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# Land Reform and Beyond in Times of Social–Ecological Change

Perspectives from the Karoo

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## Introduction

Land reform remains a potent challenge in contemporary South Africa, one that demands attention. This much has been confirmed by the strong passions the issue of expropriation without compensation has aroused, as well as the political currency the debate on amending the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa has gifted idealists and opportunists of all colours and stripes. The issue cannot be dispatched to the margins of public life with more commissions of inquiry or retooled business plans for the beleaguered Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) (now folded into the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD)). Nor can the visceral power of land as a symbol of dispossession and inequality be tempered through sober analysis alone, whether of actual land demand or changing patterns of settlement, land use and land ownership. Nevertheless, the staleness of contemporary policy debates, the extent of the political impasse in the state, and the urgency of other challenges facing the country – not least corruption and climate change – demand fresh ways of thinking about the contribution of land reform to redistributive justice in the third decade of the twenty-first century. How far fresh thinking will impact on the politics of land is hard to say; however, engaging anew with not only the discourse and practice of land reform but also the broader social–ecological contexts in which it must operate is critical for more effective policy development.

Underpinning this chapter is a concern with what I see as the overly narrow framing of current policy–political debates in terms of land *as*

redistributive justice in South Africa, rather than land – actual land – as one plank in a larger framework *for* redistributive justice. I explore the need to reframe the issue from the vantage point of South Africa's Karoo region. This large, sparsely populated, arid to semi-arid region is not commonly thought of as a land reform hotspot, but looking at land from this perch offers pertinent perspectives on land use and related matters. For one thing, the Karoo's significant share of South Africa's commercial farmland in terms of gross area – some 40 per cent – should give pause to those who regard the 'white' countryside as the main prize in the struggle for social justice. Here, land-based livelihoods are visibly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change while, against the grain of popular conceptions of this region, most residents are scrabbling to make ends meet not on farms but in small, struggling urban settlements.

The Karoo is, furthermore, at the forefront of developments that are impacting what we have come to think of as the established land order in the South African countryside. New land uses, notably major investments in astronomy and renewable and non-renewable energy, are recalibrating the significance of farming in this region in a time of major social-ecological change and, in the process, reprising old questions about social justice and the equitable distribution of national public goods in changing contexts. The Karoo is also beset with deep-rooted social problems that are not receiving the urgent, focused policy interventions they require, including extremely high levels of alcohol abuse, which can be fairly described as constituting a largely unremarked national emergency. The roots of this crisis may well lie in land injustices in the past, but much more than land reform is required to break the cycle of substance dependency and build local resilience and well-being.

In developing these points, I am not suggesting the Karoo is typical of the country as a whole – this is decidedly not a one-size-fits-all approach. Nor am I arguing that the time for land reform is past. Rather, I am using the Karoo to tease out significant issues that intersect in particular ways in this region and, in that intersection, prompt new ways of thinking about land and the land question. In a nutshell: the Karoo pushes one to scale down expectations of what land reform can deliver while foregrounding other issues that require more sustained attention.

This chapter develops that argument across five cross-cutting themes: the scale of the Karoo; its demanding – some might say stark – environment, which makes it a particularly challenging area for farming; contemporary land-use changes and the threats and opportunities they bring; the small-town character of the Karoo; and the region's

multi-layered history, a history which confounds simplistic notions of restorative justice through handing land back to its assumed original, singular and only true owners. The discussion draws on a body of research conducted since 2016 on land-use changes and sustainable development in the region.<sup>1</sup> It is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the Karoo that draws attention to the intersection of scale, environment and history in the current land dispensation and what this means for a land reform programme still conceptualised primarily in terms of land for farming. This is followed by reflections on the major land-use changes underway in the Karoo and then a review of socio-economic conditions in small towns and their development priorities. The following section before the conclusion provides a case study of land issues in the small Karoo town of Loeriesfontein to show how the five themes play out on the ground. Here land claimants and small-scale farmers have found themselves competing for rights to the town's extensive municipal commonage, while investments in wind and solar farms in the municipality signal other contested development priorities nationally and hint at new possibilities for local people.

### Scale, Environment and History

In terms of scale, the first point to emphasise is the significant geographical extent of the Karoo. What can be considered its core districts cover some 30 per cent of South Africa – even more, 40 per cent, if one accepts the extended boundaries that the Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development approved in 2020 in preparation for setting up a Karoo Regional Spatial Development Framework (KRSDF) (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Furthermore, as already indicated, the core Karoo contains some 40 per cent of all commercial agricultural land in South Africa, the land that sits at the heart of the most bitter conflicts nationwide over spatial justice, redress for the past and agrarian policy. Yet the Karoo is home to only 2 per cent of the country's population, a very small proportion of which comprises actual or aspiring farmers. As I have noted elsewhere (Walker, 2019), the Karoo's share of the total area of South Africa mirrors the 30 per cent target for land redistribution that the post-apartheid government set for itself in the mid-1990s. This is a

