

# Symbolic support for land reform as a redress policy in South Africa

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Persisting inequalities in access to, and ownership of, land in South Africa remains a critical challenge that infringes on human dignity, rights and security. Recognising this, the ongoing debates and recent public hearings relating to land reform policy in the country are crucial from a social and restorative justice as well as development perspective. Therefore, ensuring that the voices of are heard and effectively shape the legislative and policy choices made around the redistribution of land is of paramount importance.

Against this backdrop, HSRC researchers used data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) to explore differentials in support for land reform, as a means of determining the extent to which there exists a consensual viewpoint of this policy issue.

The HSRC has been conducting the SASAS annually since 2003. The nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional surveys have an average sample of approximately 3,000 adults living in private residence and the surveying is typically conducted in the last quarter of each calendar year. For this analysis, we drew on data from all fifteen annual rounds conducted to date, covering the period from 2003 to 2017. Specifically, we rely on standard land reform question that is included in a battery of items aimed at assessing public opinion about redistributive policy. The question is phrased as follows: *To what extent do you agree or disagree that government should redistribute land to black South Africans?* Respondents' answers were recorded using a standard 5-point agreement scale.

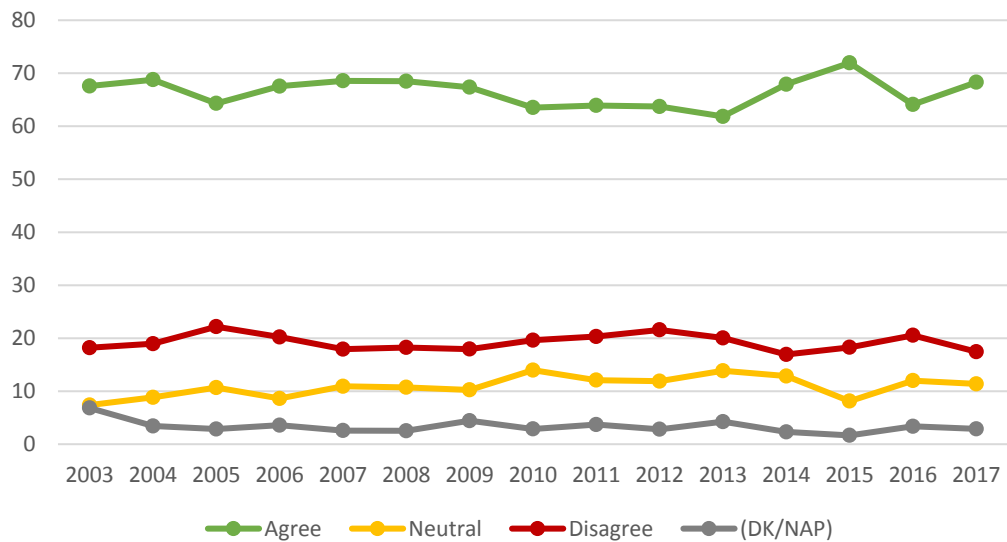
The consistent fielding of this item over a long period offered important insight into societal support for land reform policy.

## **Robust support for land reform in principle**

The graph in **Error! Reference source not found.** presents national trends based on the land reform question. It demonstrates that, despite modest fluctuations, there has been a generally consistent pattern in public preferences for land reform since the early 2000s. Over the period, an average of 67% of South African adults favoured land reform, with support ranging between a low of 62% to a high of 72%. By contrast, around a fifth of South Africans voice opposition to land reform (19% on average, ranging from 17-22%), a tenth (11%) are neutral and a nominal share are uncertain (3%).

These results point to the robust, favourable view that South Africans have of this redress policy. It is also worth noting the slight upswing in support that has occurred post-2013, which possibly reflects the growing political discourse and sense of urgency around addressing the land question.

**Figure 1: Support for land reform in South Africa, 2003-2017 (%)**



Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) rounds 1-15, 2003-2017

**How unified are South Africans?**

While two-thirds of South Africans favour land reform in principle, this view is not necessarily uniformly held among all. To provide a sense of extent and nature of the level of solidarity around land reform, Table 1 presents all-year averages (combined data covering 2003-2017) based on gender, birth cohort, population group, educational attainment, subjective poverty status and type of geographic location.

The results suggest that there are discernible cleavages in preferences for land reform among adults in the country. This is fairly modest along generational lines, with younger adults more inclined to support land reform than older adults (70% among those born after 1980 vs. 59-61% among generations born before 1960). No significant variation is found according to gender.

The gradient of variation is more appreciable along race, class and political party identification lines. For instance, 79% of black African adults support land reform compared to slightly more than a quarter of coloured and Indian adults and a meagre 18% of white adults. There is also a 20 to 25 percentage point gradient of difference in support based on educational status, subjective poverty status and geographic locations, with social disadvantage associated with higher support for redistribution. Politically, support for land reform is not especially different among supporters of the ANC and EFF (79% vs. 72%), though the divide between these supporters and DA supporters is more than 45 percentage points.

These findings show that while on average there is fairly broad-based support for land reform among South Africans, there clearly exists what some scholars have referred to as a ‘stubborn kernel of opposition’ to redistribution underlying this aggregate picture. The fact that this opposition is more apparent among elites and the historically privileged means that policy proposals that challenge the status quo are likely to remain highly contested.

