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Beyond conventional land reform: Alternative pathways for redress and spatial transformation in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper critically examines South Africa's post-1994 land reform programme, exploring its policy intentions, implementation shortcomings, and the growing imperative for alternative and complementary approaches to land access. Despite the adoption of progressive legal frameworks targeting redistribution, restitution, and tenure reform, land reform has yielded limited transformation. Key challenges include bureaucratic inefficiencies, elite capture, inadequate post-settlement support, and persistent tenure insecurity, particularly in communal and urban contexts. The failure to align land reform with broader social and economic development strategies has further constrained its effectiveness and sustainability. In response, this paper explores emerging models such as community land trusts, cooperative ownership, strategic land leasing, land value capture in urban areas, and integrated agrarian reform linked to food systems and rural livelihoods. Drawing on Spatial Justice and Postcolonial Theory, the study advocates for a more participatory, flexible, and context-sensitive approach to land governance. It argues for institutional reform, stronger tenure protections, and enhanced post-transfer support to enable long-term socio-economic empowerment. As a conceptual, literature-based analysis, the paper synthesises existing scholarship rather than presenting new empirical field data. The paper concludes by proposing a recalibrated land reform agenda, one that is inclusive, democratic, and embedded within broader goals of social equity, rural transformation, and spatial justice.

Keywords: Land Reform; Tenure Security; Spatial Justice; Agrarian Transformation; Equitable Access To Land; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Land reform in South Africa remains one of the most complex and unresolved issues in the post-apartheid era. The country continues to grapple with stark disparities in land ownership, a direct legacy of colonial dispossession and apartheid spatial planning. As noted by Sihlangu and Odeku (2021), the land reform programme, encompassing redistribution, restitution, and tenure reform, was intended to redress historical injustices, reduce poverty, and promote equitable access to resources. However, the outcomes of these interventions have largely fallen short. Despite policy frameworks such as the Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994) and the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme, progress has been slow, uneven, and often disconnected from the needs of landless communities (Mfune, 2022).

The apparent shortcomings of land reform extend beyond legal and administrative challenges. At the socio-economic level, the continued concentration of land ownership has contributed to deepening rural poverty, spatial exclusion, and limited economic mobility for many historically disadvantaged South Africans (Ngcukaitobi, 2021). Studies show that communities affected by past dispossession still struggle with land insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of access to productive assets. This situation has intensified public frustration and disillusionment, sparking growing demands for alternative models that can deliver both justice and development (Masuku and Shadrack, 2023; Nyamura and Ngwenya, 2024).

While a growing body of literature has critically analysed the shortcomings of South Africa's land reform trajectory, relatively little attention has been given to the exploration of viable alternatives beyond conventional redistribution. This study addresses that gap by examining innovative strategies that may offer complementary or substitute solutions in the absence of effective state-led land reform. These include models such as land leasing schemes, community land trusts, cooperative ownership, urban land justice initiatives, and land value taxation. Such alternatives hold the potential to reframe land access as part of a broader agenda for socio-economic transformation, equity, and sustainability.

It is important to note that this paper constitutes a conceptual synthesis rather than a primary empirical study. Its novelty lies in bringing together historical and contemporary critiques of South African land reform, alternative land access models, and comparative insights from countries such as Brazil, Kenya, and Zimbabwe through a spatial justice lens, rather than presenting new field-based data.

To guide this inquiry, the study draws on theories of spatial justice, which emphasize the fair and equitable distribution of resources across geographic and social spaces (Soja, 2013). By applying this lens, the paper seeks to understand how land access, or lack thereof, continues to shape inequality, and how alternative governance frameworks might offer more just outcomes for historically excluded populations. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on redistribution metrics, this research integrates historical context, policy critique, and forward-looking strategies to offer a more comprehensive analysis of land justice.

