

Appropriate farmer classification is key to agricultural development: rethinking subsistence agriculture in South Africa

Siphe Zantsi

*Economic Analysis Unit, Agricultural Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa and
Department of Agriculture and Animal Health,
University of South Africa College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences,
Johannesburg, South Africa*

Livhuwani Masola

*Agrimetrics Unit, Agricultural Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa, and
Walter Shiba*

Economic Analysis Unit, Agricultural Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint argues that appropriate farmer classification is key to the success of agricultural development programs. Focusing on South Africa’s small-scale agricultural households, who are often referred to as “subsistence” farmer, we show that the nomenclature creates the impression that these farming households live from agriculture, which is not the case.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilized secondary data obtained from Statistics South Africa’s General Household Survey. The data were analyzed to illustrate that the majority of small-scale farming households in South Africa engage in agricultural activities primarily to supplement their household food supply and income. Descriptive statistical methods were employed, with results presented through figures and tables to highlight key trends and patterns.

Findings – We show that this inappropriate farmer classification has already hampered the success of small-scale agricultural development programs in at least one of the South African provinces, Eastern Cape. We recommend that appropriate and practical farmer classification should be one of the priorities in rural and agricultural development policy and practice.

Originality/value – This viewpoint is one of the few articles that amplifies the argument about inappropriate farmer classification with a focus on subsistence farmers referencing the recent Statistics South Africa’s data.

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Keywords Agricultural development, Own food production, Smallholder agriculture, Farmer typology

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

Why is farmer classification important for development projects and policy practice? This brief article attempts to address this question focusing on South Africa’s small-scale farmers that are largely considered “subsistence” farmers in the nations’ dualistic agriculture [1]. Shaped by punitive colonial policies especially the apartheid’s separate development, South African agriculture is considered dual, where on the one hand, there is a thriving, well-resourced commercial agriculture on freehold land, largely operated by white male farmers. On the other hand, one finds a stagnant, resource poor agriculture on small patches of land in the former homelands or Bantu stands, operated by mostly black women led rural households as a form of supplementing either household food or income.

Since 1994, when South African became a democratic country, the government has put in place numerous policies and farmer support programs to develop smallholder agriculture in an effort to close the dualism. These include, the land reform policy and the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Program. However, it is difficult to say that these policies and programs have been successful even when judging by the policies and program’s own objectives.



As it has been argued by [Aliber *et al.* \(2006\)](#) and [Aliber and Hall \(2012\)](#), we maintain that the little impact of agricultural support programs could be largely explained by inappropriate farmer classification (see [Table 1](#)). Our reasons for us to believe that the inappropriate farmer classification is a big factor here is that there is huge number of small-scale farmers in South Africa and the budget can only meaningfully support a few farmers. The latest, Statistics South Africa's General Household survey shows that 17% of South African households translating to more than two million households are involved in some form of agriculture ([Stats SA, 2023](#)).

Besides this theoretical background, the other motivation for writing this article comes from a recent policy development project commissioned by the National Department of Agriculture to update the Subdivision of Agricultural Land Act (SALA) of 1970, where we are in the process of developing norms and standards for guiding the decisions to subdivide agricultural land. Unlike the SALA, this new policy includes the former homelands and we had to develop income thresholds to guide land subdivision for three types of farmers, subsistence, small-scale and commercial farmers. In this exercise we had to rethink what "subsistence" really means beyond just the common nomenclature used in many agricultural development policy documents in South Africa [\[2\]](#). In our rethinking of the term, which could not be translated from theory to practice, the authors contend that using the Statistics South Africa's Agriculturals Households data, that many of the households involved in agriculture in South Africa do so to supplement their own household food or income, meaning that what they practice is not "subsistence agriculture", rather "supplementary agriculture".

The concept of "supplementary agriculture" refers to agricultural activities that are not the primary source of livelihood for households but serve to complement food security and income. Unlike subsistence agriculture, where farming is the main means of survival, supplementary agriculture is practiced alongside other income-generating activities such as social grants, informal trade, or wage labor. This distinction is critical in the South African context, where many rural households engage in farming to reduce food expenditure or enhance dietary diversity, rather than to sustain themselves entirely through agricultural production.

