

Schisms and political purges down on the farm

In 2001, representatives of landless groups from around SA came together to form a national umbrella body.

Stephen Greenberg explores the evolution of the Landless People's Movement (LPM).

Things are tough down on the farm. Farmers are faced with global competition and must reorganise their product mixes and workforces. This means retrenchments and retrenchments mean evictions for farmworkers. Closer to home, residents of informal settlements find that investment friendly government policies are raising the value of the land they live on but do not have legal access to, greatly increasing their insecurity as owners speculate and clear the land for future development.

It is against this backdrop that the Landless People's Movement (LPM) in a loose alliance with other groups united by antagonism to evictions and forced removals, water and electricity cut-offs and failure to deliver on political promises.

The story isn't new and isn't uniquely South African. Many countries on other continents have been through it. And all over the world the argument has boiled down to the merits of willing buyer, willing seller land re-distribution compared to a variety of forms of radical redistribution.

One South Africa could look at is the 'social obligations' clause in the Brazilian constitution, permitting the recognition and formalisation of occupations of underused land as long as the new occupants use it productively. This offers a clear opportunity for the landless movement in South Africa to lobby at the legal level. A social obligations clause could provide legal protection for mass-based grassroots occupations of unused land or land owned by speculators for purposes of production. This route offers a possibility of practically realising the government's stated goals of household food security, productive activity and redistribution without the necessity of direct confrontation with landowners.

RESPONDING TO EXCLUSION

The majority of South Africans are landless, in the sense that they do not have ownership of, or legally secure access to, land in their own name. Under apartheid, the struggle for land was subsumed under a broader struggle for political rights and for unprejudiced participation in the economy. But tenure insecurity has carried on. Limited protection of tenure rights on land not legally owned by occupiers in both rural and urban areas and limited redistribution of legal ownership has exposed the limits of political without economic democratisation and the landless movement has emerged as a result.

Not all members of the movement are landless in the sense of having no land at all in their own names. African commercial farmers are represented in the movement at all levels. Relatively wealthy labour tenants, with access to tracts of land and owning substantial cattle herds, work side by side with very poor tenants in the movement. This suggests that the formulation of the identity of 'landless' has much to do with issues of redress and justice.

NGOS AND THE FORMATION OF THE LANDLESS MOVEMENT

The movement was formed around two different types of grassroots mobilisation. On the one hand were groups organised through the NGOs (primarily NLC affiliates) to participate in government land reform programmes. These formations were mainly based on commercial farms. On the other hand there were a series of independent grassroots mobilisations to resist encroachment on existing land access. In the informal settlements, especially around Gauteng, the LPM spread rapidly by coming to the defence of residents who were faced with the immediate threat of forced removal in 2001 and 2002.

In the rural areas, ongoing efforts to squeeze farm workers and labour tenants off the commercial farms has forced tenants to unite in resistance. These attempts by landowners to squeeze tenants off the farms go to the very heart of tenant survival strategies and the meagre resources they have at their command. The Mpumalanga Labour Tenant's Committee is a good example of grassroots organisation driven by necessity and other active land struggles are taking place in other parts of the country.

In 2002, the movement successfully mobilised thousands of their members to participate in a joint march under the banner of the Social Movement Indaba (SMI) to protest the WSSD in Johannesburg. But the success of the mobilisation, where resources were captured for a radical expression of land demand, brought to a head simmering tensions between different political factions in the NGOs and inside the LPM itself. The fundamental lines of division related to the question of the attitude the movement should adopt towards government. Some NGOs and a portion of the movement sought a continuation of a relationship of critical engagement. This was

understood to mean that the movement would continue pursuing claims for restitution and redistribution of land within the government's official land reform framework. Adopting this strategy would mean pressuring government to remove perceived obstacles to the smooth roll-out of the land reform programme. At the WSSD, this section of the movement declined to participate in the SMI march from Alexandra to Sandton, where the official conference was being held.

