Lungisile Ntsebeza: a community-engaged scholar in the struggle to build the voice and agency of the rural poor

Fani Ncapayi* and Mercia Andrews

Trust for Community Outreach for Education (TCOE), Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The article reflects on Lungisile Ntsebeza’s academic work and is informed by the authors’ close political and academic association with Ntsebeza. It traces his development from his birthplace in Cala, one of the centres of missionary education and a hotbed for political activism, which drew his attention early to politics. However, the promotion of learning by his educationist and middle-class parents, together with his early introduction to Marxist politics, moulded Ntsebeza into a serious reader. His Marxist training influenced his belief in the importance of the agency of marginalised people in society and his development into the community-engaged and world-renowned scholar he has become.

KEYWORDS

Learning centre; missionary education; middle-class educationists; Marxist politics; marginalised people; community engaged

Introduction

This article reflects on Lungisile Ntsebeza’s work as a world-renowned, Marxist and community-engaged scholar. It covers three broad themes, ‘democratisation in South Africa’s countryside, land and equity in the context of the struggle against poverty, and social movements in the land sector’ (Ntsebeza 2020), and reflects his commitment to working with marginalised communities and promoting the agency of marginalised sections of society. Ntsebeza belongs to the group of intellectuals that uses ideas and knowledge not only to challenge dominant ideas but to introduce alternative ones, drawing on its ideas and knowledge to support the underprivileged members of society in changing their situations (Shivji 2019). His scholarship has been central to debates around these three broad

*Corresponding author email: f.ncapayi@gmail.com

Accepted: 1 May 2024; published online: 16 July 2024

©2024 ROAPE Publications Ltd. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License (CC-BY 4.0), a copy of which is available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

themes in the Eastern Cape and South Africa generally. The article characterises Ntsebeza as a community-engaged scholar. Such scholars ‘contribute their respective expertise to co-create knowledge that addresses community-identified scares and concerns, as well as serves the public good’ (Morrison 2020, 4) and engage and work with communities in finding solutions to their challenges.

The other, privileged, group of scholars uses knowledge to promote the status quo in society (Shivji 2019). As Bunting and Quirk (2020, 5) observe, this group ‘go out in the world in search of information, do their best to ensure that no one gets harmed along the way (unlike most mining companies), and then go home to process their valuable findings for the benefit of their careers’, leaving ‘the communities unchanged or worse off than they were before’ (Wilmsen 2006, 1). In other words, this group’s research does not benefit the community.

Both the authors of this article have a long political relationship with Ntsebeza, dating back to the early 1980s. Mercia Andrews first met Ntsebeza when the latter ran a bookshop in Cala in the Transkei and she worked for the South African Committee on Higher Education (SACHED) in the early 1980s. She moved between the Western Cape and Cala, transporting some of the banned books and pamphlets from Ntsebeza’s shop to political activists in Cape Town. Neville Alexander provided the link and introduced Andrews to Ntsebeza. The two continue to work closely in development work, including through the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) – a South African non-governmental organisation (NGO). Similarly, Fani Ncapayi has had a close social, political and academic relationship with Ntsebeza since the late 1980s. They started working together as development activists in the Cala University Students Association (CALUSA) and have worked together academically since 1993. Thus, the authors’ reflections combine their knowledge of him as well as their reading of his work.

We will show how Ntsebeza’s work contributes not only to academia but to the public and society at large. As a class-conscious scholar able to combine theory and practice he produces material that is useful for the marginalised sections of society in their struggles for change. Moreover, Ntsebeza’s closeness to poor people makes the themes of his work relevant in addressing the critical issues affecting them at this juncture in South Africa’s development. He has personally played and still plays an active role in activating that agency in Sakhisizwe Local Municipality. Lungisile’s social upbringing and political training largely account for the character he has assumed. Coming from a middle-class background, with both parents being devoted and conscientious teachers, Lungisile had a solid social base. With his parents, there was no way he could not acquire the basics of learning. Furthermore, his political training, which emphasised close reading and analysis of text, also contributed to his academic activity.

