



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

## **LET'S PRIVATISE THE LAND AUDIT**

*By Theuns Eloff: Executive Director, FW de Klerk Foundation*

During the current Constitutional Review Committee hearings one frequently heard: “We want the land back that the whites took from us”. But who took the land and who owns it now, is not so clear. It has often been stated that without a proper and credible land audit, we cannot have a sober and balanced debate on land, and “that” land cannot be subject to land reform or redistribution.

The two land audits done by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR), raise more questions than provide answers. Criticism has already been raised many times. The 2013 audit was intended to identify State land. The 2017 audit was intended to take stock of private land ownership in terms of race, gender and nationality. One private audit, done by Agri SA, was intended to quantify the ownership and commercial transfer of agricultural land.

To illustrate the confusion with just one issue: in the 2013 audit it is stated that the State possesses “only” 17 million hectares (14%) and the deduction is therefore made that 79% of land is thus privately owned (and assumed to belong to white South Africans). The audit shows that 7% of land is not allocated but that it is probably traditional land or belongs to state trusts. At the same time, it is stated that 16 million hectares (13%) are part of the old homelands (which are not privately-owned). And the land that was consolidated for the former homelands before 1994 is apparently not included here. There is a question whether the national parks and nature reserves are included or not. It seems that the State owns or controls more than the 14% of land which had the media and politicians up in arms in 2013. The updated 2017 government audit has set private land at 94 million hectares - which contradicts the above figures.

It is clear that there is no consensus about who owns what and how it should be calculated. That is, for example, why the FW de Klerk Foundation, in its parliamentary submission on section 25's possible amendment, asked that President Ramaphosa urgently appoint a task team from all sectors to conduct a comprehensive land audit. Appropriate policy decisions can only be made with credible figures.

We have already become accustomed - because the State generally does not have capacity - for the need for many services to be privatised. This has already happened with safety and health, and education is next. What about the all-important process of commissioning a land audit?

Here is some good news: an enterprising farmer from North West, Cornelis Grobler, decided to take matters into his own hands, and do something about it - at his own expense. He and some others created a website - “LandSTORY” - making use of Google Earth and data from the Surveyor-General. Anyone can access the website at: [www.landstory.africa](http://www.landstory.africa). The



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

platform gives users access to an interactive map of South Africa. It also contains the borders of farms, as documented by the Surveyor-General's office. By clicking on the area where your land is situated, the dimensions as surveyed by the Surveyor-General will appear.

Once you have found the specific piece of land on the interactive map, users can answer questions about that particular property, such as to whom it belongs (individual, company or trust), what type of property it is (private or public), and the race and gender of the owners (where possible). It is optional, but users can also document the "story" of the property. When did my grandfather or great-grandfather purchase the land, and from whom, etc. Once this information is provided, it is saved on LandSTORY. The idea is that an accurate and verifiable central database of all land in the country can be set up by crowd-sourced data. In the few cases where land has not yet been surveyed (such as in some of the old homelands) the independent register of subdivisions (on the LandSTORY database) can be used until surveyors survey the property and add the information to the Surveyor-General's database.

Grobler and his team do not want to work against existing audits but want to try to establish *one* reliable database by making use of all existing audits, as well as the participation of ordinary people. They found that people tend to know their neighbours. You can therefore follow the same process with neighbouring farms and properties. It then becomes the start of the verification process: at the Deeds Office, and even by visiting the farm or property.

And the process works: I tried it and added the details of our family trust's farm in Limpopo (since 1976) and now it's there! With Google Earth you can see the farm and its buildings very clearly.

So resourceful South Africans have done it again! After two attempts our Government could not produce a credible land audit. But a "boer makes a plan ..."

Of course, such a process is not the alpha and the omega for all land. However, most of the traditional areas have already been subdivided and so it will also work there. Grobler says that there is still some work to be done. Individual plots in urban areas need to be added, but for that more development capital is needed. Plans are in place to make LandSTORY more user-friendly but the first step was getting buy-in for the idea, finding sponsors and then to further develop the system.

I'm not a publicist for LandSTORY, but I think South Africans need to have the opportunity to take part and help. Cornelis Grobler's email address is: [cjg@lantic.net](mailto:cjg@lantic.net). Feel free to make contact if you have advice or are willing to make a financial contribution. To ensure the website operates smoothly and to increase national awareness, about R150 000 is needed. It's a small amount to help provide certainty about the most pressing issue of our time.



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

So - there is still work to be done but the LandSTORY idea can become part of the solution to determine the truth about land ownership in South Africa. Let's privatise the land audit!

**\*First published on Netwerk24**