



Land Restitution in South Africa: Governance, Tenure Security and Transformative Potential

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Abstract

Land restitution is central to South Africa's land reform agenda but its contribution to sustainable socio-economic transformation remains contested. This study examines governance, tenure and political-economic factors shaping restitution outcomes. Using qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis, the findings reveal that institutional fragmentation, weak administrative capacity and tenure uncertainties constrain effectiveness, while structural inequalities and limited access to resources undermine beneficiary livelihoods. The study concludes that improved institutional coordination, stronger governance capacity and targeted economic support are essential to enhance restitution's developmental impact and inform policy on land reform and agrarian transformation.

Keywords: land restitution, land reform governance, tenure security, agrarian transformation, South Africa

Introduction

Land restitution remains one of the most significant policy instruments through which South Africa has sought to address the enduring legacy of colonial and apartheid-era land dispossession. Embedded within the constitutional commitment to restorative justice and equitable access to land, restitution extends beyond the restoration of property rights to encompass broader objectives of social justice, inclusive development and sustainable livelihood transformation (Sihlangu & Odeku, 2021; Paradza & Zulch, 2026). Consequently, the effectiveness of restitution cannot be assessed solely in terms of the legal resolution of historical claims, but must also be evaluated in relation to its capacity to generate durable socio-economic benefits for previously dispossessed communities. This broader policy orientation has shifted scholarly attention from the procedural completion of restitution claims towards the institutional and governance conditions that determine whether restitution fulfils its transformative mandate.

Despite considerable progress in the settlement of restitution claims, emerging evidence suggests that legal restitution has not consistently translated into sustainable development outcomes. While the restoration of land and the provision of financial compensation represent important forms of historical redress, they do not necessarily secure tenure, improve livelihoods or enhance productive land use (Maesela, Belete & Senyolo, 2025). A systematic review of South Africa's land reform programme demonstrates that formal legal gains frequently fail to produce meaningful improvements in tenure security and socio-economic wellbeing, largely because restitution often culminates in cash compensation rather than the transfer of land supported by legally secure and economically viable property rights (Shiba, 2025). This divergence between policy objectives and implementation outcomes illustrates that the settlement of claims represents only one dimension of restitution, while the realisation of equitable development depends on the institutional, governance and socio-economic environments within which restituted land is managed.

The growing body of scholarship on South Africa's land restitution programme increasingly attributes these uneven outcomes to weaknesses in institutional capacity and governance rather than deficiencies within the legal framework itself. Empirical studies demonstrate that restitution projects characterised by inadequate post-settlement support, weak institutional coordination, limited technical assistance and ineffective local governance frequently struggle to achieve sustainable livelihood improvements despite the successful transfer of land (Maesela, Belete & Senyolo, 2025; Tjale, Mwale & Kilonzo, 2022). These findings reinforce the argument that secure access to land, while indispensable, constitutes only one component of successful restitution. Equally important are governance systems capable of providing continued institutional support, facilitating productive land use and strengthening beneficiaries' capacity to utilise restituted land as a developmental asset.

Comparable debates within the broader literature on land tenure in sub-Saharan Africa further demonstrate that the developmental value of land rights is mediated by institutional effectiveness rather than legal recognition alone. Although secure tenure is frequently associated with improved investment incentives, agricultural productivity and livelihood security, these outcomes remain contingent upon governance arrangements that enable landholders to exercise and protect their rights effectively. Conversely, weak institutional environments may

transform legal reforms into new forms of exclusion, uncertainty and conflict, thereby producing what has been characterised as "land wrongs" despite the formal recognition of land rights (Unhiding the "land rights" and "land wrongs", 2025). These perspectives challenge conventional assumptions that restitution operates as a self-executing mechanism of redistribution and instead position restitution within a broader institutional ecosystem that shapes the extent to which restored rights translate into substantive developmental outcomes.