Addressing the limitations of land reform requires a shift in how land governance is conceptualised and operationalised. It necessitates a willingness to adopt hybrid and locally responsive models that go beyond state-led redistribution alone. Emerging approaches, such as land value capture, cooperative tenure arrangements, and urban land interventions, provide promising entry points for more inclusive and effective

outcomes (Borras Jr and Franco, 2025). Additionally, embedding land access within broader frameworks of spatial justice and economic inclusion can enhance the transformative potential of these alternatives.

This paper explores how the failure of land reform in South Africa has prompted the search for new approaches to achieving land justice. Through a critical review of policy failures and alternative models, the study aims to identify realistic and context-sensitive strategies to address historical injustices. The paper is organised as follows: Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Methodological Approach, Limitations, Literature Review, Discussions, Conclusion, and Recommendations.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Spatial Justice Theory, which provides a critical lens for understanding the geographical dimensions of inequality and the distribution of land, power, and resources across space (Przybylinski, 2023; Pirie, 1983). Spatial justice, as conceptualised by Shields, (2024), goes beyond economic redistribution to include the equitable organisation of physical, political, and social space. It emphasizes the importance of access, rights, and representation within spatial systems, particularly in societies marked by historical dispossession and structural exclusion. In the South African context, where colonial and apartheid policies forcibly segregated land and restricted access along racial lines, spatial justice offers a powerful framework for interrogating the persistent legacies of spatial inequality.

Spatial Justice Theory is particularly relevant for this study as it enables an analysis that moves beyond the formal mechanisms of land redistribution to consider broader questions of access to land, secure tenure, economic opportunity, and spatial inclusion. It frames land not merely as a commodity or productive asset, but as a site of justice, identity, and belonging. This perspective allows for a more holistic interrogation of land reform failures by examining how certain populations remain systematically excluded from spatial benefits, even when formal policies are in place (Moroni, and De Franco, 2024).

The theory also provides a foundation for evaluating alternative models of land governance, such as cooperative ownership, land leasing schemes, and urban land trusts, by assessing how these strategies promote or hinder spatial equity. Rather than treating land reform as a narrowly technical issue, Spatial Justice Theory enables a critical examination of how power relations, state institutions, and socio-legal structures shape who benefits from land reform and who continues to be excluded (Pirie, 1983).

Additionally, this study draws from Postcolonial Theory as a supplementary lens to situate South Africa's land crisis within broader historical and epistemic contexts. Postcolonial theory interrogates the enduring effects of colonial rule on institutions, identities, and socio-economic structures (Fanon, 1963). In relation to land, it helps frame the conversation around historical injustices, racialised dispossession, and resistance to Western-centric development models, offering deeper insight into why conventional land reform approaches may be insufficient or inappropriate for redressing postcolonial legacies.

Together, Spatial Justice Theory and Postcolonial Theory provide a robust analytical framework for this study. They guide the evaluation of both the structural failures of land reform and the viability of emerging alternatives, with particular attention to equity, inclusion, and restorative justice. These frameworks help illuminate the ways in which land policies intersect with broader struggles for dignity, citizenship, and democratic participation in post-apartheid South Africa.

3. Methodological approach

This study adopted a qualitative, literature-based research design to examine viable alternatives to land reform for addressing historical injustices in South Africa. Secondary data formed the core of the analysis, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, think-tank reports, and selected working papers accessed through Google Scholar, the Journal Storage digital library (JSTOR), the South African Bibliographic and Information Network (Sabinet), the Southern African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII), the Land Portal Foundation (Land Portal), the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). A targeted search strategy was applied, combining structured keyword searches with elements of a semi-systematic review. Search terms such as "land reform in South Africa," "land justice," "historical land dispossession," "alternative land governance models," "cooperative ownership," and "urban land equity" were used, and Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) helped refine results to align closely with the research objective. The review focused on literature published between 1999 and 2024, a period selected to capture both the evolution of post-apartheid land reform and the emergence of alternative governance models. Although South African literature was prioritised, international case studies from the Global South were included where they offered relevant comparative insights.

