

Land reform policies should not threaten SA

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SLOW GROWTH: Farm workers on a farm in Eikenhof outside Johannesburg in 2008. Picture: Reuters

The ANC's National Policy Conference Report alludes to a decidedly different land reform landscape post its elective conference this month, at which these proposals are expected to be adopted.

Among the report's observations is its strong sentiment that not enough progress has been made. It specifically states that: "The programme of land redistribution has been inadequate. Not enough productive land has been transferred into the hands of the black farmers and producers."

The report proposes that the conference should consider two options. "Option 1: the constitution should be amended to allow the state to expropriate land without compensation. Option 2: the state should act more aggressively to expropriate land in line with the Mangaung resolution based on the constitution's requirement of just and equitable compensation."

At its Mangaung conference in 2012, the ANC resolved to replace the "willing buyer, willing seller" approach with the "just and equitable" principle in the constitution. Since then, the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform has worked to implement this by introducing land reform policies through Parliament. The most recent is the draft Bill on Communal Land Tenure, whose objective is to transfer ownership of land by the state to communities. This is an issue for the forthcoming ANC National Elective Conference.

Accurate official information on just how much land has been redistributed since 1994 is difficult to come by, including how much of this land is now productive. A recent land audit by AgriSA, however, confirms that little progress has been made to radically transfer land to historically disadvantaged blacks in general. According to this report, both government and previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) bought 8.9 million hectares of land between 1994 and 2016. In 1994, South Africa's agricultural land totalled 97 million hectares of which 82.5 million

hectares were owned by white commercial farmers and only 14.5 million hectares by government and PDIs.

In 2016, South Africa's agricultural land declined to 93.5 million hectares, of which 68.5million hectares are owned by white commercial farmers and 25 million hectares by government and PDIs. This is a slight increase of 9.7million hectares between 1994 and 2016.

The biggest challenge facing the land reform programme in South Africa today is the millions of hectares of unproductive land given to rightful owners as part of the restitution process. It is widely acknowledged by sector players, including the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, that a major part of this unproductivity is due to the lack of capacity and skills of those who have received land, and lack of access to finance. This is a barrier that serves to reverse agricultural transformation.

The issue of unproductive land is something the upcoming conference ought to seriously deliberate on with a view to clearer policy direction. Any calls for redistribution without also addressing this would be fruitless. Furthermore, with agricultural land declining, issues around food security and agricultural production become more critical to address, and with any policy response, attempts should be made to fully understand the extent and causes of these problems in order to properly address them.

The caveat, however, is that the ANC does not have the requisite two-thirds majority to effect any change or amendments to Section 25 of the constitution in order to implement its 2012 Mangaung conference resolution or its national policy report which is to be tabled at this conference. This begs the question as to how the party intends to overcome this hurdle, given the downward electoral trajectory it has experienced since 2009. Will it consider the EFF's offer to vote with it in support of this constitutional amendment?

The often competing and conflicting demands for land require a careful balancing act from a policy perspective. In-migration continues to pose a serious challenge to the country's land reform and urbanisation processes, particularly with the increasing demand for residential land in urban centres. Local municipalities are faced with these challenges every day and Department of Human Settlements programmes are compromised in the process. The state ought to be in a better position to mitigate these often conflicting and competing demands for land.

Additionally, the challenge of access to finance that black farmers and producers face requires special attention. The ANC Mangaung conference resolutions proposed the establishment of a co-operative bank and rural development agency, which the national policy report does not echo.

An integrated agricultural development finance approach spearheaded by Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries as part of its operation Phakisa Programme would go a long way in addressing this challenge.

A transformative approach to land reform in the agricultural sector need not jeopardise food security and agricultural production. This policy could act as a catalyst for real agricultural reform, provided all the issues are thoroughly considered.

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*** The views expressed here are not necessarily those of Independent Newspapers.*

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