

The socio-economic impact of drought in the period 1924-1934 on the magisterial district of Vanrhynsdorp

by
Daniel Johannes Rouxan Rademan

*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University*



Supervisor: Prof. W P. Visser

December 2020

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Abstract

Drought in the historiography of South Africa was often rationalised as a cause for historical events, with little to no accompanying localisation of impacts. This creates a distinct gap in South African literature for more in-depth studies on the impacts of drought. The socio-economic impacts associated with the poorly contextualised 1924 to 1934 period in the Vanrhynsdorp district was evaluated to identify the specific contribution of drought to these impacts. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was utilised to confirm that a prolonged period of substandard precipitation, accompanied by social and economic impacts, occurred in the semi-arid district between 1924 and 1930. The resulting drop in crop and livestock produce between 1923-1925 and 1927-1930 led to food and income insecurity, causing social disruptions within households as economically active members left their homes to find more secure livelihoods. The pre-existing unproductive, indebted and impoverished population, as well as the poor infrastructure and services served to exacerbate the direct social and economic impacts of the drought. The impact of the drought was further aggravated by the failure of relief attempts provided by both government and private organisations, which can be ascribed to relief measures being underfunded, late, unfair, expensive and unsustainable and lacking coordination between relief organisations. The distress led to a migration of people from the more drought prone Northern regions of the district to the banks of the Olifants River in the South in search of employment and a higher quality of life. Although the meteorological drought ended in 1930, the economic consequences of the subsequent Great Depression between 1930 and 1934 prolonged the recovery of the district and led to further socio-economic distress and migration. The study therefore confirms the severe socio-economic impact of drought on the district of Vanrhynsdorp, particularly in the period 1924 to 1930.

Opsomming

Droogte in die geskiedskrywing van Suid-Afrika word dikwels gerasionaliseer as oorsaak vir historiese gebeure, met min tot geen gepaardgaande lokalisering van die gevolge daarvan. Dit skep 'n duidelike leemte in die Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur vir meer in-diepte studies oor die gevolge van droogte. Die sosio-ekonomiese gevolge wat verband hou met die swak gedefinieerde periode van 1924 tot 1934 in die distrik Vanrhynsdorp, is geëvalueer om die spesifieke bydrae van die droogte tot hierdie gevolge te identifiseer. 'n Kombinasie van kwalitatiewe en kwantitatiewe metodes is gebruik om te bevestig dat 'n lang periode van ondergemiddelde reënval gelei het tot ernstige sosiale en ekonomiese gevolge tussen 1924 en 1930 in die Vanrhynsdorp-distrik. Die gevolglike daling in gewas- en veeproduksie tussen 1923-1925 en 1927-1930 het gelei tot voedsel en inkomste-onsekerheid wat maatskaplike ontwrigting by huishoudings veroorsaak het, aangesien ekonomies aktiewe lede hul huise verlaat het om op ander plekke 'n inkomste te gaan verdien. Die bestaande onproduktiewe, skuldbelaste en verarmde bevolking, sowel as die swak infrastruktuur en dienste, het die direkte sosiale en ekonomiese gevolge van die droogte vererger. Die uitwerking van die droogte is verder vererger deur die mislukking van hulpverleningspogings deur regerings- sowel as privaatorganisasies, wat toegeskryf kan word aan hulpverleningsmaatreëls wat onderbefonds, laat, onbillik, duur en onvolhoubaar was en omdat daar geen koördinasie tussen hulporganisasies was nie. Die nood het gelei tot 'n migrasie van mense uit die Noordelike streke van die distrik na die oewer van die Olifantsrivier in die Suid op soek na werk en 'n hoër lewensgehalte. Alhoewel die meteorologiese droogte in 1930 beëindig is, het die ekonomiese gevolge van die daaropvolgende Groot Depressie tussen 1930 en 1934 die herstel van die distrik verleng en dit het tot verdere sosio-ekonomiese nood en migrasie gelei. Die studie bevestig dus die ernstige sosio-ekonomiese impak van droogte op die distrik Vanrhynsdorp, veral in die periode 1924 tot 1930.

List of Abbreviations, weights and measurements

AAK -	Algemeene Armezorg Kommissie
DRC -	Dutch Reformed Church
DMP -	Drought Management Plan
DEIC -	Dutch East India Trading Company
VZB -	Vroue Zending Bond
ACVV-	Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging
SAH&R-	South African Harbours and Railways
£ -	South African Pound. The main currency in South Africa during the period under study were South African Pounds. This currency was divided into Pounds, Shillings and Pennies. Twenty Pennies was the equivalent of one shilling and twenty shillings was the equivalent of one Pound.
Muid -	Unit of measurement used in South African, equivalent of 180lbs.
lbs -	Pounds. Unit of measurement wherein one lb is the equivalent of 0,45 kilograms.
mm -	Millimetres. Unit of measurement used in this thesis as a conversion from Inches. One Inch is the equivalent of 25,4 Millimetres.
NASA -	National Archive of South Africa
WCARS -	Western Cape Archives and Records Service
NGO -	Non-governmental Organisation
MOH -	Ministry of Health
ha -	Hectare. Unit of measurement for land, in this study used to replace morgen, an older South African unit of measurement. 1 ha is the equivalent of 1,17 morgen.
VRDM -	Vanrhynsdorp Museum

VRD - Vanrhynsdorp

NG Kerk - Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale for this study

South Africa is a water scarce country with one of the lowest annual rainfall measurements in the world, at an average rainfall of around 500 mm to 1000 mm per year. The occurrence of regular droughts in South Africa has always been a major motivator for securing supplies of water.¹ Within the historiography of 20th century South Africa, drought is often used by historians as a way of explaining plausible causes for change in society, but there has been little study of drought impacts on specific regions.

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the magnitude by which drought has historically impacted socio-economic conditions and the attempts to alleviate the impacts of drought in the period of 1924-1934, with particular focus on the magisterial district of Vanrhynsdorp in the current Western Cape Province.

There are many reasons for studying the region around the former district of Vanrhynsdorp in the period 1924-1934. There are few historical studies on the area, with only one doctoral thesis having been completed on the history of the district in the 1960s. A study on the irrigation schemes of the early 20th century in the area was completed in 1953.² Environmentally, the district is located in the North Western region of the former Cape Province of South Africa. This was an unofficial regional boundary to the West of the Orange River and North of the Swartberge, including the Namaqualand, Calvinia and Vanrhynsdorp districts. This winter rainfall region with low and variable precipitation can be considered to be an area which transitions from the South Western Cape to the much drier and warmer Northern Cape.³ As can be seen in Figure 2, the West coast of South Africa received low levels of rainfall, with the rainfall in the Vanrhynsdorp district averaging around 5-10 inches (127-254 mm) per annum with slightly higher precipitation along the mountainous region of the

¹ F.A. Venter, *Water*, Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel, Pretoria, 1970, pp. 16-19.

² See P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die Distrik Van Rhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Stellenbosch Universiteit, 1966; C. J. Swanefelder, "Die Olifants Rivier Besproeiingskema", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Stellenbosch Universiteit, 1953.

³ W.B, 2-'49-600, The Department of Transport Weather Bureau, *District Rainfall for the Union of South Africa*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1949, p. 17.

district when compared with the low land coastal plain (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).⁴ This made Vanrhynsdorp one of the driest districts in South Africa at the time.

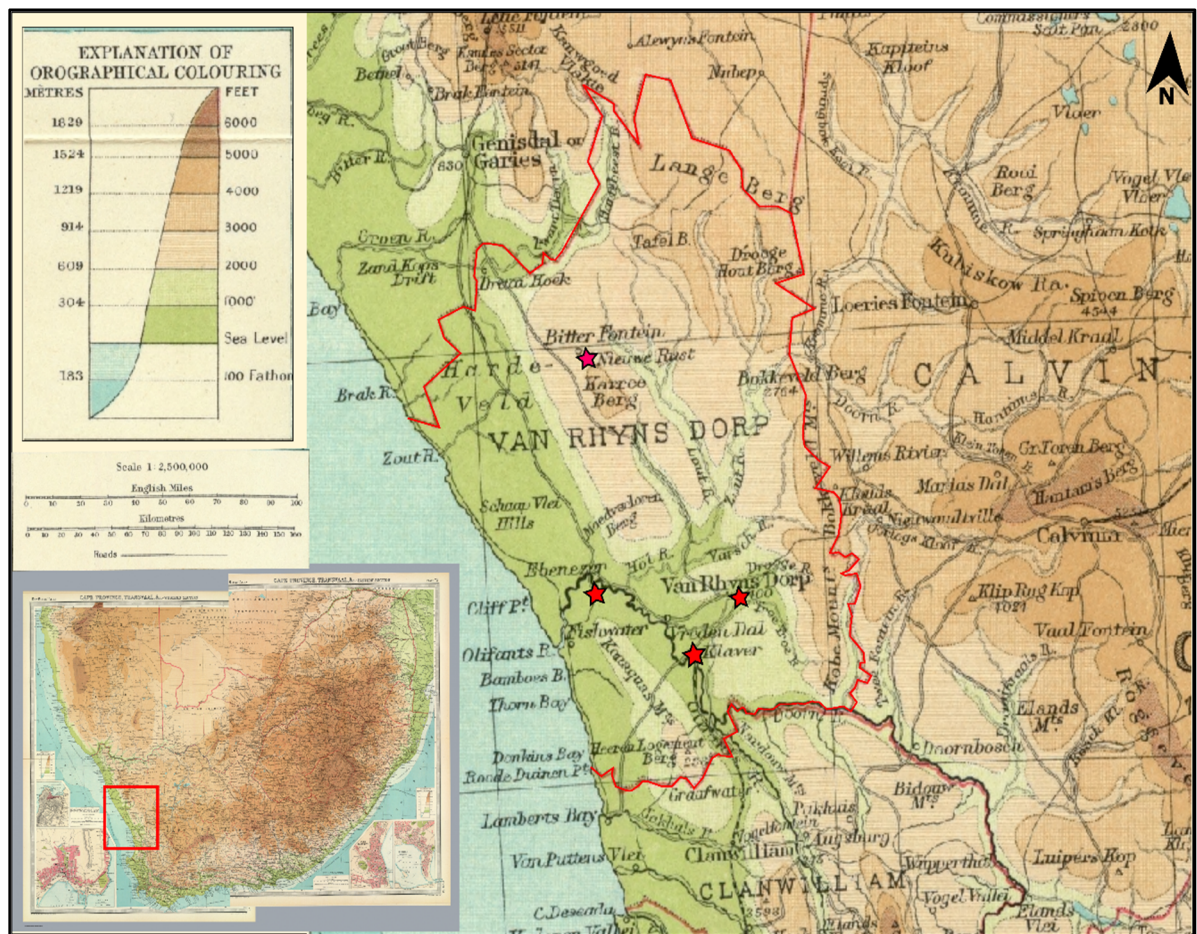


Figure 1: 1922 orographic map of Vanrhynsdorp district with key settlements marked using red stars.⁵

⁴ J.F.W. Grosskopf, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Report of the Carnegie Commission. Part 1: Economic Report: Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, p. 47; *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa and of Basotholand, Bechuanaland and Swaziland Protectorate, 1910-1925, No. 8*, Department of Statistics for the Union of South Africa, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1927, p. 67.

⁵ Map sourced from J. G. Bartholomew, *The Times survey atlas of the world*, The Times, London, 1922, p. 71.

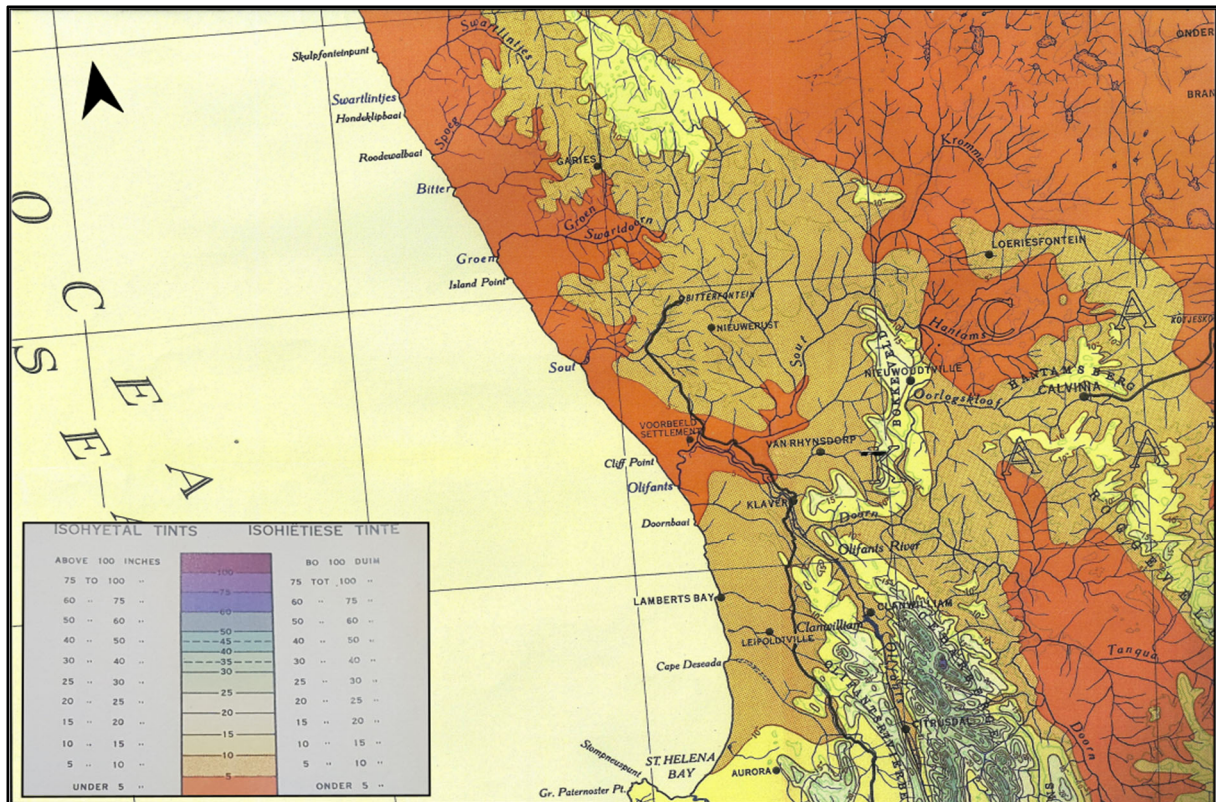


Figure 2: Rainfall map of Vanrhynsdorp district circa, 1935.⁶

The district of Vanrhynsdorp circa 1924-1934, was an impoverished and underpopulated district where only the town served as an urban centre for local government.⁷ The region relied on agrarian pursuits for its commercial sustenance, with pastoralism predominating in the arid Northern wards while horticulturists were present in the better watered Southern wards along the Olifants River.⁸ These factors made the impact of drought both economically and socially more pronounced on the population of the district, with crop failures, loss of condition in small stock or widespread deaths amongst livestock often proving perilous for the rural communities' success.

This study focuses particularly on the period 1924-1934 as evidence points toward a drought of such magnitude in both duration and severity as having a major impact on the poverty-stricken region. Drought relief methods of this early period in South African history

⁶ U.G. 6-1938, Department of Irrigation Meteorological Office, *Rainfall Normals up to the end of 1935: With an introduction and brief summary of the rainfall of the Union of South Africa*, Unnumbered attachment.

⁷ National Archive of South Africa (hereafter NASA), Archives of the Department of Justice (hereafter JUS), Vol, 636, File, 1/733/21, Formation of vigilance committee Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1932: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of justice, Appointment of vigilance committees, 25/10/1921; NASA, Archive of the Department of Health (hereafter GES), Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Systematic inspection Van Rhynsdorp Municipality by E H Cluver Assistant Health Officer for the Union, 19/11/1926.

⁸ U.G. 28-'25, *Unie van Suid Afrika, Verslag van die Spoorweg en Haweraad oor Voorgestelde Nuwe Spoorweglyne, Rapport van Raad, Klaver-Bitterfontein*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1925, pp. 75-76.

were still little more than temporary and rudimentary alleviation through food and work programs, unlike more modern relief programs which provide a wider encompassing set of relief measures, such as crop insurance and fodder banks.⁹

An important motive for studying the impacts of drought on South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s was the inherent insecurities that accompanied the country as it entered a period of rapid change. Although this period still saw primary industries (farming and mining) making up the central core of the country's economy, there were signs of approaching changes.¹⁰ South Africa would witness rapid change from 1910 to 1965 with urbanisation and industrialisation away from the former agrarian economy.¹¹ The face of agriculture in South Africa had been changing ever since the discovery of mineral resources, which brought rapid population changes driving the agricultural industry to provide produce for the local commercial centres and in turn leading to capitalisation of the industry.¹² Former small-scale farmers and sharecropping systems came under increasing pressure from the state and large private farmers.¹³ According to Timothy Keegan, commercial capital was provided in larger amounts through institutions such as the state-owned Land Bank to white farmers to further capitalise production of export crops such as wool.¹⁴

In this period of rapid change many farmers struggled to adapt to the changing nature of the agricultural economy, further exaggerated with the arrival of protracted drought from 1924. The rural communities of districts such as Vanrhynsdorp are therefore perfect examples to investigate the impact of drought on South Africans. The focus of this study was mainly to evaluate the impact of drought on communities in the early 20th century in comparison with other social and economic events.

⁹ J. P. Jooste, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte met besondere verwysing na die Noordweste*, Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Stellenbosch Universiteit, 1995, p. 5.

¹⁰ D. H. Houghton, *The South African Economy*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1964, pp. 14-17.

¹¹ J. Dagut, "Some demographic observations on white urbanisation in South Africa 1904-1948", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 3, (2), 1988, pp. 16-20; A. Lumby, "A comment on the real forces in South Africa's industrial growth prior to 1939", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 5, (1), 1990, pp.1-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

¹³ J. Bottomley, "The application of the theory of economic backwardness to South Africa 1881-1924", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 8, (2), 1993, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ T. Keegan, "Crisis and Catharsis in the Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture", *African Affairs*, 84, (336), 1985, pp. 371-381.

1.2 The concept of drought

Drought is a naturally occurring and recurring phenomenon, where the negative effects continue long after the end of a drought period. The impacts of drought are challenging to analyse at best. Unlike other natural disasters droughts leave little actual damage to infrastructure and structures. In fact, droughts can often be caused by the sheer extent of human water usage instead of rainfall shortages. Drought is a difficult process to define, as it is not only limited to periods of low rainfall. It can also be measured through societal impacts on a population resulting in regular disagreements over what to classify as a drought, especially during turbulent social or economic periods when it becomes easier to classify difficulties on natural events instead of more complicated social or economic realities.¹⁵

Drought, according to Wilhite and Glantz, can be subdivided into four separate definitions: meteorological, agricultural, hydrological and socio-economic definitions of drought. The paper points out the economic relationship people had to water supply, with drought being an over demand of water which could not be provided due to a lack of sufficient water supply.¹⁶ An older South African definition of drought is provided by the Drought Investigation Commission of 1920 stating that drought should be described as "... a period when grazing has become so scarce and the supply of water at the drinking places become so diminished that a loss of stock results".¹⁷ This definition, however, is purely focused on the impact of drought on agriculture (especially livestock).¹⁸

A more recent definition of drought from the South African Drought Management Plan of 2005 defined drought as "a prolonged abnormal dry period when there is insufficient water for user's needs, agriculture suffers first and eventually everyone feels the impact".¹⁹ There is no all-encompassing definition of drought provided in the Drought Management Plan (DMP) of 2005, although it does point out the wide variety of droughts which can occur, such as disaster droughts, financial droughts or seasonal droughts. The description of a disaster drought provided in the DMP is most likely to bear relevance to this thesis. The DMP argues that:

¹⁵ D.A. Wilhite, "Drought as a natural hazard: concepts and definitions", *Drought mitigation centre faculty publication*, 1, 2000, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ U.G. 20-'22, *The Union of South Africa, Interim report of the drought investigation commission*, 1922, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Republic of South Africa, Drought Management Plan (DMP): A discussion document for public comment, Department of Agriculture, Pretoria, 2005, p. vi.

“... Disaster droughts tend to develop gradually in grazing lands, usually from chronic lower rainfall over many months and seasons. In crop production areas a disaster drought could occur over the short term, such as when the soil has already reached an advanced stage of drying out, followed by little or no rain. Disaster droughts are not predictable and occur at uneven intervals of years. The incidences of disaster droughts are low, usually only once in 15 or more years. A major aggravating factor in disaster droughts is overstocking. This leads to a progressive deterioration of veld quality and quantity. Disaster droughts could last very long, but usually end within 12 to 36 months.”²⁰

This definition places greater emphasis on the unpredictable nature of a disaster drought and its relationship to low rainfall levels while still focusing on the agricultural impacts of such events.

1.3 Was there a drought in the district of Vanrhynsdorp from 1924 to 1934?

The district of Vanrhynsdorp in the period 1924-1934 had one of the lowest continuous rainfall averages as well as a high number of total days of zero rainfall per annum. The geographic location of the district in the Western region of South Africa, set in the Nama Karoo semi-desert climatically plays a vital role.²¹ As can be seen in Figure 2 low rainfall is typically along the West Coast of South Africa, because of the Mediterranean (semi-arid) winter dominated rainfall events boasting an inherently low average rainfall as a result of a lower evaporation rate associated with the colder Atlantic Ocean currents. These low levels of rainfall, however, become more prominent during the period of this study (See Figure 3).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²¹ W.B, 2-‘49-600, Union of South Africa, Department of Transport Weather Bureau, *District Rainfall for the Union of South Africa*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1949, p. 17.

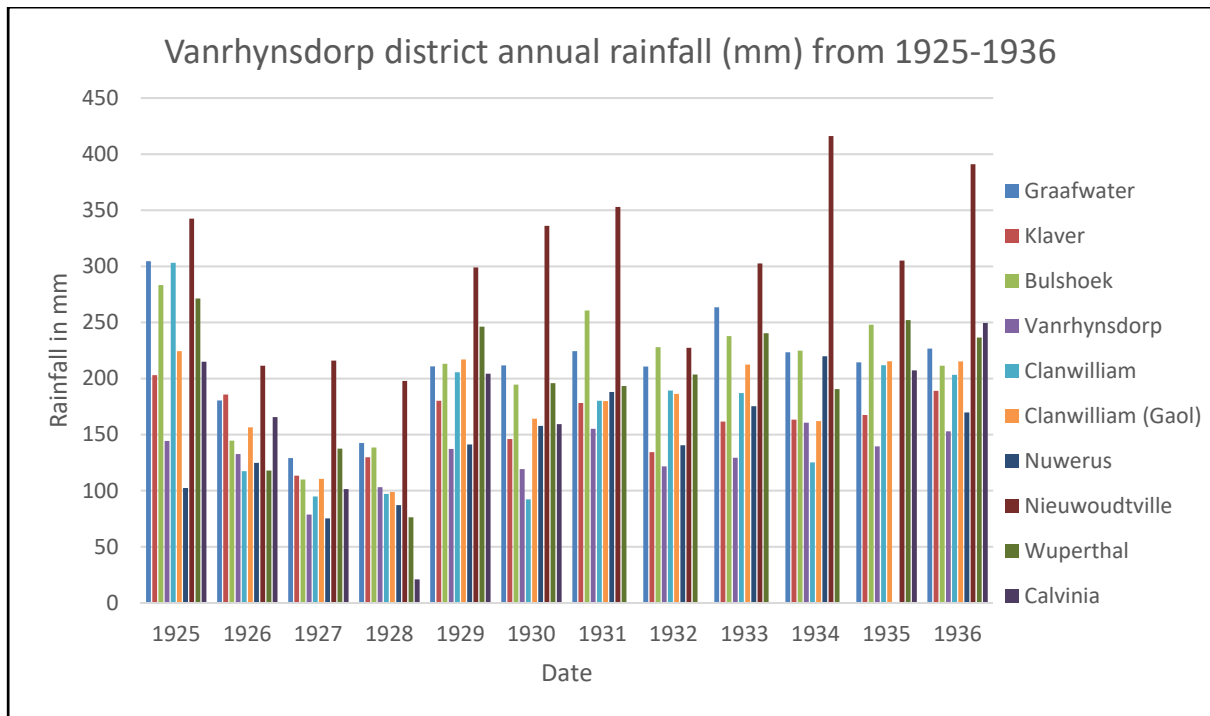


Figure 3: Rainfall in inches for Vanrhynsdorp region for 1925-1934.²²

The water supply in Vanrhynsdorp was further worsened due to the lack of additional surface water supplies in perennial rivers and streams, making groundwater the only available water source during a drought. The largest source of water in the district was from the Olifants River, which flows in the Southern part of the district. Much of the major agricultural activity in the district outside of animal husbandry was concentrated along the river's banks. The rest of the district's environment is open scrub land on a relatively flat coastal plateau, which further highlights the environmental situation of the district as a dry region. As can be seen in Figure 3, the region around the town of Vanrhynsdorp also experienced a severe and prolonged drop in rainfall between the years 1925 and 1929. Rainfall averages reduced again slightly between 1931-1934. The rainfall figures for the Vanrhynsdorp area in Figure 3 are compared with those provided by the South African Weather Service for the Western Cape from 1900-2018. The rainfall data in Figure 4 confirms that the rainfall between 1924-1934 were as low as the 2017 Western Cape rainfall, but comparatively extended virtually across the full ten years between 1924 and 1934.

²² Figure 3 was compiled using the annual reports from the Department of Irrigation's Meteorological Office, *Rainfall normal from 1925-1934*. See full references in bibliography.

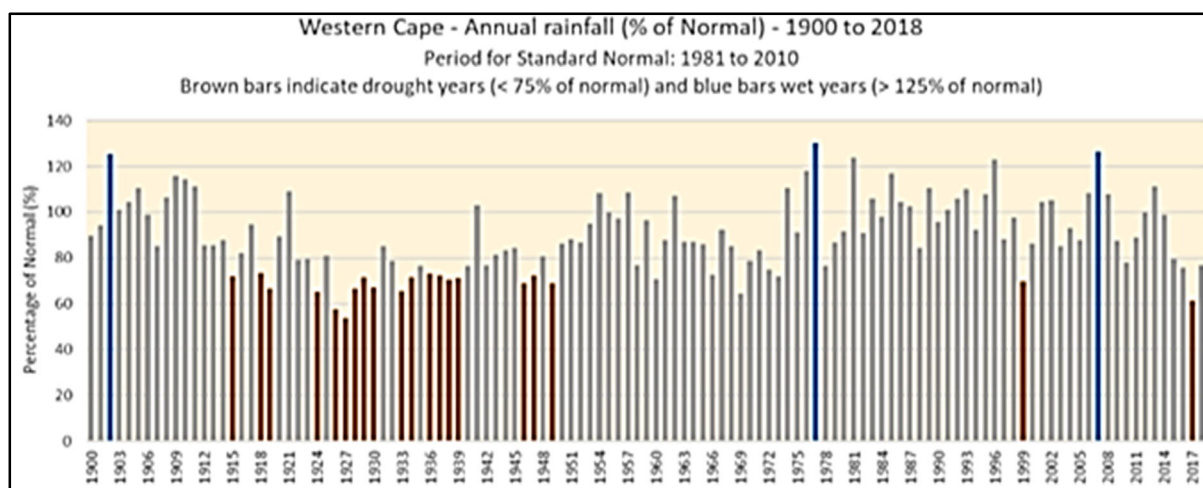


Figure 4: Western Cape Province annual rainfall (% of normal)- 1900 to 2018.²³

1.4 Literature review

The study of drought appears from time to time as a focus point for some historians. Globally, drought has attracted the attention of climatology and other environmental sciences. One of the few, yet leading observers of the social impacts of drought can be seen in the works of Donald Wilhite. Wilhite has written and contributed to many scientific journals regarding the impacts of drought on human societies and much of this thesis relies on Wilhite's work to provide generalised information on the ways in which droughts have social and economic impacts on societies which will be used with regard to Vanrhynsdorp.²⁴

A noticeable shift to study the impact of drought in the literature of the region of Southern Africa was pertained by one of the first major mentions, which came from the Stellenbosch University researcher Petrus Johannes van der Merwe. Works by Van der Merwe in the 1930s focused on how drought in the early Northern frontier led to the frequent migrations of farmers across the Orange River in the early 19th century.²⁵ The areas of focus for studies on drought

²³ South African Weather Service, Annual Climate Summary for South Africa 2018, Pretoria, 2019, p. 9.

²⁴ See e.g. the following listed articles: D. A. Wilhite, & M. H. Glantz, "Understanding: the drought phenomenon: the role of definitions", *Water International*, 10, (3), 1985, pp. 111-120; H. R. Byun, & D. A. Whittle, "Objective quantification of drought severity and duration", *Journal of Climate*, 12, (9), 1999, pp. 2747-2756; D. A. Whittle, M. D. Svoboda, & M. J. Hayes, "Understanding the complex impacts of drought: A key to enhancing drought mitigation and preparedness", *Water Resources Management*, 21, (5), 2007, pp.763-774.

²⁵ This study may be traceable as one of the main sources for other historians' frequent references to how drought caused the Great Trek. See P. J. van der Merwe, *Die Noordwaartse beweging van die boere voor die Groot Trek, 1770-1842*, Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2019, p. 176.

in South Africa were the events of the Mfecane. One of the first scholars to do this was M. Newitt, in his 1988 journal article regarding the impact of drought on the slave trade along the Mozambique coastline. Newitt mainly highlighted the massive social upheavals and increased exportation of people as a result of the large number of people forced into desperation by the drought.²⁶ Charles Ballard observed the likely relationship between ecological events in that period and the sudden growth of state formation and migration in the North of South Africa around the region of current-day Natal. Ballard suggested that the growth of drought in the early 19th century led to increased struggle between groups for control of essential grazing and cultivation lands.²⁷ This trend was continued by Elizabeth Eldridge in 1987 with a paper focusing on the socio-economic impacts of drought on the Lesotho Highlands during the 19th century, which Eldridge argued was a cause for famine and disease outbreaks in the Basotho region, as well as increased conflict with the neighbouring Free State.²⁸

The 1990s saw an increased interest among academics to evaluate the socio-economic repercussions of drought and methods of alleviating these impacts on communities in Southern Africa. One of the studies by Stephen Devereux and Trine Naeraa focused on the impact of drought on rural Namibian citizens during the 1992 drought. The drought caused poor economic performance in rural areas which led to a loss of incomes amongst farm labourers and small-scale farmers. Larger commercial farmers proved to be better able to accommodate the impacts of the drought through credit facilities and larger production capabilities. The decrease in incomes of already low-income farmers caused spikes in food insecurities for rural communities. The paper emphasised the importance of the region as some areas were more prone to the impacts of drought (such as the arid Southern Namibia) than others which received higher rates of precipitation.²⁹

Only a year later, in 1993, Vogel and Drummond produced a study discussing the socio-economic impacts of the 1983-84 drought on the Bophuthatswana Bantustan. They observed that the slow actions and poor policies of the state intensified the suffering of the local inhabitants through unemployment and starvation. This caused mass migrations,

²⁶ M.D.D. Newitt, "Drought in Mozambique 1823-1831", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, (1), 1988, pp. 15-18.

²⁷ C. Ballard, "Drought and Economic Distress: South Africa in the 1800s", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 17, (2), 1986, pp. 359-365.

²⁸ E.A. Eldridge, "Drought, Famine and Disease in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho", *African Economic History*, 16, 1987, pp. 61-65.

²⁹ S. Devereux, & T. Naeraa, "Drought and Survival in Rural Namibia", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, (3), 1996, pp. 421-425.

unemployment and food insecurity in the former Bantustan.³⁰ In a similar tone B. Maphosa wrote on the lessons learnt in Zimbabwe regarding drought alleviation following the 1992 drought and noted that although the drought hit commercial farmers they did not suffer as badly as small-scale farmers, many of whom lacked access to capital and continued to practice agriculture using the same type of failing crops.³¹ Lauchlan Munro also focused on the Zimbabwean drought of 1992-1995 and the drought relief measures instilled by the government, which included household surveys of the most successful famine relief efforts of the time. Munro noted that much of the drought relief program's success was also dependent on the large-scale inflows of maize meal to smallholder farmers who had been left impoverished by the drought.³² The issue of drought in Zimbabwe and its relief was dealt with in more detail by John Iliffe in his book, *Famine in Zimbabwe, 1890-1960*. Iliffe explained the rapid growth of Zimbabwe's population in the 20th century through the improvement of food provision techniques by the Rhodesian government.³³

An even more recent study by David Anderson, based on the impact of drought and the Great Depression on Kenyan agriculture during the 1920s and 1930s, falls relatively close to the period and aims of this study. Anderson's study noted the realities of a clash between white and black farmers in Kenya driven by economic change in the region due to the depression of the 1930s, as well as the influence of the droughts of the period. He also pointed to the reality of the "dustbowl" concept and the possibility of growing aridity in farming communities due to poor environmental conservation.³⁴

In 2002 two geographers, Endfield and Nash, studied the way in which missionaries in 19th century South Africa influenced European thought on the theory of desiccation on the African continent, through their recordings of six major droughts through the century.³⁵ The methodology used by Endfield and Nash of using qualitative sources to map out rainfall events would be replicated by Kelso and Vogel in a reconstruction of climatic data for the Kamiesberg

³⁰ C.H. Vogel & J. H. Drummond, "Dimensions of drought: South African case studies", *Geo-Journal*, 30, (1), 1993, pp. 93-95.

³¹ B. Maphosa, "Lessons from the 1992 drought in Zimbabwe: The quest for alternative food policies", *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 3, (1), 1994, pp. 53-58.

³² L.T. Munro, "Zimbabwe's drought relief programme in the 1990s: A Re-assessment using a nationwide household survey data", *Journal of Contingencies and Crises Management*, 14, (3), 2006, pp. 135-139.

³³ Quoted from J. Iliffe, "Famine in Zimbabwe, 1890-1960", Seminar paper No. 70, University of Zimbabwe, 1987, pp. 1-4.

³⁴ D. Anderson, "Depression, dust bowl, demography, and drought: the colonial state and soil conservation in East Africa during the 1930s", *African Affairs*, 83, (332), 1984, pp. 321-326.

³⁵ G.H. Endfield, & D.J. Nash, "Drought, Desiccation and Discourse: Missionary Correspondence and Nineteenth-Century Climate Change in Central Southern Africa", *The Geographical Journal*, 168, (1), 2002, p. 34.

region of Namaqualand over the 19th century in 2007. The study would find that major drought periods occurred in nearly every decade of the 19th century Namaqualand region.³⁶ These studies only focus on climate reconstruction and did not discuss the impacts of drought or drought alleviation techniques. The studies also lacked market price and agricultural data that would have provided some more in-depth data to track drought events.

In 2004 Lance van Sittert focused on the growing reliance of the Cape Colony on groundwater in the early 20th century and the role of water diviners in this process. Van Sittert argued that this growing reliance was likely due to the growing occurrences of drought in the Northern districts of the Cape, which forced both local farmers and the state to rely more on groundwater reserves.³⁷ Another South African-based study which takes into consideration the impact of drought was that of Nancy Jacobs in her 2003 book, *Environment, Power and Injustice*. This book focused on the socio-economic relationship between people and the environment as controlled by the South African state.³⁸ A journal article by P.J. O'Farrell, P.M.L. Anderson, S.J. Milton and W.R.J. Dean dealt with the general history of drought in Southern Africa, particularly providing a brief history of the South African state's intervention through commissions and drought relief campaigns.³⁹ In 2012, Makala Ngaka carried out a more recent study on the way the drought of 2007-2008 impacted on the provinces of the Orange Free State and the Eastern Cape with particular focus on the drought relief actions taken by the South African government.⁴⁰

One problem which exists around the literature on drought in South Africa, as evidenced by the literature listed above, is that very few studies go into more in-depth localised investigations on the impacts or the responses by local communities to these disasters, instead keeping a more generalised national or regional stance. Outside of the articles listed above the majority of historical works mention drought as a cause for events such as the Great Trek and Mfecane, often without going into depth on how drought caused these changes. This can be seen in Herman Giliomee's, *The Afrikaners*. Giliomee postulates that drought was a major

³⁶ C. Kelso & C. Vogel, "The climate of Namaqualand in the nineteenth century", *Climate Change*, 83, 2007, pp. 357-369.

³⁷ L. Van Sittert, "The supernatural state: water divining and the Cape underground water rush, 1891-1910", *Journal of Social History*, 37, (4), 2004, pp. 915-916.

³⁸ N.J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 19-26.

³⁹ P. J. O'Farrell, P.M.L. Anderson, S.J. Milton, & W.R.J. Dean, "Human response and adaptation to drought in the arid zone: lessons from Southern Africa", *South African Journal of Science*, 105, (1-2), 2009, pp.34-36.

⁴⁰ M.J. Ngaka, "Drought preparedness, impact and response: A case of the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces of South Africa", *Jàmhá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 4, (1), 2012, pp.1-3.

cause for the urbanisation of South Africa's white and black populations in the early 20th century, mainly arguing that drought also led to the provision of some relief funds by the state.⁴¹ Omer Cooper also makes the same statement in his *History of South Africa*, by suggesting that drought was one of the causes for trekker farmers to migrate, but fails to provide a more complex argument as to the kind of drought and what its impacts were to cause such a migration.⁴²

More recent examples of studies on drought in South Africa that do not go into deeper details surrounding the issue can be found in articles such as Karen Brown's 2003 study on the growth of progressive farming in the Cape Colony. Brown mentions drought once in relation to the role it played in encouraging farmers to switch to irrigation farming.⁴³ William Beinart's 2003 book, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa*, although meant to originally serve as a history of the development of conservation policies, does deal to some extent with drought legislation.⁴⁴ This is seen best in the chapter on H. S. du Toit and his participation in the development of a drought management strategy through the drought commission of 1924 and the development of dry land farming in South Africa. Beinart's chapter on drought focuses more on a history of Du Toit and less on the impacts of drought or the state's attempts to deal with it.⁴⁵

In 1990, Anthony Minnaar's article, observing the impact of drought on white agricultural institutions in South Africa during the Great Depression, is most connected to this study. Minnaar crucially observed that the drought during the 1930s was not only one of the worst in the country's history but the on-going recession additionally resulted in farmers not being able to collect capital from banks to survive or make payments on their loans. According to Minnaar, this led to the South African government implementing not only the drought relief acts of the late 1920s but also numerous farmer assistance programs during the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁴⁶ The findings of Wessel Visser in 2018 on the development of

⁴¹ H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003, p. 321.

⁴² J.D. Omer-Cooper, *A History of South Africa*, James Currey, London, 1987, p. 49; There seem to be more primary sources to support this argument, as can be seen in a series of letters sent to the editor of *De Zuid Afrikaan* in 1834. See e.g. Anon., "Original correspondence", *De Zuid Afrikaan*, 14 March 1834, p. 6; Anon., "Correspondence", *De Zuid Afrikaan*, 21 March 1834, p. 5.

⁴³ K. Brown, "Agriculture in the natural world: progressivism, conservation and the state. The case of the Cape Colony in the late 19th and early 20th centuries", *Kronos*, 29, 2003, p. 122.

⁴⁴ W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: settlers, livestock, and the environment 1770-1950*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pp. xiii-xx.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-245.

⁴⁶ A. Minnaar, "The Effects of the Great Depression (1929-1934) on South African White Agriculture", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 5, (2), 1990, pp. 83-104.

irrigation along the Breede River observed that drought was an issue in the development of irrigation in the 19th and 20th century, referencing the land settlement commission's findings regarding drought's impact on first time farmers.⁴⁷ One likely reason for this lack of study into the impacts of drought is pointed out by Johan Tempelhoff in his historiography of water history in South Africa. Tempelhoff argues that there has been a larger focus on political and racial events and less focus on the potential impact of environmental changes in South African history.⁴⁸

In a 2013 MA thesis Lize-Marie van der Watt wrote about the history of white agriculture in the Orange Free State during the early 20th Century. Van der Watt observed, amongst other important factors, the role of drought and its impacts on white farmers in South Africa.⁴⁹ Amongst Van der Watt's conclusions on the history of drought, she observed that drought has often been a neglected topic in South African history never fully studied on its own but always being referred to in connection to agriculture. Much of the South African literature above on drought reflects and concurs that drought has often been overlooked by studies into South African history. Van der Watt's conclusion to this problem was that specific drought events should be studied on their own and from a more economic or quantitative approach focused on known drought regions.⁵⁰ This study subsequently attempts to fill the gap in the historical literature, not only on our understanding of drought in South Africa, but also the history of the region of the West Coast, with particular focus on the former magisterial district of Vanrhynsdorp in the late 1920s and 1930s.

⁴⁷ W. Visser, "White settlement and irrigation schemes: CF Rigg and the founding of Bonnievale in the Breede River Valley, 1900-c. 1953", *New Contree*, 68, 2013, pp. 1-9.

⁴⁸ J. Tempelhoff, "Recent trends in South African water historiography", *TD: The Journal for Trans disciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 4, (1), 2008, pp. 273-276.

⁴⁹ S.M.E. Van der Watt, "It's Drought, Locusts, Depression ... and the Lord knows what else' A socio-environmental history of white agriculture in the Union of South Africa, with reference to the Orange Free State c. 1920-1950", Unpublished MA-thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2009, pp. i-ii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Sources

A mixture of primary and secondary sources was utilised in this study. Secondary sources include journal articles and books, many of which were written by historians on 20th century South Africa. Studies by climatologists and geographers into the causes of drought in South Africa, impacts on communities and community and government responses were also scrutinised. These provided theories on the definition and classification of droughts, impacts on communities and potential solutions to alleviate the impacts of droughts. They also highlighted the progressive change in scholars' approach to identifying and studying drought over time.

Agricultural, economic and historical data on drought from an international array of authors was used to not only provide examples of how drought has been studied by other academics but also to give some insight into the expected impacts and responses by global communities to the issue of water scarcity. Departmental journals such as the *South African Journal of Agriculture*, which was published during the period of drought by the Department of Agriculture to help inform farmers of issues relating to agriculture at the time, provided insight into farming-related challenges during this period.

Union Government publications (Blue Books) provided valuable statistical information such as rainfall averages used in this study. Departmental reports, census data and commission reports were also used. There were some problems however, with the use of South African historical censuses as sources for the study. These issues varied from different race groups receiving different questionnaires, censuses that only focused on one race group and the question of data accuracy. Yet the general census carried out by both the Cape Colony and Union of South Africa still provide valuable quantitative data on the social and economic history of the district.⁵¹ Commissions provided important primary reports on the impacts of issues regarding drought on communities and revealed the steps taken by the government in dealing with drought related issues. The *Government Gazette*, as well as *Hansards*, were also

⁵¹ A. J. Christopher, "The Union of South Africa censuses 1911-1960: an incomplete record", *Historia*, 56, (2), 2011, pp. 1-7; O. A. Ramela, "The evolution of occupational structures in South Africa 1875-1911: An analysis of the effects of the resource curse and blessing", Unpublished MA-Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2018, pp. 5-8.

read to consolidate a more in depth understanding on how Vanrhynsdorp had been affected in terms of drought legislation. Commissions of inquiry were used in an effort to determine the social situation in the district at the time. Reports of both government and private commissions (such as the Carnegie Commission) were also studied.

Newspapers used include *Die Burger*, *The Rand Daily Mail* and *The Cape Times*, which had a large reader community throughout the Cape Province and the neighbouring Transvaal. A popular magazine which proved useful in this time period is the *Landbouweekblad*, an Afrikaans publication focused primarily on issues surrounding agriculture. Many of these sources were accessed through the Stellenbosch University Library and the National Library of South Africa (Cape Town) or online digital libraries such as J-stor and Google Scholar.

The main types of primary sources utilised in this study were archival collections. Many of these archives were accessed through the Western Cape Archival Repository Service (hereafter referred to as WCARS), which holds many of the municipal and district council minutes and magisterial records of the district. The WCARS also holds many of the Olifants River Irrigation Board meeting minutes and other documents relating to the district of Vanrhynsdorp. The majority of the Union Government documents relating to drought policies, departmental drought-related responses and correspondences from officials regarding the drought were retrieved from the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria (NASA). These documents provide vital information such as the Department of Health's reports on the district, reports from the Department of Agriculture and documents from the Department of Welfare. These sources proved useful in not only analysing the impacts of the drought but also the reactions of the Union Government and local people to the issue.

The Dutch Reformed Church archive in Stellenbosch was also accessed as it contained information from the Dutch Reformed Churches, the *Godsdiensverslae* and the *Algemeene Armezorg Komitee* (hereafter referred to as AAK) minute book. The church was also very committed to issues of poverty amongst its members and therefore reserved some interesting information on the matter as well as how it pertained to drought impacts on the social structures of the local communities. In addition, the study made use of minute books found in the Vanrhynsdorp museum private collections. These books were documents such as the local ACVV minute book, the town's school board minutes, the local National Party minute book and the local boarding house minute book. They provided a significant amount of information

on the drought alleviation methods implemented by some of the local organisations of the district.

An important note has to be made on the terminology used in the study, mainly pertaining to regions allocated by local and national government officials for habitation by people of colour in the time period. In the early 20th century, under political and social pressure people of colour had to reside in areas segregated from where white people lived, many of these areas were known as “locations (lokasies)”.⁵² This and other terms are problematic due to the racial emphasis and subtexts behind them. However, due to the nature of these areas and the terminology in primary sources to describe them the study uses the terms to locate them within their historical context. This is particularly important as segregated areas were administered and managed differently to the nearby white areas of towns and therefore must be seen in light of this reality. Another important term to make mention of was the issue of the term “Coloured” as a racial classification for the people of colour that resided in the district of Vanrhynsdorp. The term can be linked to derogatory and racialised ideologies, however, for the purpose of historical accuracy it is made use of in this study. To highlight the problematic nature of the term the study uses a capital C on the word.⁵³

1.5.2 Methodological Approach

The study relies on qualitative data for its analysis of the various impacts of drought. By using qualitative sources of a primary and secondary nature the study highlights major issues caused by drought as well as in drought relief efforts. To support these qualitative sources where possible the study made use of quantitative data, including but not limited to, population censuses and crop production reports. This combined qualitative and quantitative approach ensures a more thorough understanding of the multi-disciplinary nature of drought. In order for this study to provide a comprehensive perspective, the thesis was divided into four major sections dealing with key elements of alleviating the impacts of drought.

⁵² J. Robinson, “The geopolitics of South African cities states, citizens, territory”, *Political Geography*, 16, (5), 1997, pp. 376-378.

⁵³ K. Brown, “Coloured and black relations in South Africa: the burden of racialized hierarchy”, *Macalester International*, 9, (1), 2000, p. 198-204.

Chapter two provides a background summary providing the history of prior drought events and associated impacts in this semi-arid region to create a better understanding of the issues faced by residents of the district. It also highlights major changes in drought relief legislation which connected later to alleviation efforts. This historical overview set the baseline from which one can determine the magnitude of change occurring post 1923. The magnitude and extent of the socio-economic impact was evaluated in detail in two separate chapters focusing on economic impact (Chapter three) and social impact (Chapter four), respectively. Economic factors include components such as crop failures, livestock numbers, markets, income and employment. Social aspects included religion, living standards, the impact on people of colour and migration. Chapter five dealt for the most part with the impact of drought on health and sanitation in the district, discussing how the social, economic and environmental impacts may have worsened disease outbreaks in the district and the provision of water to the local populace. The study also observed attempts at drought relief within the district during the study period in Chapter six and its connection to contemporaneous drought relief policies. A summary of the study's findings and possibilities to carry out further studies are presented under the conclusion.

Chapter 2. The district of Vanrhynsdorp and drought alleviation before 1923

2.1 Introduction

Drought is not a new phenomenon in South Africa and in particular the Karoo region of the Cape, which is one of the most frequently drought-stricken and dry regions of the country. Due to this reality the Cape colonial government and later Union Government developed techniques and policies of drought alleviation. This chapter provides a background by introducing a brief history of drought and its impacts on the district Vanrhynsdorp and the development of a state response to drought before 1923.

Three major drought events, which due to their harsh impacts on South African society have led to significant changes in the drought policies of South Africa, will be evaluated. The first section will focus on the district of Vanrhynsdorp, taking note of the district's formation in the 1890s and the struggle the district and municipality faced to remain financially viable whilst meeting its duties to the citizens of the district.

In order to fully appreciate the impact of drought on the Vanrhynsdorp district, it is important to know the history of the town and district, including previous drought events as well as other major events which impacted on the area such as wars, economic depressions and the formation of the Union of South Africa. It is further required to understand what legislation, policies and other drought management systems were in place at the time, which will provide the context for drought evaluation.

Vanrhynsdorp before the drought of 1924 was already an impoverished region with a predominantly rural population susceptible to changing environmental conditions. This was due to an economy reliant on one form of economic activity (agriculture) and poor hygiene, making it a reliable case study for how drought impacted on small rural areas over a prolonged period of time.

2.2 A brief history of the Vanrhynsdorp district until 1923

The region which would become the district of Vanrhynsdorp was inhabited originally by a mixture of early people known as Namaquas who practiced a mixture of a hunter gatherer and a pastoral lifestyle. With the introduction of the Dutch East India company's (hereafter referred to as DEIC) settlement in the South Western Cape from 1652 onwards there was a slow migration of colonists into the region. Originally the migration was made up of small hunting parties which tracked game along the Olifants River. These small parties were slowly replaced by migrating Trek Boers, who settled in the region with their households and livestock from the 1700s onward. These new migrants into the area would eventually lead to conflict with the already resident Namaqua people. These conflicts in turn, would eventually drive the Namaqua people North into what would later become the district of Namaqualand, forcing them to take up employment on white farms or residence on mission stations. The settlers would go on to buy loan farms from the DEIC, some of these farms would eventually attract enough people to form towns. In the case of Vanrhynsdorp, the town (then known as Troe Troe) developed around the small church building set up on the farm Troe Troe (around the early 1860s). From this point onwards the population of the town would slowly increase as both white and Coloured Namaqua people migrated towards the farm Troe Troe to be closer both to the church and the road which connected the farm to the larger town of Clanwilliam.¹

Vanrhynsdorp was legally declared a magisterial district in 1890. The district's early years were marked by its impoverished character, as it struggled to provide basic services to its populace. The district was created when the least productive regions of two older divisions, Namaqualand and Calvinia, merged. Only the district's Southern lands, seceded from Clanwilliam, were economically viable due to the presence of the Olifants River.² Vanrhynsdorp only became a separate financial region in 1892 with the founding of a district council and the election of a representative to the Cape Legislature (a post held by the local farmer P.B. Van Rhyen until the end of the Anglo Boer War in 1902).³ The early district struggled to form a tax base of farmers as the semi-arid environment resulted in many farmers

¹ G. van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp 1877-1977*, Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, 1977, pp. 1-23; P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 45-75.

² P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 93-96.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 107.

failing to make sufficient profits from the area which consequently made the sale of crownlands unfavourable. The issue had existed since the 1800s when the first legislation was passed encouraging the sale of land to private individuals. Many of the resident farmers and landowners either continued to prefer the former loan farm system, or to operate as trek farmers.

One impact of the new quitrent-based land system was that it slowly pushed many of the farmers of colour further North (towards Namaqualand) as they struggled to not only afford the prices of buying land and competition from white farmers but also the annual quitrent they would owe on the property they possessed. Eventually these processes led to most people of colour in the district of Vanrhynsdorp being alienated from owning farming land.⁴ The impact of systematic killings and forced servitude of many hunter gatherer people in the area of Namaqualand over the 18th and early 19th centuries likely also led to lower standards of living for many people of colour in the region.⁵

The farmers along the Olifants River under the new land laws developed a system of shared farming by the 1860s where members of the same family often procured property together (with one property often shared among seven or more owners). This system was deemed to be the root cause of unproductive agriculture along the river's course as the division of assets and labour amongst members were often cause for conflict and refusals to adopt new methods of production. Similar problems existed among the inhabitants of the Ebenezer mission station, where the lack of rules and regulations to assist in deciding how the station should be used caused infighting among the inhabitants that occasionally climaxed in theft within the station. These issues were deemed to be the causes for low living standards among the early inhabitants along the Olifants River and persisted well into the 1890s.⁶

Descriptions of life along the Olifants River banks before 1890 portrays a society heavily dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry that was beset by low productivity among farmers (of both races) brought about by an over reliance on heavy precipitation causing the

⁴ P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 93-96; D. Nell, "Treating people as men: *bastaard* land ownership and occupancy in the Clanwilliam District of the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century", *South African Historical Journal*, 53, (3), 2005, pp. 123-135.

⁵ J.M. de Prada-Samper, "The forgotten killing fields: "San" genocide and Louis Anthing's mission to Bushmanland, 1862-1863", *Historia*, 57, (1), 2012, pp. 172-187; P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 58-66.

⁶ G. 29-'00, *Cape of Good Hope Reports of surveys of the Olifants River conducted by Mr P Fletcher, C. E with the view of ascertaining its capabilities for the purpose of navigation and irrigation, 1860*, pp. 39-40.

Olifants River to flood its banks. Leading to a situation where of the 120 riparian farmers along the river's irrigatable banks most families' annual incomes did not exceed £11 over the nine years before 1859. Riverside inhabitants were frequently beset by low cereal production, which failed to meet most families' needs for basic foodstuffs and forced many to regularly buy supplies from further South, an expense worsened by the mirrored lack of marketable goods for export to bring in an income. However, even in the face of such adversities suggestions of creating dams or other major infrastructure along the river for improved water supply and crop production were either ignored or denied due to ignorance, fear of increased taxes or attracting people from outside the district to settle there.⁷

Inhabitants of the mission station at Ebenezer also suffered under similar poor living conditions, brought on by outdated irrigation techniques, failed attempts to introduce new machines and a lack of finances.⁸ Many of these attempts also struggled under the financial and social strain of repeated droughts and the outbreak of frontier wars which drained the community's resources, while the Rhenish mission society rarely sent missionaries and funds to assist the station's management. Consequently, many Coloured people were forced to either seek employment on white farms for low wages or hunt surrounding wildlife. Wages on white farms in the 1800s were rarely large, with most workers of colour receiving their payment with additions of various types of livestock, clothing and food. Cash wages in this period for farm labourers varied from nine dimes to six shillings, a low amount considering the cost of living in the region. The most successful members of the Ebenezer station were a small community of former slaves who had procured the property before passing its title to the Rhenish Missionary Society some years prior.⁹

⁷ *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1852*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1853, p. 309; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1853*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1854, p. 445; G. 29-'00, *Cape of Good Hope Reports of surveys of the Olifants River conducted by Mr P Fletcher, C. E. with the view of ascertaining its capabilities for the purpose of navigation and irrigation, 1860*, pp. 37-41.