Theoretical justification for this classification can be drawn from [Ellis \(2000\)](#), who emphasizes the diversity of rural livelihoods and the role of agriculture as one component among many. Similarly, the FAO (2014) highlights that smallholder farming often functions within a broader livelihood strategy, especially in regions with limited access to markets and resources. Recognizing "supplementary agriculture" as a distinct category allows for more targeted support programs that reflect the actual needs and capacities of rural households. It also aligns with international frameworks such as those proposed by IFAD [\[3\]](#) and FAO [\[4\]](#), which advocate for farmer classification based on livelihood strategies, resource endowment and market orientation.

Table 1. Summarizing examples of misclassification impacts in agricultural policy

Area of intervention	Misclassification	Impact
Input subsidy programs	Treating all smallholders as subsistence farmers	Commercially oriented farmers receive insufficient support; subsistence farmers get inputs they can't use effectively
Extension services	Uniform training regardless of farmer type	Low adoption rates; training irrelevant to farmers' actual needs
Financial services	Excluding subsistence-labelled farmers from credit schemes	Market-ready farmers are denied access to finance; others receive loans they can't repay
Infrastructure development	Planning based on broad regional labels (e.g. "subsistence zones")	Infrastructure underutilized or misallocated; missed opportunities for growth
Policy monitoring and design	Lack of differentiation in farmer categories	Poor tracking of policy outcomes; ineffective adjustments and learning loops

In what follows, we present the build-up of this argument. We begin by providing a theoretical background and rationale for developing appropriate farmer classifications. This is followed by a presentation of small-scale farmers in South Africa and their primary reasons for engaging in agriculture. Later, we discuss the implications of inappropriate farmer classification and conclude.

2. Methodology

This viewpoint adopted a descriptive research approach based on secondary data analysis. The primary data source is Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey (GHS), which provides insights into household-level agricultural engagement. The analysis is non-statistical and does not involve econometric modeling. Instead, it includes descriptive summaries, regional comparisons (e.g. Limpopo vs. Eastern Cape) and trend observations over time (e.g. [Hajdu et al., 2020](#)). These descriptive insights are supported by literature review and case-based evidence to substantiate the argument that most small-scale farmers in South Africa engage in agriculture as a supplementary activity rather than for subsistence.

3. Why does farmer classification matter in agricultural development?

Agricultural development is a component of rural development and it is concerned about improving the lives and economic well-being of rural people involved in agricultural activities and the value chains of agricultural activities. In agricultural development farmers are the key stakeholders and mostly the prime beneficiaries, hence their thorough understanding is of outmost importance. However, farmers are not one big homogeneous group. Thus to design and plan effective and meaningful farmer development support programs, a clear and appropriate classification is required.

Numerous studies have echoed the rationale for development and use of appropriate farmer classification through the study of farmer types in South Africa ([Chipfupa and Wale, 2018](#); [Zantsi et al., 2021](#); [Yazdan Bakhsh et al., 2024](#)).

[Chipfupa and Wale \(2018\)](#) studied the farmers types in 328 smallholder farm households in KwaZulu Natal irrigation schemes to understand how psychological capital can be to inform on-farm entrepreneurship development. The study found that smallscale farmer typology could be a useful tool in farmer development. The study identified five farmer typologies as follows: elderly and uneducated, cautious and short-sighted, financial capital and psychological capital endowed, social grant reliant and land endowed dryland farmers. [Chipfupa and Wale \(2018\)](#) study's key message was that grouping farmers who think and act alike enables development practitioners to design effective and tailor-made support structures.

[Zantsi et al. \(2021\)](#), studied a subset of 442 smallscale farmers that are listed as eligible prime beneficiaries of the land redistribution component of South Africa's land reform policy and identified five distinct clusters of farmers, using variables related to farmers' characteristics, income and expenditure and farm production indicators and willingness to participate in land redistribution. The study's key argument was that if farmers are segmented it is easy to identify their needs and how they can be supported.