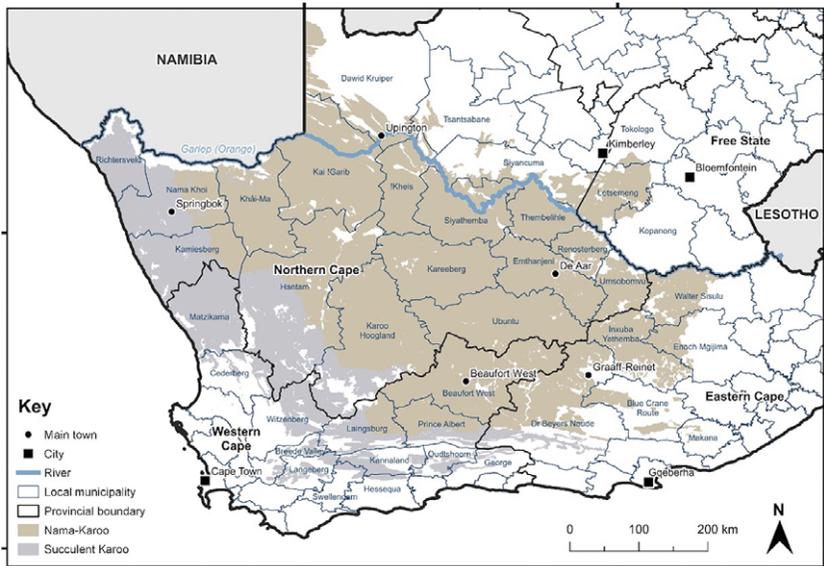
<sup>1</sup> Much of this work has been conducted under the 'Cosmopolitan Karoo' research programme of the DSI/NRF Research Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development at Stellenbosch University.

provocative, if coincidental, correspondence with which to embellish my central point: that thinking about land from the vantage point of the Karoo today reveals the limits of redistributive land reform as the default remedy for past land injustices.

The Karoo is not a tightly bounded region. Its boundaries have always been porous and, as reflected in the two divergent estimates of its extent reported above, determining where its borders lie depends on how one weighs the biophysical, socio-economic and more narrowly politico-administrative considerations at play. Its arid to semi-arid environment is, however, a defining feature. Within these drylands, natural scientists have grouped smaller bioregions into two biomes, the Succulent Karoo and the Nama Karoo, which together define the ecological parameters of what can be considered the core Karoo. Severely complicating their holistic management, the two biomes straddle four provinces, with the Northern Cape having the lion's share. However, sizable areas fall in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces, while a smaller area merges with the grassland biome in the Free State.<sup>2</sup> Figure 9.1 shows the distribution of the two Karoo biomes, along with an overlay of twenty-six local municipalities that fall entirely or largely within these biomes and comprise what colleagues and I have described as the 'social Karoo' (Walker et al., 2018).

In terms of demography, people classified and/or self-identifying as 'coloured' predominate in twenty-one of the twenty-six local municipalities in this core Karoo, with Afrikaans the predominant language in twenty-two (see Walker et al., 2018: table 1). In these respects, the Karoo differs significantly from South Africa as a whole. The national census of 2011 put the combined population of these local municipalities at just under 1 million, thus 2 per cent of the total population of South Africa at the time (Walker et al., 2018: 160). As already indicated, the great majority of Karoo residents live in small towns, many of them facing economic stagnation or decline. Poverty levels in these settlements are generally extremely high. By way of example, a household survey conducted in Loeriesfontein in 2019 found fully 59 per cent of residents had a per capita monthly income at or below the national upper-bound poverty level. State grants were the main source of income for 46 per cent of households, while 30 per cent of people with paid work had monthly earnings of R1,000 or less (Vorster, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The two Karoo biomes also stretch into Namibia. The DALRRD's Karoo Regional Spatial Development Framework extends the eastern boundary to include the Mangaung Metropolitan Area around Bloemfontein in the Free State.

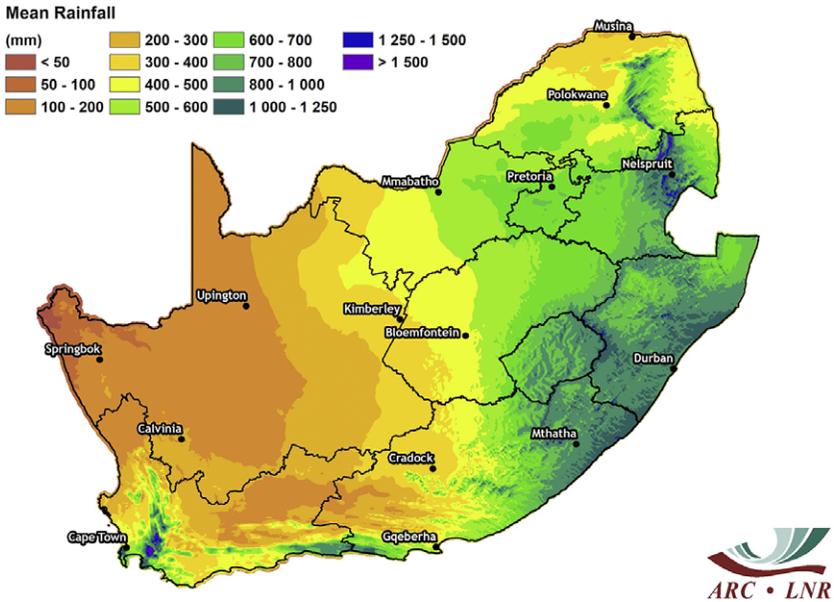


**Figure 9.1.** The Karoo, showing provincial and local municipality boundaries  
*Source:* Walker and Hoffman (in press).