⁸ The station was noted to have around 291 official inhabitants by 1875, most of whom resided in huts or tents with only a few permanent houses. This number would increase to 409 people in 1889 though the majority of dwellings were still listed as huts. See *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1882*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1883, p. 748; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1889*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1890, p. 27.

⁹ G. 29-'00, *Cape of Good Hope Reports of surveys of the Olifants River conducted by Mr P Fletcher, C. E. with the view of ascertaining its capabilities for the purpose of navigation and irrigation, 1860*, pp. 37-41; TBK, Collection of the Provincial Department of Coloured Affairs (hereafter referred to as KUS), Vol. 220, File, 106, Ebenezer Kleurlinggebied, Algemeen, 1920-1936: Minutes of evidence provided by Rev. H. Kling to the Ebenezer claims commission, 13 March 1920; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1850*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1851, p. 457.

The poor living standards and susceptibility to drought became evident by the 1860s, when a severe drought left the Calvinia, Clanwilliam and Namaqualand districts' (especially areas that would make up Vanrhynsdorp) farmers on the brink of starvation. Blame was placed on apathetic attitudes among farmers unwilling to improve their production methods through either buying more labour-saving machines, irrigation or produce variation. Consequently, the magistrate of Clanwilliam noted that there was almost no trade or cash circulating through the district, while drought and general poverty had moved many residents of the district to take up livestock theft and trekking. The vast majority of people in the district also tended to be what the magistrate termed "squatters" in reference to migratory inhabitants that lived on the crownlands with their livestock due to an inability to buy farms. Squatting was common among people of colour in the region who were unable to live on the local mission stations and instead made a living through hunting or keeping some stock on the open lands. A proclivity to such temporary living arrangements was visible in the census returns for 1865 and 1875, which noted that the majority of dwellings in the area were made up of huts and tents instead of more permanent homes. This state of affairs was likely brought on by a mixture of the trekboer (migratory farmer) lifestyle, high land prices and drought that occurred across the 1850s and 1860s.¹⁰ Many of the problems within the area would persist well into the early 20th century where under the influence of drought and depression general living standards would worsen.

The district of Vanrhynsdorp in the 1890s was predominantly agrarian and rural. Wool production constituted the bulk of the district's industry, whilst grain remained largely as subsistence agriculture. A majority of Vanrhynsdorp's 5082 residents (54% white and 46% people of colour) in 1904 comprised of rural dwellers heavily reliant on agriculture, household industries and self-supply produce.¹¹ Figure 5 and Figure 6 determine that Vanrhynsdorp's were the least productive farms in crops and livestock over the period 1893 to 1904 when compared to neighbouring Calvinia and Namaqualand. These statistics should take into consideration the fact that the district only contained 129 ha of land under irrigation by 1904,

¹⁰ *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1864*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1865, pp. 24-33; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1865*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1866, pp. 33-48; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1866*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1867, pp. 31-34; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1868*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1869, p. 45; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1882*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1883, p. 728; C. Kelso & C. Vogel, "The climate of Namaqualand in the nineteenth century", *Climate Change*, 83, 2007, pp. 366-367.

¹¹ *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope For the year 1904*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1905, p. 28; P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 125-130.

making it one of the least irrigated areas in the Colony. Vanrhynsdorp was also one of the least mechanised regions in the Cape Colony, with the majority of implements in the district consisting of wagons, butter churns, two furrow ploughs and horse driven mills. Suggesting that the agricultural economy did not make full use of the available water from the Olifants River for crop production and that there was minimal investment into new labour-saving mechanisms to improve productivity before 1924.¹² The low productivity of agriculture was a significant cause of concern for the district as 40% of its populace was dependant on agriculture for an income while 37% of the populace was dependent on others to survive.¹³

The district's founding in 1890 occurred in cohesion with the outbreak of a major drought in the Cape Colony which would last four years from 1894 to 1898. Soon after the return of normal precipitation the district would become embroiled in the Anglo Boer War from 1899 to 1902 which would lead to the occupation of the Vanrhynsdorp district by both the British military and Boer commandos. This pattern eventually led to the abandonment of many of the settlements across the district following the multiple invasions by Jan Smuts and Manie Maritz's Boer commandos.¹⁴

¹² *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope For the year 1904*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1905, pp. 355-359.

¹³ G. 19-1905, *Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1904 General Report with Annexures*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1905, pp. 416-417.

¹⁴ P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 261-283.

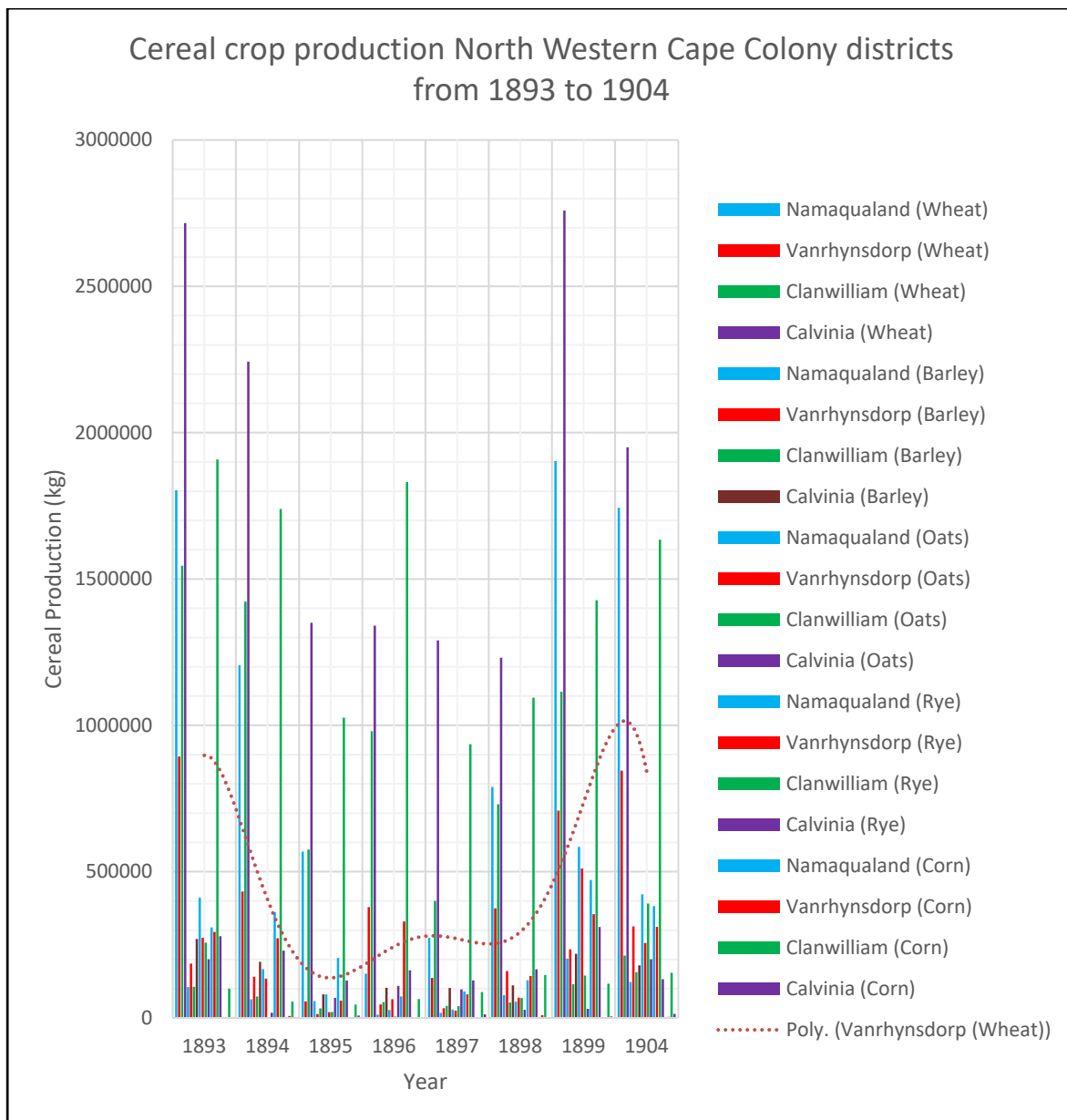


Figure 5: Cereal crop production in the North Western Cape Colonies' districts from 1893 to 1904 (kg).¹⁵

¹⁵ See full references in Bibliography under 3.1 *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*.

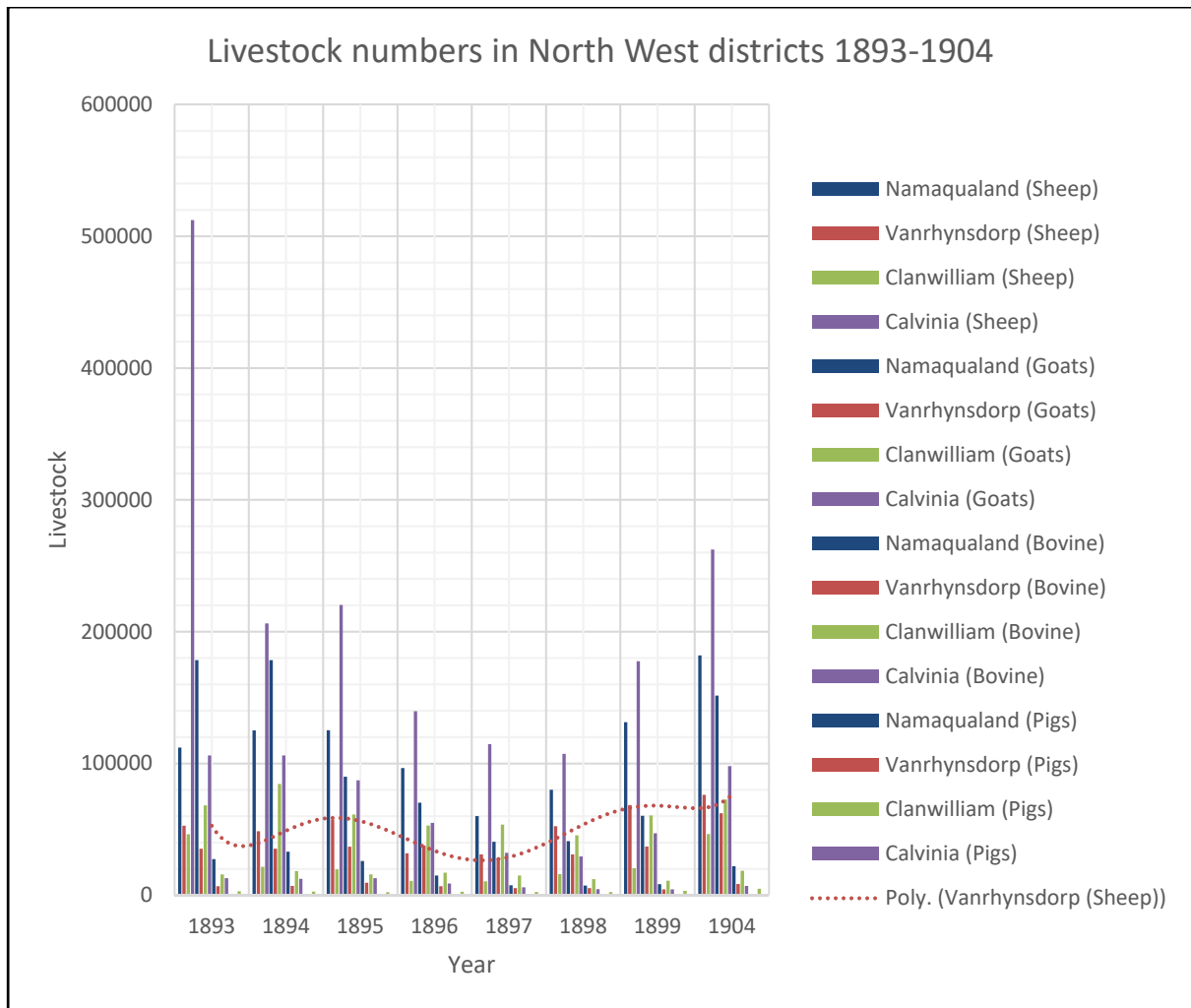


Figure 6: Livestock numbers in North West districts 1893-1904.¹⁶

The Anglo Boer War caused significant disruption to the local economy which was progressively worsened by low precipitation from 1902. The disruption can be seen in the lack of agricultural data for the period 1900-1903, which ceased to be published in the statistical register due to disruptions in production and data collection caused by the war. The disruption is also supported by the record of quitrent payments for the years 1900-1902, that witnessed large failures by farmers in making their payments due to the loss of incomes during the war.¹⁷

The worsening environmental situation and the social repercussions of the Anglo Boer War led to labour and food shortages in the district. Coloured workers refused to take employment on white farms as local farmers had threatened them due to their support of the

¹⁶ See full references under 3.1 *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope* in the Bibliography.

¹⁷ WCARS, Collection of Quitrent Registers (hereafter QRR), Vol, 239, Quitrent registers: Van Rhynsdorp, 1890-1909.

British during the war.¹⁸ By 1902 the mixture of financial losses by local farmers and a decrease in rainfall led to severe food shortages in the district. This situation forced the magistrate to request seed wheat from the Cape colonial government, leading to some 227 bags of wheat being sold to district inhabitants at a total cost of £510 and indebting the already beleaguered farmers further during the period of difficulties.¹⁹

With the start of the 20th century Vanrhynsdorp district possessed a low population of 6047 people, although the district's population showed continuous growth over the 20th century.²⁰ This growth led to the eventual formation of the district's second town, Nuwerus. The town came into existence around 1921 as a refreshment station on the mail route between Vanrhynsdorp and Garies. It was founded around the local DRC (Dutch Reformed Church) congregation set up on the farm that the town would eventually grow to encompass (see map of district in Figure 27).²¹ Dwellings within the district were often of poor quality, occupied by renters and mainly owned by white persons.²² The district also had a distinctly different demographic make-up, with a white majority, a slightly smaller Coloured population and a small Black population (see Figure 7).

¹⁸ WCARS, Colonial Office (hereafter CO), Vol, 7518, File, 655, Folios 655-657, Health Branch, 1899-1904: Letter from magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Colonial Secretary, 11 September 1902.

¹⁹ WCARS, CO, Vol, 7518, File, 655, Folios 655-657, Health Branch, 1899-1904: Letter from magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Colonial Secretary, 10 June 1902; *Ibid.*, Letter from Under Colonial Secretary to the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 12 July 1902; *Ibid.*, Letter from Under-Secretary of Agriculture to Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 24 November 1902.

²⁰ U.G. 32-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part I Population and Dwellings*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1912, p. 30.

²¹ A.J. Cornelius, "Die sending van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk onder die inboorlingvolke van Noordwes-Kaapland", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1980, p. 392.

²² By 1911 there were 2630 brick houses in comparison to 2683 wattle and daub dwellings within the district suggesting that most of the population lived in poorly made houses by the start of the 20th century. See U.G. 32-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part I Population and Dwellings*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1912, pp. 70-71.

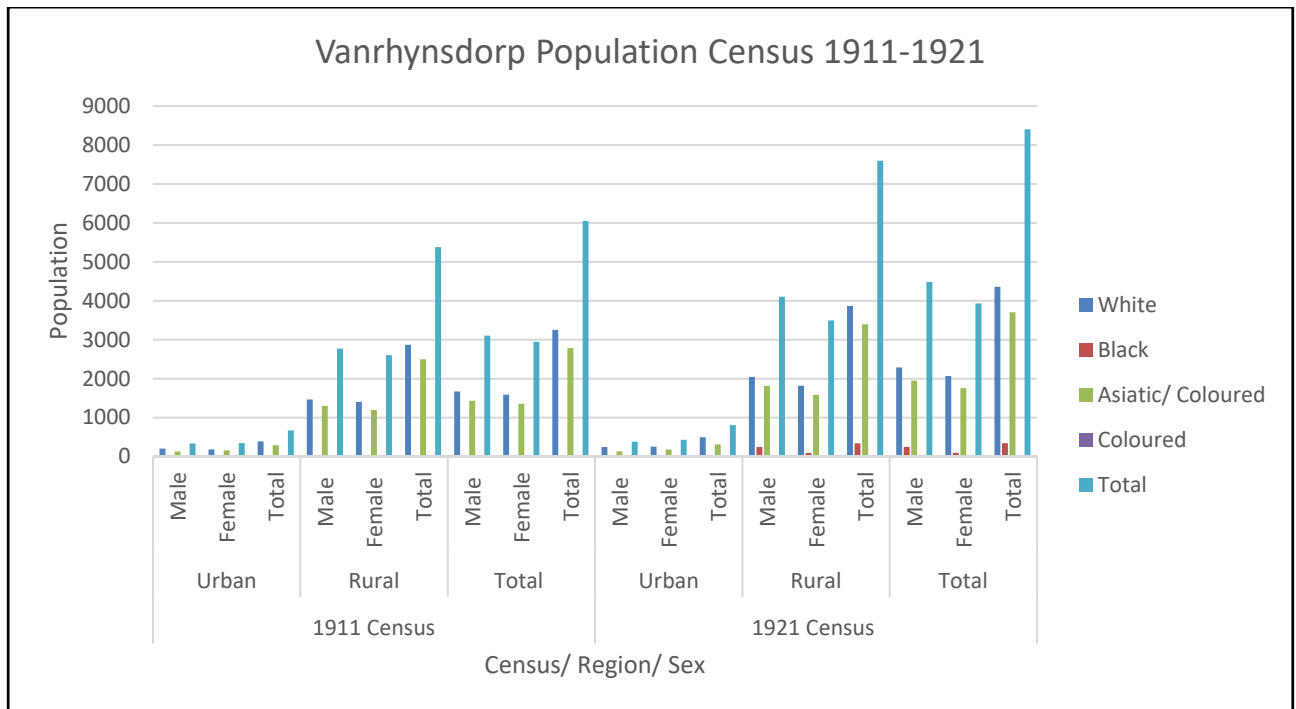


Figure 7: Vanrhynsdorp population census 1911-1921.²³

The town of Vanrhynsdorp was built up around the local DRC church in the mid-1800s as a waypoint for trek farmers to gather and attend church services, creating a situation where for much of the town's history the land it was built on originally belonged to the church. The town developed to such a size that by 1890 a village management board came into being before developing into a full municipality (with a municipal council) in 1916. The town's layout was that of a typical linear settlement, constructed parallel to the main road and the adjacent parallel Troe Troe River which runs along the Southern perimeter of the settlement. The majority of business' and essential services (schools, churches and the post office) were situated along the main road. By the early 20th century the church allowed Coloured people to settle on its property to the North of the town for a fee of three pennies per plot to cover maintenance and cleaning of the area (see Figure 8). However, in 1910 the management of the location would exceed the abilities of the DRC and the responsibility for managing the area was given to the village management board (later municipal council).²⁴

²³ U.G. 32-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part I Population and Dwellings*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1912, pp. 30-31; Union of South Africa Office of Statistics, *Census of the Population 1921*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1922, pp. 12-13.

²⁴ During the 1889 census it was enumerated that the town had a population of 370 men and women with 57 houses of which 24 were uninhabited. See *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 1889*, Saul Solomon and Co, Cape Town, 1890, p. 34; G. van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp 1877-1977*, Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, 1977, p. 41; WCARS, Ministry of Health (hereafter MOH), Vol, 387, L106A,

The new location was made up of some 35 huts constructed of reeds, clay and mud brick, with only one family allowed to occupy each plot. The location lacked any sanitary facilities and water supply. Residents had to use the church commonage above the location for sanitary requirements whilst attempts at digging wells near the location proved fruitless.²⁵

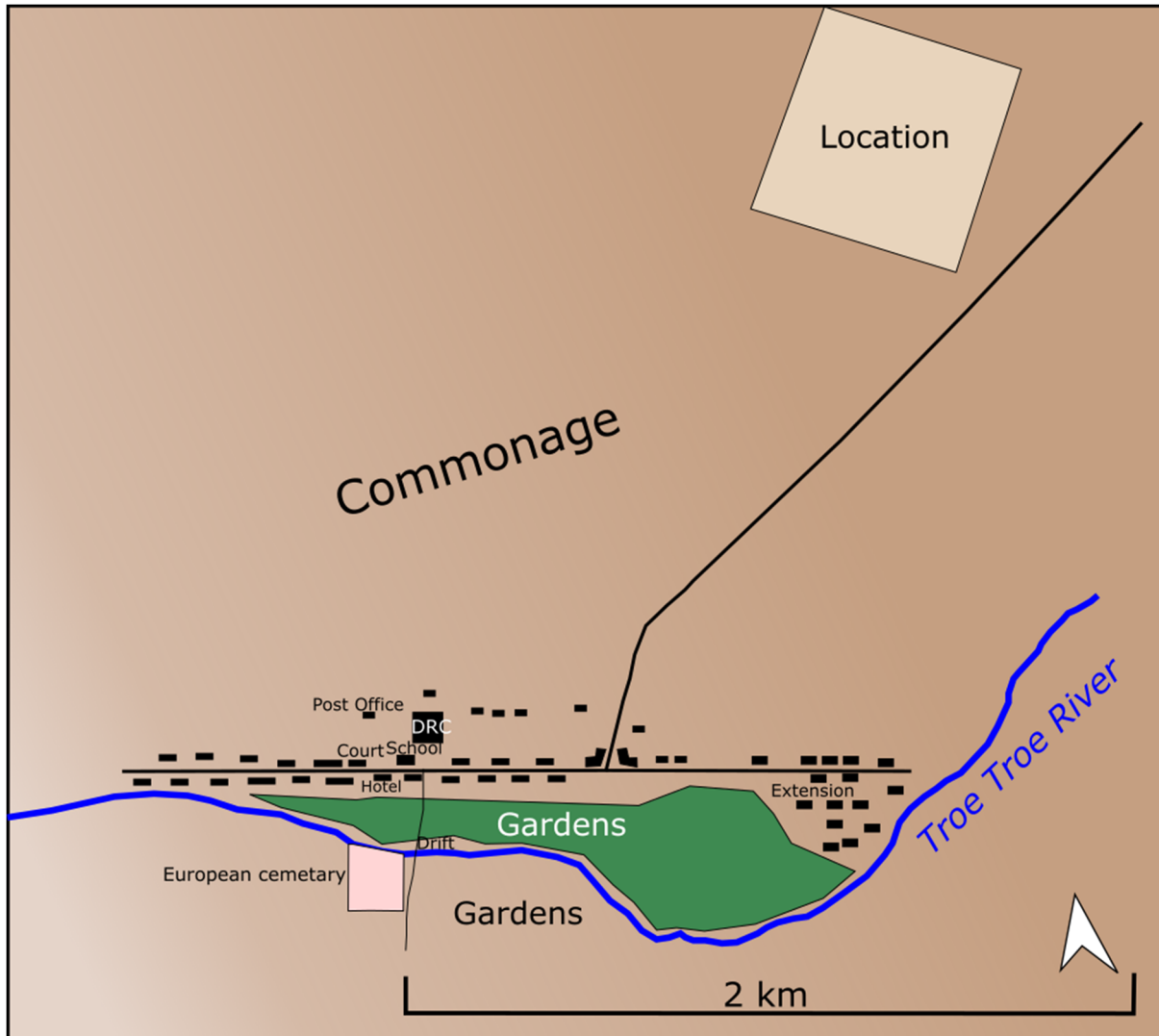


Figure 8: Digitised sketch of the town Vanrhynsdorp in 1910 based on a hand drawn map from the Assistant Minister of Health for the Cape Colony.²⁶

The gender distribution of the district populace saw the town housing a larger population of women from both races (white and Coloured), whilst the rural areas housed a

Inspections of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 1910-1910: Health inspection of the town of Van Rhynsdorp, 10/9/1910.

²⁵ The health inspector deemed conditions in the location to be 'satisfactory'. See WCARS, MOH, Vol, 387, File, L106A, Inspections of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 1910-1910: Inspection of the town of Van Rhynsdorp, 10/9/1910.

²⁶ The health inspector noted that the town extension was where the majority of poor whites lived, with the rest of the town's white population housed almost straight along the river and road. See WCARS, MOH, Vol, 387, File, L106A, Inspections of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 1910-1910: Sketch of the town Van Rhynsdorp, 1910.

larger population of men. This is indicative of a larger population of women whom may have found better employment in the small retail industry of local shops (examples being a clothing store, bakery and butcher's shop) weekly bazaars and the domestic service industry.²⁷ Many were younger women who had likely moved to the town for education purposes or to reside in the town homes whilst male family members migrated to seek employment on farms in the surrounding country side.²⁸ Evidence from the annual census noted that in 1921, 55% of the white women living in the town Vanrhynsdorp were under the age of 21. This number would increase to 73% in 1926 following the drought of 1924. These figures, however, should be considered with the wider population trends within the district under which white women under 21 made up 60% of white women in the district. Therefore, when compared with the entire white female population of the district in 1926 the majority of white women under 21 still resided within the rural areas (46% of all white women), though this was lower than the total for 1921 (51% of all white women).²⁹ These changes would reverse from 1931 when the number of white women under 21 in the district's urban areas returned to its 1921 balance.

2.2.1.1 Sanitation in the town till 1920

In 1909 the health inspection of Vanrhynsdorp described the town to have suffered from poor sanitation regimes. The inspector reported that the town's water supply was heavily reliant on private wells, with human waste dumped directly into the Troe Troe River bed, whilst domestic slop water was thrown onto streets and gardens.³⁰ Many of the wells were reliant on pumps, aerometers and buckets to retrieve water. The town only removed waste twice a week,

²⁷ By 1911 domestic work was the main form of employment for white (782) and Coloured (808) women. See U.G. 32d-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part V Occupation*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1912, p. 890; WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book, 1914-1922: Municipal Meetings 6/8/1919; *Ibid.*, 10/10/1920; *Ibid.*, 13/4/1922; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Copy of statement of evidence by Dr Peter de Bruyn in Rex vs J. Beukes, 9 March 1914.

²⁸ Evidence for this can be seen through the large number of men of all races employed in agriculture (1663) and low number of women (26). See U.G. 32d-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part V Occupation*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1912, pp. 891; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Copy of statement of evidence by Dr Peter de Bruyn in Rex vs J. Beukes, 9 March 1914.

²⁹ The census data collected by the Union Government only went into detail regarding age groups for the white population, therefore, this study could only use the data provided for white women. See NASA, Collection of the Department of Statistics (hereafter STK), Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1921 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1921: Supervisors return "C", Final, 26 May 1921; NASA, STK, Vol, 6, File, 21/095, Census 1926 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1926-1926: Final returns 1926 census, 11 June 1926.

³⁰ WCARS, MOH, Vol, 387, File, L106A, Inspections of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 1910-1910: Health inspection of the town of Van Rhynsdorp, 10/9/1910.

with private inhabitants often disposing of their own waste into the surrounding fields. Poorer white households lacked sanitation pails and instead made use of paraffin cans which they disposed of personally due to the municipal fee of 6 pennies per household to have waste removed.³¹ The inspector, however, noted that the sanitation and health of the town was much more favourable than that of other North Western towns and many of its recommendations were focused on comparatively “minor” improvements.³²

Dr De Bruyn’s (the town doctor) 1914 report to the magistrate stated that the conditions in the white town and location on the edge of town were severely unsanitary. The doctor argued that this was brought on by apathy and a lack of finances from the municipal council. He noted that many of the houses in the aforementioned locations were often too small for the number of people accommodated, with few to no provision of proximal amenities.³³ Waste was often buried too close to the river, causing contamination of the water which the people in town relied on for household use.³⁴ Outbreaks of tuberculosis was described as common in the location, which were likely caused by crowded conditions, while infection rates were aggravated by a lack of clean water and nutritiously insufficient food.³⁵ In response, an inspector from the Department of Health noted that the town was not unsanitary, but admitted that there were many issues that required urgent attention and suggested the advantages of constructing a dedicated water scheme for the district.³⁶ The inspector suggested that in only four years the standards of what was considered acceptable in terms of sanitation had changed significantly from its earlier standards under the Cape Colony which had considered Vanrhynsdorp’s sanitation provision satisfactory.³⁷

Sanitation in the town continued to be deemed questionable, according to a report in 1917, with the majority of the town’s drinking water provided by shallow wells highly susceptible to contamination from the nearby Troe Troe River (see Figure 8). Peoples’ main fear was that contaminated water from the town’s waste removal system would percolate into

³¹ *Ibid.*, Health reports of the district and village of Van Rhynsdorp, 1909. The Department of Public Health for the Cape Colony had noted already in 1908 that Coloured people were living in poorly built and overcrowded homes scattered across the village management area. See *Ibid.*, Letter from Department of Public Health to Medical Officer of Health for the Cape Colony, November 1908.

³² *Ibid.*, Health inspection of the town of Van Rhynsdorp, 10/9/1910.

³³ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Copy of statement of evidence by Dr Peter de Bruyn in Rex vs J Beukes, 9 March 1914.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Provincial Secretary, 21 November 1916.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Copy of statement of evidence by Dr Peter de Bruyn in Rex vs J Beukes, 9 March 1914.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Report by Assistant Medical Officer for Health in the Union, 6/3/1917.

³⁷ WCARS, MOH, Vol, 387, L106A, Inspections of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 1910-1910: Inspection of the town of Van Rhynsdorp, 10/9/1910.

the wells of the nearby houses, especially since the system constituted of the single pail method, with human waste deposited in pits some 64 meters (70 yards) outside town along the main road. This was too close to the Troe Troe River, with concerns that waste percolated and leached into the groundwater and ultimately contaminating both the river and surrounding ground water. The point-sourced contaminated groundwater during periods of higher flow regimes associated with the rainy season, further spread the contaminants downstream to the Olifants River.

Attempts at implementing closets (outhouses) proved insufficient, with some properties that had none, while others were dirty, poorly constructed, overflowing or used tin cans instead of pails. The town lacked a rubbish and slop water removal system. Rubbish that was removed was dumped in a pit near the entrance to the town and near the Troe Troe River, while home owners were expected to dump slop water in their gardens close to their wells. The sanitary situation was made worse by the flooding of the Olifants River in 1917 during which the Troe Troe River reached the site of waste disposal and carried much of the waste into the Olifants River and the town.³⁸ This sanitation situation was exaggerated when flash flooding following a period of drought led to large quantities of accumulated and concentrated human waste suddenly being introduced to the main water sources of the town, which led to outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid fever.

The issue of unsanitary conditions came to a head with the outbreak of *maagkoors*³⁹ (likely typhoid or enteric fever) from 1920 to 1923. This prolonged period of stomach related illnesses was one of the worst the town had experienced and led to stricter sanitation enforcement by the municipality.⁴⁰ The town council proceeded to stop the sale of meat in local butcheries and cracked down on the dumping of waste water in the town's streets. The municipality, in an attempt to disinfect the polluted water sources, also began a strict regime of dumping chlorine and lime in the Troe Troe River, wells and boreholes.⁴¹

³⁸ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health Inspector's report to Assistant Medical Officer of the Union, December 6 March 1917: Letter from Van Rhynsdorp Town Clerk to Chief Government Inspector, 17/10/1917.

³⁹ *Maagkoors* being a common phrase used to refer to any disease which caused diarrheic infections such as typhoid and enteric fever.

⁴⁰ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1914-1922: Municipal Meetings for 20 March 1920 & 10 October 1920.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Municipal Meetings for 20 March 1920.

2.2.1.2 The economic situation in the district before 1923

During the post-war economic depression, the district magistrate reported that the district showed a generally poor economic state. The district farmers and shop owners regularly struggled or operated on prolonged credit with significant financial distress in the district.⁴² The 1922 Catholic Church priest at the Rietpoort mission station in the North of the district noted that the Coloured inhabitants of the reserves were distressed by the low prices they received for wheat and the high cost of clothes and other products.⁴³

Before the outbreak of the drought in the district, Vanrhynsdorp was already a poor area with much of its white and Coloured population considered impoverished. The municipal as well as district councils were regularly underfunded and unable to carry out many of its duties. The district benefited from the construction of irrigation canals along the Olifants River in 1917 through employment and better crop production.

2.3 The drought of 1894-97

The years 1894-1897 heralded a prolonged period of drought for the North Western region of the Cape Colony, with rainfall decreasing to levels as low as 101,6 mm from the normal average of 177,8 - 228,6 mm, according to Figure 9. These figures make the magnitude of the 1894-97 drought comparable to the drought of 1924-1930 and highlight how susceptible the district had historically been to drought. The impact of this relatively small drop in rainfall in the region over a period of nearly six years was disastrous for the Vanrhynsdorp district. The poor rainfall was described by Mr Roman Pillans of the Cape Meteorological Society in 1895 who stated, “...*No rains have fallen no effective rains that is to say...only at rare intervals a passing shower or a welcome mist, yielding so little moisture as to be dried up almost instantly by the sun’s rays and the strong easterly winds.*”⁴⁴

⁴² NASA, JUS, Vol, 636, File, 1/733/21, Formation of vigilance committee Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1932: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of justice Appointment of vigilance committees, 25/10/1921.

⁴³ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Rev C van’t Westeinde to secretary for Native Affairs Cape Town, end of August 1922.

⁴⁴ Anon., “The great thirst land”, *The Cape Times*, 6 September 1895, p. 5.

The impact of this drought on the agricultural industry of the district can be seen in Figure 6, where the sheep, goat and cattle populations of the North West region decreased rapidly during the drought of 1894-97 before steadily recovering with only the cattle population in the districts still not recovered by 1898. The outbreak of rinderpest in 1896 that affected the Cape Colony had no evident impact on the North Western districts. The livestock population decreases were mainly the result of the drought, theft and other diseases. Some of the disease that caused large losses among livestock such as worms, scab and foot and mouth disease seemed to have worsened during years with lower rainfall.⁴⁵

The impact of drought on cereal production is also evident in Figure 5, which shows the sudden dip in grain production between 1894 and 1897. Crops only recovered from 1898 onwards. The impact of drought on wheat production also caused a steady inflation of prices at the Clanwilliam market, with the price for 100lbs of wheat increasing from 8 shillings in December 1894 to a high of 19 shillings in May 1897, before falling to 12 shillings in November of 1898.⁴⁶

Drought alone was not the only cause for crop losses, with locusts, rust and heavy rainfall regularly reported as the main cause of crop losses between 1893 and 1894. Reports of all three factors inflicting worse damages increased in 1894 with the growing drought due to low precipitation. A problem with the statistics on the causes for crop and livestock losses was that Vanrhynsdorp was grouped among the districts that were in the South Western Cape where drought was not as severe, therefore drought was reported as a cause for 23% of livestock deaths among cattle, sheep and goats. In comparison Calvinia, which was grouped with the other Karoo districts, reported drought as a cause for 44% of its livestock deaths in 1894, suggesting that in Vanrhynsdorp drought was likely more of an issue than shown in the

⁴⁵ Although there was no evidence of rinderpest contamination the impact may have been from a lack of ability to buy, sell and transport livestock to replace losses from the drought. See G 72-'98, *Rinderpest statistics for Colony of the Cape of Good Hope (Exclusive of the Transkeian territories) 1896-7-8*, Department of Agriculture, 1898, pp. 2-6; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope for the year 1893*, W.A. Richards and Sons, Cape Town, 1894, p. 311; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope for the year 1894*, W.A. Richards and Sons, Cape Town, 1895, p. 312.

⁴⁶ Charles Currey, "Current Rates of Agricultural Produce", *The Agricultural Journal*, 24 January 1895, p. 48; Anon., "Current Market Rates (Wholesale) of Agricultural Produce", *The Agricultural Journal*, 10 June 1897, p. 726; Anon., "Current Market Rates of Agricultural Produce", *The Agricultural Journal*, 8 December 1898, p. 803.

census.⁴⁷ It was also noted that the drought may have been worsened by the outdated kraaling system that had ruined the grazing on many livestock farms before the drought began.⁴⁸

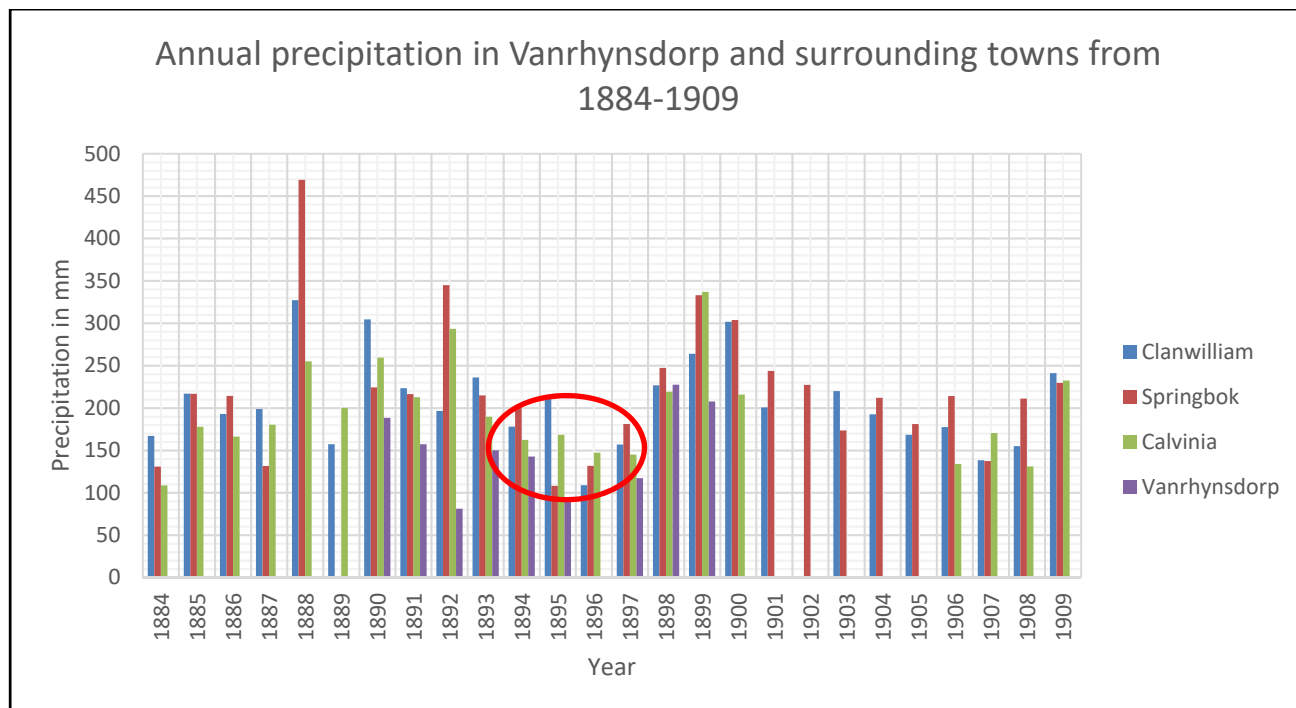


Figure 9: Annual precipitation in Vanrhynsdorp and surrounding towns from 1884-1909.⁴⁹

2.3.1 The impact of the drought on Vanrhynsdorp from 1894 to 1897

The drought of 1895 was first reported to affect around 70 families along the Olifants River who were on the verge of starvation and faced financial ruination from two years of failed crops. The Cape government considered sending advances of “seed wheat” to the Olifants River ward of the Vanrhynsdorp district to relieve the population from the possibility of starvation and ruination. The grain was to be used for planting so that the farmers could make the next harvest.⁵⁰ The fact that the drought impacted one of the main cereal growing areas in

⁴⁷ Anon., “Agricultural and Livestock Returns”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 24 January 1895, pp. 43-45; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope for the year 1893*, W.A. Richards and Sons, Cape Town, 1894, pp. 310-311; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope for the year 1894*, W.A. Richards and Sons, Cape Town, 1895, pp. 310-312.

⁴⁸ Anon., “Wool and Livestock returns”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 20 February 1896, p. 75.

⁴⁹ This graph was compiled using the *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope For the year 1884-1910* and the *Colony of the Cape of Good Hopes Blue Books, Colonial Secretary's Ministerial Division, Report of the Meteorological Commission for the years 1890-1899* (See full reference in Bibliography).

⁵⁰ WCARS, Collection of the Colonial Office (hereafter CO), Vol, 7247, File, F2255, Agricultural distress reporting supply wheat requests Van Rhynsdorp, 1895: Letter from Van Rhynsdorp Civil Commissioner to Secretary of Agriculture of the Cape Colony, 1/6/1895.

the district (due to its proximity to the Olifants River), shows the serious impact the drought had on areas even with a supposedly reliable water supply. The lack of water was argued to have been caused by deforestation along the river course resulting in erosion of the riverbanks and changing both the morphology of the river and floodplain dynamics. This resulted in flooding by the river during times of drought becoming less prevalent.⁵¹

The district civil commissioner speculated that 100 bags of wheat would be needed for planting and consumption. However, due to similar distress in neighbouring districts, the wheat would have to be allocated from further afield.⁵² The seed wheat was procured through a tender from a private company which oversaw its collection and transportation to Doring Baai near the mouth of the Olifants River by ship.⁵³ The delivery of the wheat was postponed due to rough seas, which raised fears that the grain would be late for the planting season. The grain eventually arrived on 2 July 1895.⁵⁴ The facilities at Doring Baai harbour were used to store the grain and was distributed by road to the farmers in the wards as decided upon by the civil commissioner through the suggestions by the local field cornets.⁵⁵

The drought's impact was felt in as many as seven other wards, one of which being Ebenezer.⁵⁶ In a letter to the civil commissioner, P.B. Van Rhyn the District Representative to the Cape House of Assembly, highlighted that the people at Ebenezer were mainly Coloured and due to the drought had "neither bread nor seed". Van Rhyn requested that the commissioner write to the government for assistance in acquiring more seed for the people in the region. In return the letter guaranteed the likelihood of a successful harvest and the chances of farmers repaying the seed wheat expenses.⁵⁷

The success of the seed wheat program was doubtful as the field cornet of the ward Bo Olifant's River again petitioned the commissioner, informing him that the distress amongst the

⁵¹ WCARS, Collection of the Department of Public Works (hereafter PWD), Vol, 2/3/18, File, 9252, Report of Special Commission on Agricultural distress, 1899: By Secretary of Public Works for the Cape Colony, 21-24th April 1899.

⁵² WCARS, Collection of the Department of Agriculture (hereafter AGR), Vol, 236, File, 2255, Agricultural distress reporting: Supply wheat request Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1895: Telegram from Van Rhynsdorp Civil Commissioner to Secretary of Agriculture, 5/6/1895.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Telegram from Secretary of Agriculture to Civil Commissioner Van Rhynsdorp, 8/6/1895.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter from Stephen Bros to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 24/6/1895; *Ibid.*, Letter from Stephen Bros to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 2/7/1895.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 12/6/1895.

⁵⁶ WCARS, CO, Vol, 7247, File, F2255, Agricultural distress reporting supply wheat requests Van Rhynsdorp, 1895: Letter from Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 10/7/1895.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter from Fish water to Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp district, 8/7/1895.

people of his ward persisted and required additional assistance.⁵⁸ The field cornet suggested that at least 30 families were destitute and mentioned the possibility that of the destitute some were the same farmers who had received aid earlier that year, having consumed the grain before harvest.⁵⁹ The severity of the drought was such that the Dutch Reformed Church reported that the need of the people in Namaqualand and surrounding areas had been far more than the government relief attempts could meet and the local church's relief aid capacity was overrun with pleas for aid from people in the surrounding area.⁶⁰ The situation even reached the Cape Colony's Legislature where it was reported that in Namaqualand the drought in the district and to its South was terrible, particularly for people of colour, with reports of starved persons that could not even walk. The impoverishment of the Coloured community had led to many of these families migrating towards the 'Boland' (South Western Cape) in search of work on farms. Bread and biltong, reportedly, seemed to have been the only sustenance for many families, with some farmers unable to produce meat for biltong due to a lack of livestock. Poorer rural inhabitants shared whatever meat they could acquire amongst their neighbours first before offering to sell.⁶¹

By 22 July 1895 the commissioner had come to the conclusion that the entire district was in a state of distress and requested additional seed wheat consisting of wheat and barley.⁶² The response noted that barely was impossible to acquire in the colony due to the drought, as all the districts had either run out or were storing their barley seeds away for their own farmers (see Figure 5).⁶³ The district magistrate at Vanrhynsdorp was also petitioned in September to sell some of the seed wheat to formerly well to do farmers from other districts.⁶⁴ Between 31 July and 24 October 1895 a total of 300 muids (54,000 kg) of seed wheat was delivered to

⁵⁸ WCARS, AGR, Vol, 236, File, 2255, Agricultural distress reporting: Supply wheat request-Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1895: Letter from Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp district to Secretary of Agriculture, 17/7/1895.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from Field Cornet to Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp district, 15/7/1895.

⁶⁰ A. Moorrees, "De nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 14 November 1895, p. 718; G. Genis, "De nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 21 November 1895, p. 742.

⁶¹ Hansard of the Cape Colony House of Assembly, 1895, Friday 12 July 1895, pp. 441-442; Anon., "The great thirst land", *The Cape Times*, 6 September 1895, p. 5; A.J. Cornelius, "Die sending van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk onder die inboorlingvolke van Noordwes-Kaapland", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1980, p. 209.

⁶² WCARS, AGR, Vol, 236, File, 2255, Agricultural distress reporting: Supply wheat request-Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1895: Letter from the Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 22/7/1895.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Stephen brothers to the Civil Commissioner of Vanrhynsdorp, 26/7/1895.

⁶⁴ Anon., "The great thirst land, Namaqualand bitter cry, drought, poverty and desolation", *The Cape Times*, 6 September 1895, p. 5.

Doringbaai.⁶⁵ The costs of the seed wheat came to a sum of £415, which the Department of Agriculture was unable to pay and carried over to the following financial year.⁶⁶

2.3.2 Seed wheat as a temporary relief measure

The issuing of seed wheat to drought-stricken districts appears to be one of the oldest methods of drought alleviation used by the Cape colonial government, with one of its earliest recorded efforts to do so being in a letter by the Civil Commissioner of Swellendam in 1860 begging for seed wheat to provide drought relief. The commissioner's suggestion of the use of seed wheat as a drought alleviation method was based on the lack of seeds available for planting to local Swellendam farmers in 1860 due to a protracted drought.

Seed wheat acted as a temporary stop gap for farmers until the next harvest and acted as additional supply stores from their own crop. Following the return to financial stability farmers were expected to repay their debts to the government after the drought had ended. The seed wheat was also meant to be used to feed rural families during periods of poor harvest. This process relied on tenders awarded to private companies whom allocated and transported grain to the stricken districts where it was to be stored and distributed as deemed necessary. The main supervisor of this process was the district civil commissioner who would also oversee the distribution to farmers based on need.⁶⁷ This process was not only done through the government but also by private organisations such as the 1883 Namaqualand Distress Relief Committee, which mainly provided relief to the region of the North Western Cape through buying seed wheat from less distressed areas and having it shipped to distressed communities.⁶⁸

The reliability of this system was questioned in 1896 by a reporter of the *Cape Times*. Reportedly, the drought of 1894-97 had caused a famine amongst many of the non-landowning Coloured and white people in the North West of the colony. People of different races were

⁶⁵ WCARS, AGR, Vol, 236, File, 2255, Agricultural distress reporting: Supply wheat request-Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1895: Letter from the Civil commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 21/8/1895, *Ibid.*, Telegram from the Civil commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Agriculture for the Cape Colony, 24/10/1895.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Distress in Van Rhynsdorp, Clanwilliam and Ladysmith, Under Secretary of Agriculture.

⁶⁷ WCARS, CCP, Vol, 1/2/1/8, File, A 58-'60, Annexures to the votes and proceedings of the House of Assembly, Communication from the Civil Commissioner of Swellendam reporting the recent drought and recommending the adoption of measures for relief, 1860. pp, 1-2.

⁶⁸ Anon., "Distress in Namaqualand", *The Cape Times*, 12 March 1883.

forced to walk miles to beg for food or work from local towns or farmers. The correspondent noted that the seed wheat and money provided by the colony for relief to the district was not sufficient to alleviate the famine, having run out before reaching most of the population, or not being of sufficient quantity to meet the demands of the populace.⁶⁹

2.3.3 Public relief works

Public relief works were one method of drought alleviation used by the colonial government in this early period to provide relief to distressed communities. This was deemed to be beneficial to both the distressed community and the population employed on road construction projects. The distressed population attained a much-needed income while the district could complete important infrastructure projects. This meant that road works were looked on more favourably to provide relief to communities instead of seed wheat. Therefore, in 1895 the District Council of Vanrhynsdorp attempted to alleviate the impact of the drought on the poorer members of the district by opening a series of public works to provide temporary employment until the drought lessened.

These road works were also deemed a boon to the local Coloured and white populations, otherwise generally deemed unfit for any other form of labour. It was also argued to have a more positive impact on the distressed people who felt that they were working to earn their meals and cash wages which they could spend on the food and other items they would prefer. These attempts were, however, hampered by two problems. The first being the personal views of the resident magistrate in the district, who believed both the poor white and Coloured population were lazy and would not willingly participate in the works in return for an income. Secondly, the Department of Public Works to the Cape Colony felt that government could not afford to spend money on such works unless entirely necessary.

Relief works in the district were ultimately not granted due to the reported refusal to work for one shilling per day by poor whites during the previous harvest. The district council did begin some relief works with its own personal funds while some affected locals likely relocated

⁶⁹ Anon., "Famine in the North West", *The Cape Times*, 25 August 1896, p. 5.

to Namaqualand to seek employment in the road works there.⁷⁰ This general policy of *laissez faire* relief from the Cape Colony cost many workers the possibility of earning an income. It also highlights the disconnection that existed between the local levels of government and colony-wide level of government when it came to supplying relief services. This would be of importance at a later date in the provision of relief in 1924 (see Chapter 5) where it played a much larger role in the alleviation of distress in the district of Vanrhynsdorp.

2.3.4 Trekking and drought relief

Reports of drought in Vanrhynsdorp were still ongoing by February 1897, with much of the district's Northern wards abandoned due to farmers migrating their stock into the open fields of Namaqualand, where rainfall had been rumoured to have occurred.⁷¹ By 14 October 1897 the Vanrhynsdorp Civil Commissioner reported that many of the farmers in the Northern wards of the district, who had planted during the July rainfall season, had lost a large portion of their crops due to low rainfall. The commissioner also reported that many farms had been left uninhabited and abandoned, with farmers having moved their stock to try and find better pasturage. Only wards along the Olifants River had a successful planting season in 1897. These wards, however, also suffered the indirect impacts of the drought including a sudden influx of people from other wards and districts, locust plagues and wheat rust. Only some of the eastern wards near the mountains still had relatively usable pasturage and the stock in those wards were predicted to do well that year.⁷²

Other districts near Vanrhynsdorp revealed similar situations, with Prieska, Vanwyksvlei, Carnarvon, Fraserburg and Calvinia districts reporting serious drought worsened by locusts and rinderpest outbreaks. Almost all reports remarked on the fact that many of the local farmers

⁷⁰ WCARS, LND, Vol, 1/741, File, U4, Distress in the district of Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1899: Letter from the Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Public works for the Cape Colony, 15 November 1895; WCARS, PWD, Vol, 2/5/466, File, U4, Distress in the district of Van Rhynsdorp, 1895-1896: Letter from P.B. Van Rhyndorp to Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp, 10 August 1895; *Ibid.*, Letter from Resident Magistrate to Secretary of Public Works, 21/9/95; *Ibid.*, Colonial Office to Secretary of Public Works, 27th September 1895; *Ibid.*, Resident Magistrate to Secretary of Public Works, 15th November 1895; WCARS, PWD, Vol, 1/1/58, File, A319, Van Rhynsdorp district Alleged Distress, 1895: Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public works, 15th November 1895; *Ibid.*, Letter from Chief Inspector of Public Works to Office of Commissioner of Public Works, 29th November 1895.

⁷¹ B.C.B. Dodds, "Reports and Prospects: Van Rhynsdorp", *The Agricultural Journal*, 18 February 1897, pp, 183-184.

⁷² C. Bam, "Reports and Prospects: Van Rhynsdorp", *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 404.

had ‘trekked’ with their livestock in search of better pasturage.⁷³ A description of this trek stated that farmers had abandoned their homesteads to find water along river beds, with whole families of eight or more inhabiting small matt huts near water sources (often pits with brackish water), whilst most of the livestock were sent North, sometimes as far out as Damaraland in present Namibia.⁷⁴

Trekking was the most frequent and likely reliable way in which early rural families within the Cape Colony had dealt with the impacts of drought. Van der Merwe pointed out that for many farmers in the Karoo migrating had been the only response to surviving drought before the advent of state assistance through projects such as seed wheat.⁷⁵

2.3.5 Drought and land rents

On 12 July 1895 the district council sent a message to the civil commissioner to inform him that the district would not be able to pay its taxes that year due to the extreme drought that had been affecting them for the last two years.⁷⁶ The issue of drought affecting farmers’ abilities to pay their taxes appears first in the “Report of the Select Committee on Distress in Calvinia” in 1883. The fact that Vanrhynsdorp during this period was still part of Calvinia and Namaqualand, pertained to the high rent costs of comparatively less expensive actual market values of the properties.⁷⁷

B. Dixon noted to the *Cape Times* that the region of Vanrhynsdorp and Clanwilliam also suffered from severe distress in 1883, with many of the region’s Coloured people having been forced to seek employment in the copper mines at O’okiep, Namaqualand. The local farmers were also reported to have suffered from a lack of food and a diminishing quality of livestock,

⁷³ W. Smith, “Reports and Prospects: Van Wyks Vlei”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 404; F. Philpot, “Reports and Prospects: Calvinia”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 399; S. Nicholson, “Reports and Prospects: Carnarvon”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 399; W. Geyer, “Reports and Prospects: Fraserburg”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 400; J. D. Oliveira. “Reports and Prospects: Prieska”, *The Agricultural Journal*, 14 October 1897, p. 402.

⁷⁴ Anon., “The great thirst land”, *The Cape Times*, 6 September 1895, p. 5.

⁷⁵ P. J. van der Merwe, *Die Noordwaartse beweging van die boere voor die Groot Trek, 1770-1842*, Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2019, p. 176.

⁷⁶ WCARS. 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/1, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1892 Jan-1896 November: District Council Meeting, 12th July 1895.

