Land and livelihoods in rural South Africa: What prospects for agricultural activities?¹

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Abstract/Summary

The central issue that this paper addresses is the role of land and agriculture specifically in the livelihoods strategies of people living in rural areas, with specific reference to people living in the rural areas of South Africa, most of whom fall under the jurisdiction of chiefs. There is often an assumption made that agriculture and food production are critical for the survival of people living in rural areas and for the rural economic as such. While this may be the case with respect to many countries on the African continent, many of which are characterized by low levels of industrialization, this assumption must be questioned with respect to countries such as a South Africa. It is thus of cardinal importance when making assumptions and generalizations of this nature to be conscious of the specific historical circumstances of each country.

In South Africa, for example, more than 90 per cent of the land was forcibly taken from its indigenous people, reducing the bulk of these people to permanent and migrant workers. Those who remained in the rural areas of the former Bantustans were gradually forced to rely on non-agricultural activities primarily in the form of remittances from migrant workers and later on state pensions of various sorts. The particular form that capitalism took in South Africa, going back to the

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discovery of minerals and demands for cheap labour, made colonial capitalists to change from their initial commitment to promote limited black African commercial farming to converting blacks into poorly paid workers, specifically migrant workers. With the development of the manufacturing sector, a significant number of black Africans became permanent workers, staying in urban areas with the families, in some cases with tenuous ties with their rural origins. This was by and large the situation in 1994, when South Africa became a democratic country. Disregard of this historical context, the paper argues, in current efforts towards rural development and considerations of the role of land as economic activity in South Africa would be perilous and shortsighted.

Having said this, the paper argues that the current economic and financial crisis, whose significance lies in its global character, throws serious doubts about the fulfillment of the promise of the modernization project that the rural sector would gradually diminish, with the urban sector absorbing the labour force. A glaring marker of the current crisis is the loss of jobs and food insecurity that wreak havoc in every corner of the world and felt the most in peripheral countries, including South Africa and other countries on the African continent. Despite strenuous efforts to “bail out” banks and other businesses, efforts that are address the crisis as is it felt by the capitalists, there does no hope that this will favourably impact on the labour crisis. In the final analysis, the effects of this crisis are severely felt in rural areas.

This chapter argues that the global crisis creates new possibilities for countries such as South Africa to rethink the land and agrarian questions as part of a strategy of reviving the rural economy. South Africa has since the advent of democracy in 1994 embarked on a land reform programme. This theoretically creates a situation where blacks, who were previously discouraged from embarking on agricultural activities, can now gain access to land and with support, create livelihood opportunities for the millions residing in the countryside. I however end the paper with a caution: land reform in South Africa is not a panacea to the problem of unemployment resulting from the inability of the urban sector to absorb its labour force. Landlessness and the promises of modernity have had almost indelible effects on the consciousness of many indigenous people. Going back to land based livelihoods is unthinkable, certainly in the short term, not for those who were born
and bred in urban areas, but for a growing number of those in rural areas, especially the youth.
**Background and context**

This paper is about the role of land and agriculture specifically in the livelihoods strategies of those who reside in the rural areas of South Africa, the majority of whom live in areas that fall under the jurisdiction of chiefs.\(^2\) It is informed by one of the themes of this conference: that “agriculture and food production” continue “to be the most important rural economy activity”. My paper takes a critical look at this generalization and argues that the specific historical circumstances of each country are important to take into account whenever such assumptions and generalization are made. Indeed, Samir Amin (1976), the Egyptian scholar now based in Senegal was amongst the first to warn against the homogenization of countries on the African continent. With this in mind, I caution in this paper against generalizations that are made at the expense of specificities. In this regard, South Africa, as I will show in the paper, provides a good illustration.