The following sections discuss the family and community environments Ntsebeza comes from, his political development, and his political life. The last section deals with Ntsebeza’s academic development and scholarship.

Family background and political influence

The family has a tremendous influence in a child’s development (de Figueiredo and Dias 2012; Dudhatra 2018). According to Dudhatra (2018, 1), the ‘family is the social
biological unit that exerts the greatest influence on the development and perpetuation of the individual’s behavior’. This is equally true for Lungisile, whose parents contributed tremendously to the education system in the Transkei region. His father was the founder and principal of Arthur Tsengiwe school in Cala and with his wife, Nozipho, taught in various schools in the Transkei (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001). His parents’ dedication to education provided a solid foundation for their children to progress in their lives. As Ntsebeza noted: ‘I grew up as a reader. This was an influence of my parents and siblings … I remember my father religiously bought and read the Daily Dispatch newspaper and listened to the radio. He also had his own library, which was open for all to use. There was always something to read at home’ (Rhodes University 2021).

The educational influence of missionaries in Xhalanga also contributed greatly to his family. This is despite the association of missionaries with the colonial conquest of African societies (Okon 2014). Missionaries are credited with the introduction of education and educational facilities in African societies (Denis 2010), and Xhalanga benefited from the arrival of missionaries from the Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed and Methodist churches. Each built a school in Xhalanga (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001).

Furthermore, the political environment of the 1950s greatly influenced Ntsebeza. This period was categorised as a ‘revolutionary climate’ because of the momentous developments nationally and across the continent (PUFLSA 1976, 2). On the continent, it was a period of struggles by Africans against colonial rule. Reflecting on debates of the time, Davidson (1964, 65) recalls that the African leaders declared that ‘We are determined to be free, but if the Western world is still determined to rule Mankind by force, the Africans as a last resort may have to appeal to force in the effort to achieve freedom.’ Indeed, ‘no fewer than sixteen African colonies won their sovereignty’ by the 1960s (ibid., 64). By 1963, the number of African states that had gained independence had increased to 63 (ibid.), with more to come (Chabal 1983).

Nationally, the period saw the intensification of the apartheid ideology followed by the Nationalist Party government since it came to power in 1948. The government introduced the notorious Bantu Authorities Act in 1951. The Act caused unrest in rural areas as African landholders resisted the government’s moves to implement ‘Betterment Planning’ through traditional authorities. Betterment Planning aimed at reducing the number of livestock owned by Africans as a measure to arrest land degradation in the reserves (Ntsebeza 2006; Ncapayi 2013). The Bantu Education Act of 1953 (Tabata 1954; Phillips 1999) led to the closure of mission schools in South Africa as the government withdrew its funding for them (Du Rand 1990; Overy 2002). Besides the closure of mission schools, the Bantu Education Act aimed ‘to arrest the development of the African people’ (Tabata 1954, 11). The accompanying decline in the standard of education and facilities during this period caused displeasure among the African population, including among young people (Moore 2015).

On the other hand, the introduction of legislation to bolster apartheid strengthened the resolution of Africans to oppose the Nationalist Party government. The African National Congress (ANC) started a national Defiance Campaign in 1952 against ‘certain laws which the people felt were oppressive and unjust’ (Roux 1964, 387). In 1954, the ANC, the Indian Congress, the Communist Party of South Africa and the Congress of Democrats – an organisation of sympathetic ‘white leftists’ – resolved to organise a ‘Congress of the People’ which formulated the Freedom Charter (Roux 1964). This initiative was followed
by another campaign initiated by the newly formed Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) that ended with the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 (Roux 1964). Subsequently, political movements of black people, including the ANC and PAC, were banned. The bannings were accompanied by the arrest of several leaders of the black political parties (Roux 1964).

In Xhalanga, the period was characterised by the emergence of organised resistance by rural residents against the apartheid government’s Betterment Planning (Ntsebeza 2006). As Ntsebeza (2006, 175) puts it, ‘The period could truly be regarded as the climax of resistance’ in Xhalanga. This was the period Ntsebeza grew up in. Reading books and newspapers, as well as listening to the radio, made him aware of political developments (Rhodes University 2021).

