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South Africa: after more than 30 years, land reform is far from having achieved its targets

Since the advent of the Trump administration in Washington, tensions have been growing between the US and South Africa. They involved anti South African statements made in the US that ranged from accusations of genocide against white people by billionaire Musk, a former Trump advisor, to documents issued by the US State Department accusing the South African government of taking “a substantially worrying step towards land expropriation of Afrikaners and further abuses against racial minorities” in 2024 [read [here](#) and [here](#)].

These tensions can probably be a consequence of South Africa’s genocide case against Israel before the International Court of Justice [read] and of the approval by South Africa, in January 2025, of the Expropriation Act allowing the expropriation of land with just and equitable compensation, for a public purpose or in the public interest (including land reform). The Act stipulates that when no agreement can be reached with the owner [read p. 10], land can be seized without compensation under certain conditions, e.g. when land is not being used.



The US accusations were strongly criticised by the South African government on the ground that they were relying on out of context information and discredited accounts [read]. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) acknowledged that “farm attacks are a serious crime problem requiring dedicated law enforcement

attention” but considers that “they do not amount to genocide” and “represent a small part of violent crime overall in South Africa, and their patterns are consistent with criminal rather than political motives”. It added that “recent statistics show a decline in violent farm crime” [\[read\]](#).

Meanwhile, 4,496 out of the 4,499 refugees let in by the US between October 2025 and 10 April 2026 were white South Africans (Afrikaner), on the ground of their alleged “persecution” in South Africa [\[read\]](#).

These news prompted the drafting of this article that intends to give a few facts on the progress of land reform in South Africa since May 1994, when the ANC came into power with the election of Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) [\[read\]](#).

1994: the end of the apartheid regime

During apartheid (1948–1994), South Africa was ruled by an overtly racist regime led by the National Party. Apartheid was characterised by white domination of every sphere of life. It was based on the declared racial superiority of white people and the subjugation of the “people of colour” (Black African, “Coloured”, and Indian).

Land had been systematically taken from the indigenous population since colonial times. The Natives Land Act of 1913 had prohibited the establishment of new farming operations, sharecropping, or cash rentals by Blacks outside of the reserves (Bantustans). By 1936, the Native Trust and Land Act meant that 87% of the land was under the ownership and control of the white minority, leaving only 13% to the “people of colour” [\[read\]](#). In 1993, the 1913 Act was repealed.

South Africa’s land reform program

1994–2005

When the political regime changed, in 1994, and the ANC government came to power, the average area of land held by Blacks was 1.3 ha/person, compared to 1,570 ha/person for Whites.

The **land reform program**, central to the country’s effort to address historical injustices, was launched based on three pillars:

- **Redistribution** – providing land for productive and residential purposes to a large number of rural Blacks who were dispossessed during apartheid and who are interested in obtaining land through a settlement/land acquisition grant;
- **Restitution** – in cash or kind, to compensate individuals who had been victims of forced removals following the racist 1913 Act; and,
- **Tenure reform** – to recognise individual and communal land ownership and informal settlements, and establish a new administrative infrastructure to provide access to land by discriminated population groups [\[read\]](#).

It was a market-led land reform that rested on the “willing buyer-willing seller” principle, adopted under the influence of the World Bank that was then promoting land reforms based on “voluntary land transfers negotiated between buyers and sellers, with the government's role restricted to establishing the necessary framework for negotiation and making a land purchase grant available to eligible beneficiaries” [\[read\]](#). This approach was also most likely adopted to avoid what had happened earlier in Zimbabwe, where a more radical land reform had serious consequences on agricultural production in the 1980s when farms belonging to the white minority were dismantled.

By 2005, while the South African agriculture sector continued to perform (see **figure 1**, below), land reform was slow and it became clear that the approach followed would not be sufficient to achieve the target of distributing 30% of agricultural land [\[read\]](#).

2007-2014

By 2007, progress was still limited and it was obvious that the program had largely overlooked the fact that most potential beneficiaries of the reform had no experience whatsoever in managing a family farm. Some were labourers who had worked on large farms belonging to the white minority (around 1.2 million families), and others had never been involved in farming.

By then, most land reform beneficiaries were living on small farms (average less than 2 hectares), frequently located on the least productive land and in locations ill served by infrastructure (including that related to water [\[read\]](#)) and markets, and they did not have the technical, managerial and marketing skills required for operating in a ‘modern’ economy.

They also did not benefit from support of an administration with the experience and capacity of supporting small farmers. Suggested remedies to this situation included systematic training of farmers, strengthening of public extension services and establishing marketing arrangements between farmers groups or cooperatives and canteens of public organisations (schools, administrations, prisons, hospitals, etc.) (FAO, 2007).

By 2014, the progress of the land reform was still sluggish, support to beneficiaries often inadequate, while gender disparities persisted [\[read\]](#).

