process, which fosters accountability and makes visible people’s work for critical feedback at key junctures in their PhD journey,” she says. On this journey, a number of actual, hybrid and online events have been held providing peer support and external inputs beyond the contribution that may be provided by one supervisor alone.

The peer support among the PhD cohort – which has led to the co-creation of ideas and research outputs, including published papers – was reinforced by efforts to leverage a broader network of expertise. In this regard, a number of highly cited academics were recruited to design and present hybrid workshops on proposal development, research methods and writing.

In 2021 and 2022, the external inputs also included feedback from civil society activists working with rural communities on project ideas that had been produced by the students.

“One of the benefits of this was that students were able somewhat to align their studies with identified needs and build partnerships,” says Prof Hall. “In a couple of instances, the scholars changed their case studies in order to undertake their research in places where it would be more useful and relevant.”

“The plenaries included not just academics, but representatives of social movements and peasant movements talking not about climate change per se, but about the politics of the responses to climate change...”



Land tenure - A scholarship born of women's struggle for land

Dr Phillan Zamchiya adopts a symbiotic approach to producing academic outputs and achieving impact in the field. The two inspire each other. He leverages his academic expertise to strengthen the projects that he manages, while at the same time producing published research derived from his engagement with local communities. Accordingly, although he considers himself as “first and foremost” an academic, he also describes how he has deployed his “understanding of the bigger political debates” to promote local women’s democratic engagement in the development of land policies.

The symbiotic approach is evidenced by the dual roles that he undertakes at PLAAS. As a scholar, Dr Zamchiya studies contemporary trajectories of land and agrarian change in Southern Africa and the politics of post-colonial states in democratic transitions – and has recently written a number of papers for leading international journals on topics related to these research interests. The aim of this work is to produce excellent published outputs that can re-shape the academic discourse. Meanwhile, as the manager of a major, three-year “action-research” project on the privatisation of customary land and women’s land rights in Southern Africa, he has been, in his own words, “driven by the need to see transformative change”. These two roles shape how Dr Zamchiya spends his days.

As a scholar working in what he describes as “historic academic spaces”, he has presented and delivered papers at a number of academic and public policy seminars, including at the behest of the European Union (EU) and international development agencies. He has also lectured and coordinated a course on the political economy of land and agrarian change in Southern Africa and has advocated for policy change, including at the continental level. Meanwhile, as the coordinator of the women’s land rights initiative, he has travelled from country to

country across the region, coordinating with civil society organisations (CSOs) and meeting hundreds of local women in community halls or under trees in far-flung villages.

Theory and practice also come together in the way in which Dr Zamchiya’s scholarly grasp informs his approach as a project coordinator. For example, he notes that his research interest in “the role of the post-colonial state – its politics and practice” helps him to “analyse trajectories of agrarian change, including from the point of view of the actual politics and decision-making that happens behind doors”. In this regard, Dr Zamchiya’s understanding of how politics is enacted on the ground led him to establish a number of new platforms for advocacy as part of the recent land-rights project. These have included:

- “Community-based policy briefs”, which presented local women’s land needs as expressed by the women themselves;
- Meetings at which rural women were able to engage directly with policy-makers and influential traditional leaders and local councillors; and
- A documentary entitled *All That We Have Is Land*, in which rural women in Zambia and

Mozambique talked about how they had been affected by the formalisation of land rights.

Dr Zamchiya says that the aim of these initiatives was to place the project's research findings in their community contexts rather than presenting them only as a set of academic outputs – and, in this way, attract the attention of the elected officials making and implementing policy. “My thinking was that, as scholars, sometimes when we speak, policy-makers don't take us seriously,” he explains.

It is a strategy that appears to have borne considerable fruit. Officials in Mozambique and Zimbabwe have indicated that the project's findings are shaping their countries' land policies; while, in Zambia, the research undertaken by PLAAS in collaboration with the Zambia Land Alliance produced inputs into the national land policy-making process that was taking place there at the time. Dr Zamchiya says that although “not everything was considered” by the Zambian government, some key points were incorporated into the new land policy – such as, for example, that women must be allocated 50% of land; that the age for owning land be reduced from 21 to 18 years; and that land administration should be democratised and decentralised.

Dr Zamchiya is now using the findings from the southern Africa action-research project as the basis for a new scholarly understanding of the political economy of land use and control in the region, with particular reference to the issue of women's rights in the agrarian economy. “What we have found is that formalisation per se does not guarantee women security of tenure,” he says, noting how some official models of development view formalisation as a “magic bullet” and couch progress “in terms of the number of [land-rights] certificates that people have received”. It is remarkable that “if women receive 40% [of these], it is counted as development,” he says.

Meanwhile, the attempts at formalisation which have replaced traditional forms of control over land have, according to Dr Zamchiya, led to the emergence of

new institutions of land governance at a local level – institutions which were never contemplated by the policy-makers and legislators. “Nobody tends to understand that at the moment – so it's something that would be interesting to pursue,” he says.

Accordingly, and in the context of what he describes as a “broken system” of land administration, Dr Zamchiya is proposing a new research topic which attends to the ways in which power is exercised on the ground in Africa, particularly in relation to rural women's quest for security of tenure on customary land. Noting that “women cannot be emancipated by being given land titles within a broken system”, he says that the new topic “goes beyond feminine formalisation”. In this respect, as well as more broadly, Dr Zamchiya's scholarship, fieldwork and own experience have all indicated that the goal should be to find ways of transforming the system itself.

“I work with people who go to bed sometimes with nothing to eat, and who have children they can't afford to send to school; and you see all these developmental programmes which are meant to emancipate them or alleviate their poverty, but which, in the end, only exacerbate the conditions,” he says. “So, I'm driven by that passion to make my own little contribution towards positive transformation or change.”

“Women cannot be emancipated by being given land titles within a broken system.”



Access to land - 'The aim is to identify people's needs as the basis for policy-making'

Dr Farai Mtero obtained his PhD at PLAAS and is now a senior researcher at the institute. Previously, he was a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at Wits, where he focused on the socio-economic impacts of mining expansion in mineral-rich rural areas of South Africa. At PLAAS, the main focus of his research is on land reform outcomes, specifically the extent to which South Africa's redistributive land reform has been pro-poor. More broadly, his research raises critical questions on the role of land redistribution as a mechanism for social transformation in South Africa.

In leading the project on “Equitable Access to Land for Social Justice”, Dr Mtero has sought to produce a genuinely democratic vision of how inclusive land reform may be enacted. “The aim has been to produce spaces in which key actors in the land and other sectors can engage in critical conversations about the fundamental purpose of land reform in South Africa – what it is for – and the role of this in development and societal transformation.” For Dr Mtero, “It is about helping to forge a coalition among those who are marginalised and excluded from policy processes – and on the basis of that coalition, trying to engage and influence the policy-makers and highlighting the significance of a pro-poor land reform.” Dr Mtero believes the role of the researcher “is to conduct relevant empirical research that surfaces land-related inequalities and supports evidence-based policy making and public engagement within the land sector and in broader society.”

“In terms of South African public policy, land reform has largely been equated with agricultural land reform. So, the urban land question has tended to be marginalised and peripheralised.

But the reality is that most of the land pressures, the life struggles that can be seen in the cities and towns – the evictions, the mushrooming of informal settlements – indicate that the most urgent flashpoints of South Africa's land question are urban.

“As much as there is demand for rural land for agricultural purposes, there is this huge shift. Society has urbanised, and people move in between rural and urban spaces, and that creates the kind of land pressures that we see in present day South Africa.”

Referencing the action-research nature of the project, Dr Mtero says: “The starting point is to look at the people and what their needs are as the basis for policymaking. By doing that, you are able to respond to the prevailing needs at any particular point in time that inform this quest for land in South Africa – instead of having a pre-designed programme that assumes that if you're in rural areas, there is provision of agricultural land, and, [if you are in an urban area, there is] a residential plot just to erect the housing structure.”

Accordingly, he says, the project has sought “to analyse, to try and understand, the localised struggles that people engage in on a day-to-day basis to access land; and in particular, to look at the self-provision that happens on the ground, at grassroots level.” He asks, “What do those grassroots initiatives to occupy land and assert rights by ordinary South Africans in the urban space tell us about the kind of land reform that is desirable for South Africa?”

Doing so enables the pursuit of a key goal of the research, “basically to learn from those alternatives, from what has been widely called ‘attempted land reform from below’, that is an alternative modality which is, at times, in conflict with the official paradigms, plans and designs.”

