



The Urban Foundation-backed Private Sector Council released a major policy document, 'Rural Development - towards a new framework', in September. The council claims the document 'is one of the most comprehensive studies ever on how South Africa should begin to reconstruct its rural areas as non-racial development regions'. It provides a neat, often useful synthesis of some of the key problems of land and agrarian reform - but Tessa Marcus takes issue with its assumptions and recommendations. She argues that it is a recipe for maintaining the privileges of the few and exploitation of the majority in our countryside

Strategising for capital in the countryside

There are three types of problem with the Private Sector Council's recommendations for rural development. The first relates to the timing of the report, the second to the process which produced it, and the third to its content. Together, they betray the character of the report and its intentions.

Released just two weeks before President FW de Klerk announced the state's intention to repeal the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, the document can hardly be considered instrumental in prompting this partial reform measure. In fact, the timing of the report's release raises questions which are very important in judging the integrity of its claims.

Why had the PSC/Urban Foundation remained silent on an issue so fundamental to democracy and human rights when the political climate was not favourable to such reform? Not because of a lack of evidence nor because of an absence of pressure for urgent reform, but rather because

rural reform was not conceived of as a means to influence the pace of change in the country.

The report is a thrust into political debate when 'a future non-racial development strategy has not yet been thoroughly thought through in government circles... (and) when there is great uncertainty as to the future of urban, regional and rural development policy'. This suggests that they chose to intervene in order to influence the direction of the reform, a conclusion substantiated when we look at both the process and the content of the report.

The problem of process arises from how the report was compiled and the claims it makes within it. The PSC commissioned 39 papers from a variety of academics who had to sign a secrecy clause as a condition of contract. Instead of encouraging a free intellectual debate as the findings became available, it seems the PSC adopted a military-style intelligence-gathering operation to arm itself for the 'offensive'.

The PSC also carried out an extensive literature search drawing on the work generated over the past two decades by the handful of democratically minded scholars, field workers and activists who have engaged with the problems of apartheid restructuring in the South African countryside. Whilst this is normal scientific procedure, it is also normal (and ethical) to attribute the source of your ideas - something the report does not do consistently.

Further, the report claims that 'the summary of research and policy proposals put forward ... can be seen as the contribution of the private sector and community based leadership' to the problem of rural development. In other words, the report implicitly claims that it is not just the standpoint of the PSC but also of unspecified popular democratic organisations, or their leadership.

Instances of plagiarism and, more importantly, the secrecy surrounding the research beg the question: to what type of consultation process was the report subjected?

What seems most likely is that the process of discussing with particular individuals and organisations was misread as consultation and, worse, as endorsement of the report. This is not a minor issue in the context in which this report is presented, since, for the PSC report to take hold, it has to have the backing of the majority of South Afri-

cans.

This is something of which the authors are painfully aware. Thus, they explicitly state that it is not a 'blueprint for unilateral imposition' (who ever thought it could be?) but rather that it is offered as 'a contribution to a vigorous national debate'.

The issues raised about timing and process reflect the main problem in the content of the report - its classist perspectives.

'Rural development - towards a new framework' is a singularly classist statement by monopoly capital. It might seem a little discordant to emphasise this aspect at a time when the national effort is directed towards neutralising the most reactionary, reform-resistant elements within the ruling minority. But when it comes to reform and the future it is the different class interests which come to the fore - as this report clearly displays.

Not only does the report uninhibitedly present the point of view of big business, it is also concerned to project this view as 'objective' and 'neutral', and as being grounded in science. Yet, both the definition of the problem and the solutions proposed hardly originate from a disinterested and impartial perspective.

In making this criticism, I am not dismissing their ideas and arguments out of hand. Rather I aim to highlight their limitations and shortcomings in so far as the problems of land and agrarian reform in South Africa are concerned.

The PSC rural development report makes some important and (in terms of their origins) ground-breaking assumptions.

South Africa is considered to mean the geographic entity established in 1910. And, whilst the report deals with so-called 'black' and 'white' rural areas, it emphasises the connectedness of these areas, and the common conditions of poverty and the poor quality of life enjoyed by the majority of black people living there.

Of particular interest is the suggestion that *all* rural areas are characterised by underdevelopment. This is contrary to most thinking - popular and academic - about white-owned rural areas: these areas are generally characterised as 'modern' and developed.

What are we to make of this suggestion? 'Modern' production can indeed be 'backward' when it is built upon super-exploited labour, as I have argued else-

where. Yet there is nothing in their analysis or policy proposals to suggest that the underdevelopment of white-owned commercial agriculture stems from an examination of production relations in the sector.

Indeed, since they are advocates of growth - and South African commercial agriculture displays features of growth - it would seem that what they mean by underdevelopment are the impoverished conditions of life which most black farm workers and dwellers experience. Moreover, they hold, this impoverishment is not a structural condition of the way production is organised in the sector.

Certain logical consequences flow from this problematic position - both in the way the report further defines the problem and in the solutions it proposes.

One is to identify legally created racial barriers as the primary obstacle to be overcome.

The report presents a strongly argued case for the abolition of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts and the Group Areas Act which determine racial ownership and occupation of land in the so-called white areas (and in the so-called homelands). This has been a long standing call which dates back to the very enactment of the 1913 Land Act - and certainly most of South Africa's population does not need to be convinced on the desirability of their repeal.

The problem, however, is that over time the law has been used to entrench a *de facto* white monopoly of ownership. This will not be swept away today merely by the removal of these statutes.

