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The Grapes of Mirth **Fresh Water Becomes Fresh Leverage Behind Race-Based Farmland Reform**

James G. Workman

MARCH, 2003

LUTZVILLE, South Africa – They had a farm in Africa, near the mouth of the Olifants River. At a glance it seemed the harshest patch on the continent to cultivate vegetables, vines, or for that matter, hope. The sky baked. Hyper-dry winds scoured the surrounding Karoo desert. Coastal air turned the dusty soils highly saline. Nearby, the Olifants flowed anemic and seasonally brackish; dammed and diverted to upstream farms, its winding irrigation canal ended well before reaching this 300-hectare hardscrabble scrape.

Prospects for cultivating humanity here felt equally bleak. Half an hour away in the nearest town, Vredendal, swung a single rusty traffic signal. Hours from high schools or hospitals, the nonwhite unskilled labor force grew up scattered and poor, in transient and broken families. Four in five had less than a fourth-grade education; two in five were illiterate. Some abused alcohol, each other, or their kids. In the wake of colonial farm fiefdoms, *apartheid* had hardened the yawning economic gap between whites and blacks. Racial tensions and mistrust snapped more here than anywhere in South Africa. Crime, sabotage, unemployment, disease and violence were high. Life expectancy was low.

In short, Lutouw Farm sat on the outskirts of one of those many desolate, left-behind, Afrikaans-speaking rural pockets where you pause only long enough to fuel up and buy a packet of biscuits while racing across Southern Africa bound for somewhere else. Few outsiders have lingered. Those who did, however, might have begun to notice some fabulously aberrant behavior.

* * *

Springing to the gate rose the guard, Lydia Struis. She had been cleaning a pile of onions so intently it seemed her life depended on it; after letting us pass, she raced back to her urgent task, unsupervised. Just before quitting time, Samuel Saxon gathered a group of fellow nonwhite migrant workers. Impatient while waiting for a truck to arrive so they could load crates, he busied them all with the chore of weeding rows of ripe tomatoes. Johnson Matika, 26, spent free time before and after work checking the brittle old plastic



"There must be something in the water." Actually, it is the adhesive force of water itself that drives workaholic co-operative labor, and makes Lutouw Farm unique.

Johnson Matika, 26, spent free time before and after work checking the brittle old plastic

pipes for water leaks. Kaiser Louw, 39, an illiterate tractor-driver, had recently begun implementing his own business venture. After a bad car accident, Joseph Blaauw, 44, cheerfully reported to work despite being granted sick leave. Ragel Matjan, 23, and Susan Richards, 45, are recently single because of jealous husbands; jealous, that is, of the women's passionate love affairs with their day jobs.

For centuries, the ingrained European stereotype regarded black Africans as lethargic, indolent, listless or apathetic. "They can be so hard to self-start and motivate," was a recurring complaint I'd heard from white liberals and conservatives alike. Well, regard *this*. Here every nonwhite I met seemed an obsessive-compulsive, industrious workaholic machine. They were operating in overdrive without sleep, almost fanatic.

They readily spoke with me, but each was jumpy, anxiously glancing at clock or watch. I too glanced around. Was any boss watching them, tapping feet, docking pay? No. Their impatience came not from fear, but from within. Rather than welcome a sanctioned break in a long, hard day's labor, they just couldn't wait to bend backs under the hot sun and start sweating again. Said Richards, "I need to get to Lutouw farm in my spare hours, both before after work. And especially on the weekend."

Whoa. As yet another worker bubbled on about how he or she loved to volunteer labor during precious free time, I began to suspect the government had slipped something into the local water supply. I was close. What the government had sneaked in, in fact, was a new, finite supply of fresh water itself.

It had entrusted a water license to the unpracticed hands of these and 20 other nonwhite laborers as their unique precious equity, a water equity they used to gain shares in Lutouw Farm. As precious drops transformed dirt into seasonal and permanent crops, the water also transformed 'workers' into 'owners,' government beneficiaries into capitalist profiteers. In dry economic terms, water was merely an asset; to these men and women it metamorphosed into something inestimable.

"In the past water was just there to be used, either for washing or drinking or cooking," said Richards, who

like any African woman had always appreciated water better than men do. Women tapped it, carried it and used it in the house. "But now water's all about our survival. If it weren't for water, our farm, our work, our future would cease to exist."