Recent scholarship has also expanded the analytical scope of restitution by examining the interaction between governance systems and broader political-economic processes. Rather than viewing restitution as an isolated legal intervention, these studies demonstrate that restituted land remains embedded within market structures, investment dynamics and unequal power relations that continue to influence patterns of ownership, control and resource allocation. The concept of "capital grabbing back" illustrates how market pressures, governance deficiencies and elite capture may progressively undermine the redistributive objectives of restitution by facilitating the reconsolidation of economic control over restituted land (Sommerville, Castanon Ballivián, Mudimu & Ngubane, 2025). This perspective suggests that restitution outcomes are simultaneously shaped by institutional governance and structural political-economic forces, thereby requiring analytical approaches capable of examining the interaction between these dimensions rather than treating them as independent policy concerns. Although existing scholarship has generated important insights into governance, tenure security and the political economy of land restitution, these dimensions have largely been examined in isolation. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how governance arrangements, tenure security and broader political-economic structures interact to shape the transformative potential of restitution as an integrated policy process. This fragmentation constrains a comprehensive understanding of why restitution continues to produce uneven developmental outcomes despite an extensive constitutional and legislative framework designed to facilitate equitable redress. Addressing this gap requires an analytical framework capable of examining the reciprocal relationship between institutional processes, governance capacity and structural political-economic conditions influencing restitution implementation

Existing scholarship has generated important insights into governance, tenure security and the political economy of land restitution. However, these dimensions have largely been examined independently, providing only a partial explanation of restitution outcomes. This study advances the literature by integrating these interrelated dimensions within a single political-institutional analytical framework, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of how institutional arrangements and structural conditions interact to influence the developmental effectiveness of land restitution. In doing so, the study moves beyond assessments centred on legal restitution or administrative performance to foreground the institutional mechanisms through which restitution contributes to, or constrains equitable development.

Against this background, this study examines the transformative potential of land restitution in South Africa through the interconnected lenses of governance, tenure security and political economy. Guided by a political-institutional framework, the study analyses how these interrelated dimensions influence restitution outcomes and the extent to which restitution contributes to equitable development beyond the formal settlement of claims. By integrating governance, institutional capacity, tenure security and political-economic analysis within a single conceptual framework, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on land restitution while providing policy-relevant insights for strengthening the developmental effectiveness and long-term sustainability of South Africa's restitution programme

2.Literature Review

The literature on land restitution in South Africa reflects a growing shift from descriptive accounts of settled claims toward critical analysis of institutional, tenure, and socio-economic dimensions. This review synthesises empirical and conceptual scholarship across three interrelated themes: tenure security and socio-economic outcomes, governance and institutional capacity, and political-economic structures shaping restitution. Within each theme, areas of convergence and divergence are identified, revealing persistent gaps that this study aims to address.

2.1 Tenure Security and Socio-Economic Outcomes

A dominant theme in recent land restitution research interrogates the extent to which restitution processes confer durable tenure security and translate into meaningful socio-economic outcomes (Shiba et al., 2025). A systematic review notes the view that formal legal settlement of restitution claims often culminates in cash compensation rather than the transfer of secure land rights. Shiba highlights that cash settlements, while resolving the legal claim, frequently fail to produce *de facto* tenure security, limiting beneficiaries' ability to use land as collateral, invest productively, or engage in sustainable economic activities. This finding aligns with broader scholarly work that distinguishes legal entitlement from the substantive security of rights, arguing that formal title alone does not guarantee livelihood improvements (Movahhed et al., 2025).

Empirical studies of post-settlement outcomes further reinforce this convergence. Maesela, Belete and Senyolo (2025) provide evidence from Limpopo Province showing that restitution beneficiaries who received targeted post-settlement support such as access to extension services and market linkages experienced improved food

security and household welfare relative to those who did not. Conversely, in contexts where such support was absent, tenure did not confer significant socio-economic benefits. Similarly, Ngarava (2023) documents how restitution without integrative infrastructure planning, especially for water and energy undermines the potential for stable agricultural livelihoods, demonstrating that tenure security is multidimensional rather than purely juridical. These studies converge on the insight that institutional and infrastructural support systems are essential complements to formal restitution rights.