This is an area where the environment cannot be taken for granted. The ecology of the Karoo sets it apart from the far more densely settled eastern and northern reaches of the country that dominate most analyses of land reform. Average annual rainfall is under 400 mm per year, decreasing as one moves west (see Figure 9.2). The past decade has seen a series of crippling droughts which brought many farmers to financial ruin (Conradie et al., 2019). An emerging consensus among climate change scientists sees the region becoming warmer overall in coming years. The west is expected to become even drier than is currently the case (with severe consequences for the Succulent Karoo's unique biodiversity), while total rainfall in eastern districts is likely to increase. In the central Karoo, rainfall levels are likely to remain constant (that is, low) but 'increasing aridity would still be expected owing to increasing temperatures' (Walker et al., 2018: 171).

### *Commercial Farming and Land Reform*

As a result of its aridity, over 95 per cent of the Karoo comprises 'natural land' (Hoffman et al., 2018: 212) – uncultivated rangeland that is not



**Figure 9.2.** Distribution of rainfall in South Africa  
 Source: Agricultural Research Council.

suitable for intensive agriculture but can support extensive livestock farming, mainly with small stock (sheep and goats). Most of this land is dedicated to commercial agriculture on very large, predominantly white-owned farms, with land reform making an even smaller dent in the racialised ownership patterns inherited from the past than in other parts of the country. Significantly, there is no history of ‘native reserves’, hence no former bantustans in the Karoo (although there are some pockets of communal tenure in the far west, in the former ‘coloured reserves’). Currently, agricultural land outside the former bantustans amounts to approximately 63 per cent of the total area of South Africa, of which an estimated 20 per cent had been transferred to black owners/beneficiaries by 2019, mainly through the state’s land reform programme.<sup>3</sup> In the Karoo, however, privately owned commercial farmland

<sup>3</sup> According to Vink and Kirsten (2019: 23–24), by 2018 some 17 per cent of commercial farmland had been acquired by the state for redistribution to black beneficiaries (although not necessarily transferred), with another estimated 3 per cent acquired by black

constitutes an even larger proportion of the total area than in the rest of the country, and most of this land is white-owned.

Thus in the Northern Cape (here used as a proxy for the Karoo), fully 82 per cent of the province was classified as commercial farmland in 1996 (Walker, 2008: 245)<sup>4</sup> while, as of 2018, just some 6 per cent of this land had been acquired by the state for land reform purposes. A third of this was through the municipal commonage programme whereby local municipalities rent the often extensive townlands attached to Karoo towns to small-scale black farmers, primarily for grazing; these townlands date back to the establishment of these towns in the colonial era.<sup>5</sup> The KRSDF does not provide hard data on land reform but does note that ‘much like in the rest of South Africa’ the process ‘has been restricted by slow progress and a limited reform budget’ (DALRRD, 2022: 91). Usefully, the KRSDF also highlights the challenges of land reform in this large, arid and sparsely populated region, emphasising the importance of locating projects strategically, ‘in spatial areas where the necessary social and economic support services can be accessed’ (DALRRD, 2022: 107).

The prevailing land dispensation is a consequence of the interplay of ecology and history. The history of colonisation in this region stretches back to the early eighteenth century, long before the contours of what would become the Union of South Africa in 1910 were beginning to emerge. A critical factor in the colonisation of this region is that until ways were found in the second half of the nineteenth century to tap into groundwater through windpump technology, this arid region could not support settled agriculture. The Karoo could not, therefore, sustain the larger, militarily stronger polities associated with the mixed-farming, Bantu-speaking communities of the pre-colonial and colonial highveld and eastern seaboard. Rather, the region was home to small, mobile groups of hunter-gatherers (the |Xam) and Khoekhoe pastoralists, whose collective footprint on the landscape was light (Morris, 2018). Although

landowners through private transactions; this total excludes farms owned by companies with black shareholders.

<sup>4</sup> The percentage would have declined somewhat since then, with land acquired for conservation and other developments.

<sup>5</sup> This discussion draws on data I presented at a 2018 workshop on land reform in the Karoo, at which time land redistributed through land reform in the Northern Cape totalled 2,210,307 hectares, of which 726,436 hectares were for the commonage programme (DSI/NRF SARChI Research Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development, 2018: 17). On the municipal commonage programme see, *inter alia*, Atkinson and Ingle (2018).

there is evidence of their fierce resistance, these Khoisan societies were unable to withstand the intrusion into their lands of the colonisers – white *trekboers* in the main, also pastoralists but armed with guns and, in the nineteenth century, the might of imperial Great Britain behind them. By the end of the nineteenth century, the patches of farmland that remained in ‘non-white’ hands were mainly attached to mission stations (the nucleus of the subsequent ‘coloured’ reserves) or the result of colonial land grants to black settlers that were increasingly under threat.<sup>6</sup>

This has always been a challenging environment in which to farm, a point that recent droughts have driven home. This does not make farming impossible – some districts are well suited to extensive livestock farming, and committed farmers with strong reserves and support systems, including from the state, can generally ride out periods of drought and adapt to changing conditions. But it is impossible to ignore the imperative of respecting environmental limits in farming (and other land uses) in this part of South Africa (Musakwa, 2018). In this regard, the Karoo is something of an exemplar for the rest of the country.

