

# Interview with ...

## Neil Alcock

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*For the background to Neil's work see the preceding article by Sheena Duncan. This press conference was held at the Johannesburg Institute of Race Relations on December 13, 1978*

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NEIL: There is no separation between the urban and the rural areas, and we are not talking simply about a 'rural crisis'. People once urban were endorsed out to the rural areas and are now starving. The situation is urgent because we are facing starvation in South Africa. Agriculturally we are insolvent. Our agricultural debt this year rose to R3 250 million. It is so high that unless we pull out of it, it can't go any higher. A four per cent rise in the price of fertiliser is planned for the New Year. All of us will have to cut down, and Africans particularly will have to cut down on what they eat. In my area TB and malnutrition are going sky-high. One family, for instance, consisting of man, wife and 10 children, has rampant TB. At tremendous expense to the taxpayer they will be cured at the local hospital. Within a few months, because of malnutrition, they will be back at the hospital again.

There are also tremendous environmental problems. Areas like mine — and Msinga is not just an isolated area — have only six per cent (four inches) of the original topsoil left. South Africa is known worldwide as a country where soil erosion is out of control. Nutrients are being washed into the sea. In the last 60 to 70 years chemical fertilisers have been destroying our soils by harming the microflora within them. We are now living on the carcass of the microflora.

My aim is to make the South African public aware of how bad the situation is. My wish from this meeting would be for it to lead to a co-ordinating body to do something about the problem. I see many welfare and development organisations trying to do a job in South Africa, but unfortunately most are city-based where some even overlap, but the rural areas are left out.

We must avoid bloodshed and starvation, not push people into a situation where they have to fight each other and us, the wealthy. In Msinga there is a lot of faction fighting because of hunger and congestion. The faction-fighting started when the congested areas were developed. People didn't fight before. People came from places where they had land and ample livestock. There is now no migrant labour they can depend on for money and no pension fund. There are many unemployed able-bodied men.

QUESTION: Could you tell us something about the Economic Corporation's development in your area?

NEIL: Tugela Estates was big enough to feed Kwa-Zulu and had a contract with the Zulu government. The manager planted a huge crop of maize. There were 22 000 people sitting on the fence. Just when the crop was ready to be reaped it was discovered that these people had picked it, politely leaving four rows of mealies in front of the manager's house; The response was typically South African: the land was sold to the BIC which decided to beat the Africans by turning it into an industrial estate. Now cotton and tobacco, not food, are grown there. To sell the cotton at a profit it has to be exported to Swaziland for processing.

QUESTION: What would your solution to the problem have been?

NEIL: Exactly the same as the original idea, which would have divided up the land into smallholdings for the 22 000 people. Unfortunately the people were too hurt and resentful about having been moved and were unused to farming small irrigated pieces of land. They refused to take up the plots.

At Msinga we are trying to educate people that 'small is beautiful'. I thought of starting a centralised dairy. The greatest expense there would have been distribution. But once I had got smallholdings going, one man had so much lucerne that he asked for a cow. Then he had so much milk that he was able to sell the surplus. There are no distribution problems or costs because people take the milk away in their own cans.

Many of our problems are due to our love of machines. People become unwanted units of labour. We are importing machines from America, Japan and Germany and throwing people out of work. Mr Cellie, chairman of the South African Agricultural Union, constantly complains that we are over-mechanised. The only thing farmers can save on is labour.

At Msinga we have proved that we can establish a family for as little as R300. Each person works as an individual, but some things are done co-operatively.

QUESTION: I am shattered at the thought of our having to return to a subsistence economy.

NEIL: A subsistence economy is not horrifying. Some of the more advanced countries are giving thought to using waste lots. Some degree of subsistence economy benefits all of us and helps the national economy.

QUESTION: Shouldn't one distinguish between farming on a large scale to feed cities and small scale farming?

NEIL: Not necessarily. Russia eliminated small peasant holdings to make way for collectivisation. Vast fields were created, only to be destroyed by the winds. The first five-year plan was a failure. If the peasants were allowed to revert to their traditional small plots Russia wouldn't need to import wheat from the US.

QUESTION: Isn't the task too great to be tackled by 'small fry' like ourselves? Don't we need huge relief plans and educational programmes?

NEIL: Governments are made up of us tiny little people. They are often as ignorant as ourselves, and we individuals must inform them of alternatives. This Government is very concerned about the food problem, but the trouble is that people in development want to spend millions. As I said before, it's not necessary to spend millions, which the country hasn't got anyway. R300 is enough to establish a family on half an acre. We have created a Trust with our own peasant land bank which gives people an interest-free loan for three months. This covers expenses like food, tools, seed and fencing netting for keeping out goats. During this period the people are digging water furrows co-operatively. They are willing to do this without being paid because they know they are doing it for themselves.

We also run an educational course in intermediate technology to which each community or co-operative sends selected leaders. They come for one week per month for intensive training 'on site' as it were. The 'teachers' go back to their communities as leaders, and must continue to pull their weight there. Their training doesn't entitle them to be parasites.

QUESTION: Does this small-scale farming cater for expenses like blankets?

NEIL: We can't expect a person to be totally self-supporting immediately. The arrangement I have described takes them half-way. Many will look for jobs to add to the general income. All I want is to provide a basis from which it can, ultimately, be possible for them to be self-sufficient. Bees provide honey and ultimately sugar; hens provide eggs; a pond will give fish,

fed from the overflow from the digester; a cow gives milk, cheese and butter.

There is also a sort of circulation of cash. One man sells pawpaw seedlings from his pawpaw tree so that other people can grow pawpaw trees. Our whole idea is to go back to the concept of the small village community with the farmer selling direct to the consumer and thus avoiding the expense of marketing.

QUESTION: Is it possible to restore the topsoil?

NEIL: Yes, it is. Erosion has covered the whole of South Africa. Nature does not distinguish between 'black' and 'white' areas. The black man is *not* the only person destroying the land. We are murdering it with chemical fertiliser. International authorities have said that we are nearer the brink of destruction than we know.

But it can be put right. We can try to recycle what we've got. Animal and human nightsoil recycles nutrients back into the soil. This is why our aim at Msinga will be a methane gas digester at every kraal.

QUESTION: Does the digester eliminate the danger of diseases like typhoid?

NEIL: It is almost certainly safe, as the majority of disease-carrying factors are eliminated. It is safer, anyway, than disposal behind a bush.

QUESTION: How can we get all this through to the politicians? Have you approached the Minister of Agriculture?

NEIL: I have tried, but in Pretoria there are highly-qualified planners. They won't listen to a nobody from the sticks like me. Also 'missionaries' frighten politicians.

The Government is made up of people ignorant of agriculture like lawyers and politicians. They don't have the holistic qualities needed. I have no doubt that if you people helped me form a pressure group to present other people with basic backroom facts and if, armed with some popular backing, we presented the facts and an alternative policy to the Minister of Agriculture he would be deeply interested.

The plans drawn up in Pretoria all demand thousands and millions of Rands which we haven't got, but the Msinga-type plan would cost very little. We in South Africa have limited options, and we need a group of ordinary people to spell out those options.

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• *Editor's note: Neil was to be disappointed. No such pilot group was to be formed at the meeting. This may have been due to the fact that none of the business people and none of the Progreds, who had been invited, came.*

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A delegate to the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) General Synod expressed concern yesterday over people who had died in detention... only to evoke cries of 'Staan af' (Stand down).

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