

Sustainable development: What's land got to do with it?

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Ahead of the September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa is reviewing its plans and progress towards sustainable development. This paper argues that more attention needs to be given to land reform as a key component of sustainable development strategy. It raises a number of questions and concerns that need debate before and after the Summit.

Introduction

The international community has chosen to hold a World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in September 2002. This is therefore a critical time for South Africa to decide whether it is on the right track towards sustainable development. How does it define its sustainable development challenge? What is it doing to tackle that challenge? Has it set itself the right priorities in its struggle towards sustainable development? South Africa must ask itself these questions in the context of its regional neighbours' concerns and experience. In turn, South African priorities and performance in sustainable development are likely to be relevant to those elsewhere in the region as they confront similar issues.

As a contribution to national debate ahead of the World Summit, this paper examines South African perceptions and priorities regarding sustainable development, and identifies ways in which they need to be revised. It recognises the priority that government is giving to poverty reduction in its sustainable development strategy. But it argues that, if sustainable development is to succeed in this country, land reform must be given much stronger emphasis than it currently receives. While stating the case for some basic principles and priorities, it identifies many issues on which more debate is needed and for which clear strategies remain to be defined.

'Isn't a World Summit on Sustainable Development an expensive distraction from South Africa's real development priorities?'

In fact, sustainable development is the central challenge for South Africa's future.

South Africa's sustainable development challenge

This country's sustainable development challenge is a microcosm of that facing humanity as a whole. This makes South Africa a good place to hold next year's World Summit. It is a nation of massive inequality and widespread poverty. It is a largely semi-arid land with a fragile natural resource base. The minority of South Africans who enjoy first world living standards do so at an environmental cost similar to that caused by rich westerners. The majority of South Africans who live

in poverty often have no choice but to use natural resources in unsustainable ways. To achieve sustainable development through sustainable livelihoods, South Africa must greatly reduce poverty and inequality. It must build an adequate standard of living for all its people, while sustaining or restoring the health of its ecosystems.

As they prepare their positions and review their strategies ahead of the World Summit, South African government and civil society need to understand this sustainable development challenge: its many dimensions and its integral character.

What's land got to do with it?

South Africa's colonial and apartheid regimes enforced massive inequality in land access and tenure to support the privileges of the ruling minority. Redressing this injustice is at the heart of the development task that faces the new, democratic nation. But it is not only a question of justice and human rights. The current structures of land distribution, tenure and administration are grossly inefficient from an economic point of view. Economic development is retarded by the current inequities of access and by the confusion that surrounds land rights and administration in the communal areas or former 'homelands'.

The South African government is required by the 1996 Constitution to undertake land reform. It launched a programme for this purpose soon after the end of apartheid in 1994. Since then, government and society have made slow but significant progress in some areas of land reform (Turner & Ibsen 2000; Lahiff 2001). Overall, however, most of the inequity remains stubbornly in place. Many of the injustices are still to be addressed. The inefficiency and unfairness of land tenure and administration in the former 'homelands' have yet to be tackled.

For most of the period since 1994, the land reform programme has received surprisingly little public attention. Nor has it seemed to be a high priority for government, which has committed less than one quarter of one per cent of its annual budgets to the programme (Lahiff 2001:1). Since land invasions in Zimbabwe began to threaten the political and economic stability of the region, South African land reform has been a somewhat more prominent subject of public debate, although government has not deemed it necessary to dedicate more resources to it.

‘Isn’t land reform a marginal issue in sustainable development?’

On the contrary, this paper argues that effective land reform is critical to the success of sustainable development in South Africa.

South Africa should give land reform priority in the reviews and strategies it is developing ahead of the World Summit. Like several countries in the region, it must realise that effective land reform is a core condition for sustainable development. Without a land reform programme that achieves justice, equity and efficiency in the urban and rural sectors, the nation cannot reduce poverty and it cannot care for its ecosystems.

Land reform, poverty and livelihoods

South Africans suffer many kinds of poverty. It is deepest and most widespread in the former ‘homelands’. It is severe for many of those who work and live on commercial farms. It afflicts millions more in urban and peri-urban areas. To achieve sustainable development, the nation must push back all these kinds of poverty. To do that, it must make land reform work.