The environmental constraints have major implications for how we think about land reform. Ecologist Tim O’Connor has calculated that at what he considers environmentally sustainable stocking rates, the two Karoo biomes together can support a total herd of a little under 6.5 million sheep or goats (‘shoats’ as he calls them collectively), which, if equitably distributed in herds of 600, could provide some 10,600 farming families with sufficient income for ‘basic survival’.<sup>7</sup> According to his calculations, a farming family needs a minimum of 800 shoats to support a ‘lower middle-class income’ while a herd of 400 shoats or fewer would mean the household would need a second income. Thus, assuming an average of five people per farming family,<sup>8</sup> the number of people able to

<sup>6</sup> On the history of Xhosa, Baster and Griqua colonial land grants in the Karoo, see Anderson (1985), Amschwand (2018), Chinigò (2019) for Carnarvon, and Marcatelli (in press) for Prieska.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor’s calculations were presented at the 2018 workshop on land reform cited in footnote 5 above. For comparison, commercial farmers in the Ubuntu Local Municipality reckoned that an average-sized farm of 6,000 hectares could support a herd of between 700 and 1,000 sheep (Manyani, 2020: 121). O’Connor also pointed out that to manage the rangeland optimally, farmers need to be able to move their stock seasonally between winter and summer rainfall areas and, at times of drought, ‘follow the rain’ and move livestock from worse to less affected areas – that is, practise pastoralism across individual farm boundaries.

<sup>8</sup> This is higher than the average household size in the Northern Cape in 2011 of 3.7 members.

eke out a living through livestock farming without damaging the environment on which their livelihoods depend works out at some 53,000 people – in the region of 5 per cent of the population of just under a million in the Karoo in 2011. In other words, the number of people who could benefit from a strictly equitable redistribution of rangeland in the Karoo is very low if the environment is respected.

One can argue with O'Connor's assumptions around stocking rates, herd size and returns, and adjust the household numbers up or down accordingly. However, the conclusion is surely inescapable: assuming not only an equitable but also an environmentally and economically sustainable distribution of this land, only a small proportion of Karoo households can make an adequate living from farming in this region. Given the scale of farming land in private ownership in the Karoo, achieving land justice measured in terms of the aggregated area in black ownership would go quite some way to meeting national land redistribution targets. Indeed, if one were to redistribute all of this land, it would go all the way to meeting the target of the late 1990s. Redistributing the 40 per cent of South Africa's commercial farmland located in the Karoo to some 10,000 or even 20,000 black farming households (with or without compensation to current landowners) would not, however – and this is the critical point – advance substantive redistributive justice for most Karoo households.

This is not to deny the potential significance of transferring this land to the direct beneficiaries, or the disruption of still entrenched racial hierarchies in the region that it would represent. It might even give the state some much-needed breathing room in which to refocus its land reform programme. But it would do little for the livelihoods and hopes for a better future of the overwhelming majority of Karoo residents, and it would do even less for the 98 per cent of South Africans living in the rest of the country. Without massive state support, the transfer of far-flung Karoo farms to aspirant black farmers could also end up tying many of them to marginal livelihoods, far from markets as well as health, educational and other services for themselves and their households, their prospects increasingly vulnerable to the environmental consequences of climate change.

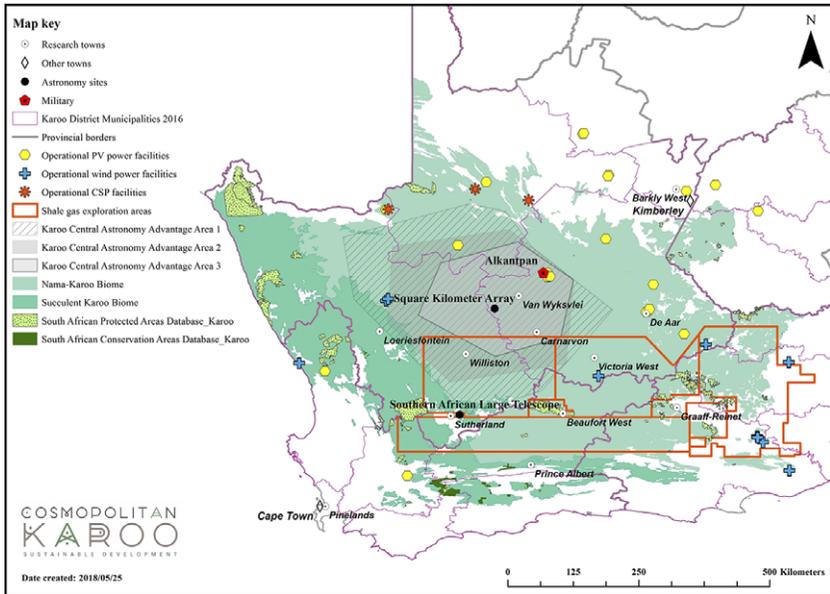
It is important that the point made here is clear. This is not an argument against redistributive land reform but one about recognising the limits of actual land's redistributive reach, particularly when tied as closely to agriculture as current policy continues to promote. It is an elaboration of my point about the limitations of focusing on land *as*

redistributive justice, the implicit starting point for many in the debate on expropriation without compensation, rather than recognising land as just one plank in a larger (and sturdier) framework *for* redistributive justice. In some parts of the country, agricultural land could and should be a substantial plank – perhaps a cornerstone. In the drylands of South Africa, however – which, as I have pointed out, constitute a sizable chunk of the country – its contribution is much more limited if eradicating poverty and inequality is a serious policy goal. Insisting that the actual number and future welfare of black beneficiaries do not count, only the number of hectares redistributed to farmers who are black, is surely a variant of what Jeremy Cronin described in 2006 as ‘representative redistribution’:

