

Agri-villages ‘will not give workers security’

Institute warns government planned agricultural villages could lead to guaranteed cheap labour for farmers

GOVERNMENT plans to establish agricultural villages will not ensure security of tenure for farm dwellers and could be a recipe to deliver guaranteed cheap labour for farmers, the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (Plaas) at the University of the Western Cape warned yesterday.

The proposal for agricultural villages is contained in the draft Land Tenure Security Bill, promulgated in December last year with only two months given to civil society and interest groups to comment — a tight deadline rejected by civil society structures and Free State Agriculture. The parties have called for an extension to give sufficient time to debate the socioeconomic implications of bill.

Free State Agriculture has complained that the bill is a radical departure from common law principles of property law and would most likely create general, and seemingly unlimited, rights for a very wide category of people in competition with the rights of landowners.

The body said in a statement that the bill's point of departure was that every one on a farm (landowner and worker) had equal rights and that this applied only to agricultural land, while communal land and mining land were excluded.

Plaas senior researcher Ruth Hall said she disagreed that the bill gave unlimited rights to farm dwellers, as the farmers' organisation feared, and it did not extend substantially rights contained in the Extension of Security of Tenure Act, a law dating back to 1997, which itself had been poorly implemented.

"If anything, the establishment of agricultural villages could facilitate a new model of 'evictions and resettlement', since the new proposal focuses on 'off-site settlement' in new areas that could become rural slums if services are not delivered and if people do not have opportunities to generate economic activities of their own," she said.

The villages would have major financial implications for municipalities, which already have huge backlogs in infrastructure development and basic services. She cautioned that most people would have only temporary permits, according to the bill, and it was unclear how this would address security of tenure, though the intentions seem noble.

In their presentations, Moleko Phakedi of the Food and Allied Workers Union argued that the village concept would "guarantee" their members "shelter and social security instead of being perpetually at the mercy of employers".

According to Statistics SA figures, total employment in agriculture in November fell to 618000 after the sector lost about 100000 jobs between 2009 and last year .

This means the bill's proposal could lead to millions being moved to the proposed agricultural villages.

Others have cautioned against the establishment of Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's Arusha Declaration — a development blueprint published in 1967 — which attempted to address the need for an African model of development and that formed the basis of African socialism called Ujamaa

However, Ms Hall argued that Mr Nyerere's Ujamaa policy was quite different to SA's proposal.

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