Chapter Nine

THE LIMPOPO PROVINCE

"On the road that leaves Pretoria on its way north to Kipling's 'great, grey-green, greasy Limpopo River', to the land of baobab trees, to Zimbabwe and the enigmatic heart of central Africa, the traveler is confronted by an extraordinary scene – a vast plain, covered in thorn trees, with deep, reddish soil and only the merest hint of a mountain 100 kilometres away on the northern horizon"

- "The Vanishing Landscape" from the "Reader's Digest Guide to Southern Africa", published by Reader's Digest Association. South Africa (Pty) Ltd., Cape Town.

Two years ago, South Africa was shocked to learn about the spectacular citrus and semi-tropical fruit farm failures in Limpopo province.

The Zebediela Citrus Estate

From 1918 to 1926, more than 565 000 citrus trees were planted on 2 260 ha of this estate's land. For the twenty five years before the estate was sold to the South African government in 1974, it showed a profit of millions of rands every year. After the sale, Zebediela grew to become "the diamond of agricultural projects".

It was of such great national pride that the Reader's Digest Illustrated Guide to Southern Africa wrote in 1978 that "nearly 400 million oranges are harvested each year from the groves of Zebediela, the world's biggest citrus estate. The output is sufficient to provide one orange for every eight people on earth.

"At the height of the season, about 15 000 cases of oranges leave Zebediela every day. The fruit comes from more than 565 000 trees irrigated by enough water to supply a city. The whole estate is highly mechanized and many of the most advanced handling techniques in world citrus production have originated from Zebediela.

"The first fruit was picked in 1926 after W.H. Gilfillan and Isidore Schlesinger divided the two original farms into 1 200 plots of 2 hectares. A handsome brochure was produced at the time offering the plots at 67 pounds each, to be farmed as a profit-sharing operation.

"The scheme proved particularly attractive to retired army officers and by 1921 most plots had been sold. In 1928, a branch railway to Naboomspruit was opened to carry the ever-growing harvest on the first stage of its journey to all parts of the world. In 1974, the South African government bought the Zebediela Estate."

After the ANC government came to power in 1994, the administration of Zebediela came under the control of the newly-formed Agricultural and Rural Development Corporation (ARDC), a government parastatal whose administration eventually ruined not only Zebediela but scores of other agricultural projects in the area. Before this takeover, Zebediela's harvest was worth R30 million a year.

It didn't take long for the corruption, theft and maladministration to set in. By 2001, the estate was in ruins. The original 2 260 hectares planted had been reduced to 800 hectares. Because no fertilizers and pesticides were used, more than half the trees died as a result of the Department of Agriculture's failure to grant funds for the survival of the project. Only ten per cent of yields could be marketed.

A loss of R35 million in 2001 followed a loss of R30 million in 2000. According to press reports, the estate was "beyond recovery".[1] Hundreds of thousands of cartons of oranges and lemons were not harvested, and workers were not paid. A lemon yield worth R8 million was left to rot because there was no money to pay staff. The fruit was in any event of inferior quality because it had not been properly looked after. Many of the fleet of 50 tractors collapsed into disrepair. Hundreds of employees were then retrenched.

Managers with in some cases forty years experience were replaced with people who had no experience of farming. One new "manager" was previously a sewing instructor while another was until the previous year a student. The press was informed that not one of the new directors appointed to the Zebediela and its sister Lisbon estate could read a financial statement.[2]

The death throes of the estate peaked at the end of March 2001 when ABSA bank stopped all credit and bounced a pension cheque of R56 million. Other estates in the area met with the same fate.

The Lisbon Citrus and Mango Estate, the largest producer of mangoes in Africa, was liquidated. While there was no money for pesticides and fertilizers to save thousands of mango trees, a consultant appointed by the province to conduct a "viability study" was paid R300 000, and then told everybody what they already knew.

A typical productive citrus farm - formerly a common sight in the Limpopo province, now in decline as the land claims increase.

Lisbon Estate boasted an annual turnover of R24 million. It produced 1,2 million cartons of mangoes and 800 000 cartons of oranges annually. It was South Africa's largest exporter of mangoes.

Representatives of the Department of Agriculture did not even attend a Lisbon Estate creditors' meeting. The telephones were cut because the estate owed Telkom R23 000.

The famous Gillemberg Citrus and Cattle Farm Project was in the same boat as the other estates. It once boasted its own cheque account with no overdraft. The annual harvest was worth R14 million. The ARDC bled this farm dry, using the estate's profits to fund crèches and pre-schools. It sold livestock from the farm to finance ARDC personnel and electricity bills. In two years, R10,3 million of the farm's resources was purloined by the ARDC. Since its collapse, the Minister of Land Affairs gave the 25 000 hectare estate to 724 black families. Although some offers were made for the project, the matter became bogged down in legal wrangling.

The Saringwa Citrus and Mango Estate which produced citrus worth R5 million six years ago, has died. The accumulated loss at the once "highly profitable and productive showcase project" was R17 million over a period of four years, including R5 million of the 2001 yield of which not one orange was sold due to disease. There was no money for pesticides. More than half of the 63 000 trees died due to lack of care. Thirty families lost income as a result of the collapse.

Under experienced management, the estate produced 500 000 tons of citrus of which 60% was exported. The takeover by the ARDC after the ANC government came to power saw an annual decline of 25% which ultimately ended in chaos in 2001.The Glendale, Allandale, Berlyn and Mariyeni Estates, each equipped with top grade facilities for packing citrus for local and export markets, were shut down in 2001. The Berlyn farm supported 30 000 citrus trees, while at the Glendale Estate, production came to a complete standstill.(3)

The ARDC

Blame for this agricultural mayhem must lie at the door of the now defunct Agricultural and Rural Development Corporation (ARDC) which took over the running of these estates under the new government.

It was established on 1 April 1996 "to promote sustainable development" but many of its goals were unattainable. Since 1996 to 2000, more than R216 million was transferred to the ARDC. Due to poor management, most of the ARDC's projects collapsed.(4)

In a 2000 audited report, it was revealed that eighty percent of the current R516 million budget was spent on personnel. "This led to the downscaling of veterinary inspections which negatively affected disease control. Ninety four percent of the veterinary budget of R45,7 million for the 1998/9 financial year was taken up by personnel, leaving only 5,9 percent for operational costs."(5)

Many one-hectare plots were allocated to people but were not economically viable as they were not close to markets. Many plot owners were not interested in farming and considered their newly-acquired property "only as a form of retirement security".(6)

Of the 77 community garden projects established by the ARDC, 15 had been abandoned by the year 2000 because there was insufficient water. Inadequate feasibility studies were performed regarding the availability of water resources for these garden projects.(7) As in the case with the Venda homeland projects, schemes introduced before the new government came to power in 1994 were crippled after their takeover because of the cribbing of budgets. Where incomes had been generated from coffee, citrus, mango and banana farms, new budget cuts prevented maintenance and repairs on equipment. By the year 2000, only 20% of the tractor fleet was still running, while irrigation equipment was in a poor state. Disease spraying programs had been severely cut, and weed control was minimal.