However, divergence emerges around how tenure security is conceptualised. Whereas Shiba (2025) and Ngarava (2024) foreground legal and infrastructural dimensions, other scholars emphasise social and collective aspects of tenure security. For instance, Turner (2024) argues that community recognition and customary governance systems are often overlooked in statutory frameworks, leading to situations where formally recognised individual rights are socially insecure because they conflict with customary norms. This perspective diverges from legal-centric analyses by highlighting the normative and relational dimensions of tenure security, especially in communal or hybrid tenure contexts.

2.2 Governance and Institutional Capacity

A second consolidated area of research interrogates governance structures and institutional capacities that mediate restitution implementation. Paradza and Zulch's (2026) longitudinal review of land reform identifies persistent administrative bottlenecks, coordination failures between national and local authorities, and resource constraints that undermine restitution processes. They argue that without sufficiently capacitated land administration systems, restitution remains procedural rather than transformative. This analysis converges with broader governance research suggesting that institutional coherence and capacity are preconditions for effective policy implementation (Adams & Mabuza, 2021; Lall & Pieterse, 2023).

Within this governance theme, scholarships diverge on where reforms should be targeted. One strand, represented by Paradza and Zulch (2026) and supported by Nkosi (2024), calls for strengthening central administrative mechanisms such as professionalising land administration and improving inter-agency coordination to reduce backlogs and ensure consistent enforcement of restitution decisions. By contrast, another body of work emphasises decentralised empowerment, arguing that community-level institutions, particularly Communal Property Associations (CPAs), require substantive capacity building to manage restituted land effectively and democratically (Tshivhase, Mahole & Matloga, 2026). These divergent prescriptions reflect differing theoretical assumptions about the locus of authority in governance systems and underscore a broader scholarly debate about decentralised versus centralised governance in land reform.

2.3 Political-Economic Structures and Restitution Outcomes

A third body of work situates restitution within the broader political-economic context of land and capital relations. Sommerville, Castañón Ballivián, Mudimu and Ngubane (2025) advance the concept of "capital grabbing back," whereby redistributed or restituted land is reabsorbed into market circuits dominated by powerful economic actors, undermining redistributive intentions. This conceptualisation diverges from institutional analyses by emphasising structural pressures external to the formal policy apparatus specifically, market forces and elite interventions that reshape outcomes regardless of statutory provisions or governance improvements. While this perspective has been elaborated primarily in global comparative studies, its implications for South Africa are significant given the country's entrenched patterns of agrarian inequality and capital concentration.

Closer to the South African context, research by Mkhize and Walker (2022) suggests that restitution beneficiaries often confront structural barriers to market participation, such as limited access to finance and value chains, which perpetuate cycles of marginalisation even when tenure is formally secured. This work converges with the broader political-economic critique by highlighting how market structures and power asymmetries mediate restitution outcomes, rather than restitution rights alone determining beneficiary trajectories.

Nonetheless, current literature exhibits limited empirical integration of political-economic analysis with detailed case studies of restitution. While "capital grabbing back" offers a compelling theoretical lens, there remains a gap in evidence demonstrating how these macro-level processes manifest in South African restitution contexts over time. This absence points to the need for research that operationalises political-economic variables alongside governance and tenure security considerations.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

To navigate these intertwined literatures and address the identified gaps, this study adopts a political-institutional framework grounded in recent developments in institutional and political economy theory. Institutional theory posits that formal and informal rules, norms and organisational capacities shape actors' behaviour and policy outcomes (North, 2022; Helmke & Levitsky, 2023). Within land restitution, institutional theory directs analytical attention to how statutes, administrative capacities and governance practices produce varied tenure security and settlement outcomes.

Complementing this, political economy theory emphasises the distributional effects of power relations and market structures on policy implementation and outcomes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020; Van der Ploeg & Ye, 2021). This lens is particularly useful for interrogating how broader economic forces including capital interests and structural inequality may enable or constrain the realisation of restitution's redistributive intent, even where

formal rights and governance systems are in place.

The integration of institutional and political economy perspectives enables analysis of restitution as a process embedded within socio-economic systems and power structures, rather than as a discrete legal event. This theoretical synthesis addresses key knowledge gaps by linking formal rights, governance dynamics and structural determinants of restitution outcomes, offering a comprehensive lens through which the present study examines empirical patterns and policy implications.