Building on the methodological success of the project and the ideas that have emerged from it, Dr Mtero says that his own scholarly ambitions going forward include making a greater contribution to “progressive societal change”. Looking to the future more broadly, he identifies a number of key challenges in a rapidly changing global and national context. “The broader political

and economic environment has, recently, been profoundly shaped by a series of crises, that include the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, the climate crisis and, one might add, the looming possibility of developing countries facing an unjust energy transition”, he says. “The unprecedented convergence of these adverse forces has been aptly characterised as a poly-crisis, and this complex environment has affected the capacity of the state, and the availability of resources to confront developmental challenges including land reform delivery. In a context in which land reform has historically suffered from policy neglect, the challenge is to keep it on the agenda given the multiple challenges facing society at the moment.”

Society has urbanised, and people move in between rural and urban spaces, and that creates the kind of land pressures that we see in present day South Africa.”





‘Research is there to open the eyes of all stakeholders’

Katlego Ramantsima joined PLAAS in June 2018 from Wits where she was an assistant researcher considering issues of mining and rural transformation in southern African. In particular, she investigated rural poverty and insecure systems of “customary” tenure under traditional authorities. Her present research interests concern resource-based development; trade and industrial policy; communal land rights; urban regeneration; and rural social change.

For Katlego Ramantsima, the Equitable Access to Land for Social Justice project has pointed to the impact that researchers such as herself can play in fostering change on the ground, as well as among government circles, by producing and sharing knowledge. “Our responsibility as researchers and as an academic institution is to provide that knowledge [on land reform] to the people that we engage with, which can also contribute to alleviating this problem of the lack of information,” she says.

Accordingly, Ramantsima emphasises the importance of disseminating research findings through the media, thus “making sure that all of our ideas, including civil society’s ideas are actually out there”. The aim should be to inform both policy-making and grassroots efforts. One of the results of this focus has been that PLAAS has become a hub for advice and research on the issue of land reform, she says. “We have seen that whenever people on the ground need some advice or research, then they approach us because they know that we have this interest in the work that we do.”

The access-to-land project’s efforts to engage civil society representatives and government officials on the issue of land reform also entailed efforts to bring them together “in the same room”, although the

contested nature of land as a topic meant that this was not always possible. As Ramantsima explains: “People usually get fired up when they talk about land, because of the different understandings that they have about what the land actually means to them. So, we, as researchers, have to be very careful in that regard.” In this context, she emphasises how important properly researched findings can be to changing hearts, minds (and policy) around the issue of land reform – although there can be significant resistance among officials to engaging on such findings.

“I think one of the main reasons [for this resistance is] a lack of understanding of how research can actually help to resolve policy and structural problems; and can actually come up with recommendations to ease some of the stresses that officials are facing. Most of the time, when you want to talk to government, they think, ‘Oh, they just going to criticise us.’ But the research is purely there to open the eyes of all stakeholders.” In this regard, Ramantsima strikes an optimistic note: “I don’t think that any of these challenges that we are seeing [in relation to land] has no solution.”

Looking to the future, she says, “I think there is more that needs to be researched in this area,

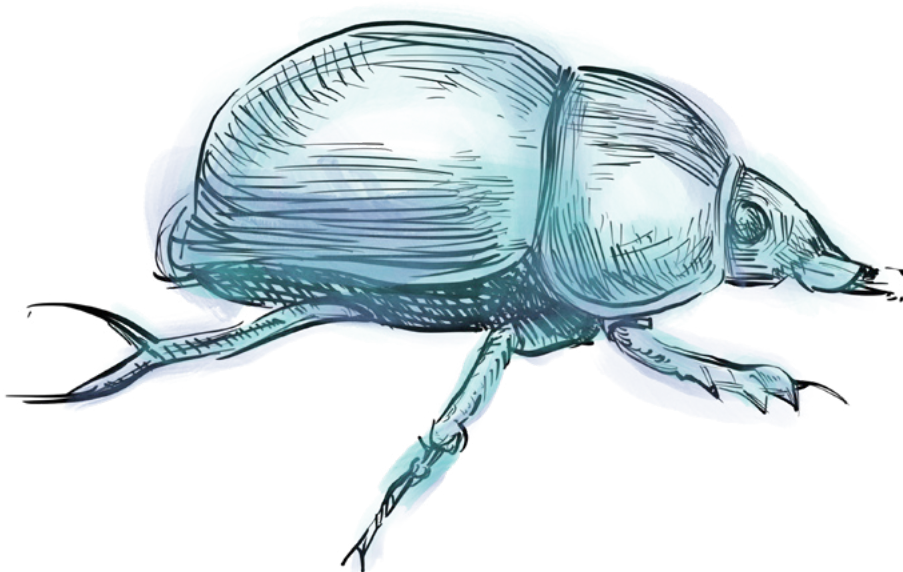
particularly in the urban land context”, and urges that the discourse around land reform should include the concerns of both rural and urban populations and should ask more questions about the state’s responsibility in addressing these concerns.

Meanwhile, in terms of her own motives as a researcher, Ramantsima describes her “love for the people” and her drive to “assist for the betterment of South Africa”. According to Ramantsima, change comes “in small ways, of course. It’s not like I’m making big moves. So, it’s about doing the little that I can, the knowledge that I can impart to the people, the knowledge-sharing, and so forth.”

When it comes to people, Ramantsima reflects on her position, “It’s so funny, as a researcher, you are often looked at as occupying a position of power,

and of knowing so much, but there’s also so much we receive from all the parties, all the stakeholders who we work with. And I think this is what fulfils me. This is why I enjoy working with civil society organisations; this is why I even enjoy working with government and those in the private sector who want to come on board. When we see the togetherness of the people in our country collaborating, that gives me great satisfaction and encourages me to want to continue with the work.”

“I don’t think that any of these challenges that we are seeing [in relation to land] has no solution.”





‘Land, in a way, is everything’

Nkanyiso Gumede joined PLAAS in March 2016 with a Master’s degree in Agriculture (Food Security) obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). A former teacher and facilitator working with smallholder farmers, he has researched the impacts of agricultural investments on the land rights and livelihoods of the smallholders in communal areas in South Africa. His current research is on the nature and character of land redistribution across the country.

In his role as a researcher on the “Equitable Access to Land for Social Justice” project, Gumede has identified the importance of allowing poor and marginalised communities a say in land reform, particularly in urban areas where land may sit empty for many years. Drawing on this finding, he advocates for greater popular participation in the formulation of the integrated plans produced by local authorities, which provide the template for the spatial development of South African cities and towns.

In particular, Gumede argues for more transparency and public information about who owns what land, and how land in the urban areas has been zoned. He says that the establishment of such a land information system would enable poorer residents to meet their land needs more effectively and head off confrontations with local authorities. “We need to devise strategies for influencing the IDP (integrated development plan) processes, at a local level”, he says.

In the meantime, however, Gumede notes, land continues to be allocated through top-down government-led programmes under which political interests and market factors favour elites. For example, even when rural land is redistributed, the “white former land owners will return to these

farms as strategic partners, service providers or input suppliers and end up appropriating all the value and profits out of that enterprise. So, now you end up with a land reform programme that does not benefit those for whom it was intended, in particular the poor.”

Indeed, the official discourse around land reform continues to be framed by “what is going to happen to the [established] farmers, what is going to happen to property owners”, he says. “And we forget that, as South Africans, we are committed to redressing the imbalances of the past, which means that there will need to be concessions in pursuit of equity.”

In promoting redress, Gumede emphasises that “land, in a way, is everything.” It enables access to housing and economic opportunities and has, historically, provided the basis upon which individuals and groups in society have achieved great wealth. It also holds great symbolic value: “South Africa is said to belong to everyone who live in it; but there are those who live in the country who do not own anything.”

In this vein, Gumede’s own commitment as a researcher at PLAAS is, he declares, “informed by a desire to see justice, under which where everyone is able to lead a productive life that is

not constrained by anything; and where all the freedoms that are listed in the Constitution are enjoyed by everyone, not just a select few”.

In this respect, he says, one of the main contributions of the research produced by PLAAS has been to identify the variety of local land needs in both rural and urban areas, potentially paving the way to more effective engagement with local authorities to meet these.

“The assumption in the urban areas has been that people occupy land only for housing purposes. But we came across people who were too poor to acquire land on the property market and who, as a result, occupied land for business purposes.”