In all, the ARDC was responsible for 285 collapsed projects which, provincial officials said, would eventually be "restructured". An amount of R23,9 million was paid in respect of wages at ARDC sisal projects, while the income at these projects amounted to less than R1 million.[8] (The Agriculture MEC at the time of these ARDC collapses, Dr. Tshenuwani Farisani, was transferred to the Public Transport department. He was replaced by Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi)

Taxpayer funds granted for drought relief were used to pay the ARDC's large salaries. The corporation employed more officials and workers than the total number of employees within the provincial Departments of Agriculture of Mpumalanga, the Free State and North West.

A newspaper article in March 2000 said a performance audit revealed that one of ARDC's projects established at a cost of nearly R100 million "had deteriorated into ruin".[9]

ABSA started to bounce the corporation's cheques, and it eventually closed down in ignominy. These estates were destroyed under the ARDC's gross mismanagement – its personnel were incompetent and corrupt.

Where was central government when all of this was happening? Was Pretoria too far away to concern itself with taxpayers' interests?

The ARDC ruined the 285 projects which have shown a loss since they were taken over by this corporation. These included coffee, citrus, mango and banana farms. Only 20% of the tractor fleets were running, while irrigation equipment deteriorated. At some projects, there was no money for diesel while at others, electricity accounts were not paid. Weed control was minimal, and other projects were vandalized.

What has happened to these projects?

In his Department of Agriculture budget speech of 5 June 2003, Limpopo MEC for Agriculture Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi affirmed that the history of the "big five" estates – Zebediela, Gillemberg, Lisbon, Mutale and Mununzwu – was well known and that he acknowledged that there had been "serious management ineptitude on the side of the ARDC." He said they had been forced to retrench ARDC management "and commence with our restructuring plans".

He claimed they had "turned the corner" at Zebediela, although the estate was under a land claim. He said the province had sought help with "strategic partners".

He further advised that his province had distributed 26 000 ha of land within the past financial year, and that some land had been donated by the private sector. In Mopani, 225 farms had been gazetted with more than 200 farms gazetted in Levubu under land claims.

He confirmed his government was working with the Land Claims Commissioner to facilitate the transfer of these farms to their new owners but in such a way that they still remain very much commercially viable because they are *highly developed commercial farms*. (Italics ours). He also said 171 irrigation schemes were in the process of being "rehabilitated" and he believed this process would take six years "if we are lucky".

Dr. Motsoaledi gave the impression that he has taken the bull by the horns as far as the rehabilitation and further development of agriculture in Limpopo is concerned.

He would need to do this – the destruction of some of the world's best citrus estates has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many, especially those who were intimately involved in the development and successful running of these estates.

The press supported Dr. Motsoaledi's speech. The local newspaper AgriReview said in July 2003 that "Lisbon and other ARDC projects (are) on road to recovery". It was essentially a report on the May budget speech. Another account said

"Citrus Estates Back on Track" [10] Zebediela was "back on its feet", it claimed. In November 2003, an agricultural magazine declared that there was "Sweet success for Zebediela handover"[11] and maintained "the Land Claim's Commission's return of the Zebediela Citrus Estate to the Bjatladi community involves an effective partnership between government, commercial and developing farmers, and is a good example of sustainable restitution."

Zebediela is being run on a fifteen-year management contract by the Boyes family. John Boyes, manager of the Zebediela operating company, is quoted as being confident that next year's citrus crop will produce a full harvest and yield 1,2 million cartons of fruit. [12] In October 2003, an Afrikaans newspaper sang the praises of the reborn estate. The paper said Zebediela was "op die wenpad". (On a winning streak).[13]

We endeavoured to assess the true position of these estates. From what we garnered from people who were intimately involved in the management of Zebediela, the following facts became apparent. As in most things in life, all is not what it seems!

Until 1980, the citrus trees at Zebediela were regularly replaced. During that period, Zebediela exported three million cartons of oranges per annum. As we mentioned, there were originally approximately 600 000 trees in production. Now, less than 200 000 trees are in production. The rest died, and were cut up for firewood.

Further, the original area under plantation was 2260 ha. Now less than 800 ha are under production. So the estate is being run at a third of its total potential. This season, 300 000 cartons were exported, exactly 10% of the estate's original export quota. (Mr. Boyes predictions that this year's harvest will be 800 000 and next year's 1,2 million cartons is extravagant, say farmers in the area.)

In 1980, Zebediela produced between 1 700 and 1 800 export cartons per hectare. Some private farmers today are producing up to 3 000 export cartons per hectare. Zebediela is now producing only 375 export cartons per hectare.

There has been no replanting since 1987. There are today 350 permanent workers and, in season, another 600 are taken on. Before Zebediela collapsed, 1 200 permanent labourers were on the payroll, with a further 900 taken on in the season. As it is now, the government is paying the permanent workers, while before, the estate carried this cost.

These facts somewhat belie the euphoria about Zebeliela "regaining its former glory". Observers tell us it will never attain this goal. The company managing the estate can hardly be expected to re-capitalize the plantation. If equipment breaks down, we are told that it is cannibalized from other estates which are moribund. Although the Boyes group put R28 million into the business, the production costs per annum are higher than this figure.

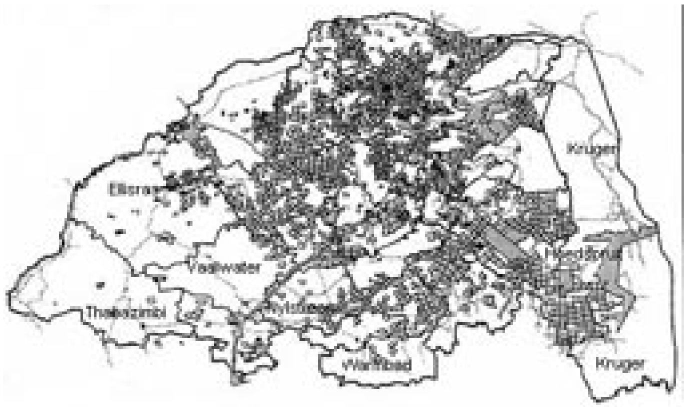
The electrical distribution system is in a "state of collapse" according to someone who knows the estate. The inspectors don't want to even go into the sub-stations because it is dangerous. There is no investment in the maintenance of the irrigation distribution system.

Water utilization is poor. Zebediela's lifeline is water, and it is essential that proper irrigation be practiced. During the last five years the dams filled up twice. There is good catchment water.

Prior to 1974, the trees were watered with flood irrigation. Now drip irrigation is used. When the original 2260 ha were under production, the water lasted three years with flood irrigation. Now with less than 800 ha in production, the dams are emptied in one year. Thus, the use of water is not optimal, and in a country like South Africa, this is crucial.

The results of the claim by Mr. John Boyes that next year's citrus crop will yield 1,2 million cartons of fruit will be awaited. Everybody in South Africa hopes Zebediela will regain its strength, but it is incumbent upon the management and the provincial government to enlighten taxpayers of the true situation at the estate and its future under non-owner management with eventual handover to land claim recipients

These recipients, the Bjatladi community, took over the Zebediela Estate on 28 September 2003. The Boyes group Henley Farm Properties will pay them R1 million a year to lease the estate. They also hold 35% of the shares of the estate's operating company.



The crowded pattern of Limpopo province land claims (each square represents a restitution demand) shows clearly where the most highly-developed areas of the province lie.

