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LAND REFORM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: ADDRESSING POLICY GAPS AND IMPLEMENTATION FAILURES

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Abstract. Land reform remains a critical challenge in Southern Africa, with efforts to address historical land injustices often falling short. Despite the adoption of progressive policies, gaps in policy frameworks and poor implementation hinder meaningful transformation. The paper examines land reform policies in Southern African countries, with a focus on South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. It focuses on the disconnect between policy formulation and execution, arguing that the lack of coherent, context-specific policies has led to slow progress and entrenched inequalities. Using a qualitative research approach, the paper analyzes secondary data, including policy documents, government reports, and academic literature employing thematic analysis to identify key themes. Policy Implementation Theory was used to analyze the gap between policy design and execution, while Institutional Theory explored how governance structures and socio-economic contexts shape land reform outcomes. The paper finds that weak governance, political resistance, resource limitations, and fragmented institutional structures hinder effective land reform. Additionally, socio-cultural factors, including gender inequality and elite capture, further complicate the process. Ultimately, the paper concludes with actionable recommendations for strengthening policy frameworks, emphasizing the need for context-specific policies, robust governance, stakeholder engagement, and post-settlement support to ensure the success of land reform.

Keywords: *land-reform, policy frameworks, policy implementation, southern Africa.*

Rezumat. Reforma funciară rămâne o provocare critică în Africa de Sud, eforturile de a aborda nedreptățile istorice legate de terenuri fiind adesea insuficiente. În ciuda adoptării unor politici progresiste, lacunele din cadrele de politici și implementarea deficitară împiedică o transformare semnificativă. Lucrarea examinează politicile de reformă funciară din țările din Africa de Sud, concentrându-se pe Africa de Sud, Namibia și Zimbabwe. Se concentrează pe deconectarea dintre formularea și executarea politicilor, argumentând că lipsa unor politici coerente, specifice contextului, a dus la progrese lente și inegalități adânc înrădăcinate. Folosind o abordare calitativă a cercetării, lucrarea analizează date secundare, inclusiv documente de politici, rapoarte guvernamentale și literatură academică, utilizând analiza tematică pentru a identifica temele cheie. Teoria implementării politicilor a fost utilizată pentru a analiza decalajul dintre conceperea și executarea politicilor, în timp ce Teoria

Instituțională a explorat modul în care structurile de guvernare și contextele socio-economice modelează rezultatele reformei funciare. Lucrarea constată că o guvernare slabă, rezistența politică, limitările resurselor și structurile instituționale fragmentate împiedică o reformă funciară eficientă. În plus, factorii socio-culturali, inclusiv inegalitatea de gen și capturarea elitei, complică și mai mult procesul. În cele din urmă, lucrarea se încheie cu recomandări concrete pentru consolidarea cadrelor de politici, subliniind necesitatea unor politici specifice contextului, a unei guvernări robuste, a implicării părților interesate și a sprijinului post-colonizare pentru a asigura succesul reformei funciare.

Cuvinte cheie: *reformă funciară, cadre de politici, implementare a politicilor, Africa de Sud.*

1. Introduction

Land reform has been a prominent issue in Africa, especially post-independence, as a means to address historical inequalities that stemmed from colonial and apartheid-era policies. The colonial legacy of land dispossession and segregation has left a lasting mark on African economies, where a significant portion of the land is still owned by a small, often non-indigenous minority [1]. Three former settler colonies in Southern Africa - South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe - introduced land reform soon after gaining independence in the 1980s and 1990s. The principal objective of their land reform policies was land redistribution, intended to dismantle the racially biased land ownership systems established by settler colonialism and the apartheid regime [2,3]. For instance, in South Africa, land reform attempted to rectify the socio-economic ills of apartheid by redistributing land, ensuring security of tenure, and providing restitution for those dispossessed by racially discriminatory laws like the Native Land Act of 1913. The White Paper on South African Land Policy (1997) served as the blueprint for reform, focusing on three pillars: land restitution, land redistribution, and security of tenure.

In Zimbabwe, the intention was to address historical land imbalances by redistributing land from white commercial farmers to landless indigenous Zimbabweans through phases such as the Lancaster House Agreement (1980-1990) and the Fast-Track Resettlement Programme (2000-2001) [4,5]. Land reform in Namibia aimed to rectify colonial land imbalances by ensuring equitable access for indigenous people, particularly small-scale black farmers, to promote rural development, food security, and economic stability. This was guided by the Agricultural Land Reform Act of 1995, the Communal Land Reform Act of 2002, and the Amended Agricultural Land Reform Act of 2003. It is apparent that land reform, therefore, emerges as a key solution to rectify the historical injustices by redistributing land to the historically disadvantaged population [6]. However, despite the urgency, land reform policies have often been plagued by poor implementation, corruption, and insufficient political will, resulting in a slow pace of change, especially in South Africa and Namibia. Also, while there is broad agreement that land reform is essential, its process is complex and often mired in political and legal challenges, leaving many communities without land, exacerbating inequality, and deepening the crisis of land reform in Southern Africa.

In Southern Africa, the issue of land reform has proven to be highly contentious and is often fueled by political dynamics. For example, in South Africa, after the end of apartheid, it can be noted that the government has made very slow and insufficient attempts towards the redistribution of land. The policy on willing buyer, willing seller could not effectively address massive inequalities in land ownership inherited from apartheid [7]. Namibia is also facing a situation similar to that of South Africa, where a large percentage of land is still

under the control of minority groups. Though this was intended to be addressed through Namibia's Land Reform Act of 1995, most of the significant lands are still held in possession by commercial farmers. On the contrary, land redistribution in Zimbabwe, initiated in the early 2000s, constitutes one of the most radical and controversial regional efforts with dire economic consequences for the country. The process involved the forced takeover of lands from white commercial farmers, which was then redistributed to black Zimbabweans. While this significantly increased the ownership of land by black Zimbabweans, it concurrently precipitated an economic collapse, accompanied by hyperinflation and international isolation for the country, thereby making the success narrative of land reform rather complex.