That link seems obvious but was hidden by a political middle layer in the patriarchal past. Water was for whites; work was for blacks. "I never realized the real value of water," Blaauw told me of his life before Lutouw. Shifting on a wooden crate, he recalled, "Ach, before, as wage labor, I never gave a thought to rainfall in the mountains so far away upstream. That was the commercial farmer's problem, not mine. I worked hard. I got a paycheck. He worried for all of us."

Today, as they grasp water's role on a farm, on *their* farm, they shoulder a burden some hadn't foreseen. Said Blaauw, "Now I wonder, What if we don't have enough rain, or surplus water in the stream? I'm concerned because the water, well, now it's all our responsibility. I spend restless nights thinking about it."

* * *

He's not alone. Lutouw farm remains a risky endeavor, still in its infancy, at a critical crossroads, yet already exceptional in several respects. First, it was one of a handful of farms in Africa co-owned by both blacks and whites. Second, worker-owners grew food not for local subsistence, but for commercial export and profit.

Third, it was a private-sector venture called a "shared-equity scheme" (detailed later) where all partners sank or swam as one. Fourth, it was starting to take root and appreciate in a fiercely competitive market even as other large farms (white and black) were failing. Finally, most uniquely, it was the first and so far only farm in Southern Africa where workers and managers were glued together by a brand new chemical adhesive, water.

Here's how. The farm's driving entrepreneurial force, and one of its white owners, was Truter Lutz, a fifth-generation local commercial farmer after whose great-grandfather the town was named. For years he had been eyeing the shallow Olifants River, hoping to pump its 'surplus winter' (seasonally swollen volume of) water into a private 100-hectare farm dam built to store it. Hell, every white commercial farmer wanted to get his hands on it. Water transformed dirt worth \$30 a hectare into



A grape in the hand is worth two in someone else's bush. Susan Richards, chair of Omaza (whice means a mingling of peoples) opts for dividends, cash and equity, while the younger members opt for more training toward the long term skills.



The Olifants/Doring River's aqueduct: "Dammed and diverted by these upstream farms, its winding irrigation canal ended well before reaching the 300-hectare scrape where Lutouw Farm was planned."

\$500 per hectare, instantly. He thought the saline soil good for grapes; grapes need water. That surplus Olifants water would be worth \$100,000 alone. In the past, the apartheid regime might have complied. But since 1990, the government had declined.

"Farmers always asked for more water allocations; more and more and more," said Willie Enright, an engineer in the region's division of Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF). "Well, we said no. They'd been getting it cheap or free for forty years or more. It was time to hold back. We needed something extraordinary; otherwise we left water in the system for a later date, increasing its value, like accruing interest in a bank. Now water brings them to the table in a different light, knowing the government had a new mandate."

Indeed it did. Private land remained inviolate. But the new constitution, enacted in 1997, effectively nationalized all water flowing across private or public land. DWAF regulated every drop in streams or underground, and required licenses from anyone who might use it. At least at the start, water was color-blind; most existing agricultural water users, black or more frequently (on 87 percent of farmland) white, received a new license without a hitch. But the same new Water Act was designed to redress

past imbalances. Its code (Section 27) ensured that, any *new* supplies of water were reserved as a priority for 'previously disadvantaged individuals.' Read: nonwhites.

Lily-white Lutz couldn't change his color, or the law. But he had a knack for organizational management, for irrigation farming, for cropping patterns. His white partner, mining-civil-engineer Jan Louw, had a knack for designing and building dams and irrigation infrastructure to control, store and pump water. A group of white outside private investors, the Olifants Bellegings Groep (OBG) CC, had a knack for numbers—crunching, finance and accounting.

And the area's unskilled, uneducated labor had a knack for, well; to be blunt, in terms of negotiating power they had a knack for having pigment and a persecuted past. Thus they became the ideal potential recipients of a water license, and if made full partners and co-owners of the irrigated farm...Hmmm. The possibilities opened up. The parties met with DWAF, floated proposals, and everyone began to talk turkey.

"I felt a moral obligation to plow something back to my workers," Lutz said, quickly adding that he felt this long before the current political pressure terrifying land-



Truter Lutz was the farm's entrepreneurial driving force, but the wrong color to get any new water. He welcomes the new emerging relationship with workers as partners.

owners as they watch Zimbabwe and Namibia expropriate white farms just across the borders to the north. "I didn't feel forced, but acted out of my heart to help give them an opportunity."