‘Transformation’ has come to mean *not* transformation but the elite redistribution of some racial, class and gendered power ... Representative individuals from formerly disadvantaged groups are the beneficiaries. Informing this politics are three buttressing paradigms – an individualistic liberal rights politics[:] ... an identity politics that posits relatively fixed and pre-given identities[:] ... and a paradigm of democratic transformation that tends to reduce democracy to ‘representation’. ... In the new South Africa, a small number of ‘representatives’ enjoy powers and privileges on behalf of the historically disadvantaged majority. This gives us an elite politics of racialised self-righteousness. (Cronin, 2006: 50–51)

### New Land Uses

The new land uses dominating national and regional plans for the Karoo provide further impetus to the call to reassess the contribution of land reform to redistributive justice in the current conjuncture. Notable here are major investments in astronomical research (both radio and optical) and energy generation, the latter targeting not only renewable but also non-renewable sources of energy. Today, powerful external players, both state and corporate, are keen to exploit the natural resources of the Karoo for non-agricultural purposes, thereby greatly expanding the significance of long-established investments in mining and conservation in its economy. The resources being targeted now include the Karoo’s clear night skies and low population density (good for astronomy), its abundant solar and wind power (good for renewable energy), its still uncertain shale-gas potential (heralded by the Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy as a ‘transition fuel’ – see, for instance, Omarjee, 2022) and its



**Figure 9.3.** New land uses in the Karoo: astronomy and energy (2018)

Source: DSI/NRF SARCHI Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment & Sustainable Development (2018).

uranium deposits. The investments aimed at capitalising on these resources are not only redefining the local landscape where individual projects are being staked out but also reconfiguring the significance of the Karoo for variously constituted national and global ‘public goods’. These include the move away from coal-fired electricity and advancing basic and applied science. The latter has been the primary justification for South Africa’s participation in the globally networked Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope project, the core site of which has been taking shape since 2008 on a cluster of former commercial sheep farms to the north-west of the town of Carnarvon (on this, see Walker et al., 2019). Figure 9.3 shows the extent of these cross-cutting initiatives as of 2018.

Of particular significance from a land-use perspective are the Astronomy Advantage Areas (AAAs) that have been proclaimed around the SKA core site and the optical South African Astronomical Observatory outside Sutherland to the south. What is not widely known is that the whole of Northern Cape Province, bar the Sol Plaatje Local Municipality around the provincial capital, Kimberley, has been declared

an Astronomy Advantage Area in terms of the Astronomy Geographic Advantage Act 21 of 2007. This Act grants the Minister of Science and Innovation extraordinarily extensive powers to regulate developments in the province to protect the national investment in astronomy within its borders. The regulations are particularly stringent in the districts around the SKA core site, where three nested Central AAAs were proclaimed in 2014, encompassing some 12 million hectares (fully 10 per cent of the country). This is because of the extreme sensitivity of this radio astronomy project to ‘radio frequency interference’ that will disrupt the array’s reception of cosmic radio waves. Disruptors that require regulating range from mining and aviation to everyday items such as cell phones, petrol-driven cars and microwave ovens. One consequence is that plans for shale-gas mining have now been ruled out in the AAAs. This has not, however, stopped the continued high-level interest in fracking in the region but diverted it to the Western and Eastern Cape Karoo (Walker, 2022).

Since 2018, more renewable energy projects have been launched while the state has concluded its major land acquisition programme around the SKA core site. The 135,000 hectares of former farmland the state now owns around the SKA was officially designated the Meerkat National Park in 2020. The primary purpose of the new park is to insulate this international astronomy project from external threats to its functionality; environmental conservation is a by-product. Individually and collectively, these cross-cutting land uses suggest very different development possibilities, as the DALRRD’s (2022) Spatial Framework for the Karoo recognises. All of them, however, raise similar concerns about who will benefit from these possibilities. A growing body of research points to the disconnect between the national gains these projects herald and local development needs. In the words of the KRSDF, ‘[w]hile the large scale current and potential future regional economic activities make an important contribution to a sustainable national economy, *the challenge is to ensure greater and more direct benefit to the small and isolated communities at a very local scale*’ (DALRRD, 2022: 108, emphasis in original). With reference to the SKA – which it acknowledges as a ‘ground-breaking project’ – the Framework notes:

The introduction of this development into the Karoo landscape and the promulgation of the Astronomy Geographic Advantage (AGA) Act of 2007 ... has had a significant impact on the development proposals of towns such as Carnarvon, Calvinia, Kenhardt and Williston, which has hindered their economic development and growth. The SKA has also

limited the future of space and technology tourism as there are concerns around the possible impact on eco and other recreational tourism forms. (DALRRD, 2022: 82)

For the new land uses to advance redistributive justice in the region, much more creative thinking is needed around how they can be leveraged to benefit host communities in meaningful ways. In most cases, the local jobs that are frequently touted as a significant benefit occur during the construction phase and are low-skilled and short-term. The community development projects required of investors by the state are not necessarily aligned with municipal development plans, even less with residents' expectations of the developments they need. Projects tend to be designed by outside experts to meet quantifiable targets, with tangible deliverables, for corporate reporting purposes – computer centres, laptops, sports equipment for schools and the like. The benefits they bring are unevenly distributed and vulnerable to local elite capture. (On the SKA, see Butler, 2018; Gastrow & Oppelt, 2019; Vorster, 2022; Walker, 2022; on the renewable energy sector, see Malope, 2022; Borchardt, 2023.)

