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Media Release

For Immediate Release – 12 June 2025

The Land Lie That's Costing South Africa R1.8 Trillion

There is a dangerous myth that continues to shape South Africa's land reform debate. It is repeated in boardrooms, on political platforms, in parliament, and in countless media reports: that white South Africans still own the majority of the land. This idea has become an article of faith, weaponised to drive policy and inflame tensions. But like many myths, it is both oversimplified and misdirected.

In a recent piece published on BizNews, Professor Lochner Marais took a necessary step toward correcting this narrative. His argument is that the commonly cited 2017 Land Audit has been misunderstood or misused and deserves serious attention. He points out that the audit excludes vast areas of urban land and fails to account for municipal billing data that shows a majority of residential properties are, in fact, owned by black South Africans. He is right. But what he stops short of saying is perhaps the most important point of all.

This is not a debate about race. It is a debate about rights. The true injustice in South Africa's land landscape is not that land is still in the hands of white South Africans, it is that the vast majority of black South Africans still do not hold secure, tradable, registered title to the land they live on. Occupation is not ownership. A street address or a municipal rates account does not amount to a legal deed. Yet millions of South Africans believe they are landowners when, legally and economically, they are not.

At the heart of this problem is a land system still trapped in its colonial and apartheid-era foundations. Roughly 34 percent of the country's 122 million hectares is registered in the national Deeds Registry. That leaves a staggering two-thirds of all land either held by the state, under traditional authorities, or existing in informal, undocumented arrangements. In rural and peri-urban areas, particularly in the former homelands, more than 16 million people reside on land they cannot mortgage, sell, or use as collateral. Their homes and plots exist in a state of legal limbo—technically theirs, but economically and politically insecure.

Worse still, government's own redistribution efforts have often failed to deliver the one thing people need most: the deed. RDP houses are regularly handed over without transfer documents.

Beneficiaries of land reform projects are made custodians, not owners. The state remains the title holder in many cases, meaning the very people these programmes are meant to empower remain tenants of the government.

This is the great lie of land reform: that delivery equals ownership. It does not. And the cost of this lie is staggering. According to research by the Freedom Foundation and the Centre for Risk Analysis, if all the informal and communally held land in South Africa were converted into secure, legally registered, tradable title, the economy could gain as much as R1.8 trillion in added value. That figure is not hypothetical. It reflects the increased collateral value, investment potential, and productivity that comes when people are no longer occupiers—but recognised owners. It represents intergenerational wealth, access to credit, secure inheritance, and local economic growth.

Yet despite this overwhelming evidence, the national debate continues to fixate on race ratios and who owns the most hectares. These narratives may serve political ends, but they do not serve justice. They do not deliver prosperity. And they certainly do not reflect the lived experience of millions of South Africans who remain invisible in the official land system.

At Izwa Lami and the Freedom Foundation, we believe the solution lies not in slogans or seizures, but in systems. In development a platform called ETitle—a technology-led, citizen-first approach to converting occupation into ownership. Using blockchain, GPS mapping, and verified digital identity, ETitle can produce tamper-proof, court-admissible title documents, backed by a ledger of transactions that cannot be erased or manipulated. It works with communities, not against them. It validates existing informal arrangements and upgrades them into legally recognised ownership. Most importantly, it gives individuals what they are owed: the security and freedom that comes with a title deed.

We are not interested in perpetuating narratives that pit one race against another. We are interested in restoring dignity and economic agency to all South Africans, regardless of heritage, geography or political alignment. That starts with truth. And the truth is this: land in South Africa is not stolen. It is stuck. It is held hostage by bureaucracy, poor data, and outdated legal frameworks. Freeing requires more than rhetoric. It requires resolve, technology, and a commitment to fairness grounded in fact.

Professor Marais has done the nation a service by challenging lazy assumptions. But let us take his logic one step further. If we are to have a real conversation about land, it must begin with clarity. Not about who owned what in the past, but about who has the legal, enforceable right to own today. When we stop measuring justice in hectares and start measuring it in deeds, only then will we begin to fulfil the constitutional promise that all South Africans are entitled to land, to property, and to the freedom that comes with ownership.

It is time to correct the record. And more importantly, it is time to correct the system. Not for the benefit of one group over another, but for the future of the country as a whole.

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About Freedom Foundation:

The Freedom Foundation is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting economic freedom, individual liberty, and accountable governance in South Africa. Through research, advocacy, and public engagement, we fight for policies that limit government overreach, encourage free markets, and protect the rights of all South Africans.