‘Surely the poor need jobs, not land reform?’

To push back poverty, South Africa has to take land reform more seriously.

In the former ‘homelands’, which contain almost a third of the national population, land tenure is legally insecure and uncertain. Since the end of apartheid, land administration in these areas has become increasingly chaotic and contested. Many residents enjoy day to day security on their residential holdings and in their ownership of fields. But acquiring new land, transacting in land rights or using land as collateral for loans and investment may be complex, corrupt or just impossible. Women’s land rights are inadequate, both in and out of marriage. Land tenure and administration are arenas of conflict involving traditional leaders, political parties and other local factions. This is an impossible scenario for poverty reduction or sustainable development.

‘How can sustainable development be achieved without private land ownership?’

Sustainable development certainly needs clarity and security of tenure within a democratic framework. This does not have to mean individual private ownership. Nor is private ownership a guarantee of environmental responsibility. Environmental care is quite possible under other tenure systems.

Furthermore, the inequities that forced people into these crowded corners of South Africa remain in place. Poverty reduction for this major sector of society requires land reform to give them better access to the majority of the nation’s land resources, from which apartheid excluded them.

Despite the gravity of these constraints on poverty reduction and sustainable development in South Africa, tenure reform for the former ‘homelands’ has so far been the slowest part of the government’s land reform programme (Lahiff 2001:1–2). It remains to be seen if and when South Africa will achieve just and effective land reform for its former ‘home-

lands’. It is an undeniably complex political, economic and legal challenge. But as the nation reviews how it is tackling poverty and sustainable development ahead of the World Summit, it would be well advised to give new emphasis to a democratic, equitable and efficient programme of tenure reform that delivers real prospects of sustainable change to these areas. Such initiatives should be linked to renewed, proactive planning to achieve the redistribution of more land in the former ‘white’ districts to ‘homeland’ residents. The land reform solution for the former ‘homelands’ lies beyond their borders as well as within them.

Hard questions need to be asked about what land reform can really achieve for these areas. We should not pretend that land reform can create an idyllic agrarian future for all the people of the former ‘homelands’. It is clear that South Africa’s current agricultural technologies do not offer a pathway out of poverty. Much commercial farming is increasingly unviable, as apartheid subsidies are withdrawn and globalisation takes its toll. Many commercial farmers are leaving the land, or taking on extra livelihood strategies. Meanwhile, it would appear that some former ‘homeland’ areas are farmed less and less. Uncultivated fields are now a common sight in many communal areas of the Eastern Cape, for example. Despite or because of their poverty, many of the rural poor seem to have decided that they can no longer farm, or that farming is no longer worth the effort. The true extent of this ‘underfarming’ phenomenon, and its causes, urgently need to be investigated. But it is already obvious that just advocating land reform as the foundation for an agricultural future is not enough.

To reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development, South Africa needs to explore and promote smaller-scale, more economically competitive farming technologies that operate within the limits of the mostly fragile environment. There will be no point in achieving better rural land rights and access if farming ceases to be a viable livelihood. But so far, nobody seems to have effective answers about how to get agriculture working again. It needs to be internationally competitive. Locally, it needs to be socially, economically, technically and economically efficient, providing quality livelihoods to much larger numbers of people.

Government’s Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS) does not suggest how this can be achieved. The ISRDS attempts to blend agrarian and other approaches. It is right to highlight the ‘marginalisation of agriculture’ as an issue of concern, but it is wrong to marginalise land reform as just a ‘complementary strategy’ (Government of South Africa 2000:viii–ix). Land reform has a much more central role to play in ensuring that the rural economy can function efficiently and that participatory strategies for rural resource management can succeed. It remains to be seen whether the ISRDS becomes an operational reality.

Although it is not yet clear how to achieve sustainable agriculture, we do know that farming cannot be the only development strategy for the former ‘homelands’. So land reform must be equally effective in clarifying and securing rights to land that can be used for business, small industrial ventures and tourism in these areas. Like farming, these sectors are constrained by the current chaos in land administration.

