

## There is a future for SA's small farmers

THE coming land and agriculture summit called by Land Affairs and Agriculture Minister Thoko Didiza presents an opportunity to rethink the fundamentals of SA's ailing land reform programme. A crucial issue is how land reform and agricultural development can help address the most pressing problems facing our society: poverty, unemployment and inequality.

A recent report on land reform by the Centre for Development and Enterprise proposes several answers to this question, some of them apt — such as large-scale urban land provision, and a comprehensive rural development strategy. It deserves to be widely debated.

But the report also contains some dubious findings. It finds that only 9% of black people who are not farmers have farming aspirations, and that only 15% of farm workers have aspirations to farm on their own, or full-time. From these and related survey data it is concluded that rural demand for land to farm is low.

The report proposes urbanisation as the answer. Yet unemployment of the unskilled and marginalised is growing, and urban poverty is rapidly increasing. Of course, creating livelihood opportunities in towns and cities is vital, as is urban land release and settlement. But these will not be sufficient on their own, and a revitalisation of the rural economy is also needed — in part to slow the flood of migrants. Both urban and rural land reform are urgently required.

The report suggests that rural land reform is a low priority. This is in part due to its focus on commercial agriculture, which it characterises as offering few opportunities for addressing poverty and inequality. But smallholder agriculture is labour-intensive, uses few external inputs and is potentially productive. It does, however, require an enabling economic environment (credit, inputs supply, extension services, markets) that is largely absent at present, as in the past. Government's land reform and rural development policies have failed to address this challenge to date.

Research shows that small-scale producers are often highly productive and make a valuable contribution to the economy. Some rural households manage to secure more than half their total livelihood from the land, and others regularly sell surpluses to earn sizeable cash incomes. Natural resource harvesting from communally held resources also makes a significant contribution. Hard evidence indicates the real potential for a revival of small-scale agriculture.

Delali Dovie, of Wits University, for example, recently found that maize yields in Thorndale village in Bushbuckridge averaged 4,3 tons a hectare. The net value of cropping for each household was more than R4000 a year, from an average of 1,86ha under crops. These are comparable to yields and returns from commercial farms. More than 22% of the harvest was sold for cash. The value of crops constituted about 15% of the total value of household livelihood activities, with livestock contributing 22% and woodland resources another 19%. Land-based livelihoods thus made up about 56% of total livelihood value.

Government desperately needs new policies aimed at stimulating smallholding agriculture and helping to reduce rural poverty. Proposals that land reform be “urbanised, marketised, individualised, monetised and modernised” are mostly inappropriate — although elements deserve attention.

Rural land reform should include support for subsistence production, multiple livelihoods, community-based initiatives and democratic systems of communal tenure.

Let us hope that the minister's summit provides opportunities to debate these crucial issues in an open manner.

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