

Distributing unused state land can move an area more than half the size of Kruger Park

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The Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform hosted a colloquium over the weekend to share its thinking on critical policy related to the land reform space and to obtain inputs from stakeholders and experts not represented on the panel. The topics were diverse, stretching from customary tenure reform, to beneficiary support and even expropriation. A short article would not do justice to all of the topics that were covered but there was a single presentation made which particularly caught the eye.

Since the very beginning of the expropriation without compensation debate, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the need to redistribute unused state land. However exactly what is meant by 'unused' state land and how much of that truly exists has been a mystery. This weekend however, an official from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform's Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Branch shed some light on the research they have been conducting and the results got everyone sitting up and taking notice.

In conducting their research, the Department had to first define what exactly would qualify as state land. For the time being, land which is formally registered in the name of a National or Provincial Department as well as a municipality seemed to be included. It is unclear whether land owned by state entities such as Universities, research institutions and other bodies created by legislation were considered or not. Furthermore, it does not appear as if state-owned enterprises such as Eskom, Transnet or Telkom were counted and perhaps rightly so, as these are companies that happen to be owned by the state but still need to balance their books, so it might not be appropriate to include their assets. In total, it was presented that the state owns roughly 25,2 million hectares of land in South Africa.

The vast majority of this land is required for legitimate public purposes and should therefore not be eligible to be redistributed. These include national parks, water catchment areas, military training and testing grounds, land occupied by dams, highways etc. This land should be excluded from any calculations as it is, for all intents and purposes, being used for public purposes. In addition to land used for public purposes, there are other tracts of land owned by the state which are already being used and will therefore also not be appropriate for redistribution without causing injustice to the current users. These include the former homeland areas that are already occupied, farms acquired through the state's Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy and allocated to existing beneficiaries, land that is formally leased out to farmers, land occupied by informal settlements and so-called 'buffer zones' around the perimeter of settlements that are used for grazing purposes. Excluding these land parcels, there is an estimated 2,9 million hectares of state land that is classified as unused.

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Much of this land is however situated in extremely remote areas in the Northern Cape that are either too far from services to be viable human settlements, or too barren to sustain large communities undertaking agricultural enterprises. As a result, the Department applied the criteria developed in a policy known as 'strategically located land' to identify how much of this land could be capable of delivering a viable livelihood for redistribution beneficiaries. The total arrived at was 1,2 million hectares.

1,2 million hectares may not sound like that much, but one should bear in mind that all of this land can be transferred without displacing any current owners, without having to resort to expropriation and with minimum costs as the land is already owned by the state. The figure below shows the distribution of this land:

