

# Land reform in South Africa is failing. Ignoring the realities of rural life plays a part

By [Elizabeth Hull](#)

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There is widespread agreement that land reform in South Africa has failed to deliver the changes [many hoped it would](#). Racially based dislocation and land dispossession were central features of colonial conquest and apartheid rule. To redress this, in 1994, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC) set a target of redistributing 30% of the country's white-owned agricultural land to black people [within the first five years of government](#). Persistently failing to come close to this goal, the government now hopes to reach it [by 2030](#).



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Agriculture continues to be [dominated by large-scale agri-business](#), and small farmers [frequently lack the support they need](#) after land has been transferred. There are many debates about why [land reform is not working](#).

My co-researcher [Donna Hornby](#) and I [investigated the socio-cultural influences on farming](#). We reviewed findings from across the social science literature. We also drew on our own research on [small farmers belonging to an irrigation scheme](#) and land reform beneficiaries operating as part of [communal land-holding organisations](#).

Our [findings](#) show that South Africa's land reform programme is misguided. It is designed for a socio-economic context that doesn't exist. It ignores three important factors:

- Land has multiple uses other than production
- Small rural farmers aren't purely economic actors who are self-reliant
- Family and community obligations create financial pressures that can force small rural farmers to stop production and fall into poverty. Social obligations may at other times consolidate social networks that keep farmers afloat.

Finding ways to support people to produce more food is critical for tackling rising hunger. But the economic viability of land reform programmes depends on their flexibility to accommodate the multiple ways that farmers and residents use and circulate resources, including land, labour and money. A narrow focus on productivity misses a wider picture about

people's diverse needs.

## Land reform programmes

A strong thread in land reform policy is the aspiration to [create "self-reliance" among small farmers](#). Therefore, "commercial viability" [underpins entitlement to redistributed land](#).

This way of allocating land overlooks its multiple uses aside from cultivation. Land is valued in ways that do not always lead to increasing yields.

Land reform programmes also assume that farmers are individual economic actors, self-reliant and autonomous. But this is at odds with the realities of life in rural South Africa. People rely on social networks of distribution to make a living. For example, farmers may not necessarily reinvest funds in productive enterprise if the social demands on these resources are more pressing.

Households need a ceremonial fund to pay for life-cycle events such as weddings and funerals. They may also be supporting non-farm activities of other family members, such as job-seeking.

Money circulates in ways that render ideas of "self-reliance" spurious. Interdependence is integral to livelihoods in rural South Africa. Economic life is embedded within social practices.

Our [research](#) shows that successful small farming depends on diversified income sources and secure distributional networks. "Self-reliance" is associated with farmers dropping out of production, often into extreme poverty.

## Three social dynamics affecting farming viability

Three key issues emerged.

First, families do not usually live under a single roof. They are split between country, town and city. Food and resources travel through networks in ways that development policy and planning often ignores. Yet the implications for farming prospects are huge.

[Unemployed youth do not necessarily take up farming](#), although there is evidence of this happening more during the Covid crisis. Instead, they travel to and from cities in search of work. However, those with salaried income in towns often have more likelihood of success in farming. They are [more likely to access loans](#).

Second, the expectations and roles of women and men, young and old, is changing in South African homes. Contradictory trends are emerging. On the one hand, customary land rights – whereby chiefs control access to land – in many regions have extended to women. This allows women [access to land without being married](#). On the other hand, pressure on women's land rights may be increasing in recent times, as migrants return from urban to rural homes following COVID job

losses.

Marriage rates have declined [in the post-apartheid period](#), in part because of the cost of *ilobolo* (bridewealth) in the context of [high unemployment](#). One implication for farming is that unmarried adults may be less willing to contribute unpaid labour to household production than if they had married and [built their own homes](#).

The third issue has to do with the economic significance of customary practices centred on ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. These life-cycle events are a central feature of rural life, and are important for maintaining connection to *amadlozi* (ancestors).

The ceremonial fund households require to maintain this social obligation can put a strain on farming. Not everyone has four or five cattle and goats to carry out mourning, celebration and marriage feasts or the cash to buy food, goods and services for these ceremonies.

In some communally held land projects acquired through land reform, wealth inequalities emerged quickly due in part to the strain caused by [ceremonial expenses for some families](#). In some cases, this led to irresolvable conflict.

## Implications for land reform

If it doesn't recognise the social dynamics that impinge on farming decisions, land reform will continue to be poorly suited to rural economic life. Post-transfer support must take seriously the social demands on land and finances that shape collective life, and that sit outside the production-oriented logic of mainstream agricultural policies.

Social demands may occur through trans-local networks and through ceremonial obligations, drawing resources away from farming. Obligations based on age, gender or marital status shape farming decisions and its viability. Without tailoring support more closely to these local realities, the prospect of land reform genuinely meeting the social and economic needs of marginalised communities is remote.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Hull, Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology, SOAS, University of London.

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