In his early twenties, Lungisile Ntsebeza was part of an emerging Marxist–Leninist political group called the Peoples’ United Front for the Liberation of South Africa (PUFLSA) (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001). PUFLSA’s manifesto declared the members’ ideological leaning in these terms: ‘It is therefore as a matter of course that we follow the ideology of Marxism–Leninism, which we shall defend ruthlessly against any attempts to vilify and vulgarise it’ (PUFLSA 1976, 2). The group believed in the centrality of a mass movement led by politically aware intellectuals. According to its manifesto:

The Puflsa has prescribed some norms, particularly for the young intellectuals from whom it is expected there will come leaders to build and strengthen the mass movement of resistance. It is expected inter alia that the young intellectuals should be well read, well behaved, sincere and dedicated. (PUFLSA 1976, 3)

Close reading of text for understanding was key in developing the ‘well read’ members. This meant members would not pass a paragraph if there was something unclear in it. Each member was expected to read the prescribed text closely and to participate actively in group discussions.

Although the political group’s life was cut short with the arrest of five key members, including Ntsebeza, in June 1976, who remained incarcerated until 1981 (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001), it made an indelible impact on its members. It inculcated a reading culture and an inquisitive mind which could not be dampened even by incarceration. Although incarcerated, Lungisile registered with the University of South Africa to pursue his interest in broadening his knowledge. By the end of his four-year imprisonment, he had finished a junior degree, specialising in philosophy. As Nash (2024) outlines, ‘Lungisile Ntsebeza’s commitment to his chosen path of intellectual inquiry came at a turning point in his life, while he was facing trial in Umtata (now Mthatha) on charges under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1977.’

In 1981, they came out of jail to very difficult conditions. Lungisile, his brother Dumisa and Meluxolo Silinga were banished to the small town of Cala. Soon after their release, Lungisile and Dumisa lost their ill father, their mother having passed on while they were in jail (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001). The death of their father and banishment did not deter Lungisile and his comrades. Instead, it provided an opportunity for regrouping and to determine their contribution to the community. Lungisile, Silinga and Bambo Qongqo formed CALUSA – a local NGO – in February 1983. Through CALUSA the group contributed to education in the Xhalanga district generally (CALUSA 1987). CALUSA was set up as an association geared towards the delivery of alternative educational programmes and books such as Training for Transformation by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, and Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed were key sources in its programmes (CALUSA 2017). Both
books highlighted the importance of people’s participation in development processes, in line with the founders’ political belief in the agency of the people. The NGO became the vehicle for the provision of alternative education in Xhalanga. Lungisile was centrally involved in such initiatives. He never failed to come and deliver lectures to CALUSA’s annual winter schools for matriculation learners (CALUSA 1989–1993) and is the only founder member still actively involved in its activities. Besides his involvement in CALUSA, Ntsebeza has also been part of other local initiatives such as the Health Care Trust – an NGO providing primary healthcare in Xhalanga.

Lungisile refers to himself as an eternal optimist, and always tries to identify positive opportunities in every situation. He revived his late father’s bookshop and used it not only for his personal financial survival, but to also contribute to the political struggle in South Africa. He stocked and sold ‘political books, the majority of which were banned in South Africa’ (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001, 141). Some of the banned books, as noted above, found their way from the Transkei Bantustan to other parts of South Africa.

The 1980s were characterised by more mobilisation and escalation of the struggle for freedom. ‘Civic organisations had been formed to support education struggles. Massive national school boycotts erupted in the townships in 1984 and 1985, with women playing a crucial role’ (SAHO 2016). Ntsebeza was part of the efforts to mobilise South Africans. As a firm believer in the primacy of the agency of citizens, he participated in initiatives aimed at mobilising the youth in the Eastern Cape. One such initiative was a meeting in 1984 in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) which he and Andrews attended. The meeting, which took place during a period of growing militancy and organising across South Africa, focused on youth leadership formation. Andrews worked at SACHED, which co-hosted the meeting with the TCOE – bringing together largely young coloured activists from the Grahamstown Youth Movement (GYM) and other Eastern Cape youth formations, including youth from CALUSA. Several of these youth groups were from the Black Consciousness Movement and others from the Congress Movement. The TCOE Director, Reverend Bennie Witbooi, a scholar of Black Liberation Theology, introduced the activists to the notion of ‘first People’ (Witbooi 1983) – stressing the importance for the youth to know and understand their heritage. The youth were also introduced to non-sectarianism, the importance of building unity among the oppressed and of political and formal education.

