

Chapter 5: The regional implications of the crisis in Zimbabwe:

Rationale and principles of regional support for land

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The matter I have been invited to address contains two basic questions:

1. How, and why, should countries in the region support land reform – either in the region generally or in Zimbabwe specifically?
2. What are the consequences for the rest of the region of the course of events relating to the land issue in Zimbabwe?

To begin, it is worth stressing that Southern Africa is different from the rest of Africa. Apart from Kenya and Algeria, it was the only part of the continent that experienced large-scale settler-colonialism. This had many consequences, among them the creation of a dual agricultural economy that comprised a large-scale, capital-intensive sector, producing commodities for national and international markets, and a small-scale, labour intensive sector producing mainly food crops for household consumption and local markets. While the dual economy itself is not unique to Southern Africa, what is different about our region is that it survived relatively intact the transition to independence and, with it, survived the highly inequitable distribution of land and agricultural opportunities created under colonialism. Again, unequal distribution of land is not unique to the region, but what is unique is its extreme nature and that in three countries in the region prime land is concentrated in the hands of a racial and cultural minority that is widely seen as unsympathetic to the broad national liberation agenda that forms a central part of the dominant political discourse.

This inequality in land holding is most evident in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia (probably in that order), but it also endures in the former settler colony of Mozambique (and to a lesser extent Angola, Malawi and Kenya). In Mozambique, the dual economy has survived not only the transition to independence but also a decade of socialism and the transition to market capitalism, as colonial estates and irrigation schemes have been transformed first into state farms and later into private companies controlled by local elites, returning Portuguese, or even white South African and Zimbabwean farmers looking for greener pastures.

The case for land reform can be made on grounds of both equity and efficiency or, to put it another way, on political and economic grounds. The inequalities in land holding and the brutality of colonial dispossession are themselves strong arguments for radical redistribution in favour of the historically disadvantaged, and these arguments have informed all national liberation struggles in the region. Post-independence, however, the political case for land reform has tended to lose out to economic arguments, based on the assumed efficiency of the large-scale commercial agricultural sector. Variations on this argument refer to the costs – political and otherwise – of confronting commercial farmers, the likely loss of foreign-exchange earnings, the potential impact on foreign perceptions (and investors) and the impact on national food security. All of these feed into what I call the myth of large-scale agriculture. Thus, governments across the region of various ideological persuasions have, through their agricultural and trade policies, effectively endorsed and even nurtured the dual economy, and with it the severe inequalities in land holding that characterises it.

Up to 1999, with the outbreak of farm occupations in Zimbabwe, governments in the region tended to use the land question to assert their credentials in the political sphere, but were unwilling or unable to translate this political rhetoric into significant action in the economic sphere. This speaks volumes about the balance of power within the region and the inclinations of the ruling parties, but also about the continuing symbolic importance of the land question to the mass of the electorate.

While governments have tended to prioritise economics over politics when it comes to land, for much of the population access to land remains both a political and an economic demand. A range of factors – including civil war (in Mozambique), falling demand for migrant labour, the phenomenon of ‘jobless growth’ (in South Africa), a long-running economic crisis (in Zimbabwe), and a general deterioration in the conditions for small-scale agriculture, tied to deregulation of markets and globalisation, along with a largely unaddressed HIV/AIDS pandemic – have combined to create a severe crisis of rural livelihoods across the region, a crisis for which the ‘traditional’ developmentalist remedies of industrial employment and urban migration no longer provide a solution.

Thus, for much of the rural poor, access to land remains a matter of direct economic importance, and one that carries immense political and symbolic significance. Land is not just a place to reside and secure a livelihood, but also a place to die, a place to commune with the ancestors, and a place that is central to the definition of a people. It must be emphasised, however, that land-based activities are no longer the dominant element within the livelihoods of much of the rural population. With the possible exception of farm workers and a small minority of better-off farmers, land-based livelihoods are no longer capable of supporting households, and typically form just part of a diversified livelihood strategy that may combine a mix of formal and informal employment, migrant labour and welfare transfers with small-scale cropping, livestock farming and harvesting of wild resources such as firewood, building materials and medicinal plants. Throughout the past century, a rural homestead and so-called subsistence agriculture provided the basis on which rural people were able to obtain a multi-faceted livelihood, often under very difficult conditions, a fact widely ignored within government policies.