To improve transparency and ensure consistency in selection, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the review process. Included literature comprised peer-reviewed articles, official government publications, and reports from reputable research institutions, provided they were written in English and offered substantive analysis of land reform, land justice, socio-economic outcomes, or alternative land governance models. Comparative studies from other Global South contexts were considered when they provided lessons applicable to the South African case. Working papers and doctoral theses were only included when they contributed rigorous empirical or conceptual insights not available in published scholarship. Excluded materials consisted of opinion pieces, blog posts, and editorials lacking evidence-based analysis, as well as studies focused narrowly on agricultural productivity without addressing issues of governance or land distribution. Non-English sources and literature unrelated to the post-1994 policy environment were also excluded. This approach ensured that empirical and conceptually grounded sources were prioritised over purely normative commentary, while still allowing grey literature where official or academic material was limited.

To give a sense of scale, the initial keyword searches generated approximately 350–400 records across all platforms. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, around 85–100 publications met the basic criteria for full-text assessment. From these, approximately 55–60 documents were ultimately included in the final synthesis. Although this does not constitute a formal systematic review, providing these figures offers transparency on how the literature was narrowed down from a broad initial pool to a focused body of work.

The final selection of literature paid particular attention to studies examining not only land reform outcomes but also the socio-economic consequences of stalled or ineffective reforms, including persistent poverty, landlessness, and spatial inequality. Emerging models of land governance, such as cooperative ownership, community land trusts, urban land equity interventions, and hybrid state-community arrangements, were also prioritised for their potential relevance to South Africa's current debates. By synthesising insights from land studies, development policy, urban planning, and human geography, the

methodological approach ensured a comprehensive yet appropriately modest review of available evidence, forming a solid foundation for assessing alternative approaches to land reform in South Africa.

3.1. Limitations

This study is primarily based on secondary literature, which, while extensive, limits the ability to capture the most recent on-the-ground dynamics of land access and governance in South Africa. The absence of primary data, particularly direct engagement with current land reform beneficiaries, community organisations, and implementing agencies, constrains the depth of insight into lived experiences, emerging practices, and the operational challenges of alternative models. Moreover, variations in the quality, scope, and recency of available sources may influence the comprehensiveness of the analysis. These limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive, underscoring the need for future research grounded in empirical fieldwork.

4. Literature review

4.1. Historical context of land dispossession in South Africa

The historical trajectory of land dispossession in South Africa is foundational to understanding contemporary challenges in land reform. The roots of land inequality are deeply embedded in the country's colonial and apartheid past, where land was used not only as an economic asset but also as a tool of social control, racial exclusion, and spatial engineering (Bernstein, 2003).

The Natives Land Act of 1913 stands as a watershed moment in South Africa's land history. While dispossession began under earlier colonial administrations, the 1913 Act codified and expanded systematic land exclusion based on race (Phala, 2013). As Hall and Mtero (2021) explains, the Act confined Black Africans to just 7% of arable land, despite constituting the vast majority of the population. This legislation entrenched a dualistic land regime, where white ownership and commercial farming dominated, while Black South Africans were relegated to overcrowded "native reserves" with limited access to productive land. Hall and Mtero further emphasise that the Act marked a turning point, embedding not only political and economic inequality, but also a spatial dualism that continues to structure South Africa's landscape.

Closely linked to this spatial and legal marginalisation was the use of land dispossession as a mechanism for labour control. Van Staden (2024) explores how the alienation of indigenous people from their land rendered them dependent on employment in white-owned commercial farms and mines. The immediate transformation of communal land into private property was not only an economic strategy, but also a tool of subjugation (Mbekeni, 2025). This implies that dispossession forced African populations into the migrant labour system, separating families and destabilising traditional livelihoods. Van Staden (*ibid*) further notes that land loss and exploitative labour systems were deeply intertwined, forming the backbone of South Africa's racial capitalist economy.

Further, the racialised geography of land ownership was also entrenched by the apartheid-era legislation, including the Group Areas Act (1950) and other influx control laws (Maharaj, 2019). Building on the foundations laid by the 1913 Act, these laws created a rigid system of spatial segregation. Black South Africans

were forcibly removed from urban centres and relocated to peripheral townships and homelands, further institutionalising unequal access to land and resources (Mabin, 1992). Hungwe and Mukonza (2025), underscores how this geographic exclusion continues to shape post-apartheid spatial inequalities, limiting access to infrastructure, services, and economic opportunity for historically marginalised populations.

