

INFORMATION SHEET

MPhil (Full Thesis) & PhD Studies in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

Concept Note Development



**Institute for Poverty, Land & Agrarian Studies (PLAAS),
University of the Western Cape (UWC),
Cape Town, South Africa**

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1. About PLAAS

The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) is a research institute established in 1995 at the University of the Western Cape. We are internationally recognized for our expertise in research, policy engagement and teaching on issues related to land and water rights, natural resources management, agro-food restructuring, land and agrarian reform and the social aspects of fisheries and ecosystem management. PLAAS hosts the Department of Science & Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF) Research Chair in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, as well as forming part of the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Food Security. Over the past 23 years, we have produced 420 publications and graduated over 220 postgraduate students. PLAAS has eminent researchers conducting cutting edge research in our field, the research capacity and the commitment.

Our mission emphasises the central importance of the agro-food system in the livelihoods of poor and marginalised people in Southern Africa, as well as its importance in strategies aimed at eradicating poverty. For much of our existence, our work has concentrated heavily on issues of land ownership and tenure, and agricultural livelihoods, but increasingly our focus is broadening to consider the upstream and downstream aspects of agro-food commodity chains and production networks and systems. In our work we also take up key aspects of social policy affecting the dynamics of poverty and inequality in Southern and South Africa. Within this broad field of investigation, our work focuses on the dynamics of marginalised livelihoods – particularly livelihoods that are vulnerable, structurally excluded or incorporated into broader economic systems on adverse terms. Another important area of work relates to the social and political dimensions of ecosystem management, in particular fisheries, water and catchment management. But our core competency remains the understanding of rural, agricultural and natural resource-dependent livelihood systems. We pursue multi-disciplinary research with a strong preference on qualitative sociological and anthropological approaches, supplemented by quantitative and econometric approaches.

2. Our Research Themes/Topics

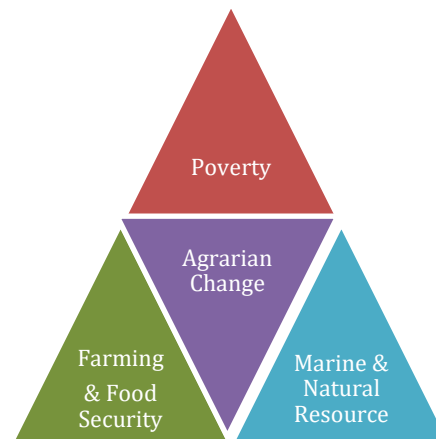
Our work is also unified by a clear focus on key underlying and cross-cutting themes that help us connect our many projects with one another and plan our research.

2.1. Themes

Firstly, our research concentrates on four critically important themes. Firstly, *poverty* is clearly one important cross-cutting theme, but we do not see poverty in a narrowly money-metric way: - rather, we see it as a key symptom of inequality. Secondly, therefore, our research is centrally concerned with *inequality* in all its manifestations – not only in the distribution of income or wealth, but also as it relates to other manifestations of social relations of power (e.g. gender, race, class and citizenship). Thirdly, our research is unified by a central focus on the economic dynamics of *livelihoods* among marginalised and vulnerable populations, and on the central role of formal and informal employment. Finally, we seek to understand the key role played by law, institutions, and the realisation of and struggles for *socio-economic rights* in all the contexts we study.

2.2. Focus Areas

Secondly, when we research these central themes, we concentrate on four concrete problematics, each relating to a distinct set of practical and policy problems. Firstly, the central problem area we are concerned with relates to the politics of land and land rights and the nature of change on rural landscapes and in agro-food systems. Secondly, we are concerned with agriculture and farming, and the many ways in which access to land can support employment, livelihoods, and welfare generation. Thirdly, we are concerned with the systems of natural resource governance (especially for forestry, fisheries and marine resources) upon which poor people depend. And lastly, we are concerned with the broader problematic of poverty and inequality, and the nature of social policies that can serve to protect poor and vulnerable populations.