In terms of Amin’s classification, South Africa would be amongst the African countries that belong to what he refers to as Africa of the “labour reserves”. The key feature of these countries, which include Zimbabwe, Namibia and Kenya, is that colonialis took a decision to settle in these countries, thus robbing the indigenous people of their land and claiming parts of the land as theirs by introducing European style freehold title deeds which create an exclusive monopoly to land. South Africa is by far the most palpable example where this land plunder took place. In this country, more than 90 per cent of the land was forcibly taken from the indigenous people, reducing the bulk of these people to permanent and migrant workers. Those who remained in the rural areas of the former Bantustans were forced to rely on non-agricultural activities primarily in the form of remittances from migrant workers and later on state pensions of various sorts. Prospects of the emergence of a group of black Africans in particular whose livelihoods would be based on agricultural activities were dealt a major blow when minerals were discovered in the latter part of the nineteenth century leading to the demand for cheap labour. These developments changed the focus of colonialists from supporting an emerging class

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\(^2\) I use the terminology that became officiated during the colonial and apartheid periods and was accepted by those upon whom the label was meant. The use of the term “chief”, be it noted, changed during the political transition beginning in the early 1990s in favour of terms such as “traditional authorities/leaders”. The term “Traditional leaders” is now commonly used in post-1994 official documents, including the constitution. Academic have yet to deal with these terminology issues.
of black farmers to converting blacks to workers, specifically migrant workers. As early as the 1920s, black Africans were becoming a fully fledged proletariat and those in the rural areas of the former Bantustans were beginning to rely on non-agricultural activities, especially remittances from migrant workers, later state subsidies in the form of pensions. This was by and large the situation in 1994, when South Africa became a democratic country. Disregard of this historical context in current efforts towards rural development and considerations of the role of land an economic activity in South Africa would be perilous and shortsighted.

Having said this, the paper argues that the current economic and financial crisis, whose significance lies in its global character, throws serious doubts about the fulfillment of the promise of the modernization project that the urban sector would absorb its labour force. Unemployment and food scarcity wreak havoc in every corner of the world and felt the most in peripheral countries, including South Africa and other countries on the African continent. The current crisis and the bleak prospects of a turnaround within the prescriptions of modernization create space for a discussion of the role land can play in the resolution of this crisis. South Africa since the advent of democracy has embarked on a land reform programme. This theoretically creates a situation where blacks, who were previously discouraged from embarking on agricultural activities, can now gain access to land. In a nutshell, I argue that the current crisis of capitalism and its failure to absorb its labour force, coupled with the possibilities thrown up by land reform in South Africa, create conditions that make a discussion about the role of land as a livelihood strategy in South Africa meaningful. It is these conditions, I argue, which can make “agriculture and food production” the once “important rural economic activity” it was in South Africa.

Conceptualising the role of land as an economic activity

Three theoretical perspectives will be briefly discussed to frame discussions about the potential role of land as a response to the livelihoods crises in the current period. These are the minimalist, distributionist and instrumentalist views.\(^3\) The minimalist point of view argues that land reform has a limited contribution towards improving the

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\(^3\) I am particularly grateful to my colleague, Dr Horman Chitonge, a Research Officer in the NRF Research Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in the Sociology Department, University of Cape Town, for this classification. For a fuller elaboration of these perspectives, see [www.landreform.uct.ac.za](http://www.landreform.uct.ac.za)
living conditions of the poor. In an empirical study based on survey data from six Latin American countries\(^4\), Valdes & Lopez (1999) and Lopez & Valdes (2000) argue that contrary to the widely held view that land reform can make a significant contribution towards poverty reduction, the impact of land reform on poverty is very limited. One of the key factors cited to explain the limited capacity was that the beneficiaries of land reform often fail to convert the land asset into income which can be used to improve their welfare. According to this view, “land redistribution from large to small farmers, may contribute to increase total farm output, but may have only limited impact on household income….and welfare” (Valdes & Lopez, 1999: 8). Bryceson (1999) and Rigg (2006) also express a similar view arguing that the significance of land and farm-related activities as sources of income for the poor rural dwellers is vanishing in view of non-farm activities. The reason given for this diminishing role of land as a poverty reducing instrument is that the livelihood of the poor are becoming more de-linked from land and farming (Riggs, 2006). Kay (1998) also questions the potential of land redistribution in reducing rural poverty, arguing that while public debates are always enthusiastic about land redistribution as a poverty reducing strategy, evidence so far point to a very disappointing result. According to Kay, most land reform programmes have failed to live up to expectations and there is no ground to believe that they can deliver.

