

Land, youths and ‘radical economic transformation’: Whither South Africa

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Abstract

The subject of land has recently assumed centre stage in South Africa with, for example, politicians in both the ruling party and in opposition political movements jostling to provide the loudest of voices on the issue. The ruling African National Congress party has placed the land issue and accelerated land redistribution from the white minority to the black majority at the centre of its intended push to what it is calling ‘radical economic transformation’, whilst the four-year old opposition Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party has gone further and called for the amendment of the Constitution to allow for the expropriation of land without compensation. Other political formations with such names as ‘Black First Land First’ (BLF) have also arisen in the last two years, showing how land has suddenly become a serious political platform two decades since the country attained majority rule. An interesting dimension in all this is that such formations as the EFF and BLF, which have been the most vocal and radical on the land issue are led by young people (below the age of 40). This paper therefore seeks to explore the generational, socio-economic and political contexts within which interest in the ‘land question’ in South Africa has suddenly surged. A key focus of the paper is on the exploration of how the recent radicalization of the land issue can be linked to and be an opportunity for addressing the issues of youth land rights and rising youth unemployment in South Africa. The paper ultimately suggests recommendations for an inclusive and progressive land reform process in South Africa going forward as based on unique historical and contemporary experiences in the country as well as on experiences on resolving the ‘land question’ elsewhere – a process which should take on board generational concerns in addition to the traditionally recognised race, class and gender aspects.

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1. Introduction and background

“The youth should be vocal in the fight to get our land back. The freedom we have now is incomplete. We have political freedom to vote but...economy-wise we are not free. That is why the youth of today should start the fire of radical socio-economic transformation”. South African President Jacob Zuma, September 10, 2017

The land issue has moved to the centre of political and economic discourses in South Africa during the course of the last couple of years. Reasons for this surge in interest on the issue are varied; however two main ones come to the fore. Firstly is the widely acknowledged failure of land reform to alter the agrarian structure of the country in the last 23 years of independence, and secondly is the likely manipulation of the emotive (land) issue by political parties to invoke the need for urgent redress in an attempt to mobilise supporters as the country moves closer to the 2019 general elections. Since early 2016, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party has been placing the land issue at the centre of what it is calling ‘radical economic transformation’. This is a call, though unclear in process as it has not been expressly unpacked, that is designed to enforce “fundamental changes in the structure, systems, institutions and patterns of ownership, management and control of the economy in favour of all South Africans, especially the poor, the majority of whom are African and female” (South African Government, 2017). The third largest political party in the country, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), has also come up as one of the most radical voices on the land issue, with the party proposing a motion in the National Assembly in February 2017 for the Constitution to be changed to allow for land expropriation from the white minority without compensation². Another notable political formation that has recently emerged with radical proposals on the land issue is the pointedly named ‘Black First Land First’ (BLF) formed in 2015. In its “Revolutionary Call” released on August 13 2015, the BLF party states that:

“Without land there is no freedom or dignity. We want Land First because it is the basis of our freedom, our identity, our spiritual well-being, our economic development and our culture. The land of Africans was stolen and this theft has rendered us landless in our own land. We want all the land...All of it belongs to us! We are a people crying for our stolen land! Now we have decided to get it back by any means necessary”

Youths are very much part of these current contestations around economic transformation and the land issue. As the quotation at the beginning of this paper shows, the ruling ANC party is pushing for its youth wing to be the vanguards of its call to ‘radical economic transformation’. On the other hand, the majority in the top-brass of the EFF and BLF – including the presidents of the two parties themselves – are youthful individuals, most of whom are below the age of 40. There appears to be a growing realisation, especially among the politically inclined youths, that the government is not doing enough not only to accelerate the land reform process but also to use the process for the betterment of the lives of youths. This paper therefore explores these current contestations in South Africa in the context of youth land rights and increasing youth unemployment. The main thrust of the paper is that current heated contestations around the ‘land question’ within economic transformation debates may be a perfect opportunity to raise issues around enhancing youth land rights in South Africa – particularly in the context of land reform – which, in the process, will simultaneously help in addressing the persistent problems of youth unemployment, poverty