Also telling is the disconnect between these new land uses and national commitments to land reform. Thus the highly efficient land acquisition programme of the SKA was conducted with little if any regard for state land reform objectives (Chinigò, 2019). National debates on the meaning of 'just and equitable compensation' in the property clause of the Constitution passed this programme by. Most farmers were reluctant to sell their family farms (Terreblanche, 2020) but were reportedly reasonably well compensated at market-related prices. Affected farm workers were not identified as potential beneficiaries of land reform projects but were offered general worker jobs with the SKA on a case-by-case basis. Gastrow and Oppelt (2019: 721) describe the SKA's approach to this process as exhibiting 'an arguably paternalistic concern' that the workers 'would fall into the all too familiar trap of alcohol and drugs' once living in town. The San Council was brought from distant Upington to bless the core astronomy site, but the local descendants of those dispossessed of land rights in the very large area impacted by the AAAs were never primary stakeholders in determining how and for whom this land should be used (Parkington et al., 2019).

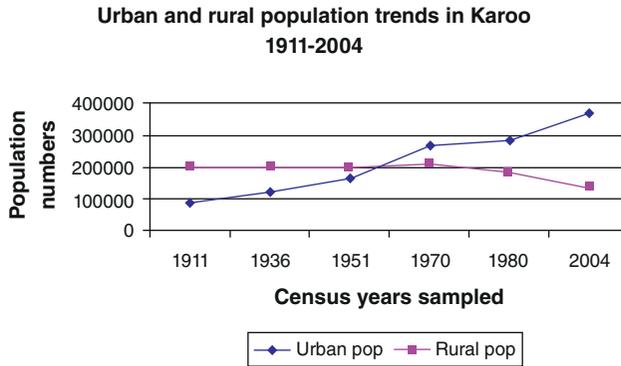
Similar disconnects can be observed around the community development projects that the 'independent power producers' participating in South Africa's renewable energy procurement programme are required to undertake in their 'host' communities (the latter defined as

communities within a 50-kilometre radius of the wind or solar farm in question). However, these projects are far less restrictive in their operational requirements than astronomy, meaning that opportunities for redistributive justice through community-based initiatives can be more readily imagined with this new land use. Wind farms can coexist with livestock farming, while solar and wind farm developers are prepared to pay lucrative rentals for land on which to site their projects – rentals that at this stage are flowing primarily to commercial farmers and local municipalities, not those most in need (Borchardt, 2023). Furthermore, although current projects are locked into supplying electricity to South Africa's embattled national grid, there is untapped potential for decentralising renewable energy generation and serving energy-poor communities via 'distributed energy resources' and mini-grids (GIZ & IRENA, 2020: 52).

There is also significant potential in the community development trusts that the independent power producers have established to meet state requirements for local shareholding in their projects. Malope (2022: 198) has noted in his dissertation on the contribution of renewable energy to sustainable development in Loeriesfontein, where two wind farms began operations in 2018, that once the two community trusts have paid off the loans that financed their initial share acquisition, they could find themselves responsible for managing capital sums of between R214 million and R509 million each – quite extraordinary amounts for a community as poor and marginalised as this one. I return to the possibilities that these funds hold for reimagining redistributive justice in this town after a more general consideration of the development needs of Karoo towns.

### Urban Karoo

As already noted, today, over three-quarters of the population of the Karoo lives not on farms but in widely dispersed small to very small towns. The percentage of the population classified as urban is thus higher in the Karoo than in South Africa as a whole (around 68 per cent in 2022; Macrotrends, n.d.). Counterintuitively, then, the Karoo can be seen as at the forefront of an increasingly urbanised South Africa, once one ceases to conflate urbanisation with the major metropolitan centres. The small-town nature of the Karoo also calls into question the appropriateness of a land reform programme still measured primarily in terms of the hectares of commercial farmland redistributed to small- or large-scale black farmers.



**Figure 9.4.** Karoo population trends, 1911–2004

Source: Hill and Nel (2018: 205).

Karoo towns developed historically as service centres for local agriculture and, in some areas, mining. The urban population of this region overtook the rural over fifty years ago, in the 1960s (see Figure 9.4). Worth noting is that the upward urban trajectory in the Karoo coincided with a downward trajectory for the segment of the population classified as ‘white’, from some 44 per cent of the total in 1911 to 12 per cent by 2004 (Hill & Nel, 2018: 207) and still smaller today. These shifts reflect major social changes involving the upward mobility of this group in the twentieth century, as white families moved off-farm and younger members migrated to centres beyond the Karoo in pursuit of better educational and economic opportunities. This trend is continuing. In her doctoral thesis on changes in commercial agriculture in the Ubuntu Local Municipality, Charmaine Manyani quotes a livestock farmer as follows:

Technology has brought the world closer to our children. They are realising there are better opportunities for them through education that don’t require burning in the sun the whole day. This has been worsened by the variable economic pressures and consecutive droughts with little or no support from the government. All these and other factors have made farming very unappealing. (Manyani, 2020: 132)

Of course, the towns of the Karoo are mostly very small settlements (*dorpe*), many of them facing economic decline, not growth (see Hill & Nel, 2018: 206). Nevertheless, these settlements are ‘urban in form and social functioning, albeit on a distinctively limited scale’ (Walker &

Vorster, 2023). In the words of one respondent interviewed in Sutherland in 2019, '[e]veryone knows one another and lives closely together'. Another respondent noted, '[p]eople gossip, but if someone dies, everyone grieves together' (Vorster & Eigelaar-Meets, 2019: 52). It is this small-town environment that shapes most people's development priorities and aspirations for the future. In response to an open-ended survey question about what could be done to develop Sutherland, the five most frequently identified needs were, in order of frequency: affordable housing; job creation; recreational facilities for the youth; tarred roads; and flush toilets to replace the pit latrines in the overcrowded, apartheid-era township where most people still live (Vorster & Eigelaar-Meets, 2019).

