Old lands, new practices? Conference on land, conservation, and development

By Monique Salomon

Close to 50 academics gathered in Grahamstown from 12 to 14 Sep 2012 to explore and debate whether contemporary issues on land, conservation, and development have shifted in Africa and South Africa post-1994. The drive from Port Elizabeth to the old settlers’ town was an appropriate precursor to the Conference, as the road meandered through vast stretches of private game reserves, luxury lodges, and hunting farms.

One conclusion of the deliberations was that land reform in South Africa is governed by a paternalistic development paradigm. Government regulations dictate what reformed land should and should not be used for. The failure to turn land reform farms into profitable large-scale commercial farms operated by beneficiary groups has been much publicized. At the Conference, case studies honed in on land transfers to claimants on condition that the land remains a protected conservation area in perpetuity.

In a play on the Conference title, speakers observed that ‘old lands’ are still ruled by ‘old practices’, sometimes disguised as ‘new promises’. Land claimants who have signed business deals with private lodges and tourism ventures, including the widely acclaimed “success story” of the Makuleke clan at Kruger National park, have seen the promise of profit overshadowed by the reality of Parks run at losses.

Co-management agreements, such as in the Dwesa Cwebe Nature Reserve, place the rightful land owners on the wrong side of the law when they want to access the natural and marine resources. The tragedy of the commons thinking still looms large in conservation circles. The reasoning that “if we give access to one, we give permission to all to exploit nature” ignores customary practices of sustainable harvesting and use of nature’s sources. Rastafarian bossie dokters (forest doctors) in the Cape cry out why they as indigenous custodians of the land are denied access while exotic vineyards are allowed to dominate the landscape.

Attempts to match conservation concerns with social development goals have resulted in an unhappy marriage founded on misguided expectations, false promises, and bad deals. Farm workers are not better off in private game reserves or lodges. Community cohesion around a land claim can quickly dissolve after land has been transferred and different interests resurface. Renewable energy also has negative impacts. The installation of wind turbines, for example, requires mining, displaces the same people as those affected by conservation, and are a hazard to birds and bats.

The role of the State in controlling people and the landscape was problematized. The need to “humanize” nature conservation or de-proclaim nature reserves were suggested. Yet, it was the call for an “alternative politics from below” that resonated most with those of us who are pushing for radical land and agrarian reform.

1 Organized by the Universities of the Free State, Rhodes, and Witwatersrand