

After the Drought: The rains have come to Msinga, but the devastation still remains

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The rains have come and the hills of Msinga, KwaZulu-Natal, are green again. The stench of rotting cattle that clogged the air in October, November and December is gone, but here and there white ribcages of the thousands of cattle that have died dot the fields. The toll on the 75,000 cattle farmers in the area has been great. By YVES VANDERHAEGHEN & DONNA HORNBY.

“Look at the green,” says Rauri Alcock from Mdukatshani land NGO. “It’s just devil thorns under the bush. There’s no grass.” A closer look reveals the pretty yellow flowers of the devil’s thorn, but indeed no grass. Even the aloes are dying. Brown skeletons of dead acacia trees break the pattern of low treetops.

The Tugela is looking its big brown self again, but even there, looks are deceptive. Alcock fully expects that both the Tugela and the Mooi River, which dwindled to a trickle this summer before the rains came, will dry up come winter. “What you see now is the winter level,” he says, pointing at the river. “Big rains come, the river rises, but then it settles back to this. And winter is still to come.”



Photo: The cattle that have died dot the fields. Photo by Rauri Alcock.

It’s a mild day. The mercury isn’t much above 30. We’re visiting a land reform farm, Ncunjane, home of the Mncubes. “People here live through their cattle,” says Zamani Madonsela, our driver. But the drought has taken its toll on this family too. Their herd of 70 is now down to 30.

Madonsela introduces us to Hambaseni Mncube. We sit down under an acacia tree, next to the cattle enclosure and talk about the drought and living on the farm.

“The land here was transferred to collective ownership in 1995,” says Mncube. “There are two households, but the farming is together for both. Four generations of family live here. There are 23 people in all. Some people leave to go to work, but because it is difficult, they are here now. There’s only one person working away at the moment. Money comes in from two old-age pensions and four child grants (about R3,400).”



Photo: Hambaseni Mncube in front of his cattle enclosure. His herd of 70 has dwindled to 30 by the drought. Photo by Yves Vanderhaeghen.

The family depends heavily on cattle so the loss of 40 out of a herd of 70 is devastating.

“The households who have lost all their cattle will start investing in goats, though the value of cattle is much higher than goats. That’s why we haven’t considered a switch. You get R5,000 to R10000 for a big ox. For two big oxen you can get R20,000. You can live a long time on that. You can’t generate that much from goats; you would have to sell the whole herd.

“We do farm crops. Mainly maize for the house. Indigenous pumpkins. *Imfa*. White beans, and there’s wild *imfino*. After the harvest, in July, we let the cattle into the field. It’s just husks and stalks.”



Photo: Impongolos being filled during the municipal tanker round. Photo by Rauri Alcock.

Is it better to own your own land, instead of being on traditional land or white land?

“At first, yes, because there were fences. Then the fences broke. Now, with the drought, it would have been better with fences. We have started fixing them. It has taken a long time to realise the need to farm differently. The drought has made people think about farming differently. When the fences are down and the cattle mingle it’s hard to see overgrazing. If we had grazing camps, we would have seen the impact more quickly and we would have put aside a camp for future grazing.

“We had 70 cattle, then we lost 40, so we have 30 left. When the borehole pump was working even the goats were well, but when it ran out of diesel, some young goats also started dying.

“But it’s still better to have the land. It’s still better to be able to sell off three or four cattle when we need to.

Mncube knows of land claims that haven’t been resolved, but he hasn’t heard of the class action court case at the Land Claims Court to force government to process long-standing labour-tenant claims. “When you are a labour tenant on another’s farm, it’s a problem. If you have 40 cattle and you want to grow, you can’t. If one wants to grow, the other has to shrink. You can’t both grow.”

“The only problem with the farm is the water here. We’ve never got dams. Even the people before never had dams.

“The weather has changed from the old days. It’s a different kind of weather. With that change, the real problems have come.

