Livestock and the rangeland commons in South Africa's land and agrarian reform

Ruth Hall & Ben Cousins

Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535, Cape Town, South Africa


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.2989/10220119.2013.768704
Livestock and the rangeland commons in South Africa’s land and agrarian reform

Ruth Hall* and Ben Cousins

Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535, Cape Town, South Africa
* Corresponding author, e-mail: rhall@plaas.org.za

Received 14 October 2012, accepted 17 January 2013

Land and agrarian reform has the potential to expand South Africa’s rangeland commons and enhance their contribution to the livelihoods of the rural poor, yet to a large extent this has been an opportunity missed. Shifting policy agendas have prioritised private land rights and commercial land uses, seeking to dismantle the racial divide between the white commercial farming areas and the ex-Bantustans by allocating former white farms to black farmers. These agendas and planning models reflect class and gender bias and a poor understanding of common property. If reform policies are to contribute to the reduction of high levels of rural poverty and inequality, then greater recognition of the potential role of livestock production on the commons must inform policy and planning.

Keywords: communal rangelands, land reform, livestock, natural resource management, South Africa

Introduction

Land reform has the potential to expand South Africa’s rangeland commons. These commons have traditionally been restricted to the ex-Bantustan areas, to the former ‘coloured reserves’ (or Act 9 areas), and to municipal commonages surrounding towns. Land redistribution has involved the purchase of commercial farms and their transfer, almost universally without subdivision, to beneficiary groups whose land uses combine forms of group-based enterprise and individual or household-based cultivation and grazing – and therefore forms of common property. To what extent and in what areas have land reform and wider agrarian (or agricultural) reforms promoted the conversion of privately titled and privately used land into rangeland commons? What have been the outcomes? What is the further potential for land and agrarian reform to transform and expand rangeland commons?

This article explores the thinking about rangeland commons in South Africa’s land and agrarian reform and argues that it has been under-recognised as a robust and durable form of property and production capable of supporting diversified rural livelihoods. We note various historical precursors and continuities in thinking about rangeland commons, and show how land reform – originally envisaged as a reversal of past policy on land tenure and land use – exhibits a continued inability to shed outdated and discredited ways of understanding the issue. We then look at how this thinking is manifest in all the major land reform subprogrammes, noting its outcomes. Finally, we present concluding thoughts for the future, to identify what land and agrarian reform can mean for rangeland commons, and what the crucial points of intervention might be.

Policy biases and blind spots

Land reform since the advent of democracy has been shaped by policy frameworks emphasising market-based transfers of privately owned farms through state-mediated purchases from ‘willing sellers’, as advocated by the World Bank in the early 1990s. From the start of the land reform process, policy thinking on land and agriculture has been uncoupled, with profound effects on how livestock and rangelands are approached. On the one hand, an agricultural policy focus on deregulation and liberalisation saw the removal of subsidies, support and protection for the (white) farming sector, while a land reform process was introduced to broaden participation in agriculture and to expand black occupation and ownership of land outside of the former ‘homelands’ or Bantustans. These disjunctures between land and agricultural policy agendas were manifested (and compounded) institutionally, as they were embedded in separate government departments of Agriculture and of Land Affairs (from 1996 joined under one ministry), and from 2009 this divide was reinforced with the creation of two separate ministries, one with responsibility for Rural Development and Land Reform and another responsible for the rural economic
subsectors of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Hall 2009a). Land reform planning has been frequently criticised as being premised on flawed understandings of farming, the non-recognition of the role and value of low-input and part-time farming by poor people (Lahiff and Cousins 2005), while agricultural officials playing a role in planning land reform projects base their advice largely on commercial farming systems (Cousins and Scoones 2010).

Land reform processes have largely ignored the wide range of non-agricultural and non-commercial uses of rangeland commons, focusing instead on cultivation (of field crops and horticultural products) and livestock production, specifically cattle, for commercial purposes. As a result (and as is the case often in rangeland management), the multiple functions of livestock have been under-recognised (Ainslie 2002, Cousins 1996). These functions traditionally include investment, bridewealth, draught and milk, yet support programmes by agricultural departments and in planning land reform projects focus overwhelmingly on off-take and cash sales of stock, which reflects a misunderstanding of the function of livestock in household livelihood strategies (Shackleton et al. 2000). Tensions may emerge as women prioritise cash income to meet household needs, whereas men may prioritise the function of livestock as an investment for retirement (Ferguson 1990).