The Lisbon Estate

Lisbon is "chugging along" according to farmers in the area. It was South Africa's top mango exporter. At its peak, it exported 1,2 million cartons of citrus and mangoes per annum and employed 1 000 people. In 1996, the crop was destroyed by a severe hailstorm, and the crop loss amounted to R14 million. However, those managing the estate sought financial assistance because they could revive it. They wanted to take a bond on the property, but the new people in control "could not take a decision and the estate never recovered".

After 2000, most experienced and competent workers were dismissed and a loss of R20 million was incurred. A new management company was brought in and ran the estate for a year. They were making progress when they were summarily removed and the Boyes group was brought in. This group thus picked the harvest fruit planted by Bruboer (Pty) Ltd., the first management team appointed. It is believed the Boyes group is on a one-year management contract at Lisbon. Now there is a land claim on the farm. If Lisbon is to be run by a management company on short term contracts, there will be little capitalization of the project, planting of new trees or the purchase of new equipment. This does not bode well for the long-term future of what once was South Africa's top mango producer.

Gillemberg Estate

This is today being run by the Bruboer Group and we have learned it is progressing well. Despite the fact that Gillemberg has bigger water problems than Zebediela, and poorer soil, and is only farming on 420 ha, the new managers exported

600 000 cartons of fruit last year, double that of Zebediela which is farming on double the size of Gillemberg's land.

Other Land Transfers

The 3000 ha farm "La Boheme" near Tzaneen was handed over to land claimants in 1996/7. It was a thriving mango and citrus farm. It is now a squatter camp.

The Inyaka/Waterval/Zoeknog coffee estates were started from scratch in the old Lebowa homeland. These three projects occupied approximately 1 000 ha. More than R6 million was put into the projects at the time and the estates' turnover was R3,2 million a year, with a profit margin of 20%.

Extensive plans were made to expand these projects as they had not reached their full potential. However, the new 1994 administration gradually crimped the budget. There was no development capital available, and eventually no money for electricity and the telephone. The efficient management structure was replaced by the new administration's political appointees. Nothing was planted and the development plans came to a halt. Today these former coffee plantations have been invaded by squatters and their cattle. The fields were burnt out three times. Everything has been stripped – the whole pump station – its roof, the pump, the electrical cable motors: everything that could be stolen has been stolen.

Roodevaal Farm

R11 million was paid for this 3 600 ha Oerlemans brothers property which was given to the Makotopong Community at a handing over ceremony in March 2002. Thousands were at the party, according to an observer. In September 2002, the Oerlemans brothers harvested their last crop of tobacco, onions and some fruit.

Since then, theft has been chronic. Equipment broke down and was not repaired. The community had no experience, say the Oerlemans, and they had no operating capital. "We offered to sell them all the implements and machinery on the farm, but they did not have money to buy them", say the brothers. The new owners did not plant. There were no crops to harvest because the grapes and peaches were dying.

The electricity supply to the irrigation systems and the pumps was cut off, so the new owners sold one of the irrigation systems, it is believed, to pay the electricity. They say they want to bring people on to plots on the land but there is nowhere for people to live.

Bartlo Oerlemans told the local Land Claims Commissioner Mr. Mashile Mokono that the people had no operating capital, to which Mokono replied that the people must go somewhere else and find operating capital. He is reported to have repeated this statement on television.

The community complained to Oerlemans that the government promised they would carry them for the first six months, but no money appeared. For example, they received a new tractor but they had no money for diesel.

The turnover of this farm under the Oerlemans was between R2,5 to R4 million per annum, depending on the crops and the weather. They paid taxes of more than R200 000 per year. They employed 120 workers, 80 of whom are now unemployed. (The Oerlemans took forty of their workers to their new, small farm).

Today there is no farming on Roodevaal. Four or five people are reputed to be there but the vast bulk of the 200 and more claimants don't want to move to the farm because there are no prospects for them there. Where will they get the money to build a house? How will they live if there is no capital?

Bartlo Oerlemans offered to help the community with his experience and his advice. They said they wanted money, and at last count, the community was demanding R4 million from the government to replace transformers, cables and water pumps. Much of the equipment is in a state of disrepair, and the community members are arguing and fighting amongst themselves.

The Soekmekaar Farm

In May 2001, the Sowetan ran a piece entitled "Land redistribution 'will bring success.'" (14) In this article, Limpopo MEC for Agriculture Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi's tone was somewhat different to that reflected in the mainstream press. The good doctor said that "a culture of dependency had developed in the former homelands of Lebowa, Venda and Gazankulu that had destroyed the people's will to achieve success and prosperity". (The three former homelands amalgamated to form the Northern Province, now known as Limpopo province, under the new government).

Motsoaledi affirmed that it was the government's most important strategy "to change the mindset of people who had been welfare beneficiaries and to instill a sense of independence and ownership (in them)". The MEC then cited a citrus project at Soekmekaar where 137 workers had each applied for a R16 000 subsidy from the government and, in addition, had obtained R350 000 from the Land Bank. In 2000, they purchased the farm for R2,1 million. Dr. Motsoaledi claimed the provincial government would "support all agricultural projects".

The farm workers on the newly-transferred Soekmekaar property "are now independent and enjoy ownership of the farm", he said. The (Limpopo) provincial government was trying to redress "the mess" created by the former homeland administrations, he averred, and he then accused previous white managers of homelands projects of mismanagement. (Our findings are completely to the contrary. Every homeland project which was handed over to the present government was efficient and productive. Some were on their way to further potential, but in all examples, if there was failure, it was drought or some other natural disaster. There was little, if any, mismanagement and ineptitude).

What happened to the Soekmekaar farm?

The farm's previous owner was asked to stay on for five years to help the new owners. He managed a few years, then left in disgust. He said it was nothing but meeting after meeting, and no decisions were made, while everyone argued about salaries.

The farm produced tangerines, oranges and other citrus, plus avocados and granadilla. It was a beautiful farm, say people from the area. After the old owner left, the farm collapsed. The granadilla plantation disappeared. The other fruit was unmarketable – it was too small because it had not been fertilized. No spraying had been undertaken. And the boreholes were not functioning.

The community didn't pay their electricity. The sprinkler system was then sold, as were the cold rooms. Everything went for a veritable song – the packing equipment, the belting, all loose assets, everything removable was removed.

A farmer nearby saw what was happening and told the community to at least plant mealies. He offered to buy the seeds and plant for them, and they would split the profit. But the community started arguing about who within their group would get what profit, and the farmer gave up.

Creditors moved in and took certain machinery and equipment which was apparently leased.

At present, there are two or three people on the farm, according to local observers. They survive by fishing and grazing their cattle, sometimes on neighboring farms because their fencing is broken. It would appear Dr. Motsoaledi has not come back to see what happened to the people who's "will had been destroyed because of their dependency on former homeland developments". A comment would not go amiss here. This is a perfect example of how the public is misled by grandiose statements at handing-over ceremonies, suitably reported on and sometimes embellished by the press. In fact, the results of the outlay of taxpayers' money are kept hidden, never mind the loss of production and the loss of taxation to the country's fiscus. This and hundreds of other cases throughout the country are examples of criminal neglect by the government and provincial authorities who should be monitoring what happens to taxpayers' money and to the hapless people who are left to "farm" virtually on their own.

