
Creating learning and action space in South Africa's post-apartheid land redistribution program

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Abstract

This paper uses the case of South Africa's latest land redistribution strategy known as the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy, to explore whether, and how, research can have direct and positive impacts on beneficiaries of land reform. The study is situated within the practice of action research: to explore how it can generate knowledge that can be shared back and forth between stakeholders, as well as how it may ignite changes that the participants desire. The findings are that Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy is not meeting the overall goals land reform. But action research has allowed the beneficiaries to emerge from the process with new knowledge about their rights, as well as what options they have to move forward in their fight for secure land rights and decent livelihoods. We introduce a concept of a 'learning and action space' to explain our practice of action research. The paper concludes that action research is a desirable approach for land reform, but while it succeeded in educating beneficiaries, it is only one ingredient in ongoing struggles to challenge power relations among citizens and between citizens and the state.

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, one of the biggest stories concerning land and justice globally has been the escalation of land deals initiated by individuals, corporations and governments of wealthy countries in poor or developing countries. Commonly known as 'land grabbing', these land deals are often criticized for their dubious effects on the livelihoods and land rights of the poorest and most marginalized people in the affected countries (Borras & Franco, 2012; Li, 2014). However, in many countries of the global south the most salient land issue has to do with the challenges of dealing with the legacies of colonialism, which resulted in large-scale, often violent, land dispossessions of the local people by colonial powers. Our focus in this article is on the latter: the difficulties of undoing the 'land grabs' of the past and bringing about reconciliation and justice in these societies.

In the case of South Africa, land, including all its multiple meanings that encompass its importance as a natural resource, sense of identity, power and territory (Fisher, 2016; Kepe, Hall, & Cousins, 2008; Li, 2014), was central to colonial conquest and apartheid, as well as to the struggle against these forces. Precisely because of these

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