A close look at this perspective shows that a key assumption made is that the land redistributed is used for ‘market production’ as opposed to non-market production. But in most low income countries, this assumption is unrealistic; the poor often use land as an asset that provides a base for multiple livelihoods which do not necessarily include ‘for market production’ (Ravallion & Sen, 1994; Cox et al, 2003; Finan et al, 2005; Yaro, 2006; van den Brink, 2006). Secondly, the minimalist view is largely based on the income measure of land reform’s impact on poverty which may not capture the non-income benefits such as enhanced social stability, equity, empowerment, self-esteem, a sense of belonging and confidence (FAO, 2006). As Finan et al (2005) have noted, the conventional income-based approach to measuring the impact of land reform on poverty ignores the multi-dimensionality of poverty, noting that “poverty is multidimensional, and an income representation of poverty is both very noisy and overly restrictive ...” (2005:28). Lastly, this view makes the bold assumption that the mere access to land should result in improvement of the poor’s livelihood, disregarding or underplaying the importance of support services which make land productive.

The second perspective that is pertinent for purposes of this discussion paper, what is referred to as the distributionist view, acknowledges the significant role land reform plays in reducing rural poverty in low income countries where the majority of the people have land-based livelihoods. Access to land, according to this view,

\(^4\) The countries whose data were analysed are Chile, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, Paraguay and Honduras. For Honduras and Paraguay, household panel data was used while for the rest of the countries cross sectional household data was used.
provides the answer to the problem of rural poverty by unlocking the potential of the poor (Lipton, 2003; *World Development Report*, 2001; Griffin et al, 2001; de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002). The core strategy of this approach is the creation of small-scale farmers as opposed to large scale commercial farming. This is supported by the argument that the small scale farms are more efficient than commercial farmers, and therefore are more productive, supporting the famous inverse farm size-productivity argument (Deininger, 2003; van den Brink et al, 2006). On the basis of this, it is further argued that the creation of small scale farms achieves the dual objective of equity and efficiency, thereby reducing rural poverty and promoting economic growth (Griffin et al, 2001; de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002).

Although this view does acknowledge that the state should play an important role in the process of redistribution, the emphasis is on a market-driven process which can create efficient allocation and use of land\(^5\) (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002; Griffin et al, 2001). Factors that are considered crucial for the success of land reform as a poverty intervention in this approach include secure tenure rights, and a functional land market (i.e., removing all market distortions such as high transaction costs, unequal access to credit, and agricultural subsidies). A strong case for this approach is made in de Soto (2000) and more directly by Deininger, who argues that “secure property rights will increase the incentives of households and individuals to invest, and often will also provide them with better credit access, something that will not only help them make such investments, but will also provide an insurance substitute in the event of shocks” (2003: xix). Although government has a critical role to play in this approach, its role is confined to creating an atmosphere that promotes efficient functioning of markets.

There are two major weaknesses with this position. Firstly, mere access to land is seen as the key to ending poverty among the poor rural dwellers. Yet, as has been shown, for land reform to have a noticeable impact on poverty, a piece of land should be accompanied with enabling or complementary services, which help the poor to convert land into a sustainable livelihood source. The second weakness is that reducing the role of government to creating a market friendly environment overlooks the complexity of rural poverty and therefore is unlikely to be an effective land reform approach in developing countries where market failures are rampant. For countries such as South Africa, where ownership of land has been a result of a calculated policy which resulted in a systematic exclusion of majority of the population for a long time, government needs to play a more proactive role beyond the consolidation of land markets and securing of tenure rights. In fact, it is unlikely that a ‘market-driven or –assisted’ approach would result in significant reduction of poverty (van den Brink, 2006).