The Khajadira Farm

In this case, the press was vigilant, but nothing was done to correct the situation. "At least 613 farm-worker families in the Northern Province (now Limpopo) face eviction or have already lost their land after local land affairs officials bungled land redistribution projects," said a local newspaper.(15)

This was an October 2001 report about "disasters which included flagship redistribution projects such as the R3,1 million Khajadira farm which was supposed to provide a new start for 230 families".(16) Land Affairs officials had neglected to tell the families they had won ownership of the 299 ha citrus farm, giving a community leader and his deputy the chance to secretly use all 230 title deeds as collateral in hotel and bottle store deals.(17)

Attorneys then sold the farm for R600 000 after the leader and his deputy faulted on payments for a Leydsdorp hotel and a Lenyenye bottle store.

Declared an official of the NGO National Land Committee (NLC): "This kind of shoddy follow through and after-care service by Land Affairs is shattering people's lives and their trust in the system. What is the use of giving people land if you simply abandon them without the skills or resources to manage it? The real tragedy is that this is not an isolated incident". (18)

This particular newspaper article mentions two other incidents involving farms costing R2,1 million and R 2,2 million, and involving 383 families. Said the NLC: "Some beneficiaries simply want new houses but are then expected to run entire farms". If this is the case, and there is no reason to believe it isn't, then the Department of Land Affairs is not choosing land beneficiaries well. If a land claim is granted, and taxpayers fund it, then the farm must carry on producing. If it doesn't, then this is fraudulent.

There are many more questions to be asked about agriculture in Limpopo province.

A figure of R3,5 million was reported as having been paid to consultants and advisers in the province in 2001. In many instances, these consultants were involved in what was called the "revitalization" of irrigation schemes and the "commercialization" of projects of the discredited ARDC.(19)

In May 2002, Dr. Motsoaledi declared that multi-million rand programmes aimed at poverty eradication collapsed in his province "because beneficiaries did not know what to do with the money". Tabling a budget of R721 million in the provincial legislature, Motsoaledi said that of an amount of more than R1 billion spent in one year, no significant outcome could be noticed.(20)

Dr. Motsoaledi receives mixed reviews from the people to whom we have spoken. There is no doubt he was landed with an agricultural calamity when he took over, and he is trying to resuscitate the many failed citrus estates in the province.

We should wait and see what happens to the projects which he says are being reconstructed. They are on the mend because of consultants who have been called in on contract. By definition, this is a temporary solution to the catastrophe which struck one of South Africa's most fertile provinces.

The future will tell, but the omens are not good. If nobody follows through on land redistribution transfers, then the policy is an abject and expensive failure. It must be discontinued because the province cannot afford any more fiascoes.

The MEC appears to be trying to prevent further collapses through his new policy of lease-back. According to a report in the Letaba Herald (September 2003), another 225 farms totaling some 31 000 ha in the Mooketsi and Duiwelskloof areas of the Letaba district have been gazetted and are the subject of Land Claims Court hearings.

The report says that government policy "is also to offer owners whose properties have been declared legitimately claimable, the option of doing lease-back and other joint deals with the tribal communities concerned".

Some farmers say they would be prepared to enter into such a deal, while others ask the question: who will re-capitalize the project as time goes by? The lessee will not own the property so will not be prepared to put money into it, and those who own it may be short of capital.

This is a real problem. Lease-backs mean someone has to be the boss, and arguments could arise regarding management policy that could be a sticking point for further development. The joint venture proposal is also a problem for the same reason.

The Polokwane Land Claims Commission told us that they are aware of the failures of the past, and that they do not want to repeat them. They want every land claimant to enter into a contract or a partnership with white farmers.

"Most of the farms will collapse if we do not have joint ventures", said the LCC's representative. "We cannot just hand over these farms to unskilled people, otherwise the whole industry will suffer. We now ask claimants if they want to become involved in farming."

The Limpopo LCC set out this policy in a structured document, and it remains to be seen whether it will work in practice. At least the LCC is trying in this province.

Agriculture is of vital importance to employment in the province. According to the October 2001 census, agriculture was responsible for the employment of 10% of the working population throughout South Africa, but reached a high of 17,8% in Limpopo. This is exceptionally important when it is remembered that 34% of the population of 20 years or more has had no schooling.

Chapter Ten

THE WESTERN CAPE

This cape is a most stately thing, and the fairest Cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth.
- Sir Francis Drake, English seaman. (1540 – 1596)

Organised agriculture is extremely worried: it warns that an alarming 75% to 80% of all the government's land reform agricultural projects for small holders end up as failures.

This pronouncement was made at Agri Wes-Kaap's annual congress held at Goudini in the Western Cape in September 2003.

The Transvaal Agricultural Union South Africa (TAU-SA) made the same announcement at its annual congress in Pretoria in August 2003. It named numerous examples of failed land transfers where beneficiaries did not maintain the farming operation received under the government's land reform program, and issued a warning to the government to take note of what was happening to farm production in South Africa.

Personal representations by organized agriculture have been made to the government on a regular basis. The country cannot afford to lose more productive land when, in some parts of the country, natural attrition, poor farming conditions and other factors are reducing the number of viable farms. The Western Cape has experienced a number of serious setbacks which have exacerbated the position of agriculture in the region – the repercussions of the fruit farm liquidations over the past two years are still being felt. The Watervliet farm near Paarl, valued at R12,3 million four years ago, went for R2,7 million at an auction in July 2001. A number of other fruit farms were liquidated around the same time.

Reasons given were increased production costs, falling world prices for fruit, increased competition from other countries and an over-supply of fruit on world markets.

Kromvlei, one of the largest fruit farms in the Western Cape's Elgin district – about 80 km from Cape Town – went under the auctioneer's hammer on 25 July 2001 to fetch "a disappointing" R11,7 million, according to auctioneer Leon Deacon. [(1)]

He said they had hoped the farm would fetch at least R20 million, which is just over a third of the value of the farm in the mid nineties. The land alone was valued at more than R15 million.

Another factor which caused the shake-out in the fruit-growing industry was deregulation after the new government came to power. Farmers used to sell their produce through the Deciduous Fruit Board's Unifruco – its marketing agent – but now they are on their own in a volatile market.

The ripple effect of the low prices for these once- expensive farms is that banks usually re-value the farms in the nearby area on which they have lent money. Overnight a farmer can be rendered insolvent, said Auction Alliance MD Alon Kowen.[(2)]

At the Agri Wes-Kaap congress in September 2003, Mr. Pieter Strauss, deputy chairman of the Agri Klein-Karoo cooperative at Oudtshoorn referred to a report commissioned by Agri Klein-Karoo on the situation surrounding a government initiative called the Toekomsrust Smallholders Trust. Formed in 2001 with 47 members, each of whom received R20 000 as a government grant, the 30 ha Karoo farm Groenfontein, with 18 ha of fertile agricultural land, was purchased and carved up into 47 smallholdings.

R160 000 was spent on a tractor, a bakkie and agricultural tools. This left working capital of R200 000. Few of the farmers knew each other, and had no experience of operating such a cooperative venture. They had no individual title to their pieces of land, and their lack of responsibility soon created splits in this community. They had no knowledge of any kind of financial management or budgeting, no knowledge of managing farms and its manpower needs. None of them could add up costs or do calculations. Further, they were not pre-selected for their farming ability, or even their desire to farm.