This focus has important consequences. It means that our work is centrally concerned with agriculture, Marine and natural resources, and the land-water-food-energy nexus. At the same time, our research is informed by an understanding of the nature of rural-urban linkages; and an awareness that our work needs to contribute to a broader understanding of the nature of rural-urban transitions in the region. We do not see urban and rural poverty as separate realities; rather, they are two sides of one regional dynamic. But our core competency remains the understanding of rural, agricultural and natural resource-dependent livelihood systems.

2.3. Policy Priorities

A key aspect of our approach is that our research is oriented strongly towards practical concerns. In addition to our research programmes, our priorities are therefore also defined by our analysis of key policy priorities: high impact, high leverage areas where policy change can make a material difference to challenging inequality and promoting inclusive development, and that can be addressed in a coherent way through our six research programmes.

At this stage, four key policy areas can be identified:

Protecting Customary Tenure Systems and Access Rights: The formal and informal systems that regulate access and exclusion to land, natural and marine resources are a vital component of both systems of production and of informal social protection among poor and vulnerable people. Tenure systems need to be supported in ways that ameliorate inequality, both at inter-group and inter-household levels (wealth, class differentiation) and within households and families (gender and generational power dynamics).

Promoting Pro-Smallholder Land Reform, Agricultural and Investment Policy: Subsistence agriculture and smallholder farmers “loosely integrated” into markets and value chains make an important contribution to the livelihood portfolios of vulnerable and marginalized households in both urban and rural areas, through small but significant contributions to food security and incomes, and through supporting informal social protection. In South Africa and elsewhere, successful land reform can also make a powerful contribution to political stability. Progress requires pro-smallholder redistribution in South Africa; genuinely inclusive business models for agricultural commercialization throughout the region; appropriate zoning, commonage and access policies in urban areas; and realistic and supportive forms of market access (informal markets, fresh produce markets, livestock markets and the like). It also requires the development of appropriate technologies (renewable energy, rainwater harvesting, sustainable farming systems, appropriate agricultural extension, etc.).

Promoting Informal Non-Farm Livelihoods and Small Enterprises in African Food Systems and the Rural Non-Farm Economy: Support for the livelihood and coping strategies of populations marginalized by the “agrarian transition” requires attention to more than farming. It also requires support for full range of activities that form part of poor households’ livelihood portfolios & contribute to the survival and coping strategies of rural and migrant populations. This includes livelihoods activities upstream and downstream from farming, as well as for the non-agricultural livelihoods that are part of a diverse rural economy. This is a key concern for approaches to agricultural commercialization and agricultural investments, which should consider not only direct cost-effectiveness and returns on investment, but the indirect impacts on the regional economy. Supporting these activities requires appropriate rural and regional development frameworks, and careful attention to the complex impact of transnational value chains and upstream and downstream concentration, and the development of policies that overcome barriers to entry by small to medium enterprises and thus open up highly concentrated agro-food sectors. We should contribute to human settlement and zoning policies that pertain to the contexts in which peri-urban and migrant populations survive.

Supporting Formal and Informal Systems for Social Protection and Welfare Generation: We need to pay attention not only to “productionist” models that seek to support productive employment and enterprise among poor people, but also to the systems that ameliorate vulnerability and protect them from shocks. This involves supporting the development of formal systems of social protection (income grants, etc.); but also supporting informal welfare production. Approaches to the informal economy need to be sensitive to the vital “welfare” function of survivalist enterprises. Access to land (urban and rural) is a vital part of this: land matters, not only as part of producing agricultural goods, but also to support survival strategies and networks of reciprocal aid.

3. Teaching Programme Research Approach

Our Teaching Programme is promoting an approach that integrates the PLAAS research strategy in supervision; to grow our postgraduate numbers and improve our quality graduates within the prescribed period. We have realigned the programmes to achieve the University’s Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) 2015-2019. We are specifically focusing on Goal Area 2 (Teaching & Learning) and Goal Area 3 (Research & Innovation). Our goal is to empower a new generation of critical, engaged and rigorous young black social scientists. PLAAS is ideally placed to foster a new calibre of new black social scientists.