² The motion was overwhelmingly defeated by 266 votes to 33

and widespread inequality. Three key propositions are advanced in the paper, and these are (a) the land reform process, as an important vehicle for economic transformation in South Africa, should be flexible enough to recognise and accommodate the needs and constraints of different categories of intended beneficiaries, including the (needs and constraints of) youths – who seem to have been largely left behind in the land reform process to date, (b) the land reform process in South Africa should include clear provisions for agricultural information and knowledge as well as farming techniques and input support targeted at young people which will provide youths with the necessary tools needed to fully empower them as agricultural entrepreneurs and enable them to see farming in a positive light, and (c) the land redistribution exercise in South Africa should be accelerated if land and agriculture are to be used to improve and transform the employment position and livelihoods of youths in the country. Following this introduction and background, the paper is organised around three main sections. The next section outlines the case for enhanced youth land rights in post-apartheid South Africa. This is followed by a discussion of ideas on pathways to enhancing youth land rights towards an inclusive and progressive land reform process in the country. Lastly is the conclusion section.

2. A case for enhanced youth land rights in post-apartheid South Africa

This section discusses the rationale for enhancing youth land rights in South Africa. It begins with a brief overview of the land reform process in post-apartheid South Africa, including a look at whether youths have benefitted in the process. It then proceeds to outline and discuss the socio-economic and political advantages of enhancing youth land rights in the country. In South Africa, youth is defined as the group of people between 14 and 35 years of age (The Presidency, 2015). It is imperative at this point to note that youths in South Africa, as in all societies, are not a homogeneous group. There are different youth sub-groups in the country and these include school-going youths, out-of-school youths, unemployed youths, rural and urban young men and women, youths in conflict with the law, young people with disabilities, young men and women heading households, and youths infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (Mathivha, 2012). Discussion in this paper takes a broad reference of youths and includes all the mentioned categories with the exception of school-going youths³. It should however be noted that in South Africa, among the youths, females and rural youths face far huge challenges than others particularly because of the problems of early motherhood and lack of educational and job opportunities (ibid).

2.1. Overview of the land reform process in post-apartheid South Africa

Land reform in post-apartheid South Africa has proceeded from three angles, namely (a) redistribution aimed at transforming the racial pattern of land ownership from the white minority to landless blacks (b) restitution of historical rights to people who were displaced from their lands as a result of apartheid era discriminatory pieces of legislation and (c) tenure reform that seeks to address insecurity of tenure especially for people staying on privately-owned farms and state land. The following sub-sections give a brief overview of these processes.

Land redistribution

The land redistribution programme has been anchored on the ‘willing buyer, willing seller’ principle, with government facilitating the purchasing of land from white commercial farmers at market value for redistribution to beneficiaries. From 1994 to 1999, the programme was

³ Dynamics discussed in this paper are largely irrelevant to school-going youths

supported by the Settlement and Land Acquisition Grant (SLAG), whereby a grant of R16 000 was availed to qualifying households (earning below R1 500) to enable them to buy land. The aim was to target the ‘poorest of the poor’ in the land redistribution process. In 2001, the programme moved away from this welfare-type process towards redistribution focused on individual beneficiaries for commercial production purposes. The main objective was to create new black commercial farmers. A new policy, the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD), was launched to support the process and the key mechanism offered by LRAD was a grant system that beneficiaries could access along a sliding scale, from R20 000 to R100 000. All beneficiaries were required to make a contribution in cash or in kind, the size of which would determine the value of the grant for which they would qualify. Under SLAG and LRAD, grants were issued to specific individuals who were then responsible for sourcing and negotiating the purchase of land from private owners (Lahiff and Li, 2012). From 2006 onward, LRAD was replaced by the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) which aimed at speeding up the transfer of land through the proactive acquisition of land on the market directly by the government for redistribution purposes. Under PLAS, land could however only be permanently transferred to beneficiaries after they had demonstrated their production capabilities in three years of monitoring by government officials. Since 2014 to date, PLAS has been replaced by the State Land Lease and Disposal Policy (SLLDP) as the vehicle regulating the land redistribution programme. Under the SLLDP, beneficiaries are not to acquire ownership of land, but to lease land from the state. Land is made available on a 30 year lease, which is renewable for a further 20 years provided there is ‘production discipline’.