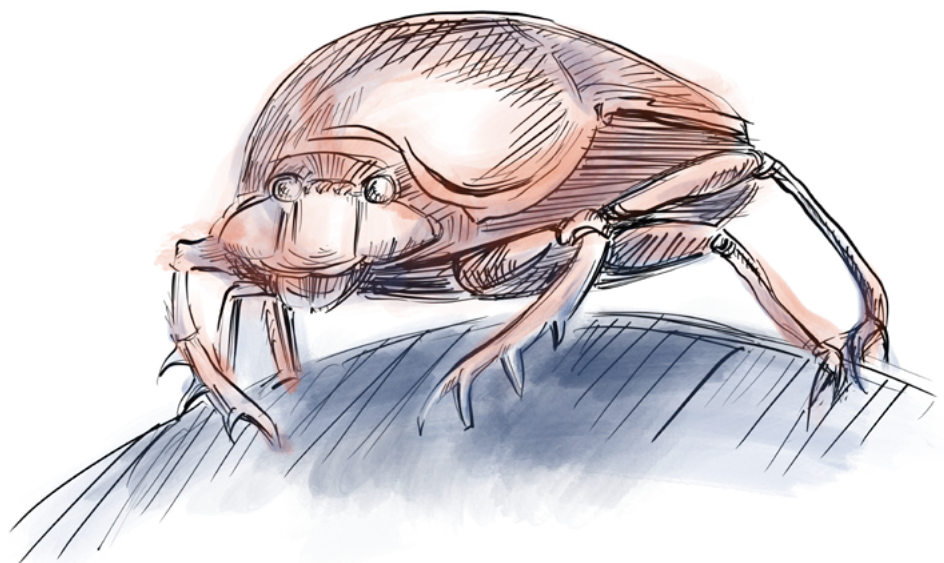
In addition, he notes, individual and household land needs were often for relatively small plots: a couple of hectares for smallholder farming, or a 5-metre-by-6-metre stand so that urban residents can build themselves a decent house.

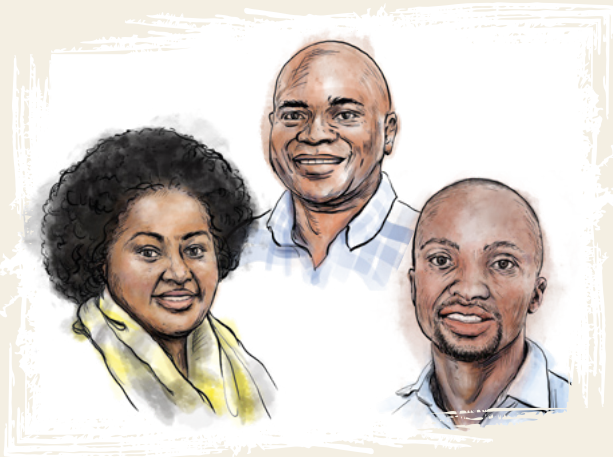
In revealing the scale and kind of land needs among the marginalised population, the research produced by PLAAS may foster more effective policy-making, he says.

Looking to the future, Gumede notes that the pressure on urban land will rise as people continue to move to cities and towns in search of employment and livelihood opportunities, and in an effort to escape the inadequate provision of services in rural areas.

In this regard, he foresees a sustained research focus on urban land struggles.

“We need to devise strategies for influencing the integrated development plan processes, at a local level”





Equitable Access to Land for Social Justice

At a time of renewed national focus on land reform, a team of researchers at PLAAS led a three-year project exploring and producing alternative proposals in support of a progressive and pro-poor approach to the issue.

The project on “Equitable Access to Land for Social Justice” sought to support public debate and social dialogue on a crucial but often unexplored political question: What is the purpose of land reform and whose interests should it serve?

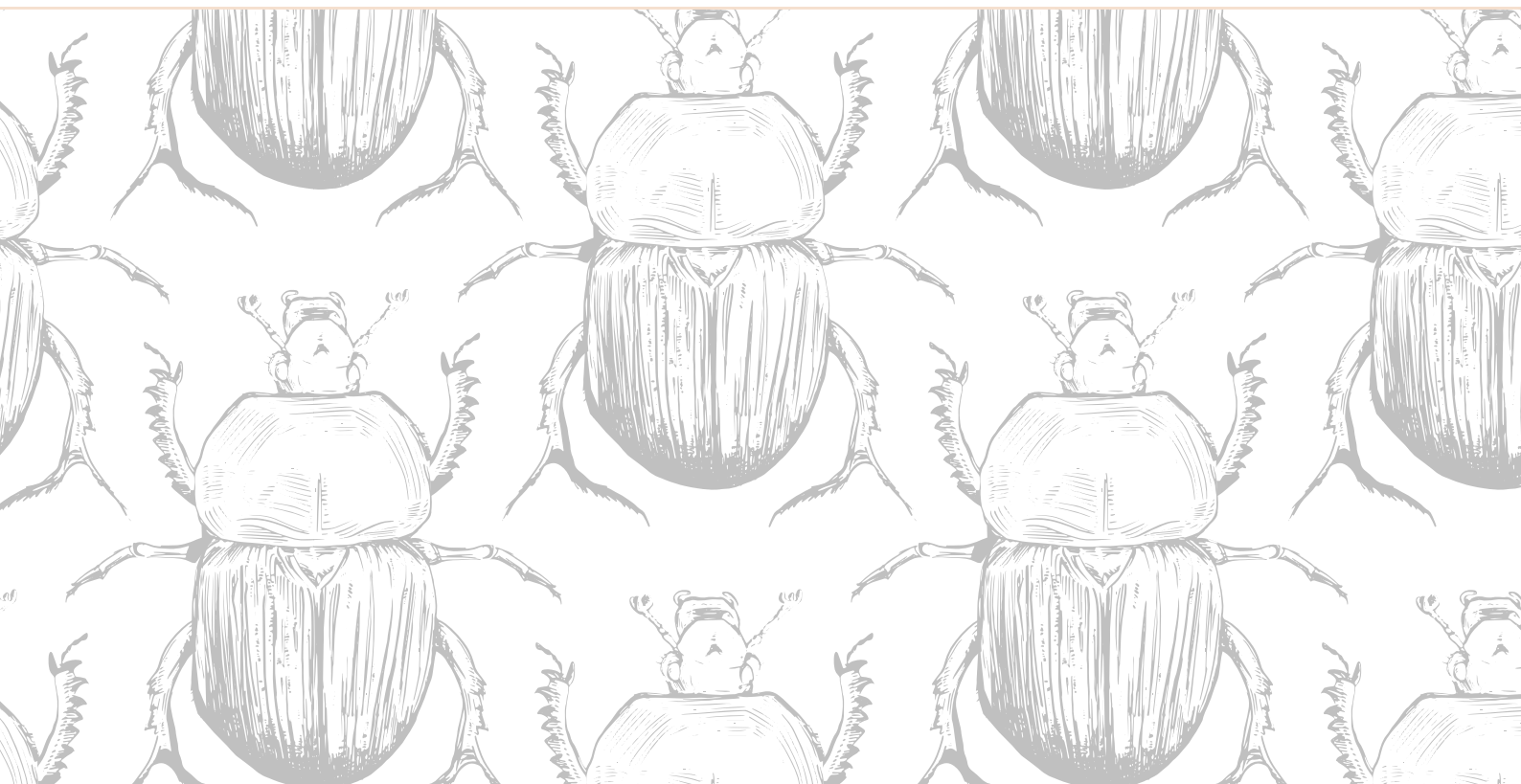
Deploying a combination of fieldwork and public engagement efforts, Dr Farai Mtero and his colleagues Nkanyiso Gumede and Katlego Ramantsima examined how society as a whole, including policy-makers, officials and beneficiaries, saw the rationale for land reform, and what this meant for people’s notions of what counted as “success” or “failure” in relation to such reform. For example, should a land reform project be deemed successful if it manages to gain entry to export markets – but at the cost of reducing “beneficiaries” to the status of farm workers in all but name? Should a project be considered a “failure” if conventional business models are abandoned, but the people working the land attain tenure security and reduce their dependence on shop-bought food?

A central focus of the project was to reach out to grassroots stakeholders in order to identify their interests and needs and, thus, produce a genuinely democratic vision of how inclusive land reform may be enacted. In an effort to address grassroots concerns, the project convened stakeholders from the Eastern Cape, the Free State, Gauteng, North West and KwaZulu-Natal to discuss the constraints on equitable access to land for more marginalised beneficiaries. The stakeholders, who were engaged through a range of outreach and research activities, including webinars, social dialogues and interviews, included community members and

activists from organisations such as the Alliance for Rural Democracy, Vulamasango Singene, Ndifuna Ukwazi and Reclaim the City.