It is against the above backdrop that this paper aims to examine the land reform policies in Southern African countries, specifically South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, which are marked by ongoing or stalled reform processes. The paper explored the gap between policy formulation and execution, focusing on the disconnect that exists between the development of progressive land reform agendas and their actual implementation on the ground. While these countries have established land reform frameworks that theoretically support equitable land redistribution, the lack of coherent, context-specific policies has slowed progress and perpetuated inequalities. By analyzing the successes and failures of land reform in these countries, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Southern Africa in achieving meaningful land reform and socio-economic justice.

The paper is organised as follows. The current introduction is followed by the conceptual and theoretical issues (along with the theoretical framework), then materials and method are outlined, followed by the results and discussions. Lastly, the conclusions and recommendations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

2.1. Historical Context of Land Reform in Southern Africa

Colonial and apartheid dispossession profoundly damaged indigenous land holdings, resulting in enormous inequities in land distribution. For example, in Namibia, land reform had been a topical issue ever since independence was gained in 1990; the first post-independence government prioritized the redistribution of land owned by a small minority of white owners to the black majority population [8]. Implementation has thus far been marred by disputes over compensation and slow progress, with elite capture hindering its progress. Similarly, Black South Africans are today dispossessed because of the legacy of apartheid policies such as the native land Act (1913), The group Areas Act (1950), and the Development Trust and land Act (1963) that denied them their rights to land many years before democracy was attained in 1994. The government set an ambitious plan for land reforms aimed at rectifying past imbalances; however, the real benefits from such plans were again questioned due to bureaucratic marginalization among the intended beneficiaries of these plans [9,10].

It has not necessarily become more productive or yielded better results in reducing poverty, despite the intended benefits of land redistributions. Zimbabwe's case is often cited as a lesson for caution about the dangers of precipitous land redistribution without adequate support for beneficiaries, it highlights potential adverse outcomes [11]. Even though black farmers received land under the so-called "Fast-Track Land Reform Program" in Zimbabwe, there has been a sharp decline in agricultural output due to their lack of training, access to inputs, and infrastructural support on their farms [12]. Southern Africa's land reform policy

has major weaknesses: redistributive reform needs to be integrated with an overall strategy of agricultural and rural development.

Another significant challenge for sustainable land reform is the issue of land tenure security. In Namibia, policies such as the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act (1995) and the communal land Reform Act (2002) have aimed to address this, but land tenure insecurity has hindered the proper utilization and investment in land, as many beneficiaries of the land reform program now face uncertainty about their rights [13]. Despite mechanisms such as the Pro-Active Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) in South Africa, land tenure remains a contentious issue, with some arguing that expropriation without compensation will do more harm than good [14]. The above-discussed historical setting of Southern African land reforms provides evidence for an interaction dynamic between historical injustices, economic priorities, and associated social problems in restructuring agrarian systems to infuse equity and productivity.

2.2. Land Reform Policies in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe South Africa

South Africa introduced land reform policies as a way of redressing the imbalances created by apartheid. The policies have three pillars: land restitution, redistribution, and tenure reforms. The Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994) gave people who lost their land during apartheid the right to reclaim, while the fundamental notion of the Land Reform Programme postulates an imperative redistribution function towards black South African citizens among all previously disadvantaged groups. Tenure reform is designed to deliver property rights protection for former homelands and rural dwellers [15]. The government has attempted to redistribute land, but progress has been slow. By 2020, approximately 10% of agricultural land had been transferred to few black South Africans since 1994 [16]. This slow progress is attributed to bureaucratic inefficiency, inadequate funding, and a continued reliance on market-based solutions that are ineffective in addressing the high cost of land [14]. Additionally, the elite capture of land redistribution programs has diminished the effectiveness of the reform, as political elites and other well-connected individuals reap greater benefits [10]. The primary issue that remains is the principle of expropriation without compensation, and how to balance and prioritize equity with the principle of maintaining economic stability in a country. There have been advocacies toward accelerating reform through land expropriation; however, other critics debate that such a move would scare away investors and harm the economy [17]. Insufficient support, training, and resources for new landowners have equally rendered the land reform less effective in increasing agricultural productivity and reducing rural poverty. So far, the reform process has slowly taken a few steps toward addressing historical land injustices, but there is still a long way to go toward realizing its full potential.

Namibia. After independence in 1990, Namibia adopted land reform policies as an integral part of the country's overall development strategy, or more precisely, as correcting the historical imbalances created by the colonialism and apartheid. The government's land redistribution and tenure reform program focus on acquiring commercial farmlands from the white minority for redistribution to black Namibians [8]. Under the 1995 Agricultural Land Reform Act and through the 2018 National Land Conference on Land Issues, ambitious objectives in this regard were set; however, to date, very little progress has been made, with only around 15% of commercial farmland redistributed by 2020 [18]. Significant constraints on land reform in Namibia include limited financial resources and the political leverage of

landowners, as the country is compelled to operate within a market-based system of land purchasing. Additionally, elite capture and corruption in the land administration system hinder fair land distribution [13] just like in South Africa. The government has made progress in increasing black land ownership. However, because the reform is slow and there has been insufficient support for new farmers, most Namibians still remain landless to date. Despite these challenges, Namibia's sustainable agriculture and rural development policy, informed by community-based land use plans, lays a solid foundation for future development. Therefore, cutting red-tape, addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies, and providing adequate support will unleash the full potential of land reform in Namibia.

Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's land reform journey has provided an experience that is both contentious and one of the most disputed and transformative episodes in the history of African land reforms. The Fast-Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP), initiated in 2000, is a perfect example of this. Introduced to redistribute land from white commercial farmers to Black Zimbabweans, in order to address historical inequalities and a legacy of dispossession by colonial and post-colonial periods, it was implemented without a plan to support new beneficiaries which lead to profound economic and social consequences nationwide [12]. The FTLRP program was seen as a win for landless blacks, redistributing more than 4,000 white-owned farms to new owners. However, adequate resources, technical assistance, and secure land tenure for new farmers were non-existent, leading to unfortunate decline in agriculture which was formerly the mainstay or backbone of the economy. Staple crops such as –maize and tobacco –collapsed with the decline of large-scale commercial farming, leading to widespread food insecurity country-wide [16]. There is no clear land tenure system, nor any support for sustainable agriculture, leaving most new landowners without the means to utilize their plots fully. Corruption and political patronage further ensured that land was not equally redistributed [18]. It must also be acknowledged that, despite these constraints, the reform process did manage to significantly alter patterns of land ownership by transferring considerable land portions to black Zimbabweans. However, it brought about success at a very high cost in terms of economics and governance. The experience of Zimbabwe accentuates the necessity of combining equity objectives with sound planning, technical assistance, and long-term agricultural sustainability to ensure that land reform works positively for the larger economy and society. Land reform policies and achievements are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Land Reform Policies and Achievements in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe						
Country	Land Reform program/legislation		Land Redistribution Achieved		Sources	Knowledge Gap / Research Need
South Africa	Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994)	- Land Reform Programme (Redistribution, Tenure Reform	10% of commercial agricultural land transferred to black South Africans since 1994	[10,16]	Updated post-2021 statistics; productivity and poverty impact; expropriation outcomes	
Namibia	National Resettlement Policy (1991), Land Reform Act (1995)		12-15% of commercial farmland	[19,20]	Updated post-2020 figures; evaluation of resettlement effectiveness; funding bottlenecks	

Continuation Table 1

Zimbabwe	Land Acquisition Act (1992), Fast Track Land Reform (2000–2010)	20–25% of commercial farmland (2000–2010)	[21–23]	Post-2010 redistribution data; tenure security; long-term social/economic impacts
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2.3. Implementation Gaps in Land Reform Policies in Southern Africa

Land reform policies in Southern Africa, though often promising on paper, often fail due to a disconnect between the idealistic design of such policies and the socio-political realities on the ground. In most countries within this region, such a situation emanates from the fact that there is little harmony between what central government policies prescribe and local community needs. In South Africa, for example, post-apartheid government land reform policies were initially guided by a willing buyer-willing seller principle; many would argue that it did not fully address the extent of land imbalances [16]. Designed as an option to avoid confrontation and allow for voluntary exchanges, leading to minimal actual redistribution of land, since rural areas, where most of the land is located, have either no or minimal existing land markets. Furthermore, the land reform policies in South Africa and Zimbabwe struggled to comprehend the complex local land markets. Consequently, the lack of adequate financial and technical support for beneficiaries resulted in abandoned or underutilized land reform projects [12]. This gap between policy design and actual implementation is indicative of broader systemic issues, primarily revolving around inadequate state capacity and political resistance from powerful landholding elites that hinder the full implementation of such policies.

Another significant gap in Southern African land reform policies is the lack of coherence and contextualized adaptation relevant to local conditions. The policies are overly generalized to account for the fundamental economic, political, and social differences that characterize a region or even a community. For instance, Namibia has a progressive land reform agenda; however, its implementation has been disjointed and inconsistent [24]. Furthermore, policy mechanisms fail to adequately respond to the diverse systems of land tenure and the crucial role traditional authorities play in rural governance. Such ignores the heterogeneity of land tenure arrangements, from communal lands to freehold systems. Generally, this is often overlooked, as are one-size-fits-all policy frameworks. Southern African land reform policies focus on formal transactions and legal ownership, often overlooking marginalized communities with customary-based land tenure systems. As a result, a significant proportion of the rural population is excluded from the benefits of such reforms [25]. These policies overlook the different farming systems, traditional leaders, and local governance across regions. If these were properly included in the reform process, it would lead to a more inclusive and effective solution.

In Zimbabwe, besides being controversial, the land reform program was accompanied by legal ambiguities and politicization. There was no clear legal framework or transparent land allocation process. The redistribution of land from white farmers to black Zimbabweans was implemented to which politically connected elites benefited from it. This has even more deeply entrenched social inequalities [26]. Equally, in South Africa, even though the Constitution makes provision for land expropriation without compensation, desired progress has not yet been achieved due to some legal technicalities and slow-moving reforms. The specific guidelines of the expropriation process are not clearly defined; hence, there is

confusion and delays [27]. Where property rights are not strongly enforced, and where land registries are inefficient and opaque, the redistribution of land cannot be seen as real empowerment of the previously disadvantaged. The more political instability and legal fragmentation there is, the wider the gaps between policy objectives and their actual realization, leaving the reform process incomplete and ineffective. This highlights the need for more robust legal frameworks and political will to ensure the enforcement of land rights takes place, as well as an enabling environment for sustainability to take root.

2.4. Barriers to Effective Policy Implementation

Weak governance and lack of political will, are significant barriers that hinder the successful implementation of land reform policies in Southern Africa. Political elites and vested interests typically resist any land reform policies because such policies pose a threat to their economic power. For example, in South Africa, land reform struggles because it requires steady political will to implement, which often is lacking. As noted by [27], powerful landowners and political elites have more resources to draw upon to resist reforms, thus explaining the slow pace of reform. These are the same elites who control vast tracts of land; as holders of significant influence over policy decisions, reforms are often skewed in their favour. Such apparent lack of 'political will' results from inadequate prioritization of land reform on the national agenda through slow policy execution that perpetuates historical land inequalities. In the view of [26], though there was an attempt by the Fast Track Land Reform Program to redistribute land in Zimbabwe, political manipulations coupled with weak governance structures precipitated economic instability and sustainability in the long run of the program. Therefore, without leadership driving the process and holding it accountable, symbolic policies on land reform in Southern Africa remain largely symbolic, with little concrete action taken to address land inequality.