Land restitution

Land restitution was limited to those dispossessed from their original lands after the Natives Land Act of 1913. The legal basis for restitution lies in Section 25(7) of the Constitution and the 1994 Restitution of Land Rights Act. The Act established a Commission on the Restitution of Land Rights (CRLR) under a Chief Land Claims Commissioner and seven Regional Commissioners. A special Land Claims Court was also established to deal with land claims and related restitution matters. Legally, all land claims are against the state and not against past or current landowners and redress for victims of dispossession may be done through restoration of the land claimed, provision of alternative land, or compensation in cash (Stickler, 2012). The cut-off date for lodging restitution claims was December 31, 1998 and a total of 76, 696 claims had been lodged by that date (Lahiff and Li, 2012).

Tenure reform

Tenure reform aims at protecting and strengthening the land rights of people staying on privately-owned farms and state land e.g. farmworkers and tenants as well as those living in the former homelands. The legal basis of tenure reform lies in the Extension of Security of Tenure Act of 1997 (ESTA) and the Land Reform (Labour Tenants) Act of 1996 (LTA). The two Acts aim at regulating tenure relations between owners and occupiers of privately-owned land and to determine when and how occupiers may be evicted so as to prevent the arbitrary eviction of people (Hall, 2007). ESTA also allows farmworkers to apply for grants for on- and off-farm developments.

Brief assessment

As noted earlier in the introduction and background section, it is widely acknowledged that the land reform programme has largely failed to transfer the majority of land from the white minority. Cousins (2016a) writes that only about 8 million hectares of the total 86 million

hectares of white-owned farmland has been transferred to black South Africans through land restitution and redistribution with many restitution claims yet to be resolved. Tenure reform has also largely failed as, for example, farm owners have continued to evict unwanted workers (ibid). The government objective of transferring 30% of white-owned agricultural land by 2014 therefore failed as the land transferred to date translates to only about 9%. It is not the intention to discuss in detail the various reasons often attributed for this failure at this point because of space, suffice it to say these reasons range from the ineffectiveness of the 'willing-buyer, willing-seller' approach, beneficiary targeting issues, lack of coherence and coordination among implementing departments and agencies, and a small budget allocated for the land reform exercise.

Youths in the land reform process

A central debating point in the historiography of as well as policy matters on land in post-apartheid South Africa has mainly been the significance of race on one hand and class and gender dynamics on the other. A focus on youths and/or generational dynamics has been a very minor strand weaving through these debates. Mathivha (2012) writes that whilst such initiatives as the Agriculture Youth Development Initiative of 1998, Youth in Agriculture and Rural Development (YARD) of 2008, and the Department of Land Affairs' Youth Empowerment Strategy of 2008 have been introduced since 1994, none of these programmes is institutionalised and operational. The Department of Agriculture's Director General is on record as admitting that "when we started with our land reform programme in 1994, we did not have specific programmes targeted at youth empowerment and this has resulted in few youths being beneficiaries of land and agrarian reform" (ibid). The National Development Plan, which is government's main development blueprint out to 2030, outlines the three principles underlying land reform as (a) deracialising the rural economy, (b) democratic and equitable land allocation and use across *race, gender and class*, and (c) a sustained production discipline for food security (National Development Plan, 2012: 144). The generational/age factor is not fleshed out in similar ways as the race, gender and class factors yet it is as important as those three. The current radicalisation of the discourse on land reform may as well, therefore, be a perfect window of opportunity to seriously raise and engage with issues around enhancing youth land rights in South Africa given the fact that youths are also fully engaged in that discourse.