The land redistribution programme is aimed at opening up access to **privately-owned farm land** for those who were forbidden to own it by the apartheid regime. Unlike tenure

reform, land redistribution has been the subject of an active programme since 1994. Although substantial areas of farm land in the former 'white' districts have been transferred to black ownership, the process was hindered by a range of problems and has not significantly altered the racial distribution of private farm ownership. Most importantly, it has had very limited impact in reducing poverty or promoting sustainable development. Indeed, its role in combating poverty was reduced by policy changes introduced since 1999 (Lahiff 2001:4–5).

'Why worry about sustainable development in the rural areas when most farming is so unprofitable? Doesn't future prosperity for South Africans lie in the cities?'

South Africa certainly needs to work on more appropriate farming technologies. But its vast rural resources can make a major contribution to sustainable development in this country.

What sustainable development in rural South Africa requires, however, is transfer of a significant proportion of privately-owned farm land to those who currently live in poverty. Such a transfer, as argued above, needs to be linked to innovations in farming practice (and in the economic framework) that make farm production economically viable and ecologically sound.

Many of the workers on privately-owned farms live in poverty, as do most other farm dwellers whose presence is still tolerated by the owners. Land reform legislation to better their lot has had little success (Lahiff 2001:2–3). More thought is needed about how they can develop sustainable livelihoods.

Throughout South Africa, **land restitution** has been another important element of the land reform programme. The restitution of land rights lost due to racially discriminatory legislation or practice can help reduce the poverty of some of those who suffered at the hands of apartheid. The programme is a valuable part of a sustainable development strategy. But many of the urban claims are being concluded with a cash payment rather than the restitution of the lost land. There is no guarantee that these payments will lead to long-term income generation or reduction of poverty. So far, the programme has redressed little of the poverty that rural land restitution claims represent (Lahiff 2001:3–4). In fact, because of its more legalistic nature, the land restitution component of land reform has had the weakest links to any sort of planning for sustainable land use or livelihoods.

Some people would argue that, with the rural economy in its present parlous state, too much concern with rural land reform is misguided. They would claim that the future for South Africa lies in its towns, and that that is where the policy attention must be focused.

It is true that South Africa currently lacks the technical experience and ideas to offer a convincing strategy for sustainable livelihoods to the millions who live in rural poverty. But it is equally impractical to expect the towns and cities to offer a viable future for the whole nation. Although largely semi-arid, South Africa has enough rural resources to support a substantial part of the population in the sustainable production of food and other commodities for domestic and export markets. Tourism has important potential too, although the number of people it is likely to employ should not be exaggerated. Beyond land reform, the challenge is to find technolo-

gies and socio-economic frameworks that spread all these rural opportunities more equitably and make them economically viable. As Zimbabwe's current experience vividly shows, there is little prospect of sustainable national development if this challenge is not met.

Land reform and the environment

Land reform also has a critical contribution to make to the other core component of sustainable development: caring for the environment.

Sustainable development requires maintaining or enhancing the health of ecosystems. People must be committed to the governance of resource use and conservation within a framework of efficiency, equity and social justice. They must be motivated to conserve natural resources as they use them, or to have this attitude even if they do not use such resources. If people consider their rights to natural resources to be insecure, or if they perceive themselves to be unfairly excluded from some of the nation's natural heritage, they are less likely to use natural resources sustainably. In situations where land rights are clear and where land administration is democratic and efficient, the motivation to use natural resources sustainably will be stronger.

However, these are necessary but not sufficient conditions for sustainable resource use. Conferring private ownership on a land user does not guarantee good environmental behaviour. In addition to clear and secure resource rights within a democratic and efficient framework, the economics of resource use must be conducive to production with conservation. Appropriate technologies must be available for the purpose. Government must provide enabling policy and a supportive authority framework for locally-determined resource management.

These arguments are clearly relevant to South Africa. Private land owners have often degraded their natural resource base, sometimes irretrievably. But the motivation for sustainable resource use is undeniably lowest, and the degradation worst, in those overcrowded former 'homeland' areas where resource rights are not clear or secure enough and where land and resource management systems are inefficient, corrupt or non-existent. Until a comprehensive programme of tenure reform and administrative upgrading is effected in these areas, there is no prospect of sustainable resource use or of sustainable development there.