**Table 1: Support for land reform among South African adults on average between 2003 and 2017 (row %)**

	Support	Oppose	Neutral or uncertain	Total
All South African adults	67	19	14	100
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	66	20	14	100
Female	67	18	15	100
<b>Birth cohort</b>				
Born Free (born after 1980)	70	16	14	100
<i>(Born 1990 and after)</i>	68	17	15	<i>(100)</i>
<i>(Born 1980s)</i>	70	16	14	<i>(100)</i>
Struggle Generation (1960-79)	67	19	13	100
Grand Apartheid (1945-59)	61	24	15	100
Early and pre-apartheid (born before 1945)	59	24	16	100
<b>Population group</b>				
Black African	79	9	12	100
Coloured	30	45	24	100
Indian/Asian	28	52	20	100
White	18	61	21	100
<b>Educational attainment</b>				
Primary or no formal schooling	75	12	13	100
Grades 8-11	70	17	13	100
Matric or equivalent	63	22	15	100
Tertiary or equivalent	53	30	17	100
<b>Subjective poverty status</b>				
Poor	78	11	11	100
Just getting by	69	17	13	100
Non-poor	54	29	17	100
<b>Geographic location</b>				
Urban formal	58	26	16	100
Urban informal	81	8	11	100
Rural traditional authority areas	81	8	11	100
Rural farms	63	22	15	100
<b>Party identification</b>				
ANC supporters	79	10	11	100
EFF supporters	79	8	14	100
DA supporters	27	55	18	100
Other political party supporters	64	21	15	100

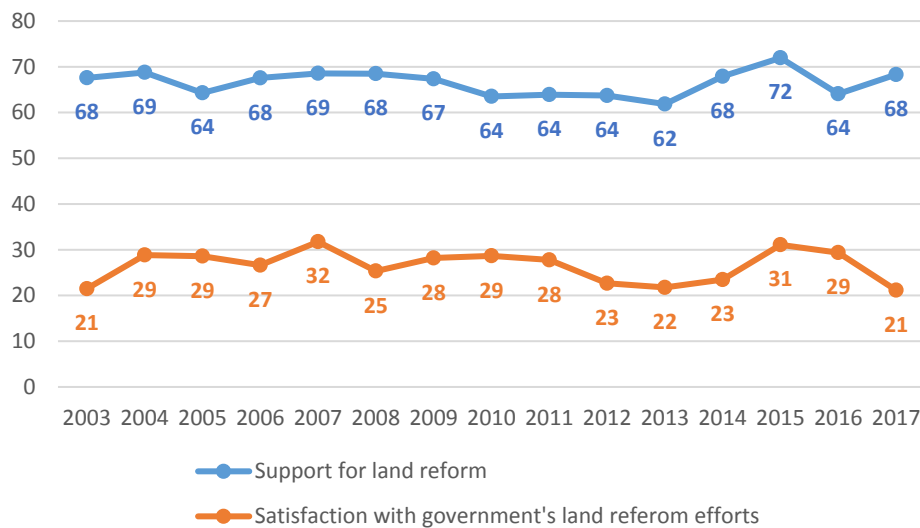
Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) rounds 1-15, 2003-2017

Note: The percentages in the table are based on combined data over the 2003-2017 period, meaning that the results should be interpreted as all-year averages.

### Are government efforts matching expectations?

After nearly a quarter-century of post-apartheid land reform, how appreciable is the gap between support for land reform and evaluations of government performance in this regard. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find that South Africans tend to rate progress in a harsh light. In late 2017, only 21% of adults were satisfied with progress in relation to government's land reform programme, with satisfaction levels fluctuating between 21 and 32% over the fifteen-year interval. Current levels of satisfaction with the implementation of land reform are at an all-time low, which may also partly explain why this policy issue has once again come firmly under the spotlight.

**Figure 2: The gap between support for land reform and evaluations of state progress, 2003-2017 (%)**



Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) rounds 1-15, 2003-2017

### Land reform and competing national priorities?

One of the paradoxes of land and associated policies and programmes is that, despite the attention it commands in political discourse, public debate and the media, it does not feature high up in the public's national agenda. When asked to specify what the most pressing societal challenges are that face the country, land appears considerably lower down the list of priorities, especially when compared to unemployment, crime and safety, poverty, corruption and service delivery.

In late 2017, land reform issues were mentioned as a national priority by fewer than 5% of South African adults. From a rank order perspective, land did not even feature in the top ten cited priorities, being placed 14<sup>th</sup> by adults. This pattern also did not alter appreciably over the last fifteen years, with the percentage citing land reform as a national priority varying in a small range between 2% and 4% over this period on aggregate.

This apparent attitudinal inconsistency between strong approval of land reform as a general programme of government and its low public ranking as a national priority certainly warrants more attention. It might again reflect the different symbolic and material meanings attached to land in the country and how these can intersect in different ways to inform contemporary land reform debates and seemingly paradoxical public opinion on land reform.

### Conclusion

The survey results show that land reform is a redistributive policy that is as widely supported, and that this support has remained relatively stable over time. The significant gap between support for this policy in principle and satisfaction with programmatic implementation is likely to be one of the factors driving the increasing popular and political appeals for new approaches and a policy rethink to progressively advance the land reform agenda. Yet, the results also point to the polarising nature and complexities that associated with such debates. This is apparent in the cleavages in support, most especially along racial, class and political lines, as well as the disjuncture between support for state-led land reform programmes and the relative ranking of land reform in the public agenda.

The survey evidence points to the urgent need for a fuller, more nuanced examination of land reform attitudes and policy preferences that takes into account emerging new global challenges and the

evolving policy context. This is something that the HSRC intends to prioritise in forthcoming rounds of its social attitudes survey series in partnership with key higher education institutions.

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