The persistence of the colonial-era mindset that divides agriculturalists into ‘real farmers’ (full-time, large-scale, capital intensive, with freehold title, typically male) and ‘subsistence farmers’ (small-scale, part-time, labour intensive, on communal land, often female) is evident across the region: in the resettlement programme in Zimbabwe in the 1980s; in the continuing neglect of the so-called family (or peasant) sector in Mozambique; and in the emphasis on ‘commercial farming’ under the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme in South Africa today. Such an attitude has locked governments into narrow development – or perhaps anti-development - policies that have exacerbated inequalities, created little additional employment, failed to lift the mass of the rural poor out of poverty and have left the so-called subsistence sector in many ways worse off than at the time of independence. The myth of the comparative efficiency of large-scale agriculture has left little scope for harnessing the indigenous knowledge and skills of rural people, of absorbing labour and building a buffer against famine by enhancing household food security and, perhaps most importantly, has failed to provide pathways for capital accumulation – accumulation from below – for the mass of the rural population, thereby entrenching poverty and vulnerability. In the era of globalisation, it has also left national economies vulnerable to the long-term decline in world commodity prices and, in this time of drought, incapable of feeding their people.

A similar degree of myth making surrounds dominant attitudes towards land tenure; in particular the false equation between freehold tenure and commercial success in agriculture. Freehold tenure in Africa emerged within a particular political and economic context that favoured particular kinds of rights (European, documented) and actively undermined another (African, customary). Farmers holding land under communal (or customary) forms of tenure have shown ample ability to respond to economic opportunities given reasonably supportive institutional frameworks. The response of South African peasants in the early decades of the minerals revolution is an obvious example, before they were smashed by the colonial state.⁶⁹ Virtually the entire West African cocoa industry, an early and spectacular example of export-oriented capitalist agriculture, has been based on customary forms of tenure. The dramatic rise of marketed maize and cotton from the communal areas of Zimbabwe after 1980s is further evidence that freehold tenure is not a necessary condition for agricultural growth and development.⁷⁰

So, does land reform provide the solution? Yes and no. There can be little doubt that a more equitable distribution of land will bring multiple benefits, in terms of enhanced livelihoods, food security, development of the rural economy, slow-down of forced migration to urban areas and even political stability – although considerable costs are also involved. And yet, political support for land reform has, up to now, consistently stalled on the economic argument that large-scale agriculture is more efficient, and therefore better for the economy. While this position is typically advanced by those with a vested interest in preserving the *status quo*, it also has its supporters within key government departments, political parties and urban-based civil society formations. This faith in the efficiency of large-scale agriculture (particularly in the Southern African context), however, rests on the very flimsiest of theoretical and empirical foundations⁷¹. Surprisingly, it has almost never been challenged directly by the advocates of radical land reform, who continue to emphasise the political (equity) or moral arguments.

Put bluntly, governments and other dominant interests in the private sector and civil society (including most political parties and trade unions) simply do not believe that small-scale farming is economically viable and, despite much political rhetoric, are unwilling to challenge the position of a narrow land-owning elite.⁷² It has taken an unparalleled economic crisis, and imminent loss of political power, to overcome this deep conservatism in Zimbabwe, with the consequences we are now witnessing.

So, does it make sense for governments in the region to support land reform? What are they doing about it at present, and what should they be doing differently? I will limit myself to a few general points.

