A new start for Zimbabwe?

IDS Professorial Fellow, Ian Scoones, Challenges the myths about Zimbabwean agriculture and land reform

Ian Scoones – 15 September 2008

The long-awaited political agreement in Zimbabwe's is to be welcomed. After years of political impasse and economic instability, there is a potential for a new start. But an informed debate on the future is needed and a focus on land and the agricultural sector must be central to these discussions. The new government will be offered advice from all quarters – consultants from around the world will arrive by the plane load, and the donor community and foreign think-tanks of all persuasions will forward their preferred plans and programmes.

But the new government must be careful. Too much of the past period has been coloured by ideological posturing and misinformation – from all sides. For a sound, sustainable policy approach for the future, a hard look at the evidence on the ground must be the starting point. This must involve engaging with field research aimed at understanding the unfolding dynamics of land, agriculture and livelihoods – and the perspective of farmers and land users themselves.

The 'Livelihoods after Land Reform in Southern Africa' programme has been doing just this. Led by the University of the Western Cape's Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, and involving researchers in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe (www.lalr.org.za) work in Zimbabwe has focused on Masvingo province in the south east of the country. The detailed study has tracked the evolution of land reform in the province since 2000, assessing the consequences for people's livelihoods and the wider economy. It has revealed some important insights that challenge the 'conventional wisdoms' dominating media and academic commentary alike. The research to date raises some fundamental challenges to five oft-repeated myths about recent Zimbabwean land reform and offers some important insights for the future direction of rural policy in Zimbabwe.

Myth 1: Zimbabwean land reform has been a total failure

There is no single story of land reform in Zimbabwe: the story is mixed – by region, by type of scheme, by settler. In Masvingo province, 1.2 million hectares have been redistributed to around 20,000 households. Across these there is much variation. On the so-called A1 schemes (smallholder farming), where there is low capital investment and a reliance on local labour, settlers have done reasonably well, particularly in the wetter parts of the province. Households have cleared land, planted crops and invested in new assets, many hiring in labour from nearby communal areas. Within these new resettlement areas, there has been a rapid socio-economic stratification – some do well while others struggle.

Some have left, often because misfortune, ill-health or death (often precipitated by HIV/AIDS) although overall attrition rates have been small.

On the A2 schemes – aimed at small-scale commercial agriculture – the economic meltdown of the past few years has prevented substantial capital investment, and new enterprises have been slow to take off. There are some notable exceptions, however, where new commercial farming enterprises have emerged against all the odds, although these have struggled given hyperinflation and lack of credit. On the redistributed areas of the sugar estates in the lowveld there is a similarly mixed story, with some new farmers making a go of sugar production on 30ha plots, often converting some of their land to vegetables and other crops to spread the risk. However, again, constraints imposed by economic conditions have put pressure on these new operations; and the estate system, geared to large scale production, has been slow to respond to the new situation.

In interviews with new settlers, despite the problems, there is universal acclaim for the resettlement programme: 'Life has changed remarkably for me because I have more land and can produce more than I used to,' said one; while another observed, 'We are happier here at resettlement. There is more land, stands are larger and there is no overcrowding. We got good yields in 2006. I filled two granaries with sorghum'.

The contrasts between A1 and A2, small and large scale, smallholder and commercial are rather arbitrary and misleading. There is much blurring between these different models. Since 2000 the old dualistic agricultural economy, the inheritance of the colonial era, has gone for good, and a new agrarian structure is fast emerging. This creates challenges and opportunities, winners and losers, but cannot be characterised as abject failure. New policy frameworks will have to recognise this new reality and avoid the temptation of re-imposing old and out-dated models. As a senior extension official commented, 'We don't know our new clients; this is a wholly new scenario'.

Myth 2: The beneficiaries of Zimbabwean land reform have been largely political 'cronies'

While no-one denies the operation of political patronage in the allocation of land since 2000, particularly in the high value farms of the Highveld near Harare, the overall pattern is not simply one of elite capture. Across the 16 sites and 400 households (341 under A1, 59 under A2) surveyed in Masvingo, 60 per cent of new settlers were classified as 'ordinary farmers'. These were people who had joined the land invasions from nearby communal areas, and had been allocated land by the District Land Committees under the fast-track programme.

This was not a rich, politically-connected elite but poor, rural people in need of land and keen to finally gain the fruits of independence. As one put it. 'Land is what we fought for. Our relatives died for this land… Now we must make use of it'. In terms of socio-economic profile, this group was very similar to those in the communal areas – slightly younger and more educated on average, but equally asset poor. Others who also gained from the land reform included former farm workers, some of whom organised invasions on the farms where they had worked. This group made up seven per cent of the total, a similar number to the war veterans who had often led the land invasions, and who, as a result, generally had slightly larger, often ‘self-contained’ plots.

