

THE WEENEN FARM EVICTIONS

CUTTING THE LIFELINE TO THE LAND

More than 2 700 people are threatened with removal from their homes on a cluster of about 20 thornveld farms in the Mngwenya Valley south of the village of Weenen and in the nearby Muden area in the Natal Midlands.

LABOUR TENANTS AND THORNVELD FARMS

These "thorn" or "labour" farms as they are sometimes known are owned by white absentee landlords and are products of the labour tenancy system.

Under this highly exploitative labour system, a "labour tenant" family lived on the land of a white landlord and worked for him for six months of the year for no wages. In return the family had access to agricultural land for the growing of crops and the grazing of cattle. This was the dominant form of farm labour in the Natal Midlands and northern districts as well as the Eastern Transvaal until the abolition of the system in the 1960's.

Many farmers who owned large commercial or mixed farms in the Natal Midlands purchased "thorn farms" in the Weenen district to house the labour tenant families. They were called thorn farms because the Weenen area is dry thornveld country, suitable for stock farming. Over many generations substantial ho-

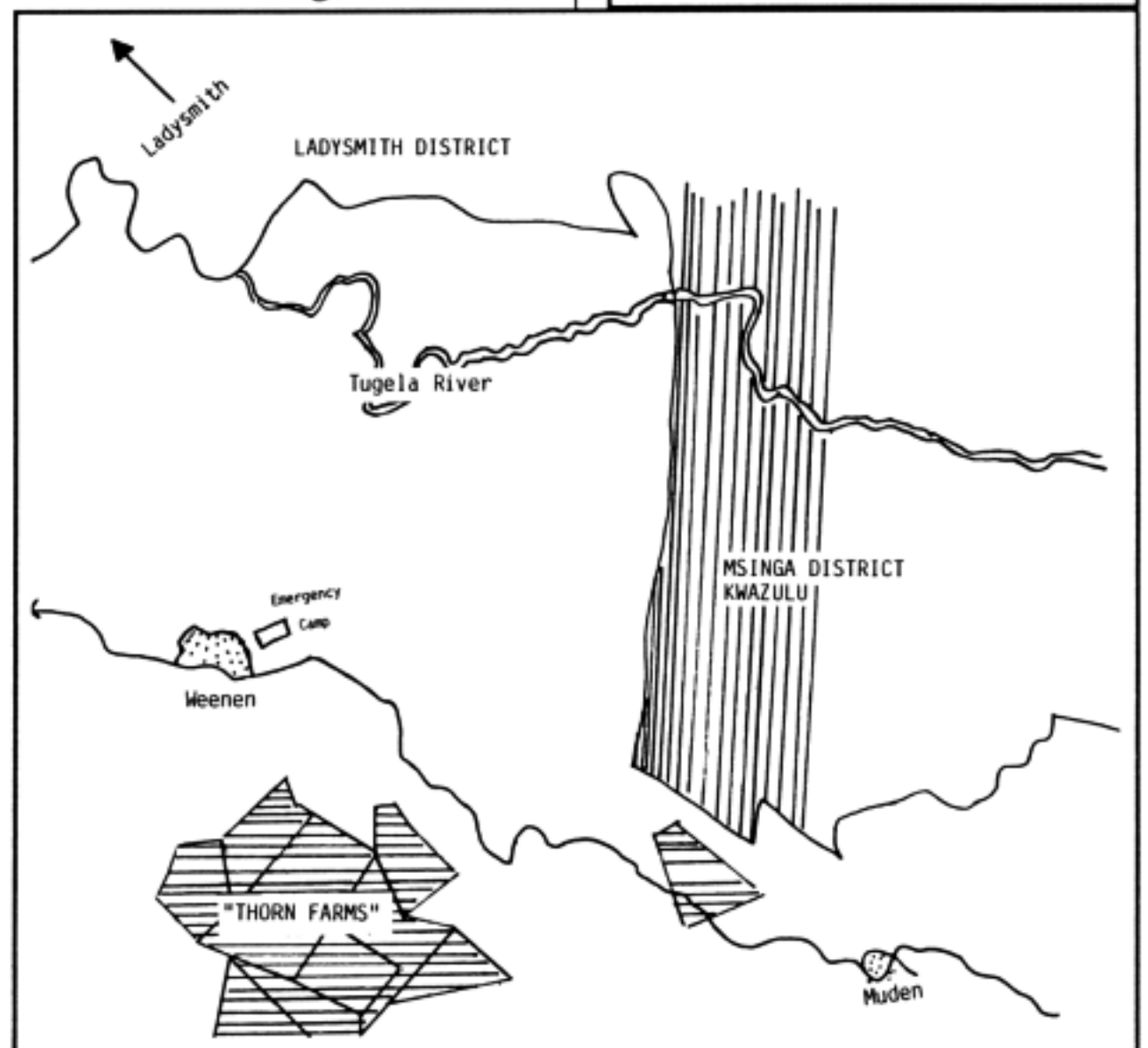
mesteads were built on these farms as families tended their crops and developed their cattle herds, whilst other members commuted to the commercial farm of their absentee landlord to fulfil the family's tenant obligations.