Literature searches also show that land in South Africa was not only a source of exclusion, but it also became a site of political resistance and identity. Van Staden (2024) argues that the land question has been central to South Africa's liberation struggle, with organisations like the African National Congress (ANC) advocating for land rights since their early formation. More recently, political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have echoed these calls, arguing that land dispossession symbolised a broader loss of autonomy, dignity, and belonging (Majavu, 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that land featured prominently in the Freedom Charter (1955) and continues to be a powerful mobilising issue in post-apartheid politics.

Yet, despite the democratic transition, the colonial logic underpinning land exclusion has persisted in subtle forms. Boisen (2017) argues that post-apartheid restitution frameworks have been shaped by liberal legal principles rooted in European property regimes. These frameworks often fail to accommodate customary or collective land claims, resulting in the continued marginalisation of dispossessed communities. Boisen further contends that colonial-era justifications for land appropriation still distort the process of redress, making true restitution elusive.

Together, these works underscore the enduring legacies of colonial and apartheid land policies. They reveal how dispossession was not only about denying land but also about controlling labour, engineering space, and enforcing racial hierarchies. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for evaluating both the limitations of current land reform and the potential of alternative approaches to address long-standing injustices.

4.2. Post-1994 land reform policy and implementation

Following the democratic transition in 1994, South Africa adopted a tri-pronged land-reform programme designed to reverse apartheid-era dispossession, alleviate poverty, and promote inclusive rural development. The programme comprised land restitution, land redistribution, and tenure reform (Anseeuw and Mathebula, 2008). Although these components were underpinned by progressive legislation, the translation of policy commitments into implementation has been uneven. Persistent administrative inefficiencies, limited institutional capacity, and fragmented support systems continue to constrain the programme's transformative potential (Mfune, 2022).

4.2.1. Land restitution

The restitution programme, grounded in the Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994), sought to compensate individuals and communities dispossessed after 19 June 1913 (Roodt, 2003). In practice, outcomes diverged sharply between urban and rural claims. Urban claims were often resolved through financial compensation, a more expedient but less transformative remedy, while rural claims involving agricultural or mining land were complex, costly, and slow to finalise (Chitonge, 2022).

Despite the return of land in some rural cases, many projects struggled to achieve sustainable productivity. Post-settlement challenges, including limited technical support, unclear governance arrangements, and

difficulties in managing collectively owned farms, resulted in low economic returns for beneficiaries (Krüger et al., 2016). Strategic partnerships with commercial farmers were introduced to address these gaps, but these arrangements often generated conflicts, uneven power relations, and uncertainty over long-term beneficiary control (Tshigomana, 2021). Thus, although restitution delivered symbolic justice, its developmental and livelihood benefits have been inconsistent.

4.2.2. Land redistribution

Redistribution policy evolved through several phases. The early Settlement/Land Acquisition Grant (SLAG) prioritised poverty alleviation, offering small grants to the rural poor. However, the limited size of the grants encouraged large group purchases, resulting in overcrowded and economically inefficient farming units (Masemola, 2021; Ranwedzi, 2013).

The introduction of the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme in 2001 marked a shift towards creating a class of black commercial farmers. LRAD's requirement for beneficiary contributions disadvantaged poorer households and facilitated the entry of comparatively well-resourced, and sometimes politically connected, individuals into the programme (Wegerif, 2004; Kau, 2011).

To address the limitations of the market-led "willing buyer, willing seller" model, the state adopted the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS), acquiring land directly for allocation through long-term leases (Antwi and Nxumalo, 2014). Although PLAS strengthened the state's role in land delivery, weaknesses in planning, beneficiary engagement, and ongoing support meant that many projects did not transition into viable enterprises (Masemola, 2021; Aliber and Mokoena, 2002).