⁷⁷ WCARS, CCP, Vol, 1/2/2/1/30, File, A 20, Report of the Select Committee of the House of Assembly: Distress in Calvinia, 1883. pp, 1-2.

who had stripped the grazing of the veld including the hardy, less palatable bushes like “*melkbos*”⁷⁸. These statements were however argued to be incorrect by one W. de Smidt who instead noted that the distress lay mainly amongst the Coloured population of the Hardeveld (the Northern region of the Vanrhynsdorp district) and not the “respectable” white populations of Clanwilliam and Vanrhynsdorp. De Smidt’s suggested remedy to the distress was the need to make land cheaper and for land rents in the North West to be lowered, emphasising it as the true issue impacting on white farmers and stopping them from becoming successful.⁷⁹

The impact of high land costs had reportedly led to many farmers having to assist neighbours in making their payments or buying food. This issue was noticeable for farmers in the neighbouring districts of Calvinia, including Victoria West, Carnarvon and Fraserburg. It was highlighted as being caused by the government setting land prices during the better years for farming, whilst ignoring the low value of the land in general. The issue of high land rents was again raised in the Agricultural Distress Report of 1898. The committee found that the land laws regarding the leasing of land on a competitive basis was unfair to the average land renter and caused severe financial trouble for small scale farmers.⁸⁰ This was also a problem in the region of Vanrhynsdorp well into the 20th century. There was little interest from farmers in buying property in the district for the high costs of low-quality property that during times of drought could not be paid back reliably.⁸¹

In 1899 the Civil Commissioner of Vanrhynsdorp also noted that much of the crown land in the district of Vanrhynsdorp was uninhabited as the price was too high for the value of the land. The commissioner additionally noted that many land renters gave up their property soon after acquiring them due to financial difficulties. The district council of Vanrhynsdorp was desperate to cancel the land rents for the years of the drought since the high rents charged by the government became impossible for farmers to pay during the dry years. These conclusions were challenged by the surveyor general who reported that, according to available data, the rents of farms were reasonable and the reason most farmers could not afford the land rents were

⁷⁸ Scientifically named *Euphorbia damarana*, it is a hardy succulent type plant that mainly grows in South Africa’s west coast.

⁷⁹ B.M. Dixon, “The Distress in Namaqualand”, *The Cape Times*, 2 November 1882, p. 3; W. M. de Smidt, “Distress in Namaqualand”, *The Cape Times*, 3 January 1883, p. 3.

⁸⁰ WCARS, CCP, Vol, 1/2/2/1/50, File, A 22-’98, Report of the Select Commission on Agricultural Distress, 1898, pp, vii-viii.

⁸¹ P. L. Scholtz, “Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp”, Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 93-96.

economic.⁸² This fact was supported by the lack of failures to pay quitrents during the drought period, as well as during the successive Anglo Boer War.

In 1898 the Cape Colony initiated a commission of inquiry into the cause of the difficulties amongst the agricultural community in the North West.⁸³ The committee concluded that the most evident causes of the agricultural distress were drought, the rinderpest of 1896 and land laws. The committee argued that it had no real solutions to the impact of drought except for irrigation and favourable location. One farmer in Kenhardt argued that although the rent was high the inability to pay it was caused by the drought of the last few years with secondary impacts resulting from rinderpest and locusts. Another petitioner from Griqualand West noted that the drought had, in tandem with the outbreak of rinderpest, led to many farmers across the colony being unable to ‘trek’ with their stock to find fresher pasturage. This was a consequence of the quarantine placed on many areas.⁸⁴

By 1899 the drought appeared to have broken across the entire Cape Colony, with Vanrhynsdorp and most other districts reporting good rains and healthy harvests.⁸⁵ In Vanrhynsdorp the civil commissioner noted that farmers were slowly recovering from the drought. They had suffered significant losses in the last five years to the drought and many of them were focusing on rebuilding their farms. The commissioner noted that one of the solutions to lessen the impact of future droughts was the construction of irrigation canals along the Olifants River.⁸⁶ It had been noted to the Committee on Agricultural Distress in 1899 that the Olifants River made the perfect source for irrigation as the river was perennial and had fertile soil that supported most grains.⁸⁷ However, despite these factors the Olifants River wards were also some the first to report being impacted by drought in 1895, likely due to their heavier reliance on free river water.⁸⁸ This was due to the irrigation methods of the time which relied

⁸² WCARS, LND, Vol, 1/741, File, L2117, Van Rhynsdorp, Agricultural distress, 1899.

⁸³ WCARS, CCP, Vol, 1/2/2/1/50, File, A 22-’98, Report of the Select Commission on Agricultural Distress, 1898, pp, ii-iii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp, 1-10.

⁸⁵ WCARS, Collection of the Prime Minister’s Office (hereafter PMO), Vol, 259, File, 2, Agricultural Distress, 1899: Van Rhynsdorp reply on dispatched circulars on agricultural distress, 1899.

⁸⁶ WCARS, Source, PMO, Vol, 259, Ref, 2, Agricultural Distress, 1899: Letter from the Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp district in response to circular on agricultural distress, 1 April 1899.

⁸⁷ WCARS, PWD, Vol, 2/3/18, File, 9252, Report of Special Commission on Agricultural distress, 1899: Report of Special Commissioner on Agricultural Distress, report by Secretary of Public Works for the Cape Colony, 21-24 April 1899.

⁸⁸ WCARS, CO, Vol, 7247, File, F2255, Agricultural distress reporting supply wheat requests Van Rhynsdorp, 1895: Letter from Van Rhynsdorp Civil Commissioner to Secretary of Agriculture of the Cape Colony, 1/6/1895. In 1904 irrigation within the district along a constantly flowing stream only made up 65 ha of the district’s irrigated land. See *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope For the year 1904*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1905, p. 359.

on the river to overflow, but years of de-bushing along the river banks had allowed soil erosion to take place. This resulted in decreasing the amount of water overflowing the river banks during periods of low rainfall. The solution to this was the construction of weirs along the river course to partially dam the river's flow and increase the odds of flooding.⁸⁹ The issue of irrigation along the Olifants River was broached again in 1909 and the possibility of beginning irrigation works along the Olifants River was discussed in the Cape Colony House of Assembly.⁹⁰ The construction of irrigation canals along the river would not begin until 1912, eventually growing to become a partially government and partially irrigation board run project that would be completed by 1924. Irrigation works along the Olifants River had the unforeseen problem of causing farmers to lose labourers, especially poor white workers seeking employment on the irrigation works due to the larger wages being offered. The irrigation system would, however, not be very successful in its early years as many of the irrigation farmers failed to make enough of a success from the works to cover the financial costs of renting the irrigatable land.⁹¹

The discussion above highlights that much of the Cape Colony's response to drought was based on the cheapest and easiest methods of drought relief. The most prevalent method of drought alleviation was through the above-mentioned seed relief system, yet this system suffered from serious flaws. The first was a lack of planning for future droughts, leading to seed wheat only being called for after the impacts of a drought. The second reason was that the Cape Colony seemed to struggle to retrieve the appropriate amount and type of grain that the districts called for. The third reason was an over reliance of the system on the civil commissioners alerting the Secretary of Agriculture in time of the need for relief. The fourth issue was transportation difficulties, which delayed the delivery of the grain to districts that required it before at a certain time (such as before the end of the ploughing season). The fifth being that the colony's Department of Agriculture suffered from a lack of funding to pay for grain ahead of schedule and as seen with the drought of the 1890's had to become indebted to the private sector to pay them for their services. The final issue was the question of just how effective this method of relieving drought was. Seed wheat often acted as little more than a

⁸⁹ WCARS, PWD, Vol, 2/3/18, File, 9252, Report of Special Commission on Agricultural distress, 1899: Report of Special Commissioner on Agricultural Distress, report by Secretary of Public Works for the Cape Colony, 21-24 April 1899.

⁹⁰ WCARS, AGR, Vol, 632, File, T229, Proposed Irrigation Scheme, 1909: House of Assembly, 12 October 1909.

⁹¹ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, Jan 1913-March 1925: Ordinary Meeting, 8 September 1916; U.G. 44-'25, *Union of South Africa, Second Report of the Financial Irrigation Commission*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1925, pp. 90-107.

temporary solution with sufferers regularly requesting more wheat due to shortages as supplies ran out rapidly.

The second method of drought relief, which appeared to be flawed, was the method of using public works to alleviate the impact of drought. As seen with the Vanrhynsdorp example, there were often conflicting sentiments between the Department of Public Works and the local district councils on whether the district required public works. This highlights a lack of co-ordination between the national and local government bodies which delayed if not outright halted the construction process leaving the local people without assistance in the interim. This observation also highlights the lack of appropriate measures taken to ascertain if there was a serious drought and how it was impacting on the local population. Much of the process was hampered by the lack of efficient statistical collection and instead national structures were forced to rely on hearsay from the local field cornets and magistrates. The end of the drought did, however, highlight a growth in interest by the government to learn from its mistakes during this period and in the coming years efforts were made to improve the drought alleviation system.

2.4 The development of the Drought and Flood Relief Act of 1916

2.4.1 Circumstances influencing the creation of the Drought and Flood Relief Act of 1916

In comparison to the drought of 1894-1897, the drought of 1914-1917 led to a serious alteration in the Union Government's policies regarding drought relief. The Union Government carried out two investigations into drought during this period which culminated in the passing of the Drought and Flood Distress Relief Act of 1916.⁹² Even though there are many qualitative sources from newspapers and personal memoirs of a major drought in the Union of South Africa between 1914 and 1917, there is little quantitative evidence for regions outside the Cape Midlands. The study suggests that combating unemployment played a significant role in the creation of drought alleviation legislation and the policies it encouraged. This legislation would

⁹² NASA, Collection of the Department of Agriculture (hereafter LDB), Vol, 1061, File, R1318/3, Drought Relief Commission avoiding losses to drought, 1914-1929: The effects of Drought on South African Agriculture with special reference to losses caused, 6/12/1937.

influence future attempts at drought relief in South Africa not only through drought alleviation but also in the Department of Irrigation's public works programme from 1910 to 1940.⁹³

From 1916 onwards a serious concern developed over the impact of a drought in the Cape Province, with the Cape Midlands and North West reported to be the worst affected areas.⁹⁴ The Department of Agriculture's annual report noted that rainfall for the year was worst in the Cape Province's Karoo region.⁹⁵ In 1917 the department noted an improvement in the rainfall of the province, however, both the Land Bank and the Department of Agriculture reported severe floods across the Cape leading to loss of livestock and crops.⁹⁶ The year 1918 was reported to be a better rainfall and crop producing year in the Cape Province, with the Department of Agriculture noting that rainfall in the region was more than usually received in a year.⁹⁷

Drought in this period was often noted in tandem with the poor white question. This was either a consequence of the drought or part of a larger concern in South African society. Deneys Reitz claimed that a social impact of the drought included a migration by impoverished white people or "job hunters"⁹⁸ from the rural Cape into the major metropolises of Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. It was argued that the cities could no longer support the influx of poor whites. *The Rand Daily Mail* noted that some residents in the cities contended that poor whites were lazy and too willing to accept a handout instead of finding proper work. Others noted that poor whites lacked the skills to compete in urban industries and would remain low income, unskilled workers.⁹⁹

⁹³ W. Visser, "Water as an agent for social change, 1900-1939: Two case studies of developmental state approaches in established irrigation schemes", *Historia*, 63, (2), 2018, pp. 44-46.

⁹⁴ It was noted that for the year 1915 2,514,769 of 22,233,194 animals were apparently lost to drought in the Cape Province, although these statistics seem very large. See Anon., "Mems", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 20 March 1916, p. 2; S.C. 3-'16, *Union of South Africa, Reports of Senate Select Committee on Droogte Nood Lening, 1916*, p. vi; NASA, Collection of the Prime Minister (hereafter PM), Vol. 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency: Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916.

⁹⁵ U.G. 25-'17, *Union of South Africa, Department of Agriculture, Report with appendices for the year ended 31st March 1916*, pp. 158-159.

⁹⁶ U.G. 5-'18, *Union of South Africa, Department of Agriculture, Report with appendices for the year ended 31st March 1917*, pp. 156-158; U.G. 26-'17, *Union of South Africa, Fifth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa for year-ended 31 December 1916*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1917, p. 21.

⁹⁷ U.G. 28-'19, *Union of South Africa, Sixth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa for year-ended 31st December 1917*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1918, p. 28.

⁹⁸ D. Reitz, *Adrift on the open veld: The Anglo-Boer war and its aftermath 1899-1943*, Stormberg Publishers, Cape Town, 2017, p. 389.

⁹⁹ Own Correspondent, "Poverty in Pretoria", *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 February 1916, p. 7; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1651, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, *Notulen van vergaderingen inwendige zending*

22 February 1916 was a day when both newspapers and government agreed that the drought affecting the country had reached uncontrollable proportions. One newspaper announced the drought's impact as exceeding the provincial administrators' capabilities to alleviate.¹⁰⁰ *De Burger* expressed concern that the drought was worse than most citizens knew and threatened whites with indignity, based on a report made by deputations from Beaufort West, Prince Albert and Murraysburg district.¹⁰¹

Although the above sources are abundant with reports of the drought's devastation, the agricultural and climatic data contradicts this, suggesting that there was merely a slight fall in livestock, while at the same time wheat production was not comparable to other droughts. This raises the possibility that the already unstable war economy and the poor white problem in the Union, when confronted with a slight decrease in rainfall and agricultural production intensified the impact on the economic situation of the country.¹⁰² It can also be noted that debates on how to alleviate the drought was often connected to alleviating the poor white problem even though government argued otherwise.¹⁰³

2.4.2 The early discussions surrounding the Drought and Flood Relief policy

On 22 of February 1916 Prime Minister Louis Botha gave a speech to the Union House of Assembly, stating that the drought in the Cape was of such an extreme nature that it was reducing once prosperous land owners to a state of destitution.¹⁰⁴ Botha noted that the state would alleviate the impact of the drought by employing the destitute in public enterprises such as the railways and road construction, whilst private farmers were encouraged to hire poor

commissie, 1916-1921: Congress of the Poor Whites, Cradock, 22-23/11/1916; Anon., "Radical changes", The International, 3 March 1916, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Own Correspondent, "Poverty in Pretoria", *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 February 1916, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Anon., "Waar Hulp Noodig is", *Die Burger*, 22 February 1916, p. 6.

¹⁰² Anon., "The price of foodstuffs", *The Rand Daily Mail*, 17 May 1916, pp. 5-6; D. Reitz, *Adrift on the open veld: The Anglo-Boer war and its aftermath 1899-1943*, p. 389; *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa and of Basotholand, Bechuanaland and Swaziland Protectorate, 1910-1925, No. 8*, Department of Statistics for the Union of South Africa, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1927, pp. 265-275.

¹⁰³ Anon., "Distress through drought", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 29 February 1916, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Parliamentary Correspondent, "Gallery Notes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 February 1916, p. 6; NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916.

whites in larger numbers in destitute districts.¹⁰⁵ The government encouraged the railways to provide cheaper transport for farm stock and feed to alleviate the need for grazing. The Cape Provincial Administrator eventually played a more significant role in supporting the impoverished rural communities of the Cape Province with food and short-term employment.¹⁰⁶

The viability of such measures was noted to be temporary, as the Union's districts lacked capacity in work opportunities and finance to afford them in the long run. Long-term solutions suggested included government funded construction of major irrigation works across the Union and assistance to farmers through restocking schemes.¹⁰⁷ These irrigation works targeted areas such as the Olifants River where it was hoped the works would provide long-term employment and irrigated plots for settlement. This was an idea supported by many NGO groups in 1916.¹⁰⁸ One issue in the development of a drought relief policy was that both government and the general public were adverse to a policy that was little more than a "dole" system, which was argued would further sink poor whites more rapidly into poverty.¹⁰⁹ There were also issues with the differences between propertied and non-propertied rural dwellers, causing uncertainty in accommodating both groups.¹¹⁰ All the while pre-existing issues in South African agriculture such as poor infrastructure and impractical farming methods complicated the discussion further.¹¹¹ Many of these issues would again appear in drought relief efforts in 1924, particularly since the rural district of Vanrhynsdorp was reliant on agriculture, and where the

¹⁰⁵ NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency: Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916; J. J. Naude, "De Arme Blanken", *De Kerkbode*, 2 December 1915, pp. 1144-1145.

¹⁰⁶ NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916.

¹⁰⁷ Anon., "Drought in Cape Province", *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 February 1916, p. 7; Parliamentary Correspondent, "Gallery Notes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 February 1916, p. 6; NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916; Anon., "Distress through drought", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 29 February 1916, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/245, File, 111/11/1916, Indigency Distress Caused by the Drought, 1916: Statement by General Botha to House of Assembly on drought, 22/2/1916; Anon., "Nood in Middeland", *Die Burger*, 25 February 1916, p. 5; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1651, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, *Notulen van vergaderingenden inwendige zending kommissie, 1916-1921, Congress of the Poor Whites, Cradock*, 22-23/11/1916.

¹⁰⁹ S. C. 2-'13, *Union of South Africa, Report of the Senate Select Committee on European employment and labour conditions*, Government Printer, Pretoria, p. iv; Anon., "Work Not Doles", *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 February 1916, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Parliamentary Correspondent, "Gallery Notes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 February 1916, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Anon., "Drought Relief Works", *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 March 1916, p. 6.

majority of its population was forced into a situation where relief was, in turn, reliant on road works.

2.4.3 The Implementation of the Drought and Flood Relief Act of 1916

The Drought and Flood Relief Act of 1916 was originally meant to deal solely with drought. However, the occurrence of random downpours led to serious floods at the same time of the first reading which led to the amendment of the act to include flood relief.¹¹² The relief measures provided in the bill stipulated that loans would be made through the Land Bank using commissions specially created for supervising loan applications. The applicants had to prove that they were farmers who had suffered losses due to flooding and drought who would only purchase stock to a value of £200. Stock had to be marked and not be disposed of until the loan was paid off, otherwise the Land Bank could repossess the animals or other property to cover the loan.¹¹³

The 1916 act was the first of its kind in South Africa, revealing the state's increased belief in its role to alleviate social issues aggravated by disasters including drought over the former low costs *laissez faire* approach of the Cape Colony. However, as this study argues, the drought did not happen separately from other issues in the country and was likely worsened by the economic problems and pre-existing poor white panic. These issues did lead to an agreement on the need for a new amended drought relief strategy, although disagreements arose over the form drought relief should take.

The 1916 Drought and Flood Relief Act marked a change in drought alleviation processes in South Africa and acted as a basis for future drought alleviation acts in 1924, 1927 and 1928, alongside many of its inherent above listed problems which's impact on the district of Vanrhynsdorp will be discussed in Chapter 6.

¹¹² NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/117, File, 20/35/16, Drought Distress Relief Act, 1916: Report, The Drought and Flood Distress Relief Act 1916, 15 June 1916; D. Reitz, *Adrift on the open veld: The Anglo-Boer war and its aftermath 1899-1943*, Stormberg publishers, Cape Town, 2017, p. 389.

¹¹³ NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/117, File, 20/35/16, Drought Distress Relief Act, 1916: Report, The Drought and Flood Distress Relief Act 1916, 15 June 1916; NASA, PM, Vol, 1/1/117, File, 20/35/16, A. B. 31b-'16, Drought Distress Relief Act, 1916; S. B. 19-'16, *Union of South Africa, Bill to provide for the relief of distress caused by drought and flood in certain districts*, 1916, pp. 1-6.

2.5 The Drought Investigation Commission of 1920-23

The findings of the Drought Commissions Investigation focused both on improving the economics of agriculture and the negative impact the rapidly booming agriculture industry had on the environment. The Drought Investigation Commission of 1920 was created in the aftermath of the 1919 drought which struck a serious blow to the Union economy.¹¹⁴ The commission reported that the drought was estimated to have caused £16,000,000 worth of direct losses to farmers with some £30,000 released in the form of drought relief to them. This estimate was based on 1914 prices, not post-war prices, which alters the valuation of the losses by farmers.¹¹⁵ The commission's aim was to find ways that the impacts of drought on the agricultural sector could be minimised. Its findings and recommendations would also have a marked influence on agricultural practices in the Vanrhynsdorp district such as fencing laws, irrigation laws and other changes in state policy.

The main reason for the formation of the Drought Commission was to investigate possible solutions to limit the impacts of drought for the Union. The commission was tasked with investigating and reporting on methods by which losses to farmers operating in drier areas through drought could be prevented or limited (particularly observing the possible need for changes in farming techniques). Reports suggested improvements on farming conditions such as the need for better water supplies to farmers, aid in dealing with the threat of soil erosion to farmers and methods by which indigency from losses through drought could be dealt with by using ensilage and agricultural education. The commission also suggested there was a need for the improvement of fodder production by farmers, especially through the cultivation of various drought resistant grasses which would better survive periods of low rainfall.¹¹⁶ The commission mainly focused on areas in the Cape Province along the Western and Southern coast lines as well as the Cape Midlands. Western Transvaal and Natal were also selected.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ C.W. Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1941, p. 252. There are, however, also earlier references to the need for studies into drought alleviation from the Union House of Assembly. See Anon., "Union assembly", *The Mafikeng post and Protectorate Guardian*, 11 May 1920, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ U. G. 49-'23, *Union of South Africa, Final Report of the Drought Investigation Commission*, October 1923, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ U. G. 49-'23, *Union of South Africa, Final Report of the Drought Investigation Commission*, October 1923, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

One of the main findings by the commission was that the South Africa climate was not becoming drier as was commonly speculated and feared and the impacts of drought on farmers in South Africa were purely manmade. The report noted that agriculture and use of land had increased with the arrival of Europeans to South Africa, which resultantly increased damage sustained by the soil. The commission findings focused on issues such as scientific improvements to combat drought through rain forecasting services, agricultural education, farming organisations and the development of a technical division for the Department of Agriculture. This technical division would primarily assist farmers with improving their farming methods and techniques. The commission also scrutinised the effects of drought on the pre-existing issue of poverty and consequent migration of people out of the North West Cape and Cape Midlands.

The commission encouraged improvement to irrigation techniques used by farmers and also highlighted the value of managed rotational paddocking over kraaling of stock to stop overgrazing. The system's success relied upon the eradication of predatory animals, in particular jackals, through jackal proof fencing. Jackals were argued to be a major cause of drought losses, as in addition to direct predation, the resultant movements of livestock from the kraal to the field and back continuously caused losses in condition and damage to the soil from grazing and trampling.¹¹⁸

The issue of paddocking lead to great anger from the general population of the Union as seen in the Minutes of the Vanrhynsdorp National Party. The fencing regulations forced farmers to take loans to buy expensive jackal proof fencing, whilst others outside Vanrhynsdorp complained that the fencing in droughts that followed in later years had cost many herders their jobs.¹¹⁹

The study also suggested the use of afforestation and planting of drought resistant fodder plants native to South Africa. The main part the study only focused on sheep and small livestock whilst ignoring other aspects of the rural economy. The commission, however, focused to a large extent on the issue of soil erosion and much of their study looked more

¹¹⁸Anon., "Drought in the Midlands Jackals blamed", *The Mafikeng post and Protectorate Guardian*, 3 June 1920, p. 3.

¹¹⁹VRDM, Van Rhynsdorp Afrikanderbond en Boereunie Minute Book 1892-1937, National Party Meeting held the 15th August 1925; A.H. Barnard, "Droogte en Gebrek", *De Kerkbode*, 12 January 1927, pp. 65-66.

closely to the role drought had in leading to soil erosion than on other impacts drought may have had.

A positive transformation enacted by the commission was the creation of long-term plans to combat drought through a series of new agricultural laws (i.e. paddocking and jackal proof fencing). The commission, however, failed to deal with the social impacts of drought. A correspondent of *The Rand Daily Mail* noted that by 1924 many of the recommendations of the Drought Commission had not been implemented by farmers which explained why drought losses in the country continued to be consistently high and repeated drought relief acts had to be passed by the state.¹²⁰ These problems were particularly true for Vanrhynsdorp, a district that was open to the ravages of drought through its impoverished society, yet by the time of the outbreak of drought in 1924 Vanrhynsdorp would be forced to handle the problem on its own with little assistance from the national as well as provincial government.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide background to and highlighted four important issues which would later impact on the district during the droughts being studied. The first issue being that the district of Vanrhynsdorp, for most of its history, was a relatively impoverished and underpopulated region which was regularly crippled by droughts and poor infrastructure. This situation was exacerbated by the Anglo Boer War, and especially impacted on the provision of municipal services in the town of Vanrhynsdorp where issues with sanitation, housing and enforcing laws were hampered by the poorer classes of people residing in the town and across the district. These problems would come to the fore during the drought of 1924-1928 to cause a significantly worse impact on the population.

The second issue indicated that drought in the 1890s had led mainly to crop failures, starvation and economic difficulties for the local population of the district. The lack of any official commitment to a larger drought relief policy led to ineffectual half measures and stop gaps such as relief works and seed wheat. The third issue dealt with in this section was the development of the first drought relief policy created in South Africa in 1916. This law would

¹²⁰Anon., "Millions thrown away", *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 April 1924, p. 7.

pave the way for later relief measures and was based on the need to combat other social issues as well as passing certain state projects such as the irrigation works and co-operative programs. The law lacked in many aspects such as its inability to provide for wealthy and poorer people affected by drought, issues which caused significant political backlash to the legislation.

The fourth issue encompassed the Drought Commission's research and findings, including the fact that the impact of drought on the Union was mainly caused by outdated farming methods. The best way to combat future droughts was for farmers to modernise farming methods and become more capital intensive. These findings caused their own problems with some of the later legislation, for instance the paddocking act, which many farmers argued they could not afford and reportedly was not as effective as the cost suggested. These findings show that by the outbreak of the drought in 1924 the perfect situation was in existence to cause serious losses to rural communities, including the district of Vanrhynsdorp in a protracted drought.

Chapter 3. The direct economic impacts of drought on the district of Vanrhynsdorp 1924-1934

3.1 Introduction

The district of Vanrhynsdorp was a small and largely rural area, where small, mainly monocultural agriculture constituted a large portion of the economic activity in the district and financial income of the population. This reliance on one type of economic product meant that the region was more prone to the impacts of drought and associated financial depression, which affected productivity and marketing. The economic processes of selling products through middlemen (i.e. store owners) as well as a lack of effective transportation options for goods all had negative consequences to the district's economy.¹ This chapter will therefore focus on the economic situation in the district and how drought impacted the economic production and incomes of farmers in the period of 1924 to 1934.

The impact of drought became evident in South Africa from the year 1924 onwards. In the Department of Agriculture's annual reports for 1923- 1924 it was reported that "cereals dropped by a startling 20%. However, fruit (including citrus) harvests remained satisfactory and locusts did a small amount of damage to the year's harvest".² Comparatively, the 1924-1925 departmental reports on the state of agriculture in the district noted that "Crops were practically a total failure"³ and that "large numbers of sheep and goats were lost through drought and famine".⁴ The rainfall for the later part of 1925 and early 1926 slightly improved with some crops improving as well.⁵ Wheat production increased by approximately 13,410 x 200lb bags (1,206,900 kg).⁶ Even though these short periods of relief did occur they were often

¹ P.L. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1966, pp. 120-144.

² U.G. 15' 25, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.4, Department of Justice Year Report, Covering the period 1923-1924*, p. 23.

³ U.G. 21' 26, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.5, Department of Justice Year Report, Covering the period 1924-1925*, p. 26.

⁴ U.G. 21' 26, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.5, Department of Justice Year Report Covering the period 1924-1925*, p. 34.

⁵ U.G. 6' 27, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.6, Department of Justice Year Report Covering the period 1925-1926*, pp. 30-33.

⁶ U.G. 24-1928, *Report of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1925-26, Agricultural Census No. 9, 1926*, pp. 117-118.

followed by increasingly lower precipitation and crop production which would decrease under the pressure of the resurgent drought from 1927-1929.

This chapter focuses primarily on the economic impacts of drought from 1924 to 1934, however, in some areas the study also considers the economic trends proceeding after the indicated period, in order to demonstrate the impacts of the drought within the larger context of the region's economic history. This is most prevalent in the section dealing with agricultural production of cereals, livestock and livestock produce, which made use of statistics from 1918 to 1937. This can also be seen in section 3.5 where the financial impacts of the drought are discussed, which focused on the period between 1922 and 1937. It is also important to note that there was no agricultural census collected between 1931 and 1933 which leaves a three-year gap in all the data provided by the study.

3.2 South African post war agricultural economic conditions

South African agriculture in the early 20th century was one of the largest markets in the country and suffered from serious conditions (poor markets, environmental problems and lacking infrastructure). This impacted on the ability of farmers and rural communities to make an income from the industry. The proceeding lack of income lead to a situation (by 1923) where the migration of former landowners and farmers towards the urban areas had begun to increase, similar to what had been discussed in previous drought periods. Some of the driving factors that forced migration include drought, locusts, livestock diseases, labour problems, local economics where farmers were too reliant on creditors and social issues (such as better schools and housing).⁷ Agriculture in the Cape during the drought was managed in a manner that made farmers reliant on middlemen, often proving unprofitable and was largely based on principles of subsistence farming.

An important factor in the agricultural economy of the Cape Province were the so-called middlemen, a role often filled by storekeepers, private banks and other businesses. Producers in the agricultural economy were reliant on middlemen to buy and transport their produce to markets. This left producers solely reliant on the often notoriously low offered prices from said

⁷ Anon., "Die verarmingsiekte", *Landbouweekblad*, 21 November 1923, p. 679.

middlemen buyers in order to attain an economic gain, because by the time produce reached markets in distant cities and towns the prices for the goods would have been inflated well past the original selling price.⁸ This had a knock-on effect in creating a situation where farmers suffered significant losses through sales to local storekeepers and middlemen, when compared to what could have been received had they sold the produce directly to the market.

Causes for lower prices included fluctuations in market prices, time between harvesting and marketing produce, demand and transport. Other factors that influenced the cost prices of goods included the quantity and quality of produce being supplied, with drought conditions often leading to poorer quality and quantities of goods for which farmers received lower prices. Middlemen were frequently the main source of credit for rural farmers, while also being their main buyers, creating a difficult position whereby farmers were largely dependent upon their creditors for an income.⁹ This situation was worsened by the important role of credit in agriculture, since without credit a farmer could not cover early production costs before the harvest had been collected.¹⁰

Many farms in South Africa operated for subsistence and not as commercial business. This meant that although the projected yearly income of a farm in South Africa stood at £800 (without costs included) the actual income could have been much lower due to poor harvests and low market prices.¹¹ The raw product prices of South African agricultural produce had consistently been unreliable since the First World War (1914-1919), with post war market speculation on produce creating an unstable situation wherein prices fluctuated unpredictably.¹² Droughts worsened this already complex financial system by ruining harvests or lowering the quality of the crop and products leaving farmers with no crop to sell or forced into a position to accept lower than standard market value. This led to farming becoming

⁸ Anon., “Landbouklagtes in die Volksraad”, *Landbouweekblad*, 13 June 1923, p. 27; A.J. Bruwer, “Produsente en verbruiker”, *Landbouweekblad*, 6 June 1923, p. 23; Anon., “Die lêers van middelmanne”, *Landbouweekblad*, 12 June 1923, p. 47.

⁹ U.G. 17-1923, *Union of South Africa, Twelfth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa for the year ended 31st December 1923*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1923, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Anon., “Die mark van die Boer”, *Landbouweekblad*, 17 October 1923, p. 325.

¹¹ Anon., “Geddelike gegewens van boerdery ontbreek”, *Landbouweekblad*, 4 July 1923, p. 105; Anon., “Winste moontlik in boerdery”, *Landbouweekblad*, 25 July 1923, p. 185.

¹² Anon., “Die bemarking van plaas produkte”, *Landbouweekblad*, 7 November 1923, p. 637d

financially unsustainable as farmers could not service their debts or make enough money to cover production costs.¹³

3.3 The agricultural economy in Vanrhynsdorp

Agriculture made up a significant proportion of economic activity for the district of Vanrhynsdorp's population groups; not only through owning farms, but also through employment on farms. The total number of farms which existed within the district changed from year to year and the tenure of land ownership under which the farms were maintained differed. The agricultural census statistics of 1930 noted that from the district's 573 farms there were 329 cases where the property belonged to its occupiers, 213 where farmers leased the premises they occupied and ten where farms were occupied under a share system with multiple owners. What is evident is that the majority of farmers in the district consisted of farm owners and not farm renters, with the majority of farmland under the direct possession of its occupiers (604,760 ha) when compared with that held under lease (271,115 ha).¹⁴ A significant subset (up to 40%) of the total farming community leased property who, in turn, suffered worse losses during the periods of drought as they were required to continue making payments on the property they occupied.¹⁵

¹³ Anon., "Is daar 'n Jona op die droogteskip?", *Landbouweekblad*, 27 October 1923, p. 577; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from Provincial Administrator to the Secretary of Labour, 30/10/1924.

¹⁴ U.G. 12-1932, *Report of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1929-30, Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932, p. 16.

¹⁵ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale kommissie vir diens van barmhartigheid, Noodlening korrespondensie gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from H. Stramsrood to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 22 July 1927; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

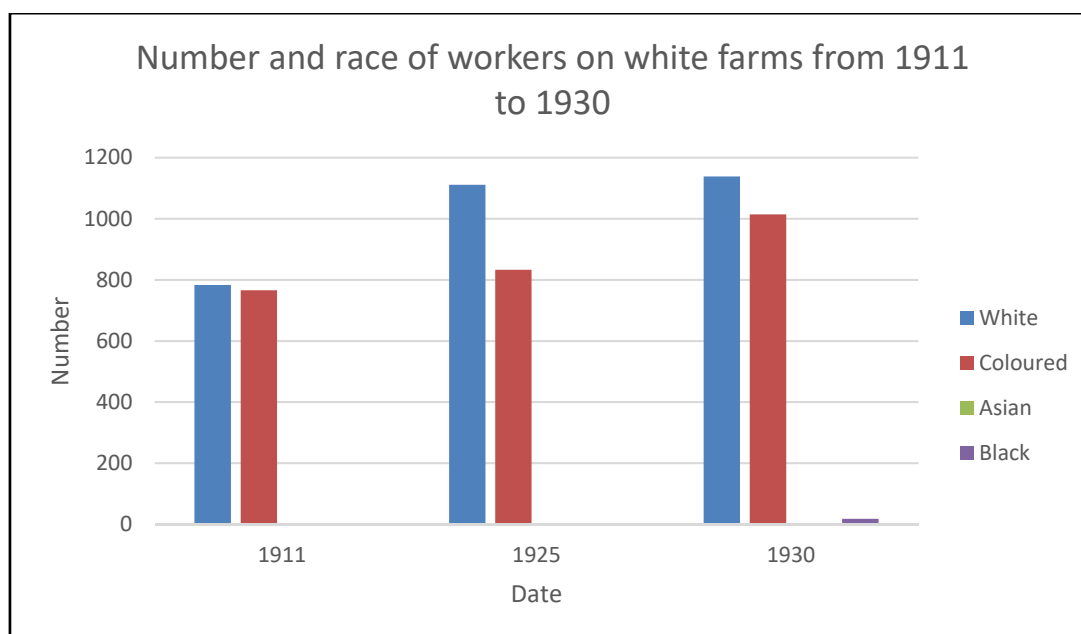


Figure 10: Number and race of workers on white farms from 1911 to 1930.¹⁶

Large numbers of both white and Coloured people in the district worked permanently on white-owned farms, with the number of permanent labourers for both races numbering around 1000 each by 1929 as seen in Figure 10. According to the 1926 census from the district's white population (6587 persons in total) 17% were permanently employed as farm labourers (1111 in total according to Figure 10). The official number of the Coloured populations permanently employed was 14% (1148 as can be seen in Figure 10) according to the 1936 population census (7503 persons in total). These figures suggest that a large number of Coloured people did not work as full-time employees, but rather as seasonal employees. The discrepancy in white and Coloured farm workers occurred after 1911 when the white farm labourer population increased exponentially over the Coloured labouring population by 1925.

Although large tracts of the district's land were dedicated to agricultural production from 1918-1930, (915,905 ha on average) only a small amount of it was actually cultivated by the district's farmers between 1918 and 1930 (15,406 ha on average). An insignificant portion of land was regularly left uncultivated or fallow by farmers (1,050 ha on average from 1918 to 1930), either to give the soil an opportunity to recuperate or due to fears that crops would not grow if planted due to low precipitation and sub soil moisture. This should also be seen in light

¹⁶ U.G. 32h-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part IX Livestock and Agriculture*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1912, p. 1347; U.G. 13-1927, *Report of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1924-25, Agricultural Census No. 8, 1925*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1927, p. 166; U.G. 12-1932, *Report of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1929-30, Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932, p. 95.

of the fact that very little of the total agricultural land taken up by farms for the period 1918-1930 was irrigated (795 ha on average in the described period). Irrigated land in the district would reach a peak in 1926 at 6,585 ha before decreasing to 2,094 ha in 1930. The district also included few boreholes, with the official number by 1930 standing at 63 an increase from the 43 of 1926. An insignificant number for such a large and dry area.¹⁷ The lack of borehole drilling was due to the large costs of having borehole drills sent to the farms in the district, making it difficult for farmers to contract drilling work on their property.¹⁸ These figures prove that although the district constituted a large area dedicated to agriculture, very little of the surface area was actually used for cultivation (more likely livestock breeding) and from the area used most did not benefit from irrigation or boreholes between 1918 and 1930. This likely left many farmers open to the threat of drought through their reliance on dryland farming.

There was also a notable disparity in property prices within the district of Vanrhynsdorp. The set value for property in the South of the district along the Olifants River and its irrigation canals averaged £10 per morgen in 1920, while land in the Northern portions of the district averaged 7 shillings and 6 dimes per morgen that year.¹⁹ Although these prices were recorded in 1920, a year marked by both economic depression and drought, it would appear that these regional property differences were engrained in the district due to the different environments of the districts North and South. The Northern wards of the district received less rainfall and was traditionally preferred for the use of grazing livestock, while the Southern wards saw larger proportions of horticulture while grains were grown to varying degrees of success across the district.²⁰

¹⁷ U. G. 53-1919, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Agricultural census No. 1 of 1918*, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1919, p. 12; U. G. 44-'22, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa, 1920-1921, Agricultural census No. 4 of 1921*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1922, p. 15; U. G. 24-'28, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1925-1926, Agricultural census No. 9 of 1926*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1928, p. 106; U. G. 12-'32, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1929-1930, Agricultural census No. 13 of 1930*, Government Printer, Pretoria, p. 16.

¹⁸ VRDM, Vanrhynsdorp Afrikanderbond en Boereunie Minute Book, 1892-1937: National Party Meeting, 15 August 1925.

¹⁹ U.G. 8' 22, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.1, Department of Justice Year Report Covering the period 1919-1920*, p. 30.

²⁰ U.G. 28-'25, *Unie van Suid Afrika, Verslag van die Spoorweg en Haweraad oor Voorgestelde Nuwe Spoorweglyne, Rapport van Raad, Klaver-Bitterfontein*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1925, p. 75.

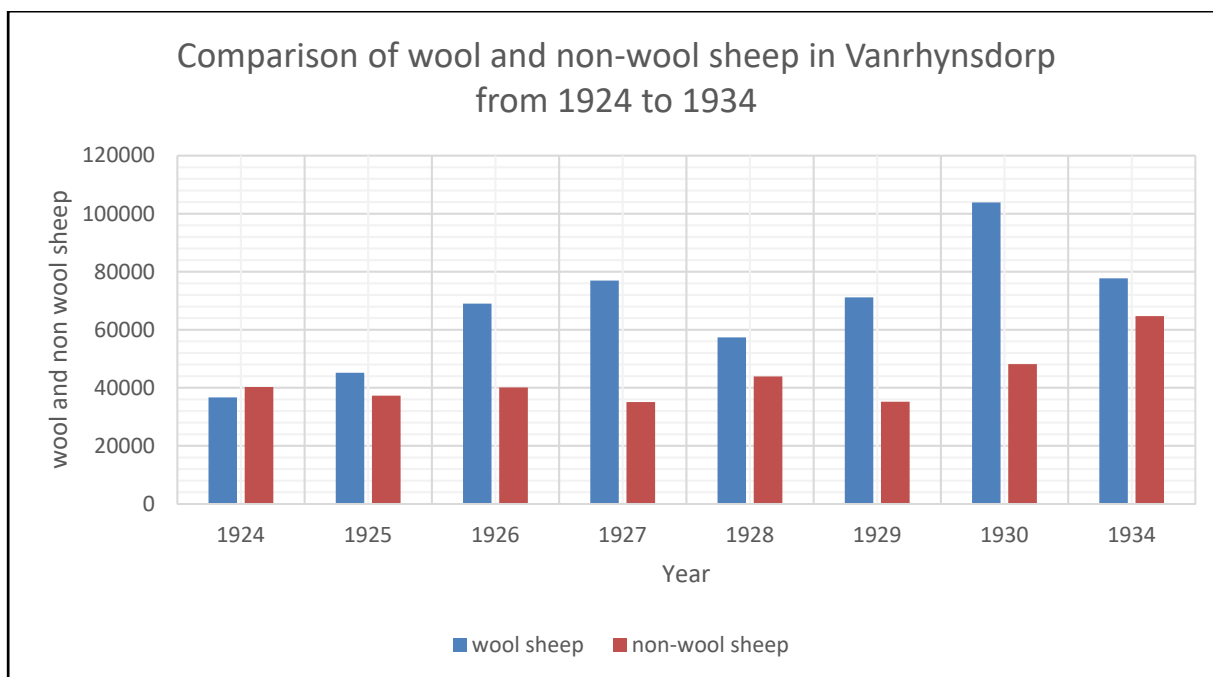


Figure 11: Comparison of wool and non-wool sheep in Vanrhynsdorp from 1925 to 1934.²¹

The vast majority of agricultural production in the district was focused on wheat, sheep and goat farming. Sheep's wool was the most prominent product, with goat's wool comparatively more minor. As can be seen in Figure 11, the wool sheep population in the district outnumbered the non-wool sheep, although during the drought years there was an increase in the, likely harder, non-wool sheep population. The majority of the livestock was then sold either to local general traders centred in the railway towns such as Bitterfontein and Klawer, or to local shops and people within the district at the major towns of Vanrhynsdorp and Nuwerus. Many of the local shops reportedly held monopolies over the surrounding rural areas as suppliers, buyers and credit providers.²²

The farmers of the district also suffered under expensive transport costs and poor infrastructure. In 1920 it cost as much as 5 shillings, or more, to transport one bag of produce to the railhead in Klawer due to the poor-quality roads in the district that were notorious for damaging vehicles and a lack of safe crossings on the Olifants River during the winter months.²³ Poor transportation infrastructure also created hardships for the outlying Northern

²¹ *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1924-34* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

²² NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

²³ TBK, KUS, Vol, 220, File, 106, Ebenezer Kleurlinggebied Algemeen, 1920-1936: Olifants River irrigation claims, 1920; G.C., Hattingh, *Die N G gemeente van Vredendal 25 jaar oud 1933-1958*, Die Kerkraad, Vredendal, 1958, pp. 25-26.

farmers who had to drive their herds on long dry treks, causing many animals to lose condition and subsequently market value.²⁴ The problem of the deteriorating district roads would become so controversial among the farming community that in 1929 farmers went so far as to threaten withholding their wheel tax if the provincial government did not step in to oversee improvements.²⁵

3.4 The impact of drought and depression on the North Western Cape agricultural economy in general and on the Vanrhynsdorp district in particular

The years leading to the outbreak of drought in 1924 had been marred by unstable markets and fluctuating prices for produce. Early signs threatened of an outbreak of drought and locusts as farmers in the North Western Cape began to report losses. However, these were either regional or national issues outside the district as 1922 saw not only record yields in crops for the district but also recorded high incomes among the district's population (see Figure 13, Figure 19). By 1923 the outbreak of drought and locusts caused difficulty for farmers in not only producing their goods but also in what they received for the goods from the local and international markets. The year 1923's low rainfall and plagues of locusts forced farmers to abandon their properties in the North West and trek with their livestock to find pastures further East and South.²⁶ Many farmers in this early period relied on the good prices for wheat and the rapidly rising price of wool to make a profit, which would remain the only reliable commodity for farmers throughout the drought period.²⁷

The two peak years of the drought (1924 and 1928) are identifiable from the fact that in both years half of the farmers reported being impacted by drought (47% in 1925 and 48% in 1928) as shown in Figure 12. Another sign of the increased impacts of drought was the diminished

²⁴ U.G. 28-'25, *Unie van Suid Afrika, Verslag van die Spoorweg en Haweraad oor Voorgestelde Nuwe Spoorweglyne, Rapport van Raad, Klaver-Bitterfontein*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1925, p. 75.

²⁵ VRDM, Vanrhynsdorp Afrikanderbond en Boereunie Minute Book, 1892-1937: National Party Meeting, 6 July 1929.

²⁶ Anon., "Terugbilk", *Landbouweekblad*, 26 December 1923, p. 840; Anon., "Oorsig van die boerdery toestand", *Landbouweekblad*, 24 October 1923, p. 567.

²⁷ U.G. 10-'23, *Union of South Africa, Eleventh year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa for Year-ended 31st December 1922*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1923, p. 12.

number of farmers from the district who sent census returns, from a high of 456 in 1926 to a low of 442 in 1929.

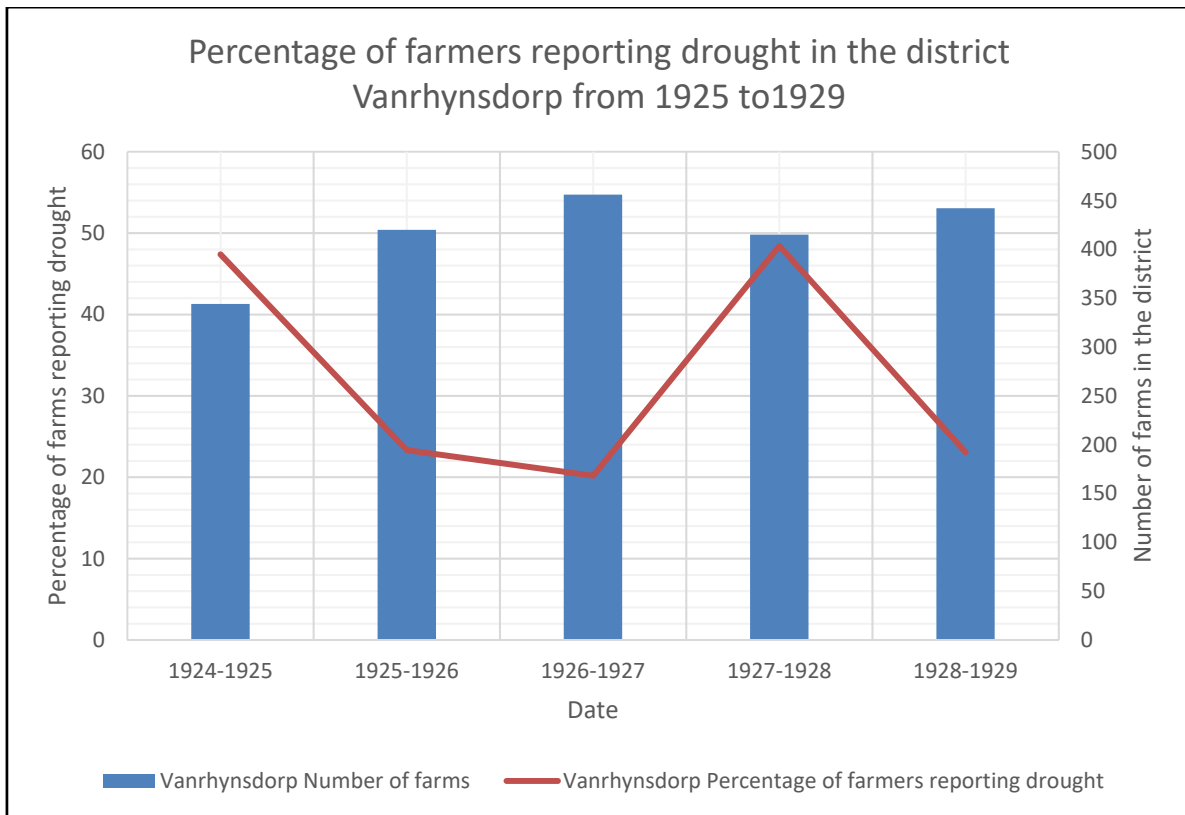


Figure 12: Percentage of farmers reporting drought in the district Vanrhynsdorp from 1925 to 1929.²⁸

The impact of the peak drought years (1924 and 1928) on the agricultural economy were marked by declining output, unstable markets and increased hardship towards farmers. The drought caused a significant drop in production amongst farmers, particularly crop farmers (as can be seen in Figure 13).²⁹ This situation forced many farmers into bankruptcy as losses from failed harvests meant that many farmers could not pay their taxes or loans. The Land Bank

²⁸ U. G. 13-1927, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1924-1925, Agricultural census No. 9 of 1925*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1927, p. 178; U.G. 24-'28, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1925-1926, Agricultural census No. 10 of 1926*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1928, p. 171; U.G. 37-'28, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1926-1927, Agricultural census No. 11 of 1927*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1928, p. 73; U.G. 41-'29, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1927-1928, Agricultural census No. 12 of 1928*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 78; U.G. 12-'32, *Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report of the agricultural and pastoral production of the Union of South Africa 1928-1929, Agricultural census No. 13 of 1929*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932, p. 84.

²⁹ *Union of South Africa, Debates of the House of Assembly, Fourth session, fourth parliament, Volume 1, 25 January to 10 of April 1924*, Parliamentary Printers, Cape Town, p. 1214; *Union of South Africa, Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Handbook of Agricultural Statistics 1904-1950*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1960, p. 183.

noted that many formerly well-off farmers had been left in a state of bankruptcy while smaller farmers had been forced to give up farming completely and seek work as labourers.³⁰ In both years many farmers were forced to trek with their stock to survive when poor rainfall led to reduced grazing and severe economic losses.³¹

During the drought years farmers became unwilling to sell their sheep either on the market or to butchers, as wool sheep had come to form an important part of a farmer's stable income during the drought.³² The high prices for sheep and wool was often of little benefit to the farmers as the profits could not make up for the losses they had suffered in other production categories during drought years.³³ Wool was the only product of which the value had remained consistently high, reaching a peak at 20 pennies per pound in 1925, one penny more than the 19 pennies per pound in 1924. Decreased production capacity in wool meant the odds that farmers could benefit from such prices were minimal.³⁴ In years of high precipitation such as 1925 and 1926 the high prices for wool and high productivity served as a temporary relief for many farmers in the North Western Cape, allowing them to make some recoveries from their financial losses.³⁵

By 1928 there was a notable reduction in wool production across the North Western Cape caused by livestock deaths.³⁶ The quality of the wool being sold on the Cape market also decreased (not fine, long or white wool) due to the poor rainfall's impact on grazing fields of wool producing areas.³⁷ The Land Bank feared that due to the continued period of stable wool prices the country would be struck by a sudden drop in the market value of wool, which had

³⁰ U.G. 24- '25, *Thirteenth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa and financial returns for the year ended 31st December 1924*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1925, pp. 25-26.

³¹ Anon., "Boerdery en handelsoorsig", *Landbouweekblad*, 18 March 1928, p. 2823.

³² Anon., "Oorsig van boerdery toestand", *Landbouweekblad*, 13 February 1924, p. 1103.

³³ Anon., "Handelsoorsig van die boerdery", *Landbouweekblad*, 20 February 1924, p. 1140.

³⁴ *Union of South Africa, Debates of the House of Assembly, Fourth session, fourth parliament, Volume 1, 25 January to 10 of April 1924*, Parliamentary Printer, Cape Town, p. 1214; Union of South Africa, *Department of Agricultural economics and marketing, Handbook of Agricultural Statistics 1904-1950*, The Government Printer, Pretoria, 1960, p. 183.

³⁵ U.G. 22- '26, *Fourteenth year report of the central board of Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa and financial returns for the year ended 31st December 1925*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1926, pp. 4-5; U.G. 12- '27, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1926*, Government Printers, Pretoria, pp. 31-32.

³⁶ U.G. 18-'29, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1928*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1929, p. 42.

³⁷ Anon., "Boerdery en handelsoorsig", *Landbouweekblad*, 28 January 1928, p. 2163.

become a dominant sector of the South African economy.³⁸ These fears would prove to be prophetic as 1928 was the last year to see record prices for wool with a recorded average of 16 pennies per lb, an increase from the two previous years' averages of 14 pennies per lb.³⁹

The year 1929 marked the early stages of the end of the drought period, although reports from the Western Cape region indicated persistent poor rainfall trends. The slight improvement in rainfall increased wool production in the region, however, falling wool prices reduced the profits that could have been earned had the price remained stable. The price of agricultural produce had fallen for all markets, with grain farmers complaining that the low prices were disastrous for them as they struggled to cover the production costs.⁴⁰ The grain farmers suffered irrespective of the marked improvement in crop production from the nearly negligible produce of 1928 to 1929.⁴¹ The problems of 1929 would simply worsen by 1930 with the Great Depression which led to a worldwide fall in prices especially for wool, forcing many farmers into selling their sheep to abattoirs.⁴² The fall in prices for wool began in 1929 at only 14 pennies per lb but would reach an all-time low of 4 pennies per lb in 1933 before rising again in 1934 to 10 pennies per lb.⁴³

The after effects of the drought would be felt in the years following 1929 with the onset of the economic recession during the Great Depression from 1929 to 1934. Farmers, who were already in a difficult economic position from losses suffered under the drought struggled to recover their losses under the depression. The year 1929 marked steady improvements in crop and animal production for the district's farmers due to increased and stable precipitation across the district. However, with the impacts of the depression through falling commodity prices, economic activity in the town of Vanrhynsdorp grounded to a halt (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). The Great Depression resulted in a lack of cash inflows towards agricultural producers as the prices for their products depreciated. This culminated with increasing numbers of local

³⁸ U.G. 18-'29, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1928*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1929, p. 42.

³⁹ Union of South Africa, *Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Handbook of Agricultural Statistics 1904-1950*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1960, p. 183.

⁴⁰ U.G. 16-'30, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1929*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1930, p. 41.

⁴¹ Anon., "Boerdery en handelsoorsig", *Landbouweekblad*, 2 May 1928, p. 3157.

⁴² Anon., "Die boer moet maar moed hou", *Landbouweekblad*, 15 January 1930, p. 2259; Anon., "Slegte toestand van wolmark", *Landbouweekblad*, 29 January 1929, p. 2416.

⁴³ Union of South Africa, *Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Handbook of Agricultural Statistics 1904-1950*, The Government Printer, Pretoria, 1960, p. 183.

farmers defaulting on loans while the number of rural households that bought goods from local stores decreased. Consequently, it brought about financial burdens to the district's store owners, general dealers and banks who relied on rural households for their patronage. As the depression wore on the magistrate for Vanrhynsdorp feared that even with the government's support to households the credit situation would eventually force many private lenders to take drastic measures to compensate their losses.⁴⁴

3.4.1 The impact of drought on cereal production in the district

The focus of this chapter is on the period 1924 to 1934, however, to ascertain the long-term production trends before and after the drought period and how drought impacted on productivity in the district, this section uses a wider timeframe from 1918 to 1937. The two years which have been marked especially as being peak drought years were 1924 and 1928, which is specifically noted when analysing the data. The section therefore has two chronological periods, a wider production period from 1918 to 1937 and a shorter period focused on the peak drought years of 1924 to 1928.

