

Challenging Western Distortions about Zimbabwe's Land Reform

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For years, Western journalists have castigated Zimbabwe's land reform program. From afar, they pronounced land reform a failure for having brought about the total collapse of agriculture and plunging the nation into chronic food insecurity. Redistributed land, we are continually told, went to cronies with political connections, while ordinary people were almost entirely excluded from the process. Farmland went to ruin because of the incompetence of the new owners. These were simple messages, drilled into the minds of the Western public through repetition. For Western reporters, certain that they owned the truth, emotion substituted for evidence. Those of a more curious frame of mind, however, were left to wonder what conditions were like in the field, where no reporter bothered to venture.

Now this gaping lacuna has been filled by two recent studies. In a report issued just over a year ago, the African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS) details the results of its extensive field investigations conducted in six districts from 2005 to 2006.(1) The other field study was done in Masvingo Province beginning in 2006 by the Livelihoods after Land Reform project, with multinational assistance, including that of the Great Britain-based Institute of Development Studies (IDS). (2)

What both studies found was that the facts on the ground were at variance with popular Western perceptions. As the IDS study noted, "Those of us exposed regularly to the international, especially British, media found it hard to match what we heard on the TV and radio and read in the newspapers with what we were finding on the ground." There were a number of misperceptions, which in large part the team felt were due to "a simple lack of solid, field-level data." (3) Although it is true that there has been such a lack, this factor alone does not account for the inaccuracy of Western news reports. The ideological factor is paramount, as always. For that reason, even though concrete information is now available, the tone of Western reports is unlikely to change.

It can never be stressed enough that Zimbabwe inherited a highly unequal land ownership pattern from apartheid Rhodesia. By 2002, 70 percent of the richest farmland still remained in the hands of just 4,500 white commercial farmers, focused mainly on producing crops for export. Meanwhile, one million indigenous families eked out a bare existence, crowded into an arid region of limited suitability for agriculture, known as the 'communal' areas. Fast-track land reform redistributed much of the commercial farmland to some 170,000 families. Whatever its faults in execution, the process has undeniably created a significantly more equitable distribution of land than what prevailed before.

That is not the story the Western audience hears. Instead, we are told that fast track land reform was a "land grab" by "cronies," bringing about a more unequal distribution of land

than what had preceded it. Yet the surveys conducted by the AIAS and the IDS found that most beneficiaries of land reform were ordinary people, whereas those who might be categorized as “elites” constituted a small minority. According to the IDS, this minority amounted to less than five percent.

But it does leave open the question of how one determines who an “elite” is and who is not. That one works for the government does not in itself mean that one is an “elite” or a “crony,” nor that one has necessarily ignored the application process and simply bullied one’s way into being granted land. Such cases did occur, but they hardly constitute the typical experience of resettled farmers. “That some of the beneficiaries are ‘elites’ is undisputed,” notes the AIAS. “What is in dispute is their character and the extent of their benefit. The tendency to generalize the notion of an ‘elite’ leaves unexplained the social content of the concept, and assumes that it lacks differentiation in a dynamic process of class formation.” Government job holders, war veterans and ZANU-PF members are lumped together with high ranking officials as “elites,” or “cronies”. It is assumed that all bypassed the land application process in order to seize land.

The AIAS points out that the empirical evidence shows “a more differentiated pattern.” This finding is confirmed by the IDS team: “The composition of land reform beneficiaries is highly varied. The claim that the land reform was dominated by politically well-connected ‘cronies’ is simply untrue. Nor are war veterans a dominant group. Although many took leadership roles during the land invasions, the majority came from rural backgrounds where they had been farming in the communal areas. While some civil servants and business people are members of the elite, many are not. Teachers, extension workers and small-scale entrepreneurs have joined the land reform, adding new skills and capacities. And farm workers too have been important beneficiaries.”

There were two resettlement schemes implemented during fast track land reform: the A1 model, in which small farms intended to benefit the landless or disadvantaged were allocated, and the A2 model, which were larger farms that were expected to be more immediately productive. The AIAS found that most of the beneficiaries of land reform came from the communal areas, about 62 percent. Other ordinary people accounted for the majority of the remaining percentage. Applicants for A2 farms “were required to submit a business development plan and a proof of capacity to finance farm operations.” For this reason urban residents unsurprisingly accounted for a far higher percentage of applicants for A2 farms than they did for A1 farms. Still, even in the A2 farms they rank second to communal farmers. (4)