Ntsebeza pursued the issue of youth development and education. Hendricks (2024) correctly refers to Ntsebeza as ‘throwing doors of learning wide open’ by making tertiary institutions accessible to children mostly from poor backgrounds in Xhalanga who ordinarily would not be able to access them. He was among the CALUSA members who organised alternative educational facilities when some learners were thrown out of the Transkei Bantustan’s education system in the mid 1980s. He also contributed to human resource development in Xhalanga more broadly. For instance, he was instrumental in Mthetho Xhali and Bongani Bunyonyo studying at Khanya College in Cape Town when Ntsebeza was part of the institution in the 1980s. He also facilitated Ncapayi’s entry to the University of Natal while he was at that institution in the early 1990s, and was also involved in a programme called Teach, Test, Teach through which the institution recruited students from poor and marginalised households to the university. He continued with this approach even after leaving the University of Natal for tertiary institutions in the Western Cape – Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town.
His dedication and commitment to the development of the marginalised people of Cala never waned, even after he left the area to study in Cape Town, and he later started working in various parts of South Africa. He also organised human and material resources for these local initiatives. For instance, he brought Andrew Nash to CALUSA’s seminars for students doing long-distance learning with the University of South Africa. He also organised people to provide training in library management to CALUSA members and set up links between CALUSA and institutions such as the Career Resource and Information Centre (CRIC), which provided technical and material support to the community library the NGO ran.

**Academic life and scholarship – a community-engaged scholar**

Ntsebeza’s academic development was enhanced immensely by his Marxist training and politics. CALUSA illustrates the point.

Books and debates had a major influence on the young people who were determined to fight the unjust laws of the apartheid system. This is how the Peoples’ United Front for the Liberation of South Africa (Puflsa) started. Activists such as Dumisa Ntsebeza, Lungisile Ntsebeza and Godfrey Silinga, were at the forefront of Cala’s political awakening, along with the likes of Mathew Goniwe who was from Cradock and part of the Cradock Four that were murdered by the apartheid police in 1984. (CALUSA 2017)

Due to his Marxist training, he pursued his academic work by applying class analysis and by siding with the poor and marginalised people. Indeed, he continues to put his scholarship in the service of poor communities, as his scholarship on land issues demonstrates.

When land reform was introduced in 1994, it focused on supporting poor households to access agricultural land through a R16,000 government Settlement Land and Acquisition Grant (SLAG), which targeted poor households. However, from 1999 there was a change in approach in the land reform programme, away from the SLAG strategy to the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD). This change triggered intense debates about the pace and focus of land reform. Ntsebeza is among the few scholars who not only critiqued the slow pace of the land reform programme but also highlighted its class character. According to Ntsebeza and Hendricks (2000, 7), ‘Only a small group of… black farmers are likely to benefit’ as the LRAD marginalises the ‘vast majority of the rural poor who have the ability and interest to farm’. The emphasis of the LRAD on people with resources has since become a dominant concern for scholars (Cousins 2014), but this is an issue Ntsebeza and Hendricks (2000) highlighted at the inception of the LRAD approach.

