

Debating the findings from Zimbabwe in the ‘Livelihoods after Land Reform’ project

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Article in the Mail and Guardian by Ben Cousins, published on 21/05/2010

Time to ditch the ‘disaster’ scenarios

The dominant view of land reform in Zimbabwe is that farm invasions from 2000/01 were nothing but a corrupt land grab by ZANU-PF and its cronies. This is said to have initiated a calamitous decline in agriculture from which it has never recovered. The story is that Zimbabwe moved from being the ‘breadbasket’ of the region to being a ‘basket case’, dependent on humanitarian aid to feed its people. The media endlessly reproduces the image that commercial farming has completely collapsed, conjuring up images of empty farms and a ravaged landscape.

This stereotype of Zimbabwean land reform is profoundly unhelpful. It is not based on empirical evidence of the impacts of land reform, or an understanding of underlying complexities and trends over time. Seeing land reform as a total failure clouds understanding of complex new realities that farmers, government officials, political parties and other players are grappling with in trying to chart a way forward.

The findings of a three year study in Masvingo Province will be published in a book later this year (see www.lalr.org.za). The study collected survey data on 400 households on redistributed land, from four sites in the province with contrasting agro-ecological potential. Farmers were engaged in different types of cropping and livestock production, including cotton, grains, oilseeds, sugar cane, cattle, goats and sheep. The sample included medium-sized farms (the A2 model) as well as smallholder farms (the A1 model) in either villages or on self-contained units.

The study finds that crop yields and output on the redistributed farms, and particularly on the A1 schemes, have increased steadily over the past few years. From 2006 onwards more than two thirds of households have produced more maize than they can consume, whenever rainfall is sufficient. Cotton production has been a notable success in one of the sites, helped by processing companies providing inputs and a reliable market. Livestock populations in most sites have increased steadily over time. Many of the new ‘settlers’ are adamant that their livelihoods have improved considerably after land reform, despite four droughts over the past

decade. In Masvingo Province, former beef ranches or wildlife farms are now supporting much higher rural populations than they did before redistribution.

National crop production data compiled by FAO clearly demonstrate the misleading nature of images of 'collapse'. Trends vary considerably by crop type, showing significant decreases in yields and total output for maize, tobacco and wheat, but increases in area planted and total output for smallholder crops like small grains, groundnuts and dry beans. Cotton production, dominated by smallholders since the mid-1980s, has seen increases in area planted, yields and total output compared to the 1990s. Export crops such as tea, coffee and sugar have seen significant decreases, but not their total collapse.

Maize, the national food staple, has been badly affected by declining fertilizer production capacity and disruption of seed production. These problems were then compounded by ineffective (and sometimes corrupt) government programmes to supply inputs to land reform beneficiaries. Maize is also sensitive to rainfall patterns. Compared to the 1990s national average of 1.6 million tonnes, the last nine years have seen shortfalls of between 1.1% (in 2004/05) and 65% (in 2007/08), with the harvest in the good rainfall year of 2008/09 amounting to 1.2 million tonnes (25% less than the 1990s average).

Clearly, agriculture in Zimbabwe has indeed experienced significant problems in the years following radical land reform, but the notion of 'total failure' is inaccurate. A new agrarian structure has come into being, with a much wider range of farm sizes and farming systems than in the past, replacing a highly unequal and dualistic structure. Novel commodity chains for crops and livestock are emerging, with new agri-businesses supplying inputs and buying produce, as in the tobacco sector. Seed and fertilizer production capacity are being restored.

How many farms were seized by the political elite and the securocrats? In the Masvingo study, very few. Three quarters of redistributed land went to small-scale farmers on A1 plots. Half of all beneficiaries were ordinary people from rural areas, and another 18 percent were ordinary people from towns. Civil servants made up 16 percent of the total, security service personnel and business people around 5 percent respectively, and farm workers around 7 percent. Urban residents and civil servants made up the bulk of the A2 settlers on medium scale farms.

The pattern is undoubtedly different on high potential farms in the Mashonaland provinces and around Harare, but other studies in these areas show that much land went to people with low incomes and few assets. Here the big losers in Zimbabwe's land reform were clearly farm workers, some of whom now work for land reform beneficiaries, but many of whom have been displaced to the margins of the economy.

Research thus reveals that Zimbabwe's land redistribution has reduced gross racial and class inequalities in land ownership, and has brought into being a potentially productive agrarian structure. This is not to deny that aspects of the land reform process have been highly problematic.

It is clear from the wider literature that land invasions in different parts of the country were often accompanied by violence and human rights abuses. Some members of the ZANU-PF aligned

elite have grabbed multiple farms, particularly on the Highveld. This is the key problem to be addressed in a land audit being designed at present. Many farm workers were abused and lost their jobs.