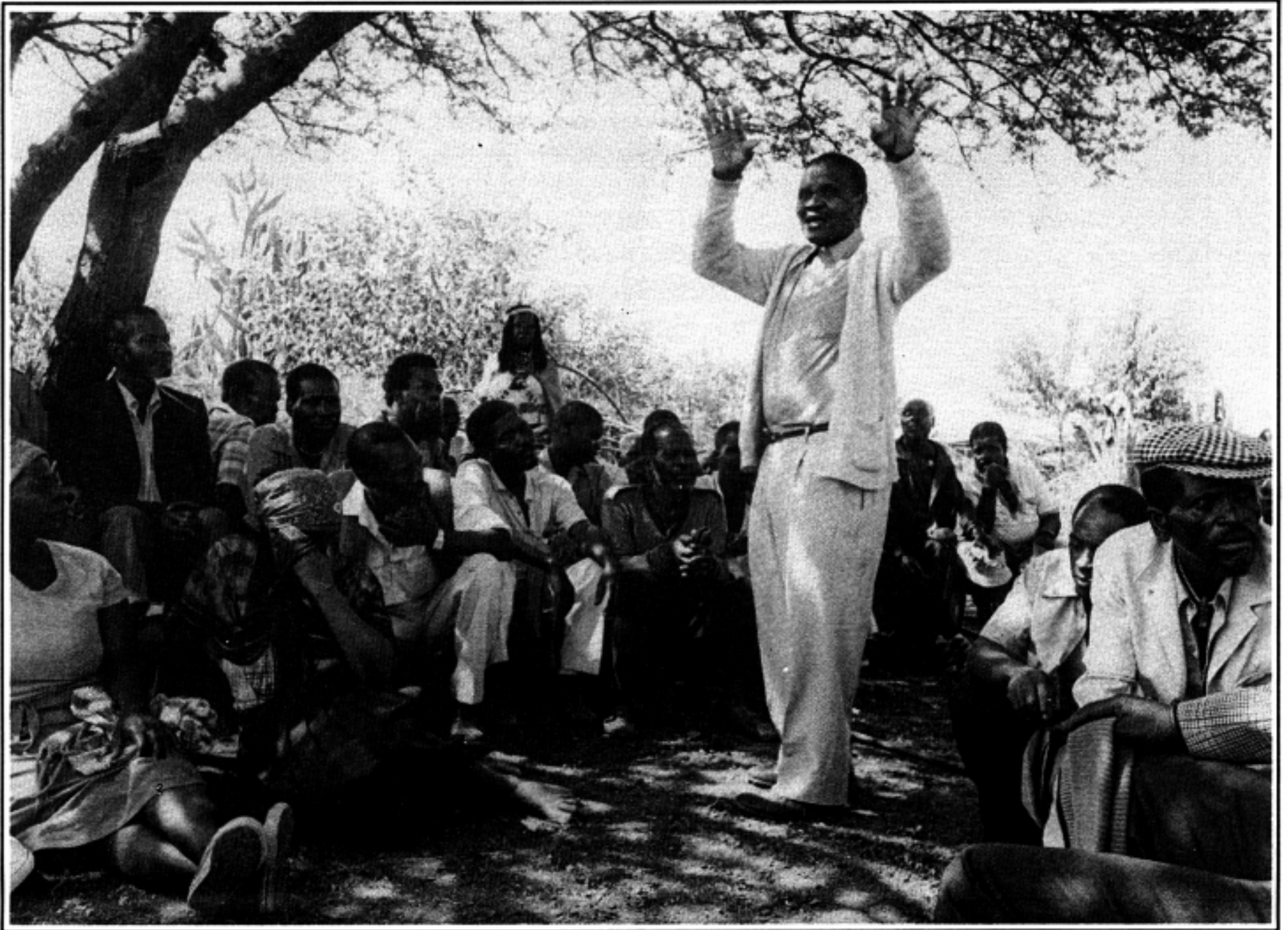
WEENEN AND THE ABOLITION OF LABOUR TENANCY

In the 1960's the government introduced a district-by-district ban on labour tenancy. This was an attempt to modernise white agriculture and to force the introduction of wage labour.

The ban was extended to Weenen in 1969. A farmer was then only entitled to have a maximum of five families living on the farm, all of whom had to be working fulltime for

him. All unauthorised families living on the land had to leave, to be resettled in KwaZulu. Mass evictions followed accompanied by hut-burnings, bulldozing of homes and court prosecutions. In a period of 3 years it is estimated that more than 10 000 people were forcibly removed from the Weenen district.





Mr Sibisi, an appointed Induna at the Weenen Emergency Camp shares his frustrations in not being able to get the government to address the problems that people face in this crowded settlement.

A TOEHOLD ON THE LAND

Despite the ban on labour tenancy in Weenen, the system continued in a modified form. The existing system is even more exploitative than the old practice. Families have been given smaller fields, and forced to reduce stock in return for "wage labour" terms which may mean only rations or a nominal wage of R10.

As the tenancy contract was no longer recognised in law, families faced arbitrary evictions with no legal means of contesting them. Farmers also increased the labour obligations of the families, often requiring three or more members to work for them for little

or no wages if they did not want to be evicted. But people have clung tenaciously to the system because it is the only means of securing access to land outside of the overcrowded KwaZulu areas.

THE PRESENT EVICTIONS

