

Land reform in South Africa was discussed in a recent BBC programme "Crossing Continents - South Africa's Promised Land:" It investigated the South African government's controversial attempts to speed up the process of land reform.

During the colonial and apartheid periods, ancestral land was taken over by white farmers. In an attempt to redress the injustice, new laws allow descendents of the previous occupants to lay claim to this land, which the government will purchase at market rates and hand over. The programme referred to instances where farms had been taken over by former farm workers and continued successfully. This takes considerable skill and effort, without which the land reverts to bush. The programme reported that more often, the new black owners do not have the resources to keep the enterprises going. The farms are falling into neglect and nothing is being produced. Once land becomes the subject of a claim, the banks will not advance credit to the farmers and those enterprises too are being driven to closure.

The experience demonstrates yet again that land distribution is not a solution to previous injustices which have led to the loss of tribal land. The colour of a land owner does not matter. The important thing is that the economic rent of all land is paid to the community and used as its principal source of revenue. Whatever the colour of the land owners, the rent of land must not be left in private hands. If economic rent is all collected, in the South African context, the white farmers can remain if they so wish, continuing to enjoy the benefits of the improvements they have themselves made to the land over a period of many years. Local and national government receives the rental value which is used for the benefit of everyone, whilst the land stays productive. If the white owners want to give up, and there are black ones that think they can use the land just as effectively, they have to pay the previous owners for the improvements made and take over the liability to pay the rental value to government. Either way, the rent is taken as public revenue and the land continues to be productive. That policy is, as it should be, colour-blind.

As things are, sadly, the ANC government is going to reopen wounds that were showing signs of starting to heal. This is an avoidable tragedy in the making. It should also be remembered that South African is industrialised and urbanised, and it is in the urban areas where the really high land values lie, not out in the bush.

The programme was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Thursday 10 July at 11.00 and can be heard on "listen again " on the BBC's web site.