This will be achieved by integrating the two goal areas identified, starting in 2017 for the next five years. Goal Area 2: Teaching & Learning indicates to *promote excellence in a learning-focused and research led academic environment that facilitates local and global engagement and is responsive to a rapidly changing 21st century context*. PLAAS aims to achieve this goal by keeping abreast of curriculum shifts in broaden the content to include more African countries. To provide value of real life experiences such as case studies, student inputs, debates, and fieldtrips to enhance the student learning experience. To incorporate blended learning possibilities in the digital era into our teaching. Goal Area 3: Research and Innovation: *to position UWC as a leading research and innovation university in South Africa, with local relevance, regional impact and global recognition*.

Our strategy is to create a teaching and research intensive space through bringing our research areas/themes into teaching and supervision at PLAAS; to focus on generational reproduction/career pathing for young researchers; increasing our postgraduate throughput rate; increase our postgraduate research student (Masters in Research & PhDs); and by improving our scholarship outputs.

3.1. Semi-Structured Framework for Research Programmes

Our Teaching Programme is introduced a semi-structured framework for PhD and Masters Research programmes to assist our students in formulating research questions and a coherent concept note and proposal. We have identified that applicants often struggle to develop a research proposal with solid research questions, presentation of key arguments, theoretical framework, methodologies to guide the research project; or they have not read extensively on the topic, or familiar with the key debates, theories on the specific topic; or they lack experience in operationalise the research process, planning fieldwork, and selecting appropriate case studies.

We recommend that applicants go through a pre-admission process, consisting of a concept note development/presentation workshop, for student orientation and introduction to our research areas; and periodic workshops throughout the research process, providing students with an opportunity to meet with supervisors, reading sessions on key literature and discussions, and feedback and learning from one another. The integration of the PLAAS key research areas in Poverty, Land, Fisheries and Water, to research projects and researcher interests so that students concept notes/topics fit into these areas. The structure of the semi-structured programme is:

- Workshop attendance to take students through the research process in year 1.
- To register students thesis title, and ethics clearance by November.
- Fieldwork workshops in year 2.
- Writing support and supervision consultation throughout the process.

4. Our Programme Offerings

4.1. MPhil by Full Thesis in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

The programme is designed to deepen student debate and critical thinking around the fundamental developmental issues of the day, and the most important theories and concepts underpinning them. An important aspect is the teaching of research methodology in preparation for field research. The programme focuses on taking students through the research process to produce a full dissertation on an approved topic. It will benefit aspiring young researchers and working professionals who seek a deeper understanding and engagement with poverty, land and agrarian issues through undertaking an empirical research project.

4.2. PhD by Full Dissertation in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

It offers specialised training in theories, concepts and research methods appropriate to the emerging field of enquiry of poverty, land and agrarian studies. This will contribute to the further development and strengthening of engaged scholarship on issues of great relevance to societies in Africa in particular, experiencing the rapid transformation of their rural economies. Scholarship of this kind has a great deal to contribute to policy making, and many of the doctoral students who are trained will work in applied professions such as development planning. Thus another purpose that the programme will serve is to build capacity for effective societal responses to social change. Students are required to complete a monograph study on an approved topic.

4.3. PhD by Publications in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

This programme offers students an alternative route to gaining a doctorate. It is tailored for students and future academics opportunities to develop a research identity early on in their studies/careers. It contributes to the early dissemination of new knowledge produced and the impact of the research is more immediate. Students complete a thesis by publications. To be eligible for this programme, candidates must meet the general admission requirements as per the University General Calendar Rule A.2.5.; have relevant publication experience; and find a suitable PLAAS supervisor that has published in the relevant field. For those who qualify, please refer to the Guidelines by PhD by Publications.

5. Admission Criteria

According to the University General Calendar Rule A.5.2.