Of course the project failed. It was set up to fail. Of the 47, only 17 wanted to farm, while the others – with no incentive to succeed because they received everything for nothing – didn't pull their weight.

The state brought in consultants who conceived three business plans at R100 000 each. Local farmers say the consultants came from up country and knew little about local conditions. One consultant's report, for example, showed that he knew nothing about access to viable water supplies and other resources. Another business plan drawn up by the Land Bank did not contain medium- to long-term projections nor environmental sensitivity studies – only short-term projections.

Local farmers were prepared to do a business plan for the project free of charge, but the offer wasn't taken up. Today, the farm, Groenfontein, is inoperative and the trust shareholders have disappeared.

The report on this failure concluded that the government should not use land in its attempts to alleviate the problems of joblessness, food insecurity and poverty.

Carving up valuable agricultural land should never be seen as a long-term solution for re-housing the poor. ANC politicians should stop issuing public, self-serving promises such as "within two years 7 000 new farmers can be settled in the Western Cape". These statements create false expectations, says the report, and the land reform process will descend into utter chaos.

The government must stop appointing inexperienced city "consultants" without any agricultural knowledge or local conditions. The report recommends that the government appoint experienced agriculturalists from the regions in question. They have the hands-on knowledge and are willing to help, concluded the report.

Thembulethu

The 23 hectare property Thembulethu near George was a highly-productive, intensively planted vegetable farm using tunnel cultivation. Seven years ago it was purchased for R8 million and handed over to 15 recipients who then carved up smallholdings of 2.1/2 hectares each. The property had excellent soil and good ground water. After five years, things started to go wrong and the Department of Land Affairs refused to provide more funding for the operation. It is now inactive and the smallholders have left.

Elandskloof

In August 2002, The Sunday Times reported that the people who had received Elandskloof six years ago under a land claim transfer were “battling to prosper”.(3) In a rare instance of good journalistic follow up, the Times reporter highlighted the “hope and pain” of Aletta Titus “who is grumpy today. She may be standing on the very spot where she grew up, a beneficiary of South Africa’s first successful land claim, surrounded by lands that can easily earn R2 million profit from citrus a year – but six years after the claim was settled, she still does not have a proper house to call her own and the valley is severely underdeveloped”.

The farm Elandskloof is situated in the beautiful Elandskloof valley of the Cedarberg mountains, two hours north of Cape Town. Commented the Times: “Despite a six-year process that has seen more than 332 000 ha of land handed over at a purchase price of R377 million – often with the assistance of neighbouring white farmers – land restitution has often been dogged by community in-fighting, state uncertainty, red tape and a critical lack of skills”.(4)

Elandskloof was a guinea pig on which the government’s developing policy was tested, and the people are having trouble making this project viable. There is still no electricity in Aletta’s tin shack, the school is a ruin, and most of the fertile valley lands are unused.

Continues the Sunday Times: “In 1996, the mood was totally different as the then Land Affairs Minister Derek Hanekom celebrated the return of the land that the around 600 people had been evicted from in 1961.” Not many of the families moved back to Elandskloof, and there was no community spirit among those who did. The National Land Commission said at the time that the restitution process had not satisfied the country’s land hunger.

To date, nothing further has happened at Elandskloof, and this example of haphazard land reform was included in the Toekomsrust Project report.

Northridge

Northridge Farm in Ceres was placed under provisional liquidation in June 2003. Plans were being made to try and salvage the 1 500 ha farm with its 148 inhabitants. The farm is believed to owe creditors, including the Land Bank, R4,5 million.(5)

This was another example of the joyous handover and the sad failure. In November 2002, the Sunday Times showed farm “boss” Niklaas Syster leaning on a glamorous car he had purchased. “A year ago, fruit packer Niklaas Syster stared poverty in the eye. Today he’s got a new house, a fancy car and he’s boss on the farm where he once toiled”.(6) At the time of the report, the farm was being held up as an example of a successful land reform project. The farm had purportedly just made a profit of R2 million. Land Affairs Minister Thoko Didiza handed over R1 000 cheques to each of the workers after the profit announcement.

A year before, the workers had approached the Department of Land Affairs and the Land Bank and managed to raise R4,6 million to buy the farm which was struggling and in the process of liquidation.

Various employees then took over the farm. Herman Martin, the mechanic, became the director of finance and administration, while Syster was reported as earning R7 000 a month, and “lives in a three-bedroomed house on the farm and drives a luxury German car”.(7)

Fast forward to April 2003. A consultant was called in. Mr. Kevin Wustefeld-Jansens "has been providing the skills training and development required by the workers."[8] It was soon discovered that the skills needed to run this type of operation were lacking.

A firm called Thomas International conducted some aptitude tests and the consultant was told "that he could not appoint anyone on the farm to a management position because the workers had an inadequate number concept, poor visual perception and insufficient management profiles". [9] They advised him to appoint people "from outside".

A local attorney involved in black empowerment initiatives said at the time that "empowerment farms need a visionary mentor – someone with exceptional people skills, knowledge and drive. Preferably the consultant should be directly involved with the business for a good few years".[10] Translated, this means someone to run the operation on a day to day basis, as commercial farm owners do.

Fast forward to June 2003. Northridge is placed under provisional liquidation. Paul Onrust, chairman of the Northbridge Community Board said there had been "internal problems with the management of the farm". Local ABSA bank risk manager Pieter de Beer said he was aware that a forensic audit had been called for by external consultants.

Four months later, the liquidators are still trying to sort out the mess. [11] Meanwhile, 150 people are looking for jobs as only three of the original 153 employees have been kept on to help the auditors.

The story of these failed farms is beginning to sound like a scratched and annoying ancient record. As with so many other failed projects, a combination of poor management, ludicrous expectations and the Department of Land Affairs' lack of serious follow up has resulted in an expensive failure for the taxpayers, loss of agricultural production and export currency, loss of taxation to the South African fiscus and a ruined farm which may never be resuscitated.

Local farmers say the farm laborers were left to manage a failing farm, planted with old orchards and apple types no longer popular in the market – without the necessary support and expertise.[12]

The government has admitted that it did not monitor the project properly. "The largest mistake in this project was to assume that the project was doing well, based on what the beneficiaries and a consultant maintained", the Department of Land Affairs told *Noseweek*.[13] All of these people, of course, had a vested interest in keeping the project alive, because they were being handsomely remunerated from it.

The role of expensive consultants comes into question, and is a matter of great concern to organized agriculture. Some comments made to our researchers about these city slickers are unprintable. Mr. Kevin Wustefeld-Janssens received R3 000 a day, while his partner Gavin Wright received R12 000 month as the bookkeeper. (We thought Mr. Herman Martin was the financial whiz kid at the farm!)

The ongoing tale of these two consultants' eventual takeover of the management of the farm makes gripping reading. Suffice it to say they ruled the roost, even buying more farms to "soak up" employees.

In April 2003, at the time of the *Farmer's Weekly* article where nothing seemed to be amiss, it is now revealed that the labor was only receiving R100 a week. After Easter, the model land reform project collapsed completely. According to *Noseweek*, the two consultants sold the extra farm they had bought with Northridge's money, and made a profit of R600 000. This money has been retained by the liquidators.

