

Land reform needs new debate

Andries du Toit

More creative thoughts are needed than simple redistribution of farm land in South Africa

South Africa urgently needs a debate about the future of the countryside: a debate not only on the "land question", but about every aspect of how agriculture works, how we feed our people and how we care for the environment.

This is highlighted by an important recent publication - *Land Reform in South Africa: A Status Report 2008* - written by Edward Lahiff and published recently by the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (Plaas) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The report identifies many problems with progress on land reform. At the same time, I believe that it does not go far enough, and that it is time to think more creatively and searchingly about the future of our farmlands.

Discussions about agrarian change in South Africa have long been curiously limited. The agrarian question is usually understood simply as the "land question", and has been addressed essentially by way of "land reform" - the project of redistributing land rights and reforming tenure to right past wrongs, address racially skewed ownership patterns, and (for some) to avert the kind of backlash against white farmers experienced in Zimbabwe.

A core problem has been how land reform relates to agricultural policy.

On the one hand, proponents of land reform have focused narrowly on the transfer of land rights. They have often been accused of failing to recognise that land reform changes farming systems, and has to make economic sense.

On the other hand, agricultural policy has taken little account of the broader social aims of land reform. Agricultural policy has tended to dismiss "subsistence" production and has been concerned mainly with promoting a modernising, export- and commercially orientated, large-scale "industrial agriculture".

Change was about removing "distortions" that supposedly protected inefficient white farmers. Land reform and agricultural liberalisation, the story went, would create an even playing field on which the black and white farmers could reap the benefits of modernising change and economic growth.

That has not happened. Although the policies seemed to make sense on paper; they embodied a deep contradiction: while it was hoped that giving land to the previously excluded would create opportunities, agricultural liberalisation intensified competition, risk and pressure on commercial farmers.

The tension between the aims of equity and social sustainability on the one hand, and the commercial rules of the game on the other, is not merely superficial. Rather, it flows from dynamics hard-wired into the present-day "food order" itself. This order is shaped above all by the increasing power of international corporate capital: big agribusiness and powerful supermarkets and retail conglomerates.

All over the world, these work to reduce farmers' power and autonomy, to increase the risks to which they are exposed, and to put pressure on their profits.

In South Africa, it is not as if these tensions were ignored. Indeed, successive revisions of land reform policy tried to deal with these difficulties. Programmes have morphed from one acronym to another: the small farmer vision

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of Slag (the Settlement and Land Acquisition Grand) gave way to a focus on commercial farming and food security in LRAD (Land Reform for Agricultural Development), which in turn was supplanted by a more commercially focused Larp (Land and Agrarian Reform Project).

Each of these frameworks embodied a new attempt to connect the aims of land reform with the requirements of “productive agriculture” - but all of them remain attempts to square the circle.

The results for land reform have been dire. Most obviously, the lack of integration between land reform and agricultural policy has resulted in the commercial failure of many land reform projects.

A national survey found that just one out of 128 land restitution projects was producing a sustainable profit, while a study in the North West found that more than half of land reform projects in that province had not implements for production. Many other problems - notably the slowness of land reform, the insecurity this has created among commercial farmers, and the lack of clarity about just who should benefit from land reform - can also be traced to this disjuncture. If debates about the future of the South African countryside are to be relevant, it is important that we grapple head-on with these contradictions.

It could be argued that even Lahiff's *Status Report* is caught in this conceptual divide. It still seems to assume that if “pot-settlement support” could just be better conceived, if existing mechanisms could just be better informed by beneficiaries' needs, if rural people could just be mobilised, land reform could still work as planned. This just sets up the Department of Land Affairs for yet more unrealistic expectations, and yet more failure.

An answer has to be found that is not about “land reform” but about a sensible direction for South African agriculture as a whole.

Two radically different responses are emerging to this challenge. The first response seems to inform the thinking behind the Larp: it argues that the tension between the social equity aims of land reform and the competitive demands of commercial agriculture should be resolved in favour of commerce. If land reform is to make a contribution, this argument runs, it needs to get “with the programme”.

Asking it to deliver social equity is inappropriate. Rather than helping millions of poor and marginalised rural people, it should aim at providing better resources to a much smaller group of black farmers who actually have a chance of making it.

Such an approach has the benefit of consistency.

At the same time, there are real problems. Even if it were successful, it would in essence amount to “narrow black economic empowerment”, using billions of tax-payers' Rands to benefit a small, better-off group.

It will leave untouched the underlying political questions that necessitated land reform in the first place. Far from averting a “Zimbabwean situation”, it would perpetuate the exclusion of the mass of poor rural people - and would sow the seeds of long-term political instability.

The second approach questions the sustainability of mainstream agriculture itself. This reframes the debate in radical terms.

While proponents of the first approach argue for getting a group of viable farmers on the commercial bus, the second viewpoint raises critical questions about the design of the bus itself.

It is indeed no longer possible to dismiss questions about the social and environmental sustainability of mainstream agriculture. While, for many years,

they seemed to be the concerns only of a marginalised fringe, recent events have suddenly made them disquietingly relevant.

As the global food price crisis has shown, the post-World Trade Organisation world food order is unable to ensure food security for large sections of the world's population. In a world hungry for biofuels (and with a China hungry for meat) grains are being diverted from the mouths of the poor, turned into feedstock for petrol and pork.

At the same time, long-standing doubts about the environmental impacts of mainstream agriculture have been revealed as bills that will soon need to be paid. The large-scale "meatification" of human diets since World War 2, for instance, has meant that the population of farm animals has been increasing faster than that of humans - with a massive impact on climate change. Export agriculture increases that carbon footprint - and has now been shown to raise serious questions about water resources.

UK consumers for example, are effectively using thousands of litres per day of "virtual water" through import of irrigation-intensive farm products from water-poor regions like South Africa.

With water tables dropping and increasing soil salinisation, the implications are dire.

At the same time, concerns mount about the environmental toxicity of chemical agriculture: in fact the catastrophic decline of bee populations in Europe and North America just this year may indicate that the situation is worse than we thought.

All these impacts are costs that somebody, somewhere, will have to pay. As Canadian academic Tony Weis has pointed out, if these costs are factored in, commercial agriculture does not seem to be so efficient after all.

Critics of the modern-day world food order point to the virtues of small farming and peasant agriculture. Not only does small farming create many livelihoods, they say, but it embodies a more environmentally sustainable approach to farming. Up to a certain point, this may be true. But using the flaws of mainstream agriculture as an argument for the wisdom of the "peasant way" involves a leap of faith. It is far from clear that alternatives to commercial agriculture can be scaled up sufficiently to feed millions of urban mouths.

The issue is not merely South Africa's land reform programme, but also our long-term ability to ensure food security, political stability and environmental sustainability. In South Africa, much depends on whether we face these questions squarely - or remain stuck in the thinking of the past.