4.2.3. Tenure reform

Tenure reform aimed to secure the rights of vulnerable rural populations, including farm dwellers, labour tenants, and residents of the former homelands, primarily through the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (1997) and the Land Reform (Labour Tenants) Act (1996) (Delius and Beinart, 2021; Van Staden, 2024). Yet, weak enforcement and limited legal support have left many people vulnerable to eviction, and progress in transferring land to labour tenants has been slow (Odeku, 2023; Zimmerman, 2005).

In communal areas, tenure insecurity persists due to ambiguous rights, limited documentation, and weak dispute-resolution mechanisms (Tlale, 2022). The attempt to formalise rights under the Communal Land Rights Act (CLaRA) of 2004 was overturned by the Constitutional Court in 2010 on grounds of procedural irregularities and concerns over the centralisation of authority in traditional leadership structures (RSA, 2013; Gazi and Uwizeyimana, 2024; Weeks, 2024). Critics argue that the Act undermined individual and especially women's land rights, reinforcing patriarchal governance patterns (Whittal, 2014). As a result, millions in communal areas remain without secure, legally recognised land rights.

4.2.4. Key implementation challenges

Across all three pillars, implementation has been constrained by systemic, cross-cutting challenges. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as slow approval processes, unclear mandates, and poor coordination among state departments, have consistently undermined delivery (Ngcukaitobi, 2021; Clements et al., 2024). The

limited availability of post-settlement support, including extension services, infrastructure, finance, and market access, has further constrained the success of land reform projects, resulting in widespread underutilisation of land (Ngam, 2021). Many beneficiaries, including those in Mole-Mole Municipality, report minimal improvements in income or productivity (Clements, 2024).

Another persistent challenge is the acquisition of land that is poorly suited to agricultural production or lacks necessary infrastructure. Weak local government involvement and insufficient integration with broader rural development strategies have further reduced the developmental impact of land reform (Ngam, 2021). Collectively, these shortcomings highlight the disconnect between policy ambitions and on-the-ground realities.

4.3. Outcomes of the unrealized land reform objectives

4.3.1. Continued landlessness and rural poverty

The failure of land reform to deliver secure land rights and meaningful redistribution has left millions of South Africans, especially in rural areas, landless and economically marginalised. Many rural households continue to rely on insecure tenure arrangements in overcrowded former homelands or on commercial farms where they have little protection from eviction or exploitation. Without land as a productive asset or as collateral for credit, rural communities remain trapped in cycles of poverty, with limited opportunities for economic advancement or sustainable livelihoods (Delius and Beinart, 2021). The result is a growing rural underclass, particularly among women and youth, whose development potential remains untapped due to insecure access to land and resources.

4.3.2. Urban informal settlements and spatial inequality

The slow pace and limited reach of land reform have contributed to rapid urbanisation, as landless rural populations migrate to cities in search of better opportunities. This has led to the expansion of informal settlements on the peripheries of urban centres, often lacking adequate infrastructure, services, or tenure security. The urban poor are forced to live in precarious conditions, reproducing spatial inequalities entrenched during apartheid. These patterns continue to reflect the legacy of racial and economic exclusion, as well-located urban land remains largely inaccessible to the poor due to high property values, weak state intervention, and speculative land markets (Turok, 2018). The persistence of spatial inequality undermines inclusive development and reinforces patterns of social and economic marginalisation.

4.3.3. Lack of access to productive land and economic opportunity

A critical consequence of ineffective land reform is the failure to open up access to productive land for black South Africans. While land reform was envisioned as a tool to redress historical dispossession and enable inclusive rural development, many beneficiaries lack the support and infrastructure needed to use land productively. This has meant that redistributed land often lies fallow or is underutilised, contributing little to economic growth or food security (Cousins, 2016). At the same time, systemic barriers, including limited access to markets, credit, inputs, and agricultural knowledge, hinder the emergence of viable black commercial farmers. As a result, land reform has done little to dismantle the dual agrarian economy inherited from

apartheid, leaving productive agriculture concentrated in the hands of a minority, and economic opportunities out of reach for the majority.

