

# South Africa's land reform policies need to embrace social, economic and ecological sustainability

Land reform is central to South Africa's quest for social justice. During the apartheid era, land was concentrated in the hands of the white minority. Black people were [dispossessed](#) of their land and excluded from land ownership.



Land reform strategies portray the land as uniform, static and independent from its social-environmental context. GettyImages

After democracy in 1994, South African policy was developed to restore dispossessed land rights ([restitution](#)), upgrade the rights of those with insecure land tenure (reform), and transform the racially biased land ownership patterns (redistribution). Despite government [policy](#) and intention, the land reform process has been fraught with inefficiencies and corruption. It is estimated that to date only [9% of farmland](#) has been transferred.

In fact, land dispossession actually [increased](#) in the first 10 years after the end of apartheid compared to the previous decade. Land reform programmes have focused on [farming](#), especially capital-intensive farming. They have neglected other ways of making a living and failed to recognise the beneficiaries' aspirations and capabilities. The result has been "[unworkable and prone to collapse](#)" projects. The land reform programmes have also yielded [little benefit](#) for marginalised groups.

We argue in [our research](#) that current land reform strategies focus too narrowly on agricultural outcomes and transferred ownership. The strategies ignore something that's critical for achieving social justice: the connections between people and nature.

Socio-economic development and human well-being [are intimately intertwined](#) with ecological health. How people use land influences ecosystem function. This in turn determines future land use options for people.

The ability of land to provide what people need and want depends on its past and its future. Land that has been eroded by previous use will need a lot of help to become productive. Land that is suitable for agriculture now may not be in future because of climate change.

## Land is more than just food

Land reform discussions haven't said much about the diverse relationships between people and nature. They haven't included the multiple functions that land offers humans, beyond its agricultural potential. The success (or failure) of many land reform programmes is measured in hectares of farmland transferred. This approach portrays the land as uniform, static, independent from its social-environmental context and disconnected from future beneficiaries and broader society.

We [argue](#) that this narrow focus undermines the goals of equitable and sustainable land reform. We explored the options and implications of thinking more broadly about land reform planning beyond agricultural solutions.

Land provides more than just food. For example, flowering plants facilitate crop pollination, wetlands help purify water and trees take carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and thus play an important role in mitigating climate change. Natural land is also important to South Africa's significant ecotourism sector.

[For many](#), land is the cornerstone of their identity. It provides a sense of belonging, an attachment to a place that's "home" and associated with their culture.

The multiple possible benefits derived from land suggest multiple possible uses. Beneficiaries of a land reform programme may be able to use land in various ways other than farming. The state has [explicitly](#) emphasised maintaining agricultural productivity and food security during the land reform process. This limits the function land should provide, especially in the [land redistribution models](#). The state should support a variety of livelihood options, especially on land with low agricultural potential.

As recognised by a recent [report](#) from the South African presidential advisory panel on land reform and agriculture, access to water may not be equal on all properties. This may severely undermine agricultural potential. Policies need to acknowledge other characteristics of land potential, like soil fertility, topography and rainfall, as well as cultural importance.

Land with high aesthetic appeal, for example, may be more suited to ecotourism while land close to urban centres could provide rental income.

This diversity of benefits serves not only the people who have access to the land, but also the broader society. Changes to land use [alter the extent or variety](#) of these benefits.

For example, if land is geared towards intensive commercial farming with high water requirements, downstream water users could have less and lower quality drinking water. If the land is used for intensive commercial farming, it constrains other benefits such as those from tourism or ceremonial uses, [and excludes many smallholder farmers](#).

If restituted land remains within a national park, it conserves the environment for future generations. But that's traded off against financial, [cultural and spiritual losses of previous landowners](#).



Giraffe and plains zebra in the Kruger national park, South Africa. Shutterstock

Land potential also varies over time. Past land management may have degraded the [land's potential](#) to support agricultural production. Current mismanagement of land has the potential to disadvantage future generations reliant on that land. Discussions on what land should be redistributed have mentioned “unused” or “underutilised” land which may be unused precisely because it’s not suitable for agriculture.

Future land benefits will also be affected by climate change. It’s [predicted](#) that most of South Africa will become warmer and drier. This is problematic for land beneficiaries who want to farm.

The ways of using the land, including current farming practices, will have to adapt to ensure current and future equity and sustainable livelihoods.

## Land reform is more than hectares distributed

Land reform strategies need to consider each land parcel’s ecological potential and social-economic context to ensure equitable distribution beyond just land hectareage. Land reform programmes thus need to be highly context-sensitive and localised. Specialists must determine land potential given the context, and take into account what beneficiaries want and can do.

Practically, the state extension services that support landowners need to be given the capacity to provide information and support beyond agriculture. A tall order, but ignoring the connections between people and nature will ultimately result in social justice failure.

Climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation form the backdrop against which land reform is happening. Yet, ecological collapse and the repercussions for human well-being are [not included in the land reform debate](#). Such policies will undermine benefits to future generations, and ecological collapse on marginal land can entrench disadvantage.

A broad consideration of equitable benefits needs to go beyond simply who has access to the land.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Mgrabi is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow Department of Environmental Science, Rhodes University.

Alta De Vos is Senior Lecturer, Rhodes University.

Charlie Shackleton is Professor and Research Chair in Interdisciplinary Science in Land and Natural Resource Use for Sustainable Livelihoods, Rhodes University.

Hayley Clements is Researcher, Stellenbosch University.

Joana Bezerra is Post-Doctoral Fellow, Rhodes University.

Kaera Coetzer is Research Associate: Social-Ecological Systems scientist, University of the Witwatersrand.

Kristi Maciejewski is Research Associate, Centre for Complex Systems, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch University.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>