Central to Ntsebeza’s critique of the failure of land reform is his position on the impact of the Property Clause – Section 25 of the South African Constitution – in the implementation of land redistribution in South Africa. The dominant view is that Section 25 is not a hindrance in the implementation of land reform (Hall 2007; Ngcukayithobi 2018; Dugard 2018). Hall (2007) believes that it is the lack of political will from the ruling party to expropriate land that affects the redistribution of land. Ngcukayithobi (2018) views Section 25 as an anti-property clause, in that it empowers the state to deal with property relations, but it does not hinder land expropriation for public interest such as land reform.
Ntsebeza disagrees with this view. He argues that the Property Clause protects land in private hands that was acquired through colonial conquest and apartheid-forced removals. Because most of the land is in private hands, there is no land to redistribute (Ntsebeza 2007). In a paper prepared for submission to the Parliamentary Constitutional Review Committee by the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR), Ntsebeza and Ntsebeza (2018) argue that Section 25(1) favours the property owners as opposed to the dispossessed African people. They further suggest that ‘Clarity is also needed on section 25(3b) … “the history of the acquisition”. It should be made clear that “the history of acquisition” means the history of dispossession.’ They further suggest that:

Section 25 (1) of the Constitution should be amended to make it less ambiguous in its attempt to balance the interests of existing property owners and the vast majority of those who were dispossessed of their property. The section should unambiguously be in favour of restoring land to those who were dispossessed of their land and subsequently denied citizenship rights which included the right to buy and sell land. (Ntsebeza and Ntsebeza 2018)

They unsurprisingly stand on the side of the marginalised or disadvantaged in that the concern of Section 25 should not be about the dispossessors, but about the dispossessed. Importantly, the fact that there are considerations about amending Section 25 illustrates the relevance of his contributions to the land expropriation debate, with some acknowledgement of the view that it adversely impacts the implementation of land reform. While pressing for reconsideration of Section 25, Ntsebeza has been concerned about the non-involvement of affected people in the debates about land expropriation. In a paper presented to the summer school at the University of Cape Town on 19 January 2019 Ntsebeza argued that:

on the question of agency, my well-considered view is that purely statist and technocratic solutions which do not take account of the struggles from below will simply not be able to deal with the abiding problems of land. It will take pressure and mobilization from below, with those directly affected at the heart of the struggles, to ensure that the land question is taken seriously and implemented. (Ntsebeza 2019)

In an opinion piece titled ‘This Land is Our Land’, Ntsebeza continued his critique of the current structure in the land sector.

So far, the process has been top-heavy and led primarily by political parties. If that continues, there is a danger that South Africa’s land reform will be reduced to a token expropriation of land that benefits an elite connected with the ruling party, the EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters], and the chiefs, while bypassing the downtrodden and the poor. (Ntsebeza 2018)

The critique about the dominance of political parties in the processes for land and agrarian change is consistent with Ntsebeza’s earlier critique of the relationship of many leaders of land rights NGOs to government and the pressure from donors funding the NGOs. Over the years he, together with Hendricks, has argued that the land question will not be resolved outside of a sustained campaign from below and driven by those affected and this is a ‘sine qua non for successful land redistribution’ (Hendricks and Ntsebeza 2010, 245).

Ntsebeza also looks at the roles played by organisations such as the National Land Committee (NLC), the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), Alliance for Land and Agrarian Reform Movement (ALARM), the TCOE and numerous others in struggles around the land question. He points out that in many cases these NGOs have either represented or tried
to represent the voice of the rural poor, and not allow the rural poor to speak for themselves (Ntsebeza 2007; Ntsebeza 2013a; TCOE 2010, 2011, 2012).

Ntsebeza contributes to an ongoing debate in South Africa about the role of NGOs in land and agrarian transformation (Greenberg 2004; Mngxitama 2005). Greenberg was critical of NGOs’ relationships with independent grassroots movements (Greenberg 2004, 16), stating that most NGOs in the land sector did not support the emergence of these movements. Only a small section of NGOs, including the NLC, that had a political perspective that was supportive of independent grassroots movements. Greenberg cites the formation of the LPM in 2001 as an example of the NLC’s encouragement of emerging independent grassroots movements (Greenberg 2004, 17).

