

LIMPOPO'S FARM DWELLERS: 32 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY, STILL DENIED WATER, HOUSING, AND TENURE.

By Mapula Mnisi

South Africa celebrates 32 years of democracy, yet more than **143,000 farm dwellers in Limpopo** still live in mud houses, fetch water from streams shared with wildlife, and remain excluded from development planning. The promise of freedom and dignity has not reached these communities, who continue to face daily risks simply to survive.

Municipal water tankers are meant to provide relief, but their deliveries are **irregular, unreliable, and insufficient**. Families report making repeated phone calls to the municipality before a tanker arrives, sometimes waiting three months or longer.

Our legislation requires that each person be provided with access to a minimum of **25 litres per person per day**, making a monthly requirement of **750 litres per person**. And yet, so many rural communities do not have access to even half of this daily amount. In the small community of **Roosloot**, under Mogalakwena Municipality, the entire population of 34 people receives just **11,000 litres of water by tanker every three months**. That translates into less than **4 litres per person per day** — woefully short of the minimum requirement. Families are left to survive on a fraction of what the law demands, forced back to rivers shared with wildlife once the tanker supply runs out. This pattern of irregularity and shortfall is a direct breach of constitutional and legislative obligations.

Families occupy houses-built decades ago by landowners, and are **prohibited** from repairing or extending them. These fragile mud structures collapse during heavy rains, leaving residents exposed to floods and storms. Children grow up in overcrowded, unsafe homes that cannot be improved, while parents live under constant restrictions.

The **Constitution of South Africa** guarantees the right to sufficient water under Section 27 and the right to adequate housing under Section 26. The **Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA)** was enacted to protect farm dwellers from arbitrary eviction and to secure their right to live with dignity, including the right to maintain and improve their dwellings. In 2019, the *Zabalaza Mshengu* judgment reinforced these principles, ruling that municipalities cannot abdicate responsibility for providing services to farm dwellers. Yet in practice, and in direct contradiction to the spirit of ESTA, many farm dwellers are prohibited from repairing their houses, forced to watch roofs leak and mud walls crumble.

“Politicians arrive with T-shirts and food during campaigns, but once elections end, farm dwellers are told they live on ‘private property.’” This cycle of promises and abandonment deepens mistrust and leaves families without representation in decisions that shape their lives.

For children and youth, the consequences are devastating. Growing up without clean water or safe housing means starting life at a disadvantage. They inherit not only poverty but also shame, forced to attend school in dirty clothes and live in homes they cannot improve. “Our children should not be punished for being born on farms,” says one resident. “They deserve dignity, education, and the chance to build a better future.”

The demands from farm dwellers across Limpopo are clear: secure tenure to end the fear of eviction, reliable water access including resuscitation of boreholes, the right to maintain and improve their homes as guaranteed under ESTA, inclusion in disaster response planning so floods and droughts do not leave them abandoned, and meaningful participation in municipal IDPs rather than exclusion under the excuse of “private property.” These are not luxuries, but basic rights enshrined in the Constitution, protected under ESTA, and affirmed by the courts.

Bottom Line: After 32 years of democracy, the fact that more than **143,000 farm dwellers in Limpopo** still live in mud houses, fetch water from streams shared with wildlife, and survive on tanker deliveries that fall far below legislative standards is a stark reminder of unfinished justice. Mogalakwena is one example, but the failure is province-wide. Until municipalities fulfil their legal responsibilities—and respect the protections of ESTA—farm dwellers will remain trapped between promises and neglect, and children will continue to grow up without the dignity that these rights should guarantee.

Disclaimer: Mapula Mnisi is a Programme Coordinator at Nkuzi Development Association, a land right support organisation based in Limpopo province. The views expressed in this article are solely her own and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Nkuzi.

To contact Mapula Mnisi: email mapula@nkuzi.org.za