

What is land if not somewhere to live a life of value?



Land beneficiaries in Macleantown and Salem, Eastern Cape, say life is as empty as ever, despite a land reform programme intended to restore their dignity and to reduce poverty and racial inequality. New research suggests shifting the focus from acquiring land to how land can create meaningful lives.

Dr Mzingaye Brilliant Xaba interviewed more than 30 people meant to benefit from farms returned to the community after the dawn of democracy. These communities were forcibly removed from their land during apartheid, and Xaba wanted to know if the return of their land enabled them to live the kind of life they have reason to value.

A life of value might include the feeling of agency and freedom, or having peace of mind and being self-sufficient. According to many scholars, and participants of this study, land can yield much more than food security; it can provide and grow many other things that people value, like proper housing, social relations, respect, independence, recreation and happiness.

But a life of value has not yet materialised for Salem and Macleantown land beneficiaries, according to Xaba's research. The study, which was funded by The DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development (CoE-HUMAN), suggests that the debate around land compensation and restitution should shift from purely acquiring land, to the developmental impacts of land and how land can create meaningful lives for beneficiaries after transfer.

One way to do this is to apply the Capabilities Approach (coined by Amartya Sen), which states that development and reform should improve the quality of people's lives, and their "freedom and choices". The CoE-HUMAN has co-opted this theory, framing human development as an expansion of capabilities and removing obstacles to living a full life, such as illiteracy, ill-health, lack of access to resources or a lack of civil and political freedoms.

While the land owned by beneficiaries is an asset to realise these values, and to enhance agency and capabilities, they are unable to utilise this land to its full capacity because of poverty. But Xaba's study confirmed that further post-settlement assistance with land-based livelihoods, like farming, would be a solution.

"This research project is important in that it exposes the differences between the goals of restitution policy and the reality on the ground as beneficiaries struggle to benefit from these projects," said Xaba.

Eastern Cape land beneficiaries need more support to live a meaningful life



Land restitution is not enough.

Xaba produced this research, titled **South African land restitution and development: the capabilities approach to an understanding of the Macleantown and Salem restitution projects in the Eastern Cape**, as part of his PhD in Sociology at Rhodes University. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the SARChI Research Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development, in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch University.



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG



DST-NRF Centre of Excellence
in Human Development
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www.wits.ac.za/coe-human

1st Floor, School of Public Health,
University of the Witwatersrand
York Road, Parktown,
Johannesburg 2193,
South Africa

Director: Prof Shane Norris

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