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Breaking the inertia in SA agriculture and land policy implementation in 2025

- The South African agriculture and land policy discourse risks entering a space of inertia like much of the country's developmental agenda. More than three years ago, we knew that the South African government over the years acquired about 2,5 million hectares of land through its Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy. Much of this land was previously utilized for various farming activities. Currently, some of the land is underutilized, and some is under short-term leases to farmers who struggle to access the necessary capital to unlock the land potential.
- Whenever we consider the long-term growth prospects for agriculture, we assume that this land would be fully utilized productively to boost agricultural output and add jobs. On various occasions over the past three years, President Cyril Ramaphosa and the then Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Ms Thoko Didiza, pushed for the establishment of the Land Reform and Agricultural Development Agency, which would be at the centre of driving the release of the land to appropriately selected beneficiaries with title deeds, address finance challenges, and lean on organized agriculture and private sector skills.
- The process has taken has taken long. Still, some progress of setting up the Agency is underway, with conceptual work completed, driven primarily by the leadership of the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development. The release of this land with title deeds to appropriately selected beneficiaries has the support of the Presidency. In his Opening of Parliament Address in July 2024, President Ramaphosa again stressed the importance of this process when he stated: "We will increase funding to land reform, prioritize the transfer of state land and improve post-settlement support by strengthening the institutional capacity of responsible structures." Thus, we believe that the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development should accelerate the process of establishing the Land Reform and Rural Development Agency and ensure that it begins its work this year.
- There is always the temptation to have elaborate consultations and dialogues about land matters. In fact, over the past three decades, South Africa has spent more time on such dialogues than on policy implementation. In 2025, Minister Mzwanele Nyhontso and the Director General of the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development should avoid the allure of these elaborate and unproductive meetings and consultations, move ahead with the current programmes established in the previous administration, tweak and improve as they implement. Failure to begin will result in another year of discussions while farmers on the ground and the sector continue to suffer.
- If the government cannot move ahead with releasing more land and supporting farmers, such inaction would risk the long-term growth prospects of South Africa's agriculture and rural economy. The success of other government programmes, such as the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan, hinges on

the progress of the land release. When the work begins, the approach should not follow the practice of the past few years, where a land parcel is allocated to numerous beneficiaries. The policy focus should be a deliberate attempt to support and nurture a new cohort of individual commercial farmers, not groups. The "*Better Few, But Better*" concept should be the running theme as we build the agricultural sector and the rural economy. This entails selecting a few and a better new cohort of commercial farmers to support.

- Indeed, focusing on creating and nurturing a new cohort of farmers does not mean the South African government must ignore the smallholder farmers. They should continue receiving the necessary support as they play a vital role in household food security. The deliberate support of commercial farming will also ensure that there are anchors of farmers in each region that could also be aggregators for the surrounding smallholder farmers that wish to access noncommercial value chains.
- 2025 should be a period of implementation and progress in land reform and agriculture. This will ensure that the goodwill that also exists in organized agriculture to collaborate does not wane while also ensuring progress of the farming economy.