Most recently, [Yazdan Bakhsh et al. \(2024\)](#) use a cluster analysis to segment a group of 212 small-scale farmers in Limpopo into four farmer types: subsistence-oriented farmers, semi-subsistence livestock-oriented farmers, semi-subsistence crop-oriented farmers and market-oriented farmers. The authors maintain that farmer classification is a pre-requisite for the design of more target-group-specific and suitable policy interventions.

In a more interrogative note on the method of classifying farmer, a review of studies that have applied smallholder farmer typology published between 2007 and 2018 was conducted and it identified four main groups of methods widely applied to characterize smallholder farms ([Nyambo et al., 2019](#)). These are deterministic, probabilistic, participatory and expert-based methods. Authors argue that deterministic and probabilistic methods such as clustering, have

an academic advantage. However, the authors were concerned about the inability of these methods to predict future trends of the farmer typologies.

In this brief review we have learned the power of segmenting farmers through clustering according to similarities and how this could improve the success of agricultural development and support. However, it does not appear that this method is used by the South African agricultural departments at least in that detailed form. Could the problem be the practicality of the analyses? What we rather note is that government policy documents refer to the broader farmer grouping, subsistence, emerging and commercial farmers, respectively. Below we will closely look at what is referred to as “subsistence agriculture” in South Africa.

4. Small-scale farmers in South Africa – are they subsisting from agriculture?

The legacy of colonial policies in the form of segregation laws and apartheid separate development still lives in South Africa in the sense that a majority of farming households on small pieces of land or those who keep animals in communal land are still by far concentrated in the former homelands (Pienaar and von Fintel, 2014; StatsSA, 2023). Also the primary purpose for the separate development is still enact, where smallholder farming practiced by black rural households contributing marginally to household food security and income. With the growing trend of access to land resulting from the 1913 Land Act, this contribution continues to decline. In Limpopo Lidzhegu and Kabanda (2022) has shown that land for subsistence is taken up for building houses. Hajdu *et al.* (2020) measured rural households income sources in 2002 from a village in the Eastern Cape and after 14 years when they return to measure income sources they found that cultivation and livestock contribution declined by 2 and 3% while social grants had increased by 30%.

A more widely data from Statistics South Africa in Figure 1 shows that the vast majority of South African households that engaged in agriculture did so in an attempt to secure an additional (75.5%) or a main (11.7%) source of food. This corresponds with the little contribution made by agricultural activities to household income discussed above. The production of an additional source of food was most commonly reported in Limpopo (89.3%) and Mpumalanga (80.2%). These provinces’s rural areas are made up of the former homelands. Only 8.2% of households engaged in agriculture to generate income.

Appropriate farmer classification is key to agricultural development, especially in contexts like South Africa where diverse farming systems coexist. While the term subsistence

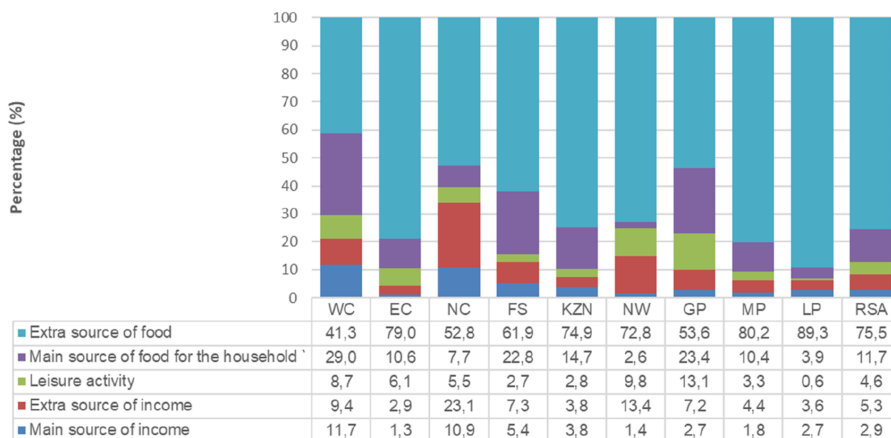


Figure 1. Presentation of farming agricultural households in South Africa by their main reasons to engage in agriculture. Source: Statistics South Africa, 2023. P 65

agriculture traditionally refers to farming primarily for household consumption with minimal market engagement, its classical definition is increasingly challenged in contemporary rural economies. In practice, very few farmers operate purely at a subsistence level. Even those with limited resources often engage in some form of market exchange, whether selling surplus produce, participating in informal value chains, or accessing inputs through local networks.