The consultants have packed up and gone back to the city, while creditors line up to try and salvage some of their money. Herman Martin, the financial man, is now being sued for debt which he incurred on behalf of the farm (up to R200 000). Absa alone is owed in the region of R6 million, according to *Noseweek*.

At last call, the government was searching for new investors in the farm.

Conclusion

Millions have been poured into agricultural training in the Western Cape. In September 2002, it was announced that the "ANC/NNP coalition government in the Western Cape" is to start training more than 7 000 people from disadvantaged backgrounds as farmers over the next few years".(13) This will increase the existing number of farmers in the province to 11 000, the report says.

In May 2003, a further R24 million was set aside by the Western Cape provincial government for agricultural training. (14) And in November 2003, it was announced that a R2,6 million training center for emerging farmers has opened in George.(15)

The sub-heading to one newspaper report says "NNP gives support to fast-track responsible land reform". There doesn't seem to be too much of that around. Perhaps political parties should concentrate on irresponsible land reform, as a starter.

Chapter Eleven

THE NORTHERN CAPE

And the springboks bounced, and fluttered, and flew,
Hooping their spines on the gaunt Karroo.
- From "The Flaming Terrapin" by Roy Campbell, South African poet (1901-1957)

Kgalagadi

The Khomani San people of the Northern Cape are stumbling under the complexities of owning thousands of hectares of land they cannot manage. Their current travails are about land they received under a claim they made for six farms totaling 36 000 ha in 1999 near the Kgalagadi National Park in the Northern Cape.

In addition to this, they were given another 25 000 ha of the park itself in 2002. During the handing over ceremony, Minister of Land Affairs Ms. Thoko Didiza hailed the second handover of land to the Khomani San people as an example of how a community "can claim its heritage".(1)

What makes these remarks so astonishing is that the six farms originally given to the San people were already on the ropes at the time Minister Didiza made her remarks committing a further 25 000 ha to them. According to a February 2002 press report(2), the first property was already on its last legs.

It had been handed over in a blaze of publicity on Human Rights Day, March 21, 1999 by President Thabo Mbeki. Just two years later, the farm infrastructure had collapsed, the community had no motorized transport and virtually no livestock, most of the game had been either sold or poached, the remaining game was dying of thirst because the water pumps were broken, leading community members were occupying houses earmarked for tourism initiatives, and the community had split.(3) Seventy five percent of the farms' infrastructure had disappeared

Did neither Ms. Didiza nor the State President check up on the San people after the handover party was over?

In June 2003, Jan van der Westhuizen, chairman of the Khomani San Communal Property Association (CPA), said the farms were going "from bad to worse because we don't have the money."(4) Members of two previous committees had been dismissed for mismanagement and corruption, a story now endemic throughout South Africa.

For four years, nothing happened on the six original land claim farms which cost the taxpayers R8 million. They have not generated any income. "There is no water, there is no money to buy diesel", says van der Westhuizen. "We live off the pensions of the elderly".(5) Each family gets a litre of water a day because water and electricity to the farms were cut off in September 2002, at the same time Minister Didiza was handing the community another 25 000 hectares.

Phillipa Holden, an ecologist working with the San, said it was incomprehensible that the government would hand over property worth millions of rands to a community "but fail to ensure they have the support and training to run the farms". [(6)]

What is even more incomprehensible is the government's attitude to this scandal. Mr. Sugar Ramakarene, Free State and Northern Cape commissioner of land affairs said the government knew about the problems "but the point of land redistribution is to give the community their land, not run it for them" .[(7)]

He then asked for a "workable business plan", this after already handing over 61 000 ha. There is a trust fund of R2.7 million which the tribe cannot touch because this money is earmarked for even more land for these hapless people! Mr. Ramarakane criticized the previous CPA because they used the interest from the fund "for their own personal expenses. The Khomani San have to be accountable for their own fate". Unfortunately, this catastrophic situation was precipitated with taxpayers' money.

Despite the fact that in 2002, a court ordered the government to appoint a manager, this has not happened. (Who else in the country can ignore a court order with impunity?) It would appear that, here too, this community has been set up for failure. Said Ms. Holden: "Someone is needed to help the community get on their feet and train them to self-sustainability. We write letters, hundreds of e-mails, make numerous phone calls. All we have is someone from Land Affairs saying they will look into it".[(8)]

Mr. Ramarakane says the government is looking into establishing a partnership between the community and business people. "But in the end it is not an ideal situation for us to give people land, but then run it ourselves".

This of course begs the question – why hand over 61 000 ha of land when it is almost a foregone conclusion that the recipients will fail? Surely the Khomani San deserve better than that? And surely the taxpayers should also expect a better deal!

A development consultant said in June 2003 that there were only 12 gemsbok and 60 springbok left on one farm which once held game worth millions of rand.[(9)]

What leaves a bitter taste is the press coverage surrounding most of these handovers. Indeed, it is the glowing newspaper articles and the TV clips which alerted us in the first place to investigate these changes of ownership. Without exception, the handovers are treated as joyous affairs, with the San bushmen "getting their land at last" [(10)] The tragedy is that the Department of Land Affairs apparently did not follow up on the progress of these hapless people after they received their first batch of farms. This is evidenced by the handing over of a second group of farms at the very moment the water and electricity supply was being cut to the first farms they received!

The Paprika Project

We were informed on good authority that close to one million hectares of land has been transferred in the Northern Cape area. "Only a few projects can be described as successful", said a dispirited member of organized agriculture who lives in the area. "We want these people to succeed, but they don't. It's a tragedy," he said.

He told us of the paprika project, where more than R50 million was pumped into setting up a new 550ha paprika farming scheme near Goodhouse in the baking Northern Cape, arguably the hottest place in South Africa. "Temperatures reach up to 50^0C in summer in Goodhouse, while for paprika to be grown successfully, the temperature must not be warmer than 32^0C", said a farmer in the know.

This project is not a viable proposition, he declared. The market value of paprika is R7,50 per kilo. But labor costs to harvest one kilo of paprika are already R4,00. Paprika farming is very labor intensive, and workers are not paid per kilogram but are paid a salary no matter how much they harvest. In early March 2003, it was reported the 55 small-scale farmers who are part of this scheme had signed a production contract with the project managers. “The beneficiary shareholding is set to ignite an immediate change in their fortunes”, said Mr. Thabo Mothibi, Western Cape Land Reform, Agriculture, Environment and Conservation spokesman at the time.(11)

However, just eight months later, another picture has emerged. The “immediate change in their fortunes” has not been ignited, and will possibly remain just a dream. In an article published on 5 December 2003, it was reported that the multi-million rand Paprika Project almost collapsed “earlier this year”. (12)

Millions of rands worth of paprika was not harvested. Mr. Thulani Binase, chairman of the Northern Cape standing committee on public accounts said the paprika development was supposed to create work opportunities for people in the province. “This did not happen. Training programs must be implemented in order that the people become involved”.(13)

Other projects upon which the committee expressed its misgivings were the Wavelength Steel Project and the Kalahari Kid goat project which had as yet not produced a profit. During a visit in November 2003, the committee found that the steel project was not even in operation.

The committee also decried the fact that the large number of overseas visits conducted by the department’s personnel had not borne fruit. “Various representative delegations went to China and have not yet informed the committee of the results of their visits.”

