

# The Land Question: A Statement of Belief

## Church Land Programme

### *Elements of our theological perspective on the land question:*

- Land is a gift from God, to be equitably shared for the benefit of all humanity.
- Land is the 'locus of life', the place where life is lived and celebrated, the place that gives life and identity. There is a critical social function of land.
- 'Ownership' of land is never absolute because this social function of land is paramount.
- We must acknowledge the propensity for commodification, accumulation and profit, leading to the exclusion of the poor and the denial of their rights in land. Our interventions must be to work against this and ensure redress.
- The Jubilee tradition affirms the redistributive nature of God's commitment to the poor, seeking to ensure just and equitable access to land and resources.
- Human work on the land should express the dignity of human labour and the joy of participation and cooperation because it is a privilege to be co-creators with God in the unfolding story of creation.
- It is judged as contrary to God's will where our working of the land strips the earth of fertility and robs future generations of its benefits.

(Taken from: Church Land Programme, Occasional Paper No. 1, 2004, *Land in South Africa: Gift for all or Commodity for a few*, Chapter 2: "Articles of Faith: Theological Perspectives on Land").

### *We believe that:*

a **holistic** understanding of land shows it to be a fundamental basis of the life of the people, of community, of shelter, of neighbourliness, of community, of the enjoyment of nature and the production of food, *but...*

too few people have enough, productive, and sustained, **access** to land in South Africa

on balance, government **policy** is not just failing to deal with the land problem, and not just dealing with it too slowly, but is taking us in the **wrong direction** in any case

aligning policy and practice of commercial land-uses (especially agricultural) with the interests of **elites** (in South Africa and globally) is a disaster, and it relegates land-use policy and practice for the poor to an ineffective side-show marked by lofty rhetoric and zero positive impact

land is not just a 'rural' issue and not just an agricultural issue

land-access and land-use policy and practices that are shaped by the dominant class interests continue to dictate what goes down and as a result, *in urban areas:*

- the rich and powerful tend to have much better access to land, housing and services while the poor do not; and

in **rural** areas, particularly in areas of **commercial** agricultural production:

- the consolidation of land ownership continues apace, driving staggering numbers of farm tenants, farm workers and even farmers off the land whilst strengthening the grip of agro-industrial and -financial interests, large-scale, energy- and input-intensive mono-crop farming predominates; and

in **rural** areas, particularly in areas of largely **non-commercial** land use:

- the combined impacts of the power of the dominant and globalised capitalist system that organises almost all aspects of life, has been to render them barely liveable under conditions of grinding poverty, social exclusion, and the systematic destruction of viable livelihoods and communities outside of that capitalist system

for both 'rural' and 'urban' it is obvious that:

- their current **crises are closely linked** (e.g., the engineered collapse of the viability of humane and sustainable rural life feeds migration to cities and the growth of shack settlements; );
- that therefore neither can be 'solved' without addressing the other; and
- that in the longer term the radical separation implied by the categories of 'rural' and 'urban' needs itself to be overcome and integrated as we collectively fashion ways of life and living together that integrate both, and that re-invent them on the basis of a **radically democratic politics and properly ecological productive systems**

**moving forward in urban areas**, it is obvious that:

- a better system will be inclusive and egalitarian, and
- getting there will be driven by the thinking and action of autonomous, mass-based, democratic struggles for equality, dignity, land and housing

**moving forward in rural areas**, it is obvious that:

- a better system of land-use will be driven by smaller-scale productive units farming agro-ecologically; and
- getting there will be driven by the thinking and action of autonomous, mass-based, democratic struggles for equality, dignity, and land

good **government policy** is better than bad policy, but the policy terrain and process itself **reinforces**:

- the idea that small group of clever **experts** (including those in 'civil society') decide things on behalf of the people;
- the dominance of powerful and rich **elite interests**;
- the power of the **state** over the people;
- **silencing** and ignorance of the real struggles, insights, practices, lives and issues of the masses of **the people**

learning from, and supporting the **struggles** of, those who tend not to be counted in the dominant systems:

- gives better insight into what it is that actually needs to be dealt with and how,
- strengthens the forces for effective and just transformation, and
- enables us to subject our social and political life to **the will of the people**

**In conclusion: the land, and the 'land question', is best resolved in the hands and the minds of the people.**