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\(^5\) Examples of successful land reforms often cited include the post World War II Japanese, and later on the Chinese, South Korean, Taiwanese and Vietnamese agrarian reforms( Deininger, 2003).
The last perspective that is pertinent to this paper, the instrumentalist view sees access to land as a first step towards improving the livelihoods of the poor. The success of a land reform programme as a poverty alleviating tool is conditioned upon the provision of accompanying enablers such as on-and off-farm support services: infrastructure, input support, access to credit, human and skills development, access to water and viable technology (Stiglitz, 1998; DFID, 2002 Cox et al, 2003). In the case of South Africa, Zimmerman (2000) makes a convincing case pointing out that the success of land reform as a poverty reducing tool does not only depend on access to a piece of land, but also to what he calls ‘ancillary support’ that can be provided. Evidence from successful land reforms, since the early 1950s, suggest that positive outcomes were recorded in cases where the reforms were accompanied with post reform support mechanisms such as creation of roads, irrigations schemes, schools, primary health care, skills development and extension services (Stiglitz, 1998; Zimmerman, 2000, Cox et al, 2003; Finan et al, 2005; FAO, 2006). Thus the instrumentalist view sees the poor as “people with multiple livelihood strategies that may or may not be linked to farming at all times. Land therefore can provide them with a base from which to launch other livelihood ventures. It may provide chronically poor household with a key commodity [land], but one that needs to be turned into a livelihood through other complementary activities” (Chimhowu, 2006:7).

Consequently, access to land in this framework is conceptualized as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for reducing poverty. For land reform to play an important role in reducing poverty, access to land should be complemented by other services which enable the poor to convert land into viable livelihoods through farm or non-farm activities. For this reason, land reform is not seen as a once-off intervention, whereby, once a piece of land is provided to an individual, the process ends there. Instead, land reform is conceptualized as “a long-term process that requires sustained support” (DfID, 2002: iv).

As indicated, the above theoretical scenarios are useful in discussions about the role land as a means of making a living has played in South Africa in the past and its potential in the period since the financial crisis in 2008. A historically grounded approach to the land question in South Africa is, I would argue, essential in current debates about the role of land in the struggle against poverty in particular.

**The case of South Africa**

The key argument underlining this discussion paper is that in the period up to 1994, hardly any case could be made for the role of land as an economic activity that the poor, including those residing in the rural areas of the former Bantustans and white claimed commercial farms, could embark upon to improve their conditions. The reason for this is simple: the vast majority of the indigenous people of South Africa
were dispossessed of their land and reduced to poorly paid workers in urban areas and on white farms. Colin Bundy’s book, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* is by far the best known work that tells the story of the rise and decline of black African farmers. This was followed years later by the work of Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, which essentially is about sharecropping in South Africa and how it was systematically done away with as part and parcel of efforts to discourage black African agriculture. With the discovery of minerals, therefore, and their demand for cheap labour, prospects of black African farming were brought to a halt. Decades of land shortage, landlessness and, as indicated, deliberate efforts to discourage agriculture amongst blacks in South Africa all of which had an impact on the gradual move to urban areas, had an impact on the consciousness of many black South Africans. The role of land as a livelihood strategy became less important. The decline of interest in land could also be seen in the nature and form of organization and struggles against the colonial and apartheid regimes. Migrant workers became a feature of rural life in the former reserves and resistance against oppression and exploitation took an urban character and the land question and rural struggles assumed secondary significance especially in liberation movements.

For this reason, it would not be accurate to claim that agriculture and food production were key economic activities in South Africa in the twentieth century. I would argue that the minimalist view outlined above best describes the situation in South Africa during the twentieth century.

This however should not be interpreted to mean that there was no land question and demand for land in South Africa. The system in the rural areas of the former reserves never collapsed to a situation where there was no longer any demand for land. The decline in agricultural production, including keeping livestock was gradual, protracted and never really reached a situation where there was no land based production at all. Ntsebeza’s research in the former Xhalanga district shows that descendants of the targeted group of progressive African farmers in this district continued with the legacy of their parents and grandparents well into the 1960s (see Ntsebeza 2006). Preliminary findings of current research conducted by liyama (2007) in the same district shows that land use still comprises a substantial part of the livelihood of this group. Research conducted by Ncapayi (2006) showed that those for whom land based activities (cultivation and livestock) is still key to their livelihood strategies tend to be elderly and would have began their working career as migrant workers, only turning to land based activities later on in their lives, either when their parents are too old or dead and/or when they want to establish their own family. The decision to return to the rural areas, Ncapayi found, was often not influenced by lack of job opportunities in urban areas. It is important to keep this in mind when considering current debates about the relevance of land in the elimination of poverty.