Cereal crop production in the Vanrhynsdorp district over the period 1918 to 1937 fluctuated frequently, while in the long term remaining relatively consistent, even increasing as seen in Figure 13. The lowest recorded production years were in 1924 and 1928, both of which were years that saw little rainfall during the height of the drought periods (see Figure 3). The 1923 to 1924 crop reports present an unusual finding that wheat and most other cereals briefly increased in that period before rapidly dropping in the 1924 to 1925 period, suggesting that late 1923 did have good rainfall that improved the harvest in 1924 before a major collapse in 1925.

Though a variety of crops were grown in the Vanrhynsdorp district, wheat remained the district's main marketed crop, with 5,674 ha of the district's available farmland being dedicated to its production over the period. Production over the drought period in Vanrhynsdorp and its neighbouring districts were low and interspaced with regular dips in output, especially when

⁴⁴ NASA, JUS, Vol, 636, File, 1/733/21, Formation of vigilance committee Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1932: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Justice, 4/5/1931.

compared with the more industrious preceding years the largest decrease in wheat production coincides with the peak drought year, 1928 (Figure 13).

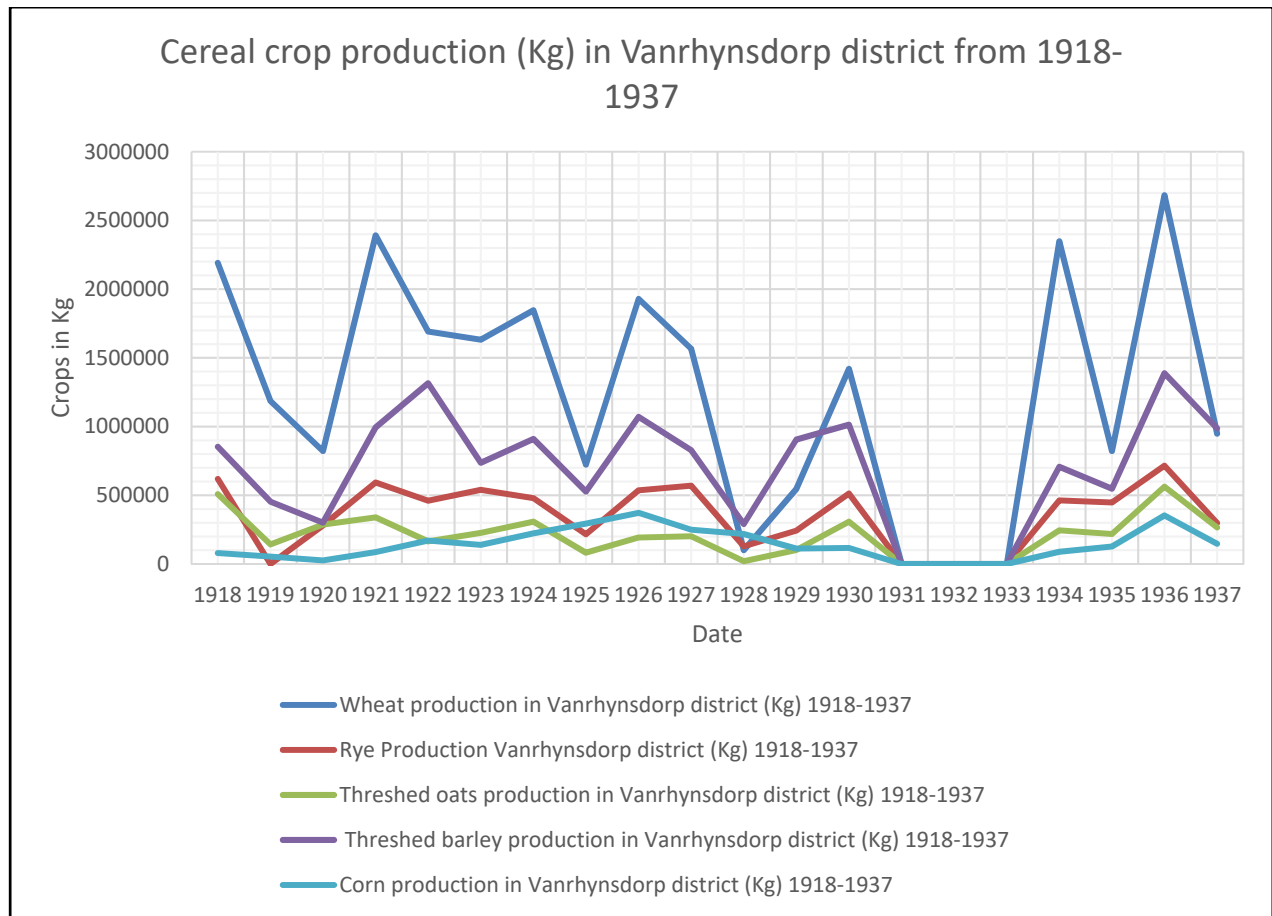


Figure 13: Cereal crop production (kg) in Vanrhynsdorp district from 1918-1937.⁴⁵

Following wheat, the second and third highest yielding crops among farmers were threshed barley and rye, both of which were crops proven to be relatively drought tolerant.⁴⁶ Barley constituted the second highest yield producing crop, with Figure 13 marking barley's similarity to wheat in production trends, though barley tended to have more minimal drops in crop yields when compared to wheat. Comparatively larger areas were planted with wheat rather than barley at an average of 1,735 ha between 1918 and 1937. Rye proved to be a less popular crop with farmers in the district (as seen in Figure 13), with only 1,298 ha being planted on average between 1918 and 1937. The yields of rye crops tended to be more stable over the

⁴⁵ *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1918-1937* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

⁴⁶ I.K. Dawson, et. al, "Barley: A translational model for adaptation to climate change", *The New Phytologist*, 206, (3), 2015, pp. 916-918; I. Czyżyło-Myszał & B. Mys, "Analysis of the impact of drought on selected morphological, biochemical and physiological traits of rye inbred lines", *Acta Physiol Plant*, 39, (87), 2017, pp. 1-6.

period 1918 to 1937, with shallow dips in yields and rapid recuperation from peak drought events in 1924 and 1928. Both barley and rye followed a similar pattern to wheat, with periods of low crop yield occurring in the drought years 1925 and 1928 while high productivity occurred in high precipitation years such as 1926, 1930 and 1934.

The two low-yielding cereal crops in the district were corn and threshed oats, both of which fell below rye in yields, with corn production dropping outside of years with low precipitation (1929-1931). This low production of corn seems to be linked to the depreciation of its market value, with the repercussion that farmers in the district decreased their yields for the duration of the depression of 1929-1934 as productivity would not return to normal until 1936 (see Figure 13).

Cereals were important crops for most farmers in Vanrhynsdorp, as particularly wheat had both an economic and social value (subsistence). Therefore, the evident decrease in crop production highlights not only how vulnerable producers were to droughts but hint at the deeper social impacts a failed harvest would have on a population that were reliant on monoculturalism of wheat.

3.4.2 The impact of drought on livestock and livestock produce

Though wheat consumed a large portion of many farmers' lands, wool sheep was the dominant driver of Vanrhynsdorp's agronomic sector. Wool's history of reliable high prices and the renowned hardy nature of the stock made it a central pillar of the district's economy. Figure 14 illustrates this, denoting that of the four main classes of livestock sheep was the most numerous, followed closely by goats and a much-depreciated cattle and swine population. These figures are represented more in depth by Figure 11 which denotes the large disparity between the district's larger wool sheep population when compared to its smaller non-wool sheep population.

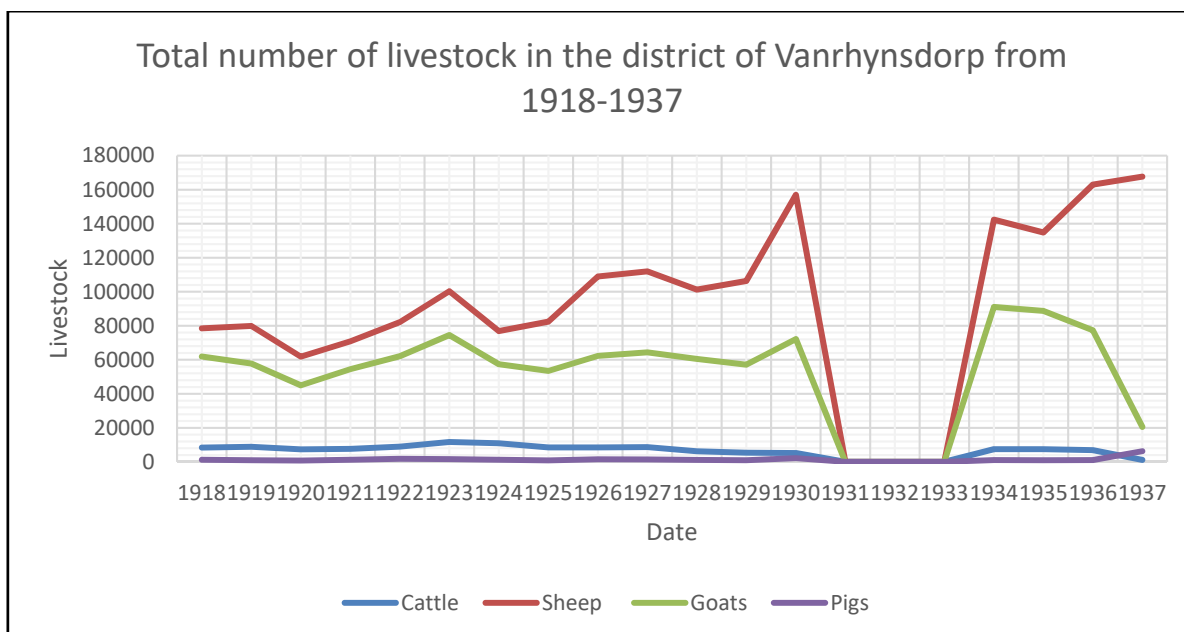


Figure 14: Total number of livestock in the district of Vanrhynsdorp from 1918-1937.⁴⁷

Goats were a close second in terms of the size of their population but were not as large an economic factor as wool sheep. There were numerous causes for this situation, one being that unlike other districts in the Cape Province the Angora goat fur (known as mohair) was never produced in large quantities within the district. Production failed to surpass its height of 881 kg in 1920. The cause for disinterest in mohair production in Vanrhynsdorp could probably be linked to the low and fluctuating market prices mohair received in the period 1919-1939. The droughts of the period also whittled away at the animal's popularity amongst farmers who instead turned to harder and more profitable sheep farming.⁴⁸ Vanrhynsdorp's large goat population were therefore slaughter stock, who were maintained to provide meat and milk for the local population.

The cattle herd populations within Vanrhynsdorp had never been large, and the impacts of the droughts had diminished these numbers rapidly. One explanation for this was the economic troubles within cattle markets of not only the Cape Province, but the Union as a whole. The market prices for cattle remained low and unstable.⁴⁹ The native environment of the district, which consisted of dry and sparse scrubland known as Vanrhynsdorp

⁴⁷ *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1918-1937* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

⁴⁸ T. Pringle, "A history of the South African mohair industry 1838-1971", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 4, (2), 1989, pp. 64-69.

⁴⁹ U.G. 24- '25, *Thirteenth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa and financial returns for the year ended 31st December 1924*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1925, p. 13.

“*knersvlakte*”, did not provide much in the way of nutrition for bulky cattle, whilst comparatively sheep and goats could thrive on the shorter grass of the region for long periods without showing ill effects.

The impact of the drought on the livestock population in the district was not as devastating as the impacts on crops, which saw rapid fluctuations in the presence of equally fluctuating and unreliable rainfall. Livestock is essentially slightly more complex than plants since they were able to receive additional imported (but expensive) fodder, consume succulents for water, were more mobile and therefore drought-related deaths declined when stretched over a longer period. Another important factor that impacted on the number and type of livestock was market demand with the number of animals directly proportional to market demand and prices. The mobility of livestock also played a vital role in population preservation during the drought, as farmers moved (trekked) to less affected regions. Other farmers made use of government restocking schemes and credit facilities to replace diminished herds. What is evident is that farmers during the peak drought years that had the lowest recorded rainfall (1924 and 1928), irrespective of the livestock drought maintenance techniques discussed, still suffered large losses in the sheep and goat populations of the district when compared to preceding years.

A notable impact of drought was on the produce retrieved from livestock to be sold on the market, with the most important product in Vanrhynsdorp being wool. Drought had two impacts on animal produce: loss of animals and loss of condition in animals. Figure 15 denotes the relationship between the number of wool sheep in the district and the amount of wool produced each year. Wool production had shown reliable growth with the amount of wool collected each year evidently related to the size of the wool sheep population in each year. The impact of the drought on production is evidenced by the falls in the amount of wool produced in 1924 and 1928. These drops in wool production were caused by drought-induced poor body conditions of the sheep affecting both the quantity and quality of wool produced as well as the number of wool-bearing sheep lost to the drought.

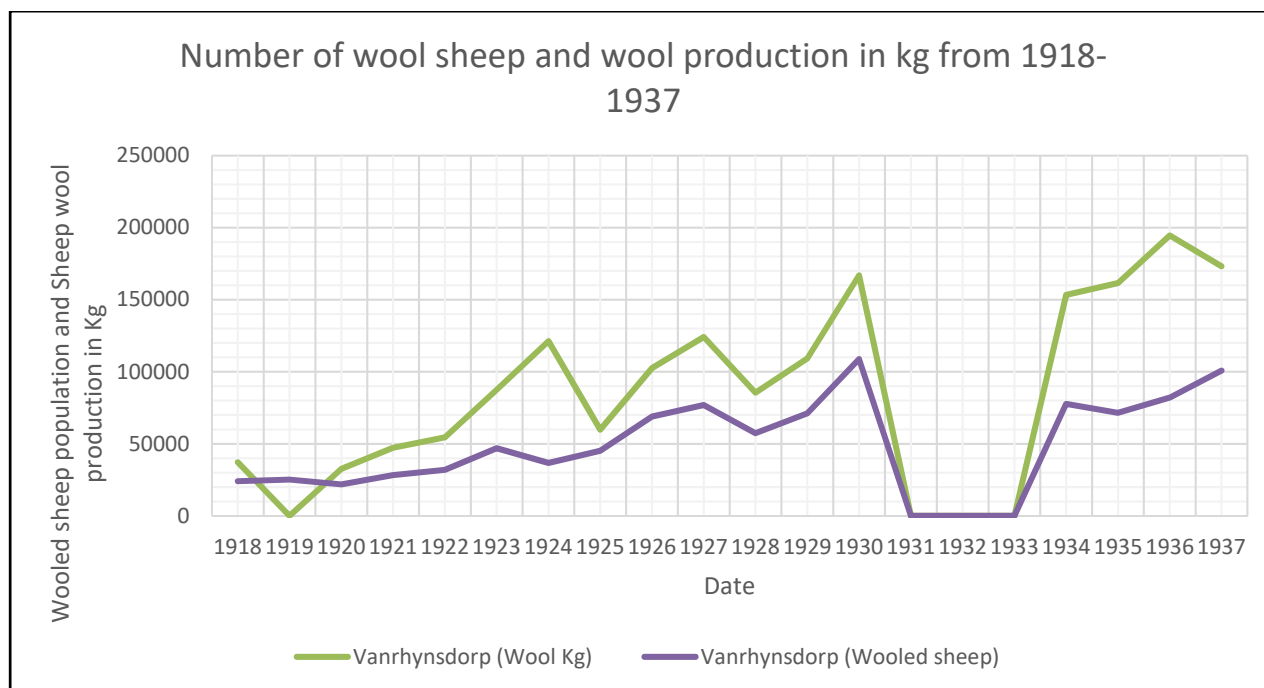


Figure 15: Wool sheep and the amount of wool produced in Vanrhynsdorp district from 1918-1937.⁵⁰

Figure 16 reveals some of the number of sheep and cattle reported by farmers to have died from drought and disease and highlights that deaths caused by drought and disease amounted to a total of 34,347 sheep in 1928, which was an increase from the number reported in 1923 (22,780).⁵¹ The graph does not differentiate between wool and non-wool sheep, so it cannot be determined what the full financial impact of the drought's losses were on sheep farmers. Cattle losses from drought were recorded at 1,877 in 1928, which was almost double the 814 deaths reported in 1923. The graph also highlights that the overall number of sheep and cattle deaths from 1927 to 1928 caused by drought and disease were comparatively much larger than the start of the drought period. It should also be noted that as Figure 12 shows the number of farms that sent returns also decreased during the drought years which makes it likely that the numbers present in the census does not reflect the actual extent of the losses. What is evident from this data is that the loss of stock during the drought likely left many farmers in difficult financial situations as they would have been forced to take expensive measures to recover from their losses.

⁵⁰ *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1918-37* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

⁵¹ NASA, LDB, Vol, 2314, File, R3381/44, Drought distress relief act 1928 Vanrhynsdorp district, 1928-1929: Letter from Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Minister of Agriculture, 18 April 1928.

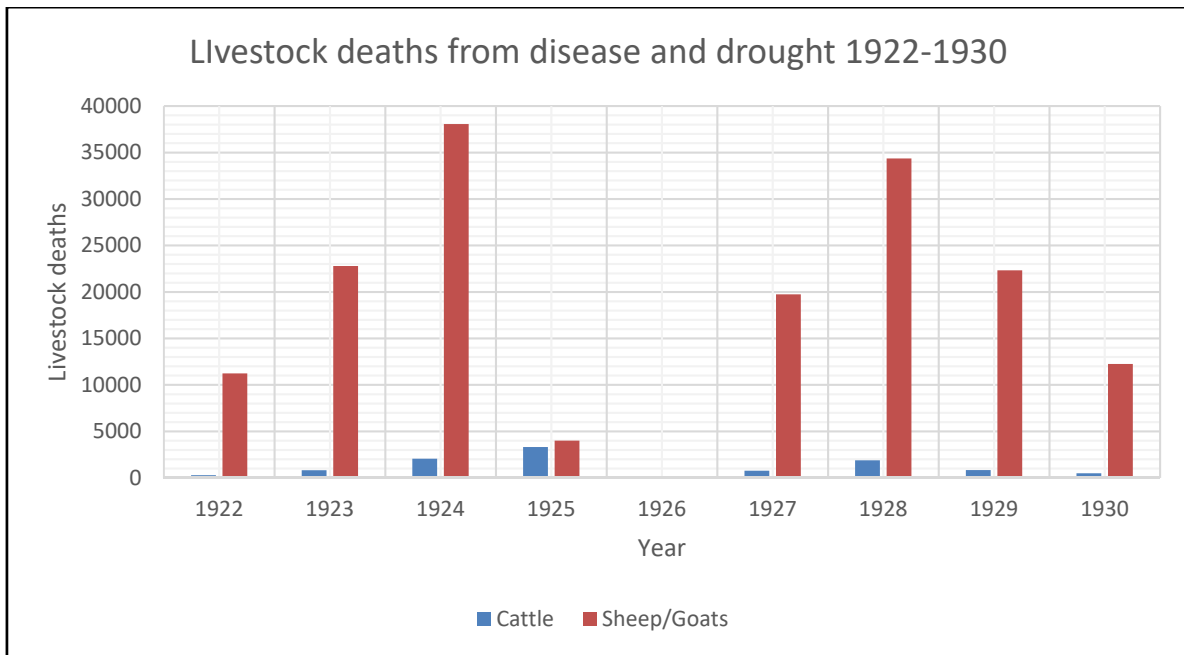


Figure 16: Livestock deaths from disease and drought in Vanrhynsdorp 1922-1930.⁵²

One product that was important to the people of Vanrhynsdorp was butter, which often aided in supplementing local farmers' annual income. Butter was often made by farmers at their homes using older small-scale methods of churning the milk to form butter. The apparent problem was that butter production was reliant on both the number of mulch cattle and goats on farms and their condition, since animals in poor condition produced less milk. The farmers were therefore faced during the years of drought with decreases in butter production for 1924 to 1925 being the lowest recorded production figures for the district on the census files (see Figure 17). This scarcity then had a knock-on effect, whereby all butter products became increasingly more expensive for all and costs of maintaining dairy cows in a condition necessary to produce quality milk also increased.

⁵² *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1922-30* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

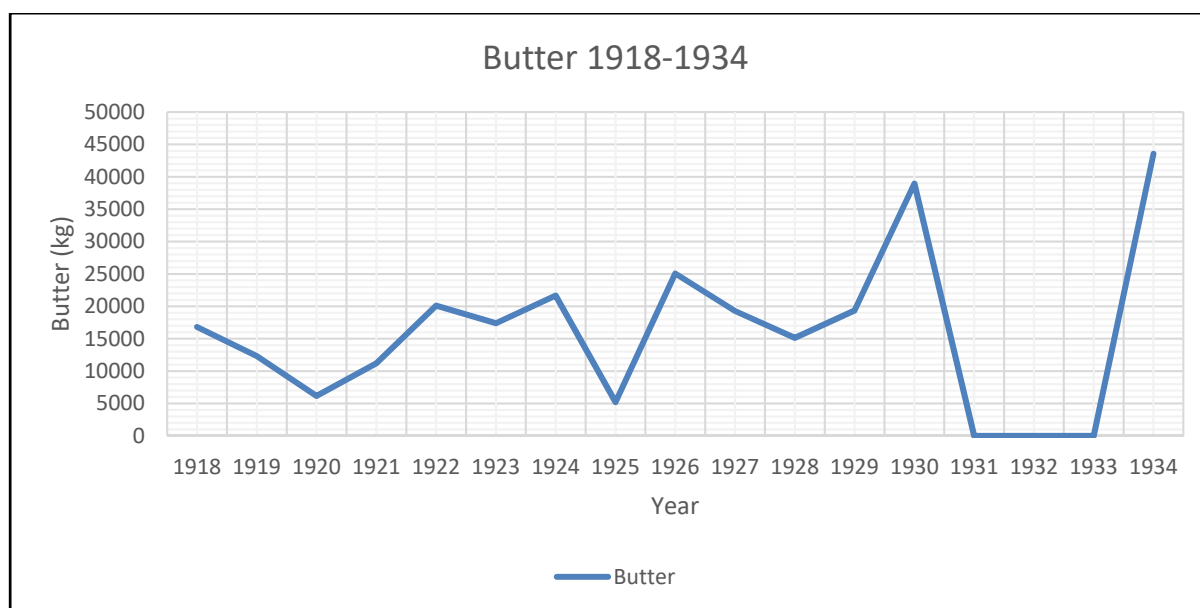


Figure 17: Butter produced (kg) in the district Vanrhynsdorp from 1918-1934.⁵³

3.5 The impact of drought on the financial income of households in the district

This section analyses the financial impact of drought on the white population of Vanrhynsdorp using tax and financial information from the Dutch Reformed Church's Algemene Armesorg Kommissie archival collection (hereafter DRC AAK) to determine how the drought had affected the households in the district materially and financially. Tax collection records published by the Commission for Internal Revenue were used to determine the annual incomes of the population in the district. It should be noted that the income tax data used by the Commission was only for a small percentage of the district population that actually qualified to pay income tax, most likely those with commercial interests. Therefore, the study, in an attempt to provide a more in-depth look to the financial impacts of drought on the district, used the financial reports from the DRC AAK collection as a means to evaluate the personal incomes of the population through what the people of the district's congregations were willing to donate to the organisation. Although, for a lack of available data, no overall picture of the financial impact of drought on the town and district's whole white population can be provided

⁵³ *Reports of the Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa 1918-34* (See full references under Bibliography, Census of Agricultural and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa).

here, it does endeavour to portray a societal cut of this community's financial position during the period under discussion.

The section mainly works with data from the years 1922 to 1937. These years were chosen as they cover the majority of the drought period including a few years before and after the period being studied. Most of the data from the DRC archive also begins in the year 1922 and it is therefore easier to compare income tax data to that from the church with this date.

As noted in chapter two, Vanrhynsdorp was an impoverished district. Figure 18 illustrates that the largest amount in tax payments in the period 1922-1937 were those made in the two years before the beginning of the drought in 1922, when an increase of £657 was collected since 1921. The latter was the year prior to the first low rainfall records of the drought and boasted high crop production and prices which translated to higher income tax payments. The income tax, however, saw a large drop to £509 in 1924 at the height of the drought. The district's tax payments increased steadily to £644 in 1927 following the return of normal rainfall in 1926 and the resultant larger harvest of produce that year. This amount fell again in 1928 to £551 due to the drought's effect on agricultural production and would continue to fall during 1929 to £383. The district's tax payments would continue its slump to a minimum of £99 in 1930, more likely as a result of the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 when the prices and demand for agricultural produce began to decline because of the residual impact of the drought. The depression seems to have had a major impact on the local economy of Vanrhynsdorp as tax payments steadily improved in 1932 to £600 falling again into a slump for most of the period. Figure 18 also highlights that the average number of taxpayers (which can be seen in the number of tax assessments) carried out each year did not generally change or vary during the period. What is evident is that during years of higher tax collections there was also a slight increase in tax assessments across the district.

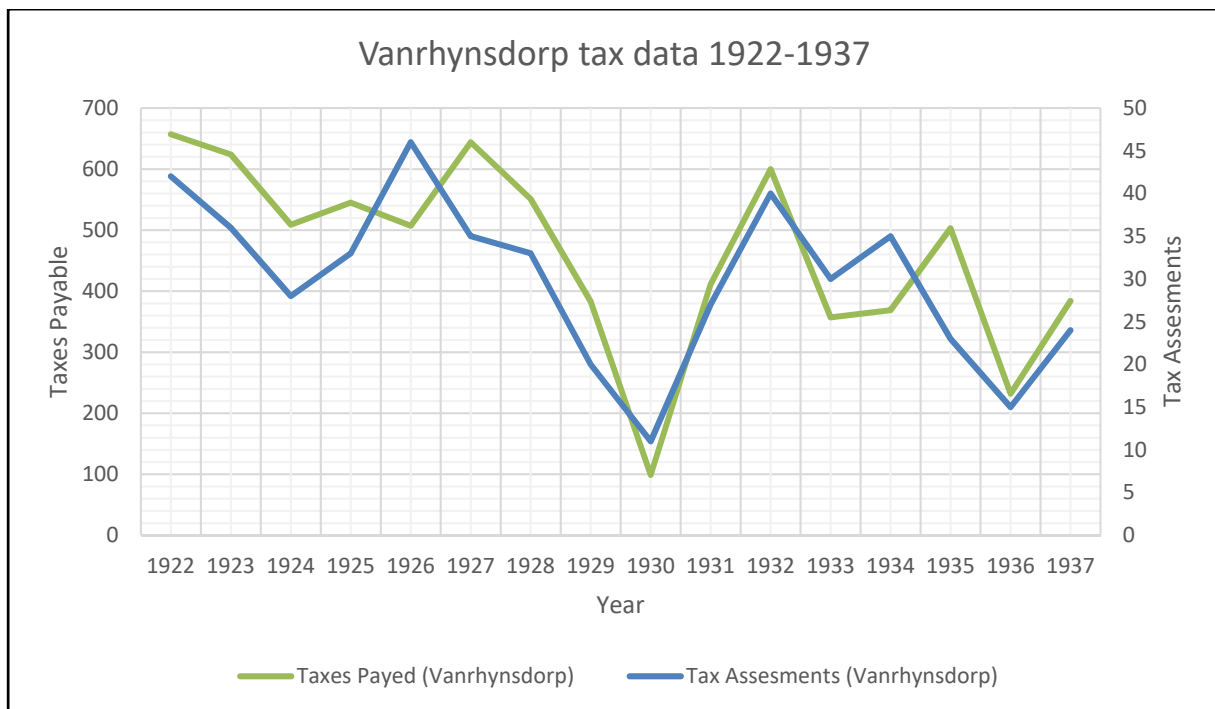


Figure 18: Vanrhynsdorp tax data 1922-1937.⁵⁴

The tax assessments taken each year were used to determine what each qualified taxpayer was due to pay for that year. This meant that the Department of Internal Revenue was capable of evaluating how much money each household had for that year and deducing what taxes could be removed. Figure 19 highlights the amount of taxable income each household had from 1922 to 1937 in the districts of Vanrhynsdorp, Namaqualand, Calvinia and Clanwilliam, which compares the trends and situation around the general incomes of each district and what the incomes were at average before taxes were deducted. The first notable trend highlights Vanrhynsdorp to have been one of the poorest districts of the four, with only the district of Clanwilliam recording lower taxable incomes. The districts of Calvinia and Namaqualand both had larger populations and agricultural output as well as mining and other industries resulting in higher taxes than Vanrhynsdorp and Clanwilliam.

Until 1928, Calvinia generally had more taxable income than Namaqualand (likely a consequence of the drought). As seen in Figure 19, Calvinia's taxable incomes dropped rapidly from £75,303 in 1927 to £46,713 in 1928 and £33,475 in 1930. Namaqualand's income however, increased from 1928 onwards until 1936, likely due to alternative sources of income, in addition to agriculture, provided by new mines in the region. Figure 19 also denotes that the

⁵⁴ This graph was compiled using statistics from the *Union of South Africa, Report of the Commissioner for Inland Revenue for the years 1922-37* (See full references under Bibliography as Report of the Commissioner for Inland Revenue).

taxable income for Vanrhynsdorp did not decrease as rapidly during drought years (1924 and 1928) as it did during the years of the Great Depression between 1929 and 1934 with only a slight improvement in 1932. A similar trend in the graphs for Calvinia and Vanrhynsdorp indicates that the good price of meat and wool during the drought periods assisted to partly offset the effects on incomes and taxes during the drought in 1924 and 1928 seasons but the drop in prices during the depression had a severe impact on income and taxes.

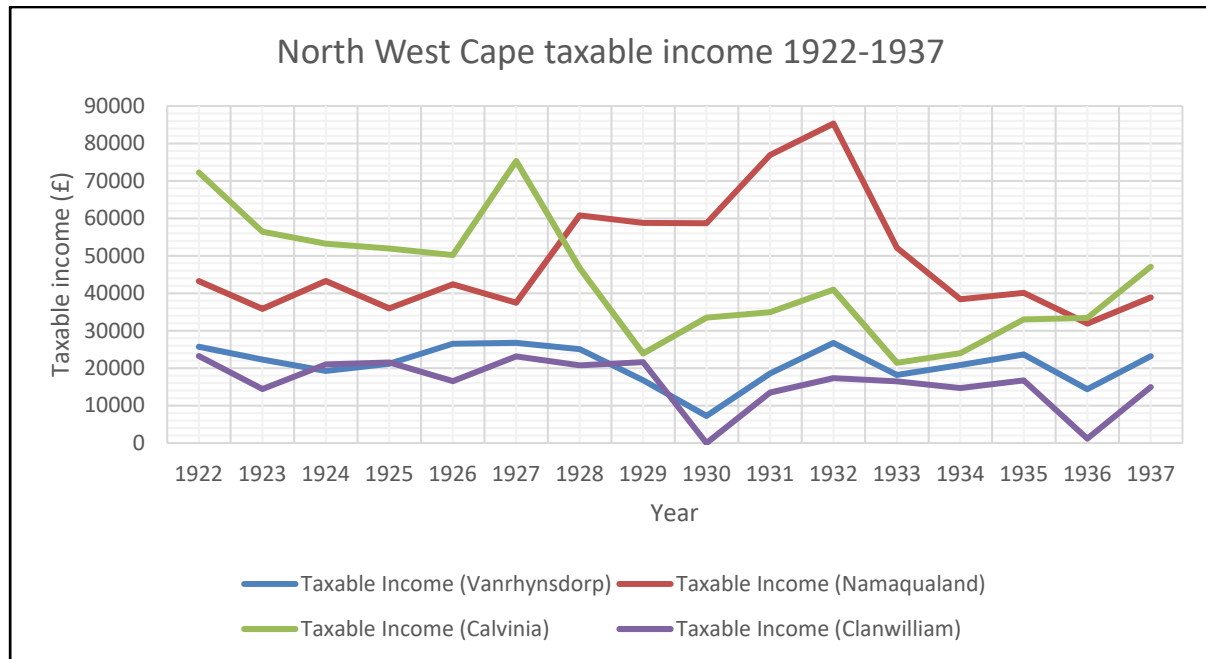


Figure 19: North West Cape taxable income 1922-1937.⁵⁵

The tax data is supported by the DRC AAK returns from 1922-1942 in Figure 20. The majority of the money given to the AAK was for the purpose of providing charitable support and poor relief to members of DRC congregations in the Vanrhynsdorp district and was therefore made up of funds collected by all congregants in the church. This data represents the differences in the amounts church members in different parts of the district were able to provide and helps to explain the often-overlooked small-scale economic differences between households in the region. Figure 20 also denotes that from 1922 to 1928 the average amount of money donated to the AAK from members of the church decreased steadily each year, with Vanrhynsdorp in particular falling faster than the relatively smaller towns of Nuwerus (the main urban settlement to the North of the district). The majority of this decrease can be ascribed

⁵⁵Union of South Africa, *Report of the Commissioner for Inland Revenue for the years 1922-37* (See full references under Bibliography as Report of the Commissioner for Inland Revenue).

to the drought of 1924 and 1928 as both years mark a decline in funds being donated by both congregations.

As evidenced by the low incomes to the church's AAK funds, congregants became less willing to provide financial assistance to the DRC as they had entered a period of financial difficulty and constraint which lasted (in total) from 1922 to 1938. There is also some evidence of the impacts of the post-drought Great Depression from 1929 to 1931 in the Vanrhynsdorp congregation, with a slight increase in the donations to the church in 1932. The Nuwerus congregation, which was the poorer of the two, continued to receive low payments from 1929 to 1934. The graphs provide proof that of the two congregations, Vanrhynsdorp was wealthier as it received larger amounts of donations in comparison with the Nuwerus congregation. These indicators, however, exclude the post-drought depression which influenced the years of 1934 to 1938 and during which time the donations received were similar for both the congregations of Vanrhynsdorp and Nuwerus. The separation of the Vredendal congregation from the Vanrhynsdorp congregation in 1934 and the resultant loss of congregants brought the latter closer in its financial position to that of Nuwerus. The Vanrhynsdorp congregation did not recover from the split until 1938, when its average income increased again to over £500.

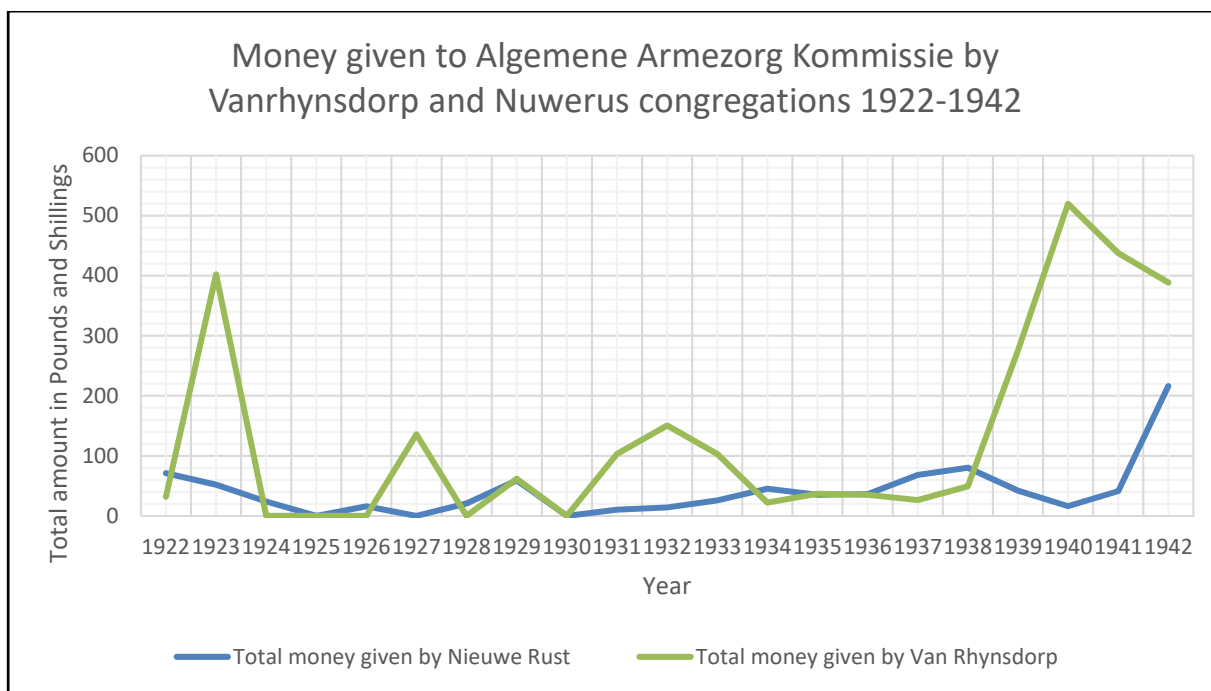


Figure 20: Money given to Algemene Armezorg Kommissie by Vanrhynsdorp and Nuwerus congregations 1922-1942.⁵⁶

The average amount of money donated by congregants fell rapidly from 1922 to 1928, with the average amount donated by congregants in Vanrhynsdorp falling by at least seven shillings (from eight shillings per member in 1922 to one shilling per member in 1927) and the poorer Nuwerus by a shilling (falling from two shillings in 1922 to five pennies in 1928). This shows the disparity in wealth and income between the two congregations even before the drought. The amount paid by each member in both congregations would only begin to increase again from 1938 onwards (post-depression). During the drought period under discussion the amount would remain low showing that many communities had little extra money to spend on charitable institutions.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The years 1924 to 1926 and 1928 had no Vorm Z sent to the NG Kerk Archive and therefore the data is seen as zero on the above graph. See NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F: Diens van barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943, Vorm Z: Nieuwe Rust, 1922-1943; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F: Diens van barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943, Vorm Z: Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1943; N G Kerk Argief, PPV 199, Ds. A.D. Luckhof Jr, Armesorgvorms, 1924, Vorm Z Nieuwe Rust, 1923-1924.

⁵⁷ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F: Diens van barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943, Vorm Z: Nieuwe Rust, 1922-1943; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F: Diens van barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943, Vorm Z: Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1943; NG Kerk Argief, PPV 199, Ds. A.D. Luckhof Jr, Armesorgvorms, 1924, Vorm Z Nieuwe Rust, 1923-1924.

3.6 Conclusion

The impacts of drought on the economy of the district was of such a nature that it left much of the district in financial difficulty which lead to greater social repercussions (to be discussed in Chapter 4). Farming in the district of Vanrhynsdorp and the rest of the country was generally not of such a good standard that it would allow farmers to make a significant or even steady income from their activities whether in favourable or adverse agricultural conditions. Many farmers received below market prices for their products due to their reliance on middlemen. Credit was a large issue for many farmers and in general the quality of their produce was not always of high standards. The apparently fluctuating prices for major produced goods generally including wheat, wool and butter, resulted in many farmers regularly being limited to the mercy of what their produce could fetch on the market with only livestock goods (mainly wool) being reliable enough to secure any meaningful income during the drought period.

The actual impact of the drought on the district's agricultural sector was focused more on its crop producing region, with wheat, rye and hay all showing significant decreases. At the same time livestock losses tended to be less heavy, though still noticeably worse during the two particular drought years of 1924 and 1928. This could be seen especially in the drop of economically important animal products such as wool and butter, the impacts of which was visible in the financial household information provided by the Commission of Inland Revenue and the money donated to the AAK. This information highlighted that in general, the income of households in the district and neighbouring districts fell significantly between 1922 and 1937, with the worst initial drops in income happening during drought years.

However, apart from the drought another significant issue which impacted on the income of farmers in the district was the Great Depression of 1929-1932, the effect of which were exacerbated by the preceding long-standing drought. Although the period 1929-1932 saw improvements in rainfall and agricultural production, a significant drop in household incomes still occurred as a result of drops in domestic prices and sales. The chapter proves that in general drought was a major issue for the economic stability in both the local and neighbouring district populations, which then lead to a drop in productivity and incomes.

Chapter 4. The social impacts of drought on Vanrhynsdorp

4.1 Introduction

There are two reasons why it is important to observe the social impacts of drought in the historical period of 1924 to 1934. Firstly, as pointed out by Donald Wilhite, when a drought interacts with a social system and physical environment it creates a set of impacts on the said system. This means that the local environment and population that inhabit that area will be impacted differently by a drought and react differently to drought than other regions even within the same country.¹ The second motivator, according to Ben Edwards (et al), is that although the economic and environmental impacts of drought has been intensively analysed, few studies focus on the social impacts of drought.²

Social impacts of drought can vary tremendously, but is usually typified by increased financial pressure on families due to crop loss, migration, disruption of social connections and emotional stress.³ Vogel and Drummond noted in 1993 that the then recent droughts in South Africa had caused increased hunger and poverty as well as displacement of families.⁴ Noted impacts of drought, particularly on women in rural areas, tend to focus on issues including the difficulty of acquiring food when crop failures occurred, migration of men to seek work and the women left behind with more responsibilities around the home.⁵

This chapter is divided into five main subsections focusing on the household impacts of drought religion, education, people of colour and migration in the district. Although the chapter's main period of observation is from 1924 to 1934, data immediately preceding and after this period was also used. This occurs in the two sections of religion and migration. In the religion section this is done to highlight the development and change in the way religious communities reacted to the drought from 1922 to the start of the drought in 1924. In the section

¹ D.A. Wilhite & M.H. Glantz, "Understanding: the drought phenomenon: the role of definitions", *Water International*, 10, (3), 1985, p. 9.

² B. Edwards, M. Gray & B. Hunter, "The Impact of Drought on Mental Health in Rural and Regional Australia", *Social Indicators Research*, 121, (1), 2015, pp. 177-194.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-194.

⁴ C.H. Vogel, & J. H. Drummond, "Dimensions of drought: South African case studies", *GeoJournal*, 30, (1), 1993, p. 94.

⁵ W. Tichagwa, "The effects of drought on the condition of women", *Focus on Gender*, 2, (1), 1994, pp. 20-21.

concerning migration, it was used to better contextualise the distribution of the district's population before and after the drought.

4.2 Household poverty and hardship in the district

A prominent impact of drought in general and specifically in Vanrhynsdorp was a fall in the standard of living. Drought resulted in macroeconomic hardships as the failed agricultural sector, in a region reliant on the sale of plant and livestock products, led to families losing an income, as can be seen in Chapter 3. The lack of an income to rural families had a domino effect on other aspects of life. Families could no longer afford the extra costs of employees, clothing or rent. Many families lacked income to spend on education and religious institutions, while others were forced to abandon their properties and seek a livelihood elsewhere in the district (or in the country). Impacts of the drought on the district of Vanrhynsdorp was thus not limited to food availability, but to the ability of local communities to procure food.

The year before 1924 marked the start of drought-related low food security within the region, brought about by the combination of poor harvests in 1923 and 1924. One report noted that poorer white children received no food or only a watered-down *pap* (porridge) in the mornings and a meal consisting of a single sweet potato cooked in water for lunch. Many families reported being so poor that many of the children walked to school in a single item of clothing.⁶

⁶ NG Kerk Argief, PPV 207, Ds. A.D. Luckhoff. Jr, Korrespondensie briewe Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1925, Korrespondensie Van Rhynsdorp (Nieuwe rust), 1922-1926, Letter from L.E. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 14/11/1923.



Figure 21: Depiction of farmers observing fields ruined by locusts and drought from a *Landbouweekblad* in 1924 titled “Dis die jaar 1924 en die sprinkane en droogte druk swaar op onse land”.⁷

The situation was aggravated in the North Western districts due to the (by most accounts) already impoverished state of districts. Many of the local farming families had already faced pre-existing problems such as poor markets for local producers, the impacts of earlier droughts, division of farms into smaller less productive units and the credit system which left many farmers in debt to local businesses. The low levels of education among the general populace, few opportunities for school leavers and the lack of affordable property had created a situation where many young men and women left the region to find work elsewhere. Many farmers were also heavily mortgaged, which was exacerbated during periods of drought when agriculturalists failed to make an income and could no longer service the loans on their properties.⁸ Together with the prevailing low precipitation and monoculturalism in agriculture, the lingering social issues created a situation where the impacts of drought and economic depression caused significant disruption to an already fragile society.

The DRC (Dutch Reformed Church) Ring for Clanwilliam noted that drought worsened the pre-existing poor white situation in some areas of the North West through losses on farms which forced many former workers and tenants to migrate into towns and to more prosperous

⁷ Anon., “Die droogte in Suid Afrika”, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 30 January 1924, p. 1011.

⁸ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F: Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943: Vorm Z: Namaqualand, 1922-23; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from Provincial Administrator to the Secretary of Labour, 30/10/1924.

farms where they would group together to financially support one another. The Ring Commission blamed this situation on the sub-par education in the area which had created farmers who could not take advantage of opportunities given to them, thereby making many of the poorer land renters and farm workers in the district more vulnerable to drought.⁹

By 1923 the above-mentioned issues with the growing impacts of drought had created an influx of impoverished people towards the more opportunity rich Southern regions of the district along the Olifants River, where better employment opportunities and living conditions beckoned. This development increased the socio-economic pressure among the population living along the river. The problems caused by the arrival of migrants would worsen this already difficult environment with the impacts of drought and later depression from 1924 to 1930 and with significant repercussions for the population of the district.¹⁰

From 1924 into early 1925 reports on the impact of drought upon the white and Coloured populace became more frequent, especially in the Northern wards of the district. Drought and locusts had ruined the harvest in 1924 to such an extent that even minor rainfall events were unable to alleviate the situation. The conditions many people lived in were described as terrible, mainly with regards to food and finances.¹¹ January 1925 still saw complaints that there was no maize or wheat to feed the relief workers along the Northern road projects.¹² A lack of food drove many of the Coloured people at Rietpoort to starvation, leaving the district council little option but to sell meat from donkeys shot at the local pound to the Coloured community.¹³ The situation in the town itself had led to many members attempting to provide relief through small charity projects such as buying food for local inhabitants.¹⁴

Rural agriculturalists began abandoning their farms and seeking employment through local relief works, creating a disproportionate flood of young boys and elderly men ranging from 16 to 70 years old. They flocked to the district towns and construction sites to find temporary employment. Families were often left to fend for themselves on the farms or nearby plots in tents and huts whilst relying on the drought relief provisions of 40 lbs (18.1 kg) of flour

⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Clanwilliam, Verslae-Algemeene Armesorg, 1 Julie 1922-30 June 1923.

¹⁰ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F: Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z: Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-23.

¹¹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J. Niewoudt to Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, 8 September 1924.

¹² WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1913 Jan-1925 March: District Council Meeting, 23 January 1925.

¹³ *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 12 November 1924.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 17 October 1924.

per family per month.¹⁵ In the Olifants River wards the problem was made worse when the farmers on irrigation plots were unable to leave their lands which many were leasing from the government and could not leave uninhabited or risk forfeiture of the property. This left many irrigation farmers in difficult positions as they ran out of food and financial incomes to support themselves. The lack of food was caused by both a poor harvest and overdistribution of their personal reserves to people that migrated from the Northern wards to the river in hopes of finding work and food.¹⁶ One observer to the situation in the North Western Cape felt that the only people who did not experience deprivation due to the drought were a handful of shop owners who ran monopolies in the rural areas of the region.¹⁷

Poor nutrition was a serious issue among poor whites and poor Coloured people in the Cape, especially during the drought years of 1924-1930. The diets of many families were overly reliant on starch (bread, potatoes and sweet potatoes) while lacking essential nutrition through fresh produce.¹⁸ Bread was of great importance to the diet of people in the Karoo, regularly replacing many other staples such as rice, porridge and potatoes.¹⁹ The importance of bread and flour as a staple food for the district's population was highlighted by ds. Luckhoff's article in *Die Kerkbode*, "*Brood, Brood, Brood...Brood is daar die groot voedingsmiddel*".²⁰ The cause for this was poverty and an environment prone to drought, low rainfall and locusts, making vegetable gardening difficult. Poor diet was reported as a result of ignorance, which the Carnegie Commission of 1932 suggested could be improved by educating white women who were responsible for much of the caretaking tasks in the home.²¹

The farming community in the district lived from one harvest to the next, relying on the funds from selling their excess crop to make a profit for that year. The failed harvests in 1924 and 1928 left many families in difficult positions. Therefore, when the resurgent drought caused a poor harvest in late 1927 (see Figure 13) and a failed harvest in 1928 which caused

¹⁵ Andrew Rich, "Die nood in Namakwaland", *De Kerkbode*, 6 May 1925, p. 384.

¹⁶ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Secretary of Labour, 28/10/1924.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

¹⁸ R.W. Wilcocks, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission, Part 2 Psychological Report*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, p. xv; NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from Father van 't Westhuizen to the Provincial Administration, 9 April 1932.

¹⁹ A.D. Luckhoff, "Die nood in Namakwaland", *De Kerkbode*, 17 December 1924, p. 1672.

²⁰ "Bread, Bread, Bread... There bread is the primary staple". See A.D. Luckhoff, "Die nood in Namakwaland", *De Kerkbode*, 17 December 1924, p. 1672.

²¹ Wilcocks, *The poor white problem in South Africa*, p. xv.

food insecurity and economic difficulties for rural families,²² the blow of this second drought was compounded by the fact that most rural families were still recovering financially from the impacts of the 1924 drought.²³



Figure 22: Map of drought affected areas by Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, circa. 16 February 1927.²⁴

In 1928 flour had become scarce and in many of the Northern wards the cost of flour had reportedly risen to £2 per muid (180lbs) of flour.²⁵ Due to the drought and high costs it was reported that white and Coloured people became heavily dependent on food rations. When supplies ran out in November of 1928 many people were left without a means to feed themselves. Food rations had been on short supply since late 1927 when families only received quarter rations. It was feared that many families would not survive without regular supplies of

²² NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from J.J. Engelbrecht to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 26/3/1928; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from unknown to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 28 February 1927.

²³ Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, "Ver en gou gery: Die droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 16 February 1927, p. 240.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²⁵ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemene, 1925-1929: Letter from M. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 21/11/1927; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from J.J. Engelbrecht to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 26/3/1928.

food, particularly the elderly, disabled, young, widowed and families with no able-bodied bread winners.²⁶

By February of 1928 there were reports that the food supplied by the Administrator's Fund no longer contained the stock necessary to meet the needs of local communities as all the magistrate could offer was 40 lbs (18.1 kg) of flour. This was deemed to not be enough to feed a single person, much less a large family for a full month when forced to divide it into three meals.²⁷ One farmer pointed out that without the food provided through the magistrate and church many people would have likely starved, especially since the local price of flour had reached £2 per bag.²⁸

In addition to the drought causing a loss of funds and food security, it also created a situation whereby many families could not afford basic essentials such as clothing. Poorer families during the drought began sending children to school with little in the way of clothes.²⁹ Adults wore clothing that was either old, worn out or mismatched, as they could only wear what they could find or were provided through charity.³⁰ The costs of acquiring clothing were accentuated as many families were so large that it had become difficult to acquire the appropriate amount of clothing.³¹

The drought additionally hampered the ability for families to provide children with toys and other non-essential items, which led to Ds. Luckhoff's Christmas charity of 1927. The charity relied on donations of gifts made up of fruit, money, sweets and toys to the *dominee* (preacher), who then distributed it. One participant noted that there had not been enough parcels for everyone, forcing them to make the parcels as small as possible, yet most ran out before they could reach the outlying farms.³² The charity only received a limited amount of gifts to

²⁶ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Provincial Administrator, 8 October 1928.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter from Vleurmuisclip to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 2/2/1928.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter from J. J. Engelbrecht to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 26/3/1928; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J.P. de Bruyn to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 5 January 1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from O.L. Kruger to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 16/8/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from M. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 21/11/1927.

²⁹ NG Kerk Argief, PPV 207, Ds. A.D. Luckhoff Jr, Korrespondensie Briewe Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1925, Korrespondensie Van Rhynsdorp (Nieuwe Rust), 1922-1926: Letter from L.E. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 14/11/1923.

³⁰ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from Vleurmuisclip to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 2/2/1928.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Letter from J.J. Engelbrecht to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 26/3/1928.

³² NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J. Burger to Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, 27 December 1928.

distribute across the Cape Province and the issue of the large, extended families made it difficult to provide for all of the children.³³ A correspondent in *De Kerkbode* also noted that it was unfortunate that only the white children received from this charity as many of the Coloured children would also have appreciated such a gift.³⁴

The drought in the district impacted on the livelihoods of white farmers, forcing many to cease farming and to give up a profession which had become their way of life. A personal account by one such farmer noted that he had grown up as a livestock farmer, but with the drought, the costs of renting land, lack of grazing and the fact that his 250 sheep could not be sold even for slaughter left him with no income. He made the decision to sell his sheep so that he could travel to the Namaqualand diamond mines to find employment.³⁵ Another farmer wrote to the *dominee* telling him that he was a former livestock farmer of 25 years but had given up farming after all his stock died in the drought. He had become a road worker to earn an income to buy food for his wife and ten children, yet he had to continue paying rent for property he could not use and it was not something he could continue to afford.³⁶

The loss of aid from the Administrator's Fund threatened starvation to the district, particularly amongst the struggling members of the community. By 1928, twelve elderly Coloured people had to be relocated to Stellenbosch as their situation had deteriorated until they were on the brink of starvation.³⁷ At the same time the magistrate noted that he was in the process of feeding ten other elderly Coloured persons at Rietpoort through his pauper relief supplies.³⁸ Many of the elderly in the district had no income and often relied on financial support from their families. During the drought reliability of such support became scarce and many of the elderly fell into destitution as the able bodied younger people had left the reserves and farms to find work in the South.³⁹ Widows and wives struggled during the droughts since

³³ *Ibid.*, Letter from A.E. van Wyk to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 17/12/1927.

³⁴ A.H. Barnard, "Noodlijdende kleurling kinder hartjies", *De Kerkbode*, 11 January 1928, pp. 69-70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from Tobias Beukes to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 25 August 1928.

³⁶ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from H. Stramsrood to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 22 July 1927.

³⁷ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Provincial Administrator, 8 October 1928.

³⁸ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary for Native Affairs Pretoria, 3/12/1928.

³⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from M. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 21/11/1927.

they were often the only remaining bread winners for very large families, all the while still having to fulfil the roll of caretaker for the children.⁴⁰

The extent of this issue should be seen in consideration of the fact that (according to the Carnegie Commission) women in the households of the North Western Cape rural communities regularly oversaw duties such as caring for livestock on the farm. These duties were completed in addition to the other traditional areas of the running of households, including cooking, cleaning and raising children which often also included educating the child. The preparing of food took a significantly larger amount of effort and time because on rural farms all food had to be prepared from raw ingredients. Many women from poorer households were also employed while being expected to fulfil these responsibilities. Women in rural households were vital for maintaining the home and their families, which meant that the impacts of drought on these women who were left alone on the farm with the children and few means of income was severe.⁴¹

The Coloured women of the Vanrhynsdorp district faced many similar difficulties, but with the addition that Coloured families often suffered because of low incomes that left many unable to save money for periods of hardship. Poor education among the Coloured population maintained the cycle of poverty and made it difficult for Coloured women to advance in their work lives or household lives. One of the largest threats facing the Coloured community was the impact of alcoholism, an endemic problem made worse by farmers who paid their workers in natura with alcohol that caused domestic abuse and other social ills. Combined, these issues created a significant increase in hardships experienced by women of colour in the district when droughts occurred.⁴²

Recent settlers on irrigated plots of the Olifants River faced a different set of problems caused by the drought. Many people believed that due to their position along the river, drought wouldn't affect the irrigation farmers. This proved contradictory as farmers on irrigated plots were just as reliant on rainfall to secure their harvest as water used from the canals exclusively

⁴⁰ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from H. J. Dippenaar to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 26/7/1928.

