

Committees briefed on in-depth study on farm workers

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29 Jan 2016

A research study that was commissioned by Stone Sizani, the then Chairperson of the Rural Development and Land Reform Committee, on what issues are contributing to tensions between the farm owners and farm workers was presented to a joint-sitting of Rural Development and Land Reform, Agricultural, Forestry and Fisheries, Labour and Human Settlement Committees. This question rose after the wake of prolonged farm riots in the Western Cape.



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Ten case studies were sampled by the researchers to respond to this inquiry. Three of these were based in the Western Cape because, one, the majority of commercial farm workers are based in the Western Cape and, secondly, the farmers in the province use more labour intensive methods compared to other provinces.

According to the senior researcher of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Margereet Visser, the research was conducted among various stakeholders and respondents such as NGOs, organised labour, individuals and focus groups that have a direct interest in the plight of farm workers.

Unmet wage demands the biggest factor

She began by stating that tensions on farms have a variety of causes, some of them external. For example, she cited the fact that "Markets have changed. As a result, retailers now have a greater monopoly on prices than before. This has led to the decreasing bargaining powers of farmers to determine the price of their produce. This has led to farm owners' inability to pay decent living wages and to provide housing for their employees."

However, the biggest factor, she said was farm owners' inability to meet farm workers' wage demands. This has led to the emergence of seasonal and permanent workers and the dynamics thereof has often led to tensions.

She also pointed to the current sectoral determination on minimum wage as a source of tension. It is insufficient because workers cannot live on R130 per day and farmers cannot, on the other hand, afford the R150 per day that many farm workers are demanding. If farm owners are forced to do so they will be compelled to close shop. "This legislation will need to be fixed to ensure that it is sustainable," she said.

Eviction trends

On the issue of eviction trends, Visser said it was difficult to find reliable information on this. "The Western Cape department of rural development had no data for evictions for 2014. Also, there are different ways of counting evictions. As such, there is no way of collating eviction cases reported to the police and eviction notices. In Drakenstein, it seems evictions have come down, but we cannot verify this because of the lack of reliable data."

Also, the mechanism meant to deal with evictions is not responsive, Visser said. "What is clear from the study is that the department hotline is not responsive. Police don't act on cases of eviction and workers don't know their rights and municipalities are ill-equipped to deal with them."

Concerns over the limitations of the study

One Committee member, Pumzile Mnguni, was concerned about the limitations of the study, claiming that it is not conclusive on evictions trends and the question of tenure. "The views of NGOs and civil society have not been taken on board in this research, especially of critical stakeholders such as labour and various formations in this terrain. They need to be taken to account."

He also stated that there is a need for a refined study that will capture the impact of the drought. But more critically, Mnguni said, this research is silent on the discrepancy between seasonal and permanent workers and the dynamics that these categories bring about on issues related to farmer owners' profitability and better conditions of employment on farms.

"To the farmers, there are benefits in employing seasonal workers, because they don't get sufficient benefits and yet the report is silent on that. In my opinion, seasonal workers are the source of the triple challenge of poverty, inequality and unemployment. We had high expectations for academics to tease these dynamics. For me, this study is very preliminary; much needs to be factored into it."

Another Committee member, Mncedisi Filtane, was concerned about the report's claim of failure of government farms and wanted to know on what this claim was based. "I am an opposition MP, but I want to challenge the notion that farms that have been given to black farmers have failed. We cannot allow such a sweeping statement to stand. The report findings on that are wanting."

Nthako Matiase, also a Committee member, claimed that we cannot speak of slavery on farms without speaking about white privilege. "We need to deal with white privilege and that will help to deal with the structural adjustments that entrench slavery on farms. The report is conspicuously silent on that."

More research and effective policies needed

In her closing remarks, the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Rural Development and Land Reform, Pumzile Ngwenya-Mabila, stated that issues emanating from the study need to be taken up with the department. "One of the things that we should prioritise is to ensure that the land rights facility is effective. We will set a date with the department to discuss

this and other matters emanating from this meeting. And as various Committees, we need to discuss the effectiveness of the policies that govern our jurisdiction and how we monitor and conduct oversight over them."

Apart from that, there is a need for more research to be commissioned to address some of the issues that this study has not addressed, she said.

In easing the tensions that transpired from the heated exchanges that emanated from this joint-committee meeting, she said: "When researchers are invited to our Committees we critique them as a means to dig deeper to get a better understanding and knowledge of their thought processes to ensure that there are no contradictions. And we are enriched by their insight and expertise."

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