Although the literature has converged on the importance of post-settlement support, tenure security, and institutional capacity, key gaps remain. To begin with, there is insufficient integration of political-economic structures with detailed governance and tenure analyses in the South African restitution context. In addition, longitudinal evidence that tracks restitution beneficiaries over extended periods is limited, constraining understanding of long-term socio-economic trajectories. Moreover, divergent views on the locus of governance reform, centralised versus decentralised, underscore the absence of conclusive comparative analyses of governance modalities.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining how governance arrangements, tenure security mechanisms, and political-economic structures together shape restitution outcomes, thereby advancing both theoretical and policy debates.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative document analysis to examine the governance, tenure security and political-economic dimensions shaping the transformative potential of land restitution in South Africa. Documentary evidence constituted the primary source of data, reflecting the study's emphasis on institutional arrangements, legislative frameworks, policy implementation and scholarly analyses of restitution outcomes.

Document selection followed a purposive sampling strategy informed by the study objectives and analytical framework. The documentary corpus comprised the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Restitution of Land Rights Act and related legislative instruments, national land reform policies, reports published by the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights and other relevant public institutions, together with peer-reviewed journal articles. Priority was accorded to literature published between 2021 and 2026 to capture contemporary policy debates and recent empirical evidence, while seminal legislative and scholarly sources were retained where necessary to establish the historical, legal and conceptual foundations of the analysis. Inclusion criteria were limited to documents addressing governance and institutional arrangements, tenure security, post-settlement support, restitution implementation and the political economy of land restitution. Documents addressing land reform without substantive engagement with these analytical dimensions, duplicate publications and sources lacking scholarly or institutional credibility were excluded from the analysis.

Data analysis was undertaken using thematic analysis guided by the political-institutional framework underpinning the study (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). Documentary sources were subjected to iterative reading and systematic coding to identify recurrent concepts, institutional processes and policy issues relevant to the study objectives. Related codes were subsequently consolidated into higher-order analytical categories and refined into three overarching themes: governance and institutional capacity, tenure security, and political-economic constraints. The analytical framework informed both the coding process and the interpretation of the findings by facilitating examination of the interaction between institutional arrangements and broader structural conditions influencing restitution outcomes.

Methodological rigour was enhanced through triangulation across legislative instruments, government policy documents, institutional reports and peer-reviewed scholarship to establish consistency in the evidence and minimise source-specific bias. Dependability was strengthened through the systematic application of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, while analytical transparency was maintained through a documented coding process aligned with the study objectives. The methodological approach is appropriate for examining institutional and policy processes; however, the findings should be interpreted within the parameters of documentary evidence, recognising that beneficiary perspectives remain beyond the scope of the present analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and analyses the key findings of the study derived from the qualitative document analysis of land restitution in South Africa. The findings are organised thematically to reflect the major structural and institutional issues shaping restitution outcomes, particularly governance and institutional capacity, tenure security and post-settlement livelihood outcomes, and the broader political-economic conditions influencing the sustainability of restitution initiatives. The discussion critically engages with existing scholarship in order to assess whether the findings converge with or diverge from prevailing academic debates on land reform and agrarian transformation, thereby situating the study within the broader literature while highlighting the implications of the findings for restitution policy and practice in South Africa.

4.1 Governance and Institutional Capacity in the Implementation of Land Restitution

The analysis of policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature reveals that governance arrangements and institutional capacity remain central determinants of restitution outcomes in South Africa. The findings indicate that while the constitutional and legislative framework for restitution provides a strong legal

basis for redressing historical dispossession, implementation has been constrained by institutional weaknesses within the land administration system. Documentary evidence demonstrates that the processing of claims has often been characterised by administrative backlogs, procedural delays, and limited coordination between institutions responsible for land reform. Institutional reports and policy evaluations indicate that despite the formal settlement of many claims, significant challenges persist in ensuring that restitution outcomes translate into stable and productive land use. These governance constraints suggest that restitution implementation is not merely a legal exercise but a complex administrative process that requires coherent institutional coordination and adequate state capacity.

