



INSTITUTE  
FOR POVERTY,  
LAND AND  
AGRARIAN  
STUDIES  
(PLAAS)

ABOUT PLAAS

PLAAS is a donor-funded, university-based research institute at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, South Africa.

We undertake use-oriented basic research on the political economy of hunger, poverty, inequality and vulnerable livelihoods in African agro-food systems. We seek to understand the causes of landlessness and poverty and explore the underlying dynamics of political and economic structures and power relations.

Within this agenda we pursue specialised research projects relating to the politics of land deals and 'land grabs' in sub-Saharan Africa, the challenges of supporting smallholder agriculture and other forms of livelihood, the dynamics of informal self-employment, and the survival strategies of the rural and urban poor. We also explore the political dynamics of water and irrigation reform, and the social and political dynamics of ecosystem and natural resource management.

While we maintain high standards of academic rigour and scholarly excellence, our research is always practically oriented, concerned with interrogating and exploring policy responses to the challenges of agrarian change in Africa.

Teaching is another core part of our mission. Our postgraduate diploma is directed at professionals working in agriculture, land and rural development policy. We also offer a MPhil and a PhD by research, which aim to equip prospective researchers with the conceptual, empirical, theoretical and methodological tools they need to work in the field and undertake high-quality research.

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**PLAAS**  
Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies  
School of Government • EMS Faculty

A place of quality, a place to grow,  
from hope to action through knowledge



## RESEARCH

Our research covers diverse areas, ranging from land and tenure reform, land investment and agro-food restructuring, fisheries and ecosystem management, to social protection and informal self-employment.

In all this work our key focus is on the causes and dynamics of inequality and structural poverty, on the economic and social agency of poor and marginalised people, and on the implications of these insights for inclusive growth and pro-poor policies.

PLAAS is also home to the Department of Science and Technology's National Research Foundation (DST/NRF) Chair in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies. Our current research areas are:



### Poverty, Inequality and Vulnerability

Our research is centrally concerned with understanding the causes and drivers of poverty in southern Africa. It is aimed at promoting inclusive approaches towards growth, emphasising the importance of understanding the factors that shape the economic agency of poor people, their livelihood activities and strategies, and how these are embedded in the broader political economy of southern Africa. Specific areas covered in our research include: defining and measuring poverty and inequality, approaches to addressing vulnerability, social protection and social grants, and 'informal sector' self-employment.



### Land, Water and Resource Rights

PLAAS research has always focused on the distribution and security of rights to land, water and other natural resources in South Africa and the southern African region, and on the effectiveness of policies aimed at reforming such regimes in the interests of the rural poor. Our research emphasises the key role of access to land, water and natural resources within the multiple livelihoods of the poor, including farm workers and dwellers, and how these are being undermined by large-scale land acquisition deals across Africa. We explore socially differentiated patterns of resource access and use, and our research focuses on the key issue of institutional arrangements for resource governance. Here, we seek to understand the links between property regimes, production systems and power relations, and to draw out the lessons for policy and implementation.



### Farming, Agro-food Systems and Agrarian Reform

PLAAS's research on farming, agro-food systems and agrarian reform includes a focus on smallholder and emerging farmers, agro-food value chains, food security, and rural development and rural livelihoods. Ongoing research continues to focus on the key role played by government and official policy, but given the central role that the private sector plays in national, regional and global food systems, we also investigate private sector innovation and corporate-led restructuring. Another growing area of work focuses on smallholder agriculture in the region, looking at corporate value chains, the prospects of partnerships between small-scale farmers, large-scale farmers and other private sector role players, and the connections between agricultural growth and non-farm employment.



### Social Dimensions of Fisheries and Ecosystem Management

In addition to the specific focus on fishing, our work over the years has also included broader attention to community-based natural resource management and commons management. Here, our work is highly relevant to the increasing international interest in ecosystem services for development and poverty reduction. PLAAS is also involved in the social dimensions of ecosystem resilience within water-linked ecosystems. In future, we hope to contribute centrally to this growing area of work, in particular, by understanding the ways in which political economy mediates and shapes socio-ecological processes and the uptake of ecosystem services by poor and marginalised people.

## POSTGRADUATE TEACHING

The Postgraduate Teaching Programme offers four unique programmes that are internationally recognised in the research areas of poverty, inequality and vulnerability; land, fisheries, water and natural resource rights; farming, agro-food systems and agrarian reform; and the social dimensions of fisheries and ecosystem management.

### Postgraduate Diploma in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

This diploma is aimed at professionals working in government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector in land and agrarian reform, rural development, natural resources, and gender, who seek to progress in their careers and improve their knowledge and skills in these sectors. It comprises a six-week block teaching programme of which all modules and attendance are compulsory.

### MPhil (Research) in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

This degree involves the completion of a full Master's thesis on an appropriate topic under the supervision of a PLAAS researcher.

### PhD

This degree involves completing a full Doctoral thesis under the supervision of a senior PLAAS researcher.

## POLICY ENGAGEMENT

PLAAS researchers engage with policy processes, sometimes working closely with government departments as advisors, as consultants in programme design or project facilitation, as reviewers or evaluators, or as policy workshop facilitators. Researchers comment on policies in popular media and academic papers, participate in public debates, and make presentations at policy-oriented workshops and conferences.

In recent years, PLAAS staff members have been active in civil society alliances in the land reform sector, and have contributed to supporting NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) in engaging with key policy issues and processes of change.

## RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

Making research accessible is an essential component of use-oriented basic research. PLAAS produces a wide range of publications (books, research reports, policy briefs, working papers, newsletters and a Fact Check series), but also various internet platforms aimed at reaching a wider audience.

Our website – [www.plaas.org.za](http://www.plaas.org.za) – is regularly updated with new publications, upcoming events and news; the website then feeds into a social networking strategy encompassing Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube.

In addition, PLAAS organises conferences, symposia, seminars and workshops to disseminate research findings, contribute to public debate, and generate discussion about policy and practice in the sectors in which we work.

## LIBRARY SERVICE

PLAAS has a useful collection of material ranging from books and journals to audio-visual and grey literature covering the organisation's research focus areas. The material is available in the Resource Centre.

The in-house librarian is available to assist with searches and queries:

**email:** [librarian@plaas.org.za](mailto:librarian@plaas.org.za)

**or phone:** +27 (0)21 959 3719.

The library catalogue is also accessible through the PLAAS website.

## INSTITUTIONAL LINKS

PLAAS maintains close working relationships with a wide range of organisations, including other academic departments and institutions, development agencies, and NGOs. Many of these links are regional, continental and global in scope. Partnerships take the form of joint research projects, strengthening networks with research information, collaborative teaching and training programmes, staff exchanges and providing facilities and support for visiting scholars.

In the land sector we are partner members of the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI), the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), and the BRICS Initiative on Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS). In the fisheries sector we are a partner in the Too Big to Ignore network, which focuses on small-scale fishers, and the Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihoods in Small-scale Fisheries (POVFISH) network. We work with the Southern African Food Lab around food systems and smallholder farmers, and with the Water Research Commission on water issues.