Effective investment in social services is desperately needed. Socio-economic surveys conducted in the towns of Vanwyksvlei, Sutherland and Loeriesfontein between 2016 and 2019 found education and skill levels to be generally very low and the school dropout rate among teenagers alarmingly high (Walker & Vorster, *in press*). Respondents in all three towns identified alcohol and drug abuse and associated crime as major problems – as already noted, rates of alcoholism and foetal alcohol spectrum disorders are extremely high in this region (Olivier et al., 2016; De Jong et al., 2021). Worth noting is that these surveys did not find widespread interest in farming as a serious option, although some households expressed varying degrees of interest in accessing commonage land for grazing small herds, and a few individuals indicated an interest in land reform opportunities. In Sutherland, 7 per cent of households in the survey sample of 253 had some livestock, but most respondents did not identify land for farming as a key concern (Vorster & Eigelaar-Meets, 2019: 47). In Loeriesfontein, where, arguably, a stronger culture of small stock farming prevails, respondents identified only 12 individuals across 201 households as likely to want to farm full-time if given a chance (Vorster, 2019: 60).

There is, however, an under-appreciated need for urban land reform in these towns, one that will not make a dent in the state's overall hectare targets for land reform but could make a significant difference to people's sense of belonging and ease of access to services. The Group Areas Act 41 of 1950 hit hard in the Karoo in the 1960s and 1970s, but the post-apartheid state's investment in much-needed low-income housing is entrenching, rather than dismantling, the spatial segregation enforced under apartheid. In both Loeriesfontein and Vanwyksvlei, the rollout of new 'RDP' (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing projects has resulted in tiny houses, on tiny plots, in extensions of the former

group-area townships, the undeveloped 'buffer zones' put in place in the apartheid era to separate the town centre (*die dorp*) from the township on its periphery still in place.

### Land and Redistributive Justice in Loeriesfontein

Given its history and current identification as a host community for renewable energy projects, the small town of Loeriesfontein (population around 3,000) offers interesting insights into the question of land and redistributive justice in the Karoo. Its municipal commonage provides a useful entry point.

The commonage covers some 20,000 hectares around the town. It consists of three colonial-era farms: the original Louries Fontein farm, which the Cape government first granted via a Ticket of Occupation to a group of fifty-nine so-called Basters in 1860, plus two adjoining leasehold farms that the state added to this land in the 1890s when the town was formally proclaimed.<sup>9</sup> The Baster group, who were the recipients of the 1860 land grant, were settled in the area by the early nineteenth century. From the point of view of the indigenous Khoisan groups in this area, then, they would have been settlers, much like their white, *trekboer* counterparts with whom they competed for grazing land but also sometimes cooperated in subjugating the Karoo's 'first people'.

After the land on which they had settled became crown land, the Basters petitioned the colonial government for recognition of their land rights, which was granted in 1860. In 1892, however, the land grant was revoked because of sustained pressure from white farmers who objected to their Baster neighbours, and a new town was planned for this land. Although the rights conferred on the Basters in 1860 were withdrawn, fifty-two Baster families who were identified by the colonial state as beneficiaries of the original Ticket of Occupation were given rights to 'a building plot, a garden plot, plus grazing rights on the commonage' in the new town.<sup>10</sup> In the twentieth century, this group was merged into the apartheid-era category of 'coloured', their second-class status in the town increasingly reinforced. In 1968, legislated racial segregation came to Loeriesfontein under the Group Areas Act; this forced all 'coloured'

<sup>9</sup> The 'Basters' were a social group of mixed Khoi/European ancestry that occupied an intermediary position between the white *trekboers* and indigenous Khoisan groups in the Northern Cape.

<sup>10</sup> Amschwand, personal communication, 17 January 2022.

residents to live in the small area designated for them on the western outskirts of the town.

The history of the townlands in the twentieth century needs more research but it is evident that black access to the commonage for grazing and some dryland cropping was progressively curtailed. In the post-apartheid era, the local municipality reversed the town's discriminatory commonage by-laws by entering into lease agreements with members of a Farmers' Association representing 'coloured' small-scale farmers, the *Loeriesfontein Opkomende Boerevereniging* (Emerging Farmers' Association). These farmers were mostly older men, including pensioners, none farming full-time but all keen to use the commonage for grazing their small herds. In 2019, the Association had between thirty-seven and forty members, 'depending who one speaks to' (Davids, 2021: 68).

By this time, however, their continued use of the land was a source of tension in the town. This was because of the settlement of a land restitution claim on the commonage, which had been running on a parallel land reform track since 1996. In that year, a committee representing 240 claimants lodged a land claim over all the townlands and various residential plots. The official claim form is regrettably not in the public domain, but it can be assumed to have centred on the loss of land rights by 'coloured' residents during the twentieth century, inter alia under the Group Areas Act.<sup>11</sup> The history of the 1860 Ticket of Occupation might also have been invoked, although that predates the 1913 cut-off date and would raise difficult questions about redress for the descendants of the original Khoisan people whose rights the Ticket had extinguished.

