

## Theme: Rural Economy and Land Reform

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### Land Reform

#### 1. Major issues about the manifestations in structural poverty and persistent, deep inequalities

The failure to resolve the land question in South Africa is central to our understanding as to why structural poverty and inequalities are so persistent. The perspective of land taken here goes far beyond the narrow association of land with agriculture and rural areas only. Colonialism and apartheid spatially carved South Africa into three categories: white dominated commercial farming rural areas; the former impoverished bantustans for black Africans and urban areas where whites had near exclusive monopoly.

The above features of colonialism and apartheid remain intact. Racialised inequalities in both access to and ownership of land persist to this day and the South African land reform programme has failed to meet even its modest targets. Yet, our research consistently confirms that blacks who have access to land are better off than those who do not. In a society such as South Africa, whose economy has never demonstrated a capacity to absorb its labour force, this is a significant finding in efforts to eliminate structural poverty and deep inequalities.

### About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

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# THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

*Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality*



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## **2. Main reasons for the deep inequalities and poverty (policy, capacity, implementation constraints)**

South African scholarship on the failure of the land reform programme is divided between those who, on the one hand, blame the government for lacking the political will, as well as not have the capacity to implement government policies. On the other hand, there are those who cast doubt on the possibility of altering the distribution of land within the current rule of law. The South African Constitution itself, particularly Section 25, the so-called Property Clause, is seen by these scholars as problematic in the sense that it recognises existing property rights while proclaiming that land should be returned to its rightful owners.

By recognising and entrenching existing property rights, the Constitution presents us with a false hope that land redistribution can be achieved without confronting colonial dispossession and the fact that a successful programme of land redress entails encroaching on white privilege.

## **3. What can be done to deal with the challenges at the macro-policy level?**

It is clear by now that the history of land reform in South Africa has been a history of failure. Land reform has reached an impasse, both at the level of policy and thinking. There is no magic solution, neither is there a short cut. What is needed is a fundamental rethinking, call it a CODESA, of the land question that would take as its starting point the colonial context of division and exclusion into account. There should also be a fundamental change in approach which takes the role and involvement of social movements and civil society more broadly seriously in the formulation and implementation of policy. Such an approach is crucial for rethinking purely statist efforts at land reform. The current context is different from the early 1990s and there is a lot of experience that we can draw from.

## **4. Potential impact of recommendations on eliminating poverty and inequalities**

The above recommendations are in many ways setting out the conditions for addressing the land question which is at the heart of the colonialism, which, as already indicated, gave rise to racialised inequalities that are enduring to this day.

**For more information on the Mandela Initiative:**