However, unlike Greenberg, Ntsebeza cites the NLC as among those organisations that spoke for people in the early 1990s, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Thus, Ntsebeza agrees with Mngxitama’s critique of the NLC’s role in the 1990s. Commenting as ‘a critical insider’ in the NLC, Mngxitama (2005, 78) points to the NLC’s internal divisions about facilitation of the formation of a radical, rural grassroots movement. Over the years Ntsebeza has consistently put forward the view that rural NGOs ‘were drawn into implementing the limited, technocratic and hopelessly under-funded land reform programme’ (Mngxitama 2005, 78).

This is why they lauded the formation of the LPM in 2001 and saw the possibility of an ignition of self-organisation as well as an emergence of struggles of the rural masses (Hendricks and Ntsebeza 2010, 229). Ntsebeza believed that there was need for an independent movement to represent poor and landless people’s voices (TCOE 2012). In the TCOE Chairperson’s statement, Ntsebeza acknowledges the role NGOs play in organising in rural areas. Citing Masifundise’s contribution in the formation of Coastal Links – a movement of small fishers – Ntsebeza argues that the TCOE was gaining experience in leadership formation that was political (TCOE 2012, 2). However, by 2010 the LPM was no longer active.

Ntsebeza’s interest in land and agrarian issues is also informed by his belief in the importance of land in the livelihoods of poor people. The question has often been raised by commentators that South Africa has urbanised, thus rural people are less interested in agricultural land but are interested in urban land for housing and jobs. This view even questions the relevance of land reform (Makhanya 2009; Bernstein 2005) and is part of the de-agrarianisation thesis that rural people are less inclined toward agricultural activities (Bryceson 1996; Bank and Qambata 1999; Manona 1999), implying that agricultural land is unimportant in rural people’s livelihoods.

Ntsebeza disagrees with this view. In a study of land reform in Chris Hani District Municipality, Chitonge and Ntsebeza highlight the importance of land in the livelihoods of rural poor people. They find that:

First, the acquisition of land has improved, in some cases vastly, the socio-economic conditions of beneficiaries. Secondly, land reform beneficiary households and those who acquired land on their own in commercial farm areas are far better off (on average) than their counterparts in the communal areas, who have limited access to land. Thirdly, most land reform beneficiaries are able to improve their livelihoods with very limited or, in many instances, no support from the state. (Chitonge and Ntsebeza 2012, 87)

Chitonge and Ntsebeza argue that their study counters the ‘gloomy picture … on land reform and livelihoods, as well as recent pronouncements by some senior government
officials and analysts, to the effect that land transferred through land reform is not improving the livelihoods of beneficiaries’ (ibid.).

**Contribution to building rural movements**

Ntsebeza has not just criticised the role of NGOs, he has actively participated and still participates in working with them in building rural movements. Besides being the only remaining active founder member of CALUSA, Ntsebeza has put his knowledge in the service of several civil society structures, serving on the boards of land-based organisations such as the Transkei Land Service Organisation (TRALSO) and the Surplus People Project (SPP). He currently serves on the board of the TCOE – a national land-based NGO. In all these civil society organisations, he has influenced their outlook and programmes. For instance, he has taken forward debates about the importance of land in the TCOE, influencing the views of its personnel, as reflected in an article by Tom and Mdoda (2014) on the importance of land in promoting food sovereignty.

In these rural communities, the main sources of income for a great number of households are seasonal commercial agricultural employment and social grants. The food security of these impoverished households is permanently under threat from the continued decline in agricultural labour absorption, the seasonality of employment, rising food prices and high dependency ratios. … One way of expressing resilience can be found in the experience of the Mawubuye Lands Right Forum in organising farming households to overcome dispossession, fight for land and promote food sovereignty. (Tom and Mdoda 2014, 38)

Addressing activists of the Inyanda National Land Movement during its general assembly in 2021, Ntsebeza re-emphasised the importance of land in the livelihoods of poor people and the importance of members of Inyanda using the land to which they have access for food production rather than expecting handouts. This, he argued, would make the activists independent and ensure a strong movement that can engage the state without the fear of jeopardising their chances of getting favours from it.²

