

## opinion

By Johan Fourie



### LAND REFORM

# The science of decolonisation

How do we build a prosperous decolonised Africa? One solution is to focus less on land reform and more on science and technology.

I recently attended an academic conference at the University of the Free State on the topic "Decolonizing Africa". Much of the debate was, understandably, about the past: the lingering effects of the (Atlantic) slave trade, European colonisation that included the imposition of largely artificial borders, and post-colonial failures of independent Africa.

At the final keynote, by the University of Pretoria's Professor Alois Mlambo, the discussion turned to the future. How do we build a prosperous, decolonised Africa?

One unescapably emotive topic is land reform. Expropriation and dispossession of land in South Africa is the root, many agreed, of the severe levels of inequality that plague the region. But correcting this past injustice was not easy; in the audience were several Zimbabwean scholars quite critical of that country's land reform programme. One student told me the story of his grandfather, a former farm worker on a white farm turned successful tobacco farmer after land reform, only to lose his land because he was considered "too successful" by the ruling Zanu-PF party. The farm is now dormant.

Getting land reform right is fraught with difficulty. Not everyone that suffered land expropriation wants to return to farming. By far the largest number of successful land claimants in SA chooses cash over land – this is often ignored by politicians and commentators when simply taking the hectares transferred as measure of land reform success.

When recipients *do* choose land, they often struggle to support themselves because of the small size of land allocated, lack of capital investment, or lack of technical or management skills.

There are also political consequences: since land recipients, like those in Zimbabwe, often do not receive title deed to land, they could become ensnared by the political party that gave them the land.

Of course, some form of wealth redistribution is imperative. But whereas land (and the minerals it contained) was clearly the most productive resource when it was expropriated in the 19th century (and the reason it was expropriated), a valid question is whether it still is the most productive. Of course, people value land not only for its economic uses: there is a myriad of historic, cultural and religious reasons why the land of your ancestors is treasured.

But as a redistributive policy aimed at creating a more equitable society, is land reform the best way to create prosperity for those who suffered historical injustice?

Think of the fastest-growing companies globally, like Airbnb: it is the world's largest accommodation service, without

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owning any property! For Airbnb and the myriad other unicorns that have created incredible wealth for their founders and shareholders, it is not land or physical property that creates wealth, but science and technology.

Mlambo remarked that India and China, both with a history of colonisation, are not growing at above 5% because they have redistributed land. They have prospered because they embraced science and technology.

Consider this: in the 2015/16 academic year, 328 547 Chinese students studied in the United States; only 1 813 South African students did.

(Accounting for population size, seven times more Chinese than South African students study in the US.) Take South Korea, a country with roughly the same population as SA: 61 007 South Koreans travelled to study in the US in 2015/16, 33 times more than SA.

How would a redistribution policy look that takes science and technology seriously? I don't have the answers, but here are some suggestions. Most of us would agree that education is key, but the South African education system has not made much progress in the last decade and it is unlikely to do so in the next.

Redistribution must start at the first year of life. Publicly funded but privately run nurseries will remove the gap between the rich and poor that has already emerged when kids arrive at school. For primary and secondary education, a voucher system that incentivises private schools for the poor is an option.

At tertiary level, we need more and better-funded universities, notably in science and technology. (It would help to send more of our smartest students abroad to study at the frontiers of science.) Visas for and recruitment of skilled immigrants can boost research and entrepreneurship. There are many more possibilities for transforming society, from improving free WiFi access to investing in renewable energies.

If Zimbabwe has taught us anything, it is that politics may triumph over economic logic. Land reform in Zimbabwe was not an economic strategy in as much as it was a strategy to keep the ruling party in power. It has had severe economic consequences, as anyone visiting Zimbabwe today can attest.

The radical economic transformations of our age – just in my lifetime, the Chinese have managed to reduce the share of people living in absolute poverty from 88% to less than 2% – have not come from redistributing an unproductive 21st century resource. It has instead been the result of investments in science and technology. Any attempt to redistribute with the purpose of building a more prosperous society should take this as the point of departure. ■

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