Land reform must thus deliver three badly needed enhancements to land rights and land administration in the former 'homelands'. It must achieve justice and equity, so that opportunities to acquire land rights and to use natural resources are fairly and transparently administered. (Accountability and user participation are key qualities in this regard.) It must provide for clarity and security of land rights, to give people adequate incentive to conserve land that they are sure is theirs. It must deliver administrative efficiency, so that resource use and conservation can be effectively controlled and promoted within a technical framework in which users have confidence.

An appropriate tenure reform programme for the former 'homelands' could make a major contribution to sustainable development by working towards these goals. But, as we have noted, no comprehensive tenure programme is yet in place.

There have been isolated instances of land reform restoring rights to people who have then committed themselves

strongly to responsible resource management on their regained land. The best known example of this is the Makuleke people of Northern Province, who regained ownership of the Pafuri region of the Kruger National Park through a land restitution claim. They have dedicated the land to nature conservation and ecotourism activities that show promise of significant economic development for the community. The 'virtuous circle' of sustainable development can certainly be achieved in South Africa.

South Africa's leading initiative for agricultural resource conservation is the LandCare programme. Building on the original international concept of LandCare in the local context would mean bringing all sectors of local rural society together to develop participation and a sense of ownership in caring for natural resources. This would plainly mean a leading role for land reform in building the rights that help create care. So far, LandCare has not done this. It has focused too much on short-term poverty alleviation through labour-intensive public works.

Land redistribution can promote sustainable resource use in South Africa, notably by reducing environmental pressure in the former 'homelands' through making more land available to previously disadvantaged people in the former 'white' farming areas. But so far, the performance of the land redistribution programme has led some people to allege that land reform is bad for the environment. At first, not enough was done to work out environmentally sustainable and economically viable production systems for redistributed land with the new owners. Some of these owners are large groups who have failed in their new farming ventures. Unsustainable resource use sometimes put environmental viability in doubt. The challenge is to bring environmental considerations to the attention of land reform beneficiaries, and to work with them to develop sustainable production with conservation systems. The Department of Land Affairs has been tackling this challenge in recent years, and has built a number of environmental procedures and guidelines into its operations (DLA 2001).

South African experience suggests that rural development cannot be environmentally sustainable without land reform. Nor can land reform be sustainable without adequate provision for environmental care. While government has acted on this second lesson, it needs to do more to address the first.

From words to action

South Africa will not achieve sustainable development unless it achieves land reform that integrates poverty reduction with the sustainable use of natural resources. It must accomplish land reform on a scale that matches the poverty and inequality that must be overcome.

It is easy to be critical and to offer general recommendations. It is more challenging to propose practical measures, and harder still to execute them. This paper does not claim to offer all the answers. But it hopes to launch debate that can generate more ideas, and that may stimulate more action to achieve sustainable development on the ground.

Some necessary steps can be identified. First, the nation's sustainable development strategy should acknowledge the key role that land reform needs to play. Now is the time to make the necessary changes in the strategy that is currently being refined in preparation for the World Summit. Secondly, the land redistribution programme should be revised to ensure that it makes an adequate contribution to reducing poverty,

while integrating production with conservation on redistributed land. Perhaps most important of all, the country needs a tenure reform programme for the former 'homelands' that achieves justice, equity and efficiency and thus reduces the poverty of the poorest zone in South African society.

All rural land reform initiatives need to be linked to technical and economic programmes that make small-scale farming both profitable and environmentally sustainable. Land reform must also facilitate the environmentally sustainable growth of small industrial and other non-agricultural livelihood options.

Working with the Agricultural University of Norway, the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies aims to advance this discussion over the months to come. Following a national workshop to debate this paper, it will prepare a more thorough status report on land reform and sustainable development in South Africa, building on its previous status report on land reform (Turner & Ibsen 2000). If it seems appropriate as preparatory discussions for the World Summit evolve during 2002, PLAAS will sponsor a further short policy brief and workshop on the issue. Whatever the details of the process, PLAAS hopes to make a useful contribution by attracting more attention to the role of land reform in sustainable development for South Africa.

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PLAAS engages in research, policy support, post-graduate teaching, training and advisory and evaluation services in relation to land and agrarian reform, community-based natural resource management and rural development.