2024

By 2024, the land reform had resulted in distributing 7-14% of the land, less than half of the initial target,¹ with beneficiaries often holding insecure lease

¹ The uncertainty on the land distributed shows how challenging the land reform is: weakness and bureaucratic inefficiencies of the agencies that should coordinate the program and provide support to the beneficiaries, changes in the policy narrative over time, elite capture are among the problems encountered [\[read here and here\]](#).

agreements or lacking title deeds, perpetuating precariousness. Moreover, because of the lack of capacity, the utilisation of land was low.

Most of the 78 million hectares were still in the hands of the white minority, while cash compensations paid out had reached around USD1.1 billion equivalent, mostly in urban areas [\[read\]](#).

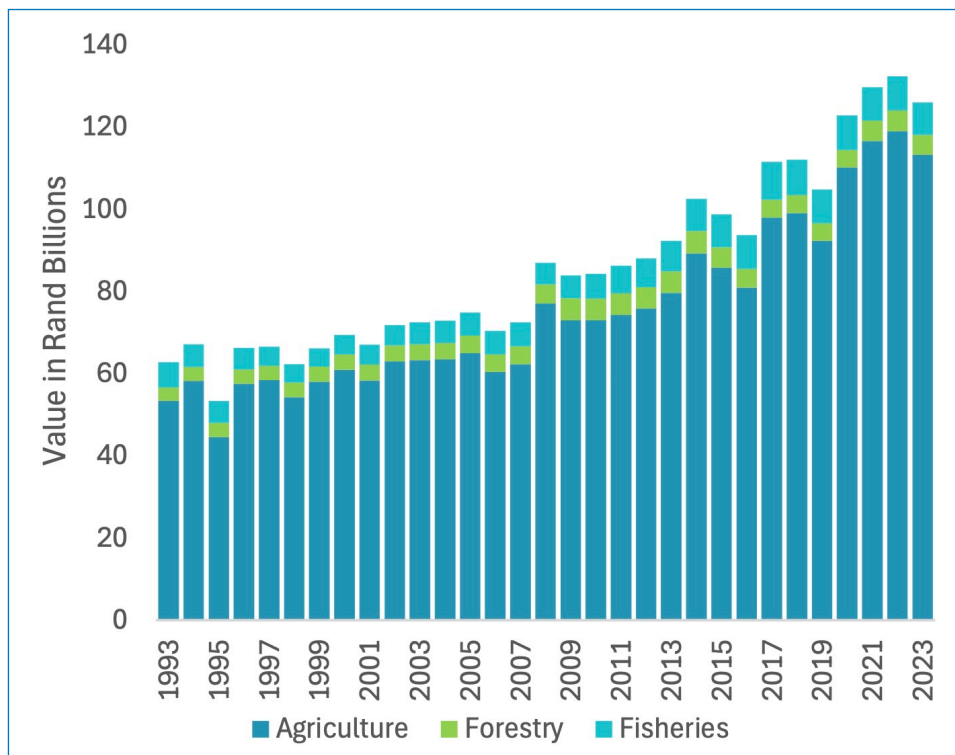
Most issues raised in 2007 were still valid and the need remained for “developing an enabling environment for its beneficiaries, including education, training, infrastructure, and access to modern farming equipment, finance, and markets” [\[read p. 573\]](#). This pointed at the unsatisfactory results of South Africa’s land reform that left millions of South Africans landless and economically marginalised both in rural and urban areas, living precarious lives.

This situation questions the approach followed and suggests the necessity of finding other ways to conduct land reform and exploring the potential of alternative land governance systems such as cooperative ownership, land leasing schemes, and urban land trusts [\[read\]](#). This will require a firmer commitment by the state.

Conclusion

Today, South Africa’s agriculture sector is still largely in the hands of the white minority. It has been performing well since 1994 and has grown, unaffected by a slowly progressing land reform (see **figure 1**).

Figure 1 – South Africa’s agricultural GDP (1993–2023)



Source: [Meyer et al., 2025](#).

Since 1993, while agriculture, forestry and fisheries weighed between 1.9 and 2.9% of GDP and grew rather regularly, the share of national budget resources allocated to agriculture and land reform fell from 1.2 to 0.8%, a sign that this does not seem to be a major priority for the government.

Yet, South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world [[read p. 2](#)]. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate, after decreasing in the first years following the change of regime, is now stalled and even slightly increasing, with more than 30% of the population living with less than USD 3/day/person, and more than two thirds of the population living with less than USD 8.3/day/person [[read](#)].

To know more:

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Selection of earlier articles published on [hungerexplained](#) related to this topic:

- [An unequal world: facts, causes, consequences, and possible remedies...](#) 2025.
- [Nelson Mandela: a hero, an example](#), 2013.
- [Land: an unequally distributed, threatened but essential resource](#), 2013.