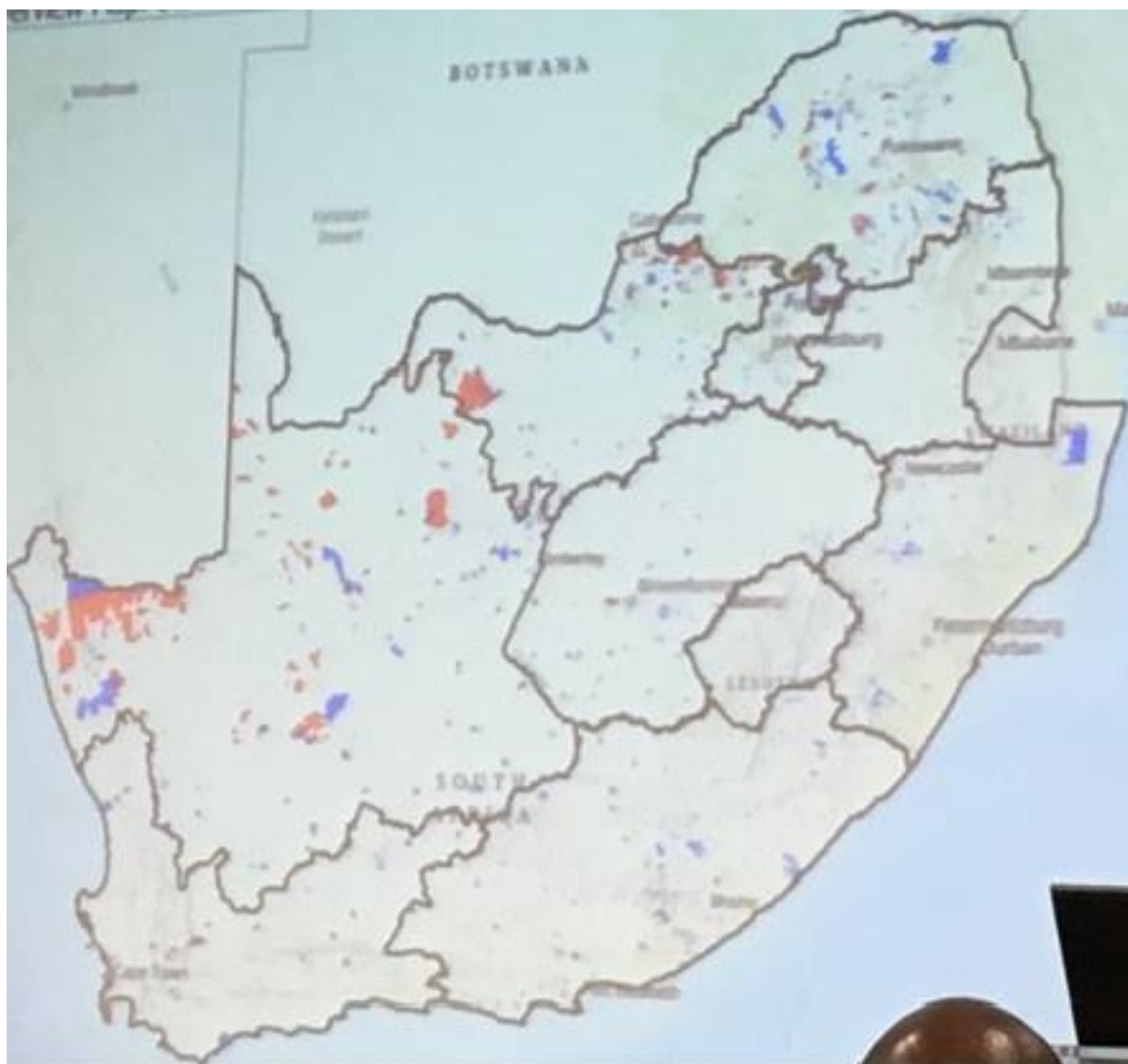


Figure 1: A snapshot from the Presentation made by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform at the Land Reform Advisory Panel colloquium held on the 7th and 8th of December 2018.

From the image you can see that the land parcels are scattered across the country. Taken separately, it does not look like much, but to place it in context, the collective is equal to an area more than half the size of Kruger National Park.

Kruger National Park is roughly 2 million hectares in total, this means that the total land owned by the state is equal to 12 and a half Kruger Parks, the unused land nearly 1,5 Kruger Parks, and the amount suitable for redistribution about 60% the size of Kruger Park. This analysis was conducted using GIS mapping and satellite imagery to determine the land use. According to the Department, the next step is to get feet on the ground to verify what (if anything) is actually taking place on the ground.

Innovative ideas are being formulated to speed up the land reform programme with several experts, government and private sector looking at the matter in earnest. Whilst the stakeholders may not always agree on the various policies and plans that are tried, tested and eventually tossed out, one has to give credit where credit is due, and this study by the Department is one such example. Redistributing this land alone can never be enough as a great deal more is required to reach the NDP's target of an additional 20% distributed in each district. What it can do however, is make a tremendous impact on the lives of the beneficiaries and give our land reform programme a real shot in the arm with little cost to the state or its citizens.