

# China's Land Reform Revolution – Lessons for Namibia

Opinions - Columns | 2019-04-16

Page no:



Moyo Mtulisi

## MOYO MTULISI

**NAMIBIA recently held a land reform conference in an attempt to solve its challenges and come up with a well-planned and systematic all-inclusive process.**

In this narrative, I trace China's land reform pathway with a view to provide possible footsteps that can guide to an all-inclusive land resolution in Namibia.

Like Namibia, agriculture in China forms the biggest pie of the people's livelihood, and is also the pillar of the country's social and political structure. Seventy percent of the people in China live in rural farming households, and depend on the use of the land for their livelihood income.

China has a long history of land ownership struggles, dating back to the 19th century. The land struggles often pitted the landless against the rich farmers. Trouble started with the legalisation on the purchase of private land around 1900 AD, as this system resulted in the concentration of land under private rich citizens, creating a system of landlordism.

In the Chinese ideology, landlords consists of people who own large tracks of land, but do not cultivate it. They

let it out to poor peasants who do the cultivation, and pay between 50% and 60% of their produce as land tax. The land ownership structure in China was extremely irrational, as landlords and other rich peasants owned 80% of the land, despite forming 10% of the rural population.

The situation of the peasant farmers became dire as land was no longer available due to landlordism, coupled with the increasing population in the 19th century. As a symptom to the irrational land ownership structure an exploitation of the landless, over 1 000 peasant revolutionary uprisings were experienced in the early 20th century, pressuring the need for a reform process.

Several factors played a pivotal role in pressing the need for land reform in China: 1) landlordism continued to exist, and deprived farmers of access to productive land. 2) the land tax was so excessive that it deprived the peasant farmers of their livelihood incomes and 3) the population increased four times, increasing the demand for land.

During the period preceding the 1950 revolution, a series of laws and legislations were enacted in an endeavour to solve China's land problems. However, most of the efforts were futile, albeit providing key learning points for the future courses of actions. China's robust land reform plan was carried out in 1949 following the coming into power of the communist regime, led by Mao Zedong.

The period realised the promulgation of a new land law in 1950, designed to distribute land to poor households. At this point, land reform was more robust and sought to incorporate economic principles, rather than merely addressing land ownership imbalances and peasantry exploitation.

Agriculture was viewed as a supplier of raw materials and a baseline for industrialisation, at the same time supplying food to the country's entire population. Productive farmers were exempt from land confiscation as their efforts of increasing agricultural production were recognised. As such, they became the pillar of the country's reindustrialisation principle.

The allottees were encouraged to organise production collectively, and this culminated in the establishment of the people's communes.

The land reform in this era was subdivided into three stages. The first stage was the setting up of the working teams for land reform. The teams were composed of intellectuals, who were sent to the countryside to formulate land reform committees. Their main task included carrying out land surveys, subdivisions, and engaging in discussions with landowners and other stakeholders at the local level.

The second stage was the redistribution of land under the auspices of land reform committees.

The size of the land allocated to peasants varied from district to district. The third stage involved education and training, as well as communist solidarity teachings.

By the end of 1952, 300 million peasant farmers across the country were allocated farmland, agricultural implements, as well as animals to kick-start their livelihoods.

At the end of the 1970s, not content with agricultural production, China launched an economic reform, the household responsibility system (HRS), a blueprint document designed to accelerate agricultural production. The dynamics of land collectivisation implemented in 1949 was revisited, and a movement towards increased individualisation was initiated.

In this phase, land was collectively owned and allocated to individual farming households. The farmers had the individual rights to land, but ownership was vested in groups. Farming decisions were devolved to the people who implemented them in their own way through collective group action. This strategy led to the improvement of agricultural produce, and much more helped to address poverty in the rural farming communes.

Empirical research indicates that the country's agricultural productivity improved tremendously after the launch of the HRS. Between 1986 and 1990, output of most crops increased by 25%, and boosted the industrial revolution.

The production of grain reached a peak of 407 million tonnes in 1988, thereby solving China's headache of feeding its own population.

Lessons from the Chinese land revolution: 1) Women enjoyed the same rights of land with men, and could register the piece of land in their own names. 2) Incidents of violence in the execution of the programme were denounced and rectified, and the communist leadership preached peace, tranquillity and prosperity across the country. 3) Industrial and commercial enterprises owned by rich farmers and landlords were exempted from acquisition, and the base of economic industrialisation was thus preserved.

4) Besides redistributive justice, land reform managed to devolve political and economic power, as well as foster cultural power and uplift self-confidence among rural communities and; 5) Local communities drove the land reform process, as opposed to the state and its perceived bureaucratic bungling. As such, a people-driven process eliminated conflicts among different interest groups.