Unlike the massive state-sponsored removals of the 1960's, the present Weenen evictions represent the private actions of farmers who wish to evict families for a number of reasons:

- In some cases families are evicted because their sons and daughters refuse to go and work for the farmers. They see the terms of la-

bour tenancy as nothing less than slave labour.

- The labour force has been reduced because of increased mechanisation or the consolidating of farm ownership under fewer owners on the commercial farms. Thus changes of farm ownership are often accompanied by evictions.
- Disputes have arisen over cattle reduction and land allocations for ploughing. Since the end of 1986, the conservation authorities have been prescribing the use of the land on the thorn farms in terms of the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act.
- There have been disputes



Mrs Sithole with her 6 week old baby that she gave birth to in the bush near the Weenen Emergency Camp following the family's eviction from their home.

over service conditions, wages, working hours and overtime.

WHERE DO WE GO TO? - WE KNOW NO OTHER PLACE

Having received eviction notices, most families are determined not to leave the farms with which they have been associated all their lives, where their children go to school and where their parents and grandparents are buried. And even if they are forced off the farm, there is nowhere for them to go to.

WAAIHOEK

Up until now the only alternative the government has had to offer the farm dwellers is Waihoek, a notorious resettlement camp in the Ladysmith district, which is remote, far from what has always been their home, where there are no employment opportunities, and where there is no place for the growing of crops and the grazing of livestock which form their principal form of investment and security in an otherwise insecure and tenuous existence.