The findings further show that institutional fragmentation across government departments involved in land reform has contributed to inefficiencies in the restitution process. Responsibilities for land restitution, agricultural support, infrastructure development and rural development are often distributed across different agencies, which can result in policy misalignment and inconsistent implementation. This fragmentation affects the post-settlement phase of restitution in particular, where beneficiaries require coordinated support to ensure productive use of restored land. Evidence from policy assessments indicates that the absence of integrated institutional support structures frequently leaves restitution beneficiaries without access to essential resources such as extension services, financial support or infrastructure development. As a result, the intended developmental impact of restitution is often weakened even when land has been formally restored.

The findings also highlight the limited institutional capacity of local governance structures responsible for managing restituted land, particularly in cases where land is transferred to community-based entities such as Communal Property Associations. Many of these institutions face governance challenges including internal disputes, weak administrative systems and limited technical expertise required to manage land assets effectively. Documentary sources suggest that these institutional weaknesses can undermine collective decision-making processes and hinder the productive utilisation of restituted land. In some cases, governance disputes within beneficiary communities have delayed or prevented the effective use of restituted land resources, thereby limiting the potential socio-economic benefits of restitution.

These findings converge with a substantial body of literature that identifies institutional capacity as a critical determinant of land reform outcomes. Paradza and Zulch (2026) similarly observe that institutional fragmentation and administrative constraints have limited the effectiveness of land reform implementation in South Africa. Their analysis emphasises that governance systems responsible for land administration require substantial strengthening if restitution is to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic transformation. Likewise, Tshivhase, Mahole and Matloga (2026) argue that weak governance structures at community level undermine the sustainability of restitution projects and expose beneficiary communities to internal conflicts and external pressures.

However, the literature diverges on the scale at which governance reforms should be implemented. Some scholars emphasise the need for stronger central state coordination to streamline restitution administration and reduce institutional fragmentation (Paradza & Zulch, 2026). In contrast, other studies emphasise decentralised governance and community empowerment, arguing that strengthening local institutions responsible for land management is essential for sustainable restitution outcomes (Tshivhase et al., 2026). The findings of this study suggest that both perspectives capture important aspects of the governance challenge. Effective restitution implementation requires a balance between centralised administrative coordination and the strengthening of local institutional capacities capable of managing restituted land.

The convergence of empirical evidence and scholarly analysis therefore highlights governance reform as a central policy priority for the restitution programme. Without improvements in institutional coordination, administrative capacity and local governance structures, the restitution process risks remaining largely procedural rather than transformative. These findings reinforce the argument that land restitution must be understood as a governance process embedded within broader institutional systems rather than as a purely legal mechanism of redress.

4.2 Tenure Security and Post-Settlement Livelihood Outcomes

The findings further demonstrate that tenure security represents a critical dimension influencing the socio-economic outcomes of land restitution. While restitution programmes aim to restore land rights to dispossessed individuals and communities, documentary evidence indicates that the form in which restitution is delivered significantly shapes the extent to which beneficiaries experience meaningful improvements in livelihood conditions. In many cases, restitution claims have been settled through financial compensation rather than the transfer of land, limiting the ability of beneficiaries to secure productive assets and participate in rural economic activities. Even where land has been restored, tenure arrangements are often mediated through collective ownership structures that create uncertainty regarding decision-making authority and land use rights.

Analysis of policy and research documents suggests that the absence of clearly defined and enforceable tenure arrangements can create barriers to investment and long-term land utilisation. Beneficiaries operating under uncertain tenure conditions may struggle to access credit, enter agricultural markets or implement long-term development strategies on restituted land. This dynamic is particularly evident in cases where communal ownership structures lack clearly articulated governance rules or where competing claims over land rights emerge within beneficiary communities. As a result, restitution may provide symbolic recognition of historical dispossession while failing to produce substantive economic empowerment.

