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## **Creating the black commercial farmer**

Land redistribution has been used to effect transition and reconciliation rather than agrarian transformation

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One of the most scathing legacies facing post-apartheid South Africa is the skewed nature of land ownership and land rights in the country.

Over the past six years, changing patterns of ownership through constitutionally backed and negotiated mechanisms of land reform have proven a formidable task for the current government.

Current challenges - such as the centralised nature of the policy programme, its failure to stimulate agrarian transformation, limited financial resources, low political commitment (evident in its budgetary allocation: 0,4%), divergent ideological approaches to the land question, weak bureaucratic complexities and community incapacity to partake in the reform process - have all contributed to the paltry rate of delivery, where less than 3% of targeted land has been redistributed. The fact that the Department of Land Affairs has underspent by R1,4-billion testifies to some of the daunting institutional challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa in her attempt to consolidate her fragile democracy.

However, these challenges articulate the emotive, political and contested character of the land question, not only in South Africa but elsewhere in Africa.

International experience (for example Zimbabwe and Kenya) attests to the fact that in countries undergoing a transition to democracy, land is often a mechanism used to mediate the dialectics of reconciliation and transition over and above the need to effect meaningful and radical agrarian transformation.

A focus on the "progressive" or commercial farmer has been a central focus in most of Africa's land reform programmes. In practice, progressive farmers are those who have shown, by past successes, that they are capable of earning money as agricultural or commercial entrepreneurs. Usually it is their ability to offer a down payment or collateral which constitutes the main effective criterion for participation in land reform programmes.

In Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, across different historical periods, there has been a desperate bid to build a stratum of "black commercial farmers".

In Zimbabwe this need was realised from the late 1980s within a context of impending pressure to liberalise all sectors of the economy. There was a need to transform the agricultural sector into an internationally competitive one. The need to build a stratum of "black commercial farmers" was a logical approach in dealing with these changes. However, this trend polarised the already existing intra-black class divisions within the agrarian sector. The lack of agri-support systems and an unfavourable "liberalised agricultural sector" failed to stimulate a significant and viable growth of black progressive or commercial farmers.

In Kenya a "class-based" land reform model that centred on the progressive or commercial farmer has been a critical political consideration that has driven the process through since the early 1950s. The implementation of the Swynnerton plan in the 1950s, the low-density scheme and the high-density or "million-acre" scheme in the 1960s was a political ploy to pacify rural unrest by creating a landed gentry and subsequently reconcile the competing and conflicting needs of the constituents involved during Kenya's transition to independence.

The Swynnerton plan contained a strategy for the development of a class of progressive farmers. The twin pillars were the institution of freehold land tenure and the selective loosening of restrictions on African cultivation of high-value crops such as coffee and tea.

The plan equally provided for the development of livestock production for the market through the provision of agro-support services such as extension services and credit. This plan gave African farmers

land titles for the first time and created an African elite with a vested interest in the economic status quo. It was argued that giving the African farmer security of tenure would enable the landowner to pledge his land as collateral for the development of capital.

However, the objectives of the Swynnerton plan were not met. People with knowledge of the registration process were able to establish claims to uncultivated land, hence muting the voices of the weaker members of the community, in particular those of women. This polarised social and regional inequality in the countryside. The failure of the plan was not a surprise, given the fact that the political logic of the Swynnerton plan was consciously to build an elite of progressive farmers who would form a solid conservative bulwark against rural revolt and political opposition.

In the early 1960s the emergence of "low-density schemes" was also meant to generate a class of black commercial farmers. The clients for this scheme were carefully selected blacks who had a capital base that would enable them to participate. However, this scheme did not meet its objective because very little prime land was available in the market. It was replaced by the high-density million-acre scheme as the transition to independence picked up.

The scheme was meant to accommodate masses of landless families irrespective of their productive potential and the quality of land they were to occupy.

The World Bank reduced its support for the scheme because the million-acre opted for clients who lacked both a capital base and credentials qualifying them as progressive farmers. At the same time, the settlement authorities skimmed deplorably in the resources that were allocated to high-density settlers.

Despite these serious handicaps, many poor and uneducated Kenyans made a significant contribution to the million-acre scheme in terms of farm productivity. Large numbers of the participants were highly motivated to succeed. Their accomplishment clearly shows that non-progressive farmers can be trusted to produce as effectively as progressive farmers and the doctrine of succinctly capturing the "able to do farmers" is a misplaced conception.

The logic behind these schemes exemplifies a long-held tradition in studies of rural development, where it is viewed as a safe and sound investment to concentrate on building a class of progressive farmers to the exclusion of the "poor and less able" farmers.

What lessons do the Kenya and Zimbabwe experiences have for South Africa's new and justifiable policy initiatives in building a class of black commercial farmers?

In South Africa the current policy shift is a credible initiative, given the demographic imbalances that exist within the agri-sector. However, this new initiative is bound to throw the initial objectives of the programme into further disarray.

Creating a class of black commercial farmers will in essence dovetail into existing patterns of social inequality, as exemplified in the dichotomised agricultural sector, with a divide between small and large-scale farmers. Most importantly, creating a stratum of black commercial farmers without unlocking the imbalances of power in favour of all within the agri-economy will only perpetuate the existing agrarian structures biased in favour of white commercial farmers.

So, what future awaits South Africa's agrarian transformation?

A probable answer to this question is a gloomy one. Given the country's macroeconomic strategy as evident in its liberalised agricultural sector, the success of the black commercial farmer is bound to be a daunting challenge. The logic of the apartheid system within the agri-sector, with its skewed support services, was to destroy the black commercial farmer. The double challenge for the current government therefore is not only to unlock historical structural constraints within the agrarian economy but also to reorient the current macro-economic climate to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of small-scale black farmers.

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