

# South Africa behind on transforming land ownership

## Analysis

BEN COUSINS

LAND is a highly charged and politicised issue all over the world. South Africa, with its history of extreme dispossession through colonialism and apartheid, is no exception.

The democratic government has tried to redistribute land to address this legacy of dispossession. But, the government has said only about 10% of commercial farmland has been redistributed or restored to black South Africans in the 23 years since formal apartheid ended. Many are angry at the failure of land reform and there are increasing calls for land to be returned to black South Africans.

But there is very little clarity as to who owns what land in the country. This is why a recent report released by Agri-SA, an organisation that represents the majority of South Africa's white commercial farmers, has proved so controversial.

The report looks at the changing patterns of land ownership. The key question it purports to answer is the degree to which racially unequal patterns of land ownership have been altered through a combination of land reform and private land purchases by black South Africans. Agri-SA argued that the initial government target of transferring 30% of agricultural land via land reform has almost been met. On the back of this, it argued that the market is more effective than the state as a vehicle for change. But these claims are not borne out by Agri-SA's own data. Its interpretation is flawed. Many of the report's core arguments are inaccurate and misleading.

It's also clear that, contrary to the Agri-SA report, we are nowhere near to hitting targets set by the government in 1994. Black South Africans remain in the minority among land owners.

Transformation simply has not happened. **A fallacious argument**

The first major flaw in the report is that it adds two numbers together, the amount of



**REDISTRIBUTION:** South Africa is nowhere near to hitting targets set by the government in 1994 and black citizens remain in the minority among land owners. PICTURE: AP/PHOTO

land held by black people and the amount of land held by the government. It does this for all land, but also for agricultural land, estimated at 93.5 million hectares, or 76% of the total of 122.5 million hectares. It argues that a total of about 25 million hectares, or 26.7% of South Africa's agricultural land, is now owned by previously disadvantaged individuals and the government.

If the land value of the 25 million hectares is considered, it asserted that this amounted to 29.1% of the total. If the agricultural potential of this land is considered, then the share owned by black people and the government is 46.5% of the total value of agricultural land.

Agri-SA's argument, then, is that land reform targets are close to being met. This is fallacious because it doesn't report on the gov-

ernment and black ownership separately. And there's no basis for arguing that the government land is black-owned. State land is held on behalf of all citizens, including white farmers.

Secondly, rural land in the former Bantustan lands, those areas held in trust by the government for black residents during apartheid, is still held in trust for communal area residents. Their occupation of about 13% of South Africa's total land area is the result of centuries of dispossession. It cannot be counted and has never been counted, as a contribution to achieving an initial land reform target of 30% of white commercial farmland.

The report's data on transactions doesn't support the argument that the market is more effective than the state in changing the pattern of land ownership. Agri-SA's data revealed

the government and black South Africans accounted for only 12.9% of the 69 million hectares purchased between 1994 and 2016. This data shows that market transactions by themselves cannot result in the changes required by land reform, particularly if it is to target the poor, who cannot afford to buy land.

Overall, vast disparities in the distribution of land in relation to race and class mean that land reform still has a long way to go. The collection of proper data as a basis for monitoring, evaluation and planning is crucial, but is inadequate at present.

### Data is lacking

The government data on land and agriculture is problematic. Statistics SA collects few reliable data on either large or small-scale agriculture and none on land reform. Data on land reform released by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform is also thin, often inconsistent and hide as much as they reveal. For example, no figures on the average size of farms transferred or the cost per hectare have been released.

We now have contradictory reports on how much land has been transferred through land reform. The department said land restitution has transferred 3.4 million hectares to claimants to date and land redistribution has transferred 4.7 million hectares. That yields a total of 8.1 million hectares.

But the Agri-SA report provided only 6.5 million hectares of agricultural land acquired through both government and private acquisitions. Which is correct? We don't know.

The absence of reliable data means that government policy on a key and highly politicised issue is being made without the benefit of rigorous evidence and informed debate on how to improve delivery. This leaves room for bodies like Agri-SA to inflame tensions with data and interpretations that misdirect society at large. — The Conversation  
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