“This drought is more severe. Yes [in the old days] the rains would be late. And yes cattle would die. But this one is more severe. That’s why the water is finished. This started in 2010. Before, you had a drought and the grass would recover. But now it never gets back. Since 2010, it doesn’t get better; each year gets worse.

“Before last year you could still milk the cows to feed the children. In 2015 and 2016 we are still not milking. A milking cow needs more grass and water. Heifers die fast when there is no grass and water.

“One problem we have seen. The price of maize is now over R400 for 50kg. It goes up and down and sometimes it’s R200 for 50kg. Now it’s R500 for 80kg. We couldn’t plant, and now to buy, for whatever purpose, is expensive.

“Another problem. If there’s no water, it means cattle have to be sold more often. But they’re thin, so we get less, and then we have to sell more, and then the herd gets diminished.

“Out of the livestock, goats are the best. Chickens do better too, but they depend on being fed by us. Young goats will die if there’s no grass and when there’s a drought, the goats don’t get pregnant, or they abort, so they don’t die.

“As for cropping, if there’s no rain you don’t plant anything. Even the black kernel maize dies. Even the sorghum dies when there are no rains. We just planted a few white beans for a bit of food, for example for the goats. We didn’t plant in 2015.

“The consequences of the drought? Even though it has rained, there is no grass. It’s like a person in the distance. We can see him coming towards us [the effects of the drought are still coming]. A lot of the cattle which survived have recovered, but some don’t have the condition they should and so more will die.”

Did the government provide drought aid?

“We got no help here. We had to fill in forms. But the lines were so long, down the hill. You had to get up at one in the morning to get to the line. We couldn’t afford to keep going and so we gave up trying. Some filled in forms. Older people and frail people were given priority in the queues. But the feed ran out anyway. The feed was a mix of molasses, maize and grass.

“The aid was for cattle owners. If you had more than 10 cattle, they gave you a cheque to take to TWK for supplementary feed.

“You needed your dip form to prove you had cattle. Then you needed to get a photocopy of the dip form. Then they told you you had to have a brand number. If it’s not your brand, then you had to show your relationship to the brand owner. This was the only help.

“We bought hay, but when the money ran out and the hay ran out we had to accept that the cattle were going to die.

“There’s another problem. The hay ran out in November (2015). Then the cattle went off to [the neighbouring farmer with whom they have a lease arrangement]. The cattle, more than agreed, broke into his fields and ate his grass. But it’s a game farm and some of the bucks also break the fences and the cattle go through. Then he impounds our cattle. It costs R600-R700 for two days in the pound. Then we have to get transport to the pound, and hire a vehicle to bring the cattle back and some of them die on the way. Now we owe him R6,000 for pound fees. We will never be able to pay that. Others owe him R14,000, R15,000.

Was there anything that could have been done better by government to help?

“If people brought ID books it could have helped stop the double helpings and the food would not have run out. There was just the help once in December. There could have been a second round of help. That would have helped.

In spite of the hardships, no one has left.

“We haven’t heard of anyone leaving here because of the drought. We wouldn’t have that discussion. Before that happened we would hire land elsewhere for the cattle. No, we can’t even begin to have that discussion. We were born here. We know it. It’s safe. We don’t know the problems of other places.

“When our money runs out, we ask the council for pumps and things for the (vegetable) gardens. But the council hasn’t responded. If the money runs out for food we go to the neighbours. Then we repay at the end of the month. This has been happening to some people.”

As we drive away Madonsela observes that the immediate impact of a drought on a household is fourfold. First, they run up costs trying to keep the cattle going. Then the cattle die and that’s a loss of income (and to the viability of the herd). Now they have to spend more on food, because the prices have gone up, and they haven’t been able to plant their own food because of the drought.”

After the dry months, the 147mm of rain in January may be about normal for this time of year. It’s only a start.

Main photo: Before the rains came. Photo by Rauri Alcock



Photo: After the rains. Lots of green, but ne'er a blade of grass. Photo by Rauri Alcock.