

# Global and historical lessons on how land reforms have unfolded

By [Ben Cousins](#)

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What can South Africa learn about land reforms from wider global and historical experiences in the 20th century? Most land reforms have involved transferring rights of ownership from wealthy landlords to poor, small-scale farmers working the land under various kinds of tenancy arrangements. These are often described as "land to the tiller" reforms.



Large estates in Vietnam were collectivised. Shutterstock

Much less common are redistributive reforms that resettle small farmers on large estates subdivided into smaller plots. Southern Africa, the Africa of "settler states", is something of an outlier in this respect.

Changes in the distribution, character and legal status of rights to land and natural resources, as well as in the class character and productivity of the agrarian economy, have powerfully shaped the modern world. Land reform has played a central role in the transition from pre-capitalist forms of economy to capitalism. Before capitalism, classes of unproductive landed property dominated the countryside.

## Reform and revolution

Two revolutionary convulsions, in Mexico in 1910 and in Russia in 1917, saw peasants play key roles in the overthrow of autocratic states. They were replaced by popular democracy in Mexico and socialism in Russia. In both cases the mass of the population was engaged in small-scale peasant farming.

Power and wealth in the countryside were concentrated in the hands of a small landowning elite. Radical redistributive land reforms were driven “from below” and large areas of land were transferred to the rural poor. Subsequent developments in Mexico, however, saw the takeover of the agrarian economy by large-scale capital. The fate of the Russian peasantry was even more tragic.

After the second world war, pressures for decolonisation and national liberation increased dramatically. European colonial powers had to give up their direct control of large areas of the world. Tensions between the capitalist West and the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union heightened – the Cold War period.

In the former colonies, most people were still engaged in small-scale farming. Land reform featured strongly in many national liberation struggles, described by the anthropologist Eric Wolf as “[peasant wars](#)”. It also formed a focus of post-independence policy. In most cases these were “land to the tiller”-type reforms. Large estates in Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba were collectivised by socialist governments.

In China, land reform initially involved “land to the tiller”. Collectivisation followed, and from 1978, in the [Household Responsibility System](#), land ownership remained with the collective. Currently, of course, China is encouraging capitalist farming.

In Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, agrarian reform helped to consolidate capitalism. It underwrote rapid industrialisation, with reforms driven from above by authoritarian states, backed by occupying United States forces. This was designed to pre-empt a turn to communism. Powerful landlords were expropriated and their land redistributed to tenants. Technological innovation raised productivity.

But the capitalists ended up appropriating the agricultural surplus. This process was made possible by administered prices, taxation and supplies of cheap rural labour to emerging industries.

## The 1980s

The 1980s saw something of a hiatus. The “developmental state” gave way to neoliberal, market-oriented reforms. But in a few countries openings were created for radical reform. These included Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, the Philippines and Zimbabwe. In the 1990s, large-scale peasant mobilisations took place in Indonesia and Honduras.

From 1990, after the collapse of Soviet-style communism, the US and the World Bank promoted a “new wave” of land reform. This was a way to consolidate capitalist property relations.

In southern Africa, for example, where redistributive land reform was necessary because of historical legacies, the advocates of “new wave” reform sought to avoid expropriation. They argued instead for policies based on “willing sellers and willing buyers”. This influenced negotiated transitions and land reform policies in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

Since the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism, many developing countries have strongly promoted large-scale, commercial and export-oriented farming. With capitalism now hegemonic, the terrain on which land reform takes place has been dramatically altered.

But these shifts haven’t been uncontested. Global social movements such as [Via Campesina](#), the “way of the peasant”, have emerged to resist neoliberal-style reform. They urge redistribution of land to the poor.

At the same time, new issues loom large within debates on land reform. Gender equity and claims to resources by indigenous peoples are two. They also include the unequal and often unhealthy character of global agro-food systems, and environmental sustainability.

Comparing these experiences, what can we conclude?

It seems to me that South Africa's land reform is pre-eminently driven by the state. But the state has been captured by elite interests.

Nevertheless, in some cases land reform has been followed by significant reductions of rural poverty. Land reform has also resulted in increased productivity, output and income. These changes have made a significant contribution to development more generally.

There have also been many disappointing outcomes. These include little or no reduction in rural poverty. And the benefits of reform have in some cases been captured by the relatively wealthy.

## **Class bias and elite capture**

Land reform in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Mozambique is quite distinctive in some ways, and typical in others. It is distinctive in its focus on breaking up large and productive farms. It is somewhat muted in rural struggles and hence its state-driven character, with Zimbabwe as a partial exception. It is also muted in its ambitions to undertake both redistribution and tenure reform on a large scale. South Africa has the added complication of restitution.

Land reform in southern Africa is not at all distinctive in the fate of land reform being closely tied to shifts in wider political economy. Hence the class bias and elite capture. Neither is it distinctive in its turn away from small-scale farmers towards large-scale capitalist agriculture. Again, in this Zimbabwe is unique.

The bigger unresolved issue of land reform in the 21st century is the need to confront the overwhelming threat of ecological collapse. South Africa's rural reforms have not yet done so. Asking questions about how to address this challenge is an urgent task.

*This is an extract from a recent [lecture](#) delivered by Professor Cousins at the University of the Western Cape.*

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