⁴¹ J.R. Albertyn & M.E. Rothman, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission, Part 5 Sociological Report*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. 174-177; NG Kerk Argief, PPV 207, Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, Jr, Korrespondensie Briewe Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1925, Korrespondensie Van Rhynsdorp (Nieuwe Rust), 1922-1926: Letter from L. E. Niewoudt to Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, 14/11/1923.

⁴² NG Kerk, B 9038, Verslae V.S.B Jaarverg, 1915-1925: Verslag van die Algemeene Vergadering van die Vrouwen Zending Bond (Kaap Provinsie), gehouden op Worcester, 6 to 9 November 1925, p. 63.

could not provide for the crops. Rainfall acted as a natural insect repellent by keeping insects from the crops and stopping them from ruining the harvest. O.L. Kruger, a local farmer, described the new settlers as having no money, livestock, crops, bread or clothing and since they received no assistance from the relief fund or government, they were living in dire circumstances. This situation was aggravated by the fact that many of them had large families and were forced to live in small reed *pandokkies* (hut-like structures, see Figure 23 for an example of such structure).⁴³



Figure 23: Example of a *pandokkie* (reed hut) near Vredendal in the 1930s.⁴⁴

In the last two years (1927 and 1928) the irrigated farms in the Southern part of the district had suffered poor harvests, similar to that of other people on the outer farms, mainly because crop growth was followed by swarms of insects that destroyed the oats while in their growth stages. One crop of oats was lost to a sudden dry spell while a second was lost to the birds and insects after it had been cut and left on the land to dry. Any crops not destroyed by the swarms of insects and drought were later destroyed by large flocks of local birds and birds from all over the region that had migrated to the river during the drought.⁴⁵

⁴³ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from O. L. Kruger to Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, 16/8/1928.

⁴⁴ G. C. Hattingh, *Die N G-gemeente van Vredendal 25 jaar oud 1933-1958*, Die Kerkraad, Vredendal, 1958, p. 53.

⁴⁵ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from O.L. Kruger to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 16/8/1928.

Kruger noted that in the two years he and other irrigation farmers had been there they had tried planting two separate crops of corn and lucerne, but both had failed. Many of the irrigated farms were bought on debt which with the impacts of drought had not been paid in two years, therefore the farmers risked the loss of their property.⁴⁶ Emotional health impacts, although often overlooked, were also severe, with many of the struggling farmers developing anxiety over how they would make ends meet. These struggling farmers often turned to prayer as a means for moral support as religion was a large cultural component to many rural households, as noted by Kruger: “The Lord shall hear us, for He knows how many sighs we have swallowed, how many prayers to save us from our suffering and sleepless nights we have been brought through, for who would not have sleepless nights and who would not ask their God for assistance when they live under such suffering as here”.⁴⁷

4.2.1 The impact of drought and depression on household living standards among the DRC white congregations of Vanrhynsdorp

Through the 1930s many families in the district were left in financial difficulties from the Great Depression and the after effects of the period of drought since the 1920s. The situation eventually led to attempts by the AAK (1933) to collect information from each of its congregations in the Cape Province to contextualise the severity and extent of impacts of the preceding drought and depression on the communities. Much of this data only seems to entail the white congregations of the DRC in the Vanrhynsdorp district and therefore cannot provide information on the impact of the drought and depression on the local Coloured population.

The returns for the Ring of Calvinia and its constituent congregations, including those in the districts Vanrhynsdorp, Namaqualand and Calvinia, creates an impression of the impact of drought and depression on living standards. A total of 701 (81 in towns and 620 in the rural

⁴⁶ The irrigation farms along the Olifants River were considered to be struggling by 1928 as none of the new farmers had managed to pay any of the rates for their land or water, with farms plagued by salinization, flooding and canal bursts. See NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from O. L. Kruger to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 16/8/1928; U.G. 7-'29, *Union of South Africa, Year Report of the Commission on Irrigation for the period ending 31st March 1928*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1929, p. 15.

⁴⁷ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from O.L. Kruger to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 16/8/1928.

areas) families that normally could have maintained a high standard of living were forced to revert to poor living conditions and poverty due to drought and economic depression. Families deemed to normally be unable to sustain an average standard of living were numbered at 566 (188 in towns and 378 in the rural areas). A total of 1267 families in the Ring of Calvinia noted themselves to be suffering from low living standards in 1933. Out of the total of this 1267 families suffering from low living standards in 1933, 160 families received food rations from the magistrate while 94 families in the Ring were deemed completely impoverished.⁴⁸

Vanrhynsdorp's congregation consisted of a minimum of twenty families who normally would have had a high standard of living in the surrounding rural areas, but in 1933 were struggling to maintain the said standard. A total of 123 families in the congregation struggled with low standards of living divided between the town (41) and dispersed across the surrounding farms (82). Comparatively, in 1933 the total number of families with below average living standards numbered 143, which accounted for 19% of the general populace of 760 families. In 1933, the newly-created Olifants River congregation only reported 25 families (6% of a total of 400 families) were incapable of maintaining an acceptable standard of living. When compared with the larger figures reported below in Nuwerus it can be concluded that the majority of unemployed and poor persons in the district existed to a larger extent in the North of Vanrhynsdorp not along the Olifants River.⁴⁹

However, the accuracy of these reports was questionable as the parameters for who qualified as having 'below average living standards' were not clearly set by the church. The church did provide a definition for what they considered to be a person with a low standard of living in 1923. The church considered anyone as having a low standard of living when they either had no set income, were unable to financially support themselves and their families or were unable to improve their situation with their financial abilities.⁵⁰

The *dominee* of Vanrhynsdorp noted that the congregation had 36 families who were deemed completely indigent, which was an appreciation from the nine families in 1923. The congregation of Vanrhynsdorp also harboured an additional 40 families living on food rations

⁴⁸ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Calvinia, Rapport van die Rings Armesorg Kommissie van die Ring van Calvinia, 1932-1933.

⁴⁹ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F: Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Van Rhynsdorp, 1932-1933.

⁵⁰ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F: Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Van Rhynsdorp, 1923.

from the local magistrate although another 60 were receiving rations on a temporary basis by 1933. These figures suggest that one of the long-term impacts of the drought was the development of a strong reliance on assistance by the government due to the increased poverty in the congregation.⁵¹

The Northern congregation of Nuwerus quantified that some 180 families located on outlying farms suffered a decline in their standards of living. The population of families which usually suffered from low living standards remained at 58 (eight in the town and 50 on farms just outside the town), which brought the total number of families with low living standards for 1933 to 238. This number accounted for a majority of 77% of the total 310 families in the Nuwerus congregation. Five families within the congregation were defined as ‘indigent’, an increase from the two reported families in 1923. Unlike Vanrhynsdorp, Nuwerus only housed one family that regularly received aid in the form of food rations from the magistrate, though this number does not include the 31 elderly recipients of assistance through pensions. This low number of recipients of state aid was likely due to the distance between the office of the magistrate and the surrounding population.⁵²

The main cause for this large number of people with low living standards were deemed to have been the aftermath of the continuous droughts and its associated financial losses, contributed to by the Great Depression. The responders had also noted that the continuously repeating droughts and their associated blows to families’ abilities to make a living had sapped many people in the congregation’s *moed* or spirit. This feeling of despondency arising from the financial distress of the drought period, was specifically noted by the *dominee* of Vanrhynsdorp to have caused a large number of men to stop searching for employment and carrying out new business ventures. Many of the younger people in the community left schools underprepared and therefore were failing to find employment. This was argued to be the result of a lack of vocational training of students that were not taught to adapt to the changing workplace mainly due to many being underprivileged and coming from poorer families.

There was also significant difficulty in finding stable employment for families with a poor education and little financial support in such a constrained economic situation as that of the post-drought period. The *dominee* argued that another cause for prolonged unemployment

⁵¹ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1933.

⁵² NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Nieuwe Rust, 1923 & 1933.

was the result of character flaws in families' bread winners, including naturally workshy dispositions, the environment at work, a lack of respect for rules and authority, an inability to adapt to change, a refusal to participate in certain forms of employment and personal disabilities.⁵³

It was also suggested that in many cases farming in the region was still too primitive and poorly applied by farmers, with very little planning and modern mechanisation utilised, which provided for little else than subsistence. The *dominee* of Nuwerus in particular singled out the barter system, which was used by the local farming community with the residing store owners under which they regularly traded livestock for cash. This system was argued by both the *dominees* of Nuwerus and Namaqualand to be unequal, because the store owner often obtained more stock for lower prices thus forcing the farmers into difficult financial positions.⁵⁴

In addition, many communities had become overly reliant on rations and relief work from the government and charities, which some *dominees* argued had resulted in many becoming unwilling to seek work or opportunities and resulting in unrealistic expectancies of free, regular food rations. This indolent style of thinking was also turned on the state relief works, which were blamed for demoralising workers to continue seeking employment on the farms when they could earn higher wages from government work.⁵⁵

4.3 Drought and Religion

Religion and disaster events are normally closely interconnected, yet is often overlooked in detailed studies. Religion can play a major role in the way people react to and are impacted by a disaster and is often closely linked to pre-existing socio-economic driving factors including

⁵³ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1933; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Calvinia, Rapport van die Rings Armesorg Kommissie van die Ring van Calvinia, 1932-1933.

⁵⁴ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Nieuwe Rust, 1923-1935; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Calvinia, Rapport van die Rings Armesorg Kommissie van die Ring van Calvinia, 1932-1933.

⁵⁵ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Calvinia, Rapport van die Rings Armesorg Kommissie van die Ring van Calvinia, 1932-1933.

poverty.⁵⁶ When dealing with natural disasters and their impact on religion, Chester and Duncan argued that there were two views in Christian theodicy. Firstly, disasters are part of an omnipotent God's way of punishing the sinful, or secondly, it is simply a natural disaster which takes place outside of divine wrath.⁵⁷ This section observes and utilises the above-mentioned theory to identify similarities or divergence in reactions based on the socio-religious impacts of drought on the district of Vanrhynsdorp (primarily Christian-oriented) and, to an extent, South Africa.

It should be noted that the opinions put forward in this section does not represent all the religious beliefs of the population of the district and only focus on the major religious groups found in primary sources. Therefore, although such focus provides a comprehensive general overview, it may not be an accurate depiction of the impacts of droughts on every religion or religious person across the district, much less the country. This section spans from 1922, leading up to the start of the drought in 1924 until 1927, providing a period broad enough to draw successive conclusions on religious reactions to drought in the time span under study, without becoming repetitive in its findings. No other sources could be found that discussed the religious aspects of the drought in the district after 1927.

4.3.1 The importance of the Dutch Reformed Church in society in the District of Vanrhynsdorp

The district of Vanrhynsdorp populace almost entirely comprised of Christian followers divided into various denominations, with the DRC congregations comprising the majority of the district congregations (4147 white people in 1921). There was also a small Jewish population of some 90 people.⁵⁸ The DRC in the North Western Cape therefore played a large role in religious and relief responses to the drought.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ J. C. Gaillard and P. Texier, "Religions, natural hazards and disasters: and introduction", *Religion*, 40, (2), 2010, pp. 81-83.

⁵⁷ Theodicy is defined as attempts by the faithful to find reason for suffering in light of religion. See D. K. Chester and A. M. Duncan, "The Bible, theodicy and Christian responses to historic and contemporary earthquakes and volcanic eruptions", *Environmental Hazards*, 8, (4), 2009, pp. 304-314.

⁵⁸ Union of South Africa, Department of Statistics, *1921 Census*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1922, p. 15.

⁵⁹ J.P. Jooste, "Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte met besondere verwysing na die Noordweste", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1995, p. 6.

The DRC had a long history in the Vanrhynsdorp district being one of the first denominations in the region to build a church in the then hamlet of Troe Troe (later Vanrhynsdorp) in 1866. Previously services had been held in home of the local field cornet on the farm Troe Troe. The small church was relatively cheap to build with a thatched straw roof and dried mud floors. It was replaced by a larger building twice to accommodate the town's rapidly growing congregation, both in 1874 (see Figure 24) and 1891 (see Figure 25). Following this, the original church building was rented to the *Sendings Gemeente* (missionary congregation) from 1891 onwards.⁶⁰



Figure 24: Second Dutch Reformed Church building in the hamlet of Troe Troe, completed in 1874 to replace the smaller one built in 1866.⁶¹



Figure 25: The new DRC building completed in 1891.⁶²

⁶⁰ J.P. Jooste, "Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte", pp. 23-24; Van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp 1877-1977*, p. 83.

⁶¹ Van Lill, *Ned. Geref. Gemeente Van Rhynsdorp 1877-1977*, p. 23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The DRC played a significant role in the lives of local communities and church activities made up important parts of people's daily lives throughout the Karoo. Churches were often centred in towns, which meant that communities had to travel regularly from surrounding farms to attend services. Church services were important in the social life of rural residents of the district as church events often doubled as gathering places for socially isolated communities who did not otherwise interact throughout the year. Drought severely impacted on the ability of local congregations to participate in church organisations and services which had dire consequences for social life in the district. The combination of the urban location of most churches and the rural nature of the congregation membership caused difficulties for the DRC to provide Sunday sermons with sacramental services such as *Nagmaal* (Communion).⁶³

Jooste pointed out that in order to address this problem, most Dutch Reformed Churches would send out members such as *dominees* (pastors), deacons and church elders to hold prayer services on outlying farms, referred to as a *wyksbidure*. A measure implemented to deal with the reality that the more rural congregants struggled to attend services in town due to both poverty and lack of transportation, problems that were worsened during times of drought. This left many members only able to attend major church ceremonies such as Communion.⁶⁴ The relatively isolated Northern congregation of Nuwerus especially suffered from a lack of attendance, with a congregation comprised of a relatively small-town population and rural farmers and workers.⁶⁵ The local *dominee* spent a great deal of time traveling to attend services, doing house calls and performing marriage ceremonies. The situation was exacerbated during periods of drought, which forced many farmers to trek further away, while others lacked transportation to reach the church due to the drought's impact on finances and beasts of burden (oxen, horses, mules and donkeys).⁶⁶

⁶³ O.P.J. Stander, "Die voorkoms van wit armoede in Oudtshoorn tussen 1914-1937", Ongepubliseerde PhD-proefskrif, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, 2017, pp. 92-95.

⁶⁴ According to the Godsdienste verslae, the Vanrhynsdorp congregation had at least ten of these gathering places scattered across outlying farms. See NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 8 October 1922; NG Kerk, K-DIV 1835, Godsdienst verslagen 1929: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, In de gemeente gelezen 30 June 1929.

⁶⁵ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 8 October 1922; NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1833, Godsdienst verslagen 1925-1926: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente gelezen 11 October 1925; NG Kerk, K-DIV 1834, Godsdienst verslagen 1927: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, In de jaare 1926-1927.

⁶⁶ Jooste, "Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte", pp. 12-20.

The DRC was a hierarchical organisation with the *leraar* or *dominee* being the most prominent leader of the community, responsible for performing services, sacraments and overseeing the general spiritual well-being of the congregation. Church deacons and elders were responsible for minor matters such as running the church finances, social events and other management duties.⁶⁷ One *dominee* crucially noted that their role in the society of the North West was to also oversee the protection of the people of that region from “spiritual foes” such as other denominations and “social evils” (e.g. alcoholism and poverty).⁶⁸ The social importance and power that the DRC held can also be understood through its ability to place members under *tug* (censure) when they failed to meet church laws.⁶⁹

The district of Vanrhynsdorp was divided into two separate *gemeentes* (congregations) by 1922, namely the Vanrhynsdorp and smaller Nuwerus congregations. Both congregations fell under the organisation of a *ring*, which was a larger collection of congregations that oversaw broader, cross-congregation activities. Efforts were made to found a new congregation in the Olifants River ward using an old church building in the mission station at Ebenezer in 1926 in response to the increased demand created by the drought-induced population influx (as described under 4.6).⁷⁰ This eventually became the congregation of Vredendal in 1934.

The DRC church also held significant political power, as can be seen in the aftermath of the drought. DRC pastors in the Ring of Clanwilliam became concerned that Coloured people on farms were neglected by the church, noting that increased missionary work to Coloured communities, targeted by other Christian denominations during the period of drought, was needed.⁷¹ To combat these focused conversion attempts the Ring of Clanwilliam moved to pressure the ministers in the national government as well as the Cape Provincial Administrator to open diamond prospecting sites (known as *delwerye* or diggings) in Vanrhynsdorp and Namaqualand. Local church bodies were also persuaded to be more active in evangelical work and co-operate with other church organs such as the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging* (ACVV) to provide medical assistance on the relief works.⁷² This provides

⁶⁷ Jooste, “Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte”, pp. 12-20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18; NG Kerk Argief, KR 236, Acta al die ringen, 1923, Ring van Clanwilliam 1923: Eerste sitting 18 October 1923.

⁶⁹ Jooste, “Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die 1933 droogte”, pp. 10-20.

⁷⁰ NG Kerk Argief, GEM-K 2428, Van Rhynsdorp Kerkraad Notules, 1905-1929: Ordinary Meeting 13 November 1926.

⁷¹ NG Kerk Argief, KR 237, Acta al die ring verslae, 1925: Ring van Clanwilliam, Second sitting 16 October 1925; Anon., “Hongersnood in Namaqualand”, *De Kerkbode*, 13 August 1924, p. 1040.

⁷² NG Kerk Argief, KR 239, Acta al die ring verslae, 1927: Ring van Clanwilliam 1927, Second sitting 21 October 1927.

a good example of just how much political pressure the church was able to bring to bear on issues such as relief work to combat other denominations and perceived threats to their domain.

4.3.2 Religious perspectives during drought

As signs of drought became increasingly evident in 1922 and 1923, some members of the religious communities understandably became increasingly worried about the inevitable growth of larger drought-related problems. One *dominee* reportedly attempted to ease the concerns of the local people by informing them that God only punishes those that had wronged Him and suggested that if the people were concerned of an impending drought then they should attend the church more regularly.⁷³ This exchange exemplified a regular view among religious leaders of the DRC, who used the theodicy that natural disasters, such as drought, were punishments for a community's sins and encouraged people to rather show signs of their devotion more regularly (i.e. attending church and prayer sessions) to combat the threat of drought.⁷⁴ The growing threat of the drought did not only cause anxiety among the general populace but also became a concern among the *dominees* of the DRC. Many of them were told during the Clanwilliam Ring conference of 1923 that the present *dominees* had to remain faithful in their religious beliefs during troubled times to assist their communities spiritually.⁷⁵

When drought conditions began to worsen in Vanrhynsdorp during 1923 the local *dominee* called for a wider show of faith and need for all congregations to enforce religious devotion, as the drought was again perceived as a form of divine punishment for sinful actions.⁷⁶ One *dominee* blamed the poor rainfall on the lack of faith among congregations and people that neighboured the district, suggesting that the people of Vanrhynsdorp were being punished for others' lack of faith.⁷⁷ Resultantly, relief of drought conditions through rain, even

⁷³ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 8 October 1922.

⁷⁴ D.K. Chester and A.M. Duncan, "The Bible, theodicy and Christian responses to historic and contemporary earthquakes and volcanic eruptions", *Environmental Hazards*, 8, (4), 2009, pp. 304-314.

⁷⁵ This may, however, only have been a coincidence as the two events are separated by a full month. See NG Kerk Argief, KR 236, Acta al die ringen, 1923: Ring van Clanwilliam 1923, Eerste sitting 18 October 1923.

⁷⁶ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 14 October 1923.

⁷⁷ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 14 October 1923.

temporarily, often led to day long sessions of thankful prayer among DRC communities in Vanrhynsdorp.⁷⁸

The *dominee* at Nuwerus similarly used the motive of drought as a divine punishment in 1923, noting that the drought had left the congregation "... tendered and broken in...by His striking hand", attributing it as a sign that God was working on the community.⁷⁹ This was enhanced by the fact that in addition to the drought, there had been locust plagues and associated losses in the area that year.⁸⁰ The drought also led to a rise in attendance of services, with reports of non-believers and businesses closing so that people could flock to the church for days of prayer.⁸¹ The intense devotion and reliance on faith throughout communities were emphasized by nation-wide days of humiliation and prayer carried out in 1924 across different religious organisations at the behest of the Prime Minister, J.B.M. Hertzog.⁸²

De Kerkbode, the DRC's national publication, accommodated many correspondents arguing the importance of prayer in relieving the drought.⁸³ The moderator of the DRC regularly called for days of *verootmoediging en bid* (humiliation and prayer) to bring an end to the drought in 1923. During such events, it was expected that all Christians would spend the day praying and attending services for an end to the drought.⁸⁴

As the drought's impacts worsened, correspondents to *De Kerkbode* began to note that even though many members of the DRC had prayed for rain nothing had changed. One correspondent reasoned that the only solution was for religious communities to hold prayers more frequently and in larger numbers.⁸⁵ These morally-dominated beliefs were also shared by farmers who believed that if they prayed they would receive support, with many farmers regularly praying for rain.⁸⁶ What becomes evident in these correspondences is the broader

⁷⁸ R. van Meulen, "Vanrhijnsdorp", *De Kerkbode*, 9 May 1923, p. 610.

⁷⁹ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, Jaar eindige 30 June 1923.

⁸⁰ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, Jaar eindige 30 June 1923. A report supported by *De Kerkbode* noted that due to some light rains the water had attracted swarms of locusts to devour the young crops. See Anon., "De droogte en de sprinkhanen", *De Kerkbode*, 31 October 1923, pp. 1476-1477.

⁸¹ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, Jaar eindige 30 June 1923; Anon., "De droogte en de sprinkhanen", *De Kerkbode*, 31 October 1923, p. 1476.

⁸² Anon., "Rand keeps day of humiliation", *The Rand Daily Mail*, 28 July 1924, p. 8.

⁸³ Anon., "De droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 3 January 1923, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Anon., "De droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 10 January 1923, p. 30.

⁸⁵ D.S.B. Joubert, "De Droogte en die roepstem tot gebed en verootmoediging", *De Kerkbode*, 10 January 1923, pp. 59-60.

⁸⁶ F.J. Strauss, "Die droogte en lamsiekte", *De Kerkbode*, 21 February 1923, p. 285.

importance some members of the church placed on the idea of an omnipotent God that controlled all and the feeling of no control many of them seemed to have over this and the drought.

By 1924 the DRC had begun to move away from a focus on spiritual solutions to drought, instead focusing on the secular aid that could be provided, with calls in *De Kerkbode* for donations to the church or government charities.⁸⁷ There seems to have been two reasons for some members of the DRC to turn to more materialistic support. The first being the supposed threat of the Roman Catholic Church using aid in the drought to convert Protestant Coloured people. The second reason was the actual starvation and poverty amongst both white and Coloured people in the districts.⁸⁸ In Vanrhynsdorp the drought had caused an apparent spiritual problem by 1924, with services becoming less visited (although this was also due to the previously discussed lack of funds and transport), whilst at the end of every service the *dominee* was visited by larger numbers of concerned congregants.⁸⁹

The Catholic Church's parishioners in the region were also stricken by the drought and made regular pleas for aid and assistance because of the situation in the Vanrhynsdorp area. The Catholic Church in the Vanrhynsdorp district had few followers among the white population, but a significant portion of the Coloured community in the district belonged to the faith. What is of particular interest to note is the difference between the Catholic and DRC method of requesting assistance from their church followers for drought relief. The most active attempt at drawing support for the Catholic missions in the North West came from Bishop Simon of the church at Pella, where he made a plea in 1924 for support from other Catholics for material aid. The bishop in particular focused his plea around the idea of charity being a way to receive spiritual rewards from God.⁹⁰ This was in comparison to other pleas for charitable support made by DRC *dominees* in *De Kerkbode*, where pleas for aid relied more on

⁸⁷ Anon., "Nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 10 December 1924, p. 1630.

⁸⁸ Anon., "Hongersnood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 13 August 1924, p. 1040; Anon., "De nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 19 November 1924, p. 1533; H.C. Pienaar, "Die nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 12 November 1924, p. 1507; H.P. van der Merwe, "Die nood in die Noordweste: Oproep van die moderator van die Kaapse Sinode", *De Kerkbode*, 19 November 1924, p. 1544.

⁸⁹ R.H.T. van der Meulen, "Van Rhynsdorp", *De Kerkbode*, 15 October 1924, p. 1383.

⁹⁰ Bishop Simon, "S.O.S, Bishop Simon implores immediate aid for his poverty-stricken people, a pitiable position", *The Southern Cross*, 23 April 1924, pp. 8-9.

the idea of a nationalistic requirement for people to assist their brothers and sisters being threatened by drought through analysing their own actions and believes.⁹¹

By 1925 the *leraar* at Nuwerus stated that the drought in the Northern regions of the district had been particularly difficult, causing widespread poverty amongst members of the church.⁹² One correspondent noted that although the town had received much aid from the government and administrator, the only real help they could use was rainfall and the *dominee* continued to encourage the church's congregants to show their faith through prayer.⁹³ With increased rains in 1925 the drought was described as a time of *beproewing* (test) which had strengthened the faith of people of Nuwerus. Which suggested an increase in religious belief amongst members of the congregation brought on by the arrival of rainfall in 1925.⁹⁴

The year 1926 highlights a period of reprieve for most people in the congregation of Nuwerus, whereby the *dominee* noted that God had "led them through heavy waters". He also observed that attendance of services during the period, as well as the number of children attending the town boarding house (*koshuis*), had increased tremendously. The *dominee* attributed this increase in participation as a direct result of a redevelopment of religious belief following improved rainfall. However, improved financial situations in family groups also likely played an integral role. The growth in money donated to the church's collection box also resultantly increased that year, tying in with the improved financial situation for most.⁹⁵ Vanrhynsdorp also reported that church attendance had increased, with the church functioning at full capacity during a Sunday service.⁹⁶ This elucidates the shared communal perception of relief and greater positivity during this brief period of reprieve.

The reprieve was short-lived, and the worsening drought in 1927 met with a feeling of hopelessness amongst some congregants. These trying conditions raised concern with the *dominee* of Vanrhynsdorp that some members would become atheistic, However, he was gladdened that there had not been a development of atheistic beliefs or lack of faith amongst

⁹¹ Anon., "De nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 19 November 1924, p. 1583; Anon., "De nood in Namaqualand", *De Kerkbode*, 10 December 1924, p. 1630; Anon., "De droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 3 January 1923, p. 4.

⁹² NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1833, Godsdienst verslagen 1925-1926: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, In de gemeente gelezen year 1924-1925.

⁹³ J. Burger, "Nieuwe Rust", *De Kerkbode*, 17 May 1925, p. 673.

⁹⁴ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1833, Godsdienst verslagen 1925-1926: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, In de gemeente gelezen year 1924-1925.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Nieuwe Rust, In de gemeente gelezen 1925-1926.

⁹⁶ Anon., "Van Rhynsdorp", *De Kerkbode*, 14 July 1926, p. 41.

the people of the congregation. The *dominee* hoped that the faith of the congregation would hold out over the fear and suffering caused by the drought and he travelled through the *buitewyke* (rural church wards) giving moral support to rural congregants.⁹⁷

By 1927 the church returned its focus to more physical assistance over the spiritual approach, commenting that God would end the drought but till then they would rely on the AAK to provide assistance to needy communities. *De Kerkbode* began to highlight articles calling for aid to Karoo towns.⁹⁸ The *dominees* of the Ring of Clanwilliam set themselves the task in 1927 of working towards assisting the relief workers and carrying out more evangelical work in their respective congregations during the drought.⁹⁹

As the drought worsened *De Kerkbode* increased its calls for material assistance to alleviate the drought. One article bemoaned the fact that even with growing numbers of prayers for rain and spiritual aid by congregations in drought-stricken areas they received no succour and demanded that the moderator once again call a National Day of Prayer. Another demanded that wealthier farmers should show their true Christian nature by donating more money to aid the stricken.¹⁰⁰ Arguments over the cause of the drought began to develop again, with one correspondent arguing that overpopulation and poor farming methods had created the emergency, not climatic conditions.¹⁰¹ Evidence of increasing spiritual efforts to end the drought was seen in reports of people praying for rain in unusual public places and not usually religious people developing religious habits.¹⁰² Drought evidently had a significant impact on the religious beliefs of the people of Vanrhynsdorp, as with the worsening conditions brought on by the drought the population of Vanrhynsdorp could be seen to change their way in thinking about it and how they responded to the impacts of drought.

⁹⁷ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1834, Godsdienst verslagen 1927: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, read to congregation 31 June 1927. This is not particularly unheard of as the growth of recent studies on the impact of drought on the mental health, especially among farming communities in Australia, have highlighted drought as having negative impacts on people's mental health. See C. Stanke, M. Kerac, C. Prudhomme, J. Medlock & V. Murray, "Health effects of drought: a systematic review of the evidence", *PLoS Currents*, (5), 2013, Online [Accessed 18/1/2020].

⁹⁸ NG Kerk Argief, KR 239, Acta al die ring verslae, 1927, Ring van Clanwilliam 1927: Second sitting 21 October 1927; "J.C.V", "Die droogte in die Karoo", *De Kerkbode*, 10 August 1927, p. 209; H. L. Booyens, "Die droogte en die noodlydendes", *De Kerkbode*, 10 August 1927, p. 209.

⁹⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KR 239, Acta al die ring verslae, 1927: Ring van Clanwilliam 1927, Second sitting 21 October 1927.

¹⁰⁰ P. J. Viljoen, "Die droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 9 February 1927, p. 211; B. B. Burger, "Die droogte duur nogt voort", *De Kerkbode*, 23 February 1927, p. 283; S.J. Latsky, "Die Droogte en sy lesse", *De Kerkbode*, 10 August 1927, p. 209-210.

¹⁰¹ H. Alston, "Die skroef van die droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 9 March 1927, p. 354.

¹⁰² N.J.J. Badenhorst, "De nood van de Droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 26 January 1927, p. 143.

This corresponds to the argument made in the introduction of the chapter where it was noted that droughts cause societies to change. In the case of Vanrhynsdorp the drought altered the mainly Christian population's relationship with the religious institutions of particularly the DRC. This is seen in 1924 when the number of people attending church events in the South increased while other congregations saw decreases in their numbers as congregants were forced to migrate. The situation had an effect on the church and the manner in which *dominees* attempted to assist their congregants through the drought period as the congregation's needs changed.

4.4 Education

Education during the drought was impacted by the poverty of the local people. Farmers reported that they could not afford to send their children to school or finish their schooling due to financial losses caused by the drought. During the drought period (1924 to 1928) there was an increase in interest from farmers to have their children acquire a tertiary education and many requests were sent to ds. Luckhoff and other organisations to help fund their children's education.

Education in the region was vastly different in quality and provision between the North and South of the district. The Nuwerus congregation reported at least 150 children not attending school in the Northern portion of the district, while the Vanrhynsdorp congregation only reported around 80 children not attending school.¹⁰³ These figures likely differed both due to time and other events, therefore it is difficult to estimate how accurate or reliable these statistics are.

Education reform and improvement was particularly important for Vanrhynsdorp as the district began the 20th century with a population where 35% of white people and 90% of people of colour could neither read nor write.¹⁰⁴ This highlights the disparity between the two

¹⁰³ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Nieuwe rust, 1922-23; K-Div 1593, Vorm F, Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-23.

¹⁰⁴ These figures remained stationary with the census of 1911 reporting that 34% of whites and 85% of people of colour could not read or write. See U.G. 32b-1912, *Census of the Union of South Africa 1911, Part III Education of the people*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1912, p. 334; *Statistical Register of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope For the year 1904*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1905, p. 36c.

populations and the reason why it was more difficult for people of colour in the district to advance.

As noted above, one regular comment among members of the DRC was that the education system was failing to create better educated children, this was concurred by the Carnegie Commission of 1932.¹⁰⁵ According to the Carnegie Commission on poor whites, education among white children in economically poor areas such as Vanrhynsdorp rarely progressed beyond standard four (current Grade 6). Among these children most would attempt to find employment in the agricultural sector, however, a lack of proper education and training often resulted in failure to find worthwhile employment. It was also noted that children in rural areas and those that attended school from a boarding house had lower academic results than their peers in urban areas who remained at home while studying. Many of the poorer children that failed to complete their standard 4 and 5, often being sixteen years and older, had to be released from the school boarding houses.¹⁰⁶

In comparison, education for children among the Coloured population in the Cape during this period was reported to constitute underfunded and poorly furnished schools, which often left Coloured children with lower success rates in their education when compared to white school children. A study in 1935 found that, on average, the number of Coloured children in the Cape Province reaching standard four fell from around 10,000 to around 7,000 children, which was considered part of the trend in the province which had seen a steady decline in Coloured children both attending and finishing school since the creation of the Union.¹⁰⁷ The only statistics the study could find for the number of Coloured children attending schools in the district was for the reserves at Rietpoort and Stofkraal where some 469 children went to school either at the Catholic Mission School (346) or the Dutch Reformed Mission school (48) in 1947.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, it is possible that the same problems were present in Vanrhynsdorp which were likely impacting upon the education of the Coloured population of the area.

¹⁰⁵ R.W. Wilcocks, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie commission, Part 2 Psychological Report*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. viii-xi.

¹⁰⁶ E.G. Malherbe, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie commission, Part 3 Educational Report*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. xxv-xxvii; VRDM, Vanrhynsdorp Schoolboard Minute Book, 1892-1946: Meeting held 7 July 1925.

¹⁰⁷ U.G. 54-1937, *Report of the Commission Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union*, Union of South Africa, 1937, pp. 139-162.

¹⁰⁸ U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, p. 45.

In 1924 the District School Council wrote to ds. Luckhoff with a request for permission from the provincial administrator to distribute books for free to needy white students. The school council additionally requested a higher school fee discount from 15% to a 50% per annum or even free education as the majority of people in the district could not afford to pay school fees.¹⁰⁹ For many parents the actual difficulty of paying for their children's education originated from the additional costs of train tickets, books and clothing which they could not afford to pay anymore. The situation was further aggravated by the problem of large families, as farmers had to try and send multiple children to school. The costs of a secondary education were also notably higher as the only high school in the district was in the town of Vanrhynsdorp.¹¹⁰ The severity of the situation would lead the provincial administrator to provide the district of Vanrhynsdorp £300 in funds specifically to supply food to children. The DRC AAK also provided grants for 150 children to reside in the church boarding houses across the district for 1924 to assist their parents with funding issues.¹¹¹

The extent of the failure for students to complete their education was highlighted by one case in which a 20-year-old in desperate need for work asked for assistance from ds. Luckhoff in finding employment with the state service after having recently finished standard six. His parents had lost their home in the drought and still had five other children to put through school, which forced them to send their older children to find employment.¹¹² A farmer in 1928 was left in a similar position when he had to send his eldest son to the road works while having to decide if he could afford to keep his second eldest daughter in school for that year as he had two other children that also had to go to school.¹¹³

The abundance of poorly educated young people having to go find work was noted and caused concern for the Civil Engineer of the road projects in the Cape Province in 1929 who had witnessed many young boys working on the roads in the district.¹¹⁴ Outside of the

¹⁰⁹ NG Kerk Argief, PPV 207, Ds. A.D. Luckhoff. Jr, Korrespondensie Briewe Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1925: Korrespondensie Van Rhynsdorp (Nieuwe Rust), 1922-1926: Letter from Louis Rood to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 19 December 1924.

¹¹⁰ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1746, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes A-P, 1927-1928: Letter from J.A.J. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 13/8/1928.

¹¹¹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1651, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Notule, 1916-1921/1921-1932: AAK Notule 1921-1932, Meeting held 13 August 1924.

¹¹² NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from Emile van Zyl to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 30 March 1925.

¹¹³ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1746, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes A-P, 1927-1928: Letter from J.A.J. Niewoudt to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 13/8/1928.

¹¹⁴ WCARS, Provincial Administration Roads Department (hereafter PAR), Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief works by local bodies: General, 1927-1930: Letter from Chief Inspector of Roads to Provincial Secretary, 21/3/1929.

extraordinary suffering caused by the drought and depression it was a common expectance among both Coloured and white families that their children would return from school to assist with the harvest and planting seasons. This often kept children away from school for prolonged periods of time. In other cases, it was reported that families would often trek with the changing season to more water rich areas taking their children with them and interrupting their education.¹¹⁵

Many of the applicants to the AAK (Algemeene Armesorg Kommissie) relief fund attempted to secure funding for tertiary education in the period 1924-1929, particularly to attend colleges and universities. In many of these cases the applicants would offer to take a loan rather than receive the funding as charity, often on the basis that the loan will be repaid once they had completed their education. Families often resorted to seeking grants or loans for further education because they could not carry the additional costs when they had other children who also still had to finish their secondary education.¹¹⁶ Children who had to go to trade schools tended to come from poorer families but were argued to be good achievers in school.¹¹⁷

The students attending the secondary school in Vanrhynsdorp experienced the impact of the drought on their studies, with their emotional wellbeing often negatively affected due to troubles at home. In many students' home lives, they suffered under extreme poverty, with at least 80% of the students coming from families that experienced the economic impact directly related to the drought. An inspector noted the surprising number of the children who chose to bear the troubles in silence. The principal and his staff were commended for the efforts they made in assisting the children through social work during the drought with programs that provided food and funding to needy students.¹¹⁸ However, even with these measures the high school principal still noted that some of the poorer students from families with no incomes

¹¹⁵ VRDM, Van Rhynsdorp Afrikanderbond en Boereunie Minute Book 1892-1937, National Party Meeting held the 20th February 1926; WCARS, SBVR, Vol, 1/1/2, School Board Vanrhynsdorp 1925-1932: School Board Meeting held 9/2/1928; G.C. Hattingh, *Die N G Gemeente van Vredendal 25 jaar oud 1933-1958*, Kerkraad, Vredendal, 1958, p. 105.

¹¹⁶ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J.P. van der Westhuizen to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 22/12/1927; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J.P. de Bruyn to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 5 January 1928; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse korrespondensie, 1927-1928 1969-1971: G. Visser, 6/8/1928.

¹¹⁷ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampsfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928, 1969-1971: Letter from Louis Rood to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 23/11/1927.

¹¹⁸ WCARS, PAE, Vol, 1200, File, V166/10/ER, Van Rhynsdorp high report, 1927-1937: Yearly inspection of Van Rhynsdorp high school, 12 January 1928.

studying above standard six had to be removed from the school due to a lack of funds to support them.¹¹⁹

As the drought worsened in mid-1927 the general health of many children that went to school deteriorated. This led to attempts by the local charity organisations to improve the provision of food for school children through daily soup kitchens. The local branch of the ACVV, who were very much involved in these relief efforts, noted that they were worried about the children in the local schools. It was suggested that many of the children were not receiving sufficient meals at home and teachers were asked to formulate a list of children in need of support from the soup kitchen.¹²⁰ The type of food provided by the organisation varied depending on the season, with soup being provided during the cooler winter months and *beskuit* (rusks) in the summer months.¹²¹ The food drive by the organisation, although considered a success, was still forced to request that students provide them with any vegetables or meat donations from home as the organisation's funds became depleted.¹²²

Signs of underfeeding were also evident amongst the Coloured school children living on the Rietpoort reserve where many Coloured families in the North of the district sent their children to study at the Catholic Mission Station. The extreme suffering of the children at home was highlighted by the priest who reported an incident where a child had died of starvation after leaving the mission school.¹²³ By 1928, the priest was desperate for the magistrate to send them an additional eight bags of *boermeel* (coarsely grinded wheat flour) as the six original bags received that month were not enough to cater for the large number of children under their care. The priest also complained of the discrimination and unfairness of the small amount of *boermeel* received in comparison to the nine bags received by the smaller Dutch Reformed Missionary. The priest noted that he had four schools with 124 children each that required food. The priest went on to note that all the food received exclusively went to the children, with none shared with the parents or teachers.¹²⁴

The priest stated that the starvation among the Coloured people was the result of the majority of familial bread winners (mainly the men) in the reserve who had left their families and walked

¹¹⁹ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 10 February 1928.

¹²⁰ VRDM, Van Rhynsdorp ACVV Minute Book 1915-1942: Extraordinary Meeting, Monday, 25th July 1927.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Ordinary Meeting, 4 February 1928.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Ordinary Meeting, 14 July 1928.

¹²³ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to Secretary for Native Affairs Pretoria, 24/10/1928.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 11/4/1929.

50 to 100 miles (80 to 160 km) in search of employment. This left their wives and children on the reserves, unable to make an income or acquire food resulting in starvation. It also meant that many of the children were solely reliant on the food provided by the church in the form of one pound (or cup) full of flour a day to provide some relief from the drought. The priest noted that they actually needed 13 bags of *boermeel* or samp per month in order to feed everyone in the schools with one cup of flour per day, but could make do with eight bags a month instead if pushed.¹²⁵ The magistrate, however, argued that exceptions and special relief could not be made to one community alone and that every local method of relief should first be exhausted before he could send more food to them.¹²⁶ The difficulties experienced on the reserves by the Coloured children was a consequence of prevailing social problems, which when seen in the light of the extra difficulties brought on by the drought caused additional complications towards the children completing their education.

The issue of poverty and underfeeding once again became an issue in 1934 when it was noted that many of the Coloured children who went to the school in Doringbaai were evidently underfed due to the closing of the local crayfish factory. Among the local Coloured families, the crayfish factory had been the only source of local employment and yet, since the company had been forced to close the factory, many families had reluctantly become destitute. This was caused especially by the impacts of the drought and depression which lowered the district's demand for Coloured labourers, forcing many to move to Doringbaai in search of employment. Many families turned to fishing as a means of sustenance, however, unstable seas led to unreliable catches from the ocean. Many of the locals also lacked the ability to travel to Vanrhynsdorp to collect food or find work, effectively leaving the community stranded. The children were resultantly deemed needy enough to justify receiving food assistance from the Department of Welfare in late 1934.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 14/3/1929.

¹²⁶ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary for Native Affairs, 6/4/1929.

¹²⁷ NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from Principal of Doringbaai School to police constable at Bamboesbaai, 31/7/34; *Ibid.*, Letter from police constable at Bamboesbaai to Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 31/7/34.

4.5 Drought and the Coloured reserves

The Coloured people who lived in the district of Vanrhynsdorp were scattered across the area living on either individual white owned farms, locations such as the one in Vanrhynsdorp, or in Coloured reserves and farms such as Rietpoort, Ebenezer and Stofkraal.¹²⁸ The farms Rietpoort and Stofkraal in the North of the district were quite sought-after land, with the magistrate noting that the farms were the best quality land in the area. This was due to the soil's high moisture retainment rate which was able to produce large crops of pumpkins, melons and beans along with a wheat crop when used in accordance with dryland farming. Many Coloured inhabitants, however, regularly relied on their livestock, especially goats, to make a living. Potable water was difficult to find on both missionary stations with local wells reported to be brackish where it could be found. The occupiers of these farms were considered very poor and many of them owed money to local money lenders. The poverty of the community was such that in 1913 it was reported that residents often resided within huts made from assortments of grass, mats and mud. These living conditions appeared to have continued up to 1940, suggesting people on the reserves lived in similar style accommodation through the drought period. Due to poverty many of the Coloured inhabitants of the reserves and surrounding farms were left susceptible to the impacts of the droughts in the 1920s.¹²⁹

The reserves all ran a system of communal funding to which each person on a reserve paid £1 which was used to finance improvements to the reserve such as digging wells, fencing, road repair and paying off debt to the state. The reserves also adopted a system of growing 200 lbs

¹²⁸ The total population of Stofkraal and Rietpoort stood at 363 while Ebenezer housed 809 people of all races by 1921, with a vast majority of the population being Coloured people followed by black people and lastly white people. See NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1921 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1921: Supervisors return "C", Final, 26 May 1921.

¹²⁹ The magistrate also complained that the inhabitants of the farms were not putting the property to its full agricultural use. See WCARS, ACLT, Vol, 220, File, 3161, Van Rhynsdorp en Namaqualand, Stofkraal, Rietpoort en Lepelfontein, 1906-1960: Report by Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Surveyor General on farms Stofkraal and Rietpoort, 29 May 1906; *Ibid.*, Letter from Surveyor General to the Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp, 14 September 1906; *Ibid.*, Report from Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Surveyor General on Rietpoort, Stofkraal and Lepelfontein, 18 October 1906; *Ibid.*, Letter from Civil Commissioner of Van Rhynsdorp to Surveyor General, 1 November 1906; TBK, KUS, Vol, 216, File, 113/12/2, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied, 1913-1915: Letter from the Department of Native Affairs Pretoria to the Secretary for Native Affairs in Cape Town, 26 February 1913; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Superintendent for the Namaqualand Native Reserves to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 8 February 1913; U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, pp. 8-9.

(91 kg) of wheat annually and selling it to the Roman Catholic priest at £1 a bag.¹³⁰ The decisions surrounding how to spend the funds were made by a local representative board appointed by the people of the reserve. Each reserve also had its own corporal who oversaw the collection of funds and maintenance of the reserve in addition to implementing the law.

The Rietpoort Catholic Mission Station was generally commended for being a large and well run one, housing a grain mill, school, boarding house, hospital and shop. This made the station a major centre of commerce of the region for the local Coloured community.¹³¹ The reserves of Rietpoort and Stofkraal were mainly Catholic, although Rietpoort also housed a Dutch Reformed Mission on the property, called Putskloof. Each reserve housed a school for Coloured children which was not only used by children from the reserve but also from the surrounding farms.¹³²

Further South the Ebenezer mission station under the DRC lay on the banks of the Olifants River. The station was moved from its original position at the middle of the river course to a point nearly at the river's mouth by the 1925 Land Exchange Act. The new station suffered from poor irrigation canals that had not been completed and grazing lands that became brackish from the irrigation process. The Coloured people that lived on the station were also reportedly very poor and had few livestock while being unable to grow large amounts of crops due to a lack of funding and brackish soil. The station did, however, have a large school which provided education to many of the Coloured children who lived along the Olifants River while the water supplied from the river also allowed the local people to maintain large gardens.¹³³

¹³⁰ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to Secretary for Native Affairs Cape Town, End of August 1922.

¹³¹ A.J. Cornelius, "Die sending van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk onder die inboorlingvolke van Noordwes-Kaapland", Ongepubliseerde MA-verhandeling, Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1980, p. 346.

¹³² TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en Nedersettings Algemene, 1914-1936: Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to Secretary of Native Affairs Cape Town, 9/8/1922; *Ibid.*, Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 25/9/1922.

¹³³ U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, pp. 37-38.

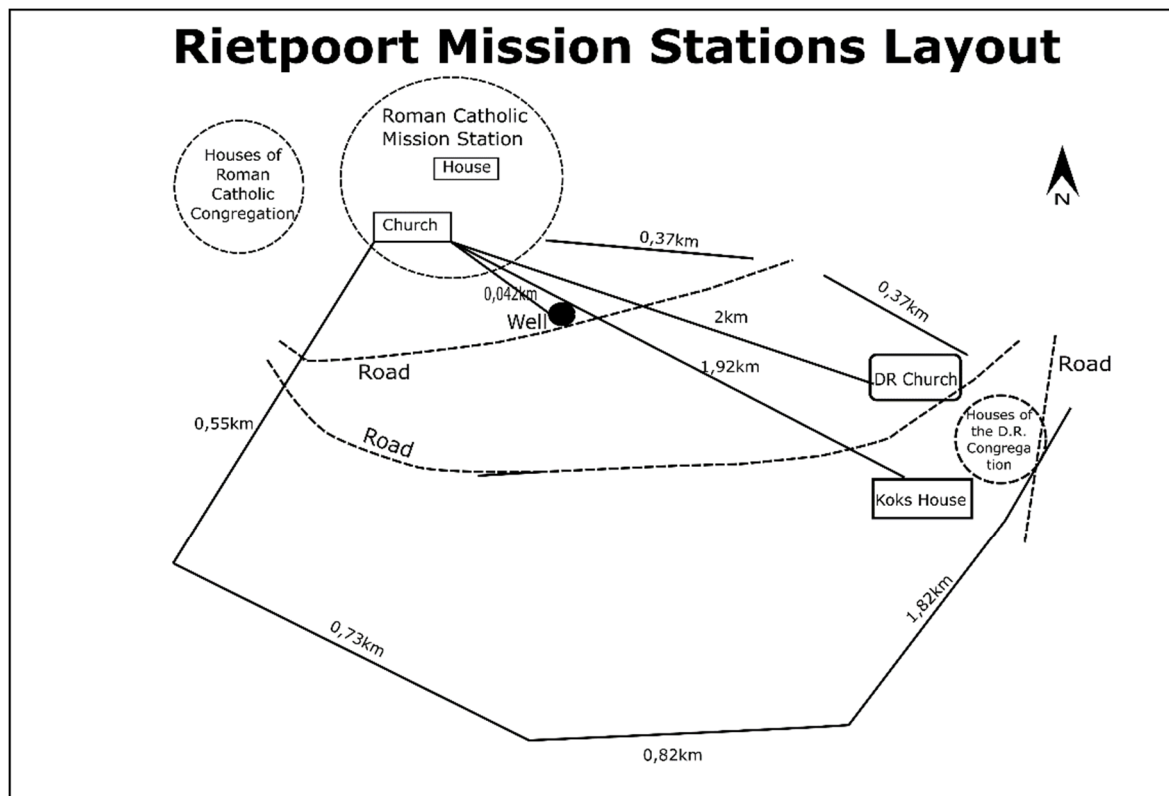


Figure 26: Digitisation of the hand drawn map of Rietpoort showing the position of mission schools and dwellings.¹³⁴

The drought of 1924-1930 also caused significant harm to the financial position of the Coloured population on the reserves. Coloured people living there owned some land for grazing stock and growing crops with some reports of relatively impressive herds. However, the drought ruined the harvest and flocks (as noted in Chapter 3) forcing many to rely on work from white farmers. Concurrently, work on white farms had become scarce as the local farmers were just as badly impacted and could not afford to pay labourer's wages, which made many of the Coloured people directly reliant on the government and charities for aid. This situation was made worse by the closure of the copper mines in Namaqualand and the fish canning factory in Port Nolloth which had previously employed many of the reservation's families.¹³⁵ This resulted in a statement by one *dominee* that said: "*De armoede is groot, maar waar dit van den blanken waar is, is 't gebrek en de honger bij de kleurlingen veel erger*".¹³⁶

¹³⁴ NG Kerk Argief, KS 257, Sinodale Sending Kommissie, Upington, Van Rhynsdorp, 1890-1939, Letter from Louis Rood to Ds. A.C. Murray, 17 December 1925.

¹³⁵ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en nedersettings algemeene, 1914-1936: Letter from Rev C van't Westeinde to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 4/9/1928; U.G. 54-1937, *Report of the Commission Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1937, p. 73

¹³⁶ The impoverishment is great, but where this is true of the whites, the lack and hunger among the Coloureds is much worse. See A. H. Barnard, "Droogte en gebrek", *De Kerkbode*, 12 January 1927, p. 65.

Figure 10 denotes the fact that between 1925 and 1930 the number of Coloured people working on white-owned farms could be seen to have increased while at the same time the number of white people employed on white farms had remained relatively similar. The causes for this may have been (as noted above) that many Coloured people had begun to leave the reserves due to the worsening drought to find employment on white-owned farms. In addition, this may suggest that some of them took up regular positions on those farms, although it must be noted that the statistics only represent regular full-time farm workers and not seasonal or temporary work which the majority of the Coloured population filled.¹³⁷

Many Coloured men and some women worked in the agricultural sector. Many more Coloured women (especially younger women) regularly went to local farms or towns to try and find employment in households as domestic workers. There was also evidence of Coloured women traveling to more Southern districts under the guidance of A.A.S. le Fleur's Griqua church to find employment and better living standards in the less drought-stricken region of the South Western Cape.

The vast difference in wages and benefits for different classes of Coloured labourers meant that the wages to farm workers varied from 10 shillings to 2 shillings, while housing for Coloured farm workers could vary from small huts to proper brick houses. These differences depended on whether the labourer was a permanent employee or a seasonal worker. There was also a difference caused by geography and type of the farming, as pastoral workers generally received lower wages than horticulturalists. Many laboured on the premise that they could receive a small portion of land for their own use on which to maintain some crops and livestock of their own while working on the farm. In other cases, Coloured workers would often quit their work during the winter rainfall season to return to their families on the reserves and attempt making a profit from the year's harvest. This created an unfortunate cycle where Coloured workers operated on temporary contracts for short periods instead of taking up more long-term contracts.¹³⁸

Many families relied on other family members to supplement their incomes, with women often having to find employment as domestic servants, while older children often took

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ U.G. 54-1937, *Report of the commission regarding Cape Coloured population of the Union*, pp. 74-76; U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, pp. 6-7.

on small tasks on the farm.¹³⁹ Some reports from the districts in the Southern Cape noted that older children were mainly employed as ‘leaders’ to lead a team of draft animals on the ploughs while young girls were hired for work in the household or picking fruit when in season.¹⁴⁰ In the district of Vanrhynsdorp it would appear that by 1936 the average wage for what the magistrate deemed an ordinary Coloured worker was an average £1 per month.¹⁴¹

The impacts of the drought on the Coloured population exceeded that of the white population, with one correspondent to *De Kerkbode* noting that the roads of the Karoo were filled with Coloured people searching for employment on farms. The correspondent blamed the recent implementation of jackal proof fencing on farms for causing many farmers to lay off Coloured herdsmen and unskilled workers. The drought also resulted in many white farmers having little in the way of work or food to offer as charity. It should also be noted that in light of the Union Government’s land ownership and squatter laws, being evicted from a farm or loss of employment for many people of colour meant that they had no other place to live. This situation forced many of the Coloured people to move to towns and mission stations where they could settle on locations, although there was a growing concern around the poor standard of living in such areas.¹⁴²

Drought therefore meant that a large number of the Coloured people in the district were left unemployed, which forced many to become reliant on relief works, temporary employment and state assistance to survive.¹⁴³ The reliance on assistance from the state in the form of food parcels following the conclusion of relief works in Vanrhynsdorp had created a flood of Coloured people into the town to be closer for food relief from the magistrate. Le Fleur’s response to this situation was to arrange with the magistrate to have some 400 women and children sent Southwards to place them with people where they could live and work under better conditions. The receiving families agreed to the terms which stipulated that they would house and feed the women and children who worked for a wage of 5 shillings a week. Most of

¹³⁹ U.G. 54-1937, *Report of the commission regarding Cape Coloured population of the Union*, pp. 74-76.