* * *

Years ago I might have gagged on that. But the longer I've been here, the grayer, more nuanced and complex my picture of interpersonal race relations became. It dulled my judgmental edge. In the past decade, all races have been struggling to redefine their relations with both themselves and each other, past and present. This was his outlook, and I believed him. That said, looking out for nonwhites wasn't his exclusive interest, nor virtue itself his only reward. Lutz made it clear he was out to make a tidy profit.

Even as water pulled partners to the table, profit pushed them apart. From observation and my own hap-

less experience, I'd found Afrikaners notoriously hard-nosed bargainers. Lutouw Farm was no exception. The government held water in its cards, but when the dust cleared after three years of negotiation the resulting share distribution looked lopsided. As managers and entrepreneurs, Lutz and Louw held 50 percent of the farm; OBG investors held 10 percent. And the 27 farm laborers, as Omaza Workers Trust, owned just 40 percent. Problem: After adding up the value of 'their' water, 'their' government grants, and their soft loan from the South Africa Wine Industry Trust (SAWIT), critics have pointed out that, technically, the nonwhite Omaza Trust should own 62 percent of the project.

Technically, it should, and in the future, such trusts may own that much. But initiative was priceless in the forgotten rural corners of arid Africa, and the most important things can't be quantified on a ledger. Like trust, faith, or shared expectations. I watched how, both on and off the clock, Lutz and the Omaza Trust workers devoted the bulk of their mental and physical and spiritual energies toward a fraction of their income, all with the hope that someday, years from now, their mutual venture might bear fruit.

That underlying dynamic engrossed me: the quest for water became the essential catalyst cementing together the short- and long-term futures of advantaged, educated whites and illiterate, deprived blacks. To my knowledge, it had never been tried. Still, rivers transcend artificial political borders between nations; so perhaps the winter flow of the Olifants could overcome the older, deeper divisions between race and class. And if shared access to the river could fuse land and people at Lutouw, I wondered, could it bind their fates elsewhere in arid Africa?

I wasn't the only one interested in an answer. A half-



dozen groups have put the farm under a microscope, including DWAF itself. By linking water to race, South Africa combined two volatile forces in one latest bold tactic to win Africa's oldest, thorniest and most spectacularly unsuccessful political crusade: agricultural land reform.

Throughout the subcontinent, the stakes were rising fast. Piss away water and you sank this inconspicuous farm. Sacrifice the farm and you may well lose the campaign. Lose this campaign and Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) party surrendered its decades-old *raison d'être*. And if land reform collapsed in rich and stable South Africa, where could it rise?

* * *

To appreciate how that ingredient, water, might work as a catalyst for sustainable land reform, I first had to understand what didn't. From Rwanda to Tanzania to Zimbabwe and South Africa, the post-colonial and post-apartheid states legitimately tried just about everything to reverse the historically gross inequity whereby a tiny minority tribe, typically European, owned the vast majority of arable farmland. Governments offered sticks and carrots, subsidies and sanctions. They trained labor. They rewrote constitutions. Yet voters grew hungrier for land and food.

At worst, like Zimbabwe or Namibia (or Rwanda right before the 1994 mayhem), leaders encouraged un-

employed squatters and thugs to intimidate and expropriate farms from fourth-generation owners, without compensation. The moral public (and amoral Foreign Exchange market) bemoans Zimbabwe's illegal, racist tactics as the "wrong" way.

Clearly. But while bumping along the dusty back roads of southern Africa I wondered: Then what was the "right" way? From Washington, a World Bank-led consensus suggested governments should arrange a voluntary willing-buyer/willing-seller process, financed through donors and agencies. It sounded simple and fair, so that's exactly how South Africa proceeded after 1995, with the finest intentions. The Department of Land Affairs (DLA) carefully registered the names of previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) throughout the country. It offered each a once-off, 16,000-Rand (\$2,500) no-interest loan/soft subsidy to buy land, especially small farms. Where farms were larger, or expensive, it encouraged them to pool funds with 80-100 others to purchase white farms from willing sellers outright, which many did.