Exceptions to this trend may exist in highly marginalized or remote areas where market access is severely constrained, infrastructure is lacking and institutional support is minimal. In such cases, households may rely almost entirely on their own production for food security, with little to no commercial activity. However, these instances are rare and often transitional. Most smallholder farmers operate along a continuum from subsistence-oriented to semi-commercial and fully commercial, depending on factors such as resource endowment, market orientation and livelihood strategies (Khalil *et al.*, 2017; Gollin, 2018).

To this end we have presented a detailed and compelling evidence to show that majority of small-scale farmers in South Africa live from social assistance and other off-farm income sources with agriculture contributing very little. This little contribution is not to say small-scale agriculture is not important. It is important, evidence has shown that households who are involved in agriculture experience less hunger than those who are not farming (Rogan, 2018). In other case, evidence shows that there are spillover effects that benefit the non-farming households in the sense that presence of farming households makes food cheap in a given village as result of the surplus sold by farming households (Aliber and Mdoda, 2015). However, to refer to the small-scale farming households as “subsistence farmers” does not seem to be true. What are the possible dangers of the inappropriate terminology for the broader agenda of agricultural development?

5. Discussion

The efforts to bridge the divide between commercial farmers and small-scale farmers in South Africa continues and numerous programs have been implemented since 1994. Some of these programs focus on developing commercial oriented smallholder farmers to commercial agriculture through land reform other programs, such Fetsa Tlala, focus on supporting and developing supplementary farming agriculture often referred to as “subsistence” agriculture.

Fetsa Tlala is a government initiative that translates to “eradicate hunger” or “end hunger” and promoting food production within the country. The initiative is implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, with the goal of supporting small-scale farming households and developing agricultural value chains. An evaluation of 70 farming households who have benefited from the Fetsa Tlala and four Fetsa Tlala projects in the Eastern Cape revealed that the business model of the program was not built with sustainability in mind and the systems approach was ignored when designing the program. The study further established that the cost of the program outweighs its benefits (Njara, 2018).

Another similar maize flagship program, which is one of the government’s efforts to revive small-scale maize field cultivation, the government introduced mechanization cultivation and is implemented by provincial departments of agriculture. Zantsi and Xaba (2025) reported on one case study in the Eastern Cape, where the government contributes about 60% of maize production costs and the rest is paid by beneficiaries as an annual fee of nearly R3000 (US \$155) per hectare per member and in turn received an average a share of 1.2 tons of maize per hectare which amounts to R6000 (US\$310).

In both of these case studies, most of the beneficiaries complained about the high contribution they had to make to benefit from the programs. The contributions are way above the typical total rural household income in the lower bracket. Here we are talking about households who depend on state transfers, old age grant (R2 315 per person per month), child support grant (R560 per child per month) and or Social Distress Relief grant (R370). Considering all other household expenses, such households could hardly afford to partake in these projects, yet they are the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Had a proper farmer

classification made, this could be identified from the project conception and an alternative support program be designed for such low-income households.

5.1 Fetsa Tlala initiative

The Fetsa Tlala was launched to enhance household food security by supporting small-scale farmers with inputs, mechanization and advisory services. However, studies show that the program suffered from weak planning, inconsistent input delivery and unequal distribution of resources (Hutamo *et al.*, 2025). These issues were partly due to the assumption that all small-scale farmers have similar needs and capacities. For example, inputs were delivered late in the season and some farmers received support they could not utilize effectively due to lack of market access or technical knowledge. This reflects a failure to distinguish between subsistence-oriented farmers and those with commercial potential.

5.2 Maize flagship project

The Maize Flagship Project, particularly its emphasis on genetically modified (GM) maize, aimed to integrate smallholders into modern value chains. However, research shows that structural inequalities, high input costs and limited access to infrastructure and education have prevented many smallholders from benefiting (Fischer, 2022; Nazia, 2024). The project often assumed that smallholders could adopt GM technologies like commercial farmers, ignoring the socio-economic and institutional barriers they face. This misclassification led to policies that favored large-scale producers while marginalizing smallholders, especially in provinces like the Eastern Cape.

