



Agriculture

Transforming agriculture in Africa

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Generally, agricultural reform must start by unlocking access to credit, enabling farmers to advance towards higher productivity. That is only possible by making land a bankable asset, yet the potential for property rights to unlock capital remains unrealised, in part because the average smallholder farmer cultivates less than two hectares of land:

- An estimated 90% of rural land in Africa is not formally documented.
- Just 4% of African countries have mapped and titled the private land in their capital cities.
- Less than 20% of occupied land in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) is registered; the rest is undocumented, informally administered and, as a result, vulnerable to land grabbing and expropriation without adequate compensation.
- Up to 60% of national land in sub-Saharan Africa is held under customary or traditional forms of land ownership.

A myriad of factors affects whether land titles are useful, such as custom, other laws and the capacity of the state to enforce people's legal property rights. Additionally, vested interests, such as traditional leaders and urban elites, obstruct [reform](#).

With few exceptions, agriculture in Africa has low levels of technological advancement, seen in limited irrigation, low levels of mechanisation (as labour is cheap and farmers need more capital) and minor (or no) fertiliser use. All of these require access to credit. The continent also sees limited use of genetically modified seeds, which are more resilient to disease, slow progress in organic farming and little cultivation of indigenous crops better suited to the continent.

Credit requires secure and transferable [land ownership](#), indicating the need to formalise, regulate and modernise land ownership. With clarity on ownership, farmers can access finance, transfer land or protect themselves against encroachment.

Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto noted that farmers inevitably need help to leverage their [resources](#) and assets to create wealth. Legally protected property rights are the key source of the developed world's prosperity, he argued, and the lack thereof is the reason why many nations remain mired in poverty by the 'tragedy of the commons', where their unregistered assets can be stolen by powerful interests, hurting individuals and broader economic development.

It is, therefore, somewhat ironic that a comprehensive 'land grab' was recently evident across Africa, particularly in the Nile River Basin, which covers an area of 3.18 million km² (from Uganda to Egypt). Companies from several developed nations have acquired fertile Nile-irrigated land for growing food crops, flowers, tobacco and biofuels, rearing livestock and logging trees. Most of these deals are agricultural leases and forest concessions, though the recent wars in South Sudan and Sudan have disrupted this trend. Although some industrial-type farms have brought positive benefits to local economies, in most cases, the local people suffer because governments prioritise foreign investment and export earnings above pursuing local livelihoods.

The World Bank has found 'little evidence of a relationship between increased [commercialisation](#) and improved nutritional status.' Low- and lower-middle-income [African countries](#) should prioritise food production for domestic consumption before pursuing cash crops for the export market, it argues.

To capitalise on the benefits of having an educated and healthy labour force, governments need an unwavering emphasis on achieving food security with an apparent effort to support the consumption of domestic crops suited to the local climatic conditions. Agriculture should be pursued with the primary purpose of ensuring national food security before

opportunities for foreign exchange although the two are, of course, closely related.

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Ms Alize le Roux joined the AFI in May 2021 as a senior researcher. Before joining the ISS, she worked as a principal geo-informatics researcher at the CSIR, supporting various local and national policy- and decision-makers with long-term planning support. Alize has 14 years of experience in spatial data analysis, disaster risk reduction and urban and regional modelling. She has a master's degree in geographical sciences from the University of Utrecht, specialising in multi-hazard risk assessments and spatial decision support systems.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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