¹⁴⁰ NASA, Collection of the Department of Labour (hereafter ARB), Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from C. R Plumley to the Inspector of Labour, 3 December 1924.

¹⁴¹ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 17/14/2, Magistrates reports, 1/2/1930-24/1/1949: Annual reports, 1936.

¹⁴² A.H. Barnard, “Droogte en gebrek”, *De Kerkbode*, 12 January 1927, pp. 65-66; U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, p. 15.

¹⁴³ Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, “Die nood in Namakwaland”, *De Kerkbode*, 17 December 1924, p. 1672; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from Ds. A.D. Luckhoff to Provincial Administrator of Cape Province, 14 February 1925.

these funds were paid to those that remained in Vanrhynsdorp. Le Fleur reported that in that time the Griqua Church's settlement at Stylhoogte had been overrun with desperate people, especially the sick and ill, from the relief works.¹⁴⁴

The Department of Labour had come to the conclusion, following a report from its regional inspector, that the labour market in Vanrhynsdorp was overcrowded. This situation was causing the severe unemployment among Coloured people who were leaving the relief works and failing to find alternative employment on local farms and diamond mines in neighbouring Namaqualand and South West Africa (Namibia). The inspector therefore believed that the only way for the department to lessen the chronic unemployment was by moving unemployed Coloured people Southwards. However, this was deemed a last-ditch measure that would only be taken if no other solution could be found as the inspector noted the severe social disruption forced migration would cause. The department would therefore change its mind on the matter and moved to stop the migration of Coloured people from the district.¹⁴⁵

The issue of migrating Coloured people seemed to be more worrisome for the Department of Labour, which preferred that they remained in the North Western region and only be moved to Southern districts as farm workers in rare cases. The department was therefore opposed to the migration of a large number of Coloured people Southwards with the assistance of the Griqua Church. The department also noted that there was no available work for Coloured people in the Cape as the region already suffered under considerable unemployment among the people in and around Cape Town. The department therefore began to offer drought relief assistance to Coloured people to remain in the districts of Vanrhynsdorp and Namaqualand, mainly focusing on food supplies and seed wheat for persons who lived and farmed on the reserves.

The situation for the Coloured people living in Rietpoort would stabilise to some degree in 1926 with improved rainfall. This would change with the resumption of the drought in late 1927, making it nearly impossible for the local Coloured people to survive.¹⁴⁶ The district

¹⁴⁴ A.A.S. le Fleur, "Distress in Namaqualand", *Griqua and Coloured people's opinion*, 22 May 1925, p. 2; A.A.S. le Fleur, "Chiefs tour to Van Rhynsdorp", *Griqua and Coloured people's opinion*, 22 May 1925, p. 2-3.

¹⁴⁵ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from Inspector of Labour to Secretary for the Department of Labour, 9 March 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from Department of Labour to the Magistrate of Springbok, 8 June 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Inspector of Labour for Cape Town to the Secretary of the Department of Labour, 25 February 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from Piquetberg to Minister of Labour, 17/11/1924.

¹⁴⁶ NG Kerk Argief, KS 257, Sinodale Sending Kommissie, Upington, Van Rhynsdorp, 1890-1939: Letter from Louis Rood to Ds. A.C. Murray, 17/12/1925.

magistrate declared the people of the reserves as distressed and many of them received some proportion of foodstuffs directly from his office. He suggested that prospecting for diamonds on the farm Stofkraal would be of great relief to the people on the property.¹⁴⁷ Father C. van't Westeinde was interested in prospecting, not only to provide relief, but also because the living standards on the diamond diggings outside the reserve were degrading for many Coloured people.¹⁴⁸ The priest on the reserve noted that the drought was rapidly worsening the position of the Coloured people on the reserve who were quickly reaching the point where they would be too weak to do a proper day's work.¹⁴⁹

By early 1928 the impact of the drought had led to a growth of desperation amongst the local white farmers who began to turn to more racial solutions to the problems of the drought. A deputation of poor white people from Namaqualand had demanded that the Prime Minister remove Coloured people from crownlands as they were a "burden" on the government. The priest at Rietpoort was irate at this and noted that he could not see what most of the poor whites would do with more land since many of them already owned property which they failed to inhabit for most of the year. Calling the Coloured people, a "burden" seemed particularly hypocritical to the priest who noted that if anything the poor whites were a burden to the state who spent millions on them annually. The priest instead stated that he needed food to feed the Coloured people on the reserve who were starving and considered the possibility of creating an industrial school there.¹⁵⁰

In 1928, the Coloured reserves in Rietpoort and Stofkraal were again impacted the worst by severe hunger and as a repercussion were the most reliant upon the Provincial Administrator's Fund for food relief.¹⁵¹ The priest noted that the people on the reserve were struck by the drought as there was no more work from the white farmers and the harvest was expected to be a failure. This meant that news regarding the exhaustion of the Administrator's Fund in 1928 made many of the people desperate as they had no other way of acquiring food,

¹⁴⁷ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en Nedersettings Algemeene, 1914-1936: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 22/11/1927.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter from M Collins to Rev C. van't Westeinde, 10/11/1927.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C. van't Westeinde to M. Collins, no date but likely November 1927.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C. van't Westeinde to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 30/1/1928.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C. van't Westeinde to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 29/8/1928.

forcing the priest to send requests to the Native Affairs Commissioner for 25 bags of flour to maintain the community until the next harvest could be collected.¹⁵²

In response the magistrate noted that the harvest in late 1928 had failed and that he himself could not see that the situation in Rietpoort was as desperate as the priest said it was. According to the magistrate, many of the Coloured men and ‘grown up sons’ from the reserves had moved Southwards to find employment on the Olifants River Irrigation Scheme where they received a wage of 2 shillings 9 pennies a day.¹⁵³ However, the migration of the main bread winners of the families to the South had the above noted impact of starvation on their families left behind on the reserve.¹⁵⁴ The magistrate noted that Father C. van ’t Westeinde was not mentioning the fact that his mission had received more food than any other communities, both white and Coloured.¹⁵⁵

By 1929, a significant disagreement had broken out between the magistrate and the mission priest. The magistrate noted that the mission priest only wanted more food as he refused to send any of the reserve’s inhabitants to work on the irrigation canals or anywhere else that was not within walking distance of the reserve. The magistrate stated that he could not send the mission station more food as no one else was receiving food from him and it would cause both the white people in the surrounding area and the Coloured people in the South to protest.¹⁵⁶

The drought would also reap a toll in later years through loss of productivity brought on by over cultivation caused by overpopulation on the reserves and mission stations that with the drying out impacts of the prolonged droughts, caused widespread erosion and lower crop yields in later years. This situation highlighted the difficult position drought left the Coloured communities in as they were unable to continue receiving assistance even during the distress of the drought, often forcing many to migrate, seeking employment and better living standards but leaving behind social repercussions to those dependents still on the reserves.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Rev C. van’t Westeinde to Secretary for Native Affairs Pretoria, 24/10/1928.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria. 3/12/1928.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter from Rev C. van’t Westeinde to Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 14/3/1929.

¹⁵⁵ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en Nedersettings Algemene, 1914-1936: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 21/9/1928.

¹⁵⁶ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, Ref, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 22/1/1929.

¹⁵⁷ U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, p. 8.

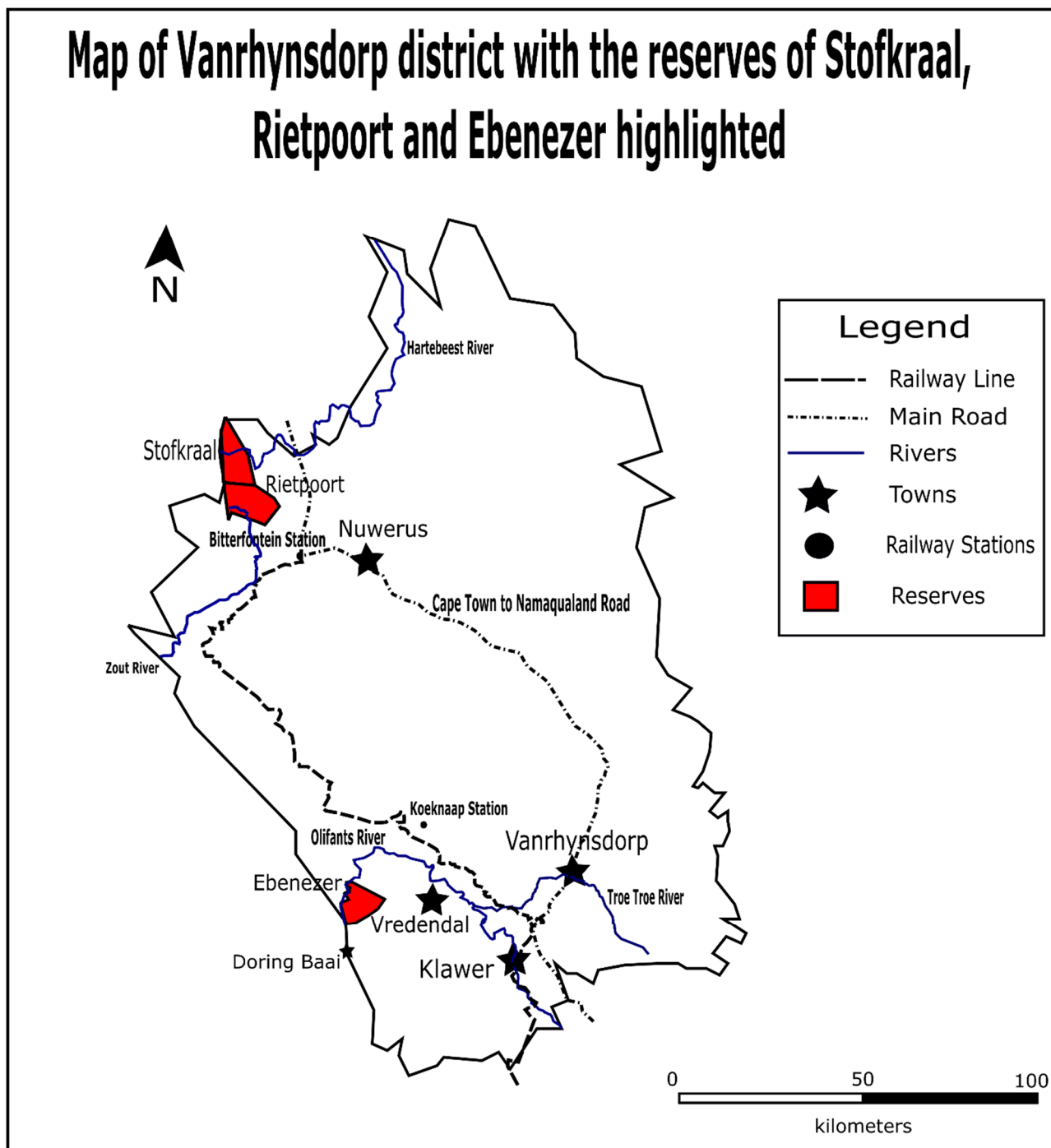


Figure 27: Digitised map of the Vanrhynsdorp district with the reserves Stofkraal, Rietpoort and Ebenezer highlighted.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Constructed from information in WCARS, ACLT, Vol, 220, File, 3161, Van Rhynsdorp, Namakwaland, Stofkraal, Rietpoort en Lepelfontein, 1906-1960: Map of farms Rietpoort and Stofkraal as provided by the Civil Commissioner to Surveyor General in report on farms, 18 October 1906; J. G. Bartholomew, *The Times survey atlas of the world*, The Times, London, 1922, p. 71; WCARS, MAP, Vol, M4/1209: Vanrhynsdorp Magisterial District, 1931-1931.

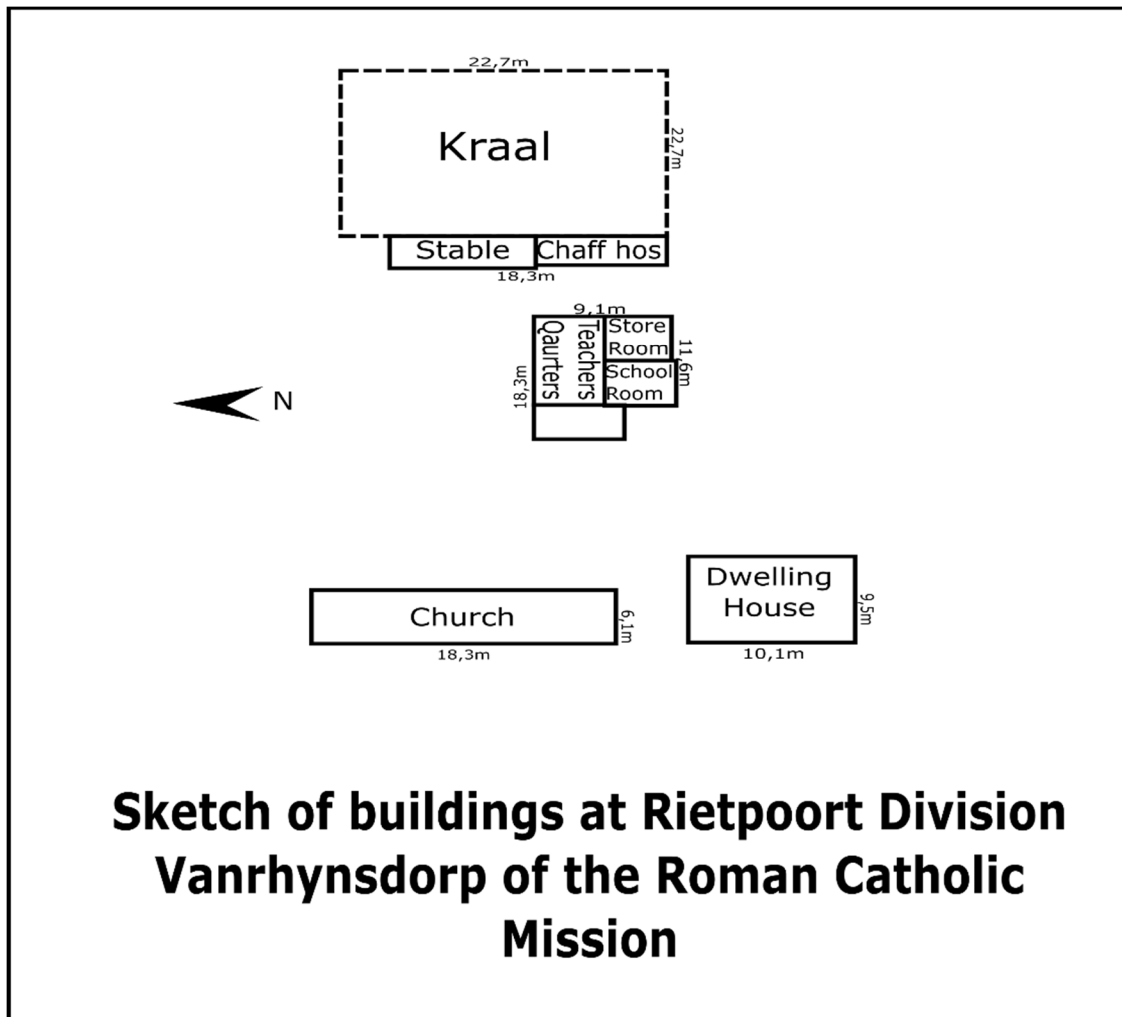


Figure 28: Sketch of Roman Catholic Mission at Rietpoort 1920.¹⁵⁹

4.6 Migration towards the Olifants River due to drought

The largest impact the drought had from 1924 to 1934 was in the migration of white and Coloured people into the Southern wards of the district along the Olifants River, with many of the migrants originating from Namaqualand and the Northern wards of the district around Nuwerus. The year 1928 was a low rainfall year, which likely acted as the main catalyst for the migration (see Figure 3). The Drought Investigation Commission's report of 1923 proved that the peak drought conditions of 1919 caused a migration of white South Africans out of the North West region of the Cape Province. This was argued to have been caused by the losses of

¹⁵⁹ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en Nedersettings Algemene, 1914-1936: Letter from Rev C. van't Westeinde to Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 12/11/1920.

predominantly sheep herds to prevailing drought conditions and resultant financial and employment losses due to poor farming methods, which had made the impacts of drought worse on the dry region of the Cape Province.¹⁶⁰

This pattern of migration by rural people both white and Coloured developed after the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) as many lost the financial ability to continue as farm owners or renters and became labourers. In many cases the number of unemployed people in the rural areas had always been high, but with the onset of driving factors such as drought, especially during the peak drought years of 1924 and 1928, unemployment in rural areas became chronic. This led to a situation where many of these unskilled white and Coloured workers were forced to take up work for wages. It was considered comparatively more of a reliable income than what they received under the strained economic conditions working as agricultural labourers and tenant farmers.¹⁶¹

Worsening drought conditions in Namaqualand, particularly amongst the Coloured inhabitants, created a multi-racial influx of people to the wards that bordered the Olifants River, especially towns and hamlets such as Vredendal, Ebenezer and Vanrhynsdorp.¹⁶² The migrants primarily comprised of white tenant farmers (*bywoners*) from Namaqualand and Northern Vanrhynsdorp district, as well as Coloured people who migrated in large numbers to settle along the river and seek employment in constructing irrigation canals. The situation along the river was considerably less desperate than the region further North which was a factor driving the Southward migration.¹⁶³ W.A. Booyesen (a senior member of the Ebenezer Missionary Church) noted that there was a continuous movement of white and Coloured people towards the region around Ebenezer to find employment, which placed great strain on the support efforts provided by the church.¹⁶⁴ Concurrently, in Namaqualand the white farmers and Coloured people that lived on the mission stations were reported to be suffering from high levels of poverty which had forced many to seek employment at the diamond prospecting sites and others to start trekking Southwards towards the Olifants River.¹⁶⁵ Bishop Simon at the

¹⁶⁰ Anon., “Die Droogte ondersoek”, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 18 July 1923, p. 181.

¹⁶¹ U.G. 30*32, *Union of South Africa, Komitee van ondersoek insake werkloosheid Oktober 1932*, pp. 9-11.

¹⁶² A.D. Luckhoff, “Die Algemene Armezorg, verkorte notule van die vergadering van die kommissie, Kaapstad, 15 en 16 Februarie 1928”, *De Kerkbode*, 7 March 1928, p. 327.

¹⁶³ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1665, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes Korrespondensie A-V, 1926-1950: Memo besoek van Ds. Souts en Luckhoff na die Noordweste, 28 Maart 1928.

¹⁶⁴ W.A. Booyesen, “Hulp aan noodlydendes”, *De Kerkbode*, 11 January 1925, p. 45.

¹⁶⁵ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1665, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Gemeentes Korrespondensie A-V, 1926-1950: Memo besoek van Ds. Souts en Luckhoff na die Noordweste, 28 Maart 1928.

missionary church in Pella noted that many of the Coloured people in the west of the Namaqualand district had fled on foot as they no longer had draught animals to travel with.¹⁶⁶

This process had occurred frequently in the drought prior to the 1890s, but had become more widespread in the period leading to the drought of 1924, particularly as Southern wards reported receiving large numbers of people searching for work on the irrigation canals and nearby railway construction between Graafwater and Klawer from 1916 onwards.¹⁶⁷

In the region of the North West Cape the drought had reached a point where most farmers were reported to have taken up trekking as the only way to keep their stock alive. In many cases these families loaded their wagons with all of their possession and moved to either a place where there was still some grazing for the stock or where there was more water. Some farmers took their wives and children, while others left their families behind on the farm to care for the property in their absence.¹⁶⁸

One correspondent to *Die Burger* reported that the drought which had struck Vanrhynsdorp district had been worsened by the low rainfall events during its previous two winters (see Figure 3), causing intensified drought conditions during the summer of 1928. This led to the failure of both crop and animal harvests, which left many farmers with no other alternative than to migrate with their stock towards the river wards of the district (see route depicted in Figure 29).¹⁶⁹ One problem with this migration was noted in 1925 when the poor rainfall in the Boesmanland region had also led to an overwhelming number of trek farmers and their livestock, who due to overgrazing subsequently destroyed the newly grown grass along the Olifants River banks.¹⁷⁰ The situation was aggravated by the fact that many farmers in the Namaqualand and Clanwilliam districts reported regularly trekking into the Vanrhynsdorp district during the drought of 1923, likely towards the Olifants River. This reaction to drought appeared to have become ingrained into the stock farmers of these districts

¹⁶⁶ Bishop Simon, "S.O.S, Bishop Simon implores immediate aid for his poverty-stricken people, a pitiable position", *The Southern Cross*, 23 April 1924, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ NG Kerk Argief, Collection Korrespondensie Diverse (hereafter K-DIV) 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1914-1916: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente Gelezen 25 September 1916.

¹⁶⁸ G. J. van Zyl, "Die droogte in die Noordweste", *De Kerkbode*, 21 March 1928, p. 405.

¹⁶⁹ Anon., "Vooruitsigte Donker: Besproeiing Langs Olifantsrivier", *Die Burger*, Wednesday 4 January 1928, p. 10.

¹⁷⁰ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from Ds. A.D. Luckhoff to Provincial Administrator of Cape Province, 14 February 1925.

during the frequent drought periods experienced in the region.¹⁷¹ What likely also drove the migrators was the difference evident in income from different regions highlighted by the DRC in 1933 and by the AAK donation amounts in Chapter 3. Many families saw a better future for themselves living in the South of the district than in the more impoverished Northern portions around Nuwerus.



Figure 29: Migration routes out of and within the Vanrhynsdorp district from 1924 to 1934.¹⁷²

The migration within the district is represented by black arrows in Figure 29, while the movement of people towards the diamond prospecting areas of Namaqualand and Namibia are depicted by the blue arrow. The red arrow represents migrants towards the South Western Cape over the drought period.

¹⁷¹ U.G. 25-1925, *Union of South Africa Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, Report on the Agriculture and Pastoral Production of the Union of South Africa, 1922-1923, Agricultural Census No. 6, 1923*, p. 48.

¹⁷² Map sourced from Map made by J.G. Bartholomew, "South Africa", *The Times survey atlas of the world*, The Times, London, 1922, p. 71.

Evidence of this migration can be seen in Figure 30 where the population of all race groups South of the 31.4° latitude line increased exponentially between 1921 and 1936 by 117%. The total population North of the separating line in the district comparatively only increased by 25%. The two dates (1921 and 1936) were the only years in which a full population census was carried out within the study time frame. The district map in Figure 30 was divided using the 31.4° latitude line as the majority of the district's more economically active regions such as the Olifants River, Vanrhynsdorp (town) and the railway line that lay South of this line. North of the separating line there was little in terms of economic hubs or population centres but this region did still constitute a large land mass. Observing the broader trends of population growth across the district the causes for the movement of people Southwards between 1921 and 1936 can better be seen to relate to the impact of drought on the population.

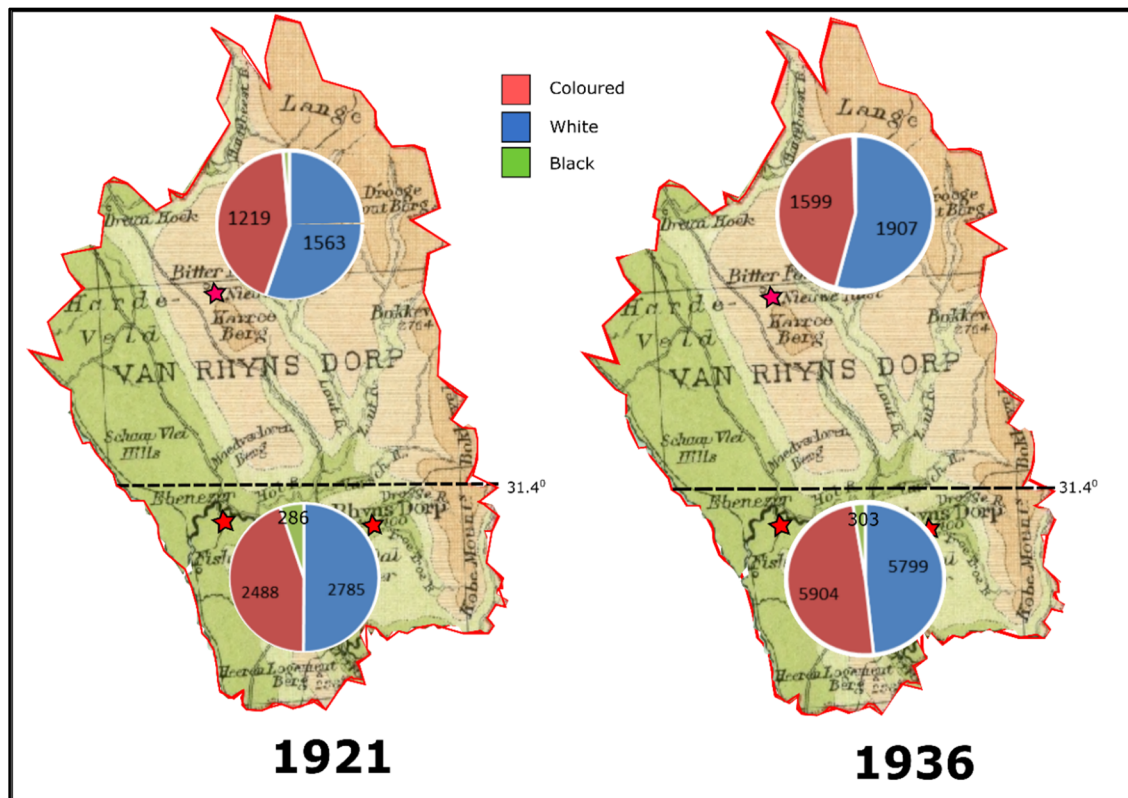


Figure 30: A comparison of the population statistics of both the Northern and Southern regions of the district for the census years 1921 and 1936.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Note that the Black population of the Northern portion of the district was below 50 and therefore the numbers for that region are not shown in the graph. Information sourced from map made by J. G. Bartholomew, "South Africa", *The Times survey atlas of the world*, The Times, London, 1922, p. 71; NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1921 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1921: Supervisors return "C", Final, 26 May 1921; NASA, STK, Vol, 12, File, 21/095, Census 1936 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1936-1936: Final returns form "C" census 1936, 3/6/1936.

The increased white population in 1921 was most likely caused by three factors: the irrigation works at the Olifants River, the arrival of the railway line at Klaver and natural population increase. The irrigation works had led to a massive influx of white people to the Southern parts of the district to work on the canals and to start living on irrigation plots. The railway led to the establishment of the small town of Klaver which comprised primarily of small business owners and railway workers. The black population of the district also rapidly increased, but this was temporary as many were not permanent workers and were relocated out of the district once public works had been completed. The Coloured population also increased after 1921, due to three causes: a high rate of natural population increases, the arrival of Coloured workers on the irrigation project from within Vanrhynsdorp and its neighbouring districts and the arrival of migrants from Namaqualand seeking work after the closure of the copper mines.¹⁷⁴

The 1931 census of the white population in the district noted that the district population had increased, although at a slower rate than previous years. This was primarily a result of the large number of families who had trekked out of the district during the drought years. Only a small amount of children (208) had been born in the district to local white families, meaning that the only cause for an increase in the white population in 1931 was the rapid influx of people towards the Olifants River wards and the railway line between Klaver and Bitterfontein.¹⁷⁵ The increase of the population around the Olifants River had been so significant that another polling district had been added to the census area in the South. The census work had been impeded by a lack of time given to the enumerators to travel across the district, which caused a serious problem in attaining accurate tallies since many of the people lived scattered across the North of the district.¹⁷⁶

The 1936 census confirmed and highlighted that apart from the black population of the district, which had increased due to an influx of temporary workers, the white and Coloured populations also increased. The population was very unevenly distributed, with nearly half of

¹⁷⁴ NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1921 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1921: Letter from the First Sergeant of Van Rhynsdorp to the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 11 August 1921.

¹⁷⁵ NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1931 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1931-1931: Report from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Director of the Census, 11 July 1931.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Director of the Census, 11 February 1931.

the district's population concentrated along the Olifants River's banks where the newly-irrigated land attracted desperate drought affected farmers.¹⁷⁷

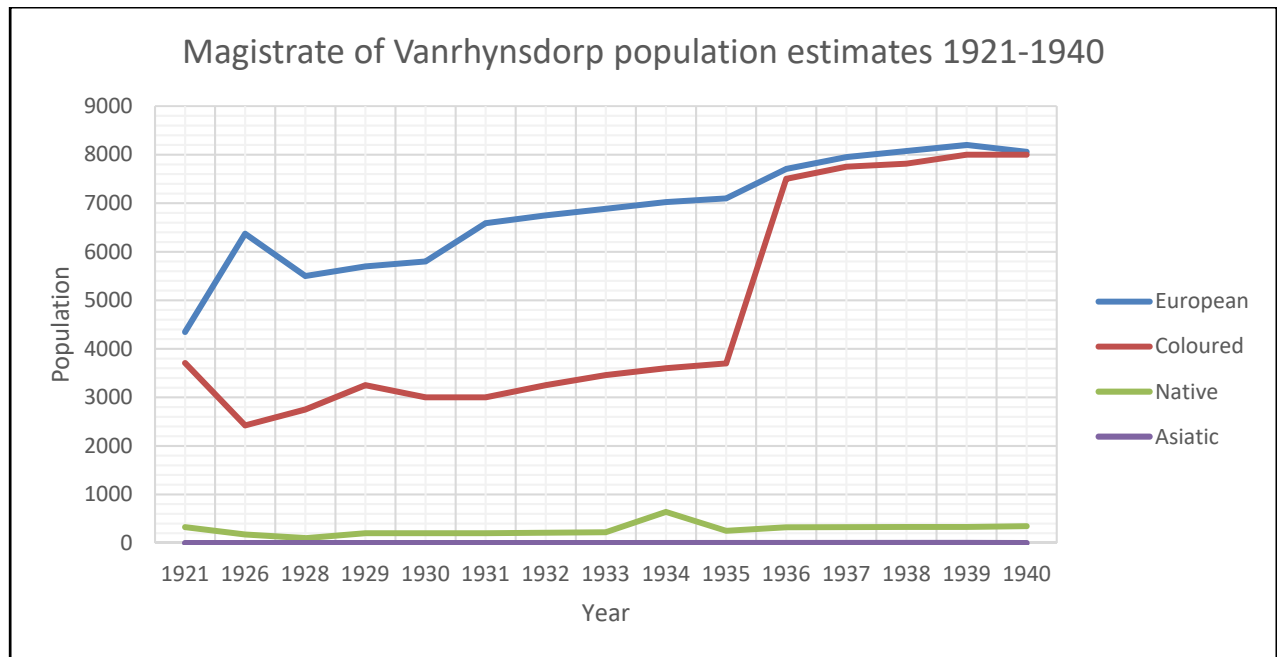


Figure 31: Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp population estimates 1921-1940.¹⁷⁸

This impact of the drought on the population of the district is best represented by the population estimates of the magistrate. These estimates, seen in Figure 31, indicate a fluctuating trend, with a sudden drop in the white population from 1926-1928 before steadily increasing from 1928 to 1939. The Coloured population in the graph denotes a decline from 1921-1926 after which the population began to steadily increase till 1929, followed by a sharp drop again in 1930. From 1930-1935 the Coloured population remained relatively stable, followed by a sudden population boom in 1936 from where both the Coloured and white populations showed near exactly similar population counts and a steadily increasing trend.

The magistrate's estimates highlight the decrease in the white population of the district through the early years of the drought (1926-1927), while the Coloured population increased. In comparison to the official census statistics the years where no census was held for

¹⁷⁷ NASA, STK, Vol, 12, File, 21/095, Census 1941 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1941-1941: Letter from Magistrate of the District of Van Rhynsdorp to the Director of the Census, 13/7/1936.

¹⁷⁸ NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1921 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1921-1921: Supervisors return "C", Final, 26 May 1921; NASA, STK, Vol, 6, File, 21/095, Census 1926 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1926-1926: Final returns 1926 census, 11 June 1926; NASA, STK, Vol, 10, File, 21/095, Census 1931 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1931-1931: Final return census 1931, 17 June 1931; NASA, STK, Vol, 12, File, 21/095, Census 1936 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1936-1936: Final returns form "C" census 1936, 3/6/1936; NASA, STK, Vol, 12, File, 21/095, Census 1941 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1941-1941: Final return form "C" census 1936, 26/5/1941; WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 17/14/2, Annual Reports 1/2/1930-24/1/1949: Annual reports, 1929-1940.

demographics outside of the white population, the magistrate underestimated the Coloured population growth. The magistrate estimates had likely have been skewed by his perceptions and lack of thorough reporting of the migratory trends of Coloured people out of the district and not taking into account the Coloured migrants moving into or within the district.¹⁷⁹ Contrastingly, his estimates of the white and black population growth patterns tend to be more accurate when compared to the other census data.

Evidence of an increase in the district population during the period of the drought, particularly in the South of the district, can be seen in Figure 32, which consists of statistics from the DRC congregations of Vanrhynsdorp and Nuwerus (1916-1940). The data in Figure 32 indicates that from 1916 to 1920 the congregation of Vanrhynsdorp's congregants had remained relatively stationary. The congregant numbers fell suddenly in 1921 due to the creation of the Nuwerus congregation from the Northern portions of the district. The Nuwerus congregation grew steadily over the early period of the drought (1922-1924) whilst no comparison could be made to the Vanrhynsdorp congregation in the period as it did not provide any data for those years. The Vanrhynsdorp congregation would, however, see a steady increase in its congregants over the later drought period (1926-1928). This growth phase would continue until 1934 when the Vanrhynsdorp congregation decreased suddenly with the creation of the Vredendal congregation. It supports the evidence that the drought caused a sudden migration of white farmers toward the Southern wards of the Vanrhynsdorp district, particularly near the Vredendal area where the new congregation was established to cater for the influx. The Nuwerus congregation would follow a different population change trajectory, with its population decreasing to its lowest numbers in the peak drought year of 1928 before increasing slowly over the period 1929-1935 (940 congregants). Figure 32 points out that throughout the drought period of 1924 to 1928 Nuwerus had a smaller number of congregants when compared to the Southern congregation of Vanrhynsdorp.

The growth in Vanrhynsdorp's congregation was explained to have been caused by an influx of poorer congregants to the irrigation works on the Olifants River and the migration of other impoverished people towards the town searching for work, schools and relief from the drought. References to this migration begin to appear numerous by 1924. By 1925, the growth and demand among the poorer congregants living along the river lead to the church

¹⁷⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928 & 1969-1971: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Administrator of the Relief Fund, 8 October 1928.

arranging for four farms in the area to be set up and used for informal services.¹⁸⁰ This flood of congregants to the Olifants River would reach new heights in the peak of the drought period of 1927 to 1929, which forced the church to seek other spiritual workers to assist in the river wards.¹⁸¹ As mentioned, many of the more permanent white migrants to the Olifants River were settlers on irrigation plots along the river's banks or railway workers.¹⁸² This supports the findings of Figure 30 that there was a migration of people out of the Northern portion of the district and towards the Southern regions near the Olifants River due to the economic impacts of the drought between the years 1924 and 1928.

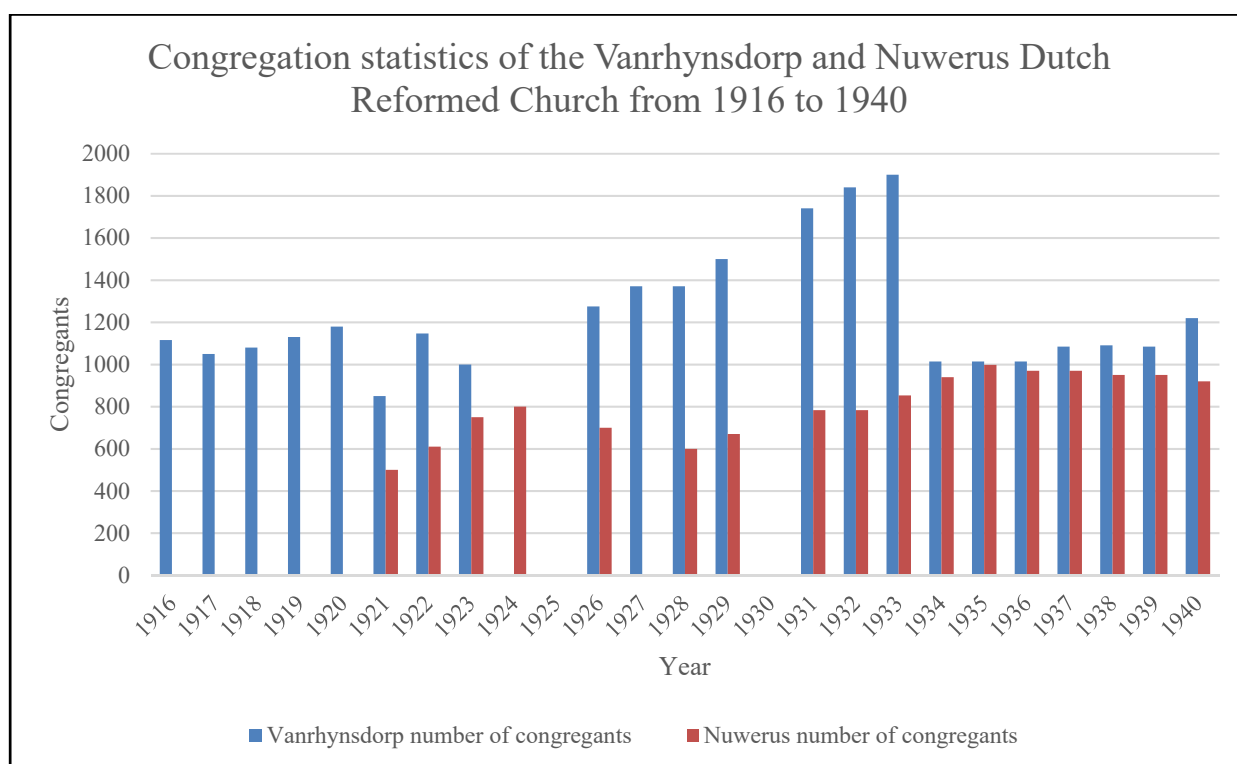


Figure 32: Congregation statistics of the Vanrhynsdorp and Nuwerus Dutch Reformed Church from 1916 to 1940.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1832, Godsdienst verslagen 1922-1923: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente gelezen 8 October 1922; NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1833, Godsdienst verslagen 1925-1926: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de gemeente gelezen 11 October 1925.

¹⁸¹ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1835, Godsdienst verslagen 1929: Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, In de jaar 1929.

¹⁸² NG Kerk Argief, GEM-K 2428, Van Rhynsdorp Kerkraad Notules, 1905-1929: Ordinary Meeting 13 November 1926.

¹⁸³ NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1473, Vorm A, Gemeentelike statistiek, Gemeentes T-Vi, 1916-1949: Van Rhynsdorp 1916-1940; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1469, Vorm A, Gemeentelike statistiek, Gemeentes Mi-N, 1916-1949: Nieuwe Rust 1922-1940; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1590, Vorm F, Diens van barmhartigheid, Gemeentes N-Pi, 1922-1943: Vorm Z, Nieuwe rust, 1922-1943; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1593, Gemeentes V-Y, 1922-1943, Vorm Z: Van Rhynsdorp, 1922-1943; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1504, Vorm D, Sending, Gemeentes Sts-Ven, 1914-1940: Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1940; NG Kerk Argief, K-Div 1500, Vorm D, Sending, Gemeentes N-O, 1913-1940: Nieuwe rust, 1922-1940.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter identified the social impacts of drought in the 1920s and 1930s on the population of Vanrhynsdorp. Drought destroyed food and financial security of many families of different races. The most vulnerable of society, women, children, the elderly and people of colour, could be seen to bear the brunt of the repercussions, such as forcing many families to become reliant on charity and welfare support. Many people in the district had to eventually turn to alternate livelihoods as they found themselves unable to survive on the traditional agricultural economy. The result of these events would be seen in the low standards of living and migration within the district following the drought's conclusion. Many of the impacts of the drought were aggravated by pre-existing complications such as poor education standards in both races, substandard infrastructure and high levels of unemployment and poverty.

Religious leaders had a strong belief in the idea that disasters such as drought were a punishment sent by God. The approach taken by the church was that spiritually the only solution to the drought was through prayer to show remorsefulness and to ask for divine intervention. The idea of prayer showing remorse played an important role in the spiritual way many members attempted to end and endure the drought through prayer, especially during days of *verootmoediging*. The response to drought, although often beginning as spiritual discussions, eventually became a more practical issue and prayers were supplemented by providing assistance or other practical methods to combat the drought such as food relief. The ongoing drought environment resulted in the religious organisations of the district to change and become more able to provide assistance that suited the needs of the district's population.

Education within the district marked the impact of drought, not only through visible malnourishment among students but in the reported psychological impact of drought-induced poverty in student's home lives. Older children were forced by circumstance to find employment to assist their families, disrupting the education system and making it more difficult to improve education within the district among all races.

The Coloured population on the reserves bore the brunt of the drought, with many Coloured people (who already suffered from low living standards) losing their jobs on white farms while much of the agricultural production on the reserves also failed under worsening conditions.

The drought's impact was therefore intensified among the Coloured population who suffered not only under its impact but also as a result of low wages and other social problems which forced many to become reliant on food relief programs to survive.

The cumulative effect of the prolonged drought, followed by the depression, eventually led to the visible migration of people of all races towards the Southern regions of the district between the start of the drought in 1924 and its termination in 1934 to live along the banks of the Olifants River where there were better opportunities for employment and access to government services.

Chapter 5. The impact of drought on water, health and sanitation in the Vanrhynsdorp district.

5.1 Introduction

Harri Mäki in his study on the development of sanitation and water supply schemes in South Africa from 1880-1920, noted that almost all water and sanitation in South Africa prior to the larger cross catchment supply systems created under the control of South African municipal authorities were originally supplied by private sources. Mäki noted that in general, water supply had for much of the 19th and 20th centuries been an arrangement of open water transit systems in the form of furrows that diverted water from river streams and springs across farms to where water was collected, stored and (waste) disposed of. Underground water systems only became popular from the 1900s onwards.¹

Mäki observed in his research that there were a number of reasons for the development of water and sanitation systems in South Africa in the early 20th century, the main ones being population growth, municipal finances, racial attitudes, the role of experts, infrastructure development, hygienic revolution, public and private considerations and lack of good governance.² The study of the Vanrhynsdorp water supply and sanitation systems is relatively novel and no prior studies have been done, much less on the impacts of drought on the district's health systems.

The central aim of this chapter is to determine what the impact of drought was on health and sanitation within the district of Vanrhynsdorp. The study of health in the district is curtailed in its analysis to the existing available documents. In this case most information on sanitation in the district that could be found mainly related to the Municipality of Vanrhynsdorp. Information on the sanitation and water supply situation in the rest of the district is limited mainly since it consisted largely of farms. The section on health and sanitation between 1924

¹ H. Mäki, *Water sanitation and health: the development of the environmental services in four South African cities, 1840-1920*, Juvenes Print, Tampere, 2008, p. 304.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 310-317.

and 1934 ties in with earlier background evaluation of these aspects for the period prior to 1924 (see Chapter 2).

5.2 Water supply of the town Vanrhynsdorp

Between 1917 and early 1927 groundwater sources (shallow wells) and rain-water tanks made up most of the water supply in the town, as dedicated water schemes were non-existent. However, the town's water provision had seen some improvements since its earlier period. One such improvement was in the town's location (where many of the people of colour resided) which in preceding years had no water supply beyond wells dug by local shop owners. This situation changed in 1927 when the town drilled a borehole in the location to provide 2000 gallons (7570 litres) of water per hour.³ A galvanised tank was constructed later that year at the borehole with a windmill to pump water into the tank creating a more constant supply of water to the Coloured population.⁴

In 1917 many of the town wells were reported to be covered, often with a wooden cover, but shallow wells were still open to the possibility of contamination as the walls of the wells were, in many cases, not impervious to surface water runoff.⁵ By late 1927 the town's water supply had improved notably, with all local wells grouted (made impervious using cement) and pumps installed to improve water supply and well sanitation.⁶ In 1928, a request was submitted to secure the nearest government drill rig, which was to be used to drill more boreholes around the town to secure a greater water supply during the drought. However, this request was refused and the town's plans for creating more boreholes would be prolonged till 1936.⁷

³ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Municipal Office of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary for Public Health, annual health reports for year-end 30 June 1927 and 4 August 1927; *Ibid.*, Letter from office of the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Native Affairs, 13 September 1927; *Ibid.*, Letter from Municipal Office Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Native Affairs, 5 May 1927.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Louis Rood response to 1928 health report to Secretary of Public Health, 27 March 1929.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Systematic Inspection Van Rhynsdorp Municipality by E.H. Cluver, Assistant Health Officer for the Union, 19/11/1926.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Municipal Office of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary for Public Health, annual health reports for year-end 30 June 1927: *Ibid.*, 4 August 1927.

⁷ The Department of Irrigation refused due to the risk of other municipalities requesting drills designated for agricultural drilling being requested away. See NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: E.H. Culver to the Secretary of Public Health on water for the municipality, 22/5/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from Department of Irrigation about boring in Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 11/6/1928.

By 1927 the health inspector hoped that a reliable supply for the town could be guaranteed through a water scheme to individual houses or a street tap via a storage tank or small water reservoir, but this suggestion was never put into place.⁸ The inspector noted that a clean, proximal water supply in small towns was vital, arguing that the lack of water was a threat to the white and Coloured population of the town. However, the only way Vanrhynsdorp could increase its water supply was through additional boreholes.⁹ Hopes of creating any kind of centralised water scheme for the town were not feasible, due to the distance between homes, lack of sufficient water pressure and costs. Instead, it was suggested that each home should have a water tank installed to distribute chlorinated water directly.¹⁰ The proposed individual tank system would have made the job of chlorinating the water more accurate and reliable as it was difficult to estimate how much chlorine and lime individual wells required to purify the water.¹¹ None of these propositions were implemented by the town during the period studied and the town's water supply would remain dependent on less reliable methods such as shallow wells, which the inspector considered hazardous, until 1936 when the first water supply scheme was implemented.¹²

The town's pervasively poor water supply situation meant that the loss of surface water sources during the drought did not disrupt and create water shortages throughout the town as it already relied on alternative water sources. The town was still affected by water-borne diseases due to the contamination of ground water sources (especially shallow wells) by proximal sewage pits and the nearby Troe Troe River's stagnant water pools. This meant that the wells had to be cleaned regularly to stop the spread of waterborne diseases, which became especially important during drought and the summer months when ground water contamination became more prevalent due to long periods of low to no rainfall. These periods of drought were also typified by the increase of mosquitos concentrated in the 'wetter areas' around the household wells and the Troe Troe River's banks during periods of low rainfall.

⁸ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter to Town Clerk of Van Rhynsdorp from Secretary of Public Health relating to annual health report of 1928, 22 March 1928.

⁹ It was noted that apparently Van Rhynsdorp had good boreholes at the gaol and school to supply water to them. See *Ibid.*, Van Rhynsdorp Municipality Annual Health Report 1929, 5 March 1929; *Ibid.*, Note for Van Rhynsdorp Sanitation file, 19/3/1929.

¹⁰ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health Inspectors Report for Van Rhynsdorp, 30 June 1929; *Ibid.*, Health reports for the year ended 30 June 1931, 1 July 1931.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Health report for the year ended 30 June 1932, 11 July 1932.

¹² TBK, PAA, Vol, AA 122 9, File, F405, Van Rhynsdorp Municipality Health Reports, 17/3/1927-25/2/1975: Health Inspection Report of Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 7/2/1936.

5.3 Sanitation in the district and town

The sanitation situation in the district of Vanrhynsdorp had been contentious for some time, with the town of Vanrhynsdorp described by both the Secretary to the Minister of Health and a health inspector as “dangerous to the public health”. The Secretary of Native Affairs deemed the situation in the location as “disgraceful”.¹³ Attempts were made by the town council to improve the sanitation situation, which saw the town creating a series of posts to monitor and to improve the municipality’s sanitation and health services. The town clerk served as the Municipal Officer of Health, Dr De Bruyn as the Health Officer and a sanitation contractor was employed to oversee the provision of health services.¹⁴

The town sanitation problems were, however, rooted in a definite lack of enforcement of its own regulations. In 1923, following the typhoid outbreak from 1920 to 1922, the town had attempted to encourage townspeople to better maintain their own wells and outhouses, use standard regulation pails and to build proper outhouses.¹⁵ By 1926, reports surfaced of families with no outhouses and terrible conditions within outhouse buildings that lacked proper pails and families reverting to burying their waste in their gardens.¹⁶ The town’s implementation of health regulations was further set back by corruption directly associated with the sanitation inspector, T. Woldensholme, who stole and fled with the town’s allocated sanitation funds. It was later uncovered that this theft and corruption had been occurring for several months and the health inspector had also failed to comply and complete his allocated duties.¹⁷

Serious focus on the need to reform the town’s sanitation began to form in 1927 during the midst of the drought. This was set into motion following a letter from Dr De Bruyn regarding the sanitation in the town, which subsequently led to serious discussions in the

¹³ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from Secretary of Native Affairs to Secretary of Public Health. 17/3/27; *Ibid.*, Letter from Municipal Office Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 6 May 1927.

¹⁴ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health Report for the Municipality of Van Rhynsdorp, 21st August 1928.

¹⁵ Pressure for these sanitation improvements only grew in 1925 when Dr De Bruyn’s report noted that the town needed to see to it that all wells were properly walled-off with cement, that each house had an outhouse with a sanitation pail and the river had to be kept clean. See WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book, 1920-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 12/3/1922; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 6/8/1924; *Ibid.*, Special Municipal Meeting, 13/2/1925; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 17/2/1926.

¹⁶ A practice which Dr De Bruyn was quick to denounce and the town council decided to try and stop the practice as soon as possible. See WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1920-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 17/2/1926; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 4/3/1926.

¹⁷ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1920-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 18/11/1925; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 2/12/1925.

council meeting. It was proposed that the council take a drastic new step to force the implementation of sanitation in the town. A new health committee, with stricter health authority over implementing sanitation regulation, was created with immediate effect, consisting of Dr De Bruyn and two other medical practitioners. New regulations focused on a more comprehensive detailing of tax payers' rights with regards to the Troe Troe River's cleanliness and health, the creation of public wash basins in the town, an overview of sanitation and water supply in the location, as well as the right of the new committee to implement at least £50 worth of works for sanitation purposes.¹⁸

In 1927, the town made use of the single pail system to remove waste. The waste was then subsequently transported using the sanitation cart and dumped half a mile from the town, along the main road, into a deep trench which was left uncovered. This system of concentrated waste in a trench created a terrible odour which was smelt through the town and it was also a concentrated point of groundwater contamination. The sanitation inspector altered this practice in such a way that the contractor had to dig shallower trenches more regularly, while refuse trenches had to be moved further from the town's perimeter.¹⁹ The health inspector recommended that the municipality adopt the double pail system, which allowed for one pail to be properly cleaned and tarred before being returned while the other was in use. It was also argued that efforts had to be made to ensure that the town's people owned pails instead of using paraffin tins or the bushes, as well as the need for residents to maintain their own yards.²⁰

The first sign that drought directly posed significant threats to health in the district appeared in 1927 when it was observed that the fallen water levels of the Troe Troe River resulted in a nuisance due to stagnant river water ponds which caused foul odours and became a breeding ground for flies and mosquitos.²¹ Home owners along the river admitted to burying

¹⁸ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1922-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 2/2/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 16/2/1927.

¹⁹ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from Municipal Office Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 6 May 1927. Although there had been earlier mentions of switching to a double pail system before 1927 the municipality had never implemented it. See WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1922-1932: Special Municipal Meeting, 24/3/1926.

²⁰ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from Secretary of Native Affairs to Secretary of Public Health, 17/3/27; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter on 'algemene sanitasie van die dorp' from Municipal Office, c. 1927. In response to these findings and attempts by the municipal council to enforce towns people to build outhouses and deposit waste either through the municipal system or directly were told so by the municipality, many apparently simply ignored the municipal orders. See WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1922-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 2/2/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 4/5/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 20/7/1927.

²¹ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1922-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 2/2/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 5/10/1927.

waste along its banks, which worsened the contamination of the stagnant river pools and surrounding groundwater. Typhoid was thus understandably reported to be worst in homes along the Troe Troe River course.²² The contaminated river, although not a primary source of potable water, was the only means for many towns-people to wash their clothing, which continued even when the water became stagnant in the midst of the drought (1927-1928). This continued community contact with the contaminated river understandably raised fears that many people may become sick from the continued exposure to the stagnant water. In response, the municipality offered clean water crates for towns-people to wash their clothing while the local boarding house had water piped from its borehole to allow for the children's clothing to be cleaned.²³ The other issues caused by standing water (especially mosquitos) was dealt with by the town clerk who resorted to mixing paraffin into the river, wells and boreholes throughout the town for the entire remaining duration of the drought.²⁴ The town clerk had also taken to regularly pouring chlorine and lime into the river and wells in an attempt to combat diseases.

In 1929, the health inspector reiterated that the single pail system, which was still in use two years after the initial suggestion for change, was a threat to the public health of the town and again suggested either the adoption of a double pail system or a proper sewerage system. This issue continued through to 1936.²⁵ The main reason for the inability of the municipality to upgrade to a double pail system was based on a lack of funds for the implementation of the system.²⁶ To underscore this need for a system upgrade (1928 to 1929), the recent growth in reported cases of typhoid in the town, particularly around the women's indigent boarding house, was directly blamed on the pail system and lack of a clean water supply from the municipality.²⁷

²² NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from Municipal Office Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 6 May 1927.

²³ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book, 1914-1922: Special Municipal Meetings, 6/3/1928; VRDM, Notules van die Kerkopvoeding Komitee, 1922-1935: Meeting held, 2 February 1929.

²⁴ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Municipal Office of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary for Public Health, annual health reports for year-end, 4 August 1927; *Ibid.*, Health report for the Municipality of Van Rhynsdorp, 21 August 1928. It had even been decided that the river had to be cleaned with chlorine and lime at least eight times in the summer. See WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1920-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 6/8/1924; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 3/8/1927; *Ibid.*, Special Municipal Meeting, 18/8/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 16/11/1927.

²⁵ It was noted that apparently Vanrhynsdorp had good boreholes at the gaol and school to supply water to them. See NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Van Rhynsdorp Municipality annual health report 1929, 5 March 1929; *Ibid.*, Note for Van Rhynsdorp Sanitation file, 19/3/1929.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Louis Rood response to 1928 health report to Secretary of Public Health, 27 March 1929.

²⁷ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Department of Public Health, 24 June 1929.