One of the most significant barriers to effective land reform is the lack of financial and technical resources. Land reform programs often fail not because of a lack of good intentions, but due to insufficient resources for implementation. This has been the case in South Africa, where land redistribution policies exist; however, funds have not been provided to support new landowners after settlement [16]. As a result, they lack the resources to make their newly acquired land productive. Challenges here include insufficient funds for infrastructure, training in agriculture, and access to credit - each of which is critical to successful land reform. Even more so, this situation is testified to by [26] study on Zimbabwe, when inadequate funding of new landowners led the government to let the entire land reform program collapse. The Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy of South Africa highlights the insufficiency of financial resources. This program has never secured sufficient funds for land transfers or support for new landowners. In Zimbabwe, funds were not made available under the Land Reform Program for training and agricultural input support; thus, beneficiaries do not have the means to maintain productive land. Without adequate funding and technical assistance, any effort at reforming land will fail and, therefore, will not achieve its economic and social objectives.

Institutional, and structural barriers are also of paramount significance. As highlighted by [1], the governance structure is fragmented by various ministries and departments with responsibility for different dimensions within land reform, which creates inefficiencies in the implementation of policies. In South Africa, inadequate harmonization between the Ministry of Land Reform, the Department of Agriculture, and other relevant bodies has led to

inconsistent policy applications due to ineffectual coordination among these institutions. This has created institutional gaps, which have failed the National Development Plan (NDP) and Land Reform Policies that were supposed to unite all the disparities relating to land administration into one coherent plan. Similarly, [24] point out that Namibia's Land Reform Act (1995) struggled with institutional fragmentation, which set legislated barriers against efficient policy implementation. The lack of clear mandates and coherence among government agencies in both countries has led to delayed and inconsistent land distribution. As long as there are inadequate cohesive institutional frameworks and strong inter-agency coordination, the existing policies on land reform will continue to be ineffective instruments for redressing historical inequities that they were designed to address.

The most critical barrier to the success of land reform in Southern Africa is not what many may expect; it is the overemphasis on land redistribution rather than agricultural productivity and sustainable land use. As noted by [1] and affirmed by [28], policies on land redistribution mostly neglect the fact that technical support, training in agriculture, and access to modern means of farming are imperative for new landowners. In South Africa, [16] observed that the priority on land redistribution, without accompanying support for training and resources in agriculture, has led to poor productivity on newly acquired land. This can be viewed as an omission gap resulting from inadequacies in such policies as the LRAD program, which has, despite redistributing the land, failed to include sufficient agricultural support to new landowners. [26] notes that the Command Agriculture, initially intended to increase agricultural production, did not technically support new farmers, who lacked the necessary tools and knowledge to succeed, and therefore would not yield expected results. Land reform will only be successful if integrated with agricultural development programs wherein support does not end at the turn-over of land but helps new landowners to become productive farmers who can have sustainability in the long run. Policies must go beyond land transfer and focus on training, infrastructure, and financial support that are necessary for attaining productivity in agriculture. Table 2 presents the summary of barriers to effective policy implementation.

Table 2

Summary of Barriers to Effective Policy Implementation					
Barriers	Description	Support Evidence		Policies	
Weak Governance and Political Will	Lack of political commitment and resistance from political elites undermine the effective implementation of land reform policies.	In South Africa, political elites resist land reforms due to vested interests, leading to slow progress [27]. In Zimbabwe, political manipulation hindered reform success [26].	South Africa's Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994) and Land Reform (Agrarian Development) Policy face delays due to political resistance. Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Program lacked sufficient political backing.		

Continuation Table 2

Limited Resources for Implementation	Insufficient financial and technical resources prevent the successful execution of land reform policies.	In South Africa, lack of post-settlement support for new landowners hampers land reform success [16]. Zimbabwe's financial mismanagement led to the failure of land reform [26].	South Africa's Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) suffers from underfunding. Zimbabwe's Land Reform Program lacked necessary financial support for new farmers [26].
Institutional and Structural Challenges	Fragmented governance structures and weak coordination between agencies lead to inefficiencies and inconsistent policy application.	Poor coordination between ministries in South Africa and Namibia hinders effective policy implementation [1,24].	South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) and Land Reform Policy fail to address inter-ministerial coordination and institutional capacity. Namibia's fragmented Land Reform Act (1995) also faces similar challenges.
Land Redistribution vs. Agricultural Productivity	Focusing solely on land redistribution without accompanying agricultural support leads to poor outcomes, including low productivity.	Land reforms in South Africa and Zimbabwe failed to provide sufficient training and resources, resulting in low agricultural productivity [1,26,16].	South Africa's Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) policy, while redistributing land, lacks support systems to ensure agricultural success. Zimbabwe's Command Agriculture failed due to the absence of technical support [26].

2.5. Socio-Political and Economic Factors Affecting Implementation

Poverty, infrastructure deficiency, and social inequality constantly hinder efforts to implement land reform policy in Southern Africa. Infrastructural gaps and social support services are prerequisite conditions for productive utilisation of land; thus, successful land reforms should not focus only on the redistribution of land but also on infrastructural support and social support services [29]. Most beneficiaries of land reform who have access to markets, technology, or financial resources are unable to make full use of their capacity on their newly acquired lands. [30] point out that without adequate finance and access to

technical assistance, the results from South African and Zimbabwean land reforms have led to uneven results. At the same time, most beneficiaries are left without sustainable livelihoods on the land. For instance, under the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) in South Africa, institutional capacity and, consequently, actual objectives intended towards uplifting the rural poor economically remain largely elusive due to financial constraints. Also, where infrastructure like roads and irrigation is missing, these socio-economic constraints become worse, thus making it harder for new owners to get to markets and improve productivity [16]. These factors show that without focused investments in infrastructure and access to services by the Southern African nations, land reform will not be able to overcome the structural inequalities blocking its success.