Despite a lack of infrastructure, beneficiaries were quick to take up farming operations. For instance, nearly 72 percent of those allocated land in 2002, the peak year of land resettlement, began operations that same year. This, despite resistance by evicted commercial landowners, and the refusal of many of them to vacate the land. By 2003, the percentage of these resettled farmers that had begun farming had risen to almost 96 percent, a far cry from the popular image of land going to waste. (5)

Agricultural productivity, we are so often told, has been dismal since the launch of fast track land reform. The not always unstated implication of Western reports is that the land would have been best left in the hands of the few wealthy commercial landowners, as only they were capable of producing bountiful outputs. That view is a manifestation of the free market philosophy that is so comforting to the entitled: that the greatest good should go to the privileged few. From that vantage point, the many who suffer the consequences of an

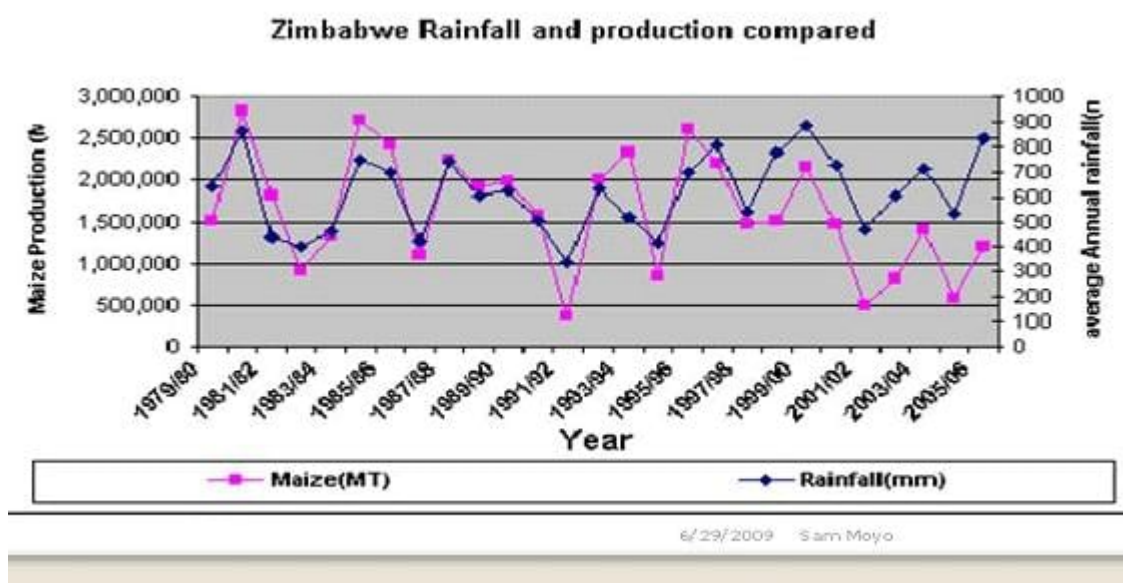
extreme and narrow concentration of wealth are deemed unworthy of consideration.

There has indeed been a decline in agricultural production in recent years, although for varied and complex reasons. Certainly one of the key factors responsible for the decline is that Zimbabwe's entire economy has shrunk by around 40 percent since the year 2000. By abandoning the destructive Western-initiated structural adjustment program, and then by accelerating land reform efforts in order to achieve a more equitable distribution of land, Zimbabwe triggered Western hostility. Neoliberal sensitivities were offended, and punishment was not long in coming. By late 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act, which instructed U.S. officials in international financial institutions to "oppose and vote against any extension by the respective institution of any loan, credit, or guarantee to the government of Zimbabwe." The U.S. wields enormous influence in the decisions of the IMF, World Bank and other international financial institutions. Great Britain and other Western countries were of like mind, and Zimbabwe found itself shut out of the kind of normal credit operations that are essential for any modern economy to operate.

Western meddling did not stop there, and the net effect was to cause the Zimbabwean economy to take a nosedive, a trend which unavoidably had an adverse impact on agricultural operations. Agriculture does not exist in isolation. In myriad ways it is interrelated to the general economy, and it cannot remain unperturbed by a deep economic downturn. For all of their expressed concern for Zimbabwe's agricultural productivity, Western leaders must bear a major portion of the responsibility for its decline. But then, that is what sanctions are intended to do: sow economic ruin in the target nation.

Another not insignificant factor in the decline of crop production is that much of the region in which Zimbabwe is situated is especially susceptible to the effects of climate change, and over the last decade there has been a sharp increase in the frequency of major drought conditions. According to the AIAS, "the period from 2001-2005 was characterized by poor rainfall distribution, the worst in the post-independence period." (6)

As this chart illustrates, rainfall and agricultural production in Zimbabwe track quite closely. Maize is measured in the chart, as this is the staple crop in Zimbabwe.