First, I would like to suggest that trying to develop a regional position on land reform on the case of *Zimbabwe* is really to miss the point. Land is just one part of a wider economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe, and trying to address the land issue in isolation makes little sense. The first priority for the region, and the Zimbabwean people, must therefore be to re-establish the rule of law and address the profound economic crisis facing the country. This is not to suggest that land is not important to Zimbabwe – it is, and will remain so for a long time to come. It is just that it is not an appropriate starting point for addressing the current crisis. Moreover, the land question extends across the region, as I have argued above, and the position that neighbouring states take on land reform in Zimbabwe will be closely related to the position they take on land reform in their own countries. The question then becomes: what can be done about land reform in the region?

A few brief points:

- Land reform in Southern Africa is necessary, and possible (as experience from Zimbabwe itself in the 1980s demonstrates).
- Land reform, to be sustainable, must be linked to far-reaching reforms of the agricultural sector and substantial support for small-scale farmers.
- The biggest obstacle to land and agrarian reform is the established commercial agricultural sector. Reform cannot proceed while the current structures of the agricultural economy are left intact. Restructuring of the agricultural economy – overcoming the dual economy – will have its winners and losers. How this process is managed is a critical political question.
- The redistribution of land is a complex and potentially disruptive (and expensive) process, and cannot be accomplished overnight or without opposition. International experience suggests that reform requires strong political and financial support from the centre, allied to a decentralised and flexible system of implementation.
- Land reform requires a high degree of state intervention (and a degree of coercion). As Riedinger et al.⁷³ have argued, no successful land reform has ever been achieved through the market, despite what the World Bank and others would like us to believe. Markets tend to exacerbate inequalities – they are not redistributive or transformative in nature. Thus, the current orthodoxy of willing seller, willing buyer, deregulation of

agricultural markets and minimal state intervention, is unlikely to bring about fundamental changes in landholding or in the economic opportunities for the rural poor.

What, then, do the events in Zimbabwe tell us about the prospects for land reform in the region, and how has it affected its neighbours?

As stated above, I am not convinced that the crisis in Zimbabwe is primarily about land, although for many in the region and further afield this is how it appears. Rather, it is about economic collapse and a crisis of political legitimacy, leading to the abandonment of the rule of law.⁷⁴ But it does tell us a number of things that have importance for the region.

First, that land is important. The demand for land has always been there but, as Prof Moyo has recently argued, has been largely ignored by government and urban-based interests⁷⁵. A mix of economic desperation and unfulfilled political expectations have fuelled a widespread rural revolt against certain types of property – including white-owned farms, conservancies and state land – that took on greater proportions as it won the support of an embattled ruling party and the organs of state.⁷⁶

It also shows us the potential for violence, not just between new settlers and white farmers, but also between settlers and farm workers, who would appear to be the biggest losers in the current events.⁷⁷ It also shows us the vulnerability (or unsustainability) of a small, privileged minority in times of turmoil, especially when that elite is racially, culturally and politically distinct.

So, have these lessons been learned in the region?

For South Africa, Zimbabwe has certainly raised the profile of land reform, an issue that hardly existed on the political landscape in 1998.⁷⁸ At the grassroots level, there has been a noticeable increase in militancy, with the formation of the Landless People's Movement and a series of actual or threatened 'land invasions'. It is significant that most of these have been in urban areas, or on state land in rural areas – occupation of operational commercial farms are still very rare, but low-intensity violence against farm owners and destruction of property are endemic.⁷⁹ While this has led to calls for an acceleration of the pace of land reform from virtually all sides, including farmers' unions, and the occasional swipe at white farmers by our Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, it has not led to any fundamental changes in the market-based approach. Indeed, the period since 1999 has seen a significant shift away from the pro-poor land reform of the Mandela presidency towards more explicit attempts to foster a new class of black commercial farmers, via the market.⁸⁰ Other areas of land reform, such as protection of the tenure rights of farm workers and labour tenants, remain in the doldrums, although considerable progress has been made with the settlement of restitution claims.⁸¹

Overall, the efforts of the South African government have been directed towards assuring outsider observers (and investors) that 'it won't happen here', and getting tough with its perceived opponents at places such as Bredell and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. The President is adamant that what the rural poor want is not land but jobs and services (although the delivery of the latter has greatly exceeded the former). In all of this, the South African government would appear to have learned at least one lesson from Zimbabwe – keep a firm grasp on political power and the economic fundamentals, and the land question need not become a crisis. In this it is probably right, but this stance offers little hope to the millions of rural poor and landless.