Alas. Both methods — by "fast-track war veteran" force or by "incremental rent-a-crowd" grants — resulted in rapid, quantifiable but inflated progress; the number of black landowners rose on paper. Yet beyond that numerical bubble, both approaches resulted in stagnation or ruin. For want of farming's financial, organizational,



Glued together by water: In an impoverished racially-divided rural area, the conditional, leveraged water grant made 27 nonwhites co-owners of Lutouw, and it created 30 full-time and 200 seasonal jobs, like these.

marketing, or cultivars skills, many 'black-empowerment' lands eroded. Soil degraded. Crops sickened and died. Seeds and equipment vanished. Disputes rose and productivity plunged. After a few years' sabbatical, white farmers were able to buy back 'their' farm at a fraction of what they sold it, and then rehire 'their' black unskilled workers who had so fleetingly owned it.

Such failures depreciated more than land. They devalued trust: in democracy, in each other, in the future, in land tenure. Instead of closing the gap between white and black, past government approaches to land reform all too often widened it. Rather than acknowledge historical disadvantages, white cynics could complain, as some whispered to me: "See? Not only can't black Africans respect property rights, but here, when you give them free land on a platter, they don't know the first thing about what to do with it."

In turn blacks often felt stung, set up to fall down. "Never mind that white commercial farms are going under. That's always forgiven, attributed to the irrational whims of the weather, the price, the markets," said Marthinus Saunderson, director of South Africa's Wine Industry Trust, which warehouses the water equity loans in Lutouw Farm. He shakes his head. "Banks and others are just waiting for us to fail because," he leans forward and deadpans a whisper, "as everyone knows, *blacks can't farm.*"

* * *

His point tweaked generational-inbred prejudice. But there's more than a grain of truth in his irony about why past land reform efforts collapsed. Indeed, many blacks I



Grape Expectations: According to the ANC's Freedom Charter, "The land is owned by those who work it." More importantly, now, so is the water.

met in the fields were the first to admit that in fact they actually *can't* farm. Not yet, anyway. Not without years of practice and direction and training and education.

Right now, as I saw, they can pick. Most emphatically, they can plant. They can weed and prune and pack and load and fertilize and haul and plough a perfectly straight furrow with a John Deere diesel tractor like nobody's business. But that's \$4-a-day wage labor, they said, not farming.

What had passed for 'land reform' up to now, said Saunderson, was like taking temporary workers off an assembly line, 'empowering' them with grants to buy the plant from its owners, and saying: There. Now you can design, build and sell machines for yourselves. "Or look, something's wrong with America's space-shuttle program," he said, switching gears. "But what would happen if tomorrow your government put you in charge of NASA?" I shuddered, resenting the unwanted responsibility, just as workers might have resented how the government had waved wands, signed paper, made them overnight landowners, then walked off as their farms keeled over. They had no endurance.

So nonwhite rural farm workers possessed the desire but lacked the skills to become successful independent farmers. Government possessed laws and subsidies, but lacked the ability to train them. Africa's white commercial farmers possessed the means to train their workers to farm, but lacked the time, money and any real incentive to do so ('moral obligation' notwithstanding). Result: stalemate.

Land-reform progress had been negligible throughout South Africa's agricultural powerhouse, the Western Cape, but especially in its oldest, whitest, vast, booming wine-farm industry. I walked and drove down hundreds of miles of dirt roads through mouth-watering landscapes. I passed row after row of vineyard after vineyard: Ruby Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz and Pinotage. These grapes introduced in the 1600s by Europeans like Willem van der Stelle, remained in hands that were 100 percent white as the 21st century approached. Despite the DLA's vigorous commitment to land reform by way of lawful restitution, redistribution and tenure reform, by 1999 not one black farmer had been settled through its top-down policies.

But by the late 1990s, an exciting new model bubbled up from below, albeit on no more than a half dozen farms. It was a private sector venture called a "shared equity scheme."

In contrast to the government's clumsy collectivist approach, the land-equity scheme let a smaller group of, say, two dozen workers invest in part of a new farm subsidiary that they propose, negotiate, form and share with skilled white commercial farmers. While still 'labor' on

Grape Expectations:
In the last two years, Johnson Matika went from the point of resignation to become the proudest co-owner of Omaza Trust and Lutouw Farm. He smiles that others are envious of his position.



their old farm, they become ‘co-owners’ of the new one, like Lutouw. They invest labor, hold director’s seats on the board, but are never left alone, abandoned. In their negotiated contract they receive custom-tailored adult education and training; they share profits and responsibility with existing skilled managers and engineers, who rely on workers as much as the workers rely on them.