Housing in Vanrhynsdorp was a serious issue throughout the period of the drought and the resultant poverty. The homes of both the white and Coloured people were reported to be of poor quality and often overcrowded. The poorer white homes were made of low-quality materials, lacking many amenities and the inhabitants were accused of overcrowding their dwellings (see example in Figure 33).²⁸ This was probably made worse by the migration of white people towards the town at the height of the drought period. The town clerk noted in 1929 that housing of poor whites in the town was of much better quality than could usually be expected from towns in the area, which was a positive fact as the municipality lacked the funds to provide better accommodation.²⁹



Figure 33: Example of a *matjieshuis* in Vanrhynsdorp 1927.³⁰

By 1933 the inspector reported that some households still had no access to sanitary facilities such as water closets or proper pails and many townspeople regularly befouled the surrounding fields to relieve themselves. Others removed their own waste for dumping instead of making use of the municipal service, as the recent poor economic situation brought on by drought and the economic depression led to many being unable to afford to pay for the service. The municipal sanitation cart removed night soil three times a week while rubbish removal was only done on payment to the municipality. The health inspector argued that this should be

²⁸ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 17/14/2, 1/2/1930-24/1/1949: Annual reports, 1929-1940; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health report for the Municipality of Van Rhynsdorp 30 June 1928, 21 August 1928.

²⁹ See NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Van Rhynsdorp Municipality annual health report 1929, 5 March 1929; *Ibid.*, Note for Van Rhynsdorp Sanitation file, 19/3/1929.

³⁰ VRDM, Standard Bank photo album: "Bank Matjieshuis", 1927.

changed to a free service to stop poor members of the community from reverting to unsanitary waste removal practices.³¹ The issue of night soil removal and unsanitary waste removal habits, however, persisted to 1936 when the health inspector once again called for free municipal waste removal.³²

5.3.1 Sanitation in the Coloured location

By 1927 the situation in the location had not changed from the dire conditions noted in the initial report by Dr De Bruyn in 1916, with numerous reports of no sanitation facilities or water provision. The surrounding veld had been fouled to a terrible extent with waste and refuse from the location. This was a serious issue as by 1927 the location's population had become excessively crowded with forty huts housing an average of nine people per hut while the average size of a hut was 8 meters by 3 meters. Many of the huts in the locations were made of stone and in poor condition, while occasional hessian cloth huts were also common. These crowded, poor living conditions increased the rate of disease spread and walked hand-in-hand with poor sanitation.³³

In late 1927 the municipality attempted to make improvements to the location such as the hiring of a Mr P. Danster as the location's special constable, whose job mainly consisted of collecting hut tax payments and overseeing the sanitation conditions in the settlement.³⁴ The successful drilling of a borehole in the location to provide water, and less successful efforts to improve the housing conditions of the Coloured people in their neighbourhood, were also endeavoured.³⁵ Ablution facilities (such as outhouses) were severely lacking in the neighbourhood, with only three public and two private outhouses available for the whole

³¹ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from the Town Clerk of Van Rhynsdorp to the Undersecretary of Public Health, 15 November 1933.

³² TBK, PAA, Vol, AA 122 9, File, F405, Van Rhynsdorp Municipality Health Reports, 17/3/1927-25/2/1975: Health inspection report of Van Rhynsdorp municipality, 7/2/1936.

³³ *Ibid.*, E. H. Culver to the Secretary of Public Health on water for the municipality, 22/5/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from Department of Irrigation about boring in Van Rhynsdorp Municipality, 11/6/1928; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter on 'algemene sanitasie van die dorp' from municipal office, c. 1927; NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health reports for the Municipality of Van Rhynsdorp 30th June 1928, 21st August 1928.

³⁴ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book, 1920-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 24/12/1926.

³⁵ The housing improvement program mainly entailed offering money to local inhabitants to make improvements themselves. See NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter to Town Clerk of Van Rhynsdorp from Secretary of Public Health relating to annual health report of 1928, 22 March 1928.

location. This situation was denounced by the district surgeon, who called for better supervision of the location's sanitation needs. Refuse removal was also deemed inadequate as much of the refuse was taken from the location and dumped in the nearby fields by local people.³⁶ The town clerk noted that all the recommendations made by the inspector had been discussed by the municipal council but funding to implement the necessary health changes were lacking.³⁷ These issues led to a situation where contagious diseases ran rife among the Coloured population, which during periods of drought, made it difficult for the local people to survive more frequent outbreaks of such diseases.

5.4 Health issues

Vanrhynsdorp was regularly plagued by tuberculosis and typhoid (also known as enteric fever). Typhoid was particularly difficult to deal with among the Coloured population as in times of major outbreaks, people that became sick either did not report themselves to the local medical practitioner or they could not reach medical assistance.³⁸ Tuberculosis (hereafter TB) was the second most frequent disease within the town of Vanrhynsdorp, which was particularly widespread amongst the Coloured population.³⁹ The noticeable increase of TB among Coloured people was blamed on the economic depression and low living standards of the population. The town clerk noted that the only real treatment for typhoid that the town could offer the sufferers was rehydration mixtures and educational pamphlets on the disease.⁴⁰

Typhoid fever plagued many small towns throughout South Africa during the early 20th century. This was caused by a predominance of poor sanitation enforcement within these small and often rural settlements, where poorly planned refuse and waste removal systems had created breeding grounds for easily transferable diseases. Typhoid was better able to spread

³⁶ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health report for Van Rhynsdorp year ended 30 June 1933, August 1933; WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/2, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute book 1922-1932: Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 2/2/1927, *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 20/7/1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Municipal Meeting, 3/8/1927.

³⁷ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Letter from the Town Clerk of Van Rhynsdorp to the Undersecretary of Public Health, 15 November 1933.

³⁸ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health Inspector's report for Van Rhynsdorp, 30 June 1929.

³⁹ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health report for municipality of Van Rhynsdorp 30 June 1928, 21 August 1928.

⁴⁰ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health report for the year ended 30 June 1932, 11 July 1932.

and become one of the predominant diseases within the Union thanks to its multiple vectors of transmission as it could spread through asymptomatic carriers, contaminated water and food, flies and contact within the household. These factors were exasperated by ignorance and poor hygiene practices of the general populace, with infections most common among families that resided within the same household.⁴¹ These reasons explain why typhoid and enteric fever was known more generally within South Africa as the “Filth Sickness”.⁴²

The year 1928 marked a year of extreme drought. Concurrently, the number of typhoid cases in the country had seen a notable rise of 1769 cases across all races. The town of Vanrhynsdorp, as discussed in the chapter 2, in particular was a centre of increased infection, with at least seventeen reported cases and an increase of at least 4% in comparison to other years.⁴³ The number of cases among the smaller communities were argued to be large and, in many cases, it was also considered to be a result of poor sanitation measures by local councils.⁴⁴

TB had become an epidemic for Coloured people by 1934, with a total of ten recorded casualties. This was mainly due to undernourishment and ignorance of the disease by the Coloured population. The town clerk noted that the best solution to combating TB was to further educate the Coloured population about the disease, uplift their economic, housing and nutritional requirements as well as combat the high unemployment rate of Coloured people in the town. As noted above, there was a steady increase of Coloured people moving into the town’s location over the period being studied, which could also have led to increases in the TB spread.

The Town Clerk noted in his inspection of the town for 1934 that:

“At present accommodation and housing is inadequate within the location, but steps are being taken to improve matters. It is realised however that until such a time, as when the coloured races have been educated up to it and higher wages paid, this menace will always be at our door. Children are born

⁴¹ U.G. 8-’22, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.1, Department of Health, Calendar year 1920*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1922, p. 153.

⁴² U.G. 47-’28, *Union of South Africa, Department of Health, Year ended 30 June 1928*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1928, pp. 23-25.

⁴³ U.G. 21-’26, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.5, Department of Health, Year ended 30 June 1924*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1926, p. 246; U.G. 6-’27, *Annual Departmental Reports (Abridged), No.6, Department of Health, Year ended 30 June 1925*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1927, p. 274.

⁴⁴ U.G. 47-’28, *Union of South Africa, Department of Health, Year ended 30 June 1928*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1928, p. 23-25.

*in poverty and dirt, nourishment is inadequate, and consequently we have weaklings unable to resist disease.*⁴⁵

The providers of healthcare to the people of the town and district outside of the district surgeon and town doctor, were local charity organisations and a town nurse. The town had hired a qualified nurse through pressure from charitable institutions in 1927 to assist in the town clinic and provide additional care to the people of Vanrhynsdorp.⁴⁶ The year 1927 was also the year in which the local ACVV created its *Gesondheidskomitee* (Health Committee) to provide medical assistance to the needy, particularly school children.⁴⁷ The town's free clinic was too small for the number of cases it received and had to regularly request assistance from the government. The clinic received much assistance from the local ACVV as well.⁴⁸ The collaboration of the town clinic's nurse and local ACVV was praised for the headway made in providing health services to the general populace but especially with pregnant mothers.⁴⁹

5.5 Health in the rest of the district at a time of drought

Outside of the town of Vanrhynsdorp the district suffered many of the same health and sanitation problems in its smaller hamlets and villages. One example being the hamlet of Doringbaai. For small settlements such as Doringbaai sanitation provision was severely lacking, likely the result of expansion by the small community around a single fish factory (circa 1927). Outhouse facilities were only available at the white dwellings and none near the factory for the Coloured workers or community. This lack in sanitation facilities resulted in repeated outbreaks of typhoid throughout the small township.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Annual Health Inspection by the Town Clerk for year ended 30 June 1934, 6 July 1934.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Municipal Office of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary for Public Health, annual health reports for year-end 30th June 1927, 4 August 1927.

⁴⁷ The ACVV *Gesondheidskomitee* (Health committee) functioned under a wider *Gesondheidsraad* (Health Council) which co-ordinated the organisation's efforts with other organisations. The aim of *gesondheidskomitees* was to assist women and children with healthcare. See VRDM, Van Rhynsdorp ACVV Minute Book 1915-1942: Bestuursvergadering, 6 October 1927; *Ibid.*, Ordinary Meeting, 13 July 1929.

⁴⁸ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File, 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Health report from the year ended 30 June 1931, 1 July 1931.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Health report for the year ended 30 June 1932, 11 July 1932.

⁵⁰ NASA, GES, Vol, 687, File 201/13, Sanitation Van Rhynsdorp, 1913-1935: Inspection of North Bay Canning Company factory in Doringbaai, 12 June 1929.

The issue of health conditions, particularly for relief workers, was brought up early in 1924, when Dr De Bruyn noted that many foremen in the district did not implement effective health services for the road workers. The doctor noted that workers with pre-existing conditions should not have been hired and that medical aid should only be administered for severe illnesses, contagious diseases or broken bones. In the case of other ailments workers were expected to either deal with their illnesses themselves or find transport on the supply carts to seek medical aid. This was particularly a problem in the work camps that were often rife with diseases and where the sole responsibility of diagnosing ill workers were placed on untrained foremen. The doctor also noted that foremen had to take better initiatives in terms of providing sanitation for road work crews, securing good quality potable water and ensuring that bodily functions were performed further away from the camp.⁵¹

In 1924, the farm of Vredendal had an outbreak of diphtheria. The outbreak was initiated by the arrival of a family of twelve (two parents and ten children) impoverished trekkers from Boesmanland, who had migrated to the Olifants River because of the drought and were living in a tent. One of the children had reportedly died from the disease and two others were very ill. In response, the rest of the family were inoculated and segregated from the infected children as well as educated on the disease by Dr De Bruyn.⁵²

Health on the surrounding farms of the district was also affected by a general lack of sanitation facilities. In 1929, an outbreak of spinal typhus in the district occurred amongst white relief workers on the farm Baklyplaas, with three deaths and around seven confirmed cases. The only solution was the segregation and isolation of people who had been in contact with the infected parties and the destruction of their personal belongings.⁵³

The mission station at Ebenezer struggled with TB, which had been the leading cause of death among many of the Coloured people on the station. In 1934, the magistrate reported four deaths on the mission station directly associated with seizures from malnutrition. The starvation conditions were aggravated by the lack of medical care facilities near the station.⁵⁴

⁵¹ WCARS, Vol, 4/1/1, Algemene Korrespondensie, 1922-1925: Letter from Dr De Bruyn to Secretary of Divisional Council on Health at work camps, 14/10/24.

⁵² WCARS, Vol, 4/1/1, Algemene Korrespondensie, 1922-1925: Letter from Dr P De Bruyn to Resident Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp on diphtheria at Vredendal, 25/9/24.

⁵³ NASA, GES, Vol, 501, File, 217/10, Van Rhynsdorp typhus fever, 1/7/1929-10/7/1929: Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 1/7/29; *Ibid.*, Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 3/7/29; *Ibid.*, Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 9/7/29; *Ibid.*, Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Secretary of Public Health, 10/7/29.

⁵⁴ There were similar reports of death due to starvation on the mission station of Rietpoort in 1928-29, where the mission priest reported that one student had died while walking home, although the magistrate had denied the

Water supply to the station was reliant on the irrigation canals, often polluted by both animal and human waste. Human waste or refuse removal was not offered in the area.⁵⁵ Farmers alongside the banks of the Olifants River reported (in 1926 already) that the river was polluted as a result of people washing clothes in it, leaving animal carcasses along its banks as well as refuse and waste contamination.⁵⁶ This rapidly increased the rate of transmission of typhoid within the mission station, with regular reported deaths amongst the community.⁵⁷

The likelihood of diseases spreading in the district (especially the rural areas) was increased as many of these rural area dwellings held high occupancy rates. Evidence of this can be seen in the 1926 Census Report, which although only enumerated the white population, can still provide an approximation of the larger situation throughout the district. Many dwellings were overcrowded, with the town of Nuwerus reporting that for a population of 192 there were only eighteen dwellings. This meant that there were, on average, eleven people living in each household. Other areas further to the South, such as Vanrhynsdorp and Vredendal, had a slightly lower average of five people per household. The problem with these statistics, however, was that not all families were evenly distributed and especially poorer families were more likely to live in overcrowded conditions.⁵⁸ This large headcount in lower income areas was more conducive to the transmission of diseases (i.e. typhoid, diphtheria and TB) in drought driven overpopulated and impoverished circumstances. There is also no real way of investigating the quality of the houses or the sanitation facilities of the individual dwellings, considering the established low standards of living in the rural areas of the district, this can be assumed to be low. The appearance of many rural farming homes in the district can be compared to that in Figure 34 below.

report. See WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: The Secretary of Native Affairs to the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 3/12/1928.

⁵⁵ NASA, GES, Vol, 937, file, 722/13, Sanitation, Ebenezer Kolonie board of management (Dist-Van Rhynsdorp), 4/8/1932-3/8/1934: Health report of Ebenezer kolonie, 19 July 1934.

⁵⁶ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 10 December 1926.

⁵⁷ G.C. Hattingh, *Die N G gemeente van Vredendal 25 jaar oud 1933-1958*, Die Kerkraad, Vredendal, 1958, p. 97.

⁵⁸ NASA, STK, Vol, 6, File, 21/095, Census 1926 district file Van Rhynsdorp, 1926-1926: Final returns 1926 census, 11 June 1926.



Figure 34: An example of an average farmhouse within the district, photo taken near Giftberg in 1929.⁵⁹

5.6 Conclusion

Vanrhynsdorp was the perfect place for disease outbreaks to occur during the drought. Although there is no evidence of major outbreaks of infectious diseases amongst the population in the period covering this study, the growing incidences of *maagkoors* (typhoid) within the town from 1927 to 1930 does highlight the likelihood for disease to impact on the populace. This was brought on firstly by the town's lack of reliable water supply, especially in its Coloured location where a proper water supply was only secured in 1927 with the drilling of a borehole in the area. The second problem was that many families had no access to council sanitation services due to a lack of outhouses, proper pails or even a refusal to use the council system due to its costs, while the system's reliability was also placed under question. The third problem, caused by drought and increased the risk to disease, was the fact that most of the district's inhabitants were poor and, in many cases, had a poor diet and questionable quality homes which were normally overcrowded. The Coloured population, in particular, suffered from high rates of TB spread in the location and reserves such as Ebenezer and Rietpoort. The fourth problem caused by drought was that the rural homesteads of the district outside of the town had little in the way of appropriate sanitation services and water supply. These issues were often made worse by the migration of rural people that placed them in poor quality and unsanitary situations that were rife for the spread of disease.

⁵⁹ VRDM, Standard Bank photo album, 1927-1931: Picture of Farmhouse near Giftberg 1929.

Chapter 6. Government and public attempts at dealing with the impacts of drought 1924-1934

6.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the concept of drought alleviation mainly, referring to activities taken by either government or private groups of people to counter potentially negative social or economic impacts of drought events. South Africa's attempts at alleviating impacts caused by drought began as early as 1860, with rudimentary food relief and grain assistance to farmers. This system evolved slowly and during the 1894 drought remained very similar to the methods of 1860, with a heavy reliance on state sold food relief and grain provided on credit to secure the next year's harvest. The Cape Colony was more supportive of laissez faire relief methods, which were cheaper and required less intervention from the state. This changed in 1916 with the Drought and Flood Distress Relief Act of 1916, which allowed the state to take responsibility for drought alleviation through state mechanisms such as the Land Bank. Drought alleviation was delegated to provincial government as poor relief but suffered from being too short-sighted and not focused on making the indigent economically active again.¹ This eventually led to the state investigation through the Drought Investigation Commission of 1920, which summarised the causes of agricultural losses and ways to minimize such losses throughout the Union.

One reason for drought-induced social disruption, according to Stephen Devereaux, was caused by what he referred to as "entitlement failures". An entitlement in this sense refers to any goods or commodities that can legally be acquired. One example is a labour entitlement, which allow people to keep everything earned from their labour, i.e. their salary. Entitlements, according to Devereaux, can be subdivided into four categories: production-based (e.g. crop harvests), labour-based (e.g. wages), trade-based (selling and buying commodities) and transfer-based (informal methods of acquiring goods such as through charities). Drought had a severe impact on these systems by decreasing what people were able to earn and produce on their own, thereby lowering the entitlements received during the drought affected stage. This,

¹ U.G. 61-1937, *Union of South Africa, Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee in Poor Relief and Charitable Institutions*, 1937, p. 5.

in turn, had corresponding repercussions on other entitlements.² Within Vanrhynsdorp the impact of drought on entitlements was highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4, where it was noted that the drought caused crop failures and livestock deaths which developed into prodigious unemployment levels resulting in starvation and eventually a heavy reliance on welfare and charity.

Devereux argued that with timely intervention at the early stages (i.e. low crop production) the impacts of the drought could be lessened before it reached the point of food shortages. Devereux also suggested that drought alleviation techniques had to be specific to the problems impacting on a population, meaning that if drought caused high unemployment relief works should be provided to replace the lost employment opportunities. Therefore, when studying the impacts of a drought, it should not be asked what caused the drop in food availability but rather why the relief response failed to alleviate the problem.³ Donald Wilhite argued that drought policies should be focused around the principles of allowing local governments to be adaptable, provide equitable access and remain consistent in its provision as well as policies.⁴

6.2 The government's response and drought distress relief acts

The period post 1916 marked a change in the drought alleviation process for the Union of South Africa. As seen in Figure 35, spending on drought relief efforts grew substantially in this period, with funds from the Union government reaching new peaks by 1940. This increased assistance was due to an apparent realisation of the importance of the role government played in assisting destitute citizens throughout disaster periods but mainly supported by the Drought and Flood Distress Relief Act of 1916.

² S. Devereux, & T. Naeraa, "Drought and Survival in Rural Namibia", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, (3), 1996, pp. 423-424; S. Devereux, "The impact of droughts and floods on food security and policy options to alleviate negative effects", *Agricultural Economics*, 37, 2007, p. 47.

³ S. Devereux, "The impact of droughts and floods on food security and policy options to alleviate negative effects", *Agricultural Economics*, 37, 2007, p. 47.

⁴ D.A. Wilhite, "Drought policy in the US and Australia: A comparative analysis", *Journal of the American Water Resources Association*, 22, (3), 1986, pp. 425-438.

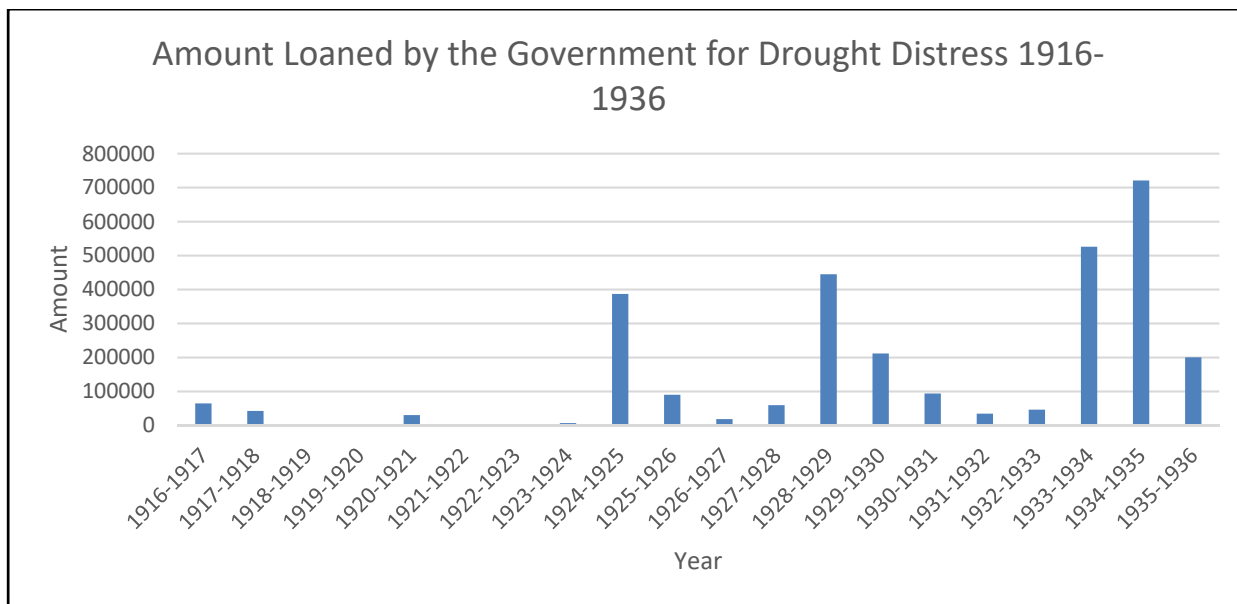


Figure 35: Amount loaned by the Government for Drought Distress Relief across South Africa, circa 1916-1936.⁵

By early 1924 the drought had become so severe that it had caught the political attention of the Union Government. This was marked by the Governor General of South Africa's speech at the opening of parliament in 1924 where he first mentioned the Union Government's interest to combat the problems caused by drought and locust outbreak of 1923. Subsequently, the Governor General introduced the new policy of drought relief to place more emphasis on the role of agricultural co-operatives in assisting farmers to receive funding from the government. The new drought alleviation policy took the cue from its 1916 predecessor and placed the management of the act under the Land Bank. The state had also begun a process of opening the railway network for use by farmers to move their stock to better grazing during the drought, although farmers were obliged to repay the transportation costs at a later date.⁶ The main problem with these plans were that they only focused on ways to assist farmers and the agricultural economy and effectively ignoring the need for community social relief measures.

The Drought Distress Relief Bill of 1924 was tabled in parliament not long after the opening of the legislature. The bill was heavily modelled on its 1916 predecessor, with policies such as a requirement that districts first be declared distressed by parliament and a district committee created to receive and process applications for assistance. The district committees operated

⁵ Most of the relief expenditure in this graph was aimed at the Cape Province although the expenditure from 1933 to 1935 was aimed at the Transvaal province, mainly in the form of transportation costs for livestock and feed. See NASA, LDB, Vol, 1061, File, R1318/3, Drought Relief Commission avoiding losses to drought, 1929-1941: The effects of Drought on South African Agriculture with special reference to losses caused, p. 8, 6/12/1937.

⁶ *Union of South Africa, Debates of the House of Assembly, Fourth Session of Parliament, 25th January to the 10th of April 1924*, Cape Times, Parliamentary Printers, pp. 2-26.

under the General Manager of the Land Bank, who oversaw the final authorisation for all relief provision.

The main purpose of the 1924 bill was the provision of relief to land owning or occupying farmers and not the general public, particularly with the aim of stopping the flow of farmers towards the cities and towns. The main difference between the bill of 1916 and 1924 was that where the relief bill of 1916 had only provided for assistance to farmers in buying more stock to replace those lost in the drought, the bill of 1924 permitted farmers to buy fertilizer, implements and seeds, up to the cost of £300. The act allowed for seeds to be distributed to farmers, but the cost of the seeds had to be recompensed through the profits of the next harvest. Farmers could only apply for assistance if they possessed a piece of property and had actively used it for a period of one year, which was a serious concern for *bywoner* (share-cropper) farmers in impoverished districts such as Vanrhynsdorp.⁷

An outspoken critic of the bill was the National Party leader, D.F. Malan, who suggested a major flaw in the bill was that it had come too late to save the farming community, since it would only come into action by late 1924 or early 1925. This critique proved true for Vanrhynsdorp, where the district was not declared stricken until 29 August 1924. Malan also critiqued the 6% interest rate that was raised by the government on relief, since most farmers were unable to repay the loan for some time, creating additional financial stress. Malan questioned the reasoning behind the raised interest on relief, since farmers had little in the way to repay such loans in the first place. He also pointed out that under the act, aid could only be given to people that had been declared bankrupt, which left many who were on the verge of bankruptcy unable to acquire assistance to prevent such an eventuality from occurring. A final complaint by Malan remarked that relief would only be provided to farmers who were suffering under the current drought (1924) and ignored farmers who had become insolvent from prevailing drought conditions over the two previous years (1922 and 1923).⁸ These were valid criticisms of the manner in which drought relief was provided and would all prove to be founded in the period 1924 to 1928 when farmers failed to repay their seed relief credit.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1211-1214; Anon., “New act of Parliament”, *The Rand Daily Mail*, 17 April 1928, p. 17; Anon., “In die parlement”, *Landbouweekblad*, 19 March 1924, p. 1273.

⁸ *Union of South Africa, Debates of the House of Assembly, Fourth Session of Parliament*, 25th January to the 10th of April 1924, Parliamentary Printer, Cape Town, pp. 1214-1216; *Union of South Africa, Government Gazette*, (No.191 of 1924) 29 August 1924, p. 318.

The Drought Relief Act was provided with a budget of £300,000. However, it became evident by 24 October 1924 that funds were insufficient to meet the needs of the 7,420 applications for assistance (mainly from the Cape Province). The total funds supplied came to around £500,000 of which 74% was spent on relief and the remaining funds allocated to administration costs. This had a further negative effect of prolonging the time taken for relief to be distributed as the new budget had to be approved in parliament.⁹

By 3 November 1924 the Vanrhynsdorp committee had only submitted seven applications to the fund, of which one had been granted for £3 out of the original £351, 71 shillings requested. This number grew to seventeen applications valued at £2,713 in 1925. Only eight applicants were successful and received £1,027 collectively, which was used to procure 61 sheep, 30 goats and £211 worth of seed. It is doubtful that such low numbers of applicants and approved funds provided much in the way of remuneration from the total losses suffered by the district's approximately 400 farmers. Comparatively, the neighbouring district of Namaqualand received no assistance from the government while Clanwilliam only had one successful applicant, suggesting that Vanrhynsdorp was more successful than some of its neighbours. Only Calvinia district had relative success in acquiring assistance from the government between 1924 and 1925.¹⁰

The enactment of the act was further stalled by the impact of the drought, meaning that until 1925 the circumstances in the district were too poor to sustain restocking efforts or the planting of crops using seed wheat.¹¹ Low interest from North Western farmers to the 1924 Act was explained to have been caused by a more immediate need for relief through work and food rather than long-term investments such as livestock and seed wheat.¹²

⁹ NASA, Collection of the Department of the Treasury (hereafter TES), Vol, 8125, File, 116/4, Drought Distress Relief Loan Vote 'o', 1924-1925: Letter from the Secretary of Finance to the Managing Director, 30 September 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Managing Director to the Secretary of Finance, 14 November 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Finance to the Managing Director, 1 December 1924

¹⁰ NASA, TES, Vol, 8125, File, 116/4 Vol 2, Drought Distress Relief recoverable advances under Act No. 15 of 1927, 1925-1936: Letter from the Acting Controller Auditor General to Secretary of Justice, 8 October 1925; U.G. 24- '25, *Thirteenth year report of the central council of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa and financial returns for the year ended 31st December 1924*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1925, p. 35; U.G. 22-'26, *Fourteenth year report of the central board of Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa and financial returns for the year ended 31st December 1925*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1926, p. 43; NASA, LDB, Vol, 1915, File, R2547/1, Suggested relief to farmers during drought and locust distress, 1924-1925: Statement showing position as of 7 March 1925, 16 March 1925.

¹¹ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Secretary of Labour, 28/10/1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Agriculture to the Secretary of Labour, 4 November 1924.

¹² *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Clanwilliam to the Secretary of Agriculture, 24 October 1924.

There was a brief period of refrain in 1926 as rainfall events returned to a relatively normal level before many farmers in the district were once again left in a difficult financial situation in late 1927 by another period of decreased precipitation. This led to the creation of another Drought Relief Act in 1927 by the Union Government followed by a minor amendment to it in 1928.

Members of the Senate raised concerns that the 1927 Drought Relief Bill was the third such law created in less than two decades, with some arguing that this was a sign that the country needed a more permanent answer to the issue of drought instead of constantly having to provide relief to farmers. Most members were more than willing to support such measures on the premise that prior legislation had been quite successful and most of the funds repaid after only one year (£117,000 paid back with few write-offs).¹³ The bill suggested that at least £400,000 would have to be paid by the government, which took a significant period from the initiation in June to come into operation.¹⁴ The primary concern of the 1927 Drought Relief Act was the restocking of farms and a return to economic viability. The Cape Administrator reportedly requested assistance from the Union Government in providing relief to families in the form of food and work, however, this early request was not successful. The Union Government felt that as a matter of policy charitable relief was not the primary role of the central government, as it was feared such measures would create a habit of frequent requests for assistance.¹⁵

The Drought Distress Relief Act of 1927 was very similar to its predecessors in 1916 and 1924 with the same committee structure and standards for land owning or renting farmers to qualify for aid from the government. Farmers were still expected to repay their loans within five years at a rate of 6% interest while farmers that failed to repay their debts could have the livestock or implements bought using relief funds repossessed by the Land Bank. The act also pushed for farmers to join agricultural credit societies in order to receive funds.¹⁶

Vanrhynsdorp was declared a drought-stricken district in February 1928. The district committee received 382 successful applications from farmers for a total sum of £5,365, of which £1,727 was paid out in early 1928 by the Land Bank. The majority of these early funds were expended on acquiring 1,436 sheep (at a total cost of £1,640) and 158 goats (bought for

¹³ Anon., "Drought distress bill", *The Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1927, p. 10.

¹⁴ Anon., "The Cape's cry of distress", *The Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1927, p. 8.

¹⁵ Anon., "Government and drought areas", *The Rand Daily Mail*, 20 December 1927, p. 27.

¹⁶ Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette Extraordinary*, (No.25 of 1927) 24 June 1927, pp. x-xiii; Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette Extraordinary*, (A.B. 3-'28), 6 February 1928, p. ix.

£87). The district also received £3,135 worth of seed by 31 December 1928. By 1929 the total amount of £5,134 was paid out, mainly to buy 1,552 sheep, 133 goats (collectively amounting to £1,843) and £3,291 worth of seed.¹⁷

The greatest demand in the district was for seed to plant in preparation for the next harvest as noted earlier in Chapter 3. The process for acquiring assistance was long and drawn out and required that a district first be declared drought-stricken, then after a committee had collected applications and decided on the most deserving cases and calculated estimates, the applications were forwarded to the Department of Agriculture. The department provided the grain in increments that was stored locally by the committee until a sufficient reserve had been built up that was distributed to the successful applicants. The original approximation of seed approximations made by the committee for the district in 1924 came to 1,000 bags of wheat, 300 bags of barley and 200 bags of oats. This reflects trends seen in Chapter 3 regarding preferred crop production in the district and all three seeds being cereals with the majority of the demand consisting of wheat.

The relatively large amount of funds allocated in the district for seed and not livestock was a result of the Land Bank originally being unwilling to supply farmers in the district with financial assistance to procure livestock, instead preferring to focus on seeds for planting. Later the local drought relief committee and the district magistrate suggested that the bank should include livestock with the seed funds due to a significant number of requests for assistance in acquiring livestock. The Ministry of Agriculture's negative stance on loans for stock seemed to change due to both the losses of stock in the district and the fact that the region was a good producer of wool. Additional incentives to change the loaning policy was also influenced by the Land Bank and Minister of Agriculture, whom both felt that the introduction of new and better-quality breeds of sheep to the primarily wool-producing districts would improve farming endeavours.¹⁸

¹⁷ Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette*, (No.27 of 1928) 17 February 1928, p. 294; U.G. 18-'29, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1928*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1929, p. 51; U.G. 16-'30, *Fifteenth yearly report of the central board of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa together with financial statements for the year ended 31st December 1929*, Government Printers, Pretoria, 1930, p. 59.

¹⁸ NASA, LDB, Vol, 2314, File, R3381/44, Drought Distress Relief Act 1928 Vanrhynsdorp district, 1928-1929: Letter from Minister of Agriculture to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 3/2/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Minister of Agriculture, 13 February 1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the General Manager of the Land Bank, 4 April 1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Minister of Agriculture to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 19/4/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from Minister of Agriculture to the Land Bank, 19/4/1928.

The provision of relief within the district was problematic as many farmers had reportedly failed to send applications within the designated three months of the act's declaration of the district as distressed. Farmers had instead waited for sufficient precipitation before sending their applications and in the process missed the deadline. This was the consequence of the fear that without sufficient rainfall the assistance would fail and leave the farmers with a combination of poor produce and additional debt that they would struggle to repay. Subsequently, by the time good rainfall had occurred and applications were sent, it was deemed too late to meet the act's operational period. The district had to be re-proclaimed as drought-stricken to allow late-coming applications, although access to funds allocated for the period was limited to £2,000. This assistance came too late to be of much immediate assistance to the farmers of the district.¹⁹

One of the notable issues with the Drought Distress Acts were their reliance on the Land Bank, which kept a policy of maintaining financial liquidity throughout its activities. The Land Bank in the early 20th century had a strict policy of maintaining its liquidity through providing loans only to those who could repay them and regularly repossessed farmers' property for failed payments. This increased risk was a likely reason for the reluctance of farmers to take loans from the Land Bank.²⁰

Local political organisations additionally played major roles in requesting assistance from the national and provincial governments to assist in drought alleviation through focusing the attention of government to the need for more aid to the district. One of the earliest movements to petition the provincial administrator was from the Mayor of Vanrhynsdorp, who requested food and an extension of employment on the railway line in the district in 1927.²¹

At the same time the local branch of the National Party in the Vanrhynsdorp district sent a delegation of its members to speak with the Minister of Agriculture with regards to acquiring assistance for local farmers.²² By June 1928 the party's annual meeting noted that many members felt that the local district council no longer had the interest of farmers at its heart due to failures to assist them during the drought. The party requested that the "government" (no

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from Department of Agriculture to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 24/8/1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Department of Agriculture to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 24 August 1928.

²⁰ S. Schirmer, "Market regulations and agricultural development", *Economic Research Southern Africa*, University of Witwatersrand, 2001, pp. 4-6.

²¹ WCARS, 3/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp Municipal Minute Book 1922 Feb-1932 March: Special Municipal Meeting, 16 August 1927.

²² VRDM, Van Rhynsdorp Afrikanerbond en Boereunie Minute Book 1892-1937: National Party Meeting held the 13 August 1927.

specific department was mentioned) send free food to the Klawer railway station to combat the threatening starvation within the district. The local National Party described the proclamation of the district as distressed as an “eleventh-hour” regulation and that the situation could have been avoided through more timely initiatives. The party branch also petitioned the Union Government to help fight unemployment in the district, particularly amongst the farming community, by beginning the construction of a railway line between Vanrhynsdorp, Klawer, Loeriesfontein and Brandvlei. The railway was considered as a means to better connect the farmers in the most rural parts of the district to other districts as well as creating employment in rural areas among distressed farmers.²³ There is little evidence though on just how effective many of these proposals were in receiving actual support from the government.

The National Party of the Cape Province, in general, was concerned over the drought and during its conferences in 1927 and 1928 it had multiple discussions over issues relating to drought relief and employment. The year 1927 saw the National Party of the Cape Province introduce laws to combat drought by focusing on issues such as lowering the price and increasing the number of government drills while increasing the repayment period on jackal proof fencing in drought-stricken districts. The party also called for the transport of stock or food on the railway network to be done for free as the additional cost of transporting these items to and from drought-stricken areas was high. The party suggested (in 1928) that the government consider creating a more permanent drought relief scheme or fund to continue assisting farmers in place of having to constantly vote on a new law each time there was an outbreak of drought. This suggestion was, however, refused by the broader party structures. Many of these requests came from the local connections which the Vanrhynsdorp National Party branch had with farmers that made up much of the party’s support base.²⁴

Over the period 1924 and 1925 it was reported that the Union Government spent around £170,000 on relief efforts in the districts Vanrhynsdorp and Namaqualand mainly via road works and food provision. The Union Government would focus on two main methods of more permanent drought alleviation in the region through firstly increasing borehole drilling in the

²³ *Ibid.*, National Party Meeting held the 28 June 1928.

²⁴ Stellenbosch University Library Archive, 1/41/13 (23-34), Nas. Party Kaap 2, Kongress Notules, 1916-1928: Die Nasionale Party van die Kaap Provinsie, *Notule van Twaalfde Kongres gehou op Robertson van 5 tot 7 Oktober*, Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1927, pp. 12-13; Stellenbosch University Archive, 1/41/13 (23-34), Nas. Party Kaap 2, Kongress Notules, 1916-1928: Die Nasionale Party van die Kaap Provinsie, *Notule van die Dertiende Kongres Gehou op Oos-Londen van 4-7 September 1928*, Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, p. 15.

districts and secondly expanding the government's diamond prospecting operations in the region.²⁵

The most dedicated provincial response to the drought came from the provincial administrator. The Provincial Administrator's Fund was created in 1924 to provide relief to the drought-stricken regions of the Cape Province. The fund provided relief through foodstuffs, subsidising relief works or distributing clothing.²⁶ By 1927 the re-enacted relief fund received large amounts of support from both the provincial treasury and the Union government, with both providing £5,000 to the fund on their own to relieve the distress caused by the drought. The fund was overseen by a council chaired by the provincial administrator, with each district housing a local committee made up of two members from the district council and two members from the local municipal council who operated with the local churches and charitable organisations to oversee the provision of relief. These committees advised the central committee on the number of people in the district requiring relief, what form the relief should take (food, work and clothing) and the distribution of relief items.²⁷

6.3 Road relief works

Road construction projects became the preferred form of relief employment for the district of Vanrhynsdorp circa mid to late 1920s. The projects were a necessity due to the prevailing poor condition of roads that were not tarred and prone to falling into disrepair rapidly, especially during periods of extreme weather conditions. One example of the need for road works was emphasised through the complaints of the SAR&H truck service, whose ability to provide services was regularly disrupted by deteriorating roads that had formed sharp rocks which cut through the wheels of the vehicles and damaged suspensions. The Vanrhynsdorp District Council attributed the poor road conditions to the size of the trucks, the weight of their cargo and the drying-out effect the drought caused on many roads that had created cracks and ruts. Normally the district council lacked the funding for repairing roads and therefore much

²⁵ Stellenbosch University Library Archive, 1/1/57, Suid Afrika, Parlement Verklaring van die regering, Namakwaland en Van Rhynsdorp, 1925, Verklaring aangaande tegemoetkoming deur regering van toestande in Namakwaland en Van Rhynsdorp.

²⁶ WCARS, Provincial Administration Roads (Hereafter PAR), Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief works by local bodies general, 1927-1930: Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Chief Inspector of Roads, 30 June 1927.

²⁷ WCARS, PAR, Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief works by local bodies general, 1927-1930: Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Magistrates of the Cape Province, 15 June 1927.

of the materials and processes were of poor quality, making it easier for the roads to deteriorate under the aforementioned conditions.²⁸ Road works therefore provided significant advantages to the local population and farmers, especially those living in the vicinity of the works, through either nearby employment or upgraded transportation infrastructure which made for easier and more rapid movement for local residents and goods.²⁹

The drought of 1924 caught the district council in a state of unpreparedness, creating a situation where local government was unable to respond appropriately and timeously to the ensuing impacts of the drought. The council only began attempting to implement public works by late 1924 when it received a portion of £30,000 in relief funds from the Union Government meant to be shared between the three districts of Namaqualand, Vanrhynsdorp and Calvinia.³⁰ These funds were purely for the purpose of relief works and were therefore closely monitored by the provincial administration's auditors and secretary to prohibit any misappropriation of funds. The Vanrhynsdorp district created a works committee that managed the projects by prioritising the ones most critical and sensible to use the funds to create viable employment opportunities in their region, since the funds could not be used for already existing projects. The district council was forced by the worsening drought and the district's poor financial situation to propose that they receive a full one third sum of £10,000 from the fund's total amount. This was decided after it was discovered that the estimated costs of relief work in the district would incur a debt of between £3,000 and £4,000. The district, however, did not receive the full requested sum and had to operate with the original sum offered of below £10,000.³¹

On the relief works the average wages for employees were based on a scale determined by job position, marital status and race, where wages heavily favoured married white men. Under this scale married white men received three shillings and six pennies in comparison to unmarried white men's three shillings per day. In comparison, a married Coloured man could only expect two shillings six pennies a day while unmarried Coloured men collected a wage of

²⁸ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 11 November 1927.

²⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from J Niewoudt to Ds. A. D. Luckhoff, 8 September 1924.

³⁰ The conditions were that the funds provided had to be repaid within 10 years by the district council. See WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1913 Jan-1925 March: Special District Council Meeting, 22nd August 1924; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Secretary for the Department of Labour to the Provincial Secretary, 13 August 1924.

³¹ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1913 Jan-1925 March: Special District Council Meeting, 22 August 1924; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925.

two shillings per day. The lowest wages were reserved for black men who could expect between two and one shilling per day. Wage scales for black workers were not used in Vanrhynsdorp as the district did not have enough black people to hire on the works and because the provincial administrator was vehemently opposed to the idea of relief works hiring black workers. District councils were instead encouraged to hire married white and Coloured men. Unmarried men were deemed fit enough to find employment outside of relief works, while also having less responsibilities towards family members and therefore were not targeted for specific assistance from the relief works.³²

The married workers, however, claimed that 3 shillings 6 pennies per day was not enough for some workers with very large families. This was especially so since many of the workers' families, left on farms or in nearby towns, were dependant on their male family member's salaries. Workers noted that they struggled to afford food and clothing for their families. This raised significant concern for the majority of the committee members, though some pointed out that the wages were still higher than what would normally have been expected had the workers remained on the farms. One suggested cause for the failure of wages to meet some workers' needs was that local people were wronged by shopkeepers who had inflated the prices for their goods, while colluding with district councils to create a monopoly for themselves amongst the road works. This was argued to have resulted from the previously discussed monopoly many storekeepers in the rural areas of districts such as Namaqualand and Vanrhynsdorp had, often being the only suppliers of goods in the vicinity. Other workers complained (this was later confirmed by the investigators) that the district councils had created deals with the local store owners to force workers into either buying solely from their shops or to receive supplies in lieu of cash wages. Although the majority of these practices were in the Namaqualand district, there was also evidence of it occurring in the Northern wards of Vanrhynsdorp.³³

Vanrhynsdorp originally only hired 500 workers when they opened their road relief works, but others in the more Northern wards likely took up work in Namaqualand, where road works employed as many as 1000 men. The aforementioned funding issues meant that the

³² WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1913 Jan-1925 March: District Council Meeting, 17 October 1924; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief Works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Secretary for the Department of Labour to the Provincial Secretary, 13 August 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Provincial Secretary, 15 August 1924.

³³ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

district relief works could only hire a small number of employees and had to refuse the applications of multiple job seekers. The district works committee hired large numbers of white and Coloured workers (white workers were also hired to act as overseers on the works) to fill worker's parties that each consisted of 30 men. The main form of construction on the road appeared to have been tamping down the sand and gravel by hand for an average workday of between 8 to 9 hours.³⁴

One issue which had become a controversy around the relief works was the social "class" of person that had taken up jobs on the relief works. Many statements were made to the media that land-owning farmers were forced to take up work. This had raised significant concern among politicians and urban dwellers at the prospect of a potential collapse of the rural economy and "degradation" of white people becoming dependants of the state. However, on the contrary to the suspicions, none of the white people participating on the road works (save a handful of exceptions) were found to have been land-owning farmers. Most of these men were what a commission from the provincial executive referred to as "tillers of the soil", likely a stand-in reference for *bywoners*, tenant farmers and farm renters. Investigators were also unwilling to believe rumours that the majority of the *bywoners* on the works would lose interest in returning to farming after the road works were concluded. This was a theory born from the belief that the supply of free food through the Administrator's Fund would make the workers lazy and unwilling to continue earning a living. To the contrary, when workers were interviewed, many noted that they were eager to "regain their independence" as farmers. The actual problem was that many of them had little hope of returning to the agricultural sector without more assistance from the national government in acquiring property and other materials.³⁵

Support from the government for the road works, according to the investigators, had been a major aid to the impoverished people in the North Western Cape who otherwise would have been left destitute. However, this was not a one-size-fits-all solution and the limited funding for districts had hampered the hiring of large numbers of people, which left many

³⁴ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1913 Jan-1925 March: District Council Meeting, 20th February 1925; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Minister of Railways to the Secretary of Labour, 4/10/1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Secretary to the Department of Labour, 18/10/1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Secretary of Finance, 29 December 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Provincial Administrator, 21 February 1925.

³⁵ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief Works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

without access to assistance, specifically among young, fit and unmarried men who were overlooked in the selection criteria. This problem was alleviated with the help of the national government through the construction of a railway line to connect Vanrhynsdorp with Koekenaap further down the course of the Olifants River, creating some 284 jobs. These projects were not a permanent solution to the food and financial insecurity the drought had caused among white and Coloured families of the region and under recommendation the provincial administration was to continue the provision of relief works in the region.

The more pressing concern at the time were men who could not participate in heavy manual labour due to poor health or disability. They were deemed to require urgent and immediate assistance due to the high risk of starvation if not assisted. Many of the men that fell under this category received assistance from the magistrate either from the Provincial Administrator's Fund or through pauper relief.³⁶

The relief works were originally only intended to last four months, however, due to the desperate situation in the district it was decided to extend the works from its original completion date of December 1924 into 1925. The extension was granted primarily due to the continued suffering and general need of the people in the district and a premature halt in the relief works would have caused significant poverty and possibly a famine. It also encouraged fears that the former white workers would, when faced by hardship, choose to migrate towards the nearby urban areas and become poor whites. The provincial administrator was strongly opposed to prolonging the relief works as he felt that the high salaries attracted too many Coloured (and some white) workers away from the agricultural economy. Unless it was soon halted many of them would refuse to return to their former employment as low wage labourers, according to the administrator.³⁷

The conclusion of relief works was set for April 1925 with aid from the Department of Labour in arrangement with the local district magistrates and councils to ensure that workers

³⁶ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief Works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924; U.G. 27-'25, *Union of South Africa. Report of the Council for Railway and Harbours for the year 31 December 1924*, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1925, p. 8.

³⁷ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1913 Jan-1925 March: District Council Meeting, 20 February 1925; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Private Secretary to the Minister of Railways to the Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, 4/10/1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Secretary to the Department of Labour, 18/10/1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Secretary of Finance, 29 December 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Provincial Administrator, 21 February 1925.

were gradually dissolved back into normal employment leading up to April. A special inspector from the Department of Labour assisted with finding employment for Coloured people and to enforce the termination of relief for Coloured workers. Workers, white or Coloured, who refused to take alternate employment offered to them were removed from the works entirely and they were no longer able to receive assistance from the government as a means to enforce the transition. This measure was deemed to be a last resort for getting workers to leave the road works and inspectors encouraged that the transition be enacted over a prolonged period.³⁸

The relief works only began to come to an end around May 1925, with much of the distress caused by the drought still active. The district council noted that many Coloured people had to be hired on other road work programmes after the sowing period ended due to the continued unemployment and distress amongst the Coloured community in the district. Furthermore, many of the roads that had been constructed or repaired by relief work crews had either been left unfinished or had been severely damaged by the heavy rainfall experienced in 1925, which forced the district to hire more workers than normal to finish and repair the roads.³⁹

With the resurgence of drought in 1927 the district council of Vanrhynsdorp began implementing road works early in an evident attempt to avoid the damaging impacts experienced by the previous droughts. The attempts by the district council to avert the disaster in its early stages led them to contact the provincial administration in the hope of convincing the provincial government on the value of funding emergency relief works early on. The council was forced to such measures not only by the looming humanitarian crises, but also as a result of their financial position, which had been left in ruins by the massive debts they had incurred funding relief works in 1924 and 1925. The district debt had ballooned to such an extent that by 14 October 1927 the district bank account was overdrawn by an amount of £1,603. This was an evident move away from the previous state of surprise the drought of 1924 had caught the district in and it is also evident that the local government had learnt the value of rapid response.

Funding from the provincial government was slow to materialise and the situation once again devolved to the point where attempts at early evasion ground to a halt from lack of

³⁸ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from the Secretary of Labour to the Provincial Administrator, 21 February 1925.

³⁹ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 8 May 1925; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 13 March 1925, *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 8 April 1925.

funding. The council was forced to downsize the relief work gangs (groups of workers). Downsizing was based on the presumption that some relief works were better than none. The council had also decreased the average salary of its relief workers to 2 shillings 6 pennies from its original three shillings, to further stretch funds, the impact of which was somewhat lessened since many workers received free food from the road works.

In the face of this rising dire situation the provincial administrator made it clear to the council that relief works could not begin due to funding constraints. The district council attempted to create a relief work scheme with below £1,000 available to the council. However, the council was unable to come up with a solution, instead agreeing that only the national government could provide them with any assistance at that stage. The council pushed particularly for the lifting of the government's ban on diamond prospecting outside of Namaqualand, as it felt that allowing people to carry out exploratory diggings for gemstones on their properties would at least provide some form of income to the distressed population.

The growing focus on road works in the district also caused a new set of difficulties concerning which workers could be hired under the racial policies of the time and clashed with practical realities of drought alleviation. The Department of Labour notified the district council in 1927 that it was preferred by the department and government that white workers received preference over Coloured and black workers. It appears that this order was ignored by the district council, who continued to hire Coloured people on the relief works, particularly those in the North of the district.⁴⁰

When attempts at receiving assistance from the provincial and national governments were not immediately forthcoming in 1927, the district council turned to private means of funding their relief efforts. The council successfully secured a donation of £200 from Dr Hans Merensky and Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, specifically for assistance to poor whites. The council chairman had personally contacted them to request the assistance and the funds were immediately put to use by the council in preparing larger work crews for the reparation and graveling of the roads between Bonteheuwel and Bitterfontein. The work was accomplished using two road work gangs, each consisting of fourteen white men and two foremen at a wage of three shillings per day for workers and five shillings per day for foremen. The council

⁴⁰ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 12 August 1927; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 9 September 1927; *Ibid.*, District Council Special Meeting, 20 September 1927; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 14 October 1927; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 11 November 1927.

covered the additional costs of materials such as food, tools and vehicles, as well as the five shilling salaries for the foremen to free up more funds for the purpose of hiring workers.⁴¹ However, the wage rate of three shillings once again came under question in late February 1928 when complaints were raised that the average salary of road workers was deemed too low for white workers. This forced the council to raise the average wage of white road workers to three shillings six pennies for married workers from an already tight budget but the rate of three shillings for unmarried workers remained the same.⁴²

The Provincial Administrator's Drought Relief Fund provided late assistance that could only be utilised in the form of subsidies to the workers' salaries under the condition that all costs be repaid within the following three years. The provision of funds for relief works was a new feature of the fund, which had originally been designed to provide food and clothing to those most in need. The sluggish response from the provincial administration was the result of their dependence on the national government and could only be supplied through the Provincial Administrator's Fund. This meant that the funding only became available at the height of the district's trouble.⁴³ The district's decision on which projects were awarded subsidisation was based on the recommendations and guidelines of the Department of Labour and the Provincial Department of Roads. The wages for relief work carried out by "civilised labourers" meant that the average wages on relief works were often high and had to be calculated for each district by officials.

Councils received subsidies either as cash in hand or as vouchers that were not available until after works had been completed. Production costs such as those for materials, food and tools were covered by the local district and municipal councils' in monthly payments. This was done as it was feared that the fund would have been bled dry in the short term when it aimed to provide relief over a long period, since most people were uncertain as to how long the drought would last.⁴⁴

The long-awaited Administrator's Fund, received in late February 1928, amounted to approximately £2,000, which was divided between the two districts of Vanrhynsdorp and Namaqualand. The district council already had 500 people listed as eager to participate in relief

⁴¹ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 13 January 1928.

⁴² *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 10 February 1928.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 10 February 1928.

⁴⁴ WCARS, PAR, Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief works by local bodies general, 1927-1930: Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Magistrates of the Cape Province, 15 June 1927.

works, spilt racially into an equal 250 workers for both races that required employment until the end of 1928.⁴⁵ However, the council felt that the aid being offered would amount to very little since the district lacked the funds to cover its full share of the relief works and its recent increase of wages for relief workers from two shillings six pennies to three shillings six pennies negated much of the benefit the money could have brought. The district was further hamstrung by the fund's policy of only supporting new relief works, since the district had already begun relief works the previous year which left none of the projects eligible to receive funding. The district was thus forced to begin a new work project on widening the Van Rhyns Pass on the district's mountainous border with Calvinia, a project deemed to be of little economic value to Vanrhynsdorp. The district council did begin to receive £150 each month to support the relief works within the district from May 1928 and work commenced not long afterwards.⁴⁶

These issues serve to highlight the conflicts and the challenges of relief management and distribution associated with relief programs, especially between local governing bodies and larger provincial or national authorities. These were all issues that originated from the Administrator's Fund that was deprived by its reliance on a small budget spread across a large area over a significant period of time.