Customary attitudes to land, gender inequality, and elite resistance are the significant constraints confronting Southern African land reform. [31] posit that customary tenure systems, often emphasising the male head or owner, reduce the ability of women to participate fully in schemes for redistribution. The program's objective regarding social justice cannot be achieved due to the significant constraint on women's access to land. In addition, the reluctance of large landowners to allow their land holdings to exceed an acre, a common practice in most parts of the country, directly impedes the effective implementation of a program [32]. These elites use their economic and political power for interest protection as well as actual redistribution obstruction. [33] argue that Namibia's experience demonstrates that, despite the Land Reform Act of 1995, which is intended to be progressive, traditional leaders and powerful landowners actively resist redistribution efforts, thereby maintaining the concentration of land among a few hands. The problem of elite capture has cultural overtones in resisting changes in the systems of ownership of land, particularly in areas where land is viewed as an ancestral asset or a male-dominated asset. Thus, land reform policies need to be accompanied by cultural and social interventions that would empower the most disadvantaged group, women. Other than offering only a purely legalistic approach, it has to ensure that land reform acts as an agent of wider socioeconomic change.

2.6. Theoretical Framework on Policy Implementation

The paper is guided by Policy Implementation Theory and Institutional Theory. Policy Implementation Theory is used to assess the gap between land reform policy formulation and its execution, highlighting barriers that hinder successful policy implementation. Institutional Theory provide insights into the role of political institutions, governance frameworks, and socio-economic contexts in shaping land reform.

2.6.1. Policy Implementation Theory

The Policy Implementation Theory has been very relevant in explaining the gap between the intended and real output of land reform policies. The [34] version of this theory shows the numerous steps involved in translating intentions into actual outputs. This, therefore, explains why the land reform policies face significant implementation problems with so many dimensions, such as coordination, resources, and local capacity coming in. Successful policy implementation requires, as discovered by [34], multi-level government coordination between different agencies. There is no such discovery of multi-level government coordination between the national government, local authorities, and other stakeholders for Southern African land reform; instead, there were discoveries of fragmented

implementations. [16] note that in South Africa, the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) program was facing significant challenges due to poor synergy between the departments of agriculture and land reform, thus reducing its potential to meet its intended objectives. Apart from this, inadequate resources are being injected into most land reform programs, causing some to be financially underfunded and technically poorly assisted, which is why they are not successful. A lack of local capacity compounds this problem because most beneficiaries of land reform do not have the requisite skills or access to modern agricultural practices necessary for achieving increased productivity. Such factors, as elaborated within Policy Implementation Theory, serve to explain how the gap between policy design and outcomes emanates from the challenges embedded in the intricate process of translating policy goals into practice. The theory underscores the need for better coordination, adequate resource allocation, and capacity-building at the local level to bridge the gap between policy intentions and actual results. In other words, the application of the policy implementation theory in this context helps to explain the persistent gap between policy design and outcomes in land reform. By addressing these dimensions, policymakers can bridge the gap between intentions and actual results, ultimately improving the success of land reform programs in Southern Africa.

2.6.2. Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory is critical in understanding how political, legal, and economic institutions shape the land reform process. As explained by [35-36], this theory posits that the effectiveness of land reform policies depends largely on those institutions which control or govern land ownership, use, and distribution. An important aspect highlighted under Institutional Theory is that policy can easily fail when weak governance structures direct the path and strength of rights over property. This situation is particularly problematic in countries with agrarian-based economies, which are often required to support their claims for such rights. Insecurity in property rights means beneficiaries do not have title deeds: this explicitly undermines both the willingness of beneficiaries to invest in land and government capacity towards enforcing any form of related policies effectively [35]. This is particularly relevant in countries such as Zimbabwe. [26] articulates how unclear and insecure land tenure systems precipitated failed land redistribution and ultimately led to economic collapse after the Fast Track Land Reform Program. [36] points out that when political institutions fail to effectively manage the country and control corruption, it allows such issues to take place, leading to elite capture and unequal distribution of land. In a country like South Africa, [24] note that political and economic institutions typically perpetuate existing inequalities where large landowners and elites resist land reforms; hence, even more inequality is created. The applicability of Institutional Theory, in the context of Southern Africa, is central to understanding how governance structures impact the success of land reform policies. In countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa, institutional weakness—ranging from political manipulation to fragmented legal frameworks often prevent equitable land distribution. In this regard, the paper argues that effective land reform requires robust and strengthening governance structures and securing property rights, as well as institutional alignment with the socio-political realities of each nation.

2.7. Key Gaps Analysis on Land Reform: Cross-Country Comparison

One significant gap in the literature is the limited research comparing land reform policies across different Southern African countries, despite shared socio-economic contexts and common policy challenges. While individual studies on countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia abound, cross-country comparative studies are relatively sparse. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the differences and similarities in policy execution, challenges, and outcomes. [21] argue that comparative studies could help policymakers understand how various political, economic, and institutional factors influence land reform processes. While [24] offer insights into Namibia's land reform, a similar cross-country comparison between Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa could help highlight which strategies have worked best in overcoming common challenges such as elite capture, financial constraints, and resistance from large landowners. This comparative approach remains under-researched and presents a key gap in understanding the broader regional implications of land reform.