They also share risk. All drown or sail as one, growing the capital (the 300-hectare Lutouw Farm and 100-hectare dam) or devaluing it to death. One catch: they’re locked in for at least half a decade, as grapes mature, and might not see any returns or dividends on their investment before then, let alone afterward. For hungry people living hand to mouth, paycheck-to-paycheck, such a risky investment requires a quantum leap of trust.

“I almost lost faith and gave up in the first year after Lutouw’s creation” said Johnson Matika, an Omaza Trustee. “It wasn’t working out as I’d thought it would. Things were taking longer to get started, and pay off.” Two Omaza members dropped out, frustrated at the incremental pace, the pressure, the risk. Susan Richards, Omaza Trust’s chair, shook her head, looking back. “Expectations were too high at the start,” she recalled. “No one was sure where we were going or when we’d get there. Even now we’re in mid-crisis, only starting to get where we can start making some money.”

They appeared chastened, yet cautiously optimistic. What’s more, each grew self-esteem. They no longer automatically address whites as *minheer*, a subservient Afrikaans word for “sir.” They used first names. They are not scared of joining a trade union (to the dismay of conservatives). With meetings and solidarity, they’ve begun to overcome doubts, motivating each other with remind-

ers of long-term potential rewards like increased productivity, changed attitudes, greater trust and shared profits.

They also grew in the eyes of their family, neighbors and friends. Each of the Omaza Trust workers told me about mixed reactions, from envy to pride to resentment and wonder. “Many people I know have grown jealous,” boasts Matika. “They want to join a trust like Omaza. I’m part of a development that others are still dreaming of.”

* * *

That’s a good sign, said observers. “Jealousy and envy means word has been filtering out from farm to farm, meeting to meeting, between whites and nonwhites alike,” said Gus Pickard, as we gazed at the workers bent over crops in the distance. Pickard was DWAF’s ‘social facilitator,’ speaking to and for the nonwhite Omaza workers since the project was first proposed, a critical role that combines union rep, negotiator, advisor and preacher. “There is a grapevine effect, spread by the migrant farm workers and even from Lutz when he meets with white commercial owners. Others have expressed an interest in replicating the equity-sharing model we’ve developed at Lutouw.”

But there’s the rub faced by any budding entrepreneur: Scraping up equity itself. Jump-starting such schemes requires a substantial stake, or purchase, by all shareholders. Middle-class whites can leverage their existing property to borrow capital for their share, but millions of nonwhite families have no or meager savings at best. On smaller farm schemes, blacks offered “sweat equity” — working for free in their spare time, after hours or on weekends — in exchange for shares in the farm, its capital accumulation and future dividends.¹ Many used their 16,000 Rand grants from the government. Still others were granted public lands, like a converted tree plantation, as equity.

Unfortunately these sources were finite and non-re-



I Heard it through the Grapevine:
“Envy is good,” said Gus Pickard, Omaza’s government-appointed fixer, negotiator, advisor and preacher. “It means word has been filtering out through migrant workers and farm bureaus. Now others have expressed interest in our model.”

¹ Those dividends may be cold dry cash or warm juicy grapes. If the latter, nonwhite workers on two equity-sharing schemes, Fairview and Uitgezocht, have pressed, bottled, and marketed their own labels — ‘Fair Valley’ and ‘Freedom Road’ — sold to a British importer at a very favorable price.

newable. First, there was only so much surplus tax revenue, or public land, that the government could appropriate for its 16,000- Rand grants. Second, there was only so much free time the workers had to spare. Third, sweat equity favored healthy young men over women or the elderly. Finally, opportunities were limited by the voluntary good will of white commercial landowners. Though vastly superior to collectivist, top-down attempts at land reform, the equity-sharing model still remained heavily slanted in favor of skilled 'haves' over unskilled 'have-nots.'

The government felt increasing political pressure to even the scales, but years of setbacks had emptied its toolbox, confidence and authority. "We had no precedent for this process, and no model," said Willie Enright, the DWAF Western Cape water manager who helped structure Lutouw Farm. "We had to learn from existing projects what not to do in the future. We could, and ideally should, bargain for a better share for previously disadvantaged workers in a scheme, but what do we have to negotiate with?"

What indeed. The wine industry in particular is a capital-, labor-, technology- and management-intensive sector. Arid Africa's budget-strapped governments had none of those four to offer as any incentive to drive land reform. Fortunately, dry-land irrigation farming was also extremely *water*-intensive. And one thing the new federal government most definitely *did* possess, said Enright, was water.