The findings also reveal that the socio-economic outcomes of restitution are closely linked to the availability of

post-settlement support systems. Evidence from institutional reports and academic studies indicates that beneficiaries who receive targeted support services, such as agricultural extension, financial assistance and infrastructure development, are more likely to derive tangible benefits from restituted land. Conversely, in the absence of such support, restituted land may remain underutilised or become economically unproductive. This suggests that tenure security alone is insufficient to ensure positive livelihood outcomes; rather, it must be complemented by institutional and economic support mechanisms that enable beneficiaries to utilise land effectively.

These findings converge with existing scholarship that emphasises the multidimensional nature of tenure security. Shiba (2025) argues that the formal recognition of land rights through restitution does not automatically translate into effective tenure security if beneficiaries lack the institutional and economic resources necessary to exercise those rights. Similarly, Ngarava (2023) demonstrates that the socio-economic benefits of restitution depend on the integration of land reform policies with broader resource governance systems, particularly in relation to water and energy access required for agricultural production.

At the same time, divergence exists within the literature regarding the most appropriate institutional arrangements for ensuring tenure security. Some scholars advocate individualised property rights as a means of strengthening investment incentives and facilitating access to credit markets. Others argue that communal or collective tenure arrangements remain more appropriate in certain socio-cultural contexts, particularly where land management has historically been organised through customary governance systems. The findings of this study suggest that neither model offers a universal solution. Instead, tenure arrangements must be designed in ways that balance individual security of rights with the collective governance systems through which many restitution beneficiaries organise land use and resource management.

In a nutshell, the findings underscore that restitution policies must move beyond the mere restoration of land rights to address the institutional and economic conditions that shape how those rights are exercised. Without secure tenure arrangements supported by functional governance structures and economic support systems, the developmental potential of restitution remains constrained.

4.3 Political-Economic Constraints and Structural Inequality in Restitution Outcomes

The analysis also reveals that land restitution outcomes are shaped by broader political-economic structures that extend beyond institutional governance and tenure arrangements. Documentary evidence indicates that restitution beneficiaries frequently operate within economic environments characterised by limited access to capital, weak integration into value chains and persistent structural inequalities in agricultural markets. These conditions significantly influence the capacity of beneficiaries to translate land ownership into sustainable economic opportunities.

Findings from the document analysis show that many restitution beneficiaries face significant barriers when attempting to participate in commercial agricultural markets. These barriers include limited access to financing, inadequate infrastructure and difficulties in establishing market linkages. As a result, restituted land may remain underutilised or be leased to external actors who possess greater financial and technical resources. While such arrangements may provide short-term income for beneficiaries, they may also limit the long-term redistributive impact of restitution by reinforcing existing patterns of economic dependency.

The findings also indicate that market pressures can reshape land use patterns following restitution. In some instances, beneficiaries enter into partnerships with private investors or agribusinesses in order to access capital and technical expertise. While these arrangements can enhance productivity, they may also shift control over land use decisions away from beneficiary communities. These dynamics raise important questions about the extent to which restitution genuinely redistributes economic power within the agrarian sector or whether it inadvertently reproduces existing patterns of inequality.

These findings resonate with the political-economy perspective advanced by Sommerville et al. (2025), who argue that redistributed land can become subject to processes of “capital grabbing back,” whereby market forces and economic elites reassert control over land that was initially transferred through redistributive reforms. Their analysis suggests that land reform policies must address not only institutional governance issues but also the broader economic structures that shape land use and ownership patterns.

Other scholars have similarly highlighted the importance of analysing restitution within the context of broader agrarian transformation. Studies examining land reform in South Africa argue that structural inequalities in agricultural markets, including unequal access to finance, technology and market networks, continue to disadvantage new landholders even after land rights have been restored. These findings converge with the evidence presented in this study, reinforcing the argument that land restitution cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political-economic systems within which land use decisions are embedded.

However, some scholars maintain that market integration remains essential for the long-term viability of restitution projects. From this perspective, partnerships with commercial actors may provide necessary resources and expertise that enable restitution beneficiaries to engage effectively in competitive agricultural sectors. The divergence between these perspectives reflects broader debates within land reform scholarship regarding the role of markets in redistributive policies.