ABOLITION OF INFLUX CONTROL

Although the abolition of influx control in 1986 has meant

THIS IS THE STORY MR ZUNGU (63) FROM HOPEWELL FARM, MNGWENYA VALLEY TOLD AFRA BEFORE A SERIES OF ARRESTS, COURT CASES, JAIL SENTENCES AND FINES FORCED HIM TO LIVE IN THE BUSH NEAR WEENEN LIKE A REFUGEE. AT PRESENT ANOTHER CHARGE OF ILLEGAL SQUATTING IS PENDING AGAINST HIM.

Suddenly we are told to clear off from this farm - the reason being that our children do not want to work in the farm anymore. We were born here, our grandparents were born and died here...We know no other place. I myself have worked for years. The reason why my son doesn't want to work in the farm is that he doesn't want to be like me - work and work for nothing.

I did all sort of work for this mlungu *. I used to water huge fields - carrying water on the head like a woman. I used to load big lorries..No wonder my back is bent like this now.

Now that my back is broken like this , that I am so old, I am sick, I am of no use to the farmer anymore - I must go! Where will I go to as sick as I am? How am I an old sick man like me to start all over a new life again! Why doesn't he let me die here in this farm.

*** mlungu - Zulu word for white person**

that the evicted farm dwellers are legally entitled to move to the cities, the difficulties of securing housing in the cities, the problems of massive unemployment, their own lack of skills, and the alienating experience of urban life for these rural people, (particularly with the present political tensions in the urban areas of Natal), make the possibilities of an urban migration a non-option. The result is that the families stay where they are and hope for the best.

STATE PROSECUTION AND THE ILLEGAL SQUATTING ACT

The farmers have responded to this situation by using state backing in the prosecution of the families for illegal squat-

ting. A number of family heads have appeared in court on numerous occasions and have faced heavy fines and prison sentences. In this way a rural people struggling against the dispossession of their homes have been turned into criminals. But despite this they continue to hold onto their land.

DEMOLITIONS AND IMPOUNDINGS - THE WAR OF ATTRITION

Some families allege that farmers, impatient with the slow legal process, have resorted to other forms of harassment to get the families to leave. One family alleges that the farmer destroyed three kraals in their homestead and then dumped their belongings at the Weenen Emergency Camp.



Mr Sithole tells a meeting of farm dwellers how he was evicted from his home and his concern for his cattle which the farmer has threatened to impound.

STATEMENT OF BHALIWE SITHOLE (58), MUDEN

In March last year the farmer gave me a notice. It said I had one month to leave the farm. That was after my son was dismissed for burning the grass with the fertilizer. Then in October the farmer came to our place with two other white people. They then pulled down my three huts with a tractor. Then a few days later they came again and burnt the ruins of the huts which we were still occupying. Then he came for my goats. There were 11 of them. He took them to Fosani's place which is near my home. They stayed there for a whole day. Then at sunset they were driven away...I don't know where he took them to.

MATHUTHA SOSIBO, MNGWENYA VALLEY, 12TH SEPTEMBER 1986

I am Mathutha Sosibo. I was born on this farm long-long-ago. When I grew up there were no cars around here. All our grand parents are buried here. What I remember is that I was herding cattle during the World War. Now this white man who has just come to the area tells me that I must go! This white man is a devil! He first told me that I must go on pension - then afterwards he told me to go.

Another family says that a farmer attempted to have them arrested for "stealing" firewood and water which they use on the farm. A number of families have reported that the farmers have shot their dogs and impounded their stock or forced them to drastically reduce their numbers.

ORGANISING FOR A SOLUTION

In 1986, Afra was requested by a committee representing the farmworkers in the Weenen area to assist them in attempting to resolve the eviction problem.