There were serious recriminations about the paprika project. Mr. Binase complained that the people who developed these projects “from outside” brought nothing to the table. In the March press report, Haymake Investment, Gili Greenworld, Variety Holdings and Nocal Ltd. were mentioned as the project managers

The provincial government set up the paprika scheme next to the Orange River. No impact study was apparently concluded, said the local farmer, otherwise they wouldn’t have created this project in this area. Questions as to the role of the consultants are being asked locally.

The processing factory is 300km away in Springbok, and if not enough paprika is harvested, then transporting it is not an economic proposition. The 55 participants from the coloured community, received 10ha each. The professional consultants were “doing their best”, said our farmer. But the project was stopped in the recent past for three months, and this resulted in the crop loss of some few million rands. Fortunately, the project is on course again, but for how long? The advice of the consultants is often not taken, we heard, and the owners – the community – “don’t want to farm - they want the money without the hard work”, said a source. “The only thing that will work here is a joint venture (with professionals) or a one-manager arrangement. Too many people as “owners” is a recipe for disaster, he said.

He added that the area never before produced paprika, and that the Department of Agriculture had conducted a study on paprika growing near Upington and had concluded it would not work there. Goodhouse is hotter than Upington, so why the R50 million development when there is only a slim chance of success?

Riemvasmaak

The origins of the land claim against the Riemvasmaak area of the Northern Cape are an interesting legal conundrum. One hundred and forty kilometers west of Upington, one of the hottest places in South Africa, live 2 400 Namas on 14 000 ha of hilly desert wilderness. These Namas were originally from the old South West Africa (now Namibia) and during the 1914 war, they fled across the South African/SWA border and were given refuge and helped to settle in the area by the Roman Catholic church.

Under the old National Party government policy, the community was returned to the then South West Africa. After the present government came to power, they claimed the land "where their forefathers were buried" and some of the community returned to Riemvasmaak in South Africa after the claim was granted. Others remained behind in Namibia. (Land claims based on graves is a moot point, and is contested by many farmers in the courts. As in the Botshabelo case near Middelburg, Mpumalanga, claims based on forefathers being given refuge at churches or missions would also not appear to be legal.)

Riemvasmaak has turned into something of a disaster. It was one of the first land restitution projects in South Africa. There is no electricity or running water for the community, and the ground is full of shale and stones. "It is not good enough to simply dump people on a piece of ground and then hope they can look after themselves", said a farmer near Upington.

At the end of 2003, the community was struggling to establish a tourist operation - a four-by-four hiking route and other related schemes. There is no irrigation at Riemvasmaak, and development is very slow. A new housing scheme has been built but there is no self-development, no spring of initiative, no investment of note. This project is hardly the shining light of the government's land reform initiative.

Richtersveld

The Nama people of Richtersveld, a barren piece of land along the southern banks of the Orange River in the Northern Cape, were the beneficiaries of a recent Constitutional Court decision confirming a Supreme Court of Appeal ruling to return their land from which they were removed in the 1920s, when alluvial diamond mining commenced.

The land is currently held in trust by the South African government and is leased by mining companies Alexkor and Transhex, who pay a small royalty to the Richtersveld community. This land claim was the first brought under aboriginal title rights in South Africa, and the ruling made history because, inter alia, the government sided with the mining company Alexkor and not the claimants.

Several elderly community members testified that their historic links to the land went back 200 years when the Nama occupied the land as semi-nomadic pastoralists. Their land claim was originally rejected by the Land Claims Court - the SA government and the mining company Alexkor entered a defence against the claim. The case involved the key issue of the validity of aboriginal title, and set a precedent in land claims applications in South Africa where "aboriginal" title claims are unusual. The Richtersvelders' claim was supported by the South African Legal Resources Centre, and the amount of their legal compensation for diamond sales, if they should eventually win, would be considerable.

The government for its part did not want to lose the lucrative benefits of its ownership of Richtersveld and its minerals. The Constitutional Court's ruling that the Richtersvelders have a right to the land they are claiming has implications for property rights in South Africa. It also reveals something else: if the Richtersvelders have "aboriginal title", then who else is "aboriginal" in South Africa? Or is no one else "aboriginal" except the San, the Khoi and the Bushmen? This implies that everyone else living in the country is, in one way or another, a settler.

While the government is prepared to dish out private farm land to claimants on the flimsiest of bases at times, they appointed rafts of expensive lawyers to fight the Richtersvelders tooth and nail – because diamonds are clearly Ms Thoko Didiza's best friend!

The Goats Milk Project

Four years ago, this project was set up near Victoria West at a cost of around R2 million. The plan was to make cheese from free-range goats belonging to local residents, and the dairy production company Simonsberg was called in to provide training for the project. Cheese-making equipment was provided and forage was purchased for the goats. However, some participants forgot to bring their goats in at the weekend, and many of the animals were mishandled. They were badly penned, and in the end, the SPCA was brought in to remove the last two remaining goats which were in a parlous state.

Naturally this cooperative venture to assist fifty people collapsed, and in 2003 the equipment was sold under auction.

Bucklands

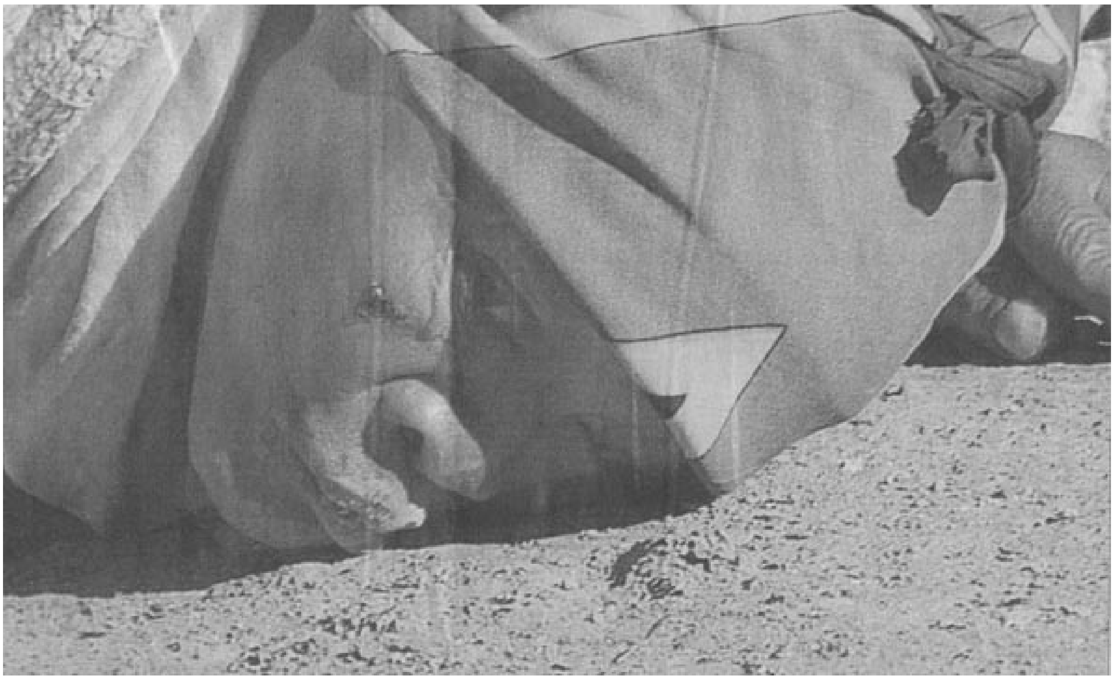
In June 2003, "after almost ten years of struggle" (14), the Griqua people of Bucklands near Kimberley received nine farms under South Africa's land redistribution policy.

