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Infrastructures as ethnographic objects of inquiry: a study of development in Agnes Rest, Eastern Cape

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Abstract

Development discourse is grounded in the assumptions of modernisation theory. The basic assumption comes from European ideology – that so-called 'traditional' and 'primitive' societies are changing in to more advanced, modern, and industrial societies through a process known as 'modernisation'. But how well does this discourse allow us to understand the social context and processes of change in a rural settlement? This research report provides a window into the lives of the residents of Agnes Rest, a village in the Eastern Cape, by investigating their relationship to water and electricity, thus beginning the work of treating elements of infrastructure as ethnographic objects. Focusing on the nature and delivery of infrastructure, in this case water and electricity, the report explores how these residents understand "development" in this form. I explore how the delivery of infrastructure affects interactions among residents themselves as well as their interactions with the state, both in terms of relations of governmentality and their perceptions of change in the world around them. Through telephonic interviews and archival research, I show how infrastructure connects and differentiates people, how infrastructure constructs social spaces, how infrastructure constructs locally constructed meanings of change and development, and lastly how inequality is emerging in relation to the differential ability of residents to choose a level of service, thereby producing changes within the community their access to shared spaces for communal activities. Despite the post-apartheid government's attempts to improve service delivery through laws and policies intended to combat this inequality in access, I argue that it is the individual initiatives taken by local households to better their livelihood that achieves a transformation of their circumstances. The report unfolds this argument, by first recounting these and attempts at infrastructure provision by government, then by detailing the materiality of infrastructure itself in the village, then by unpacking, the discourses of social inequality that have arisen in relation to infrastructure provision and access, and finally by analysing the different perceptions of 'development' that are consequently held by the residents of Agnes Rest.