On the new resettlements, particularly in the A2 schemes, there were significant numbers of civil servants (14 per cent across all resettlement sites) – usually teachers or extension workers who had been allocated land. With non-existent salaries from their government jobs, access to land became critical for sustaining livelihoods. A further 5 per cent were identified as business people, often those with businesses such as shops, bottle stores or transport operations in town. Finally, there was a group, mostly given land on the A2 schemes, who were members of the security services – police, army, intelligence officers with strong political connections. This group made up three per cent of the total beneficiaries, and was the one which was probably most associated with political patronage and ruling party connections.

These latter groups – civil servants, business people and security service employees, however, have added in different ways both expertise and connections which assisted the broader community. This wide social mix in the new resettlements contrasts with older resettlement schemes and thecommunal areas, offering opportunities for social and economic innovation in the longer term.

An understanding of this social composition and its potentials will be critical in any future policy support for the new resettlements. It is important not to assume that the A1 schemes are ‘just like the communal areas’ and that the A2 schemes are ‘just small commercial farms’. With the new agrarian structure, a new social and economic order is emerging in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, one that will require carefully attuned policy support to foster the undeniable, but as yet unrealised, potentials.

Myth 3: There is no investment in the new resettlements

International media images of destruction and chaos have dominated the headlines about Zimbabwe’s land reform. While there has certainly been substantial damage done to the basic infrastructure of commercial agriculture operations in some parts of the country – perpetrated by both new land occupiers and former owners – there has also been significant new investment; almost all of it private, individual efforts with vanishingly little provision through the state.

Changes to the production system – from large-scale commercial farming to largely smallholder mixed farming systems – means investment is not in the form of pivot irrigation schemes or mechanised dairies, for example, but more modest and appropriate to immediate needs and ambitions. The new settlers, particularly on the smallholder A1 schemes, have cleared substantial areas of land (on average around three hectares per household), involving substantial labour in clearing bush, de-stumping and ploughing.

Settlers have also built new homes, 41 per cent made from bricks, many with tin or asbestos roofing. A key investment has been cattle, with herds building up fast. 62 per cent have cattle on the resettlements, with an average herd size of five. They have also acquired equipment: 75 per cent of households own ploughs; 40 per cent own bicycles; 39 per cent own ox-drawn carts and 15 per cent own private cars. This level of asset ownership is higher than comparable samples in the neighbouring communal areas and since acquiring land most new settlers have been accumulating, despite the hardships.

The investment picture on the A2 schemes is less promising. Most A2 schemes in Masvingo province are little different to the A1 areas, with only a small portion of the land utilised. However a few – with access to alternative sources of investment income, usually in foreign exchange – have managed to invest in new equipment and develop new enterprises. One, for example, has developed an irrigated wheat farm, with a new pump station, irrigation piping, tractors and hiring in combine harvesters. Another is developing a dairy, combined with a beef production feedlot system. Others have started horticultural enterprises, resuscitating abandoned irrigation equipment.

These successes are few and far between and most have been unable to invest, due to the state of the wider economy. The key policy challenge for the immediate future will be the stabilisation of the economy and, with this, provision of credit for new farmers – not just those undertaking so-called ‘commercial’ enterprises, but the many commercially-minded smallholders too. If fostered sensitively a vibrant agricultural economy will almost certainly re-emerge – though transformed and requiring substantial investment in new market chains and support systems.

Myth 4: Agriculture is in complete ruins

Agriculture in Zimbabwe has been through difficult times. Radical restructuring is inevitably painful and especially so when combined with economic collapse and recurrent drought. All statistical indicators on all commodities are down – reflecting the collapse of the old, formal, commercial agricultural economy but not the whole agricultural economy, particularly in the smallholder sector.

In Masvingo province the former commercial agricultural sector was dominated by the beef industry and the wildlife sector – and in the estates, sugar and citrus. The beef industry has transformed radically and the wildlife sector is suffering due to the decline in tourism and hunting. But former beef ranches have been taken over by small-scale mixed agriculture, with significant new investment in multiple use livestock herds and flocks, combined with arable agriculture, mostly maize with small grains in the drier areas.

While operating well below potential due to the poor supply of inputs – notably seeds and fertilizers – this sector, particularly in the A1 schemes, is certainly producing. In the relatively wet season of 2005-06, around 75 per cent of households in the northerly sites in Gutu and Masvingo districts produced more than one tonne of maize, sufficient for household provision, some sales and storage. However, this was not replicated in the drier areas – or in recent drier years when the food security situation has been very precarious.