In this regard, the democratic goal of the project was to identify land needs among both the rural poor and the urban poor, including where these converged, and to build a consensus and coalition for change among these groups. Indeed, the social dialogues held by PLAAS with its civil-society partners highlighted the need to connect both urban and rural land reform, allowing those on the ground to articulate their vision of what constituted equitable land reform in different areas and spotlighting the policy shortcomings and administrative failures that have hindered land reform in South Africa.

The project was an “action-research” one. The reports, papers and opinion pieces that were produced as the project’s academic outputs were all viewed as emanating directly from the social engagements that formed the basis of the research methodology. The goal was that these outputs could then inform government decision-making so that it could become more responsive to actual needs. In this context, the social dialogues established by the project not only provided research material to inform policy-making, they also operated as spaces for enabling ordinary people to be able to articulate their vision of inclusive urban land reform in South Africa. Accordingly, one of the main aims of the action-research methodology of the project was to produce a more effective popular platform that could advocate for inclusive land reform.





Conservation - Agenda for change must be shaped by 'lived realities' of marginalised groups

Professor Moenieba Isaacs is driven by a quest for justice in the research and training programmes that she manages and in her own scholarship. The quest shapes the way in which she and her collaborators undertake research – working with civil-society organisations (CSOs), rather than on their behalf. This commitment shapes her efforts to train policy-makers, academics, civil society practitioners and business people so that they can apply a critical lens to how natural resources are controlled, used and conserved across Africa. And it shapes the goals of her research – that is, the promotion of socially just outcomes, including in relation to food systems; fisher livelihoods; and conservation.

“My goal is to foster just transitions,” Prof Isaacs says. “I want to create a scholarship that works with communities to be able to understand the changes they require – and to work with them and be part of that transition.” This is Prof Isaacs’ theory of change. “For me”, she explains, “the vision is activism linked with participatory research. This shapes the thinking tools that I use and the meta-narratives that are produced – narratives that are then deployed to influence policy at the local, national, regional and international levels.”

The quest for social justice also shapes how Prof Isaacs defines scholarship itself – that is, as a form of activist engagement rather than just the production of published outputs. “A key aim is to make sure that our work, which focuses on engagement and communities, is recognised, because this type of work does not necessarily take the form of peer-reviewed articles that the university wants to celebrate,” she says. In this regard, she describes how the research that she has managed and undertaken seeks to empower local civil-society partners so that their needs and views of realities on the ground are expressed and can directly influence policy-making.

For example, CSOs with which PLAAS collaborates were recently placed at the forefront of a major

one-year project funded by the International Development Research Centre in Canada on how Covid-19 responses had affected marine- and land-based food systems in Ghana, South Africa and Tanzania. “It was exciting to work with the non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners and not do the work for them, because often the system is: they collect the data and the academics write the papers.” Prof Isaacs describes how she along with other principal investigators on the project, sought to “demythologise that process – the idea being that we provide support, as much as they support us.”

The training programmes undertaken by Prof Isaacs also seek to promote the interests of those who have been marginalised, albeit more indirectly, by encouraging key public- and private-sector actors to adopt a political economy lens in their work. The idea is that an analysis of the power relations that underpin present systems of land governance and conservation can reveal the ways in which certain interests are privileged over others – and can point to how the inequity that is produced as a result may be most effectively addressed.

In this context, Prof Isaacs emphasises the impact of two short-course training programmes which she has helped to coordinate: the Political Economy of Land Governance in Africa, which was implemented

as part of the UWC's membership of the Network of Excellence in Land Governance in South Africa (NELGA); and Living Landscapes in Action: New Thinking on Integrating Biodiversity and Social Justice in Southern Africa, an initiative funded by the Oak Foundation. She notes that the two courses are creating new networks of African activists which include government officials as well as community-based practitioners.

The pursuit of social justice also drives Prof Isaacs' current main research interests and projects in the fields of conservation and fisher livelihoods. As the principal investigator of a new multi-year project seeking to redesign the wet and dry conservation sector in southern Africa, Prof Isaacs is seeking to disrupt a dominant narrative that seeks to protect flora and fauna "at all costs", including at the expense of local livelihoods. Applying a political economy lens, the research interrogates how the "fortress conservation" approach, which fences off areas for recreation, reproduces past forms of spatial injustice under which particular groups are deprived of access to spaces and natural resources on the basis of race, gender and class.

In place of this approach, the project imagines a form of "convivial conservation" under which people in rural and urban areas can "start living next to, with, and in landscapes" in a way that fosters both biodiversity and local livelihoods. The research entails "collecting and developing evidence so that we understand what are the lived realities of people living in and around conservation zones", according to Prof Isaacs. In addition, she says, it requires the adoption of "a strong activist lens".

"While we are doing the research, we also need to see to what extent we can address some of the spatial injustices and economic injustices that are present, dealing with issues of labour and gender that are coming through, as well as the poverty issues that need to be addressed by conservation."

Similarly, Prof Isaacs deploys the concept of "blue justice" to frame her continuing engagement with, and research into, small-scale fisheries. In particular, she says, she is interrogating spatial

and gendered forms of injustice in and around enclosures in the blue economy – and, in this way, is linking her research interest in fisher livelihoods with the findings that are emerging from the living landscapes project.

Her activism in this field of research has produced a number of significant communications and campaign outputs, which leveraged the United Nations' (UN's) declaration of an International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture in 2022. These included the production of a book co-authored by Prof Isaacs, *Beyond the Blue – Women of the Sea*; and PLAAS's leading role in convening the 4th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress, which was held in Cape Town with the support of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Development Bank.

In all her projects and research, Prof Isaacs seeks to foster scholarship that addresses and meets the needs of those living in the Global South. So, she seeks to reframe theoretical approaches, such as that of convivial conservation (which has been described as a narrative from the North), placing them in an African context. In a similar vein, she supports the development of African scholars, proudly noting that all of the lecturers for the short course on the land governance that is held by PLAAS hail from the continent. The conservation project also has sought to identify and promote "critical black scholars", particularly given that this field has historically been, as Prof Isaac notes, "very much a white enclave".

"I want to create a scholarship that works with communities to be able to understand the changes they require..."

Living Landscapes in Action

In partnership with Wageningen University in the Netherlands, UCT and the Oak Foundation, PLAAS has launched a project entitled “Living Landscapes in Action” to promote spatial and social justice in conservation. The concept adopts a political ecology lens in an effort to integrate biodiversity and social justice, and decolonise the idea of conservation through the establishment of new ways of governing natural landscapes.

The initiative entails training and building a network among a new generation of conservationists; and implementing a communications programme to promote the idea of convivial conservation or “living landscapes in action”. It also entails establishing three on-the-ground field sites in South Africa, at Mapungubwe, isiMangaliso and Cape Town, which will seek to put the new concept into action.

Broadly speaking, the convivial conservation approach seeks to foster long-term care for biodiversity alongside social justice. In particular, the goal is to overcome fundamental problems with mainstream forms of conservation that place the emphasis on fences and protected reserves; embrace economic models that maintain and even exacerbate inequalities and injustices; and promote forms of growth that harm biodiversity.

By contrast, convivial conservation aims to transform the economy so that human needs are aligned with those of the rest of life; and seeks to integrate people as part of nature and enable biodiversity to flourish in human landscapes. In the process, some human places will become wilder and some wild areas may become more human.

In line with this approach, the Living Landscapes project aims to transform conservation ideas, practices and networks so that conservation can become an inclusive, just and sustainable sector. To this end, it has undertaken two registered short courses on “Political Ecology: New thinking on integrating biodiversity and social justice” and on “Living

Landscapes: New thinking on integrating biodiversity and social justice”, which were held in Cape Town in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

About 50 participants from Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe who work in government, research and civil society joined these courses. The training sought to enable the participants to:

- Understand the history of conservation and how this relates to the biodiversity crisis and issues of social and environmental justice;
- Interrogate conservation through a political ecology lens that emphasises different interests and economic positions in relation to biodiversity, resources and people;
- Identify and critically evaluate key current debates in conservation;
- Understand and critically evaluate possible alternatives to mainstream conservation and how to promote these; and
- Relate current debates and alternatives to key themes in conservation, such as rights, violence, law, gender, livelihoods and biodiversity.