5.3 Linking the two agricultural programs to farmer misclassification

Both programs were designed with good intentions but were built on overly simplistic classifications of farmers as shown in Table 2. Fetsa Tlala treated all smallholders as

Table 2. Incorrect beneficiary treatment in key agricultural programs

Program	Intended goal	Misclassification issue	Incorrect beneficiary treatment	Impact
Fetsa Tlala	Enhance household food security through input and mechanization support	Assumed all smallholders are subsistence farmers	Inputs distributed uniformly without assessing land size, market access, or farming capacity No evaluation of whether farming was the primary income source or a supplementary activity	Inputs underutilized or wasted; market-oriented farmers under-supported Ineffective targeting; limited improvement in food security
Maize Flagship Project	Promote GM maize adoption and integrate smallholders into commercial value chains	Assumed smallholders could adopt commercial technologies without structural support	Promoted GM maize to farmers lacking irrigation, credit, or extension services Did not assess whether maize was a primary crop or if farmers had capacity for value chain entry	Low adoption rates: benefits concentrated among better-resourced farmers Exclusion of vulnerable farmers; reinforcement of inequality

subsistence producers, ignoring differences in market access, production capacity and aspirations. As a result, some farmers received inputs they could not use effectively, while others who could have scaled up were under-supported. Similarly, the Maize Flagship Project assumed that smallholders could adopt genetically modified maize and participate in commercial value chains. However, many lacked the necessary infrastructure, financial resources and technical support. This misclassification led to policies that favored better-resourced farmers, leaving others behind. A more effective approach would involve using typologies that consider market orientation, resource endowment and livelihood strategies, enabling targeted support that aligns with farmers’ actual conditions and aspirations.

The systems approach in agricultural development considers the interconnected components of farming production, marketing, institutional support, infrastructure and socio-economic context. In Fetsa Tlala, this approach was largely omitted see [Table 2](#). The program prioritized input distribution without assessing whether farmers had the capacity, infrastructure or market access to use those inputs productively.

This omission led to misclassification, where all smallholders were treated as subsistence farmers. As a result, the program failed to differentiate between:

- (1) Market-oriented farmers who needed support to scale up and access value chains.
- (2) Vulnerable subsistence farmers who required basic food security and extension support.
- (3) Diversified livelihood farmers who may not rely primarily on agriculture.

Without this differentiation, interventions were poorly targeted, reducing the program’s effectiveness and reinforcing structural inequalities.

[Table 3](#) highlights the disconnect between policy design and farmer realities, emphasizing the need for a systems approach and nuanced farmer classification to improve targeting, efficiency and impact.

Table 3. A Comparative Table policy design vs. farmer reality

Policy design assumptions	Reality of smallholder farmers	Resulting limitations
Farmers are uniformly subsistence-oriented	Farmers operate along a spectrum: subsistence, semi-commercial, commercial	Misclassification leads to poorly targeted support and inefficient resource allocation
Input provision alone can boost productivity	Productivity depends on access to markets, infrastructure and extension support	Programs like Fetsa Tlala fail to address systemic constraints beyond input access
Farmers have similar resource endowments and capacities	Wide variation in land size, labor, capital and education levels	One-size-fits-all interventions ignore differentiated needs and capacities
Technology adoption is universally feasible	Adoption depends on training, affordability and relevance to local conditions	Maize Flagship Project overestimated readiness for GM maize adoption
Farming is the primary livelihood for all rural households	Many farmers rely on multiple income sources (e.g. remittances, casual labor)	Policies overlook livelihood diversification and fail to support integrated development
Market access is assumed or easily achievable	Many farmers face logistical, informational and institutional barriers	Value chain integration efforts exclude those without infrastructure or networks
Beneficiary selection is based on administrative categories	Actual farming potential and goals vary widely within categories	Support reaches the wrong beneficiaries or fails to match their development trajectory

5.4 Integrating farmer typologies into policy critique

Agricultural policies like Fetsa Tlala and the Maize Flagship Project have often failed to differentiate between farmer types, leading to misaligned interventions. This oversight can be addressed by referencing typologies developed by institutions such as the FAO and IFAD, which classify farmers based on:

- (1) Market orientation (subsistence, semi-commercial, commercial)
- (2) Resource endowment (land, labor, capital)
- (3) Livelihood strategies (agriculture as primary or supplementary income)

These typologies provide a multi-dimensional framework that reflects the diversity of smallholder farmers and helps tailor interventions accordingly.