The claim was formally gazetted in 2004, then adjusted and re-gazetted in February 2008, shortly before being declared 'settled' at an official ceremony a few months later, once the local municipality had agreed to transfer ownership of the commonage to the DRDLR for free.<sup>12</sup> It appears that the land reform potential of this land as a municipal asset was not carefully considered. Davids (2021: 64) notes that the Regional Land Claims Commissioner's office praised this transfer of land to the national government as a contribution towards the state's 30 per cent target for land reform; however, 'the Hantam Municipality was unhappy

<sup>11</sup> On unsuccessful attempts to access the official claim form from state agencies and get details of the claim from local gatekeepers see Davids (2021).

<sup>12</sup> This account draws on Davids (2021).

with the lack of compensation and seemed to have been “bullied into the transaction” (here citing the Legal Resources Centre, a champion of the commonage programme in the Northern Cape at the time). Claimants were also offered financial compensation, raising questions about how many may thereby have formally forfeited their rights to the restituted land.

The formal settlement of the claim was followed by a protracted period of uncertainty and confusion in the town over who actually owned the commonage, who could still use it, and who was responsible for its day-to-day management. A Communal Property Association (CPA) was established to represent the claimants in 2008, but it took six years for the title to the first of the three commonage farms to be transferred to it, in 2014. In December 2019, the Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development acknowledged in Parliament that the CPA needed ‘regularisation’ and there were ‘disputes regarding access to the land’ (National Assembly, 2019). She put the number of restitution beneficiaries at 800. The state had still not transferred ownership of all the commonage to the CPA, and it was not clear how the new land-owners intended to utilise their land. According to the list of claimants the Minister made available in Parliament, 27 of the original 240 claimants were not living in Loeriesfontein but elsewhere (mainly in the Western Cape), while 91 were deceased (meaning that their heirs needed identification). At the time, the drought was biting hard, and oversight of fences, water pumps and stock numbers on the commonage had crumbled, none of this boding well for its sustainable use.

It is a familiar story of the misalignment between promise and outcome that has bedevilled so many land reform projects since 1995. Yet as the previous discussion has brought to the fore, in Loeriesfontein other land-use options are pointing to new possibilities, along with new challenges. In addition to the two wind farms already in operation, a solar farm is under construction in the district, and further renewable energy projects are on the drawing board. Might one be considered for the former townlands? Could the local community development projects that these schemes are required to support be planned with stronger community participation and complement, rather than compete with, each other? What of the capital sums accruing to the community development trusts, which hold out such significant financial prospects not only for the town but potentially for the wider Hantam Local Municipality, provided strong, accountable institutions are put in place? Malope, for instance, has proposed that the trusts could finance direct

cash transfers to households in need (thus bypassing local patronage politics) – a local dividend from the national investment in renewable energy that could be modelled along the lines of a basic income grant. (On the developmental and moral logic of a basic income grant, see Ferguson, Chapter 12, this volume.)

Space precludes discussion of the many issues to consider, but what is clear is that direct cash transfers would make a significant difference to household income and community well-being. As already noted, in 2019, before the COVID pandemic, per capita income was below the country's 'upper-bound' poverty line for 59 per cent of Loeriesfontein residents. A modelling exercise that calculated the impact on household incomes of the state's top-up to social security grants during the COVID pandemic showed what a difference even this very modest cash injection could make in the town. Working with data from the 2019 household survey, Jan Vorster has calculated that if the top-up grants were fully disbursed, a third of Loeriesfontein households trapped below the food poverty line would move into the 'upper-bound' poverty band while over a quarter of households in that band would be pushed above the official poverty line (Vorster & Walker, 2020).

### Conclusion

Using changing dynamics in the Karoo as evidence, this chapter has argued that it is time to decentre the place accorded land reform in the quest for redistributive justice in South Africa – not to abandon it but to place its contribution in perspective and pay more attention to other mechanisms that are better attuned to current conditions and the challenges they are laying bare.

As the country struggles to come to terms with climate change, the Karoo provides an instructive reminder that the environment matters. So too do regional and local histories, which are usually more complex than the land restitution programme has been designed to handle. The story of the Loeriesfontein commonage shows that simply restoring land to legitimate claimants may not necessarily advance either justice or livelihood opportunities for those most in need. At the same time, the new land uses in the Karoo signal new opportunities for reimagining multiple pathways towards a more just and sustainable future. The call for a 'just transition' that is animating the debate on renewable energy is instructive here.

Land reform still has a place, but its limitations need to be recognised and its objectives realigned with the regionally inflected social and

ecological changes that have unfolded since 1994. The extent of commercial farmland transferred to black ownership is an inadequate measure of redistributive justice in the Karoo and, given its extent, in South Africa more generally as well. The racial disparities in land ownership are particularly extreme in this region but, as the discussion has shown, land redistribution in the Karoo will not contribute significantly to reducing poverty and inequality here or nationally, despite the spatial extent of this region. Policies intended to advance redistributive justice need to be designed keeping in mind where people live and what they aspire to. In the Karoo, this means focusing far more imaginatively on prospects for small-town regeneration and how to harness the natural resources of the region to benefit its people in ecologically sustainable ways.

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