This demonstrates the potential of small-scale agriculture on the new resettlements, as one among a number of sources of livelihood which includes a diversified portfolio of off-farm activities, trade and remittance income. The potential of agriculture, as the core livelihood activity for most, will need to be nurtured and enhanced by policy interventions that ensure input supply and wider extension support, both currently sorely lacking. For the drier areas, water control is the key constraint, and investment in small-scale irrigation and water harvesting is unquestionably a major priority for the future.

Myth 5: The rural economy has collapsed

While the wider formal economy is in dire straits, and inflation running wild, the rural economy in Masvingo province has been adapting fast. The radical shift in agrarian structure has altered value chains – formerly dominated by large-scale commercial agriculture, white-owned businesses and government parastatals – beyond recognition.

The beef value chain is a good example (see Mavedzenge et al 2008). In the past there was a reliance on a few suppliers from the large-scale ranchers, going through a few abattoirs or the Cold Storage Company. Today a huge range of sources supply meat and many new players are involved. The collapse of the export market due to foot-and-mouth outbreaks has led to a focus on local sales and market connections. There have been significant supply constraints, as new farmers build up their herds and avoid selling – beef is no longer sold through in-town supermarkets, but through small butcheries and pole slaughter outlets in the rural areas and townships.

Newly emerging supply chains are linking the resettlement areas with feedlots and butcheries in very different patterns of ownership and management to before. This means that new players are participating in the rural economy, and benefits are being more widely distributed. Economic activity has thus relocated, linking local supply and demand, as well as new trading links, often involving illegal cross-border economic exchange.

There is also evidence of substantial investment in new businesses in and around the new resettlements, including shops, bottle stores, butcheries and transport operations. Such investment has generated a variety of new economic linkages, creating some much-needed rural employment. These multiplier effects have, however, been undermined by the wider hyperinflationary pressures, together with the imposition of price controls and other measures. But, with changed conditions, these new businesses will be revived and new economic activity will undoubtedly emerge.

Future strategies must work to enhance economic stability – boosting local production and spending power. At the moment the overall net benefits of restructuring following land reform are unclear, but, with the right support, wider economic growth can be realised. What will be essential is to ensure that such support does not undermine the diversified entrepreneurialism that has emerged in recent years. The complex new value chains are perhaps a bit haphazard, unregulated and chaotic at times but their benefits are more widely distributed and economic linkages more embedded in the local economy. In the longer term such new economic arrangements can enhance broad-based and resilient growth and livelihood generation in ways that the old agrarian structure could never do.

Let us hope that the new government – and the donor community who will hopefully rush to support it – will take heed of such findings, and act to support positive change, rather than – as so often happens with hasty decisions and ideologically-driven positions – undermine the clear potentials and opportunities.

Much needs to be done: there is an urgent need for economic and political stability; there are substantial requirements for focused investment and support in agriculture; but, at the same time, there is also much to build on and positive dynamics to catalyse. Let us hope that a positive spiral will emerge which builds on the redistributive gains of the land reform and the real potentials of small-scale agriculture to be the motor of economic growth and regeneration.

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Additional material:

For more information on the Livelihoods after Land Reform in Southern Africa project, see www.lalr.org.za, including the background paper *Redistributive Land Reform and Poverty Reduction in Zimbabwe*, at http://www.lalr.org.za/zimbabwe.

For work on the changes in the livestock sector following land reform, see http://www.ids.ac.uk/UserFiles/File/knots_team/Masvingo_research_report.pdf

On 'real markets' and the changing beef commodity chain, see: Mavedzenge, B.Z., J. Mahenehene, F. Murimbarimba, I. Scoones and W. Wolmer (2008) The Dynamics of Real Markets: Cattle in Southern Zimbabwe Following Land Reform. *Development and Change*, 39(4): 611–637.

For a focus on crop-livestock integration, see: Scoones, I. and Wolmer, W. (eds.). (2002). *Pathways of Change in Africa: Crops, Livestock and Livelihoods in Mali, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe* (James Currey) http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=697

For an historical perspective on land and landscape change in the lowveld of Zimbabwe, see Wolmer, W. (2007). *From Wilderness Vision to Farm Invasions Conservation and Development in Zimbabwe's South-east Lowveld* (James Currey) http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=880

For more depth on livelihood issues in southern Zimbabwe, see: Scoones et al (1996) *Hazards and Opportunities: Farming Livelihoods in Dryland Zimbabwe* (Zed Press) http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=301 Also: the Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa Programme, www.ids.ac.uk/slsa and Wolmer and Scoones (eds.) (2003) *Livelihoods in Crisis? New Perspectives on Governance and Rural Development in Southern Africa*, IDS Bulletin, 34. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=751