

NEVA MAKGETLA: Big land question is how and what can be sown and reaped

Giving people land does not provide real redress, and creating a new generation of first-time farmers takes time and resources

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For a country in which most people are at least bilingual, it's amazing how easily we talk past each other. That's particularly true of the land debates, where proposals diverge in aims and methods.

One set of demands centres on historic injustices and the need to disrupt SA's extraordinarily inequitable economic and social systems; the other targets practical measures to raise living standards by embedding people as producers in formal farm

value chains.

Expropriation without compensation is an attractive slogan because, 25 years after the transition to democracy, the majority of South Africans are still disempowered economically, socially and politically. Even if their living conditions have improved, most still do not feel they have an equal say in society and governance, or a fair income. According to this logic, land theft was a foundation of apartheid, so restoring it to the impoverished will return their dignity, giving them at least some assets.

This is the Uber of political discourse, prizing disruption for its own sake. But disruption, by definition, risks high costs in return for promised benefits. Disruptive land expropriation would put food systems, farmworkers' incomes and the investment climate at risk — and the benefits might only show up decades from now.

In any case, the initial causes of a problem aren't always what lead to its reproduction. Land expropriation was central to apartheid, but giving people land 50 years later doesn't provide real redress. Yes, they will have an asset, but for most a modest plot won't generate much income or new opportunities. The main wealth in SA today isn't in land, but in big companies and banks.

Land invasions in cities don't use the language of policy, but they still represent a policy position: a reaction to the shortage of housing for low-income families. The country's urban population has nearly doubled over the past 25 years and housing has not kept pace. Yet most municipalities hold visibly underutilised land, including nine golf courses within Johannesburg's freeway ring. The real question is why municipalities don't pursue densification seriously. Johannesburg city's nonresponse to protests in Alexandra reflects this paradox.

The alternative approach to land reform targets more inclusive agriculture rather than redress for apartheid. Using this logic, land is not a symbolic asset to make the historically oppressed whole, but a potential source of income and value. Here, the core questions become who should get land and how they can best use it. The government has vacillated between providing livelihoods for the poorest by supporting very small producers and promoting a new class of black commercial farmers.

Treating land reform as a way to achieve narrow black economic empowerment inherently limits its impact on inequality and poverty. True, only about a quarter of

formal farms are black owned compared to half of formal businesses in the rest of the economy. But only about 50,000 commercial farms are in operation, so improving representivity won't do much to dent inequality or raise living standards.

It's hard, however, to transform agriculture to improve livelihoods on a mass scale. Land reform worked in Asia and Latin America because it freed long-established smallholders from paying extortionate rents, without giving land to people who were not farmers. Setting up systems to provide technologies, inputs, marketing and finance for people who move on to entirely new farms is far more difficult than merely allocating land.

Inevitably, the state defines property rights, including land ownership. The question is how, not if, it should determine access to land. The debates on land reform reflect the more fundamental question of how current ownership systems help reproduce inequality in today's economy, especially in the countryside. They also highlight the costs and risks that inevitably follow from disruptions.

Yet failing to address SA's deep inequalities in household income, pay scales and asset distribution has long spelled mass hardship, and ultimately imposes even greater risks.

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