2.2. Socio-economic and political rationale for enhancing youth land rights in South Africa

Arguments for enhancing youth land rights in this paper are mainly centred on the redistribution aspect of the land reform process towards beneficiary *control and ownership* of land for farming and agricultural purposes. The restitution and tenure reform aspects primarily involve people historically associated with the lands involved thereby limiting access of new players onto those particular lands.

Socio-economic arguments

Young people constitute 37% of the country's population (The Presidency, 2015). They therefore constitute the biggest age category of the South African population. In the same vein, youth unemployment and associated poverty are among the greatest socio-economic challenges in South Africa (Mbatha and Roodt, 2014). Youth unemployment rate in the country currently stands at an all-time high of 55% and has averaged 51% from 2013 to 2017 (Trading Economics, 2017). These figures may as well be interpreted as a ticking socio-economic time-bomb because, if not addressed, the effects may include increased poverty,

increased crime and drug-related gang culture and increased potential of political instability. It is in this context that enhancing youth land rights by opening up specific opportunities for them in the land reform process and supporting them in agriculture can go a long way in addressing the problems of unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime and food security in the country. South Africa's National Development Plan (2012) states that the agricultural sector has the potential to create one million jobs by 2030, which means enhancing youth land rights may be the most immediate means of catalysing employment for young people, positively transforming the livelihoods of youths, and economic growth.

Political arguments

The land issue serves as a glaring symbol of generalised oppression and dispossession and as Cousins (2017) argues, even in an urbanised country like South Africa, it resonates powerfully because of widespread inequality and chronic poverty. To many South Africans therefore, land inequalities carry a profound political charge. As long as the distribution of land continues to be racially skewed, political formations in the country will continue to invoke land dispossession and the need for redress as a way of mobilising supporters. A huge energetic, unemployed youth constituency may also be an easy tool of manipulation in driving these political agendas. Politicking with such an emotive issue as land, however, has the potential of destabilising a country's peace and economic development as happened in Zimbabwe with respect to that country's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) of the early 2000s. Critics of the FTLRP argue that, faced with very high prospects of losing the 2000 general election to a formidable opposition, the ruling ZANU PF party invoked the land issue as its main campaign trump card and immediately engineered the chaotic fast track land redistribution process. FTLRP involved the massive and often violent expropriation of white-owned commercial farms without compensation. Many white commercial farmers and their farm workers were illegally displaced by veterans of that country's 1970s liberation war and youths aligned to the ruling party as encouraged by ruling party leaders. This exerted a heavy toll on the country's agricultural sector with devastating effects on agricultural production, food security and the economy from which the country is yet to recover.

Cousins (2016b) argues that current political rhetoric on the land issue in South Africa draws on a narrative 'in which white farmers are the villains, black South Africans are the victims, and the government (and/or opposition parties) are heroes rising to the rescue'. As already noted, in the context of high rates of youth unemployment and widespread inequality, the situation, if not speedily addressed, may remain prone to abuse by politicians especially towards election seasons. Enhancing youth land rights and mainstreaming youth development in the agricultural sector will therefore be one major step towards addressing the land situation in South Africa and averting chances of abuse of this emotive issue by political forces for self-serving political ends. Land reform in South Africa requires a new narrative towards an inclusive and progressive process that should take on board generational concerns in addition to the traditionally recognised race, class and gender issues. Enhancing youth land rights may, indeed, be an integral part of a genuine 'radical economic transformation' vis-à-vis an inclusive agrarian reform process – a process which should encompass a rapid break from the past without significantly disrupting agricultural production and food security.