5. Discussions

5.1. Alternative models to land reform

The ongoing challenges of South Africa's formal land reform, such as delays, unequal access, insecure tenure, and lack of support after land transfer, have made it necessary to consider alternative and complementary ways of accessing land. These models seek not only to accelerate land redistribution but also to address deeper structural inequalities in more innovative, locally grounded, and sustainable ways. Importantly, they attempt to align land access with broader goals of social justice, economic inclusion, and ecological resilience.

5.1.1. Community land trusts and cooperative ownership

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and cooperative ownership models offer practical alternatives to address the shortcomings of formal land reform in South Africa. CLTs involve the collective ownership of land through a non-profit entity governed by community members (Thompson, 2020). This structure helps protect land from market speculation and ensures long-term, equitable access, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women and the landless (Mingay, 2022; Thompson, *ibid*). In the South African context, CLT experimentation has emerged primarily through small-scale urban and peri-urban initiatives, such as the Philippi Village CLT in Cape Town, where local NGOs and community groups have explored community-managed land for mixed-use development (Keohane, 2023).

In South Africa, CLTs can be adopted to formalise tenure in communal and peri-urban areas, especially in former homelands where insecure land rights are common. By promoting transparent, democratic governance, CLTs can also reduce elite capture and ensure that land remains a shared community resource. Pilot initiatives supported by local NGOs have already demonstrated that this model can support housing, community agriculture, and inclusive decision-making (Mncwango, 2004). Although these initiatives remain limited in scale, they demonstrate a growing appetite for collective models of land governance.

Similarly, Kumar et al. (2015) contend that cooperative ownership, where land is collectively used and managed by a group, can be a powerful tool for supporting smallholder farmers and promoting rural livelihoods. This builds on existing traditions of mutual aid and can help reduce the individual risks of land ownership. Cooperatives enable shared investment, joint decision-making, and equitable benefit-sharing, making them especially effective in contexts where resources are limited (Mnguni, 2023). Agricultural cooperatives in South Africa already have a long history, especially in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal, though many remain informal or under-resourced (Sikwela, et al., 2016).

This simply implies that CLTs and cooperatives can be adopted in agricultural regions by providing legal recognition, financial support, and capacity-building to help groups operate sustainably and access markets. Overall, both CLTs and cooperatives offer flexible, community-driven solutions that can expand land access while promoting inclusive development, making them well-suited for adoption within South Africa's diverse land governance landscape.

5.2. Strategic land leasing and negotiated access

In contexts where the outright transfer of land is financially or politically difficult, strategic land leasing and negotiated access agreements present more flexible alternatives (Deininger, 1999). These arrangements may involve long-term leases or user rights granted by the state, private landowners, or traditional authorities to individuals or communities, often with support from civil society organisations or municipalities (De Janvry et al., 2001). South Africa already has substantial experience with state-mediated land leasing, including the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS), under which the state leases acquired farms to beneficiaries on long-term contracts (Mtero, et al., 2024). Additionally, numerous land restitution cases have resulted in lease-back agreements, particularly in Mpumalanga and Limpopo, where communities lease land to former owners or commercial operators while retaining ownership (Makhubele, et al., 2022).

This model is particularly relevant in commercial farming areas, where access to land can be negotiated without immediate change in ownership. Examples include lease-back arrangements between land claimants and former owners, or government-facilitated leases on state-owned land (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2014). When structured to provide secure, long-term tenure and accompanied by technical support, such arrangements can enable meaningful land use for housing, farming, or livelihood diversification without the delays and complexities of full-scale expropriation or purchase (Cousins, 2016).

Moreover, strategic leasing could play a critical role in climate-smart land use planning, allowing flexibility in adapting to shifting environmental conditions and land availability, particularly in provinces like the Eastern Cape or Limpopo, where both underutilised private land and communal areas co-exist (Muchara et al. 2015; Williams, 2015).

