

Border farmers rise to the challenge

(...but they won't buy a one-man-one-goat deal!)



Stutterheim farmer

By Ronel Scheffer

When a not-so-progressive Eastern Cape farmer waves goodbye with a mock clenched fist salute, his sunburnt features radiating mischief, one knows things can't be that bad. The "one-man-one-farm" debate might still get off the ground in the white farming community – and it won't be short on irony or laughs.

John Matthews' good-humoured salute came towards the end of a two-day land workshop hosted by Idasa in the Border area in June. It captured the strong spirit of realism and co-operation among white farmers who seemed ready to divert resources to existing and prospective black farmers and to face up to any possible "sacrifices" demanded by a new land dispensation.

They listened with lively interest – and some protestation – to the views of the handful black farmers present, to the positions of the ANC, and to the advice of technical experts. With no dissenting voices, for example, the white farmers supported the following (urgent) land release package for black people:

- victims of forced removals must have their land returned or be compensated

- two million hectares held in trust for homeland consolidation must be made available as soon as possible to black farmers

- white farmers who are endemically indebted ("super uneconomic farmers") must be encouraged off the land and black farmers must get first option to that land

Admittedly, the 60 or so farmers who came to the Katberg workshop represented the more affluent and politically enlightened

section of the Border farming community who will probably not be much affected by such a release package. Yet, they were eager to take the discussions back to their communities, many of them deeply conservative. I heard one Afrikaans farmer – determined to take back the message – frantically organising for a partner to address his farming association.

Discussion at the workshop revealed three issues of potential immediate influence: the extremist voice among white farmers is over-emphasised on the national level; farmers are sufficiently aware of developments in land reform but need direct contact with organisations like the ANC and black farmers and rural communities to promote understanding; individual white farmers have "organised" themselves out of the debate on land

unions, the liberation movements' land committees, rural communities, Ciskei agricultural interests, service organisations and technical experts.

The workshop itself covered vast ground: the nature of the present crisis in agriculture, the historical background to land dispossession, problems related to land hunger and options for a new land dispensation, including the proposals of the government and the ANC. Inevitably, not much was resolved in terms of "how", but there was some consensus about what needs to be done about land redistribution and land use in South Africa.

Key issues of consensus were the need for affirmative action to promote access to land for black people and for extension service support to new black farmers. Delegates also agreed on the necessity of a flexible approach to tenure systems, the importance of maintaining a vibrant commercial agriculture sector, the need to urgently determine a demarcation between land for agricultural and residential use and to find new definitions of "farmer" (to include rural women and part-time farmers) and "farmland".

The workshop started against the backdrop of a number of sobering statements on environmental and agricultural constraints in South Africa by Fort Hare ecologist Prof Jock Danckwerts which emphasised the need for realistic expectations about the availability of land and agricultural production.

He stated it plainly: "The ideological dream of peasant agriculture on a one-man-



Idasa regional director Hermien Kotzé with Jock Danckwerst of Fort Hare (middle) and Mike Kenyon (GRC)

reform, which will profit by their participation and has the potential to prevent solutions that are politically and not economically motivated.

The Katberg delegates – they all attended in their private capacity – decided to take the initiative forward to a more broadly-based conference in October where they hope to have formal representation from agricultural



Preston with his wife, Wendy, and the Rev Themba Sibeko of Balfour.

one-farm basis with self-sufficiency in meat and vegetables is farcical in South Africa – the environment cannot support it. If this approach were attempted, a more appropriate catch phrase would be one-man-one-goat, and a pretty miserable one at that,” he added.

Dealing with the aspirations of the landless later in the debate, Rosaly Kingwill of the Grahamstown Rural Committee said rural black communities generally had a clear understanding of the macro-economic issues involved in agriculture but land remained an “emotional issue”. To whites rural land represents units of production, to blacks communal tenure in the rural areas was a source of security.

More than half of the people living in the rural communities served by the GRC technically are landless and carry the disparaging title of “squatters”, despite the fact that they were born in these areas. Kingwill said any new land policy would need to create legal access to rural land for these people who had no hope of being absorbed in urban areas like Mdantsane where unemployment was already running as high as 50 percent.

‘Unless they get involved, white farmers won’t have any leverage’

She said there was increasing support for strong local government structures in the rural areas to govern access to land, stock control and

criteria for land use. “The minute groups find out that they will have control over these issues, the ideas come out.”

In response to whites farmers’ complaints about conflict with their black neighbours, Bonile Jack, a former Director General of Agriculture in Ciskei currently farming in the Balfour district, said it was important to promote understanding between people who follow different tenure systems and to avoid generalisations about the practices of black rural people.

Historian Dr Jeff Peires, who is the secretary of the ANC’s land commission, urged white farmers to participate in the debate on land policies so that politically acceptable alternatives that are fair to black and white can be found. “Unless they participate immediately white farmers are not going to have any leverage in the medium and long term,” he said.

He criticised what he called the “Father Christmas” syndrome which the government displayed in drawing up its White Paper on land reform without properly consulting all interest groups. The time was past when con-

cessions could be dished out to people. “Things have to be discussed,” said Peires.

Sketching the history of dispossession in South Africa, Peires said it would be impossible to revert to the situation that existed in the country 300 years ago. “If we want to do that, it would mean that we will have to give the Lady Frere district back to the Bushmen and the people who live at Keiskammahoek will have to go back to Natal,” he said.

However, there were many examples where land could be given back to the original occupants without any problems. Such a case was the Fingo people who were removed to Keiskammahoek from the Tsitsikama area where their land was still not being farmed viably by the new white owners.

Peires said it would appear that the peri-urban land hunger was more critical and urgent than that in the rural areas.

Dr Johan van Rooyen of the Development Bank of Southern Africa said experience in other countries had shown that it was important to make land transfers “dramatic and speedy”. Policies that may appear politically convenient now could create problems 10 years down the line. Transfers also had to be accompanied by a comprehensive support programme and participants had to contribute financially towards the schemes.

Furthermore the “rules of the game” have to be clear and easily understandable with minimal redtape; ceilings need to be placed on land size and price and certain criteria must be established for access. Among these were productivity and political acceptability.

As the workshop was drawing to a close, John Matthews, a prosperous farmer dispossessed by the government’s land consolidation programme in Ciskei, related a tale of opportunities lost to black farmers. His family had farmed in the Alice district for four generations before losing their land.

He told how he had “begged” former Ciskei leader, Chief Lennox Sebe, to identify 20 potential black farmers whom he could assist to establish themselves on a commercial basis on the land vacated by white farmers around Alice. “He held my hand for a while and then said no.”

The result was that a district which used to provide 20 percent of the beef requirements of the city of Port Elizabeth was left to go to ruin. “And that to me is as much a sin as throwing people off their land,” said Matthews.

He added: “Our history of land is bad in this country, we must try and put it behind us and do what we can about the future.”



Black and white farmers at the workshop

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