But a sizeable portion of the movement was convinced that a more antagonistic relationship to government was necessary. In their view, government has the capacity to carry out the substantial and rapid transfer of land to the landless, but has opted for a different political and economic path. Pressure therefore needs to be applied to shift the government from its political and economic trajectories through mass collective action. Failing that - or parallel to it - redistribution from below through mass occupations would be necessary to ensure the transfer of land.

This was the first major internal division in the movement. It led to a fragmentation as different parts of the movement opted for different directions and chose to recognise the formal leadership or not. At the national level, the formal leadership structures remained under the control of those who favoured a more overt challenge to government, but this was contested. This retention of control was partly the result of the close relationship between the LPM's national council and the NLC's national office that at the time supported the more radical approach to mobilising and organising.

At a national level the LPM cobbled together a compromise national leadership structure to try to hold the different factions together. This has been partially successful but not without its own political costs. On the ground, the LPM was pulled in different directions, depending on the NGO on which a specific section of the LPM relied for resources and support. In most cases, the NGOs had always only interacted with the LPM on their own terms. Where the LPM tried to formulate radical programmes that the NGO did not approve of, this section of the movement was strangled and NGO favour

was redirected to 'tamer' grassroots formations.

At provincial level, where individual NGOs had more influence on the movement, some parts of the movement opted to support the national structure while others distanced themselves. In no case did a section of the movement cease calling itself the LPM. Those who stood in opposition to the national structure considered it unrepresentative and operated as the LPM in their own province. Sometimes in the same province, other parts of the movement continued supporting the national structure. This is the way the situation stands at the time of writing. All in all the political conflict has prevented the movement from elaborating and practically carrying out a united programme around land access.

The NGOs, most of whom favoured the route of critical engagement with government and of operating inside the government's legal and policy framework, went on the offensive against radical staff inside the network. The political fallout included the systematic sidelining and removal of activists pushing a radicalising line inside the network. In this way, the NLC re-stabilised itself as a smaller 'moderate' centre focused on a continuing critical engagement with the government's land reform programme. The expelled activists sought a mass-based alternative to the government's programme.

The LPM has adopted a number of controversial tactics and campaigns to highlight its demands for a radical redistribution of land and secure tenure. Most notable of these is the movement's support for Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's land expropriation programme and its own land occupations campaign. Prior to the WSSD in 2002, the LPM requested Mugabe to come and speak to its members in South Africa. Mugabe's disregard for the conventions and niceties of liberal democracy are viewed by many in the movement as resistance to neo-colonialism rather than a political manoeuvre to deflect attention from rising opposition to his government.

Land occupations have been identified as part of the repertoire of actions the movement is willing to carry out. Mass occupations are not uncommon in the history

of the land struggle in South Africa. In urban areas, the intense demand for housing has resulted in regular mass land occupations.

At present, the movement lacks the political or organisational strength to coordinate and sustain such actions. But the idea of mass occupations remains a popular expression of frustration and desire for rapid redistribution of land. According to Jabu Dladla, an LPM organiser in Mpumalanga: 'People here are ready to occupy. They have been calling on the leadership to do this, but we have been delaying because we suspect people won't be strong enough to stand against farmers and the police.'

STATE RESPONSES TO RISING LAND DEMAND

The emergence of the LPM, in tandem with the unfolding land expropriation process in Zimbabwe, has had a notable impact on thinking around land in South Africa. The state has responded with a mixture of reform and repression, while other elements have become more vocal in their opinions on land redistribution.

Following the initial and much publicised rise of the LPM, both the SACP and Cosatu have made public statements calling for the speedier and more effective implementation of the official land reform programme. The motivations for these pronouncements may vary from a political strategy to absorb land demands into the ambit of the alliance, or they may be a genuine attempt to provide greater support to the struggles of the landless.

To date, government has tended to be more responsive to the calls of capital and business to maintain the current programme than to the ANC's own alliance partners or the LPM. While it appears ready to concede to a demand for a national land summit to discuss the land reform programme, the department has explicitly stated that the willing buyer - willing seller model is non-negotiable.

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Greenberg is an independent researcher. This is an edited version of a case study prepared for the UKZN project entitled: 'Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in post-Apartheid SA'.