The above discussion does not in any way undermine my argument about the decline of agriculture and agricultural activities in the rural areas of the former
Bantustans. Land shortage in the rural areas of the former Bantustans and the growing population in these areas, in particular made crop production especially difficult to embark upon. The failure of the Betterment Scheme to maintain the basic infrastructure, including the fencing of grazing land made it almost impossible for those who had fields for cultivation to grow crops. As one interviewee once remarked in a conversation: “Silimela impahla” (we grow crops for livestock). In other words, those who had land, however limited, could not use it for growing crops. But this, as Ncapayi’s research showed, was a tiny minority. The vast majority of rural people struggled to get land for residential purposes, let alone crop production. My research in Xhalanga showed that by the 1980s, fields for the production of crops were being reduced to grazing land for the whole village. Under such circumstances, the rational thing to do for many rural people was to embark on other forms of livelihoods and to send children to schools where they would learn to make a living on non-agricultural activities such as civil service and the professions. Agriculture as a school subject gradually disappeared from the school curriculum from the 1970s. These points, it must be emphasised, are important to keep in mind in discussions about land and livelihoods. It is also to bear them in mind before journalistic claims about the ability and/or non-ability of black Africans to farm.6

Lack of interest in land based livelihoods continued well after the advent of democracy in South Africa. There is little doubt that despite the extent of land dispossession in South Africa, which has no parallel on the African continent, the land question remains marginalised. The announcement of the land reform programme at the advent of South Africa’s democracy did not make a visible impact in terms of an interest in land for production purposes. In its 1994 election manifesto, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the African National Congress (ANC) identified land reform as key for rural development. This entailed the provision of “residential and productive land to the poorest section of the rural population and aspirant farmers” (ANC, 1994:20). Land reform in South Africa has been implemented through three principal programmes: Land redistribution (which focuses on redressing the inequalities in the ownership of land), Land Restitution (which seeks to compensate people who were forcibly disposed from their land from 1913) and Land Tenure Reform (which addresses the tenure rights and land administration) (Didiza, 2006). With reference to the redistribution programme, the Land Reform Policy described its objective as providing “the poor with access to land for residential and productive uses, in order to improve their income and quality of life” (DLA, 1997). This vision has been restated in subsequent land reform policy documents. For example the Land Reform for Agrarian Development (LRAD, 2001) asserted that one of the strategic objectives of land redistribution is to improve the livelihoods of poor people especially in rural areas. Despite these intentions, the land question remained marginalised in economic and political debates in South Africa.

6 Most recently (2009 and 2010) Mondli Makhanya, the editor of the Sunday Times, has been making wild journalistic claims about black Africans no longer interested in land.
A question may arise as to how to explain the above marginalisation of land post-1994. One explanation is policy and legislative promises about the delivery of land did not translate into reality. Land reform and rural development have been, for various reasons, neglected for most of the 15 years of South Africa’s democracy. No one, not even the government officials and ministers, defends the criticism that land reform in South Africa has been a colossal failure, with a mere five per cent of agricultural land transferred in the 15 years of our democracy. However, I would argue that land remained marginalised largely because of the impact of modernisation and its promises about a better life in urban areas. There is also the additional factor that those who received land through the government programme seemed to struggle to make a living out of land. This might have had a negative impact about land based livelihoods as an alternative to jobs in urban areas.