5.3. Urban land justice and spatial transformation

In South African cities, apartheid-era planning still affects where people live, with most Black South Africans pushed to the outskirts, far from jobs and services. As a result, access to well-located land in urban areas remains limited, often leading to land invasions and growing informal settlements (Du Plessis, 2014).

To address this, land value capture is being used more often. This means the government takes some of the value that land gains when public projects, like new roads or transport, are developed, and uses it to fund affordable housing or other public needs (Turok et al., 2024). The goal here is to make urban land more accessible and fairer, rather than just benefiting private developers. Metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town have recently begun experimenting with value-capture mechanisms, although still in early stages, as part of their inclusionary housing and transit-oriented development strategies (Gethe, et al., 2023).

Other helpful strategies include land banking by municipalities (where land is kept for future public use), partnerships between government, communities, and businesses to build affordable housing, and giving people legal rights to the land they already occupy (Sasu et al., 2022; Tappendorf and Denzin, 2010; Alexander, 2005). South Africa's most advanced examples include the eThekwini Land Bank and City of Johannesburg's Corridors of Freedom programme, both of which illustrate the potential of municipal-led spatial transformation (Kumar-Nair, 2022). Together these efforts aim to undo the spatial inequality that still defines many South African cities today.

5.4. Integrating agrarian reform with food systems and rural development

A transformative land reform agenda must also be rooted in a broader vision of agrarian transformation, one that extends beyond land transfer to encompass food sovereignty, environmental stewardship, and inclusive rural development. In this regard, integrating land access initiatives with agroecological practices, localised food systems, and rural value chain development offers a more sustainable and livelihood-enhancing pathway (Rosset, 2006; Nhamo et al., 2022).

Rosset (2013) further outlines that this integrated approach emphasises support for smallholder farmers to produce for both subsistence and local markets, the creation of infrastructure (e.g., storage, irrigation, market access), and the mobilisation of youth and women into rural entrepreneurship. Crucially, it requires the reconfiguration of existing agricultural extension systems to be more participatory, context-sensitive, and socially accountable. In South Africa, a growing movement of agroecology hubs, such as those coordinated by the African Centre for Biodiversity and the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, demonstrate the practical potential of integrating land reform with localised food systems (Rudolph, and Zenda, 2025).

In light of the above, by linking land reform with food systems and rural development, land becomes more than a productive asset: it becomes a tool for dignity, nutrition, and stronger communities. This is especially important in South Africa, where rural poverty, food insecurity, and climate change remain serious challenges (Leonard, 2022).

Across these models, their political feasibility, administrative requirements, and developmental impact vary considerably. CLTs and cooperatives, while socially embedded and highly participatory, require strong local governance capacity and enabling legislation, making them more feasible at small scales in the short term. Strategic land leasing is politically palatable and administratively familiar, given existing state programmes, and therefore the easiest to scale rapidly, though its developmental impact depends heavily on complementary support services. Urban land justice mechanisms face the greatest political contestation due to pressures from property developers but hold the potential for the most transformative impact on spatial inequality. Ultimately, a hybrid approach, combining politically feasible models with high-impact interventions, may offer the most realistic and transformative pathway.

5.5. Comparative and regional insights

Comparative experiences from the Global South offer valuable insights into both the potential and the limitations of alternative land reform models. For one, in Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST) has demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilisation in securing land access for the rural poor. Through occupations, legal action, and sustained advocacy, MST has enabled thousands of families to settle on land and develop cooperative farming communities (Robles, 2001; Carter, 2015). In hindsight, a key strength of the MST model lies in its emphasis on collective organisation, political education, and long-term support systems, including schools, health clinics, and training centres for agroecology. However, its notable dependence on political alignment with progressive governments and uneven state support has also exposed vulnerabilities in sustaining gains over time (Carter, 2010).

In Kenya, the formal recognition of community land rights under the Community Land Act of 2016 has marked a significant shift toward securing tenure for pastoralist and indigenous groups, many of whom

previously held land under customary tenure with no legal protection (Rahma, 2023; Robinson, and Flintan, 2022). The Kenyan model illustrates the importance of legal recognition of communal tenure, especially in contexts where traditional authority structures still play a central role. However, challenges remain around implementation, capacity constraints, and ensuring that community land governance is transparent, inclusive, and gender-sensitive (Robinson, and Flintan, *ibid*).