In addition, the project is undertaking action research in three diverse landscapes, where communities suffer different forms of dislocation, disinheritance and displacement. The goal is to foster the conditions for a network and community of practice around convivial conservation in each of these living landscapes.

Led by Professor Moenieba Isaacs, who is the principal investigator (PI) for the project, four associate researchers – Zina Jacobs, Ayanda Madlala, Siphesihle Mbhele and Maud Sebelebele – have been appointed to undertake fieldwork at the three sites.

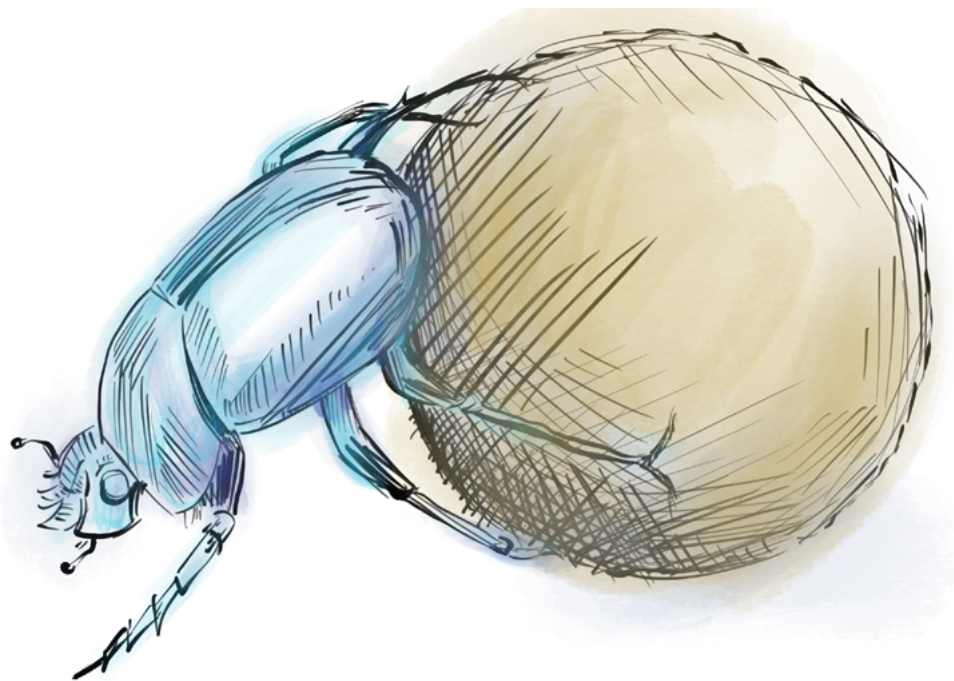
The three research sites

iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) covers more than 330,000 hectares and stretches 220 km along the Indian Ocean from Kosi Bay in the north to Maphelane in the south. It covers 9% of South Africa's coastline. It has been designated a World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for its terrestrial-oceanic nature. It is also considered a protected site of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The IWP has been established in a place where communities have historically been displaced. Areas have been fenced off, enabling exclusionary access to marine and natural resources for elites, and creating conflict between park authorities and local tribal communities over access to natural resources.

The **Cape Town** case focuses on two vleis (wetlands) in the southern part of the city and their surrounding landscapes, which include informal and formal settlements, a business park, nature reserves, a sewage works and a major waste dump. The vleis are also home to a large number of animals, including re-introduced hippos, birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants. The nature reserves of Rondevlei and Zeekoevlei and adjacent settlements pose particular environmental

governance challenges for municipal administrators and other stakeholders. By focusing on a landscape characterised by a complex mix of socio-economic, political and environmental tensions, the research should produce a clearer view of how convivial conservation can be integrated into urban settings can be established.

The **Mapungubwe** landscape straddles the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers. It has great cultural significance – the historical kingdom of Mapungubwe is to Southern Africa what the Mayan empire is to South America. Contemporary land uses include mining, conservation and farming across a mosaic of private, communal and state land. These land uses are set against the backdrop of colonial and apartheid evictions. In this context, the research focuses on a farm, Den Staat, which is home to a community of successful land claimants. The farm shares a fence with Mapungubwe National Park, so wildlife traverse this farm daily while the inhabitants participate in subsistence fishing, commercial agriculture and hunting. It is hoped that through its understanding of the life of Den Staat, the research will promote the ways in which the community there engages with the local environment and address mainstream conservation narratives.





‘My aim is to see through local people’s eyes and understand what conservation means to them’

Ayanda Madlala, who holds a post-graduate diploma in poverty, land and agrarian studies from the UWC, is currently based at isiMangaliso as an associate researcher for the Living Landscapes project. She previously contributed research to a PLAAS project investigating the operation of African food systems under Covid-19. She has worked with young, small-scale farmers providing extension-services support and also founded a women’s group so that the voices of women are included in the land debate.

Ayanda Madlala says that the immersive nature of her research in Khula Village in isiMangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) has led her to a complex, nuanced appreciation of how local people view and respond to their environment as well as some unexpected findings. In particular, Madlala says that “it’s been very exciting” to deploy participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools which enable a depth of engagement that would not normally be possible in one-on-one interviews and focus groups. At the same time, she stresses the importance of clearly managing the expectations of local people in relation to her role in a space which, she says, has already been “highly researched” in a quite exploitative way.

The importance of managing expectations properly takes on added significance given the present and historical context in which the views and interests of the local community have been largely misrepresented or ignored over the years. As Madlala explains, “Having read about isiMangaliso, there was this great picture about how the communities had willingly given their land, and how they were benefiting from tourism and development as a result. Unfortunately, that [official view] is not necessarily the case. For instance, in the area where I am based, people were forcibly removed from one part to another.”

Against the background of a joint management arrangement for the wetland park, which Madlala describes as “fuzzy”, she has found that members of the local community generally seek to pursue their interests by making representations through official channels, such as their local councillors. However, if such efforts fail to secure them adequate livelihoods, then they may resort to various forms of resistance. “When things are really tough at home, that’s when they take the route of fishing at night, because they don’t want to be caught cutting the fences.” Madlala notes that small-scale fishers in the area are also adopting a collective approach in a broader sense, formalising themselves as a group so that they are no longer struggling as individuals on their own.

Madlala’s research has further uncovered a number of unexpected findings in terms of the impacts being produced by climate change. “The people living in the wetland are increasingly facing floods,” she said. “Their houses are being soaked in water and their crops are being affected, which is creating new land-leasing arrangements as they seek to sustain their livelihoods.” Such findings have impressed upon Madlala the need for her to undertake further research on the link between land and sea in a time of climate change once she has finished her Master’s degree, which is focusing on conservation.



‘As an engaged researcher, you need to be an activist’

Maud Sebelebele, who holds a postgraduate diploma in poverty land and agrarian studies from PLAAS, is currently based at Mapungubwe as an associate researcher for the Living Landscapes project. She has worked in the natural resources conservation sector, including in the Eastern Cape and at Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens in Cape Town. She has undertaken ethnographic fieldwork as a social ecologist and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Development Studies, focussing on how herders in the Northern Cape ascribe value to plants used for fodder.

The farmworkers living near Mapungubwe National Park in Limpopo are an overlooked and “trapped” community, according to Maud Sebelebele. She says that their plight stems in part from their lack of control over land in this area, which is largely owned by private farmers and absentee landlords or managed by the national conservation authority overseeing the park. It is also, she says, a product of their vulnerable residential status in this frontier region, where many of the local people are undocumented second- or third-generation migrant workers.

This undocumented status renders them vulnerable to exploitation, including in relation to being charged high rent for accommodation and being underpaid for their labour. It also means that they cannot access services, including education for their children or protection from law enforcement, which is quite important in an area where poaching and cigarette, livestock and meat smuggling are rife. As far as officialdom is concerned, these undocumented families are “ghosts”, says Sebelebele.

Meanwhile, the complex and competing ways in which land is used in and around the park, including for cultural heritage purposes as well as for game drives and hunting, tend to squeeze out local people

seeking to eke a living. Sebelebele cites the case of a group of subsistence fishers who travelled from the town of Musina to see what they could catch along the banks of the Limpopo River. She describes how they had had to contend not only with the hippos and crocodiles that freely roam the landscape around the park, but also gamekeepers from Botswana who came and confiscated their nets.