3. Enhancing youth land rights towards an inclusive and progressive land reform process in South Africa

This section discusses ideas on pathways to an inclusive and progressive land reform process in South Africa going forward, which could contribute in directing manoeuvres towards

genuine and well-planned socio-economic transformation in the country. Whilst an inclusive and progressive land reform process has to take into account the interests of all hitherto marginalised groups, including women and the disabled, this section zooms specifically on youths as that is the main thrust of the paper. The section therefore discusses specific ways through which youth land rights may be enhanced in South Africa and the challenges and opportunities involved.

3.1. Discarding the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to land reform

One of the main problems with the land reform process in South Africa has been little flexibility vis-à-vis accommodating the needs and constraints of different categories of people. Beneficiaries have often been treated as a homogeneous group and defined in very broad and almost exclusively racial terms yet people are socially differentiated. Key categories of people intended to benefit are not specified clearly enough yet different groupings of people have different needs and constraints. Youths are a separate and key grouping whose needs and constraints should be clearly spelt out in the land reform process vis-à-vis access to land, provision of implements and inputs, business skills, access to information, opportunities and markets. As noted in Section 2, even among the youths there are various sub-groups. Policy makers should therefore make efforts to understand the challenges, opportunities, perceptions and aspirations of different youth sub-groups vis-à-vis land across geographical, racial, gender and class divides.

3.2. Provision of clear agricultural information, knowledge, farming techniques and inputs targeted at young people

What complicates the position of most youths in South Africa vis-à-vis the land reform process includes scepticism regarding the economic viability of agriculture, lack of skills, low-levels of school education, and low social capital. Targeting youths in the land reform process should therefore be anchored on a value-chain approach encompassing a wide-range of activities which include providing them with the necessary inputs, extension training that assists them with technical and managerial skills, capital for purchasing or leasing equipment, and facilitating their access to high value markets (AGRA, 2015). In addition, policy makers should make concerted initiatives targeted at youths to present farming more effectively as a business opportunity rather than as an occupation for the aged, the illiterate and for people living in rural areas. Political parties and the media specifically have a major role in this process of changing negative perceptions around farming among the youths.

3.3. Accelerating the land redistribution exercise

If land and agriculture more broadly is to be used to improve the position of youths in South Africa, then agricultural land must be redistributed more speedily and on a far bigger scale than is currently happening. This may not necessarily require a change in the Constitution to allow for the government to expropriate land without compensation as some political players are clamouring for at the moment, but it may require a radical shift in and realignment of government priorities⁴. A key aspect of this priority shift will be to substantially increase the budget on land reform primarily so as to allow for the accelerated purchase of more land for redistribution. An increased budget will also allow for the extensive training of extension

⁴ Changing the Constitution to allow the government to expropriate land from the white minority does not appear to have a buy-in from politicians across the political divide at the moment as evidenced by the overwhelming failure of the EFF party’s motion in the National Assembly in February 2017 which essentially sought to propose that path.

staff in the provinces as well as increased skills and input support. As Walker (2017) writes, it is remarkable that land reform's share of the national budget has never exceeded one percent. He notes that in the 2014 budget for example, the total allocation to the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) was less than a third of that allocated to the Department of Human Settlements for national housing delivery, reflecting far greater government priority to deal with housing backlog in urban areas. Government priorities may therefore have to change to reflect the significance that land has assumed in national political and economic discourses in recent years.

4. Conclusion

Land reform is an important aspect of social and economic transformation in South Africa, as a means both of redressing past injustices and of alleviating the pressing problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality (cf. Lahiff and Li, 2012). The current heated contestations around the land issue in South Africa present opportunities to raise critical points around the inclusion of hitherto 'forgotten' but very important groups of people such as youths in the land reform process. Youths constitute the biggest age category of the South African population and a genuine 'radical socio-economic transformation' in the country can only be fully realised when the youths are fully mobilised, incentivised and equipped for participating in such key economic sectors as agriculture. Enhancing youth land rights towards an inclusive and progressive land reform process will therefore be critical in simultaneously dealing with the problems of increasing youth unemployment, poverty and widespread inequality bedevilling South Africa.

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