Will Land Reform Change Black Rural Rural Women's Realities in South Africa

By:

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February 24, 2021

This review is written whilst the world is in the grip of Covid-19. Lockdown measures and its militaristic enforcement like in South Africa, disrupted people's lives and livelihoods. As a result, food insecurity and hunger have increased. Small farmers and rural people's crucial informal food markets were cut off. President Ramaphosa announced on July 12 that the coronavirus storm is upon us with more than 12,000 new infections per day. The results of the unequal power and property relations manifested in reports of evictions of tenants who can no longer afford to pay rent, shack dwellers and landless people who occupied unused land and whose structures have been demolished. South Africa's harsh realities and inequalities seem to have amplified rapidly during the pandemic and so has the urgent need for radical change.

The engagement with several chapters of the book 'rethinking land reform in Africa' is informed by research experiences and interests in the lived realities of

farm workers, the implications of game farm conversions, land reforms, labour relations and resistance to power in South Africa. Over the years, I learned that land reform plans and realities are not the same thing. Land experts and planners are often far removed from everyday lived realities in the worlds they are engineering. As Cosmas Ochieng stated in the introduction to the edited book, it is important to understand the assumptions, rationales and motivations behind land reform. Land reform is an inherently political process that is not technical or ideologically neutral. The book would have benefitted from a concluding chapter that brings ideas together and reflects on its meanings for African land reform.

Chitonge (p99) points out that few people would disagree with the need for land to be used in a way that creates viable and sustainable livelihoods and reduces poverty and inequality for all Africans. It is the ideas about 'how' land reform should happen that generate disagreement and polarization. I will discuss two aspects of this 'how' questions and relate them to the South African context specifically: The idea that 'good governance' is the path to increased productivity as well as equitable and sustainable land use in Africa (Chitonge) and the idea that land reform should focus on smallholders.

Lipton's chapter is a kind of checklist to predict the success of land reform in Africa. He departs from the assumption that "the essence of land reform is eventual employment transition from agriculture to industry and skilled services" (p22). Agricultural transformation should later fuel non-farm growth. Ultimately, the ideal seems for Africa to follow the trajectory of Asia's green revolution. Lipton presents this as an inevitable and necessary development path for the whole continent. In the process, he states that land redistribution should focus on developing smallholders as they are more efficient, innovative and sustainable compared to large-scale agriculture. Lipton's 'checklist' also comes with four warnings. One is that "radical land redistribution is best attained with a high degree of consensus; and this is usually feasible" (p27) but not in South Africa where a powerful armed landowning class is not prepared to give up privileges and power. The active resistance to land reform as witnessed in South Africa is hardly studied, discussed or challenged. Despite decades of land reform, the country's plans for transformation still serves the interests of corporate and large-scale agriculture.

South Africa's vision as outlined in the National Development Plan is to develop agriculture through partnership between smallholders and the commercial farming sector that is predominantly male and white. It identifies subsistence farming and informal markets as key problems for productivity. A key assumption in the NDP is that the process of growing and developing smallholder agriculture is part of a wider process of expanding commercial agriculture in South Africa. This is a bleak prospect for black rural women who do not have access to land and have the most insecure and low-paid jobs as seasonal farm workers on commercial farms. In the debates on land expropriation without compensation (EWC), Ramaphosa kept assuring current land owners and investors that EWC will not be 'disruptive' . This means that radical land redistribution will not happen with consent of established agriculture and the African National Congress (ANC) government. How relevant is Lipton's list of conditions when they are only imagined through state intervention and agreement? Where are the voices and engagements with ideas from black farmers promoting agro-ecology and food sovereignty in Africa?

Chitonge's chapter reviews emerging land governance dynamics in Africa, especially in areas with customary tenure relations. Chitonge assumes that land governance is fundamentally about power relations between land actors on different levels. It consists of 3 components: 1. rule, laws and principles, 2. institutions through which they are applied, and 3. their application to guide day to day interactions. The interest in 'good governance' in Africa emerged along the development of liberalization strategies. These focused on strengthening land markets, large scale land acquisition, and privatization of natural resources. In this context, good governance was needed because the rights and livelihoods of local people were squashed by private investors causing food insecurity and poverty.

The chapters by Berry and Alden Wily discuss the formalization of customary rights as a part of land reform. Chitonge states that "the strategy of focusing on formalization of land has not yielded much in the past and may have contributed significantly to the persistent agrarian crisis on the continent" (p201). In Africa, there has been no empirical evidence that it raises productivity on its own. Moreover, Chitonge and Berry assume that securing land titles contributed to increased inequalities and abusive forms of authority

and control over land. Berry then suggests that given the rising levels of competition over land, Africa's focus should not be only on land reform but on strengthening socio-economic safety nets, jobs and support services (p42). It is governments, international donors and public-private partnerships that should facilitate this. Where does this leave community struggles for land and autonomy? Why should people living amidst an abundance of natural resources depend on jobs and international donor money?

The call for autonomy is present, loud and clear. Communities in areas under customary tenure in South Africa have been fighting ongoing violent battles against land interests for mining, conservation, and tourism. Activists have been killed. Farm workers have organized mass uprisings in the wealthy wine farming regions. The ANC and power brokers such as traditional authorities negotiate deals with investors who promise jobs and economic development and divide communities. How will good governance solve these conflicts? Chitonge argues that participatory governance approaches will yield better results and that effective leadership is important. Who is assumed to provide good governance leadership? Leaders of community struggles face intimidation, threats and repression from powerful enemies tied to the State. How will good governance help here?

Alden Wily suggests that legalizing customary land rights is important. She urges for a "moving out of colonial-induced thinking that the state is rightfully and appropriately the majority land owner" (p68) and insists that community ownership delivers more effective and sustainable protection of natural resources. Contrary to the rest of the African continent, South Africa's areas under customary tenure are small compared to commercially owned land (about 80%). Many commercial farmers have converted to game farming as wildlife is private property and a source of incredible wealth for landowners and the state. Land beneficiaries of restituted protected areas often have no access to natural resources as the state deeply mistrust Africans as custodians of its natural resources.

In my view, land reform ideas, opportunities and challenges should be informed directly by people depending on land and fighting for different social relations: rural women, rural movements, farm workers, urban land occupiers, shack dwellers, and smallholder farmers. Without listening to them, land reform will

not result in just societies.

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."- Arundhati Roy

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