In Zimbabwe, the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) initiated in 2000 aimed to redress historical land imbalances by redistributing white-owned commercial farms to black Zimbabweans (Kabonga, 2020; Moyo, 2013). While the programme succeeded in transferring land on a massive scale and addressing long-standing grievances, it was marred by poor planning, politicisation, violence, and inadequate post-transfer support. As a result, productivity declined in many areas, and the broader economy suffered. Nevertheless, some research shows that smallholder farmers in certain areas were able to achieve food security and livelihood gains, particularly where informal support networks and local innovation filled the gaps left by state neglect (Gwekwerere, et al. 2018; Kabonga, 2020).

These cases highlight several important lessons for South Africa. First, state commitment and capacity are essential for meaningful and sustainable reform. Second, community participation and ownership, whether through cooperatives, trusts, or customary structures, must be central to the design and implementation of land programmes. Third, post-transfer support, including infrastructure, training, and market access, is as important as land redistribution itself. Lastly, attention must be paid to gender dynamics and elite capture, ensuring that reform processes empower the most marginalised rather than reproducing inequalities.

Using the postcolonial and spatial justice lens, it is clear that land reform models cannot simply be copied from one country to another. Different colonial histories, land governance systems, and patterns of spatial inequality shape how these models work in practice and whether they truly empower marginalised groups or unintentionally reinforce unequal power relations.

6. Conclusion

Despite South Africa's progressive legal framework and policy intentions, land reform has fallen short of its transformative goals. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, elite capture, tenure insecurity, and a chronic lack of post-settlement support have severely constrained its impact. As a result, many beneficiaries have not experienced meaningful improvements in livelihood or economic inclusion. Urban and rural spatial inequalities persist, and the historical legacies of dispossession remain deeply entrenched. The disjointed implementation of reforms and the failure to integrate land redistribution into broader developmental frameworks have undermined both the credibility and sustainability of the programme.

However, the emergence of alternative land access models and comparative insights from other countries in the Global South offer pathways for rethinking land reform. Initiatives such as community land trusts, cooperative ownership, land value capture, and integrated agrarian reforms linked to food systems and rural development demonstrate the value of participatory, flexible, and context-specific approaches. These models emphasise that land must not only be redistributed, but also utilised in ways that support livelihoods, ecological sustainability, and long-term social inclusion.

7. Recommendations

To revitalise land reform in South Africa, institutional capacity and coordination must be strengthened. This includes establishing dedicated support hubs at municipal level to ensure integrated planning, faster administrative processes, and stronger alignment across departments. Public institutions responsible for land administration should be professionalised, and corruption must be actively addressed through greater transparency and accountability mechanisms.

Tenure security must be expanded across all landholding systems. This requires completing legislation to protect communal land rights while ensuring democratic governance and gender equity. Existing laws such as the Extension of Security of Tenure Act and Labour Tenants Act must be enforced more effectively, with enhanced legal support for vulnerable groups and strengthened community-based dispute resolution.

Land reform should also be embedded within broader economic and social development strategies. This means aligning land redistribution with local food systems, climate-resilient agriculture, infrastructure development, and market access. Post-transfer support should be comprehensive and inclusive, with tailored assistance for women, youth, and other marginalised groups.

Alternative models of land access should be piloted and scaled. Community land trusts, strategic land leasing, and cooperative farming schemes can offer more locally responsive solutions that foster collective ownership and long-term sustainability. Urban land justice must also be prioritised through tools like land value capture, public-private-community partnerships for housing, and spatial transformation initiatives that redress apartheid geographies.

Finally, there is much to learn from other countries in the Global South. Structured learning exchanges and regional cooperation can help South Africa adapt effective models to its own context. Such comparative insights can enrich policy design and encourage a shift toward land reform that is not only redistributive, but also democratic, developmental, and inclusive.

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