In 1990, '84% of households in the rural and dense settlement areas received incomes below the Minimum Living Level' and in 1983 average per capita income per month on white farms was R12. Further, in 1985 'the average investment in a commercial farming unit was in excess of R650 000'.

Black rural poverty and the high price of commercial farm land that these statistics underscore begs the question: how many among the black rural population will be able to be counted amongst that new category of farmers the report speaks of - those 'who have sufficient resources to purchase existing commercial farms'? My point is: a non-racial land market will not be created simply by removing moribund racial laws.

The report recognises this fact, in part, by suggesting the creation of two other new categories of black farmers. These are 'emergent' small scale arable or in-

extensive livestock farmers without sufficient resources to purchase existing farms' and 'communities wishing to lease state-owned grazing land in extensive pastoral farming areas'. Thus, the drops of private black land ownership will be made, with state assistance, into puddles of mostly small-holders submerged in a sea of white monopoly.

In part, the answer is said to lie in the restimulation of all forms of tenancy - with due legal protection. But not only is tenancy in a private land market a very unequal and insecure relation, this proposal also begs the question: why should land be owned by those who do not work it? If people are to be made tenants why should they not be tenants of the state? Why should the rent they pay for land be uncontrolled and used as a source of profit by private landlords rather than being effectively rechannelled into the social wage essential to give substance and meaning to an affirmative action programme?

There is not much non-racialism in a countryside where land ownership remains mostly in the hands of whites and tenancy is mostly black.

Another logical consequence is to place the creation of a black farming class at the centre of the proposed solution. Black farmers - resourced or 'emergent', owners or tenants - are to be stimulated through extensive 'farmer support programmes', to be absorbed into the agricultural production system as it exists.

This is problematic for two related reasons.

Firstly, because commercial agriculture is underdeveloped despite increased production. The poverty of the rural areas not only stems from the racial division of labour but also from the social division of labour, and especially from the labour forms and social characteristics of the agrarian working class.

Labour in the sector centres on a small stabilised core of on-farm male workers and their families supplemented by a large migrantised and casualised work force drawn from off-farm labour pools. Most of these workers are women and children. In addition, small pockets of labour tenants and a sizeable number of prisoners work in commercial agriculture.

In other words, the profitability of the sector as it is presently structured, depends on the relative cheapness and rightlessness of the workforce. If the structure

of production is unchanged then, as the PSC correctly observes, farmers will continue to substitute capital for labour to counteract efforts to improve conditions in the sector.

While the report recognises the problematic nature of 'the economic and political structure' of commercial agriculture, this remains little more than an observation. Its implications are not followed through in the report's policy proposals. In turn, this undermines the weight of its call for the inclusion of agricultural workers in the Labour Relations Act - which, again, comes when the state has already indicated its intention to do so.

The PSC report would have it that black emergent farmers should be absorbed into this milieu of exploitation. They should apparently emulate or even exceed the white example in order to survive in conditions in which they are notably resource-poor and at a disadvantage in comparison to their white counterparts.

But even then it is an open question as to whether these emergent black farmers would survive given the centralisation, concentration and capital intensity of production in the sector.

There is a second problematic aspect to the concentration on creating a new black farming class: its composition. Surely the focus should fall on the needs and rights of the majority of people who presently work the land - farm workers. This is not to suggest that they have exclusive rights to the land. But their rights cannot be made supplementary or even incidental to a rural reform programme, not least of all for economic reasons. Farming jobs disproportionately influence both the geographical distribution of the population, (as the PSC report points out), and the social conditions of the countryside.

And what about the women? In the report there is a total absence of any reference to women. Yet, as we all know, the racial and class divisions of the South African countryside are further complicated by a gender division which systematically relegates African women to among the most disadvantaged. They make up the majority of rural occupants and the majority of people engaged on the land - either in sub-subsistence farming or mostly as 'casualised' and sometimes as full-time farm workers.

The legacy of patriarchy which pervades much intellectual thinking does

not satisfactorily explain the authors' failure to address the problem of gender. Assuming their reforms were gender neutral was mistake enough. But there is a further point. The facts necessitate that redressing inequalities arising from the oppression of women (particularly African women) must be a central consideration of any rural reform programme.

Lastly, we need to look critically at the concepts underlying proposals to carry out the report's recommendations. The 'how' has two components.

The first refers to the theoretical means by which the goal of rural development is to be achieved. The problem here is that equity or fairness does not mean equality. Thus, a rural development strategy which aims for 'growth with equity', as nice as that sounds, does not presume to redress the inequalities of the countryside. Moreover, the primary 'redistributive' mechanism is assigned to the market, which as we have already seen is structurally loaded against the majority of South Africa's rural population - black and poor and largely female.

The only redistributive tendencies that market forces display is towards the rich and empowered. In this context, we also need to treat with caution the particular interpretation the report gives to the call for 'growth through redistribution', which it considers as a supplementary measure.

The other refers to how policy is to be translated into practice, how it is to be implemented. The PSC report has taken the 'cargo' notion of policy on board in full. Policy is viewed as a package (from outside), to be delivered in a given fixed space/time framework (a project), and then evaluated to iron out inevitable 'shortcomings'. This approach, although mainstream 'state of the art' and in the mode of thinking of such heavyweights as the World Bank, IMF, most states and many non-governmental organisations, is also highly problematic and needs to be publicly debated.

In sum, the PSC strategy for rural development rests on the creation of a small black farming class, to be absorbed into the predominant system of agricultural production, without impinging on the economic, social and racial privileges of dominant farming interests. Although the proposals make small inroads into racial inequalities, key class, gender and racial issues which affect the majority of South Africa's rural inhabitants remain outstanding. •