Importantly, his scholarship and community engagement has not only produced young aspiring academics, but also proved empowering to the local communities. For instance, the support he gave to CALUSA and TCOE personnel in their work on land and governance issues has contributed to the emergence of articulate local leaders such as Mcebisi Douglas Ntamo, the late Nosebenzile Fani, and the late Zwelinzima Dyantyi, Nozolile Qayi and Nomvuzo Nophothe. Nozolile Qayi became the leader of a land reform project, Delindlala Communal Property Association, while Nomvuzo Nophothe became the spokesperson for the campaign by the Siyazakha Land and Development Forum to democratise governance – a local rural movement in the Sakhisizwe Local Municipality (TCOE Annual Report 2014, 2015). She went on to become Deputy Chairperson of the Inyanda National Land Movement.

Ntsebeza has put a lot of energy into seeing to it that the agency of poor people is built and strengthened. Writing the chairperson’s statement in TCOE’s 2012 annual report, he excitedly commented on his observation of growing frustrations and protests by rural people across the country (TCOE 2012, 3). One of those protests was that of the mine-workers at Lonmin Mine in Rustenburg which culminated in the Marikana Massacre on 16 August 2012, where 36 mineworkers were killed. A few months later in November
2012, an uprising of farmworkers erupted in De Doorns and rapidly spread to over 25 rural towns in the Western Cape. The protests lasted for four months (Andrews 2013). Ntsebeza closely monitored the farmworkers’ struggles. He attended meetings, walked the streets of De Doorns, visited farmworkers’ dwellings and went to different towns where he started to engage with some of the demands that the farmworkers were making.

Commenting on the struggles, he pointed out that it was the first time in the history of rural struggles that farmworkers revolted in the heartland of commercial agriculture, and that they confronted the farmers themselves (Ntsebeza 2013a, 130). To Ntsebeza, the farmworkers’ revolt resembled the rural struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, in that the farmworkers led their struggle. He argued that it was the ongoing efforts and struggles of farmworkers themselves that allowed for sustained mobilisation over a long time. This directly challenged the invisibility and docility often associated with farmworkers.

Writing about the amaMpondo revolts of the 1950s and 1960s, Ntsebeza laments the marginalisation of rural struggles, given the limited focus they receive in the literature. Similarly, there has been very limited research on the Western Cape farmworker uprisings (ibid., 131). Ntsebeza points out that much of the work that has looked at the uprisings focuses on the farmworkers’ monetary demand of R150 per day (ibid., 135). However, the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) produced a document of demands, including for land (ibid., 134), illustrating the centrality of land to the farmworkers and the need for reimagining the countryside.

Importantly, Ntsebeza argues that the De Doorns farmworker uprisings illustrated a break with the methods of rural struggles of the 1990s, which were mainly located within the policy environment. In his view, the 2012/13 uprisings highlight the extent of the evictions taking place on the farms (ibid., 137). Andrews (2013) adds that beyond land issues, the ending of the system of labour brokers as well as an end to farm evictions were completely left out of the equation. One of the small victories from the struggles was the 52% increase in wages and the exposure of the government’s Sectoral Determination 13, which was established to determine the wages of vulnerable workers. In the absence of high levels of unionisation, farmers kept farmworkers’ wages very low (Andrews 2013).

As a further illustration of Ntsebeza’s belief in the agency of poor people, he provided space to farmworkers at the Centre for African Studies (CAS) at the University of Cape Town. They were participants in a colloquium on ‘Land, Race and Nation’ that CAS jointly organised with Rhodes University and the TCOE in June 2013 to mark the centenary of the Natives Land Act of 1913. This enabled several rural movements, smallholder producers, farmworkers’ organisations, NGOs, rural activists and scholars to come together to discuss their concerns, demands and hopes. They also engaged with ideas around the land and agrarian question (Andrews 2019). Ntsebeza was part of the development of a Peoples’ Assembly Declaration during the colloquium which put forward alternatives to the government’s land reform programme. This declaration was presented to representatives of the Department of Rural Development and Agrarian Reform at Parliament on 23 June 2013 (Andrews 2019, 83).