She says that many of the local people seeking livelihoods struggle with the highly restricted forms of access to land in this area – with the result that they effectively become “trapped within the landscape” and lose hope of a better life. In this context, she sees her role as a researcher on the present project as one that extends beyond her efforts to understand local people’s relationship with their natural environment and conservation efforts. For example, she says, it also entails disseminating knowledge, such as in relation to rights, that can be of use to local workers and their families.

Looking to her own future, she says she enjoys being a researcher – “I’m one of those people who are paid for doing what they love” – and is hoping to undertake a PhD which will adopt an interdisciplinary approach to considering the relationship between marginalised communities and nature.



'It's imperative to come in as someone who understands the culture'

Siphesihle Mbhele, who holds social sciences degrees in Public Policy, Administration and Ethics from UKZN, is currently based at isiMangaliso as an associate researcher for the Living Landscapes project. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Public Policy at UKZN. Mbhele is passionate about youth development and social justice and is the founder of a Youth Policy Advisory Forum at the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation. He is also the founder and co-host of an "Activating youth activism" podcast.

Discussing his research in isiMangaliso Wetland Park, Mbhele emphasises the "sensitivity" of conservation efforts in the area, which led to park rangers allegedly shooting and killing a local subsistence fisherman, Celimpilo Mdluli, in September 2020, as well as the deaths and arrests of other fisher folk. In this context, he notes how important it is for him to build trust with local people while also ensuring that he is seen as independent by them. "It's imperative to come in as a person who understands the culture and the language (isiZulu) and, through multiple meetings and visits, to build strong relationships with ordinary members of the communities, as well as their leaders," he said.

Mbhele says that his starting point for engaging with local people was to undergo a "traditional ethics clearance process". He had to present himself at the chambers of the local traditional council and asked for permission to conduct research in the area. Having passed this test, however, he has been at pains to let local people know that he is there independently with a number of set research goals under the Living Landscapes project.

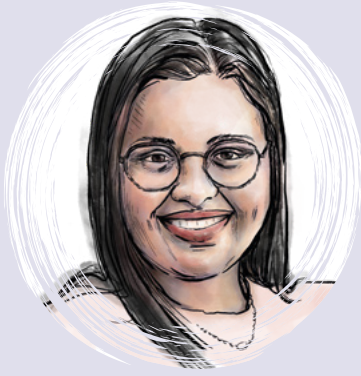
In particular, Mbhele refuses to communicate with local people through those working for the traditional authority or local social justice campaigns.

"If I want to study the traditional authority, I'll go to the traditional authority and question them; if I want to study the social justice leadership, I'll go and question them – but I never go through these people."

At the same time, Mbhele's independence as a researcher does not imply distance from the community. "When I visit, I eat the same food, and wake up and herd the cows just as they do. I go to the lake as they do. Because it is through these interactions, such as over the fire at night, that I learn what it means to live as they do."

Mbhele's independence also does not prevent him from adopting an advocacy role in support of the community that he is researching. "I don't come in with an agenda for change. Rather, I am guided by the people who may be involved in a particular case [of alleged injustice]. So, it's almost like I'm helping them to achieve their goal."

In a similar vein, Mbhele envisages a future as a researcher in which he undertakes fieldwork and deploys the data from this both to produce academic outputs and to engage in advocacy at the level of policy and to foster change.



‘The idea is that conservation as a mechanism can transform the economy’

Zina Jacobs, who holds a Master’s degree in Geography and Environmental Studies from UWC, is currently based in Cape Town as an associate researcher for the Living Landscapes project. She has worked as a people and conservation officer for the Wolfgat Nature Reserve in the city; and has also engaged disadvantaged communities on the Cape Flats as part of an environmental education programme for youth. Her Master’s thesis focussed on contestation and exclusion in relation to land in Mitchell’s Plain.

Working in and around four conservation areas in Cape Town, Zina Jacobs says that her main achievement during her first year as an associate researcher on the Living Landscapes project has been in the field itself – interviewing members of local marginalised communities and collecting their stories. “My main aim has been to unpack the realities and the challenges that people are experiencing in terms of their access to these conservation areas,” she said. She has conducted in-depth interviews with local residents and has also talked to representatives of community-based organisations and local and traditional leaders in these places.

Jacobs, who herself hails from the Cape Flats, says that she has learnt to take great care in the ways that she elicits local people’s stories, given their family histories of being forcibly removed and settled in these places under Apartheid. “The issues of land and access are all quite contested on the Cape Flats,” she said. “And it brings up emotions.”

The fieldwork has already led to the production of significant academic outputs. Jacobs co-authored a paper considering how communities in the city are addressing their marginalisation in terms of conservation management, and she presented this at a conference convened by the International Association of the Study of Commons (IASC) in

Nairobi, Kenya. The research also led to Jacobs hosting a field trip for participants at an international short-course training held as part of the Living Landscapes project.

Beyond interrogating and broadcasting people’s experiences of their local conservation experiences, Jacobs says that the next stage of the work should entail establishing platforms for civic engagement between members of marginalised communities, civil society organisations and the municipality so that “everyone has the opportunity to voice their opinions in a free and fair manner”. She explains, “The idea is to look at conservation as a mechanism or vehicle that can transform the economy and speak to the needs of everyone, not only those who can afford it.” In this regard, she cites the case of Macassar Dunes Conservation Area where firms are allowed to mine the sand, while local people are prevented from grazing animals.

More broadly, Jacobs says that she hopes her research will contribute to a shift in conservation practices, “not just in Cape Town, but in South Africa ... for the betterment of people and [in support of] their livelihoods and the needs”. She also views the research as forming the basis of her own academic endeavours, as she looks to the possibility of undertaking a PhD on spatial injustice and urban conservation on the Cape Flats.



Africa's development depends on including its youth

Urgent action to support young African scholars along their career paths is required as part of efforts to address a mounting crisis in African knowledge production that threatens to undermine the integrity of the continent's development, says PLAAS researcher Cyriaque Hakizimana.

Noting that “70% of knowledge that goes into policy processes is produced by the global north”, Hakizimana says that the present failure to provide young African scholars with appropriate resources and employment opportunities is constraining Africa's own academic capacity, rendering the continent increasingly reliant “on so-called international consultancy to shape and influence its policy-making and future direction”. Accordingly, Hakizimana has dedicated much of the past two years to strengthening the Young African Researchers in Agriculture (YARA) network, which he helped to found in 2014 with the support of the African Union (AU). The network seeks to provide budding local academics with appropriate backing in the form of research grants; training on the political economy of the agrarian question; networking; and exposure to international academic and policy-making circles, so that they can establish careers as scholars.

Hakizimana himself is a researcher and PhD candidate at PLAAS, having obtained a Master's degree in Development Studies from the UKZN. As well as supporting the YARA network, he is producing original research focussing on the changing nature of Africa's agro-food systems, with a particular interest in the generational dynamics at play in the commercial farming sector. “In the past few years, the world has witnessed multiple crises – such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine – which have reignited the debate on the urgent need to develop and adopt

sustainable crisis-proof food systems, including in Africa,” he said.

Against this background, the modernisation of African food systems has been identified as critical not only in terms of their capacity to provide human sustenance, but also in relation to how they may act as drivers of structural transformation on the continent. Hakizimana says this narrative is predicated on two assumptions: that there is a big potential market for food which may be exploited by African farmers; and that there is an African demographic dividend that may be realised if appropriate investments are made to unlock opportunities for young people. However, he argues, “both these propositions are problematic, and their underlying assumptions are assumed rather than proven”. In particular, he notes, “the demographic dividend framing does not capture all the complexities of rural youth's exclusion from Africa's agro-food systems”.

Accordingly, Hakizimana's recent and future research agenda is focussed on this issue which, he says, will likely shape Africa's prospects for development. “Given the youthful nature of the African continent and the reproduction crisis of young people across the continent, these issues remain critical for development policy and the thinking around agrarian transformation on the continent.” For Hakizimana, “These are the issues that keep me awake at night and which my academic work is oriented towards addressing.”

In this context of this research agenda, young African scholars may be considered particularly well-placed to respond to the shifting development challenges facing the continent; and Hakizimana stresses the importance of mobilising resources as part of the YARA programme to enable them to undertake research and produce new inter-generational knowledge that can affect policy-making.

As an example, Hakizimana recounts an observation from a recent trip to the Chinese capital when he was taken along a “walk of fame” at one of the universities in Beijing. The “walk” comprised a series of photographs of individual scholars who had excelled in producing knowledge on Africa. “What surprised me was that among all these photos on the wall there was not one African.” Accordingly, he has sought to ensure that the training and development of young African scholars includes exposing them to opportunities to appear at major international research conferences. “Now the scholars are able to penetrate those spaces; to be there and to be counted; and to interact with [all the other academics] attending,” he says.