Similarly, the mixed species composition of herds (and the significance of smaller livestock) is not well recognised, with significant gender implications, given that women are major owners of small stock. Cattle, which remain the focus of policy interventions to promote livestock production, are mostly owned by men (Shackleton et al. 2000), though recent evidence suggests there may be some change in the social conventions around stock ownership towards women owning cattle (Hornby 2012). Goats are important in production systems in the communal areas and land reform projects, but the scale is generally under-estimated – while official figures record about 800 000 goats in KwaZulu-Natal province, research by the Mdakhatshi Rural Development Trust (MRDT) now suggests that this under-represents the population and the real figure is probably closer to 5 million (Rauri Alcock, MRDT, pers. comm.). Goats are routinely bought, sold and slaughtered in informal markets, and play a key role in household livelihoods through consumption and income smoothing, yet this ‘hidden goat economy is not well-enough quantified or recognised’ (MRDT and PLAAS 2012: 14), illustrating how policies are missing important realities. These policy blind spots are gendered: there are increasingly large numbers of female-headed households in rural areas who find it easier to establish their own livestock herds with goats rather than cattle.

Further, the potential for hybrid livestock systems combining aspects of single-purpose, commercial and multiple-function herds is not widely recognised or understood. Where this has emerged in land reform contexts, ownership of ‘project’ livestock herds alongside ‘household’ herds has produced complex dynamics and tensions, though there may be synergies too. For example, Donna Hornby’s research at the Besters land reform projects in KwaZulu-Natal documents the growing levels of social differentiation across households with ownership of cattle ranging from zero to 250 per household (Hornby 2012). Here, group-based beef enterprises are often combined with household livestock ownership and production, with complementary project objectives, but also disputes over how profits from the commercial herd are to be used (e.g. whether to pay out to project members or to reinvest in production). What this case suggests is that what is emerging through land reform is neither specialised commercial livestock farming, nor household production for a variety of purposes, but rather a hybrid; debates that pit ‘commercial’ against ‘subsistence’ agriculture ignore the much more nuanced systems already in operation.

Further, the significance of crop–livestock interactions within smallholder farming systems is not widely recognised. Outputs from livestock production may represent inputs into crop production (in the form of draught and manure) and outputs from crop production represent inputs into livestock production (in the forms of dry-season crop residue being a winter reserve for livestock). Fencing arable blocks may be more cost-effective and more appropriate than investing in fencing camps for livestock, and can enable grazing land to be rested during the dry season. The fencing programme that forms part of the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) is thus a useful tool that could be put to good effect, enabling these positive crop–livestock interactions.

**Historical precursors and continuities**

Land degradation narratives have long animated official discourses in South Africa and have, ironically, continued into the land reform era, shaping implementation of redistribution programmes and business planning practices. These narratives predate betterment, destocking and villegation, and were evident in the findings of the 1932 Native Economic Commission that soil erosion due to overgrazing threatened environmental disaster. More recently, concerns over degradation of the rangeland commons have informed the view that titling of communal land (either to communities or to individuals) is the answer. The argument for community titling was evident in the Communal Land Rights Act, No. 11 of 2004, now struck down as unconstitutional, whereas the private members’ bill proposed by the official opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, in 2011 and again in 2012, proposed individual titling of communal land.

One of the objectives of land redistribution in South Africa has been to contribute towards ‘decongesting’ the communal areas, and address over-stocking, but there is not much, if any, evidence of this. Rather, the creation of ‘projects’ on formerly white-owned farms, often far from beneficiaries’ homes, has produced a pattern of people ‘straddling’ multiple sites of residence and production (Andrew et al. 2003). Neglect of the tenure reform dimension of land redistribution and the consequent failure to strengthen and clarify local rights and institutions has meant that many land reform projects suffer from conflict and elite capture (Lahiff 2009).

