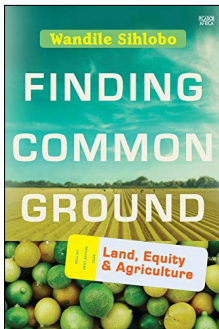




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Finding common ground: Land, equity and agriculture



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Strategies for land reform and agriculture

Wandile Sihlobo has established himself over the last 5 years as one of the leading journalists and commentators covering land and agricultural issues in South Africa. He writes for *Business Day*, *Daily Maverick* and *Farmers Weekly* and this book is – in his words – a ‘harvest’ or ‘isivuno’ of his articles with linking passages. Since 2016 he has worked at AgBiz – an association of agribusiness organisations that aims to publish data and influence policy. He has been incorporated into key policy groups such as the President’s Advisory Panel on Land Reform and Agriculture (PAP 2019). Trained as an agricultural economist, Sihlobo has wonderful access to information on agriculture and land, to both government and private sector, and to breaking issues. He gets out and about, visits farms and projects, talks to a wide range of practitioners, and attends conferences. Above all, *Finding Common Ground* is a well-informed, broad-ranging and sensible book that covers a wide variety of topics from land reform to international markets. Some articles are jointly written, and it is not always clear when we are hearing Sihlobo himself. But collectively these pieces show a deep understanding of South African agriculture – its diversity, strengths and weaknesses – in comparative perspective. He is also strongly aware of the politics of land, although he approaches the politics with caution.

Sihlobo is a moderniser and argues that land reform should be focused not least on production. He and his co-authors, especially Johann Kirsten in a 2018 series, emphasise that successful agriculture at any scale requires investment, intensification, skills and technology. They note the expansion of high-value fruit, nuts and horticulture from old-established citrus to more novel blueberries. In 2018, nearly 50% of the value of agricultural output was exported – much of it from this sub-sector, which is also important for internal markets and food security. Sihlobo is an advocate of GM seeds and sees them as fundamental to South Africa’s continued capacity in maize, where yields have increased recently; he argues that such innovations should be extended to smallholders. There is an intriguing article analysing regional approaches to the legalisation of dagga; he supports this as a means of stimulating smallholder production and high-value processed products.

Sihlobo and Kirsten are particularly focused on how to pursue land reform in a way that may sustain and enhance production, livelihoods and employment. They discuss thoroughly the problem of who should be beneficiaries and what kinds of transfers facilitate farming. For them, expropriation without compensation will have a negative impact, on both agricultural investment and financial institutions. In these and other articles, Sihlobo accepts that agriculture and associated rural livelihoods will be pursued at all scales. He returns on a few occasions to the potential of perhaps 1 million hectares of underutilised land in the former homelands, which could be a significant source of income for the relatively poor communities that live there. He sees particular promise in partnerships where commercial operations or experts work with smallholders and new black farmers – providing knowledge, inputs, capital and access to markets: he is impressed by a visit to a 65-ha community-owned farm on which blueberries and peppers are grown, and sounds a particular note of optimism about a group of 17 black commercial farmers in Matatiele, initially supported by the Old Mutual Masisizane fund, that is expanding maize and wheat production.

The problem with land reform in this view is not an insufficiency of land but ineffective bureaucracies and inadequate support to beneficiaries. Too many have been ‘set up for failure’; government departments have been slow to provide opportunities and back-up. Sihlobo hopes that the recent re-amalgamation of the Departments of Agriculture and Land Reform/Rural Development, under Thoko Didiza, will resolve some of the blockages. He and Kirsten are uncomfortable with the government’s shift, under the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS, from 2006), to renting out redistributed land. While they are not in favour of rapid privatisation in the former homelands, they see individual land ownership as the most likely form of tenure to facilitate agricultural investment and production.

The joint position paper that Sihlobo wrote with three other members of the PAP suggests that individual smallholder models are the most successful. By contrast, South Africa has tended to pursue group farming models through Communal Property Associations where decision-making can be a recurring hurdle. It is certainly interesting to see two papers that fed into the PAP and this one also, somewhat surprisingly, seems to favour a fast-track, state-supported programme to transfer 30% of agricultural land in freehold to black South Africans. It is not exactly clear what the authors mean, and whether this includes the 10% of agricultural land that has been transferred through government schemes. But this proposal seems somewhat out of step with Sihlobo’s approach as a whole, in which he puts projects and successful production ahead of unrealistic targets. Elsewhere, he is highly critical of Zimbabwe’s fast track.

Although he does not develop this point, Sihlobo also notes that downstream processing of agricultural produce generates a greater percentage of GDP than primary agricultural production and such industries and processes have particular potential for jobs, especially those that are highly skilled. Is the implication that unravelling the large farm sector, for an uncertain future in which production and food security is dependent on undercapitalised smallholders, is unwise and that a more productive priority is deracialising the ‘entire production chain’? It would be valuable to have further development of Sihlobo’s views on some of these ideas, as well as more detailed discussion about interventions that might unlock the productive potential of smallholders.

This book is a very welcome intervention – an optimistic discussion with a strong sense that, despite the legacies of apartheid and divisive politics, problems can be solved. It is the approach of a well-informed, sensitive observer who advocates building on successful models of production and technical advances. This is what South Africa needs.

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