(Source: Sam Moyo presentation – “Zimbabwe’s Agrarian Reform and Prospects for Recovery”)

The drought in the 2007-8 agricultural season was particularly nasty, and national maize output plummeted to 470,000 metric tons. Yet in the following season, the nation enjoyed good rainfall and as a result more than two and a half times as much maize was produced. (7) It is impossible to consider the correlation between rainfall and agricultural output and then continue, as Western reports do, insist on its irrelevance.

In Masvingo Province, the area the IDS studied, the “production since settlement, for all farmers outside the irrigated plots, has been highly dependent on the pattern of rainfall, and the droughts in many of the seasons since 2000 had a huge impact on people’s ability to establish themselves. By contrast, the good rainfall years resulted in substantial harvests and were vitally important in the pattern of accumulation, allowing for the purchase of new inputs, equipment and livestock.” (8)

Western media have distorted the pre-land reform picture as well. Contrary to the rosy picture painted of the apartheid-era inherited land ownership pattern, most commercial farms focused on export crops such as tobacco, while the bulk of food for domestic use was grown by communal farmers. In more than half of the years in the two decades preceding fast track land reform, Zimbabwe needed to import food. (9) It is simply untrue that the import of food is a new development in Zimbabwe’s history.

It is inaccurate to attribute a drop in agricultural production entirely to resettled farmers. The “pattern of low yields based on inputs’ constraints,” the AIAS reports, “also affected communal area farmers...Indeed, a large proportion of the marketed maize and cotton in recent years is found to have originated from the newly resettled areas.” The evidence in the AIAS survey, as well as according to the views of farmers and extension workers, “is that yields have declined mainly because of the shortages of (and failure to access) inputs” by new farmers due to inadequate credit and personal savings. “Yields were also affected by frequent bouts of inclement weather.” The shortage of draft power, too, “is a key constraint to timely and adequate plowing.” (10)

Historically, the success of any land reform effort depends on the support new farmers are given. Adequate agricultural inputs are essential. Unfortunately, Zimbabwe has had to deal with some daunting challenges in that regard.

The AIAS found that less than half of the farmers it surveyed relied on inorganic fertilizer, production of which has sharply declined in the nation. “Fertilizer and agro-chemicals use have been most affected because they require some imported content yet foreign currency resources have been scarce.” (11) And the supply of foreign currency is low due to Western sanctions. As the IDS study points out, other factors include “frequent plant and machinery breakdowns and power cuts, and the reduced capacity of the National Railways of Zimbabwe, leading to increased costs of moving raw materials from mines and ports by road.”(12) Sanctions have reduced Zimbabwe’s access to spare parts to keep machinery running, and the poor supply of foreign currency limits the amount of electrical power that can be imported from neighboring countries. “Furthermore,” the AIAS notes, “the majority of the new farmers are resource-constrained and thus cannot afford to meet their input requirements from the market even when the inputs are available.” (13)

Prior to the fast track land reform process, large commercial farms received strong credit

line support from both state and private financial institutions, while nearly all smallholders lacked such support. After fast track land reform, most of the private financial companies withdrew altogether from offering credit to farmers. Only two percent of resettled farmers “benefitted from private sector crop input schemes and none were beneficiaries for livestock programs.” (14) Financial support for the burgeoning number of farmers fell to the state, which was ill equipped to meet the need, with its financial resources stretched to the breaking point by economic sanctions. As a result, only a small percentage of resettled farmers were able to benefit from adequate credit support, compelling most of them to rely on their own savings to manage. (15)

International NGOs for the most part refused to provide any services to resettled farmers, and focused their efforts elsewhere. Relying for their funding on Western governments hostile to the land reform process, NGOs were loath to support the beneficiaries of a process they preferred to see fail. (16) Less than three percent of resettled farmers in the AIAS study sample received extension support from NGOs. “Input assistance from NGOs was even lower with 1.7 percent of the beneficiaries having received such support.” (17) AIAS interviews with NGO officials revealed that the organizations were opposed to operating in resettled areas because they regarded land reform as illegitimate. (18) These humanitarian organizations, it seems, were much happier with the old system, in which the many suffered hunger and privation while the wealthy few thrived.