Hakizimana also promotes networking among African scholars themselves, identifying the process as crucial in remedying the enduring divisive impacts of colonialism in Africa. “One of the biggest problems that we’re facing on the continent is the colonial legacy which divided Africans among themselves. In fact, from my own experience based in South Africa, I can say it can be easier to collaborate with academics from the United Kingdom (UK), the US and Canada than with those from Zimbabwe, Malawi and Botswana.” Hakizimana hopes to turn this around, “to undo that colonial legacy, to ask ‘How can we Africans come to appreciate each other, and learn to collaborate?’ – that’s the whole political message for me behind the YARA initiative.”

Hakizimana says that the approach adopted by YARA to promote young African scholars focuses on the challenges that they face within their institutions,

rather than on the larger structural and inter-institutional challenges inhibiting research in African universities. In this regard, he sees YARA’s work as complementing that undertaken by, for example, the Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (NELGA), which, with PLAAS’s support, seeks to foster collaboration and capacity in relation to issues of land governance across the continent.

In respect of YARA’s mission, Hakizimana says the problem is not so much how many PhDs are being produced, but rather the fate of the African doctoral graduates that emerge from this pipeline in terms of their career progression. He says that they are commonly marginalised in their own institutions by an older generation of academics who seek to control the deployment of resources and ensure that the employment opportunities are reserved for themselves. “In terms of market dynamics, knowledge production, like many other processes, is highly politicised; and the knowledge-production environment is one of the most hostile environments.

“There is so much contestation. The older scholars have crowded that space in order to maintain control over the available resources for research, while the young scholars’ contribution is, literally, reduced to a footnote. But this has serious ramifications for the future of the continent’s academic project, with many academics closer to the grave, but nothing in the middle – indicating a problem of reproduction.”

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Sustainability depends on adopting a holistic approach to using natural resources

In a quest to protect livelihoods among rural fishing communities, Professor Mafaniso Hara focuses on making new kinds of connections – with government, with the private sector, and even among countries – so that old problems can be addressed, and new solutions can be forged.

A social scientist with 30 years' experience of working with vulnerable coastal and inland fishing communities, Prof Hara has studied how livelihoods are pursued and sustained in these places and how small-scale fishers can participate in agro-food value chains in South Africa and the region more effectively. The research is not merely academic in nature – it seeks, through collaboration with communities, government and local firms, to produce practical outcomes that can support small-scale fishers who depend on natural resources to make a living. To this end, he has led a number of recent projects which have aimed to make a real difference in local people's lives, including one that has led to the establishment of a new system of rights over inland tracts of water; and another promoting anchovy fishing.

Such efforts at change can encounter significant resistance. For example, in addressing the issue of inland fishing rights, Prof Hara confronted inertia – a lack of policy on the issue – and entrenched vested interests – such as those of recreational fishers averse to ceding their historical control over bodies of water created by dams. “There was a lot of gatekeeping,” he explains. This took a number of forms: stocking lakes with the kind of fish that those fishing for fun would like to catch rather than fish with commercial or significant nutritional value; and seeking to restrict the use of ghillie nets for conservation reasons (even though the mesh size and material of such nets can be adjusted to protect fish stocks).

Recreational fishers were not alone in their attempts to prevent local communities from fishing lakes and reservoirs in support of livelihoods. Provincial government departments and parastatals also opposed more inclusive use of these places. In response, Prof Hara coordinated with the South African government to produce an evidence-based national policy that vested authority for inland fisheries in the Department of Fisheries, which is now responsible for coordinating with provincial and local government on this basis. “That will help a lot in terms of providing access to people who have been denied access illegally by recreational fishers,” he says.

Subsequent to this work on inland fisheries, Prof Hara has been leading another effort to extend small-scale fishing rights – this time through a multi-stakeholder project along the coast of the Western Cape that is seeking to transform the market for anchovies in South Africa and across the continent. At present, only about 50% of the 300,000 tonnes of anchovy that may be caught sustainably each year are being fished. In large part this is because local anchovies are mainly used to produce fishmeal and oil, rather than as food for human consumption, which has led to limited demand. In this context, given that the quality of the catch is not a major concern, the relatively tiny anchovies that are being caught are dumped in the holds of boats where they are squashed and are not preserved with ice.

However, in collaboration with food scientists and local fish processors and exporters, Prof

Hara has identified a potentially large market for new anchovy products and whole anchovies as food — a market which could support local fisher livelihoods and make a significant contribution to the national economy. Accordingly, Prof Hara has been promoting a number of supply-side innovations and reforms, such as the development of new anchovy food products for market-testing; a shift in anchovy fishing so that larger fish are caught and are stored more carefully; and the distribution of rights by the government in support of such fishing. “If you give people rights, they can land the food properly, and a certain amount of [local] processing would make the fish available for communities as a source of nutrition and [as a source of income since] the fish could be sold at neighbourhood markets,” he explains. The aim is to provide an additional avenue for fisher livelihoods; improve food security in terms of the per capita supply of fish; and, in the process, boost the economy at both the local and national levels.

Prof Hara has also been working at the regional and continental level in support of more inclusive governance of commons, including fisheries. In particular, he has been involved in the Belém initiative, working with colleagues from Brazil and Argentina to safeguard utilisation of the Atlantic Ocean by countries in the Global South. The initiative comes as a response to the establishment of consortia among government bodies in North America and Europe seeking to share the Atlantic. “We’re trying to stretch this [arrangement] down to Africa and South America,” he says.

Looking to the future, Prof Hara is focussing on integrated resource governance as a key area of research interest. Such research represents a response to a tendency in government departments to manage natural resources such as fisheries and forests separately, in silos. However, as he explains: “The way people use resources is interrelated, and all these uses and utilisations matter. For example, the fact that people are fishers does not mean that they are fishers only. They may also use forests for wildlife, for farming, for energy. They may also be farmers. Prof Hara points to how significant the

relationships between land rights, fishing rights, and forest rights are. “Unless they are managed in a holistic way”, he says, “with an understanding of how communities use these resources and benefit from them, sustainable solutions will never be found.”

Another key area of future work is research into the links between biodiversity, climate-change resilience and poverty. According to Prof Hara, “Climate change is increasingly leading to variability in the populations of many species, which is, in turn, affecting the scale and kind of ecosystem services, that is, the benefits that may be derived by people from natural resources.” Accordingly, he is aiming to conduct research into how vulnerable local communities are coping with and adapting to the impacts of climate change – and, in this context, the kinds of multi-stakeholder collaboration that may need to be established to foster the resilience of such communities.

“The fact that people are fishers does not mean that they are fishers only. They may also use forests for wildlife, for farming, for energy. They may also be farmers.”

Support and administration



Online connectivity meets the human touch

Bahiha Mohamed holds a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) and is a certified financial officer with the Chartered Institute for Business Accountants (CIBA). Having acquired qualifications in project management, accounting, supervision and coaching at Nelson Mandela University and Wits, she has a wealth of experience from a background in managing grants, programmes, operations and finance in higher education, civil society and the private sector.

Mohamed was appointed as Finance and Operations Manager at the height of the Covid-19 crisis in September 2020 when travel bans were commonplace and many staff were working from home rather than at the office due to the threat of infection from the virus.

As a result, she did not meet any of her new colleagues in person for more than six months, coordinating with them virtually instead, which presented her with a significant management challenge. "Who you meet online and who you meet in person are often two different characters," she says. "So, it was difficult for staff and me to get to know each other and find that rhythm that emerges when people understand how their colleagues work. That took some time."

One of the lessons from this period was the importance of actual meetings as a mechanism for promoting collegiality. Once the Covid-19 restrictions started to ease, Mondays became the day for the staff to come together at the beginning of their new hybrid working week. "The idea was to try and get everybody in on a Monday, which, with Tuesday, became a day for face-to-face meetings. Then, on the Thursdays or Fridays, the focus was on putting

one's head down and bumping those numbers and compiling the reports, which can take place from home." Mohamed says that the hybrid approach to work is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, particularly given the savings it offers in terms of travel costs.