Policy responses to actual and perceived under-utilisation of redistributed land, and to unplanned and non-commercial uses in general, have included efforts to curb this through business planning to ensure ‘commercial viability’, and more recently an insistence on ‘production discipline’, evident at
the African National Congress’s policy conference in 2012. Concerns about post-transfer land uses have prompted the growing prioritisation of projects for individuals rather than groups. This is reflected in the sequential policy shifts from the Settlement/Land Acquisition Grant which provided small grants for groups of poor households (1994–1999); to the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development programme (2000–2008), which had a commercialisation focus, providing larger grants to better-off beneficiaries; and to the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (2006 to the present), which continued the commercialisation focus, enabling farms to be allocated on leasehold to individuals, small groups or companies. The latter approach would, policymakers reasoned, help to deracialise commercial farming while also reducing problematic group dynamics evident in the earlier policy approaches. These shifts over time reflect the aversion among policymakers to expanding rangeland commons, and the privileged place of commercial land uses and of individualised property rights.

Land reform’s uneasy relationship to the rangeland commons

Land reform in South Africa takes multiple forms, from redistributing private white-owned farms to black ownership, on an individual or group basis (and sometimes to former owners now claiming restitution) to expanding municipal commonages, upgrading tenure rights of labour tenants on private farms, and reforming systems of land allocation and administration in the communal areas. While some of these programmes were intended to expand the rangeland commons, ideological attachment to private ownership and to commercial land uses have tended to undermine the thrust towards making land available to poor people for basic livelihood purposes, including livestock production on an expanded rangeland commons.

First, land redistribution has involved in many instances the transfer of farms to groups of beneficiaries to co-own and co-manage. For this reason, institutions for resource management are key, but communal property associations (CPAs) set up as legal entities to hold the land, and with rules promoting democratic group-based management of common resources have often proved to be dysfunctional (CSIR 2005). ‘Whole farm solutions’ have been a cornerstone of redistribution, a programme that (despite its professed aims of establishing successful smallholder farmers) has neglected both subdivision of farms (to enable individual smallholdings) and aggregation of farms (to enable communal grazing). Rather, its focus has been on changing ownership of existing farms, while maintaining continuity in land uses (Hall 2009b). These choices have shaped who benefits and who loses out in the process. Lebert (2004) shows that in Namaqualand elite capture was often the result of attempts to promote commercial livestock farming on redistributed land. Dominant patterns of thinking and planning have sometimes produced bizarre outcomes, for instance at Dikgolo in Limpopo, where officials prohibited beneficiaries from bringing their livestock from communal areas onto their newly acquired land, and required them instead to use their limited grant funding to build up a commercial beef herd (Lahiff et al. 2008).

Second, land restitution involving often large and heterogeneous claimant groups poses problems for management of the commons. Tensions among claimants relate to whether whole-farm commercial enterprises should be established (typically favoured by the better-off members and those not planning to relocate to the claimed land), or whether ‘community ownership’ should form the basis for homesteads to re-establish themselves and to engage in land uses similar to those in communal areas – a mix of household-based field cropping and livestock grazing on the commons. Large-scale commercial farming models and the priority placed on notions of commercial ‘viability’ and continuity in land uses have proved to be a major constraint, despite some evidence that the potential of mixed livelihood options might be far more productive and appropriate to beneficiaries’ capabilities and needs. As Aliber et al. (2013) show in Munzhedzhi in Limpopo, a project that ostensibly ‘failed’ in planners’ terms enabled large numbers of claimants (and non-claimants as well, in this case) to benefit from cheap access to residential land, small plots for cultivation, and communal grazing.

Third, municipal commonage is an existing resource for livestock owners and, in recognition of this, provision was made from 1996 for municipalities to access land reform funds with which to purchase additional commonage to make available to disadvantaged and landless livestock owners, to invest in infrastructure and to support management of the commonages. Yet the potential of municipal commonage to expand substantially the common land available has been unrealised and de-emphasised over time, as commonage was largely abandoned as a distinct programme of land reform from the early 2000s. Institutional requirements have been often neglected, enabling local elites and owners of larger livestock herds to monopolise these public resources (Anderson and Pienaar 2003). At its core, the debate about the role of commonage centres on contestation over whether or not its purpose should be to provide a ‘stepping stone’ for livestock owners wishing to accumulate resources, grow their herds and ‘graduate’ into commercial operations on their own land (Anderson and Pienaar 2003, Atkinson and Benseler 2004). Evidence from an Eastern Cape study, though, confirmed that poorer households were more dependent than the better-off on these rangelands for a combination of grazing and natural resource harvesting for fuelwood, medicinal plants and other purposes (Davenport et al 2011). Commonage therefore provides a crucial livelihood base for the poor, not only a means of accumulation. The eclipsing of the commonage programme by initiatives to establish commercial farmers on their own land is therefore a missed opportunity to recognise the function of commonages as rangelands – and public assets – for the poor.

