

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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Lies of the land – government’s deeply questionable Land Audit

Government’s Land Audit – widely quoted as a central reference point in the debate around land reform – is a deeply questionable source of information. It leaves at least as many questions open as it answers. And the manner in which its information has been presented to the public has been misleading.

These are among the key points to emerge from *Who Owns the Land? A Critique of the State Land Audit*, an in-depth analysis from the Institute of Race Relations (IRR).

The Land Audit has been central to justifying government’s move towards a policy of property expropriation without compensation. The resolution passed in Parliament in February to investigate the modalities of doing so cited the Land Audit in its claim that ‘black people own less than 2% of rural land, and less than 7% of urban land’. The audit has provided the basis for similar claims by senior figures in government, such as Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, and President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Who Owns the Land? notes that aside from numerous errors in its texts and tables, the Audit does not support many of the claims that have been made. The racial profile of ownership is only available for a limited proportion of both urban and rural land in South Africa: properties that are owned by private individuals and registered at the Deeds Office. Land held on these terms accounts for a little over a fifth of urban land and less than a third of rural land.

No racial identity is assigned in the Audit to land held by companies, trusts, community-based organisations or the state. These holdings exceed – by a considerable extent – those of private individuals.

Claims – such as that made in the Parliamentary motion – have invariably taken individually owned and registered landholdings and presented them as the sum total of black (African) people’s landholdings.

This is significant and deeply misleading. As *Who Owns the Land?* shows, this ‘disappears’ vast tracts of land to which Africans have historically had access. This includes land in the former ‘homelands’, which is now classed as state land, or is in some instances not registered at all. The Ingonyama Trust, with holdings of close to 3 million ha, is explicitly mentioned in the Audit as state land.

The Audit also ‘disappears’ most of the land acquired through the land reform process. This is because of the terms on which land was conferred on its beneficiaries, and recent policy which has sought to retain land acquired by the state for redistribution rather than passing it on to the ownership of land reform beneficiaries.

Who Owns the Land? observes: “Little of this land would be individually owned today as most land claims and redistribution projects had multiple beneficiaries, and furthermore since 2009 the government has held back from granting title to the beneficiaries of the land redistribution programme. In addition, government has made no effort to ensure those living on their ancestral land in former homeland areas acquire individual title to their land.”

Quite ironically, the narrative put forward from government on the basis of the Land Audit is to underplay if not deny the progress it has made in restitution and redistribution efforts – to the tune of some 8.1 million hectares since 1994.

Who Owns the Land? further makes some valuable observations about the differential carrying capacity of different regions of the country – suggesting that a dogged, numbers-driven approach to land reform is mistaken. The Northern Cape, for instance, accounts for a large portion of landholdings (primarily those of white and coloured people), but given its climate, is of limited value for any but very large-scale agricultural operations.

Finally, *Who Owns the Land?* underlines the need for better information in the national debate around land reform: “To sum up, then, the land audit may have given the state access to highly sensitive information about the race and nationality of individual property owners via census and Department of Home Affairs data – essential information for any planned ‘Radical Economic Transformation’-style programme of racial dispossession – but the report itself provides little meaningful basis for discussion as to overall patterns of rural land ownership in the country, let alone of agricultural land in particular.”

Ends.