Another gap in the literature is the insufficient attention paid to the local-level implementation of land reform policies and how local governance structures influence the success or failure of these reforms. Much of the existing research focuses on macro-level analysis, while the impact of local governance, community leadership, and local-level decision-making on land reform implementation is under-explored. [31] mention that local actors, such as traditional leaders and municipal governments, play a crucial role in the land allocation process, yet their influence is often overlooked in the literature. Localized governance structures, with their unique socio-political dynamics, can either facilitate or impede the equitable distribution of land. More research focusing on these local experiences could shed light on why certain reforms succeed in some areas and fail in others.

3. Materials and Methods

The methodology for this paper follows a systematic literature review (SLR) to ensure a rigorous and transparent analysis of land reform policies in Southern Africa. A comprehensive search strategy was employed, utilizing reputable databases such as JSTOR, Google-Scholar, Scopus, Research-Gate, and government publications, as well as grey literature sources such as institutional reports from international organizations like the World Bank and FAO [37-38], and working papers. A total of 180 sources were retrieved. The PRISMA flowchart in Figure 1 shows the number of studies that were identified, reviewed, checked for eligibility, and ultimately included in the final analysis. Table 3 provides a succinct summary of the key methodological steps followed for conducting a systematic literature review. The inclusion criteria for this review were peer-reviewed articles, government reports, grey literature and credible sources published between 2003 and 2023 focusing on land reform policies, and implementation strategies in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The period between 2003 and 2023 was to ensure that the review captures the most relevant and recent policy shifts in the three countries. Moreover, this time frame is significant as it includes key developments such as the ongoing debates around land expropriation in South Africa, the implementation challenges of Namibia's land reform policies, and Zimbabwe's post 2000 Fast-Track Land Reform Programme. Grey literature was essential, as it allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of land reform policies, including insights that may not be published in traditional peer-reviewed journals [39]. Exclusion criteria included studies not directly related to land reform in Southern Africa, those published before 2003, studies

not available in English or lacking full-text access. After the relevant studies were identified, data was extracted based on predefined categories, including themes such as policy gaps, governance challenges, and socio-economic barriers to land reform. Such method of extraction aligns with best practices in systematic reviews, as outlined by [40], ensuring consistency and objectivity. Keywords such as "land reform," "policy implementation," "land redistribution" "governance structures," "policy gaps" and "Southern Africa" were used in searches with Boolean operators (AND, OR) applied to narrow and expand search results. The data used in this paper were derived from secondary sources. The complete list of references used is provided within the manuscript. Ethical approval was not required since the study is based on secondary data and does not involve direct interventions with animals or humans.

The data underwent thematic analysis, following [41] guidelines for qualitative analysis, to synthesize the findings and reveal both consistent patterns and differences throughout the selected literature. The researcher coded the data from 67 studies and then conducted the thematic analysis to develop themes. The process involved multiple rounds of coding, where the researcher reviewed and categorized the data into themes based on the article's objective. The researcher regularly revisited the coded data and refined the themes through an iterative process to ensure consistency and robustness in theme identification. In cases of uncertainty, the researcher revisited the existing literature and theoretical frameworks to ensure that the thematic analysis remained grounded in established research. The studies included in this systematic review were assessed for methodological quality following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A PRISMA checklist was used to ensure the completeness and transparency of the reporting. Through this process, the paper synthesized findings to create practical recommendations that enhance Southern African land reform policies by adapting them to local socio-political contexts. Key aspects of the review, including study selection, data extraction, risk of bias assessment, and synthesis methods, were aligned with the PRISMA standards. Generally, the research draws from secondary data, so the main ethical requirements are to give credit to all sources and uphold intellectual property rights while maintaining an unbiased interpretation of the data. A key limitation of this review is the potential bias from grey literature, such as government publications, which may lack peer review and could introduce selective reporting. Another limitation is that the review relies solely on secondary data. In other words, it draws data only from previously published studies rather than first hand research. As a result, it may not fully capture the real-time experiences or personal perspectives that primary data could provide.

Table 3

**Key Methodological Steps for Conducting a Systematic Literature Review
on Land Reform Policies**

Steps	Description	Justification
Research Objective(s)	Focus on identifying gaps in land reform policy frameworks and understanding the challenges in their implementation in Southern Africa.	Ensures the review remains focused on key policy issues [39].

Continuation Table 3

Search strategy	Use key databases (JSTOR, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus) and grey literature. Focus on keywords like “land reform” and “policy implementation.”	Provides comprehensive coverage of available evidence and includes grey literature for broader insights [39].
Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	Prioritize studies from 2003 to 2023; peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and credible sources.	Ensures the relevance and timelines of the studies [39].
Data Extraction	Extract data related to policy gaps, governance challenges, and socio-economic factors	Aligns with best practices for data extraction in systematic reviews, ensuring consistency [40]
Synthesis process	Conduct thematic analysis to identify recurring themes such as policy gaps and barriers	Ensures a comprehensive understanding of patterns across studies [41].