Fourth, labour tenants are mostly livestock owners using rangelands on land designated as private, and are entitled to claim ownership of the land they already occupy and use. Lower population densities on these farms have meant that rangeland commons issues have been less recognised, but population pressures are growing and institutional adaptations will be needed (Cousins 2011). In some areas, instead of upgrading their tenure in situ, as envisaged in law, government is instead buying clusters of farms and
transferring these to groups of labour tenants – sometimes involving people moving to new land and forming new legal entities to hold and manage their resources in common. This means that rangeland commons are indeed being expanded for labour tenants, producing new institutional challenges (Hall 2009b).

Fifth, communal tenure has not been reformed, leaving existing (and growing) patterns of abuse by traditional leaders and contestation over development planning unchecked. In policy, there now exists a vacuum, with the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 having been struck down as unconstitutional in 2010. Its ‘transfer of title’ model involved centralised decision-making and, critics argued, would have reinforced apartheid boundaries and aggravated conflict and elite capture by traditional leaders (Claassens and Cousins 2008). Management of rangelands in these areas could instead be based on recognising the realities of lower-level decision-making plus flexible boundaries to allow for patterns of herd mobility premised on ecological variations that are both spatial and temporal in character (Swift 1995, Cousins 1996, Cousins 2011). It remains to be seen how government intends to fill the vacuum.

Why has land and agrarian reform done so little for rangeland commons?

The importance of enhanced access to land for grazing for multiple livelihood purposes has been under-recognised in South Africa’s land reform; instead the policy focus has been on cropland and, to a degree, on commercial livestock (especially cattle) production. This is in turn an outcome of an (unarticulated) class and gender bias in land reform, which has curtailed opportunities for the rural poor, and women, to expand their ownership of livestock assets and the diverse sources of income derived from them. Institutional arrangements in land reform have shifted over time in response to the growing class and gender bias: first, land reform involved the transfer of private ownership, either from white owners or the state, to new black owners, usually in groups; in recent years, this has been abandoned in favour of state ownership, where government buys and makes land available on a leasehold basis to identified beneficiaries (in the period from 2006 onwards, and from 2011 as the only form of tenure in redistribution). Both the private and state models implemented so far have involved the de facto (and often unintended) creation of common property regimes, yet there exists strong distaste in government for taking responsibility for providing ongoing institutional support to communal property associations (Cousins and Hornby 2002, CSIR 2005). These two dimensions – biases in relation to class and gender interests, and in relation to preferred forms of property – have shaped the land uses and land management institutions emerging through land reform, and are at the heart of the reason for the programme’s limited contribution to expanding and transforming the rangeland commons.

Conclusion

Redistributive land reforms could play a significant role in expanding the rangeland commons in South Africa, focusing for instance on reducing the ‘livestock Gini’ (i.e. highly skewed patterns of livestock ownership), and countering long-term trends towards increased levels of social differentiation. First, area-based targeting of land reform could play a key role by expanding the areas available by adding to existing commonages, decongesting communal areas, and enabling flexible access to diverse habitat patches to enable herd mobility and enhance resilience. Second, this would require the strengthening of institutions for the management of rangeland commons and in order to limit elite capture, by drawing on available expertise to identify and work with existing institutions rather than relying solely on business planning modalities. Third, exploration of new and more appropriate common property management systems is needed in redistributive land reform. While the CPA model has proved problematic in practice, improved support and implementation might address many of the problems, and alternative institutional models should also be explored. Much of the rangelands and land reform literature suggests that learning from local institutions, and experiences of local institution-building, is key (Swift 1995, Cousins and Hornby 2002, Lahiff 2009). While the search for a technical institutional fix continues, an exclusive focus on national policy frameworks would be a mistake.

References