- For admission to the **MPhil Research in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies**, applicants must have obtained an Honours degree in a relevant discipline (e.g. sociology, history, economics, political science, agriculture, public administration, development studies, geographical and environmental studies). Students must demonstrate a good understanding of their chosen research topic and have research experience in one or more of the following themes – poverty, land and agrarian reform, rural development, and natural resources.
- For admission to the **PhD in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies**, applicants must have obtained a Masters degree in Social Sciences, Arts, Law, Humanities, Environmental Sciences and Development Studies or any other relevant discipline. Students should have achieved a minimum average mark of 65% in the relevant Masters degree. Students must demonstrate a good understanding of their chosen research topic and have research experience in one or more of the following themes – poverty, land and agrarian reform, rural development, and natural resources.

6. Applying to PLAAS

To apply to one of the PLAAS research programmes, applicants are to:

- Apply online to UWC at <https://www.uwc.ac.za/Students/Admin/Pages/Apply-Online.aspx> *
- Submit an updated CV outlining your relevant qualifications, working experience, community work, and publications (if applicable).
- Submit certified copies of your academic transcripts and degree certificates.
- Submit a draft concept note – please refer to the guidelines provided in item 7 below.
- SAQA evaluation certificate (international qualifications only – see item 6.1. below)

*Please ensure you select 2021, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, MPhil/PhD Programme, PLAAS Department

All supporting documentation must be emailed to postgraduates@plaas.org.za

6.1. Certificate of Evaluation for Foreign Qualifications (SAQA Certificate)

Prospective students who obtained qualifications from non-South African universities are required to submit a Certificate of Foreign Qualifications Evaluation from the South African Qualifications Assessment (SAQA) offices. The purpose of the evaluation is to compare foreign qualifications with South African qualifications and to advise on the recognition of the foreign qualification in South Africa in terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Please note that this is the candidate's responsibility, including all costs related to this. The process can take up to three months to finalise, and could delay the selection process. Kindly visit the SAQA website on <http://www.saqa.org.za> or contact the call centre on +27 12 431 5070 for more information.

All applications are to be submitted directly to Ms Carla Henry by **Friday, 07th August 2020**.

Ms. Carla Henry,
Postgraduate Senior Administrator
Email: postgraduates@plaas.org.za

7. The Structure of the Concept Note

A concept note is a research intention developed within the PLAAS research themes/topics, about what your central problem question is, why it is a problem worthy of study, and how you will go about studying it. It should be approximately 1-2 pages, clear and informative. The structure of the concept note should consist of a number of key elements, such as:

i. **Title**

The title should convey clearly the research topic. It should be brief and provide a good idea about the focus of the proposed research topic.

ii. What is to be researched under the heading: **Background**

This should include a brief statement of what is to be researched (i.e. the research problem), together with the key theoretical issues and debates that inform the research context. The scope of the research should also be clearly specified.

iii. Why it is to be researched under the heading: **Rationale and Significance of Research**

The reasons why the research is being undertaken, together with the usefulness of the possible research findings for practitioners and researchers in the field of study, and the potential contribution of such findings to scientific knowledge.

iv. The research hypotheses or questions under the heading: **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of the research should be listed, together with the key research questions and, where appropriate, key research assumptions, propositions and/or hypotheses.

v. How it is to be researched under the heading: **Research Methodology**

The general research method and specific analytical techniques to be used should be listed, and critical technical requirements relevant to the research should be specified.

vi. What concepts, frameworks, or theories will guide your research under the heading: **Conceptual Framework**

Provide clearly the central issues that will structure the research. Demonstrate the context in which your research would be located. Explain the relationships to existing theories or frameworks of analysis is made explicit.

vii. What are the key ethical issues under the heading: **Ethics Statement**

Ethical issues related to the research should be listed, together with a brief statement of how these will be addressed in the study.

viii. **Keywords**

Provide 10 keywords that convey what the research topic is about.

8. Structure of the Concept Note Presentation

Selected candidates will be allocated 15 minutes slots to present their concept notes to the PLAAS Committee. All presentations should be a powerpoint presentation and should be presented in 10-15 slides. Please use the headings indicated below:

- i. Cover page: Title and participant name
- ii. Rationale and Significance of the Study
- iii. Research Objectives
- iv. Research Methodology
- v. Conceptual Framework
- vi. Ethics Statement