The findings of this study suggest that while market engagement may offer opportunities for economic development, restitution policies must incorporate safeguards that ensure beneficiaries retain meaningful control

over land resources. Without such safeguards, the redistributive objectives of restitution may be compromised by structural economic forces that favour established actors within the agricultural sector.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that the developmental effectiveness of South Africa's land restitution programme is fundamentally conditioned by the interaction of governance arrangements, tenure security and broader political-economic structures, rather than by the restoration of land rights in isolation. Although restitution has made a significant contribution towards addressing the historical legacy of dispossession, the evidence suggests that its transformative potential continues to be undermined by institutional fragmentation, weak post-settlement governance, inadequately coordinated state support and persistent structural inequalities that constrain the productive utilisation of restituted land. These interrelated constraints collectively explain the disparity between the constitutional aspirations of restitution and its uneven developmental outcomes.

Viewed through a political-institutional lens, the findings suggest that restitution should be conceptualised as a continuous governance process rather than a discrete legal intervention culminating in the transfer of land. Within this context, tenure security assumes developmental significance only where institutional arrangements are capable of promoting accountable governance, effective resource management and sustained economic participation. Similarly, the restoration of land rights, while indispensable to restorative justice, remains insufficient to achieve meaningful socio-economic transformation in the absence of institutional environments capable of facilitating access to productive assets, financial resources, markets and technical support. The persistence of structural political-economic inequalities further reinforces the limitations of approaches that evaluate restitution primarily through administrative outputs, such as claims settled or hectares transferred, without sufficient consideration of post-settlement governance and long-term livelihood outcomes.

The principal contribution of this study lies in advancing an integrated analytical perspective through which governance, tenure security and political-economic structures are understood as mutually reinforcing determinants of restitution outcomes. This perspective extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that the developmental trajectory of restituted land is shaped not by any single institutional or structural variable, but by the cumulative interaction of governance capacity, tenure arrangements and the wider political economy within which restitution is implemented. Reconceptualising restitution in this manner provides a stronger analytical basis for understanding the persistent implementation challenges confronting South Africa's land reform programme and offers a more comprehensive foundation for future policy reform.

Recommendations

The findings underscore the necessity for institutional reforms that respond directly to the governance and structural constraints identified in the analysis. The persistent fragmentation of post-settlement support arrangements highlights the need for a statutory intergovernmental coordination framework capable of integrating land administration, agricultural development, rural infrastructure and development finance within a coherent implementation architecture. Such an institutional arrangement would facilitate greater policy coherence, minimise administrative duplication and improve accountability across the agencies responsible for supporting restitution beneficiaries.

The governance deficiencies identified within Communal Property Associations equally warrant a more systematic institutional response extending beyond periodic administrative oversight. Establishing continuous governance support mechanisms incorporating financial administration, organisational management, dispute resolution and leadership development would strengthen institutional accountability while enhancing the capacity of beneficiary institutions to manage restituted land effectively and sustainably.

The analysis further demonstrates that strengthening tenure security requires attention not only to the legal recognition of rights but also to the institutional arrangements governing their exercise. Developing standardised governance frameworks for restituted land, incorporating clearly defined decision-making procedures, accountability mechanisms and dispute-resolution processes, would contribute to greater tenure stability while creating conditions conducive to long-term investment and productive land utilisation.

Addressing the structural political-economic constraints identified in the study similarly necessitates policy interventions extending beyond land transfer itself. Improving beneficiaries' access to agricultural finance, extension services, market opportunities, productive infrastructure and value-chain participation would reduce the structural dependence on external commercial actors while strengthening the capacity of restitution beneficiaries to derive sustainable socio-economic benefits from restored land.

Given that the present study is based on documentary evidence, further empirical investigation incorporating beneficiary experiences and institutional perspectives would provide valuable insights into the manner in which governance arrangements, tenure systems and post-settlement support interact across different restitution contexts. Such evidence would further strengthen the emerging body of knowledge on the institutional conditions required for restitution to realise its developmental objectives.

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