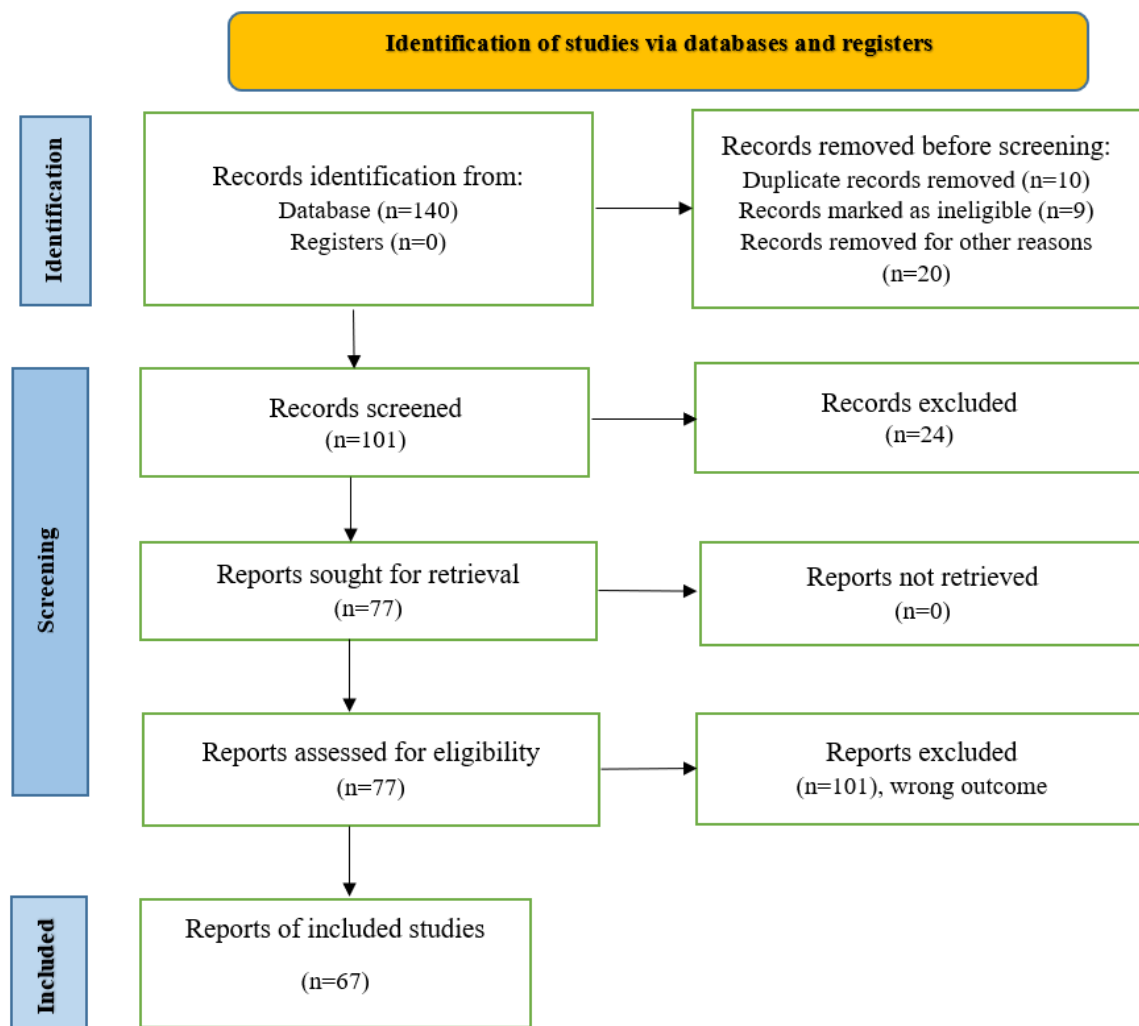


Figure 1. Prisma Flowchart [42].

4. Results and Discussions

The paper explores the land reform policies of Southern Africa. It focused on South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, aiming to identify gaps in policy frameworks and the challenges in their implementation. Findings are organized and discussed around several key themes that emerged from the analysis.

4.1. Theme 1: Policy Framework and Gaps

Findings reveal that the fundamental gap between policy and practice towards achieving the intended objectives of land reform emanates from an overambitious articulation of policies in conditions outside the real situation on the ground. For example, in South Africa, the sustained dependence on and the principle of a willing buyer, willing seller reflect a gap in the execution of policies as anticipated by the Policy Implementation Theory. The theory suggests that a significant gap exists between the design of a policy and its actual implementation, mainly due to inadequate coordination among various factors, the real-world situation, and resource inadequacy. It also shows that this policy, though created to make it easy to redistribute land, was not successful because there was not enough political will, a lack of resources, and a lack of intergovernmental coordination. As stated by [34], these are classic barriers to success in the implementation of a policy, where fragmented efforts across the body of governments involved create the gap between the design and application of a policy. Just as in the case of Namibia, while the Land Reform Act (1995) articulated clear intentions on the redistribution of land, failure to incorporate local governance systems and traditional land tenure systems further speaks volumes about the difference between theory and practice. The inability to align policy with real-world realities speaks volumes about the challenges as articulated in Policy Implementation Theory, which suggests that coherence between different levels of policies is, more often than not, a determinant of whether implementation takes place.

4.2. Theme 2: Barriers to Effective Policy Implementation

Weaknesses in governance, political resistance, and inadequate resources were identified as significant factors hindering the successful implementation of land reform in Southern Africa, according to the Policy Implementation Theory. In South Africa, political elites were found to be resisting the redistribution of land. This poses the problem of slow land redistribution more as a highly political issue that goes beyond matters of policy, and where elite interests constitute a significant obstacle. In Zimbabwe, the data revealed that the Fast-Track Land Reform Program had failed to provide adequate post-settlement support to new landowners. This validates the claim by the Policy Implementation Theory that resources and technical assistance play vital roles in determining the success or failure of any policy. The absence of these resources will again hinder the attainment of set objectives from such a policy, and therefore lead to less than optimal agricultural productivity and increased instability. Fragmented institutional structures have also hindered the country, as Namibia sits at the table of addressing the challenges effectively through implementing its land reform program. According to Institutional Theory, such barriers arise from power relations and systems of inadequate governance that control and dominate the setup. [27] aptly described this condition by observing that South African political elites resist land reform because they feel it conflicts with their economic interests, which delays redistribution. Therefore, breaking or overcoming such barriers shall require more political will and better governance of agencies, plus resources to implement relevant land reform policies.

