

URGENT INTERVENTION NEEDED TO BUILD CAPACITY IN DISTRICT LAND REFORM

Many district land reform committees are not functioning optimally, yet only a few were willing to participate in an HSRC research and capacity building project.



Tim Hart and Prof. Leslie Bank report.

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More than a year after the establishment of district land reform committees across South Africa to facilitate the identification of transferable land and beneficiaries, several of these committees are functioning either sub-optimally or not at all. To address this, the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) needs to revisit the mandate of these committees as well as that of key state departments that are involved in land reform at provincial, district and local level.

This was the finding and the recommendation after the HSRC conducted a research and capacity building intervention for selected district land reform committees in 10 districts across South Africa. Researchers completed the 10-month project in August.

The intention of the committees

Land reform in the agricultural sector remains high on the political agenda and is considered an

essential economic contribution to rural development and food security at household and national level. Flowing from recommendations of the National Planning Commission and for the purposes of the National Development Plan, district land reform committees were set up in all 44 districts by mid-2016. These committees are intended to be multi-stakeholder platforms representative of various local constituents in each district. Their purpose is to facilitate and fast track the agricultural land redistribution process to ensure that at least 20% of land is redistributed in each district by 2030. Using a community-led decentralised approach, the committees have to identify local land needs and farming land that can be acquired without distorting the land market. This could typically include land that has already been placed on the market, land owned by absentee property owners who are willing to participate in redistribution, or land in a deceased estate.

Supporting the committees

The focus of the HSRC project was to increase the capacity of the committees to conduct basic research on land use and needs, invoking a participatory framework in conjunction with specific interest groups and communities at large. The researchers also piloted strategies to reach out to these sections of the local community.

The intervention was located in 10 districts across Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape (see Figure 1). The land available for agricultural redistribution varied in size, type, contemporary usage and pricing, so did the needs of residents. Some people wanted land for household cultivation, some for commercial cultivation, while others needed land for housing and household cultivation (particularly former farm-dwellers). In the Western Cape, respondents indicated that land was very expensive and difficult to purchase as a result. In parts of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, some bemoaned the fact that land in traditional areas was lying idle, as those with permission to use this land were not doing so. In Limpopo, people were concerned about the general shortage of land for farming. Therefore, the findings of the study were diverse across districts.

Non-functioning committees

The main finding of the study was that despite more than a year of existence, some of the 10 committees studied were not

functioning as expected and three were not functioning at all.

In some districts, committees were involved in redistributing large tracts of farmland to a small number of recipients, while in other areas they were struggling to redistribute any land at all, apparently because of dysfunctional committees. For example, those in the Overberg and the Cape Winelands were not functioning at all and the committee in Amathole crumbled during the study period. The redistribution of large tracts of land to a few selected beneficiaries was largely due to the continued unwillingness to subdivide large farmland and the desire to transfer as many hectares as possible and as quickly as possible, irrespective of the socioeconomic class of those benefitting. The result was that mainly small groups of elite applicants received large tracts of land.

Too little participation

While most committees were interested in the research and capacity building project, few actually participated in the activities. Some felt that as volunteers they were already too busy dealing with existing applications for large-scale commercial farmland and thus could not get involved in more work for which they did not have the resources. Others were concerned that reaching out to a broader group of land seekers may raise expectations, which government would not be able to satisfy and this would put the committees in an awkward position. Many of the 10 committees were under-represented and consequently under-skilled, as they did not liaise with other important stakeholders in local municipalities, state departments or the commercial farming sector. In

Figure 1: Geographical location of the final LUNA Pilot Districts in South Africa



Source: Bank et al. (2017).

a few cases, the committees were frustrated with the slow procedures of government departments and attempted to move forward without their government partners, raising questions about adherence to their mandate and overall accountability.

Urgent need to step in

Local representatives chair the committees and the provincial arm of the DRDLR serves as their secretariat. Interestingly, both the secretariat and the management feel frustrated with the process indicating that the DRDLR needs to urgently step in and revisit the functioning of the committees regarding their mandate in terms of roles and responsibilities. This needs to be done on a regional basis and involve not only the committees but also key state departments at provincial, district and local level. While the HSRC study only covered 10 districts, subsequent to a scanning exercise,

there is a need to examine the functioning of the remaining 34 committees too.

The HSRC's partners included the University of Fort Hare and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A number of postgraduate students participated in the research activities to develop their experience in applied research. The project was supported by the DRDLR and the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BRC).

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Reference:

Bank et al. 2017. Land Use and Needs Assessment District Land Reform Committee (DLRC) Research Capacity Building Pilot Project. Final report (31 August 2017) submitted to the DRDLR and the BTC.