Ntsebeza argued that while social movements need to take charge of their struggles, there was a need for the NGOs to support the social movements.

On the strength of developments in the Western Cape it appears, from preliminary evidence, that the argument for the coexistence of non-governmental organisations and social movements is more applicable than the one that favours the gradual phasing out
of non-governmental organisations. It seems clear from the case of the struggles in the Western Cape that social movements on the ground needed the support of non-governmental organisations such as the Surplus People Project and the Trust for Community Outreach and Education. (Ntsebeza 2013b, 54)

The NGOs did organise legal support for the striking farmworkers. Nevertheless, they were sensitive not to be seen to be leading the struggles (Ntsebeza 2013b). Thus, the farmworkers remained in the forefront.

Conclusion

This article has reflected on Ntsebeza’s scholarship, which has not only contributed to academia but also to societal changes. His work on land and agrarian issues has provided knowledge to landless people who have used it eventually to acquire land. For example, the Delindlala Communal Property Association is a product of Ntsebeza’s scholarly work. Similarly, his work on the democratisation of governance has been of direct relevance to the residents of Cala Reserve in the Eastern Cape in their struggle for rural democracy. Through his work, the villagers were able to successfully entrench their right to elect a leader to govern their area. Moreover, the influence of Ntsebeza’s scholarly work extends to civil society. His major impact has been on CALUSA, which has undergone fundamental change in starting to deal with the immediate challenges of organising services in the constituency. This shows that his research not only produces knowledge that helps the residents to challenge processes that undermine their right to decide their future, but also has broader relevance.

At the same time, the article has shown why Ntsebeza is characterised as a community-engaged scholar. His research approach does not just extract information for academic purposes and leave the communities unchanged. He establishes relations with residents and works with them beyond the research period. In Cala Reserve and Luphaphasi, the research site for his doctoral studies, he continues to work with the residents of Xhalanga. This work contributes to the development of local leaders who can articulate their issues.

His confidence in the agency of poor people has made him one of the activists who gives primacy to the need for a movement of poor people to drive land agrarian change. Ntsebeza’s long involvement with NGOs since the 1980s has given his work in movement building a very rooted and direct experience. It is this direct engagement and ongoing involvement that has allowed him to often be a critical voice. Many of his critiques have been around the relationship between NGOs, popular rural associations, or movements and rural communities. Some of his main arguments and criticism draw attention to the fact that many NGOs act as substitutes, blocking out or even marginalising the voice and agency of rural poor people, the landless, and small producers (Ntsebeza 2013a,b).

Lastly, we have also shown Ntsebeza’s ability to integrate his political training into his scholarship. His Marxist training has led him to believe in the agency of the marginalised sections of society. When a dominant view held that Section 25 of South Africa’s Constitution was no hindrance to land reform, he insisted the contrary and advocated that the section should be not about the disposessors, but about the historically dispossessed sections of society. This truly shows that Ntsebeza’s work goes beyond analysis of society. Working with affected people, he actively participates in efforts to change society.
Notes

1. The PUFLSA manifesto is included in this issue as the appendix to Andrew Nash’s article, ‘Clearing a path to academia: a tribute to Lungisile Ntsebeza’.
2. Fani Ncapayi’s personal notes taken during the gathering, 26–30 April 2021.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Fani Ncapayi holds a PhD in sociology with special interests in land and agrarian issues, as well as governance issues. He is a senior researcher for the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) – a national NGO. He is also a member of the locally based Cala University Students Association (CALUSA) NGO in the Sakhisizwe Local Municipality, Eastern Cape. He conducts action research that supports TCOE and poor people, some of whom are members of the Inyanda National Land Movement.

https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9463-9695

Mercia Andrews is the co-director of the Trust for Community Outreach for Education (TCOE). She is a regional coordinator of the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly, a movement of poor women. She also serves on the global secretariat for the People’s Dialogue, a network of movements, popular associations and NGOs that campaigns and works on alternatives to the extractivist model of development that contributes to ecological crises.

https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2165-5950

References