This prime land is on a spot at the confluence of the Vaal and Orange Rivers. "The 13 000 ha have great development potential for irrigated agriculture. It is virgin soil and is reputed to be some of the highest yielding farmland in the country".(15)

Most of the land is covered with thorn trees and shrubs, but there are reputed to be many diamond deposits on the farms. A further 12 farms valued at R41 million by the Department of Land Affairs in 2001, are due to be handed over under the same claim. There is however resistance from some of the present owners because the farms carry expensive agricultural structures and contain diamond deposits. Further, and perhaps more importantly, two owners dispute the validity of the claims.

Schalk Human is one of the farmers challenging the claim against his property. He said he didn't even know there was a claim on his land until the local claims commissioner came to his farm. Louis Wilken also contests the claim. The land has been under white ownership since 1876, both farmers say, and the restitution law commences from 1913 and onwards. Human and Wilken say the local land claims commissioner warned them that if they resisted the commission's ruling, they might be taken to court and their land could be expropriated. (16)

In another twist, a local farmer says the land already given to the Griquas - Bucklands - was originally state land, and the claim on that could be invalid as well. However, the farmers who occupied it didn't contest the claim, and because it was state land, the claim was not argued in court.



A land claimant kisses the soil of Bucklands – nine farms at the congruence of the Vaal and Orange Rivers which were handed over. In addition to the farms, the claimants also received rights to diamond deposits in the area. Local farmers, who contested the claim on the grounds that the land has been under white ownership since 1876, while the restitution law commences only from 1913, were warned by the local land claims commissioner that if they continued to resist, they might be taken to court and more land expropriated.

William Wellen, chairman of the Bucklands Community Property Association (CPA) has big plans for the farms. He wants to build the Nelson Mandela Holiday Resort. The community is also hoping diamond mining companies will come in. However, it seems there is no fixed business plan for agriculture or any other project, and it cannot be ascertained whether working capital was given to the community.

A report in July 2003, just one month after the handover, tells of a split in the community of 3 500.[(17)] They want to obtain mining permits before giving access to their land. At the other end of the spectrum, mining companies both in South Africa and overseas are dealing directly with the government to try and obtain permits to mine the land.

So far, the Bucklands people have not received their permit. They cannot fill in the application forms, and they say no one in the government will help them. In desperation, the community has turned to lawyers to exert pressure on the Department of Minerals and Energy Affairs to help them. But the department says it doesn't know what the community is talking about.[(18)]

The community wants a moratorium on any permits issued until it can obtain help with its application. Its previous application was rejected for technical reasons. The community says it wants to form a mining company and then enter into a joint venture, but the community wants to keep the majority of the shares. This is of course a problem, for obvious reasons. In the meantime, the community has hired a lawyer, and they need help. They have met neighbouring farmers who want to help, but the figure being tossed around to develop the land is R40 million to start.[(19)]

Groot Vlakfontein/Metsimatshwe

Another claim we will be watching is the 10 000 ha handed over to the Metsimatshwe community at Groot Vlakfontein near Kuruman in the Northern Cape. The five farmers who sold did not contest the claim and "were happy with their price", we were told. However, the history of the claim reveals why perhaps the farmers were happy to go. The community's first claim in 1996 was rejected. In 2001, some of them simply camped on Groot Vlakfontein. They were arrested and charged with trespassing.(20) They again pitched tents on the land, and were again arrested. The claimants were supported by the National Land Claims Committee, an activist NGO.

This pressurized both the DLA and the farmers, and a compromise was reached "in the spirit of reconciliation" said one of the farmers.

The properties are excellent cattle farms, there is enough underground drinking water, with first rate housing and outbuildings. What we must watch now is whether the Metsimatshwe community can make a go of their new farms, and whether they will be assisted in their endeavours by the Department of Land Affairs. All of this remains to be seen.

Good cattle farming land in the area goes for around R500 per ha. We were unable to ascertain the price paid for the farms but it is estimated to be in realm of R5 million.

Diamonds

Two land claims in the Northern Cape involve considerable diamond deposits. The small Tswana community headed by brothers Abel and Joseph Pholoholo are angry because the claim they lodged in 1995 has been gazetted, but they say they sit on the sidelines and watch diamonds being taken out of their ground, and can do nothing.(21) The ground belongs to a British company and they have lodged their rejection of the claim.

Abel Pholoholo says there has been much hedging over their claim because of the overseas company's involvement.

In another case, there appears to be government involvement in a claim at Schmidtsdrift, about 80 km west of Kimberley. A black economic empowerment company New Diamond Corporation (NDC) was accused by the claimants of acquiring the land "illegally" (22) Claimants say "political forces" have prevented the community from obtaining their mineral rights from the NDC. In December 2002, lawyers representing 1 200 people who form part of the Schmidtsdrift community wrote to the Minister of Mineral and Energy Affairs about the problem, and four months later they hadn't received a reply.

The NDC holds 80% share in the Schmidtsdrift Mining Company and the community 20%. The dealings between the mining company, the NDC and the community are something of a cat's nest. Five businessmen involved in African Renaissance Holdings, one of the companies within the NDC group, are reportedly part of President Thabo Mbeki's Consultative Council.(23)

Without the diamonds, of course, Schmidtsdrift would hardly be on the map. A rocky dry place, most of its inhabitants do not have access to health facilities, there is no high school, and the majority of the people are unemployed and illiterate. The people are waiting to see what benefits they will receive from the mine.

Something that works

South Africa’s biggest grape exporter told us his partnership with local people in the Kubus Fruit Farms in the Northern Cape is working. Piet Karsten says the only deal that works as far as land reform is concerned is a joint-venture operation where inexperienced potential farmers can be brought into farming through a learning process. Dumping people on land and expecting them to farm with no support is a recipe for failure.

His company Karsten Boerdery has entered into an agreement with the Industrial Development Corporation and a black empowerment group to produce grapes for export. The project is predicted to bring in much needed foreign currency and create thousands of jobs. At its peak, 1,9 million cartons of table grapes will be exported to Europe from the 500 ha development, predicts Mr. Karsten. This deal is the IDC’s largest empowerment investment into the agricultural sector to date.

Karsten Boerdery will control the operation and run the farms. The farm workers will be part of the project. Piet Karsten told us his group had been empowering their employees for years. His group already has 300 black shareholders. The Kubus project is not part of the government’s land reform program, but is an example of cooperation within the agricultural community, Karsten says.

Observers have faith in Piet Karsten’s business ability, experience and skills. As long as his company continues to run this huge operation, everyone will benefit. .

Despite the success of groups like the Karsten Boerdery, poverty lurks on the fringes of communities in the Northern Cape, South Africa’s most barren and harsh landscape. Farming here is the most difficult in South Africa, all the more reason for circumspection in deciding whether a land claim will be of benefit not only to the claimants but to the whole of South Africa.

A harsh terrain needs a highly skilled operation to be viable, something outside the parameters of South Africa’s aboriginal people who populate this desolate area. A new look at how to assist them is needed.