The period since 1994, though, has created conditions that create possibilities for the relevance of land as a livelihood strategy to combat poverty primarily, although not exclusively, in the rural areas of South Africa. These possibilities have been enhanced by the failure of the urban economy to absorb its labour force, thus dealing a severe blow to the idolised myth that the South African economy was exceptional compared to countries on the African continent and would develop an industry similar to the West that would absorb its labour. The current economic and financial crisis especially has created an extremely bleak picture of the prospects of the urban economy creating jobs for South Africans. If anything, what is being experienced is growing unemployment. Large amount of rural residents of all generation and gender leave the countryside and flock into the cities without prospects of jobs. This in turn creates major housing and other crises in the cities. There is thus an urgent need for alternatives to be explored. As already indicated, the environment is conducive for serious discussions about the role of land in the struggle against poverty in South Africa to be entertained in the search for alternatives. The fact that the democratic state in South Africa has committed itself to land reform makes the possibility of land based livelihoods much more practicable than would have been the case during the colonial and apartheid periods. Land reform has the potential of returning land to its rightful owners thus creating possibilities for blacks to embark on viable agricultural activities. These discussions could draw from the other two perspectives adumbrated above, the distributionist and instrumentalist views.

In addition, arguably for the first time since the inception of democracy in South Africa, the government appears to be taking the land question more seriously.

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7 It is not the intention of this discussion document to embark on a critique of the land reform programme. See Ntsebeza, L. and Hall, R (eds) 2007, for the first major assessment of the South African land reform programme.
8 Again, this is not the time and place to get into details about these perceived failures. Suffice it to say that this area needs more careful and nuanced research. The NRF Research Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in South Africa has embarked on this exercise and preliminary results should be coming out towards the end of this year, 2010. See their website: www.landreform.uct.ac.za
than before. In the run up to, during and after the ANC’s national conference held in Polokwane in December 2007 the land and agrarian questions received prominence although, I would contend, not much substance accompanied the pronouncements. This, however, was by far the first time issues of land, agriculture and rural development were raised since the Land Summit of 2005. During the discussion on rural development, there was evidently a sense of urgency in the call for the acceleration in the “equitable distribution of land”. Following this conference and after the 2009 national and provincial election, rural development and land reform have been one of the top five priorities of the ANC-led government under President Jacob Zuma. That a new Ministry of Rural Development and Land Reform has been established after the 2009 election might be an indication of how seriously the question of land and rural development are being taken by the current administration.

The reality of the situation is that poverty in rural areas and evictions on white claimed farms force large numbers of people to urban areas without any prospects of them getting jobs and even houses. It seems clear that it is to some degree the crisis caused by this influx that the ANC has been forced to at least put the issue of rural development on the agenda. A successful rural development strategy would no doubt stem the tide of migration to urban areas and could even lead to a situation of reverse migration, where some of the employed could move back to the rural areas and make a livelihood out of land. We are seeing this happening in Brazil and Zimbabwe. Current research, already mentioned, undertaken by the Research Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in South Africa at the University of Cape Town is already picking up similar trends in the Chris Hani District Municipality of the Eastern Cape, where a significant number of farms have been transferred to black Africans, the majority of whom are from the rural areas of the former Transkei Bantustan.

**Concluding remarks**

The centrality of land in both policy and public debates lies in the acknowledgement that access to land is a major determining factor of well-being for people with land-based livelihoods, especially in rural areas. This is particularly the case in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2001, DFID, 2002, Mafeje 2003, 2006). Despite my argument that the majority of South Africans, the blacks, were rendered landless and reduced to workers, empirical studies conducted in South Africa have shown that although poverty head-count is generally higher in rural areas, the incidence of poverty is highest among rural households without access to land (Carter & May, 1997; May & Deininger, 2000). Although evidence from India’s rural Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh suggest that it is not always the landless who are the poorest, empirical evidence generally point to a strong correlation between
landlessness and extreme forms of poverty (Bandeira & Sumpsi, 2009; Finan et al, 2005; Deininer, 2003; Lopez & Vlades, 2000; Ravallion & Sen, 1994).

If access to productive land plays such a significant role in determining people’s well-being, it is imperative to understand the role land reform can play in the fight against poverty in South Africa. Having said this, I would like to caution that land reform in South Africa is not a panacea to the problem of unemployment resulting from the inability of the urban sector to absorb its labour force. Such a conclusion would be ignoring the political economy of South Africa and its effects on the consciousness of the indigenous people.
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