* * *

Recognizing this came through a slow, steep learning curve. Farm-raised whites had bulked up the National

Party's *apartheid* regime. In contrast, it was mostly educated nonwhites with law degrees who ran the ANC. Its legal and political urban strength allowed practical rural ignorance. Indeed, for a political organization whose very founding lay in the resistance to racially based land legislation that reserved 87 per cent of the agricultural land in South Africa for the exclusive use of whites, the ANC land and agricultural policy was embryonic, even naive at the time of unbanning in 1990.²

Admittedly, so was my own. I'd only 'hunted' in the frozen foods, or 'gathered' mushrooms after they'd been properly Styrofoam- and cellophane-wrapped. I once grew a 10-by-5-foot vegetable garden and so envisioned agriculture as a fairly simple enterprise. But after I wandered Lutouw Farm's cash-crop fields learning about how to time fertilizer applications, minimize labor costs, link transport schedules, cut seed storage losses and anticipate, say, the impact of ripening humidity on the price margin of bulk tomatoes shipped between Durban and the Cape, a reality rapped my thick skull. Farming was both a timeless art, and a cutthroat business.

The one common denominator traversing time and place and scale and policy, was water. So while private land rights remained permanently rigid and inviolate, public water rights became flexible, fluid leverage. The ANC's Freedom Charter had a long-running slogan that said, 'The land shall belong to those who work it.' An unwritten slogan now, it seems, is: So shall the water.

"We have begun working closely with the other departments, like Land Affairs and Agriculture, so that land



Clanwilliam Dam: As the new constitution nationalized all water, stored streams may become giant government bargaining chips, contents used as leverage to bring more integrated and equitable patterns of farmland co-ownership.

² Johann Hamman and Joachim Ewert, *Development Southern Africa*, Vol 16, no 3, Spring 1999

does not exchange hands without our looking closely at the water component,” said Eright. “There are different categories of land management, and different approaches, but by getting shares in water, people get shares in the land.”

The benefits to managers, and the country, have been documented. A study of other equity-sharing schemes indicated a 60 percent more positive loyal workforce, 30 percent higher productivity, and 40 percent less idling or absenteeism. Another aspect DWAF and others have begun watching carefully, at Lutouw, was whether efficiency of water use, or crop per drop, improved.

I circled the Lutouw Farm’s dam. It could hold the 2.7 million cubic meters of water allocated by DWAF, but workers must monitor seeps and evaporation losses from the dam and implement plans to reduce loss. By linking, including and thus ‘internalizing’ water and labor as part of a farm’s equity, there was less room to misuse either. Every worker I spoke with, from Johnson Matika to Ragel Matjan, now kept a vigilant eye out for water waste because, as Matjan reasoned, “waste has a negative impact on growing; more water to spare equals more money for us.”

Looking broader- and longer-term, however, Lutouw may have ripple effects throughout the country. The farm was born out of “surplus” water that had been set aside for nonwhites as a priority. But soon every drop in the Olifants, along with every river in South Africa, will be used. There will be no surplus.

“Once we have fully allocated the river,” said Enright, “we can only squeeze more available water through the leverage of compulsory licenses.” That means water-pricing, policy incentives, education, dam-raising and conservation. The Olifants River basin is one of the nation’s pioneers in new, decentralized “water-user associations” which aim to reduce and self-regulate water use.

If it gains the expected water savings, will the government then require equity-sharing like Lutouw as a condition for exchange of water licenses? It’s too early to say, says Enright, “But it will be one criteria.”

* * *

On the windy western corner of the dam, I saw where, come winter floods, a big

The DWAF license allows ‘winter surplus’ water, if used efficiently as:

A Giant Sucking Sound draws from the Olifants River...



Pumps it into Lutouw Farm’s 100 hectare dam...

Draws it through these sand filter tanks...



And lets it trickle through plastic drip irrigation into the earth

red pipe would be lowered to suck water from the Olifants and pump it into the dam. On the opposite side, in the northeast, I saw where the dam would pump water through sand filters into tiny black tubes. Later, trudging through the vineyard, now in its third year, I saw those black tubes dripping the precious fluid into the soil, one of the most efficient methods of irrigation around.

