

Rural people do need land for farming

Ben Cousins

Professor Ben Cousins directs the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies at the School of Government, University of the Western Cape

A recent report by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) [*Land Reform in South Africa: a 21st century perspective*] suggests that most South Africans now see land as a ‘place to stay’ rather than as a ‘place to farm’, and concludes that land reform should focus on urban settlement not rural agriculture. There is some truth in this; urban land provision has indeed been neglected. Other findings (for example, that government lacks a comprehensive rural development strategy) deserve attention.

But the report also contains questionable research findings, a flawed analysis of agriculture, and a misguided obsession with the market and private sector interests as driving forces. It proposes a set of ‘guiding principles’ that if adopted would set back the cause of land reform for decades.

A key finding from a 2001 attitudinal survey is that only 9 per cent of black people who are currently not farmers have farming aspirations, and that only 15 per cent of farm workers have aspirations to farm on their own, or full-time. The demand for urban land close to potential jobs and services is said to be much higher.

Attitudinal surveys are notoriously unreliable guides to complex social realities. Ticking boxes in questionnaires, answering questions that are not contextually specific and may contain hidden assumptions, can be problematic. For example, assumptions that farming must be ‘full-time’ are inappropriate; even in the commercial sector many farmers earn substantial complementary income from non-farming sources. In the small-scale sector diverse livelihood sources are even more important.

The report does acknowledge that among people living on land without alternative income, in well-watered areas and on the borders of former homelands, demand for land can be intense. Although no figures are supplied, it asserts that the numbers of such people are ‘large’, a significant policy challenge. Tellingly, the report reaches this particular conclusion *not* on the basis of its own attitudinal survey, but (presumably) an assessment of a wider array of evidence.

Even more problematic than the CDE survey data is a logic that derives policy options from preferences. If only it were so simple. People may desire high salaried jobs, suburban houses and fancy cars, but the likelihood of achieving these is another matter. It may be the case that for many rural people a land-based livelihood offers their best chance to move above the poverty line (even if only just above). Policy needs to be made on the basis of realistic pathways out of destitution.

Is urbanization such a pathway? The CDE report makes the heroic assumption that the best route out of poverty is urban employment. Yet most rural people in search of urban jobs and houses are not finding them, unemployment of the unskilled and marginalized is rising, and urban poverty is increasing. This is why so many migrants

continue to maintain close ties with their rural base, which despite continuing neglect provides benefits poorly understood by many analysts.

Creating livelihoods in towns and cities is vitally important, as is urban land release. Support for peri-urban market gardening for black smallholders is urgently required. Even rural optimists such as myself recognize that only a proportion (albeit a significant proportion) of the rural population will benefit from land reform. It is not a matter of either urban or rural land reform; *both* are urgently required.

Rural land reform is very much the poor relation in the CDE report. This is in part due to its one-sided analysis of agriculture as a 'fragile, relatively small, knowledge-intensive sector' offering few opportunities for addressing poverty.

This view underestimates the potential of smallholder agriculture in a country with a large domestic market for food products. Smallholder farming is labour-intensive, and potentially highly productive, but requires an enabling economic environment (credit, inputs supply, extension backed by research, marketing infrastructure). Government policies have failed this challenge, and skepticism about smallholder agriculture is a major impediment to appropriate policies and budgets.

The weakest arguments in the CDE report are in relation to market-based and private sector-driven land reform. It is simply woolly-minded to describe private purchase of land by black people with sufficient capital to do so as 'redistribution': the holders of one form of asset are simply converting them into another. These transfers do nothing to address structural inequality. It is true that fairly large amounts of land are being transferred in this manner, perhaps more than through state programmes, but all this reveals is how badly the latter are failing the poor.

The private sector initiatives described by CDE are interesting and show that agribusiness does have a role to play, but far too much is claimed for them. Most are rather modest in scale and some have run into serious problems. In others (for example, companies supporting small-scale cotton growing in Makathini) the burden of debt is increasingly shifted onto small-scale farmers.

Given the CDE's starry-eyed view of markets and the private sector as the key drivers of development, it is unsurprising that the continuing failure of market-based land reform is not adequately assessed. This failure suggests that government must drive land reform and the revitalization of the rural economy, and its capacity to do so must be enhanced.

Government also needs new and better-conceived policies. CDE proposals that land reform be 'urbanised, marketised, individualised, monetised and modernised' are decidedly unhelpful. Rural land reform remains an urgent priority for South Africa, and should include support for small-holders, community-based initiatives, and democratized systems of communal tenure. Furthermore, programmes with these characteristics are also needed in urban and peri-urban areas, where individual titling is failing to provide tenure security, and jobs and viable micro-enterprises are in short supply.

And let us all stop thinking urban OR rural; now more than ever, we need an integrated approach to a challenging set of problems.