Looking slightly further afield, I don't believe the events in Zimbabwe have had a great impact in Mozambique. The most significant development there in terms of land reform has been the 1997 Land Law, which preceded the current crisis. While the Land Law protects the rights of peasants on communal land, it has done little in terms of delivering economic benefits.⁸² Mozambican government policy still looks to elusive 'investors', both national and international,

to develop the rural economy, and while some investment has been forthcoming, the developmental benefits that have 'trickled down' have been very limited.

In Namibia, the Zimbabwe events have certainly raised the political rhetoric around white-owned farms, but as yet there appears to be little move towards fundamental reform. Actual transfer of land has been painfully slow, and 'willing-settler, willing-buyer' remains official policy.

Conclusion

Recent events in Zimbabwe have irrevocably raised the hitherto neglected question of the unequal distribution of land in Southern Africa: the unfinished business of the transition from colonialism to national independence. The manner in which the latest redistribution of land in Zimbabwe has come about may be deeply distasteful to many – the violence, destruction of property, dislocation of farm workers and farm owners, the political intolerance - but there can be little doubt that it was overdue and that it enjoys support from large sections of the population. Whether it succeeds in the longer term – in providing sustainable livelihoods and economic growth that favours the mass of the rural population – remains to be seen, and will depend heavily on the resolution of the wider economic and political crisis besetting the country. The challenge facing the rest of the region is to assist Zimbabweans to re-establish the rule of law and create a democratic and prosperous country. There may then be practical support that countries in the region can provide to make land reform a success, but the idea that interventions can be made around the land question, without first addressing the political and economic context, is not, in my opinion, a viable one.

Given the very different political and economic conditions prevailing in countries in Southern Africa today, I do not believe it likely that the so-called 'farm invasions' can 'spill over' into neighbouring countries, despite the similarities in land-holding patterns discussed above. This is not to say, however, that events in Zimbabwe are not impacting on its neighbours. This is most evident in the international arena, in the perceptions of Southern Africa among western governments and investors. The influx of Zimbabweans to the border areas of South Africa has been accelerating for some years now, driven not by land reform but by deteriorating economic conditions at home. The options available to countries in the region to influence events in Zimbabwe are, I believe, quite limited, and there are pressing reasons why many governments are not willing to take a more robust line. Nevertheless, I believe that South Africa, in particular, could do itself and the region a favour by being more outspoken on flagrant abuses of civil liberties and the democratic process.

At the popular level, as I have suggested above, the events in Zimbabwe have certainly had an impact, particularly in South Africa. The likelihood of mass mobilisation and direct action by the landless has, I would argue, been greatly increased by the images of war veterans and others occupying former white-owned farms, even if this is based on a very limited understanding of Zimbabwe's political dynamics. Pressure is being exerted on the faltering Department of Land Affairs not only from below but also from opposition parties and landowners themselves to accelerate the pace of land reform, precisely to avert the possibility of 'another Zimbabwe'.

The question that remains, however, is what can be done about land reform in the region? Is the 'Zimbabwe model' the only option, or can other approaches achieve politically and economically desirable goals by other means? Taking the example of South Africa, it would appear that this question has only begun to be asked. The market-based reforms implemented since 1994 have managed to transfer less than 2% of agricultural land, as against a target of 30%, and although the ANC now acknowledges the need to speed up delivery, it continues to put its faith in an unproven market-based model. There is no doubt in my mind that radical action is going to be required sooner or later across the region to address the 'unfinished business' of national liberation. This poses an enormous challenge to the current neo-liberal orthodoxy espoused by most governments. Now is the time to ask what can be done to

achieve fundamental land and agrarian reform, not to hide behind the illusions that 'the market will decide' or that 'it can't happen here'.