5.5 Theoretical structures of segmentation

Several theoretical models support this approach:

- (1) Livelihoods framework: Recognizes that farmers pursue multiple strategies and rely on diverse assets (Scoones, 1998).
- (2) Agricultural household models: Account for production, consumption and labor allocation decisions within farming households (Singh *et al.*, 1986).
- (3) Farm typology approaches: Used by FAO to guide policy targeting by grouping farmers into clusters based on structural and behavioral characteristics.

5.6 Why these matters?

Without applying these frameworks, policies risk treating farmers as a homogenous group, ignoring the following aspects:

- (1) Their capacity to engage with markets
- (2) Their access to infrastructure and services
- (3) Their goals (e.g. food security vs. income generation)

This leads to ineffective targeting, resource misallocation and limited impact as seen in the blanket input distribution of Fetsa Tlala and the technology-push strategy of the Maize Flagship Project.

Agricultural policies often presume that smallholder farmers can afford substantial co-payments for inputs, services or technologies, largely due to generalized assumptions about their economic status. These policies typically treat farmers as a uniform group, assuming that farming is their primary and profitable livelihood and that they have disposable income to invest in agricultural development. However, this overlooks the reality that many smallholders operate at or near subsistence levels, with highly variable and often precarious income sources including remittances, social grants and off-farm employment. The failure to apply nuanced farmer typologies or assess resource endowment and market orientation leads to interventions that exclude vulnerable farmers who may be committed but financially constrained. Consequently, co-payment requirement is intended to ensure commitment or cost-sharing, end up reinforcing inequality, benefiting only those with sufficient capital while marginalizing those most in need of support. This disconnects between policy design and farmer realities underscores the importance of integrating segmentation frameworks into agricultural planning.

6. Concluding remarks

This brief article has argued that appropriate farmer classification is key to the success of agricultural development programs. Focusing on South Africa's small-scale agricultural households, who are often referred to as "subsistence" farmer, the article has shown that the nomenclature creates the impression that these farming households live from agriculture, which is not the case. Secondary data from Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey was used to show most of small-scale farming households in South Africa are in fact use agriculture to supplement their own household food and income. This is different from other African countries especially in Southern Africa, for example Malawi, where rural households produce a significant share of their food. To increase the chance of success of the agricultural development programs, development practitioners must begin by segmenting farmers appropriately.

6.1 Recommendations

To improve the efficiency and equity of agricultural support programs, especially in contexts where farmer misclassification has led to poor targeting, a set of reforms is recommended. First, a means-tested approach should be adopted to assess farmers' income levels, resource endowment and market orientation before allocating support. This will ensure that subsidies and services reach those who genuinely need them, rather than being distributed uniformly. Second, grant-based input support should be provided to ultra-poor or subsistence-oriented farmers who lack the financial capacity to co-invest but still require assistance to maintain food security and basic productivity. Third, a sliding scale subsidy model can be introduced, where the level of support is adjusted based on the farmer's classification offering full subsidies to the most vulnerable, partial subsidies to transitioning farmers and minimal or no subsidies to commercially viable farmers. These reforms will align support with actual farmer conditions, promote fairness and enhance the impact of agricultural policies by ensuring resources are used where they are most needed.

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Notes

1. This term was first used by Merle [Lipton \(1977\)](#) and recently Wandile Sihlobo's book reaffirms Lipton's argument.
2. E.g. Chapter Six of the National Development Plan ([NPC, 2012](#)).
3. [Indicators & typology](#)
4. [Developing country-wide farming system typologies](#)

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Siphe Zantsi can be contacted at: siphezantsi@yahoo.com