4.3. Theme 3: Socio-political and Economic Influences

The findings identify cultural attitudes to land, gender inequality, and elite capture as some of the major socio-political factors retarding the process of land reform in Southern Africa. Under customary systems of tenure, mostly paternalized, women have no direct ownership; hence, they do not benefit from redistribution programs. Political elites also manipulate the process of Land Reforms to control the resources of a country, thereby promoting inequality. This can best be analyzed through Institutional Theory by indicating how informal institutions, through gender relations and elite power, influence outputs in land reforms. It essentially finds that, despite the legal frameworks guiding land redistribution, where elite capture manifests as the failures of such policies to effect meaningful change—powerful landowners and political elites resisting any efforts at redistribution—gender inequality still impedes the process of land reforms in Namibia. Customary laws barring women from owning land best illustrate how much social norms have taken deep roots in defining systems on matters relating to land. Institutional Theoretical postulates that where the weak institutional frameworks do not challenge the existing cultural practices, such practices become further entrenched. The findings are supported by [31], who noted that cultural attitudes and gender inequality still pose formidable barriers, as they are perpetuated through a traditional system that has historically relegated women to land ownership. Therefore, such barriers can be minimized by a gender-sensitive land reform policy that targets the reduction of elite capture through transparent and inclusive measures in land distribution.

4.4. Theme 4: Institutional and Policy Coordination Challenges

Institutional fragmentation and weak coordination among government agencies in Southern African countries have been identified as one of the significant challenges to effective land reforms. This proved that the role among the ministries of land, agriculture, and finance, redistributive function inefficiency, and delay in South Africa and Namibia. The lack of coordination validates the challenges described by Policy Implementation Theory, that without proper communication and collaboration across government agencies, there is slow momentum. All these further validate that, in Zimbabwe, inadequate security of property rights and insecure tenure, as validated under the Fast-Track Land Reform Program, governance institutions have failed to establish stability and legality protections for new landowners. Generally, the data underscore that weak institutional frameworks act as a significant constraint against the success of land reform policies through clear land rights and effective enforcement mechanisms, thereby bringing in the governance aspect that Institutional Theory postulates to be very instrumental in achieving desired policy outcomes. As postulated by Policy Implementation Theory, together with security of property rights, inter-agency coordination is a prerequisite for effective policy implementation. This has also been advanced by [34] in their work, which suggests that fragmented governance systems and inadequate coordination lead to failures in land reform policies. Therefore, addressing such issues requires improved institutional coordination together with clear legal frameworks accompanying the security of property rights for new landowners.

5 Conclusion

The paper concludes by pointing out significant obstacles to land reform in Southern Africa that require policy and practical underpinning for success. Findings confirm that, despite substantial progress in paper, land reform policies do not materialize due to a gap

between policy formulation and local realities, weak governance, political resistance, and a lack of resources. The Policy Implementation Theory and the Institutional Theory could offer a practical analytical framework for tracing and understanding the failure of these challenges, showing that weak institutions, poor coordination, and entrenched political power structures prevent land reform from achieving its intended goals. Significant lessons emerging from the study are the imperatives of context-specific policies, political will, and strong institutional support for any meaningful land reform process, having cultural barriers such as gender inequality and elite capture addressed so that benefits accrue to all, particularly the marginalized. From the viewpoint of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Adjust Land Reform Policies to Local Contexts.** The land reform should be undertaken based on the set socio-political, cultural, and economic environment of a locality in Southern Africa. Therefore, applying generalized policies across diversified localities does not work due to different governance systems, land tenure arrangements, and community dynamics. Indeed, traditional land tenure systems often conflict with some formal legal frameworks, but should be considered in the policy design process. Therefore, communities and other stakeholders, together with traditional leaders, shall formulate such policies that can incorporate local knowledge and customs into reforms to satisfy their needs for effectiveness and sustainability.

2. **Strengthen Political Will and Governance Structures.** One of the significant challenges that has stood against successful land reform in Southern Africa is the resistance of the political elite and landowners, who benefit from the current power dynamics. Thus, raising political will to prioritize land reform on a national scale is imperative for governance to be engaged in transparent, inclusive processes decisively towards reform implementations. Strong governance structures should accompany this to diminish avenues for corruption and hold accountable all parties involved in any reform process.

3. **Redistribution of land is significant;** however, support for beneficiaries after receiving the land is also very crucial for the success of the process. In most cases, it is realized that new owners lack the technical training, credit, infrastructure, and access to markets and other vital elements needed to make their land productive, leading to unfruitful results from land reforms. This requires governments to allocate sufficient resources to post-settlement support, including agricultural training, financial services, and the development of rural infrastructures such as roads and irrigation systems. A comprehensive support system will maximize new owners' abilities to tap all the potential from their lands, increasing productivity and ensuring that the land reform leads to sustainable economic development.

4. **Design land reform policies to ensure access to resources for women.** In most countries in Southern Africa, women are disadvantaged in having title deeds to land because customary tenure systems give preference to male ownership. In this paper, the authors argue that for the government to achieve gender equity, it should put in place a policy framework that will guarantee women's legal rights to land, support them with necessary assistance to claim and administer land, and involve them in the process of land administration. Another significant obstacle towards achieving successful land reform is elite capture. The politically connected individuals, together with large landholders, manoeuvre the process so that they retain their hold on lands, thus defeating the very intention of redistributed lands. Reduce elite capture by implementing measures that ensure transparency in land allocation and establish mechanisms to monitor the distribution process, ensuring it remains fair and inclusive.

5. Enhance inter-agency coordination and legal frameworks. Effective land reform requires clear role-sharing among government agencies in land, agriculture, finance, and rural development. Execution of land reform has been hampered by delays and inefficiencies resulting from fragmented governance. The government should establish an inter-agency committee to better coordinate the implementation of land reform. Secure property rights must also be ensured as a prerequisite through clear legal frameworks. Rights that are legally recognised for new landowners are an imperative condition to attract investment and increase productivity. Strengthening such frameworks will give confidence to stability resting on these, providing sustainability to land reform, thereby promoting economic growth in rural areas.

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