National

Private partnerships are vital in land restitution programmes

When communities have land restored to them, only proper facilitation, oversight and expert advisory teams can create trust and ensure a common purpose

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When Mpumalanga's Moletele community got its land back, having successfully filed a restitution claim, it found much of it to be barren, without water infrastructure and no equipment for farming. The community had their farms restored in 2009 following the forced removals of the 1970s. The land claims were gazetted in 2004 and the first farms were returned in 2007.

The Moletele Communal Property Association (CPA) was then registered to manage and operate the farms. "We had to evaluate which model would suit the community when a private partner was brought to the party because we couldn't use the farm as collateral to raise funds," said CPA chairman Hezekiel Nkosi, speaking at a media roundtable on partnerships for land reform in Sandton on Tuesday.

The land received was in Hoedspruit, an area that enjoys good soils and climatic conditions that favour mango and citrus production. Nkosi said social stability in the community, along with trust between the community and the private player, is critical.

Partnerships between the private sector and the beneficiaries of land restitution have come to be regarded as vital for the economic sustainability and development of land. All too often, land is returned to communities beset with problems — such as with Moletele — that include the lack of "serious capital" and expertise.

Head of the Commission of Restitution and Land Rights, Nomfundo Ntloko-Gobodo, also speaking at the roundtable, said that once one land has been handed over to its rightful owners, ensuring it becomes viable is complicated — and this is where partnerships become important.

"As a commission, we are not an expert on running the business," she said. "The land may be in the hands of different people but you can still create the same opportunities for the new individuals who now have the title." She referred to rural economic transformation models that focus on the acquisition of land while making sure the tools and entities that focus on its development are in place.

AgriSA legal and policy advisor Annelize Crosby said partnerships need to be managed by a facilitator that oversees the social and financial needs of the land reform process, and manages the community's expectations. Among such facilitators is Vumelana Advisory Fund which works with communities in the land restitution programme to develop their land. It funds advisory services to structure commercially viable partnerships between communities and investors.

In 2012, the Moletele CPA asked Vumelana for support in finding an investor to develop its newly returned farms. An advisory team was appointed that made an early stage cost-benefit analysis used to quantify the most significant socio-economic benefits from the project. A comparative baseline for tracking impact over time was also set up.

Mazwi Mkhulisi, programmes manager at Vumelana, said that when working with communities, it is important for the advisory team to appreciate the diverse concerns that exist: "You need to identify and prepare a foundation on the same structure so that you build a common interest among community members and private partners."