Lutz walked alongside, rattling off figures about how much a box of gemsquash cost to grow and ship and how I paid six times that in the city supermarket. Gus Pickard, Omaza's negotiator/advisor, strode ahead of us, calculating human costs and gains. DWAF will soon decide whether to keep him on or let Omaza Trust fend for itself. It would have been pleasant to find that after 30 months, workers had learned enough and were ready to stand on their own. A few, like Matika, felt optimistic that they could, if forced to; all acknowledged that they had a long way to go, and needed as much of the external support from Pickard they could get.

We stopped and rubbed dust off the tomatoes and took a bite. Some were plump red and juicy, others needed a bit more time to ripen. "Sort of like the workers?" I asked.

Both men offered honest appraisals of 'empowerment' at Lutouw. They too wished workers could be trained faster, but given the long, inequitable history, "If we're honest with ourselves, we're looking at years, even decades, to really bring lasting change," said Pickard, who



"What if we don't have enough rain, or surplus water in the stream?" worries Omaza Trustee Joseph Blaauw. "Because now it's all our responsibility. I spend restless nights thinking about it."

had grown both personally and professionally attached to the workers. "Like anywhere, there's some in the group who get it faster than others, and some who have different priorities."

Speed, priority and progress fell predictably along fault lines of age. I found that, given a choice, the young wanted to invest more in human education and training. The older ones, with less time to learn and fewer years to retirement, favored farm capital and dividends. But all Omaza Trust shareholders I met were touched, bound together by water. They had a different outlook from workers cut off from the Olifant River's flow.

As the seasoned farmer with extensive management experience, Lutz was elected chief executive by the farm's equity holders. He called the shots, and would be around whether DWAF's Pickard stayed on or left. So I wondered aloud if or when Lutouw Farm might one day reach the mature point where he could step back and let Omaza workers make more decisions, whether he agreed with them or not.

While broaching this question to him, I caught myself employing an almost apartheid-like, patronizing analogy: "It might be like a parent who, at some point, needs to let their children start to make their own mistakes and learn from them, in order to go it alone."

Lutz shook his head. "We're not to the stage where I can let them make decisions for the whole farm. They still don't have the self-confidence, savvy and the guts," he said. "But now they're focused and so it's a matter of time. Once they're over the edge" — he snapped his fingers — "they will take off like that."

Still, the water was Omaza's, and they knew this. So there appeared to be give-and-take in their emerging relationship, moving from former paternalism to current partners. As their skills improved, some members of Omaza approached Lutz asking for a raise. He declined. It was too early yet; the farm wasn't breaking even. Then they came back with the idea of using five hectares of the vineyard to grow and sell cash crops until the vines bore fruit. It was their water, after all, and partly their farm. He couldn't say no, and in fact pitched in himself.

As the sun set, Lutz, Pickard and I walked through those five hectares. The gemsquash, planted six weeks ago, were already starting to bud. Lutz's handshake-crushing hands were constantly in motion, pulling up weeds, breaking off and pruning dead shoots. His hands seem to have a mind of their own. An instinct. As he plucked at a grape vine, wrapping its tendrils tightly around the wire and supporting itself, he carefully pointed it out: "See? You get them to this stage and you can pretty much leave them alone. All they need is water."

I wasn't certain if he was talking about the farm's



Equity-sharing ripens on the vine: In the next two years, after much patience, the vinyard will finally start yielding big grapes, big juice, and hopefully, big profits for its diverse owners.

grapes or the Omaza Trust workers. Or whether you could distinguish the two.

* * *

On the way back to the dirt road, Lutz had a question of his own. He had given me free rein to talk with his workers in private. But knowing I'd write it all up, he was naturally curious about how their views and hopes about the farm might have reflected on his decisions: "What did they have to say about it?"

As a strict researcher, or reporter, I might have declined to answer. But he had opened to me, and so without revealing names, I offered my impressions. I told him that, although not for the first time in their lives, the workers said they were deeply concerned about the future. Not about each other: "We're a strong lot, hard working;

we can do it." Or about Lutz: "We've got faith in his capacity." Or the government: "It's finally on our side." They're not apprehensive about anything in human control, in fact, but they were all pretty damn worried about that water.

"They have begun absorbing the risk they used to leave exclusively up to you and other white commercial owners," I tell him. "They were anxious about whether there will be enough water flowing down the river, enough to pump into their new dam. They're losing sleep over whether enough rain will fall in the mountains this winter."

Lutz grinned, nodding all-too-knowingly at their nightmares. "Ach, yeah," he said, slapping off some dust. "So they're starting to know what it is to be a farmer." □

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