And yet, despite all obstacles, many resettled farmers have managed to prosper. According to the IDS study, “impressive investments have been made in clearing the land, in livestock, in equipment, in transport and in housing.” Indeed, the IDS argues, “the scale of investment carried out by people themselves, and without significant support from government or aid agencies , is substantial, and provides firm foundations for the future.” (19)

“Cattle holdings have a direct impact on crop production,” notes the IDS study, and “the value of draft power, transport and manure is substantial.” (20) In the IDS study sample, herd sizes in the resettled areas have grown, while households without cattle have declined. (21)

One of the primary goals of land reform in Zimbabwe was poverty alleviation, a deeply unpopular concept in the U.S. and Great Britain, but one that still means something in much of the rest of the world. While not every farmer is succeeding, the majority of resettled farmers have experienced real change in their lives. As one farmer explained, “We are happier here at the resettlement. There is more land, plots are larger and there is no overcrowding. Last season I got very good yields, and filled two granaries with sorghum. Following resettlement, there is now a future for my family, and my sons will have land.” (22) Another man had “little land to farm” prior to resettlement, and relied for help from his relatives in order to survive. He and his wife have managed to clear four hectares on their new farm. “Before I had no cattle,” he said, “but now I own five head, all purchased through farming. I have also managed to buy a plow.” In a turnaround, no longer needing support from his family, it is he who helps family members back in the communal areas during periods of drought, and sends cash to pay for his young brothers’ school fees. “The new land has transformed our lives,” he remarks. (23) According to another farmer, “Life has changed remarkably for me because I have more land and can produce more than I used to.” (24) These are typical comments from resettled farmers.

“While newspaper headlines around the world emphasized the collapse of agriculture and the growth in food insecurity in the country,” the IDS study reports, “the new farmers were

getting on with establishing their new farms and producing, sometimes in very substantial amounts. This disconnect between perception and reality became most apparent following the 2008-9 season which resulted in very substantial production. At the same time, the aid agencies and those interested in discounting any success in land reform, were proclaiming impending famine and need for massive food imports.” (25)

This is not to say that there are no problems. For example, as the IDS study points out, “The failure of input supply and delivery has seriously hampered production.” (26) Indeed, improving the supply of inputs is perhaps the single most important task need.

Wages paid to farm workers tend to be low, a pattern that has persisted even after fast track land reform took over most of the large scale commercial farms. (27) Still, more farm workers than not report an improvement in their working conditions since the implementation of fast track land reform. (28) Working conditions for farm workers constitute a key weakness, and even though the lives of farm workers were particularly harsh under the former large scale commercial farm owners, there is substantial room for improvement.

The discrepancy in size between A1 and A2 farms presents an inherently unstable situation when there are still so many people who need land. The class differentiation between A2 farm owners, A1 farmers, and those in communal areas, including landowners and the landless, is likely to grow over time.

In particular, in a region highly vulnerable to climate change, an expansion of irrigation schemes is critical. That, however, will be difficult for the cash-strapped government of Zimbabwe to achieve, except in the unlikely event that Western governments ease the sanctions regime.

Still, despite these problems, fast track land reform has created a vastly more equitable distribution of land compared to the previous lopsided ownership pattern. Poverty alleviation has been real, and many have for the first time in their lives been given hope. Resettled farmers are determined to succeed. As one put it, “Land is what we fought for. Our relatives died for this land... Now we must make use of it.” (29) As a sovereign nation, Zimbabwe has the right to improve its citizens’ lives, regardless of how offensive that ambition is to the imperialist nations. The land belongs to the people of Zimbabwe, and resettled farmers are succeeding in spite of the obstacles thrown in their way by Western sanctions and interference.

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<http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Liberators-Militarism-Mayhem-Pursuit/dp/1595265708>

Notes

- (1) “Fast Track Land Reform Baseline Study in Zimbabwe: Trends and Tendencies, 2005/06,” African Institute for Agrarian Studies, December 2009.
- (2) Ian Scoones, et al, “Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Myths and Realities,” James Currey, 2010.
- (3) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 1-2
- (4) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 22

- (5) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 50-51
- (6) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 52
- (7) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 103
- (8) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 96
- (9) Sam Moyo, "Agrarian Reform and Prospects for Recovery," African Institute for Agrarian Studies, July 28, 2009
- (10) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 175
- (11) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 69
- (12) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 96
- (13) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 69
- (14) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 163
- (15) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 75
- (16) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 77 Ian Scoones, et al, p. 210-211
- (17) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, p. 163
- (18) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, note on p. 163
- (19) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 77
- (20) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 122
- (21) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 117
- (22) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 6
- (23) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 66-67
- (24) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 238
- (25) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 124-125
- (26) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 125
- (27) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, note on p. 109
- (28) African Institute for Agrarian Studies, note on p. 112-113
- (29) Ian Scoones, et al, p. 76

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