By late (August to December) 1928 the impacts of the drought had peaked as the poor harvest led to mass unemployment, which led to the district turning to three main methods of relief work: roads, irrigation canals and prospecting. Maintenance and improvement work along the river canals grew to provide employment for some 452 people (400 Coloured and 52 white) by August 1928 and remained in the region of 400 employees until mid-1929. The district had also seen the opening of prospecting rights on private farms to search for diamonds. This led to many poorer people flooding to the new prospecting areas. The magistrate requested an additional £300 from the Administrator's Fund for the months November and December (1928) in extension of the original £150 pounds due to the peak unemployment rate having been reached by late 1928. The district also received a further extension on its relief works until 1929 as it was evident that the distress would not dissipate by the end of 1928.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 8 June 1928.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 20 February 1928; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 9 March 1928; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 13 April 1928; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 11 May 1928; *Ibid.*, District Council Meeting, 8 June 1928.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Inspection of Road Works for Administrator's Fund inspected, 25 November 1928; J.F.W. Grosskopf, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie commission, Part 2 Economic Report*, Ecclesia,

The loss of work in the agricultural sector worsened to such an extent that by 1929 almost all of Vanrhynsdorp's farm workers (of all races) and small tenant farmers had taken up employment on the road relief works. The average wage provided on the relief works at Vanrhynsdorp in 1929 had averaged at 7 shillings 1 penny, just below the Department of Labour's average of 7 shillings 5 pence for married men with children, and 4 shillings 6 pence for unmarried men with no dependents. This reportedly created a situation similar to what had been rumoured and feared during the 1924 drought where farm workers, labourers and the sons of farm-owners from both districts (Namaqualand and Vanrhynsdorp), regardless of financial status, flocked to the road works in the hope of attaining the high salaries offered. The Carnegie Commission reported that the works eventually hired as many as 1500 white men by early 1929 when the projects were concluded.⁴⁸

The total assistance provided to the Vanrhynsdorp district in the provision of relief works over the period 1928 to 1929 amounted to £1,920.⁴⁹ This amount was unevenly distributed over a period slightly shorter than 12 months.⁵⁰

6.3.1 Criticism of road relief works

A report to the Provincial Executive for the Cape Province in 1924 argued that in the North Western districts, such as Vanrhynsdorp where drought was a frequent problem, the solution could not be temporary provision of relief whenever drought occurred. Although the report suggested it as the duty of those living in the non-drought-stricken parts of the province to support the people struggling in the Northern districts, relief works were not a long-term solution. They deemed it unsustainable to frequently take measures such as relief works and food aid, particularly those regularly stricken by drought (such as Vanrhynsdorp). One example of some people's opinions on road works was presented in the *Landbouweekblad*, where Figure 36 described the road works as the worst solution to dealing with poor whites.

Stellenbosch, 1932, p. 237; WCARS, WSO, Vol, 4, File, 107/2, Work Reports to Head office, 1932 to 1934: Report on Activities to 31 August 1928, 6 September 1928.

⁴⁸ WCARS, PAR, Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief Works by Local Bodies General, 1927-1930: Inspection of Road Works for Administrator's Fund Inspected 7 February to 6 March, 21 March 1929; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1651, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, 1916-1932: AAK Notules, 1921-1932, Ordinary Meeting, 20 en 21 Maart 1929.

⁴⁹ WCARS, PAR, Vol, 115, File, P41, Relief Works by Local Bodies General, 1927-1930: Audited statement of expenditure on relief works 31/3/1929, 20 November 1930.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Administrator's Fund: List of Allocations, 9 October 1928.



Figure 36: A drawing from the *Landbouweekblad* stating: “The worst solution to the poor white question, the road workers”.⁵¹

The report called for a more permanent solution from the national government. This was proposed through the building up of infrastructure and farmers to allow the full potential of natural resources in the region to be achieved. Improvements would have had to focus on the extension of railway lines to open further trade opportunities between the Southern markets and to isolated areas such as the Northern regions of the Vanrhynsdorp district. The report also noted that developing irrigation systems and boreholes in the region would likely increase the amount of land that could be used for agriculture while dampening the impacts of future droughts. The study called for a revision of the education system in the Northern region to focus more on teaching children practical skills such as farming instead of complex mathematics.⁵²

The Carnegie Commission visited the area in late 1929 and decried what they saw as the negative impacts of relief works on white labourers. They argued that the road works created a dependency among workers on a higher income, which the commission argued had taught them consumerist habits such as buying luxury products and services. The commission also accused the relief works of having drawn agricultural labourers away from their fields which was believed to have led to many not benefitting financially from the successful harvest

⁵¹ Anon., “Die stem van die boer”, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 6 February 1924, 1039.

⁵² Anon., “Drought victims of Namaqualand”, *The Rand Daily Mail*, 10 December 1924, p. 12; NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

of 1930. This prolonged the distress of the farming community as many farmers returned to the lands with no capital to restart farming after a two-year hiatus. Many of these arguments were shared by the DRC Ring of Clanwilliam in 1933 who blamed road works for creating a situation where former white labourers and tenant farmers no longer wished to return to farm work for the same low pay.⁵³

Concurrently, the AAK of the DRC complained that, in many cases, the local district councils rarely carried out works beyond simple road construction and repair. The committee felt that this was an unproductive use of the relief workers as the districts could have instead used the workers to improve on pre-existing infrastructure or add infrastructure to the region that would assist in combating drought in later years (such as irrigation canals).⁵⁴

Another outspoken critic of the road relief system was Dr W. Steenkamp, a member of the National Party for the Namaqualand electoral district (comprising of Namaqualand and Vanrhynsdorp districts), who spoke out against relief works in parliament. He noted that although the road works in Namaqualand had saved many people from hunger and poverty, relief works had failed to solve the problems faced by the poor whites. Steenkamp argued that the road works were pointless since the number of people hired were often too small to be effective on a larger scale. The road works were also deemed to progress very slowly as little actual work was ever accomplished by the relief workers, who reportedly shirked away from the hard work and instead waited out their workdays. The quality of roads being constructed were also subject to criticism as many were built cheaply by an unqualified and inexperienced workforce, making the quality and durability of the roads questionable at best. The road works were also deemed unhealthy for workers from a psychological point of view as many of them earned little money and often spent the time doing mindless work that they gained little satisfaction from, while losing their self-respect. Instead, the doctor suggested that the government focus on building more irrigation works along the Olifants River for increasing settlement of farmers in the region, as well as extending the railway line into the Namaqualand area to better connect farmers to their Southern markets.⁵⁵

⁵³ J. F. W. Grosskopf, *The poor white problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission, Part 1 Economic Report*, Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. 237-238; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1765, Kommissie, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Ringverslae A-D, 1918-1943: Ring van Calvinia, Rapport van die rings Armesorg Kommissie van die Ring van Calvinia, 1932-1933.

⁵⁴ Ds A. D. Luckhoff, "Die Algemeene Armesorg verkorte notules van vergadering van die kommissie, 8 en 9 Augustus 1928", *De Kerkbode*, 22 August 1928, p. 255.

⁵⁵ Stellenbosch University Library Archive, 1/41/16, Dr D.F. Malan collection, 1927: Die seun van die Noordweste pleit vir sy mense, 1927.

Many of these complaints would later be repeated by the Department of Social Welfare in its first report of 1937, the department called out relief works for being expensive short-term projects that did little to improve and ‘rehabilitate’ the rural population. The report also argued that relief works created social evils by separating families from male members who were both breadwinners and role models to younger children. This was a situation argued to cause delinquent behaviour in children left behind.⁵⁶

6.4 The system of food rations

Food rations to those impoverished by the drought became one of the most needed initiatives by local people to alleviate food shortages and a lack in ability to acquire food. Throughout the period under study none of the major political parties were willing to support food supply projects within the district and the responsibility for such relief measures fell upon the poorly funded shoulders of local government and charitable organisations.

By August 1924 the District Council of Vanrhynsdorp was forced to request 500 bags of wheat and corn to distribute to farmers who were in severe need of basic food stuffs from the provincial administration but the request was denied due to a refusal from the provincial government to take responsibility of supplying food resources. The same issue occurred later when the request for a further 200 bags of wheat and 25 bags of corn to the national government via the Department of Agriculture was again rejected. The council then attempted to acquire 500 bags of wheat and 200 bags of corn from the provincial secretary which also did not appear to be successful. Eventually, the council managed to arrange for food to be delivered through the Provincial Administrator’s Fund and the DRC AAK. The dispersion of food relief from 1924 to 1925 was overseen by the district magistrate and a committee was raised to decide which applicants were the most in need. One controversial aspect of the food supply schemes was that the food was often sold on credit to the starving people of the district with the understanding that they would repay the costs of the food to the local magistrate.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Union of South Africa, Report of the Department of Social Welfare for the Financial Years 1937-1939*, Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1940, p. 112.

⁵⁷ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/3, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1913 Jan-1925 March: Special District Council Meeting, 22 August 1924.

In October 1924, when the provincial administrator first created the Administrator's Fund, the circumstances were so severe that he felt the traditional seed wheat system was not effective. He originally created a larger fund to oversee the provision of food for free to the needy suffering under worsening starvation and unable to repay the debts incurred under the traditional seed wheat system. The administrator was also aware of the fact that as had happened to the District Council of Vanrhynsdorp both the national government and provincial administration would not be willing to perform such charitable services as both feared it would create a precedent of dependency. The administrator was therefore driven to create the Administrator's Fund originally for the purpose of providing food to the impoverished people of the distressed districts free of charge and it would expand in its duties to other relief methods by 1928. It must also be noted that this fund did not use race as a criterion for the provision of relief. In fact, one major concern for the people managing the fund was that people of colour had come to rely heavily on food rations to survive. To accomplish this the magistrate arranged for assistance from the DRC and other churches to co-ordinate their relief efforts and better raise awareness among the general populace towards the need to support the fund's efforts⁵⁸

The year 1925 heralded the after-effects of the drought in the form of mass unemployment and widespread food shortages that had increased into a humanitarian crisis by the late provision of relief measures in October the previous year. The response to the drought may have developed late but it did still take interesting and different forms by 1925. Two relief funds were established in the Cape Province and operated throughout that year specifically within the district of Vanrhynsdorp. Both were operated by the provincial administration through the local district magistrate who was responsible for overseeing local distribution and record keeping. The first fund was the Cape Province's Administrator's Drought Distress Relief Fund that operated as a personal charity overseen by the Cape Province's executive committee and saw to the provision of free food to those who could otherwise not afford relief rations. The second fund was a Union Government loan used to provide rations on credit, particularly to property-owning families known as "middle class farmers" or land-owning families.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Letter from Provincial Administrator to the Secretary of Labour, 30/10/1924; NG Kerk Argief, KS 1745, Noodlenings Korrespondensie Algemeene, 1925-1929: Letter from Ds. A.D. Luckhoff to Provincial Administrator of Cape Province, 14 February 1925.

⁵⁹ WCARS, Provincial Administrator Secretary (hereafter PAS), Vol, 3/141, File, R120/68/108, Namaqualand relief distress fund sale of wheat on credit to Van Rhynsdorp, 1925-1946: Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 3 October 1925.

The need amongst the “middle class farmers” was first noted in 1924. The Cape Provincial Administration found that “middle class farmers” required special attention as these normally financially independent farmers were in a position of distress purely as a result of the drought. Middle class farmers were found to only require short-term assistance of a year (if not less) to support themselves until the next harvest. The main cause of food shortages among land-owners were financial responsibilities such as loans and rents, particularly since many of them rented land from the state, which they could not repay during the drought while having to buy food and other goods. As discussed in Chapter 3, these farmers were particularly well-known for living off the credit provided by store owners and general traders on the promise of their harvests. However, during drought periods many credit providers refused to provide credit or supplies under such circumstances, leaving the farmers unable to support themselves. These farmers had submitted a significant number of requests for relief in the form of wheat or flour for immediate consumption instead of farming, which was justified on the premise that they could repay the costs of food production at a later date.⁶⁰

To support the middle-class farmers’ relief fund (not to be confused with the Administrator’s Relief Fund) the provincial administration was provided with £7,500, which was spent purchasing a mixture of wheat and corn and distributed to districts declared distressed. The district magistrate was entrusted with the role of receiving and selling wheat to the population of the district including the Northern wards around Nuwerus. The magistrate received some 800 x 200lb (72,000 kg in total) bags of seed wheat. This wheat had to meet the needs of the district farmers until September of 1926 when it was hoped by the provincial administration that there would no longer be a need for government food rations. The administrator emphasised to the magistrate that the only families eligible to buy rations were those in dire need of food aid and that once the supply had been exhausted the committee would not be able to acquire more.

A prominent problem in the drought relief system for struggling middle income farming families was that recipients still had to repay the cost of the rations. Under the food assistance program recipients were given promissory notes known as ‘tickets’ which had to be endorsed with a surety (down payment) of 30 shillings (£1 and 10 shillings). The final debt most farmers owed was based on a mixture of the actual cost of the rations, transport costs and an additional

⁶⁰ NASA, ARB, Vol, 582, File, B506/2, Relief Works North Western Cape Province Namaqualand Vanrhynsdorp Calvinia, 1924-1925: Report to the Cape Provincial Administrator and Executive Committee, 8 December 1924.

6% interest charged per annum on the grain. The magistrate was permitted to waive the surety if the borrower was known to be able to repay the costs of the grain at a later date. The wheat was only delivered to Klawer station in March 1925, highlighting a significant lag in the food distribution process. The food was then distributed by road to recipients across the district that had been vetted by the local commission and the magistrate. The provincial administrator encouraged the local magistrate to furnish them with all the receipts for the sale of wheat and the amount of money that had been repaid so that proper accounts could be held in an attempt to counter-act any corruption in the process.⁶¹

The original 800 bags sent to the district would not prove sufficient for the requirements of the middle-class farmers and the magistrate was forced to include an additional 54 bags of wheat from the “relief wheat” provided by the Provincial Administrator’s Relief Fund. Problems quickly arose from the single district aided by two different relief funds designated for the same purpose but targeted towards different groups of people, when the magistrate used wheat from the Administrator’s Relief Fund to cover the shortfall among middle class farmers. This caused significant consternation as food meant for the poorest members of the community who could not afford to buy their own food had been sold to the middle-class farmers who, although in need, were not as desperate as those supplied through the Administrator’s Relief Fund.⁶²

The lack of immediate success after the initial rations were sold forced the magistrate to suggest that an additional 100 bags would better assist the population in meeting their needs. The middle-class farmer’s fund eventually provided the district with 1,232 x 200lb bags (110,880 kg) of wheat which was sold on credit for £1,971 between the project’s founding date in 1925 and its end in 1926. Table 1 below indicated that the total amount spent by the fund on wheat for middle class farmers across the North West would come to £7,557, which was well outside the original budget.⁶³ The table highlights that in comparison with the other districts that received food from the Administrator’s Fund Vanrhynsdorp was one of the main receivers of relief after Calvinia and Namaqualand. The repayment of funds from 1925 were prolonged by another twelve months from December 1926 due to the continued poor agricultural

⁶¹ WCARS, PAS, Vol, 3/141, File, R120/68/108, Namaqualand relief distress fund sale of wheat on credit to Van Rhynsdorp, 1925-1946: Letter from Provincial Secretary to Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 10 March 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, March 1925.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 19 June 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 11 January 1926.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrates of the districts Vanrhynsdorp, Calvinia, Laingsburg, and Springbok, 8 January 1926.

conditions in the North Western Cape, but a significant proportion of the debts were never recuperated.⁶⁴ In comparison, the Administrator's Fund was deemed a great aid in alleviating the threat of starvation in the district before the drought ended.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter from Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 2 December 1926.

Table 1: Middle class farmer's relief fund 1925.⁶⁵

Middle class farmer's relief fund		
Magistracy	Quantity (200lb bags) and type of cereal	Value of promissory notes exclusive of interest which is due at 6 % per annum. (Pounds: Shillings: Pennies)
Calvinia	19 bags Maize	14:14:11
"	711 1/2 bags Wheat	1177:00:02
"	12 bags Wheat	19:17:00
"	160 bags Wheat (sold for cash and paid into paymaster general's account)	240:00:00
" (at Niewoudtville)	324 bags Wheat	553:11:06
Vanrhynsdorp	1232 bags Wheat	1971:04:00
Springbok	332 bags Maize	372:00:00
"	1314 bags Wheat	2496:00:00
"	65 1/2 bags Wheat (sold for cash and paid into paymaster general's account)	130:00:00
"	24 bags of Maize (sold for cash and paid into paymaster general's account)	28:06:00
"	291 bags Maize	319:12:06
"	10 bags Wheat	18:00:00
"	56 1/2 bags Maize (sold for cash and paid into paymaster general's account)	56:12:04
"	5 bags Wheat (sold for cash and paid into paymaster General's account)	10:06:00
Laingsburg	100 bags Wheat	150:00:00
Total		7557.4.5

By December 1927 the resurgent drought and the impacts of former droughts left many farmers unable to afford to buy bread or flour for the coming year. This led many farmers from the district to write urgent petitions of assistance to the provincial administrator to restart the former middle-class farmer fund. The farmers were very clear on the fact that they were not seeking assistance for free, but rather that they wished for the food to be sold on credit so that they could repay the costs later. The farmers hoped that government would withhold their period to repay the loan by at least one year as they were unlikely to be financially able to repay

⁶⁵ WCARS, PAS, Vol, 3/141, File, R120/68/108, Namaqualand relief distress fund sale of wheat on credit to Van Rhynsdorp, 1925-1946: Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 2 February 1926.

the debt in a shorter period. The petition suggested that the fund should also include some of the smaller farmers and *bywoners* who could not afford to repay the foods costs immediately.⁶⁶

The district magistrate was, however, not as supportive of the idea around giving food on credit to farmers as most of the farmers on the petition had failed to repay their debt on the 1925 drought relief wheat by 1927. This situation was aggravated by a corresponding request from the district council to the national government to supply them with 20 to 30 muids of seed wheat which they also suggested the recipients could repay.⁶⁷ The magistrate was more willing to support a programme of providing food on credit but only if other distressed districts were receiving similar assistance from the administration.⁶⁸ The petition was a failure as the provincial secretary noted, by January 1928, that the provincial central committee was out of funds and could no longer sell any commodities even on credit.⁶⁹ It would appear that by 1928 the provincial administration had moved away from the belief in requiring farmers to pay their wheat on credit due to the difficulties of the former system.

The Provincial Administrator's Fund provided food mainly in the form of flour and grain to people, with each receiving what appeared to be an average of 40 lbs per family each month. The Administrator's Fund was also plagued with shortages in funds and eventually, in 1928, did not have enough rations to meet the demand and resultantly stopped sending food to Vanrhynsdorp. The Administrator's Fund also received regular complaints from the magistrate and the recipients of food aid that the amounts provided were not enough to meet the needs of the large families in the district and the district at large. It is evident that the Administrator's Fund, which was technically a private fund, struggled to meet the needs of the district during the later drought of 1927-1928.⁷⁰

By 1928 the distress in the region reached a point where neither the efforts of the Administrator's Fund nor the DRC fund was of any assistance anymore. Calls were regularly

⁶⁶ WCARS, PAS, Vol, 3/141, File, R120/68/108, Namaqualand relief distress fund sale of wheat on credit to Van Rhynsdorp, 1925-1946: Petition from Vanrhynsdorp farmers to the Private Secretary of the Provincial Administrator, 7/12/1927.

⁶⁷ WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book, 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 13 January 1928.

⁶⁸ WCARS, PAS, Vol, 3/141, File, R120/68/108, Namaqualand relief distress fund sale of wheat on credit to Van Rhynsdorp, 1925-1946: Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 5 January 1928.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 13 January 1928.

⁷⁰ This matter is dealt with in slightly more detail under Chapter 4. See also NG Kerk Argief, KS 1747, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Noodlening Korrespondensie Gemeentes q-z, Rampfondse Korrespondensie, 1927-1928: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the administrator of the relief fund, 8 October 1928; *Ibid.*, Letter from Vlermuisklip to Ds. A.D. Luckhoff, 2/2/1928.

made imploring the government to make a greater effort in providing relief to the people in these regions, as the funds of the private charities simply could not meet the demand. This obvious distress of the privately-funded and local organisations is in stark contrast to the generally negative attitude that the government maintained towards policies which had provided free food relief efforts.⁷¹ This issue would be brought up again in 1937 where the Inter-Departmental Commission on Poor Relief would recommend the Union Government take over more responsibility around the provision of support to the indigent.⁷²

6.5 Pauper relief and pensioners

The 1920s saw rapid changes taking place in the government's social relief measures, with measures such as old age pensions (introduced in 1928) and pauper relief funds becoming more frequently used throughout districts. These measures provided targeted relief to white and some Coloured families and played a major role in the magistrate supporting the aged and otherwise infirmed during the drought.⁷³ Pauper relief was generally provided to people unable to acquire an income for themselves or needed assistance from the government over a short period of time through food rations, school or medical fees.⁷⁴ The pauper relief provision was decided on a case to case basis by the resident magistrate, with many of the paupers often comprising of elderly persons who did not earn a state pension due to race or other criteria. In the case of Vanrhynsdorp, the drought and economic depression often led to increases in the number of people requiring assistance from the government pauper relief fund.

Old age pensions were given to those that could no longer earn an income for themselves due to advanced age. The numbers of pensioners were high in the first two years after the act's creation in 1928 before but would decrease thereafter as the majority of elderly were qualified to receive aid (see Table 3). Correspondingly, the number of people awarded pauper relief (see Table 2) began at a high of 150 in 1928, likely driven by the drought. The number then

⁷¹ Anon., "Die nood van die droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 7 March 1928, pp. 334-335.

⁷² U.G. 61-1937, *Union of South Africa, Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee in Poor Relief and Charitable Institutions*, 1937, pp. 21-22.

⁷³ J. Seekings, "'Not a single white person should be allowed to go under': swartgevaar and the origins of South Africa's welfare state, 1924-1929", *The Journal of African History*, 48, (3), pp. 375-384.

⁷⁴ See NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to Provincial Secretary, 14 August 1924; *Ibid.*: Letter to Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp from Unknown, 7 November 1924.

decreased in 1929 before increasing again to 179 in 1930. The number of paupers receiving assistance from the magistrate would remain high at an average of 200 between 1931 and 1934 before falling in 1935. The number of paupers was proportional to the assistance given to paupers. Thus, the high number of paupers were an after effect of the drought and depression on the district, which had created a large population that could no longer withstand small economic difficulties. This economic climate during the drought and subsequent years of the Great Depression (1929 to 1930) also led to a high number of pensioners from families that could no longer afford to care for elderly relatives.

Table 2: Assistance to paupers by Magistrate 1928-1935.⁷⁵

Assistance to paupers by magistrate			
Date	White	Coloured	Total
1928	68	82	150
1929	52	68	120
1930	119	54	179
1931	125	51	170
1932	122	84	206
1933	130	89	219
1934	121	79	200
1935	110	78	188

Table 3: Applications for pensions 1929-1935.⁷⁶

Applications for pensions 1929-1935	
Date	Applications
1929	175
1930	281
1931	34
1932	23
1933	24
1934	33
1935	48

The unstable period from 1923 to 1932 saw regular calls for assistance to the impoverished people from the magistrate, yet the provision of financing received was often too low to meet the need of the population. This resulted in the magistrate falling into a perpetual cycle of forced overspending and repeatedly requesting for additional financial assistance. In 1923 (at the start of the drought) the magistrate noted that his office had provided nearly £181 to alleviate the above normal pauper distress in the district.⁷⁷ This increase in expenditure continued to worsen as the magistrate became inundated with the number of requests from both white and Coloured persons up till March 1924. Many of the requests had to be shifted to the next financial year of April 1924 as the expenditure would have exceeded the funding for that financial year by £20 (only £30 was allocated). Although the amount was secured it was noted

⁷⁵ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 17/14/2, Annual Reports 1/2/1930-24/1/1949: Annual reports, 1929-1935.

⁷⁶ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, File, 17/14/2, Annual Reports 1/2/1930-24/1/1949: Annual reports, 1929-1935.

⁷⁷ NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhyndorp, 1923-1950: Letter from Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 30 March 1923.

that the magistrate still overspent on his budget by some £15 buying food for impoverished people living on the reserve at Rietpoort early in 1924.⁷⁸

This trend of the magistrate overspending on pauper relief was repeated again in 1925, having not received two months' worth of funding. The magistrate rationalised the increase in requests as a consequence of the exodus of elderly and distressed people that had flocked to Vanrhynsdorp during the drought and the absence of a distress relief fund (only received in November 1924). It also forced the magistrate to, against the provincial administrator's advice, assign pauper rations to the elderly.⁷⁹

The situation continued to remain difficult throughout 1926, although funds for pauper rations were increased. By 1927 the problem of insufficient pauper relief for the demand rose again, which spurred the magistrate on to request £81 for relief until September 1928 (£27 per month starting in June 1928) due to worsening drought conditions. The amount was later raised to £90, which marked the highest amount of spending by the magistrate on pauper relief in the district for that decade.⁸⁰

This trend of insufficient funds and increasing demand persisted until 1929 and the magistrate was forced to provide pauper relief to the elderly Coloured people who could not participate in the government pension scheme.⁸¹ With the end of the drought provincial spending on pauper rations to Vanrhynsdorp fell. However, by 1931 the magistrate once again complained that the £55 he received was grossly insufficient to meet the needs of the local poor who had remained persistently impoverished. The provincial administration was unable to provide more relief as the annual budget had already been set and in the constrained fiscal environment of the Great Depression the Union was finding funding projects difficult. However, additional funding on a case-by-case basis was initiated for persons suffering extreme need.⁸²

⁷⁸ NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from the Provincial Accountant to the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 28 April 1924; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Accountant, 2 May 1924.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 20 January 1925; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 28 January 1925.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 29 October 1926; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 17 November 1927; *Ibid.*, 5 May 1928.

⁸¹ NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 21 June 1929.

⁸² NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to Provincial Secretary, 29 December 1930; *Ibid.*, Letter from Provincial Secretary to Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp, 31 December 1930.

The Catholic priest at Rietpoort began petitioning for the provision of special foodstuffs to the elderly Coloured people on the reserve in 1931 due to severe food shortages around the mission station created by an environment of low employment and decreased wages. Rietpoort had already possessed a large population of elderly paupers and pensioners before the depression and drought, which had been worsened in the proceeding years. Even with the usual relief works there was no real alleviation of the poverty in the region and the magistrate could do little to alleviate the situation due to a pervasive lack of funding. Father Van t' Westeinde noted that the health of many elderly people had improved under the increased rations in 1931. However, the sudden end to the rations in 1931 meant the problems once again escalated. By 1932 problems came to a head when the depression forced the government to cut budgets, which lead to decreased pauper relief expenditure from the provincial government and the magistrate, to a meagre £80 and which was insufficient to support the impoverished people within the district.

A major issue with the provision of aid to the poor of the district was the type of food and the insufficient quantities of it provided to paupers. This issue was raised in 1931 when the provincial administration chastised the magistrate for supplying *boermeel* amongst the elderly paupers. The magistrate justified his decision on the basis that the traditional coarser textured mealie *meel* was inedible to the elderly Coloured people and stock was not kept in large quantities in the local shops. The magistrate argued that he had been using *boermeel* as a substitute ration for some time and had even turned to using larger quantities of cheaper, more durable and palatable *boermeel* to replace other expensive and easily spoiled foodstuffs recommended by the provincial administration (such as meat). The magistrate was forced to return to the provincial rationing regulations, although he pursued a change in the regulations and later again reiterated that the older and invalid Coloured paupers could not eat the mealie *meel*, which they traded back to local shop keepers for *boermeel* of the same value. This time the magistrate supported his claim with a letter from the district surgeon and priest at Rietpoort, which eventually led the provincial government to approve the provision of *boermeel* for Coloured paupers.⁸³

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Vanrhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 18 April 1931; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate, 27 April 1931; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate to the Provincial Secretary, 30 April 1931; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp, 29 December 1931; *Ibid.*, Letter from Father Van't Westeinde to the Provincial Administrator, 2 January 1932; NASA, VWN, Vol, 2666, File, SWP 6/91, Child and social welfare Van Rhynsdorp, 1923-1950: Letter from Father Van't Westeinde to the Provincial Administration, 9 April 1932; *Ibid.*, Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Provincial Secretary, 21 April 1932; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Provincial Secretary to the Magistrate of

The above findings highlight two major problems that were associated with the process of pauper relief within the district. The first being the complete reliance on insufficient funding from the provincial government made worse by the evident increase in paupers during times of economic difficulty brought on by drought and depression. The second issue was the insufficient quantity and quality of the food provided, especially amongst the elderly Coloured population and where requests to change the ration type was met by resistance from the provincial government. These issues emphasize the desperate need for changed decisions regarding the provincial system and allocation of relief food supply during the 1924-1934 period.

6.6 Non-government response from charitable organisations

6.6.1 The Dutch Reformed Church and drought alleviation

The DRC AAK of the Cape Province played a major role in drought alleviation efforts throughout the district. The DRC crucially assisted with the management and distribution of the Administrator's Fund, while providing its own relief rations to congregations. Two church organisations that played important roles in alleviating the impacts of the drought within the district were the ACVV and the VZB (Vroue Zending Bond). Both organisations provided food either to children (ACVV) or to people of colour (VZB), while in the case of the VZB it also assisted to provide spiritual consolation to people of colour and young children in the community.⁸⁴ The VZB focused on issues such as improved housing for Coloured people, welfare for Coloured children and improved health services in Coloured communities during the drought.⁸⁵

The DRC's specific relief was mainly overseen by the AAK, which relied on donations from congregations, either in food, clothes or cash, which was then distributed via a sub-commission within the church rings to impoverished congregants. Food relief mainly took the

Van Rhynsdorp, uncertain date 1932; *Ibid.*, Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Provincial Secretary, 11 October 1932.

⁸⁴ NG Kerk Argief, K-DIV 1834, Godsdienst verslagen 1927, Verslag van den staat van den godsdienst in die gemeente Van Rhynsdorp, read to congregation 31 June 1927; NG Kerk Argief, B 9038, Verslae V.S.B Jaarverg, 1915-1925: Verslag van die Algemeene Vergadering van die Vrouwen Zending Bond (Kaap Provinsie), gehouden op Worcester, 6 November tot 9 November 1925, p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

form of raw seed grain that the recipients had to mill themselves. Clothing was either bought or collected second-hand for distribution by the sub-commission to congregations in need of assistance, often using the local ACVV or district magistrate to oversee distribution efforts. The AAK also operated in tandem with the Provincial Administrator's Fund and with ds. Luckhoff, who was a member of the Administrator Fund Board, overseeing its efforts. The AAK therefore often assisted the fund or referenced truly desperate cases directly to the fund.⁸⁶ The main problem with the fund was that it applied exclusively to members of the DRC, leaving Catholic congregants to rely on assistance from their own church or on the district and provincial governments.

One example of the relief efforts carried out by the AAK relief fund was in the community of Nuwerus that had suffered greatly when the drought struck. One participant in the fund later heralded that were it not for the DRC food rations sent out to the impoverished households, many would certainly have starved as there had been no successful harvest since 1926 (the letter was written in 1928). However, as was commonplace in food relief during this disaster period, the food delivered had rarely been enough to meet the demand and distributors were often forced to ration the food to great extents. Restrictions on food supplies brought on by dwindling supplies forced the church to ration food to 50 lbs (22,6 kg) of flour per adult per month, while children received 25 lbs (11,3 kg). The supply shortages led to desperation among many people, especially in 1928 when a meagre twenty bags of flour were received and shared among 36 families with a total of 127 adults and 60 children. The situation was further worsened by the lack of nutritional supplements to the families' diets (including meat or vegetables), which lead to severe signs of weight loss and malnutrition.⁸⁷

The year 1927 has been proven in earlier chapters to herald the gradual worsening of the drought situation in the country until it reached the peak in 1928. During this period the DRC made great efforts in providing food, clothes and other forms of assistance to Vanrhynsdorp and other districts in the Cape. However, much of the aid was reactionary in nature and nothing was done to deal with the excessive losses in the agricultural sector of the North Western Cape. In this situation the responsibility solely fell on the national Drought Relief Act to provide assistance to farmers in restocking their farms and returning crop production to former

⁸⁶ A.D. Luckhoff, "Die nood in die Karoo", *De Kerkbode*, 20 June 1927, p. 917; Anon., "Die versorging van die noodlydendes", *De Kerkbode*, 29 June 1927, p. 914; Anon., "Die nood van die droogte", *De Kerkbode*, 7 March 1928, pp. 334-335.

⁸⁷ C.J. Meyer, "Die droogte gebreek", *De Kerkbode*, 25 April 1928, p. 618.

efficiencies. Yet, the vast majority of farmers did not qualify for these forms of assistance, or they struggled under the debt such policies forced them to adopt, which led to the DRC later creating its own restocking lease scheme on a provincial scale.⁸⁸ The scheme supplied impoverished small-scale landowners with livestock through a lease system, which eventually allowed the farmers to buy the livestock from the church once sufficient financial recovery was achieved. However, the districts of Vanrhynsdorp and Namaqualand were not considered under this scheme and it is not explained why, although the most likely explanation was the persistent drought conditions in the region which threatened the viability of such efforts.⁸⁹

6.6.2 Attempts by the Roman Catholic Church at drought alleviation

After the DRC the second largest religious group in the district was the Catholic Church. As discussed above under Chapter 4, the church oversaw much of the operations of the mission station at Rietpoort. Therefore, during the drought period one of the main providers of assistance on the mission station was the Catholic priest, Friar Cornelius van't Westeinde. Friar Van't Westeinde aided the local Coloured people through regular petitions to the district council, magistrate, provincial administrator and respective departments. The majority of sources on the activities carried out by Van't Westeinde came from letters and petitions he sent to multiple governmental groups.

Father Van't Westeinde helped the people at Rietpoort to acquire 60 bags of seed wheat under the 1927 Drought Distress Act in 1928, which was used for farming practices. The priest took on the full debt of the seed wheat as the local inhabitants were unable to afford it, which amounted to £84 but later lowered to £55. Similarly, the priest had signed the promissory note for wheat he distributed to the Rietpoort area and paid it off personally. His efforts assisted the local people in planting for the next harvest to avoid continued harvest failures. The priest also regularly bought the station's wheat produce and assisted in maintaining a form of income, even during periods of drought and depression, when market trading was poor.⁹⁰ The reserves

⁸⁸ Anon., "De droogte en zijn nood", *De Kerkbode*, 29 June 1927, pp. 912-913.

⁸⁹ NG Kerk Argief, KS 1657, Sinodale Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid, Korrespondensie Aanteelverkommissie, 1928-1934: Estimation of the losses in each congregation and the number of livestock required by each, No date.

⁹⁰ WCARS, 1/VRD, Vol, 6/9, Ref, 36/1/2, Coloured Affairs, Mission Station and Coloured Reserve Act, 1918-1937: Letter from Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to Managing Director of the Land Bank, 10 June 1929.

at Rietpoort and Stofkraal would ultimately gain access to some £450 worth of drought distress funds which were successfully repaid by the 1940s.⁹¹

In early 1927, father Van't Westeinde petitioned for the district council to send assistance to the impoverished people at Rietpoort, of which at least 60 men were in dire need of assistance. The priest suggested that the district council open road works in the area to create some work. The council noted that they had already written to the provincial administrator regarding more financial assistance from the provincial government to fund an increase in local relief efforts. In the meantime, they collectively decided to begin repair work on the nearby Nuwerust-Loeriesfontein road (and other smaller roads in the area) with a budget of £25. Coloured workers received wages of 2 shillings per day. Van't Westeinde was instructed to find the neediest able-bodied men and send them to the works until such a time when more funds could be gathered to start larger work projects.⁹²

With the onset of the drought in 1927 Father Van t' Westeinde also intensified his attempts to persuade the government to allow the people on the mission station Stofkraal to be allowed to prospect for diamonds. This was suggested in the hope that by prospecting many of the Coloured people on the reserve would remain close to home, instead of having to travel far away to the South of the district where the majority of employment opportunities existed. It was also hoped that the mining of precious gems would generate an income for the local people outside of the normal struggling drought-stricken agricultural economy.

Although the Ministry of Mines and Industry and the Minister of Native Affairs tended to side against the idea of prospecting on crownland reserves, prospecting relief work was considered to have a high likelihood of success as the predominantly Coloured inhabitants of the reserves were deemed to be "less prone to theft".⁹³ The fact that the property was held under a ticket of occupation which treated it as crownlands was beneficial to the people of the reserve as it meant they would be able to prospect without having to fear losing their property to white bidders. The magistrate was just as convinced of the potential of the plan since he had seen

⁹¹ U.G. 33-1947, *Report of the Inter Departmental Committee on matters affecting Coloured persons on Coloured Mission Stations Reserves and Settlements*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1947, p. 45.

⁹² WCARS, 4/VRD, Vol, 1/1/1/4, Van Rhynsdorp District Council Minute Book 1925-1930: District Council Meeting, 12 August 1927.

⁹³ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein kleurlinggebied en nedersettings algemeene, 1914-1936: Letter from the Secretary for Mines and Industry to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 14/12/1927.

relatively reliable evidence of possible diamond deposits on Stofkraal, enough to convince him of the value of carrying out exploratory prospecting in the region.⁹⁴

A geologist from the company W.M. Spilhaus and Co. noted that although his preliminary inspection found no alluvial deposits of stones, on deeper inspection he had found a fissure on the property that had a higher probability of hosting deposits. It was advised that only further digging and trenching could determine if it was just a geological anomaly or a proper kimberlite pipe. The geologist therefore suggested that it would be best to carry out some light prospecting work to determine the nature of the potential deposit. The work was estimated to cost around £200 and would likely last a reasonable period of time.

Father Van't Westeinde was eager for the prolonging of prospecting work on the property as he believed it would not only provide more permanent relief measures to the Coloured people there but also keep them away from the state mines in Namaqualand and South West Africa further North. The father had declared these to be degrading places for Coloured people as they were forced into poor housing with little prospects.⁹⁵ The magistrate of Springbok, when giving permission to the father to prospect for precious stones, warned him that he had no problem with them looking for stones but the property could not be bought or sold.

The initial prospecting comprised of forty men digging and carrying out other tasks around the camp which aided in alleviating some of the threatening starvation. The geologist was, however, dissuaded from his earlier suspicions since the kimberlite they found in the area was 'hungry stuff'— unlikely to produce any pipeline of diamonds.⁹⁶ Prospecting for the gem stones was halted in late December 1927 as all prospecting on native reserves had been placed on hold for 1928.⁹⁷ It would appear that prospecting in the district did eventually begin again in 1928, likely more as a benefit to the local community through temporary employment, since no diamonds were found on Stofkraal.

In addition to these actions, the priest also oversaw the distribution of food to the women and children on the reserve (discussed in Chapter 4 and 5). It can be concluded that the Catholic Church in the area did play a major role in drought alleviation for the Coloured people of the

⁹⁴ TBK, KUS, Vol, 265, File, 113, Rietpoort, Stofkraal en Lepelfontein Kleurlinggebied en nedersettings algemeene, 1914-1936: Letter from the Magistrate of Van Rhynsdorp to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 17/11/1927.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from M Collins to Father C. van't Westeinde, 10/11/1927.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter from M Collins to Father C. van't Westeinde, 10/11/1927.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter from the Department of Native Affairs to Father C. van't Westeinde, no date.

district. However, considering the reliance that the church relief efforts had on pre-existing relief work funded by the government, the odds that the priest's efforts were overly successful outside of providing temporary relief, is highly unlikely. What is evident is that Father Van't Westeinde played an important role in securing assistance for the Coloured community and even stood in to take on and repay loans personally on behalf of the station community. It can be surmised that the Catholic Church played a vital intermediary role to secure financial and other forms of drought alleviation efforts between the Coloured community and the different government departments.

6.7 Conclusion

Relief efforts within the district can be divided into two types, immediate and prolonged assistance, which targeted different income groupings of people. Immediate relief was efforts which dealt with the initial attempts to combat the impacts of the drought through food, clothing or cash donations, while prolonged relief aimed at alleviating the drought's impacts over the long-term through efforts such as restocking schemes.

There were four main relief methods used within the district. The first method developed at a national level as the Union Government's drought distress relief acts of 1924 and 1928 to provide assistance to farmers in returning to productivity. These measures were plagued by issues such as only applying to land-owning or renting farmers, relief that had to be repaid at interest, lack of funds appropriated for distress relief and the short time frame for applications. The success of the process is difficult to estimate as there were no records kept on the repayment of loans by farmers or how well farmers in the district recovered. It seems doubtful that the act of 1924 provided much in the way of long-term relief due to the small number of requests accepted as well as money provided for assistance. Its second act in 1928 proved to be more successful, with a larger number of people receiving aid and larger quantities of aid being provided.

The second form of drought relief that was implemented sat more at the provincial and local (district) level of government with some financial support from national government. These were the relief works, mainly on roads. Relief works showed some success in providing

aid to the lower income groups of the district such as agricultural workers and tenant farmers with secure employment while also encouraging infrastructure development.

The problems which arose from these road works were, however, also slightly more numerous. They proved to be temporary relief measures and only small numbers of the unemployed male population from the white and Coloured demographics could be hired. These issues developed into a worsening situation due to biases in favour of white workers over Coloured workers. The administration of the relief works by district councils had also been called into question as many of the workers complained of collusion between councils and certain store owners to gain monopolies on the road worker's spending habits. Criticisms at the time also suggested that road works made people less willing to return to their former employment, more willing to expect assistance for free and led to many developing melancholy attitudes due to the monotonous nature of the work although some of these findings were questioned by others at the time.

The third form of assistance to the population was food rations. This was an essential support as pointed out in chapter 4, since the district was stricken by financial and food insecurity due to failed harvests and livestock deaths. Originally, two different systems of food ration supply were developed, one based on the older system of food loans and the second was a more modern system of supplying food for free. The practice of selling food rations to middle income farmers was only practiced in 1925, however, after many recipients failed to repay their debts it was not attempted again.

The system of supplying food rations for free was only done as a private charity initiative due to the fact that the Union Government refused to provide support. This made the programme less successful than it could have been had there been a stronger interest from the state to support such efforts. Remaining food provision efforts outside of the pension and pauper relief funds were operated as personal charities by the Provincial Administrator's Fund and local churches. The funds were inhibited in their success by a shortfall in funding to provide the large-scale food provision that was required by them and eventually they had to provide low quantities of food to large families due to shortages. It also meant that many families were forced to survive on flour with no other supplements to their diets. Assistance to the extremely poor in the district through pauper's relief did assist the most vulnerable. The fund saw regularly overspending due to the inflated number of destitute (mainly elderly) people caused by the drought. The fund also suffered from the quality of food provided which was noted in

the 1930s to not be edible to many of the elderly destitute, which forced the magistrate to alter the type of supplies being rationed out.

The fourth method of relief were the efforts by church or charity organisations to assist people in the district such as the DRC providing relief to its congregants through the AAK, ACVV and VZB as well as local church councils. The Catholic Church mainly provided relief through its priest at Rietpoort.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the drought relief efforts of the period 1924-1934 were reactionary, with funds and resources regularly not being available to support efforts over a long period of time or too little funds were being provided for the efforts required. The problems of the policies of the time meant that almost all relief efforts required the affected people to repay the costs of the goods received. The relief supplied was often unable to provide long-term solutions to the distress caused by the drought and were therefore only carried out over short periods on a small population. The provision of relief was visibly skewed to provide more relief along racial lines to the white population and especially married men, leaving women, children, the elderly and people of colour in difficult situations.

Conclusion

Drought, as defined by the South African Drought Management Plan of 2005, encompasses the insufficient supply of water accompanying a prolonged abnormal dry period. The associated depletion of surface water sources and soil moisture result in drought-induced crop failures and livestock deaths suffered in the agricultural sector. The drought effects eventually also lead to socio-economic consequences for the local population as water becomes increasingly scarce for everyday use. Rainfall averages for the Western Cape and, more particularly, the district of Vanrhynsdorp from the early 1900s reveal that the district suffered prolonged periods of very low rainfall between 1924 and 1930, with only one year of average rainfall in 1925. Rainfall improved slightly between 1930 and 1934, however, the recovery from the earlier low rainfall years was hampered by the Great Depression over the timeframe.

South African historical literature on the 1800s and 1900s frequently refers to drought as the cause for poor socio-economic conditions on a country-wide basis, even when it could be localised to a certain part of the country. In other cases, drought was simply not considered as a possible primary factor in South African history, probably due to the greater focus on other factors such as politics. This was particularly common around discussions on the impacts of drought in the 1920's and 1930's in South Africa - a period of rapid urbanisation and economic difficulties, which was often argued to be contributing to the Great Depression. Thus, the severity of drought and its consequential impacts in the 1920s in South Africa had been poorly investigated on a more localised, in depth and quantitative scale.

The aim of the study was to evaluate the social and economic repercussions of the prolonged period of drought from 1924 to 1930 and subsequent 'drought recovery' years (1930-1934) in the rural district of Vanrhynsdorp. The time period (1924 to 1934) was selected to cover a period of low rainfall and the Great Depression. This was done to understand whether the impacts of drought were causes for the often-reported change and hardship experienced in the district during the 1920s and 1930s. The study also aimed to observe to what extent drought was mitigated (or aggravated) by other factors such as pre-existing conditions, education, governmental and public support systems. The Vanrhynsdorp area was chosen as it represents a rural district in a transition zone between the higher rainfall South Western Cape and the drier North West region. The region also had no major industry outside of agriculture to sustain the economy before and during the drought.

The severity of the drought was aggravated by existing socio-economic problems and poor infrastructure in the district before the 1920s. These problems were linked to the district's recent past of being impoverished, underpopulated and agriculturally underperforming, with farmers being slow to modernise or improve local infrastructure. The district had previously particularly suffered under the drought of 1895 to 1897, where the pre-existing methods of drought alleviation such as seed wheat, trekking and relief works failed. These failures were brought on by laissez faire policy and conflicting accounts on the severity of the drought between state officials which prolonged the drought's impacts on the society and forced a migration of people threatened by starvation and poverty. The drought raised awareness of the need to improve the district, particularly around irrigation, but these improvements did not occur until 1918 with the construction of the Olifants River irrigation works. The district's already fragile position was struck another blow by the Anglo Boer War and later drought of the post-war period, which forced the population into a continuous state of recovery.

Drought alleviation techniques saw rapid change when, in 1916, the new Union Government began to take the threat of drought more seriously and assumed more responsibility for drought alleviation through the first Drought Distress Relief Act in 1916 followed by the findings of the 1920 Commission of Investigation into Drought Alleviation. These efforts, however, proved to be of little assistance to the predominantly loan farm-dominated Vanrhynsdorp as the 1916 act mainly benefited land owning-farmers. The 1920 commission on drought was focused on the threat posed to the agricultural industry and made multiple suggestions on how to avert these threats, most of which only came into action after the drought of 1924.

By the 1920s the district was deeply impoverished and in a tenuous situation, with a populace mainly settled in the rural regions where sudden shifts in the market for agricultural commodities could upset the wellbeing of the population. The economic hub and main urban centre of the town of Vanrhynsdorp struggled with issues of overcrowding, poor and mostly non-existent sanitation and poor-quality water supply that gave the area a history of disease outbreaks and low standards of living. The start of the drought in 1924 found the district with little infrastructure (irrigation, roads or railways) causing high production and transport costs, while much of the population were either low-paid labourers or tenant farmers mainly focused on drought prone pastoral farming. Many of the farmers did not practice irrigation farming and most cereals (especially wheat) was meant for subsistence, while other products were often homemade and sold on local markets. The district was predominantly dependant on animal produce such as wool for export to Cape Town. This reliance on specified commodity products

left farmers dependant on the prices offered for their goods by local traders and “middle men” who sold the goods to the urban markets, a process which often left local farmers receiving less than their produces’ actual market value.

The worst years of the drought spanned from 1923 to 1925 and 1927 to 1929. This can be seen in the precipitation record, where the average yearly rainfall in the district over these years fell by nearly 300 mm when compared to high rainfall years such as 1925. In both cases drought was the culmination of two to three years of poor rainfall in the district. This loss of precipitation caused large numbers of livestock deaths, with deaths among sheep and goats in 1924 and 1928 both exceeding the average by around 10,000 deaths. These deaths in turn led to decreases in wool, butter and meat production. The district’s cereal crops also proceeded to fail due to poor rainfall, with 1925’s wheat production equivalent to only 39% of 1924’s total tonnage, while 1928’s crop production was only the equivalent of 6% of 1927’s. This negative impact on the agricultural economy is further supported by the decrease in taxable income as well as money being given to charitable organisations in the years 1924 and 1928.

The economic problems of the district continued after the drought of 1928 when the market prices and demand for wool fell in the years 1929 to 1934 due to the Great Depression. The situation reversed as productivity grew, but profits from the sale of produce fell, causing the period from 1930 to see worse financial indicators than the preceding drought years of the 1920s.

Famine, unemployment and social decay are rarely caused by drought alone. These problems arise from weak pre-existing social support structures which fail to respond with the necessary relief measures and with the drought itself instead acting as a catalyst for social issues. Four main social problems resulted from the drought and lack of adequate timeous relief:

Firstly, the drought resulted in a significant drop in living standards among people in the district as food and finances rapidly became scarce with the crop failures and lack of alternate employment. This caused many families to be unable to afford necessities such as clothing, paying rents or other bills. In many cases this problem was compounded by the large number of susceptible people in the district such as the poor, elderly and single parent households that had already struggled to make a living prior to the drought. The loss of food security in particular was not caused by the lack of food from farming, but rather a lack of funds to afford the more expensive food that was available. An example being flour, the main staple food item

of people in the region, which had become expensive and difficult to acquire, leading to many families becoming dependant on state food rations and employment opportunities.

Secondly, the drop of living conditions among the Northern wards of the district around Nuwerus forced many inhabitants to migrate South in search of employment, grazing and better living conditions. This was a particular pull factor for the Coloured population of the district, who faced unemployment and evictions from low paid work on white farms that forced many to trek with the hopes of finding other employment or places to live. The corresponding migration to the district's Southern wards brought new problems as diseases proceeded to run rife through already weakened people who were forced into substandard and crowded dwellings, with few to no reliable sources of clean water or sanitation services. Disease outbreaks reportedly became more common as poor sanitary habits, lack of infrastructure, poorly implemented regulations, low incomes and overcrowding created the perfect breeding ground for diseases such as typhoid and tuberculosis. Additionally, the evident lack of water in many areas during the drought and the sudden flooding caused by increased precipitation after the drought served to flush faecal matter into nearby water sources, thereby contaminating the already limited freshwater sources.

The third socially driven impact was a result of the predilection toward large families throughout the population of the district. Women of all races had, prior to the drought, played a crucial role in maintaining the familial life within households while often also working. However, during the drought women had to additionally fill the role of sole breadwinner and take on increased responsibilities from the men in the household as many of the men trekked further afield to find work or grazing for livestock. The consequence of this was that many mothers and women struggled to continue feeding their families with the little money they made and which were sent from their husbands and male relatives. The lack of funds was so severe, that in the case of the women living on the reserves, starvation became a commonplace. At the same time the children within such families reportedly (especially those from Coloured families) visibly lost weight due to a lack of nutritious food and general poverty. Many children were forced by the situation to quit school due to a lack of funds and older children were forced to find employment to help sustain their families. These issues were remarked to have had severe negative effects on the psychological well-being of both the children and parents over the long-term.

A fourth impact of the drought was on religious life within the district. As the economic and social repercussions of the drought worsened, the community turned to the church for spiritual guidance and assistance during the drought. The churches provided both spiritual assistances to uplift the morale of the district population and physical relief to assist the poor within their congregations. The DRC in particular held some societal and political importance that gave it significant influence among many white and Coloured people in the district. The church had initially responded by providing spiritual means to dealing with the drought, such as days of prayer and calling regularly for members to remain faithful as the drought was a test of their faith. As the drought period reached its peaks, these methods changed to more practical relief efforts including providing food rations and clothing. Some welfare organisations of the DRC, such as the ACVV and VZB, provided important relief alleviation efforts specifically focused on women, children and people of colour. Concurrently, the missionary of the Catholic Church in Rietpoort also oversaw much of the drought relief provision to the people in the area during the worst of the drought.

In response to these impacts the drought alleviation efforts implemented between 1924 and 1928 focused mainly on food provision, relief works and attempts to assist farmers in returning to productivity on both the short and longer term. The drought alleviation measures enacted over the 1920s were notable improvements on the original Drought Relief Act of 1916. This marked a steady learning curve regarding the role the state should play in supporting drought alleviation techniques— an issue that caused significant debate and controversy among law makers as well as private citizens at the time.

The majority of relief measures suffered chronic complications and challenges ranging from refusals to provide assistance for free, delayed provision and approval of assistance, high interest rates on relief loans, a continuation of drought into following years and a lack in equitable provision of aid. Consequently, relief efforts often became cyclical processes of communities provided with too little assistance, having to request additional funds or provisions when the original provisions were depleted and which resulted in the eventual reliance on private organisations. Relief works were found to be an important source of income for many families, yet the works suffered from three problems: lack of financing, racial discrimination and the questionable quality of roads constructed by unskilled workers. The relief methods, particularly the relief works, were successful to a degree in providing some income to families. The effectiveness of relief measures could, however, have been improved had there been better co-operation between different levels of government, more funds

allocated sooner by the national government, a decrease in the high interest rates of the drought relief fund loans to farmers and more relief programs focused on the entire population instead of specific groups.

It can be concluded that drought, although not the only cause of poverty and poor living conditions in the region, served to exacerbate pre-existing issues such as poor infrastructure, under performing farmers and large debt culminated during the entire drought period, which led to severe food and income insecurity. The fact that the drought occurred in a society already racked by low incomes, poor nutrition, few opportunities, large families and racial discrimination, forced many in the district to become dependent on state assistance through food programmes and relief works. The state's response to the drought evolved over the period to provide some relief in the form of temporary employment and food rations, but over the long-term low budgets and a refusal to provide consistent relief failed to solve the problems faced by the local population. Eventually many in the district were forced to migrate South in search of opportunities and better living conditions along the Olifants River and the district's urban areas. These problems did not end with the end of the drought and return to normal precipitation from 1930 onward, as poorly performing markets and the impacts of the Great Depression caused a continuation of poor living standards within the already struggling district. It can be argued that the socio-economic impacts in the period post 1930 was not due to the often-reported coeval combination of depression and drought, but rather by the depression following a prolonged and severe drought period in the 1920s.

The study proves that there was a sustained drought from 1924 to 1930 that caused significant disruption to the social and economic makeup of the district. These findings suggest that drought, at least in the district of Vanrhynsdorp, had a long-term impact that led to the migration of people out of the district towards urban areas such as Cape Town. The drought and depression also caused significant harm to the economy of the district that persisted for some time after 1934 as the population struggled to recuperate.

The primary aim of the study to observe the impact of drought on a localised region over a short period of time has set the tone and left room for a larger study to gain a greater understanding and trends of various drought event impacts on the larger Cape Province over a longer period. This data can provide more insights on how the impacts of drought on regional farming economies led to the process of urbanisation. Further study on drought will also provide more knowledge around how government policies concerning drought alleviation

formed and evolved over time and the effectiveness of these policies in the long term. These are issues which speak clearly to the current situation (2020) in both the Western Cape and South Africa surrounding drought, drought alleviation and government's role in these matters.

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