The farmworker leaders have called for negotiations with the farmers and the government in order to discuss solutions to the problems. They argue that the land should be expropriated and set aside for their settlement. They argue that although the farms are legally in the possession of white owners, they are occupied only by the labour tenant communities who through generations of occupation regard the farms in a real sense as their own.

DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS

The farm worker leaders say they want to participate in a

development plan which would allow them to continue to live in the area, but at the same time increase the productivity of the land and conserve the agricultural resources at their disposal.

THE WEENEN EMERGENCY CAMP AND ORDERLY URBANISATION

More recently the families found out that the government had plans to move them to a temporary settlement near the town of Weenen, and this information they received from an unpublished letter to the Editor of of the Women's Page of a daily newspaper from a senior official of the

Police vans have been coming and going to my kraal. I told the police that I can't just go like a bird - I have the family and my belongings. I need to build somewhere. The question is where do I build? After all.....I just don't know why I must leave from here? Who will look after so many family graves?. Angihambi mina !*

*** I won't go**

BHEFULA MHLONGO, 72, MNGWENYA VALLEY, MARCH 1988

I want you to listen to the names of all the farmers who have been here and gone. I was here before all these farmers ever came here...There was Nkondlo, Dantjies, Hansie Boschoff, Wolf Boschoff, Smith and Anderson....Now there is this new farmer who I don't even know who is telling us to go!



Mrs Judith Mchunu stands dejectedly in front of her home that was demolished by an absentee landowner following a civil ejectment order granted by the court.

Natal Provincial Administration!

The plan is to move the tenants to the Weenen Emergency Camp - a temporary settlement on the outskirts of Weenen which was established in 1968 to accommodate tenants who had been evicted from the Weenen Townlands. The Camp at present houses about 1 000 people in a "closer settlement" with rudimentary infrastructure; but the Natal Provincial Administration together with the Tugela Basin Regional Development Association (TBRDA) and the Weenen Farmers' Association believe that this hastily erected and long neglected settlement is the solution for the Weenen eviction problem.

They argue that the area should be declared a development area, upgraded, and expanded into a township to accommodate the Weenen farm workers. Employment could then be provided by the town itself and the irrigation farms along the Bushman's river that runs through it. They say this urbanisation programme is in line with the government's policy on "black urbanisation and would assist in reducing "the black birth rate". The TBRDA also believes that a decentralisation scheme could also be introduced to provide more jobs.

URBANISATION - NO SOLUTION!

But the farmworkers are strongly opposed to the plans.

- They object to the fact that this decision was made without any consultation.
- They are strongly opposed to surrendering their land to live in a closer settlement with no land for grazing and ploughing and to be dependent on infrequent employment opportunities and the vague promise of future development which they believe will lead to immense hardship and impoverishment.
- They warn that the crowding of dispossessed people into a crowded resettlement village will greatly increase the level of factional violence present in the area, as it did in the nearby Msinga area during the

forced removals of the late 1960's.

APPROPRIATE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Any development plan or initiative must follow certain basic principles if it is going to succeed and benefit people. In the first place there must be support from the people who are affected. Planners and developers in South Africa have an unfortunate tradition of imposing "blue print" schemes on people with disastrous results.

Another basic tenet of rural development planning should be to provide the support infrastructure to strengthen and not threaten survival strategies. The people of Weenen have developed a resilient survival strategy

based on a delicate balance between migrant labour and their agricultural activities and these must provide the starting point of any development initiative.

The Weenen families say that they are aware that the government through its development agencies are now attempting to promote "black farmers". As semi-independent farmers they possess a body of skills and traditions which could well form the basis for the re-emergence of peasant producers either through co-operatives or independent plot holders.

CONCLUSION

We call on the South African government to stop the forced removal of the Weenen farm dwellers, to recognise their

right to the Weenen "thorn farms" and to assist them in developing these farms for the benefit of all.

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Thanks to Cedric Nunn for the pic

Weenen Farmdwellers discuss their problems with their committee and AFRA fieldworkers