Acknowledging that land reform has had positive impacts should not cloud the fact that some of the ordinary people who benefited from redistribution have subsequently been kicked off farms by cronies or securocrats. Large scale biofuel projects currently being planned by business interests linked to the state and the security apparatus may lead to further land dispossession.

What is the way forward from here? Suggestions that a new Zimbabwean government should attempt to reconstruct the old, dualistic farming sector dominated by large scale commercial farming will encounter strong political resistance from the many ordinary Zimbabweans who have benefited from land reform. In any event, a key component of the Global Political Agreement is that land reform is irreversible.

The central challenge of land policy in Zimbabwe is rather to build on the emerging successes of the new farmers and foster a dynamic and efficient agrarian economy with strong links to industry and the urban economy. Resolving uncertainties around land rights and land administration is critically important. Attempts by the elite to extend their land holdings at the expense of ordinary Zimbabweans should be exposed. These are the issues that media reports, editorials and public debates on Zimbabwe's land reform should focus on, rather than tired stereotypes of 'disaster and failure'.

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Responses to the article

<http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/Content.aspx?id=110430>

<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-06-25-zim-landreform-myths-beyond-false-binaries>

Article by Dale Dore on Kubatana website

The politics of land dressed up as research

By focusing their study on 400 new settlers in Masvingo, the researchers play down the wider political, economic and legal problems of the land reform programme. There is little mention of the violent and chaotic land invasions that displaced 200,000 farm workers; no mention of the SADC Tribunal which ruled that the land reform programme was racist and unlawful under international law; no mention of the massive quasi-fiscal deficits that were created by printing money to support settlers and which destroyed our currency and our economy. There is no mention of the complete lack of tenure security - the bedrock for farm investment - that undermines the efforts of commercial, resettled and communal farmers.

The recovery of agriculture and the economy needs far more than small-scale farmers producing a surplus of maize in a good agricultural season. Even after a good rainy season (2008/09), when maize production stood at 1.14 million tonnes, 2.8 million people required food

assistance during the 2009/10 marketing year. By using a selective sample, the researchers have ignored the fact that wheat production has indeed collapsed, from about 350,000 tonnes before 2000, to a mere 15,000 today. We need no further proof of the collapse of agriculture and the economy by seeing the array of goods in supermarkets. When once they were full of our own produce with the occasional imports, we now see them full of imports and occasionally with our own produce. Zimbabweans remember with pride but deep regret that we were once indeed the breadbasket of Africa and that our shelves overflowed with what we grew and made.

Agricultural recovery means putting in a place a series of measures that not only sees a surplus production in maize, but the recovery of a wide range of commercial crops to earn foreign exchange and create employment. The foundation stone for this recovery is the rule of law, but which is still disregarded with equanimity. There is the need for a land audit to determine who owns what land, bearing in mind that an international court found that Constitutional Amendment No. 17, which nationalised farms without compensation, was unlawful. The land audit should also uncover those multiple 'farm owners' who have done little, if anything, to use the land productively. We also need to provide secure transferable rights to land, enabling farmers to negotiate loans for farm investments. These are the issues on which genuine agricultural recovery is built.

However, none of these issues seem to concern those intent on dressing up political discourse as research. It is disingenuous to claim, for example, that 'research' has revealed that land redistribution has reduced gross racial and class inequalities, when land reform has in fact denied citizens their basic human rights based on race; when 200,000 workers lost their jobs, livelihoods and access to social services; and when an obscenely enriched ruling elite grabbed multiple farms. How much of their 'research' revealed that this process of land redistribution was driven by ZANU(PF) on an entirely partisan basis with the help of the same state security apparatus that has been responsible for the political violence that has denied Zimbabweans their human and democratic rights for the last decade?

It is not research but rhetoric that attempts to construct fears of a return to an 'old dualistic farming sector' or that land reform is 'irreversible'. Their research may show that those who benefited from the land reform programme oppose a return to large-scale commercial agriculture, but this view is unlikely to be shared by millions of other 'ordinary Zimbabweans' who have neither jobs nor land, who have fled the country, or those who are now dependent on food hand-outs. Nor is it likely that this view is shared by the donors who have paid millions in humanitarian assistance and on whom we are dependent for agricultural recovery.

The researchers may like to dismiss the lawlessness, corruption and the humanitarian crisis that followed land reform as an unhelpful stereotype, but Zimbabweans are acutely aware of when, why and by whom their descent into violence, poverty and misery started. Until the fundamentals of human rights, the rule of law and democracy are fully addressed, any talk about 'successful' new farmers or a 'dynamic and efficient agrarian economy' will be seen as empty rhetoric by apologists of a tyrannical regime posing as researchers.