At the same time, she points out that the move to hybrid has entailed a significant shift in work practices at the institute, as well as the acquisition of new skills by the staff. "It has been a period of change over the past two years, and we have had to adapt," she reflects. As the institute increasingly leveraged online apps for communications and as the medium for holding in-house and large-scale public meetings expanded, the administrators' roles changed. "Increasingly they were undertaking an online communications function, as opposed to sitting and doing administrative work, or answering phones and greeting guests," she says. For example, the "front-of-house" model for receiving visitors disappeared, as the number of people, including students, actually coming to the institute fell away. "So, the switchboard operator moved into her own office to help with administrative tasks as well as the online functionalities of meetings, webinars and hybrid conferences."

The shift in responsibilities necessitated the acquisition of new skills by the staff so that they could use the new technologies that were being adopted at the time. In the absence of formal training, the staff had to become familiar with online modes of operation on the hoof. “You had to figure it out on Google and then practise before getting it right through a process of trial and error,” Mohamed recalls. The learning has been a continuous process due to the potential of the new technologies being deployed, she says. “Even as the online world solves problems and creates solutions, it also generates new problems as the possibilities expand.”

In an effort to navigate a viable path through the changes, Mohamed sought to institute and streamline processes and procedures for

undertaking day-to-day tasks – “so that people can become more used to what they need to do”. She also notes that during this period of great change, a critical aspect of her job as a manager was to provide reassurance. “It’s almost like the duck. What you see is calm and collected, but underneath there is furious paddling. That’s always my motto: You have to keep calm for everybody else because they depend on you.”

“It has been a period of change over the past two years, and we have had to adapt.”





A new approach to training: The lessons learnt

Carla Henry is a Senior Administrator at PLAAS with a wide range of operational and strategic responsibilities, including as the coordinator of the institute's postgraduate programme and short-course training modules. She oversees administration and liaises with academics, students and representatives from civil society, government and the private sector to ensure the successful, high-quality delivery of this education and training. She holds an honours degree in Commerce and Management from UWC.

For Henry, the move to online platforms at PLAAS has coincided with greater recognition of her growing role as a project manager at the institute. While remaining responsible for coordinating the provision of academic training and short courses, she started coordinating major events and research initiatives from 2021, including the African food systems project which was undertaken in Ghana, South Africa and Tanzania. "That was my first project management", she recalls, "working with nine teams in three countries; setting up and minuting meetings; producing a log frame and monitoring efforts; and even helping to produce an animation through the contractual agreements and the release forms for the filming. It was exciting."

Between 2020 and 2021, Henry also coordinated an annual course on the political economy of land, which trained up to 90 people at a time; a short course on social justice in conservation; a spring school for young African scholars undertaken with the University of Cologne; an international small-scale fishers conference held in Cape Town; and a hundreds-strong hybrid conference on climate change attended by scholars and activists from across the world. This daunting list of initiatives and events required comprehensive support from Henry.

For example, in facilitating the political-economy training, Henry was responsible for coordinating with the funders; advertising the course; helping to select the participants; scheduling the curriculum; overseeing the recruitment of a dozen lecturers; sourcing and disseminating the information on the course alongside reading lists; organising logistics and payments; managing the distribution of assessments; and holding a virtual graduation ceremony. Or, as Henry describes it, "the entire lifecycle of a training course".

In the context of her new responsibilities, Henry says that she welcomed the introduction of new technologies in the workplace – "it simplifies things a lot having online meetings" – and found it relatively easy to transition to virtual ways of working – "I am quite tech savvy". In this regard, she says that although "the communication is deeper when you're actually there in front of someone, I'm quite productive when I'm on my own".

Henry relies on a flexible team of student assistants and other staff to help her manage the projects for which she is responsible. The number of people in any given team depends on the complexity of the task in hand. In terms of asking students to help, she says that it is important to identify who can do what

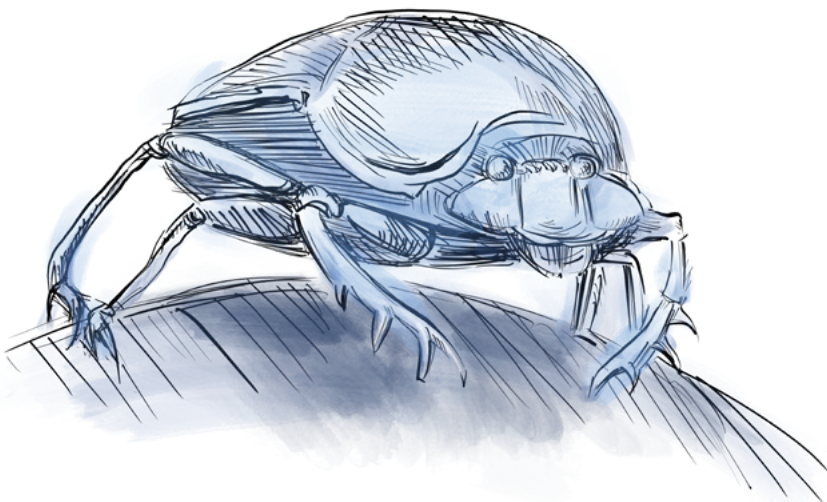
– “the strengths they have and whether they will sink or swim”. She also views the recruitment of student assistants as “a way of giving back and of allowing them to develop their skills a little bit further”.

Henry says that her main strengths as an administrator are her adaptability and her ability to identify and meet her colleagues’ needs. “If I know that a particular way of approaching someone is going to work, then I use that approach. As a result, I tend to become the conduit between people,” she said.

However, she notes that her can-do attitude at times leads to her shouldering other people’s responsibilities. “Sometimes I feel the tyranny of competence – I end up doing their work,” she says. In response, she has increasingly sought

to analyse how the ways in which the work of the institute is being administered might be modified to everyone’s benefit. “I’m a systems thinker, I put processes in place. And then I go and I reflect and ask: ‘Did this work well? Didn’t it work well’ And I ask the team, ‘How can we improve it?’” she says. It is an approach that has helped Henry to foster an optimistic outlook: “The positives are that each day you actually grow more and more in your position and learn something new.”

“The communication is deeper when you’re actually there in front of someone...”



PLAAS consolidated income and expenditure report for 2021 and 2022

Income (R)	2021	2022
	26 715 363	29 383 186
Austrian Development Agency (ADA)	3 076 650	2 652 271
Claude Leon Foundation	500 000	500 000
Conservation SA		100 000
Future Agricultures Organisation (FAO)	1 181 808	-
Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (APRA)	551 902	90 468
Informa UK Ltd (JPS Writeshop)		239 967
Oak Foundation - Living Landscapes	5 331 800	9 021 320
MARICA	251 550	80 725
Mellon		
Open Society Foundation (OSF)	3 000 000	1 000 000
SA Government -National Research Foundation Chair (NRF)	4 490 000	4 350 000
SA Government -Water Research Council (WRC)	-200 000	-
SA Government -Water Research Council (WRC)	1 080 000	-
SA Government -Water Research Council (WRC) - 2022		250 000
Endowment Fund	1 360 784	363 349
Emeritus prof Ben Cousins		
TIA (Technology Innovation Agency)	165 250	-
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)	1 433 174	3 657 800
University of Birmingham		228 072
University of Cologne		
University of Rotterdam		179 143
University of the Western Cape - Operational Support	90 000	95 000
University of the Western Cape - Staffing Support	4 188 068	4 984 062
VW Agrarian Question		1 434 558
V2V/Waterloo		156 451
Womans' Land and Water	214 377	-
Sundry Income received in small grants		
Other Income (Recovery of overhead and other expenses)		

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Expenditure (R)	Actual Expenditure 2021	Actual Expenditure 2022
	28 772 804	20 926 016
Personnel Costs (including UWC Staffing Permanent staff)	10 484 138	9 755 871
Operational Costs	4 904 093	3 169 649
Organisational Support	56 434	95 234
Equipment and Rental	431 891	251 423
Research Costs (Service Level Agreements to Partners)	7 060 428	1 815 098
NRF Research Costs	2 467 665	86 983
Teaching and Training (Bursaries for Post Graduate Program+ consultants)	2 139 420	1 750 684
Dissemination (including Communications)	149 143	350 523
Travel and Accommodation (includes Events and Research Assistants)	1 079 592	3 650 552
OPENING BALANCE AT BEGINNING OF THE YEAR	9 697 505	7 640 063
Inter-entity transfers and current period adjustments	-	320 612
Prior year adjustments	-	
Net movement for the year `	-2 057 441	8 457 170
CLOSING BALANCE AT THE END OF THE YEAR (Operating Activites excludes Investments)	7 640 063	16 417 845



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