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How have media institutions been reporting on land and agrarian reform developments in South Africa? A case study of the post-green paper on land and agrarian reform (2011)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the media have been reporting on land and agrarian reform developments in South Africa focusing on the post green paper (2011). Land and agrarian reform has been a sensitive field in the post-apartheid South Africa mainly because of the racial disparity on land ownership and the widening gap between the rich and poor. This study explores the literature available on land and agrarian reform, tracing the history of dispossession back to 1650 when Jan van Riebeck built a Fort in Cape Town in the shape of designated reserves. The 1894 Glen Grey Act, the 1913 Native Land Act and the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act as well as sundry other apartheid racist laws led to forced removals of native South African from their fertile lands into reserves, whilst the minority whites were acquiring vast tracks of farmland (Hendricks 2000, Baldwin 1975).

This study further explores post apartheid government's efforts to reverse the history of dispossession. The Department of Land Affairs introduced sundry policy interventions since 1994 which were supported by the Constitution of South Africa and in line with the dictates of the RDP program. These include the White Paper on Land Affairs (1997) policy framework, and several laws on land tenure, restitution and redistribution. South African democracy is more than two decades old, yet the land reform process is far from achieving the 30% target which had been set to be met in five years. More than three quarters of the productive agricultural land is still in the hands of the white minority, communal tenure system have not yet fully been addressed, farm labourers are still working under squalid, land restitution has been successful mainly on urban financial compensation claims and some rural land claims are still to be resolved.

The media is the main vehicle which the government is using in communicating their land and agrarian reform policies, laws and developments. The study also debunks on the current

media debates on how it has been reporting on developmental issues, particularly land and agrarian reform. Researchers argue that the duty of the South African media to inform has shifted towards a Western tradition which privilege economic, political and intellectual elites whilst ignoring the grassroots voice (Genis 2006:111-112). In order to validate this claim, the study used the agenda setting theory as a plumb-line. This theory argues that the media institutions and journalists are influenced by major institutions of society such as the economic, political and financial organizations when choosing what they want to focus on and the angles their stories will take.

In order to effectively investigate the how the media has been reporting on land and agrarian reform developments in South Africa, both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were used. The researcher collected 192 stories from the following five media houses, *Mail and Guardian* (weekly newspaper), *Daily Maverick* (online daily news), *SABC News Online* (online daily news which captures SABC News radio and television channels), *Farmers Weekly* (weekly farmers' magazine) and *Business Day* (daily business newspaper). The stories which focused on land and agrarian reform during the period September 2011 and August 2014 were selected from these media institutions using purposive sampling techniques.

The findings were gathered, analysed, and compared. The key findings of this research were that the media partially fulfilled its role as a disseminator of land reform information. This is seen in the wide coverage of major land reform events during the study period. Of concern however, are the sources which were used, set agendas, story structures and the quality of journalistic writing. This study also established that each media outlet had its own preferred sources who dominated the land reform discourse. Most of the stories represent the interests and voice of the minority elite at the expense of the landless and the marginalised rural communities. Most criticism to the land reform proposals came from organised commercial

agriculture and opposition parties. These emphasised the threats of land reform changes to food security, economic and financial viability of some proposals as well as their potential to destabilise the agricultural sector and the economy at large.