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Unpublished response to the critics by Ben Cousins

M and G article on LaLR findings in Zimbabwe – a response to Jack Lewis and other critics

Jack Lewis ("Peasant subsistence is not progress", June 18) and others seem to find it difficult to accept that land reform in Zimbabwe is not the total disaster that media reports often portray it as. Our recent research in Masvingo Province clearly demonstrates that significant levels of production are being achieved on redistributed farms, and that in good rainfall years the vast majority of beneficiaries produce a surplus of maize.

Of course, as my article of May 21 suggested, these data do not mean that fast-track land reform has been an unqualified success: national statistics show declines after 2000 in both yield and total output for a range of products. Supply of farm inputs and marketing of produce continue to be problematic, and grabbing of farms by Mugabe cronies is still taking place. The agricultural sector has a key role to play in revitalizing the Zimbabwean economy, and a coherent policy framework for both land and agriculture that addresses these problems is urgently needed. New policies and institutions can build on the *potential* displayed by the new and more egalitarian agrarian structure.

This is very different set of arguments to those ascribed to me by Lewis, who thinks that I welcome land redistribution in favour of a "subsistence peasantry". The Zimbabwe data show that smallholders have long produced a range of commercial crops such as cotton, and are now beginning to move into tobacco and sugar on a larger scale than before. The misleading dualism of "subsistence" vs "commercial" agriculture, to which Lewis subscribes, never did make much sense, and is now decidedly passé in the wake of land reform.

The research study also provides evidence of incipient class differentiation amongst land reform beneficiaries in Masvingo. Over a third are classified as "stepping up", in effect engaging in agricultural accumulation. Around 20 percent are "stepping out", or diversifying their livelihoods, while another one third are simply "hanging in". Around 10 percent are "dropping out", exiting from their new plots. One of the key effects of land redistribution in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, is thus a broadened base for both agrarian accumulation "from below" and for the diversification of livelihood options. This should not obscure the failure of a significant proportion of beneficiaries to use new land in ways that reduce their poverty.

In my view, a key objective of land reform in southern Africa must be to promote accumulation from below, and measures other than land redistribution are required to address the plight of the poorest of the rural poor. I also believe that there is a place for large-scale farming in a reformed agrarian structure – for plantation crops, and in highly specialised subsectors such as dairying.

Restoring the productivity of these branches of farming in Zimbabwe is imperative, but must also make provide a better deal for farm workers than in the past.

Land reform incurs costs as well as benefits, and concerns over the wider economic impacts are legitimate. How much did fast-track land reform contribute to the meltdown of the Zimbabwean economy after 2000? Another media stereotype, to which Lewis and others appear to subscribe, is that economic decline is almost wholly due to the collapse of commercial farming. In fact, the causalities are much more complex and land reform is only one of several factors.

The Zimbabwean economist Rob Davies has argued convincingly that the origins of the meltdown lie in structural adjustment policies adopted in the early 1990s, which saw the rise of an indigenous class of speculative entrepreneurs, or *rentiers*. These were essentially asset strippers, intent on personal wealth acquisition rather than accumulating capital through investing in production.

After the economic shocks of 1997 (unbudgeted payouts to war veterans, the war in the Congo), rents were increasingly extracted through manipulation of the parallel market for foreign exchange. After 2000, economic contraction, skyrocketing inflation, and an acute shortage of foreign exchange all combined to create opportunities for those with political connections and privileged access to forex to become extraordinarily wealthy. This undermined efforts to address the problems of the economy. The central role of currency manipulations in economic decline is underlined by the almost overnight halt to inflation after dollarization in 2009, and subsequent stabilisation. In this analysis, declines in agricultural production have hurt the economy, but are clearly only one part of a larger and more complex picture.

Another common response to my article was to characterise it as a justification for the brutality of the Mugabe regime, which it very clearly was not. It seems hard for anyone who is critical of Mugabe to admit that anything good can come out of fast-track land reform. But it is possible to identify positive outcomes without endorsing the violence and abuses that accompanied the seizure of farms.

The need for an unambiguous story-line on Zimbabwe, with neat divisions between winners and losers, good guys and bad guys, clouds our understanding of complex realities and results in simplistic stereotypes and an acute polarisation of views. As Brian Raftopoulos has often pointed out, a tragic dimension of Zimbabwe's crisis over the past decade has been the separation and opposition of human rights from redistributive concerns. Perhaps we can agree that the new politics of Zimbabwe must strive to bring these concerns together again, within an overall framework of democratic transformation, and that the need is particularly acute in relation to land and agriculture,

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