



LAND - WHERE DOES THE HUNGER LIE?

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In this article, it is (again) suggested that the country needs a proper and credible land audit before we carry on with a debate that would otherwise remain emotional and divisive. It is, secondly, highlighted that some research has shown that we may have progressed further with land reform than we are sometimes led to believe. And it is thirdly pointed out that the real "land hunger" is not necessarily for agricultural land to farm, but for urban and peri-urban land to build houses and make a home.

Land reform, especially of agricultural land, is nowadays almost a shibboleth for South African politics. The reasoning of the associated rhetoric usually has the following elements:

"Soil is prosperity, and if you first possess land, you can buy all the other good things with that wealth." And this usually refers to agricultural land.

"Historically, white people stole the land from black people and it has to be returned."

"23 years post-democracy, black people still only own 9.8% of the arable land in South Africa."

"There is a hunger for agricultural land among our people, like in Zimbabwe, and if we do not listen, we will follow the path of land occupation and confiscation."

Underscoring these arguments is that nothing - or very little - has been happening since 1994 and that radical action is needed to return (agricultural) land to black South Africans, such as to expropriate land without compensation. What is the reality? The table below shows the surface area of South Africa, as well as the percentage of agricultural and arable land. It also shows that almost 50% of South Africa is considered desert (less than 200mm rain per year) or very dry (less than 400mm per year).

SOUTH AFRICA	
Total surface area	122 million hectares
Potential agricultural land	97 million hectares (World Bank)
Arable and cultivable agricultural land	12.5 million hectares (World Bank)
Agricultural land described as desert	27.8 million hectares (22.7%)
Agricultural land described as "dry"	30.0 million hectares (24.5%)

There were two articles on agricultural land in *Rapport* on Sunday, 23 April. The first indicated that according to the latest research on landbou.com, there have been many more commercial land transactions over the last 20 years than what the President has revealed. Black South Africans now own 34.5% (33.5 million hectares) of all available agricultural land (including communal land), compared to white South Africans, who own 65.5%. The second article highlighted several successful partnerships between white and black farmers and the latter's success in the commercial sector.



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According to landbou.com's research, black South Africans own 40% or more of the agricultural land in five provinces, indicating that buyers prefer land in certain areas, where it is easier to farm. To offer further perspective: the Northern Cape (which is mostly desert and not easily commercially farmed) has a surface area of 37.2 million hectares - almost a quarter of all potential agricultural land in South Africa. If deducted from the total 97 million hectares of potential agricultural land, 59.8 million hectares remain. If you also deduct the amount of land owned by black South Africans in the Northern Cape (2.1 million hectares according to landbou.com), from the total agricultural land of 33.5 million hectares possessed by black South Africans, then black South Africans own 31.4 million hectares of agricultural land in South Africa. This amounts to 52.5% - much more than the misleading 9.8% suggested by the President. Even without excluding the Northern Cape from the agricultural landscape, the percentage of agricultural land owned by black South Africans is already 34.5%.

But there is another, bigger problem. The ideological propaganda that land brings prosperity, coupled with the view that there is a hunger for, above all, agricultural land, causes the debate to be framed mostly around agricultural land. But that is not where the "hunger" lies. It is estimated that South Africa is now about 65% urbanised. Two out of three South Africans live in cities. The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) conducted a survey of 4 000 South Africans among all races and societal levels in the late 1990s, which revealed that only 6% of respondents wanted to farm now - or one day. It's doubtful whether this statistic would look different today. Even President Zuma complained that 90% of claimants opted to take cash rather than land. In fact, with the difficult farming circumstances currently, the number of people who want to farm will probably be lower. Farming in South Africa is not easy. It usually takes a long time to become profitable and large amounts of capital are needed to get started. Subsistence farming may be another matter, but if it becomes the norm, food security will be under threat.

The point is, the land debate should not just be focused on agricultural land. The real hunger is for land to build your own house and make a home. The millions of people living in informal settlements around our cities are proof of that. And the fact that these South Africans do not have a title deed for the land on which they live cannot be laid before the door of "white monopoly capital" or the farming community. It must be placed squarely on government's shoulders. The land that is most suitable is municipal land around towns and cities. It is government that has dragged its feet over the past 20 years. Fortunately, it seems that some city councils are beginning to make a start with this process.

In the absence of firm, verified and objective facts, the land debate risks sliding into populist jingoism, with dire consequences for the nation as a whole. To continue with this sort of rhetoric, is dangerous and irresponsible.

Of course, further progress must be made with agricultural land reform. Section 25(2) of the Constitution references two key issues, namely the protection of private property from arbitrary deprivation and the necessity for constitutionally-based land reform. There is much willingness among farmers and organised agriculture to continue with land reform in a sustainable way. But two issues need to be urgently addressed: a proper land audit must be



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done and published - and through dialogue the government must be convinced to accept it as a basis for policy development. Secondly, it will help a lot if experts pose the question to South Africans again: do you want to farm or do you want to build a house?