Zimbabwe’s land reform: myths and realities

During the past decade, Zimbabwe has undergone a tumultuous process of land redistribution. The way forward on the land issue is a challenge facing us all. In an attempt to stimulate constructive national debate on this vital topic, we are pleased to publish this series on livelihoods after land reform, based on a comprehensive 10-year study of the situation on the ground in Masvingo province. This article is the third in the series.

The majority of the people who have settled on the redistributed land are ordinary people with families to feed. 

BY IAN SCOONES

One of the most repeated myths about Zimbabwe’s land reform is that all the land went to ‘Mugabe’s cronies’, those with access to elite connections and benefiting from political patronage. This did, of course, happen, and continues to do so. Tackling such extreme excesses of land grabbing through a land audit remains a major challenge. But elite capture is not the whole story of Zimbabwe’s land reform; nor indeed the dominant one.

Who got the land?

Who got the land and what is the profile of the new settlers? Our study of 400 households across 16 sites from Masvingo province showed by far the majority of the new settlers are ordinary people. About half of all new settler households are from nearby communal areas and another 18% from urban areas. These are people who had little or very poor land in the communal areas or were unemployed or with poorly-paid jobs and living in town. The remaining third of household heads was made up of civil servants (16.5% overall, but increasing to around a quarter of all settlers in A1 self-contained and A2 sites), business people (4.4% overall, but again proportionately higher in the A1 self-contained and A2 sites), service personnel (3.7% overall) and former farm workers (6.7% overall).

Farm workers made up 11.3% of households in the A1 villegised sites, with many taking an active role in the land invasions. In one case a farm worker organised and led the invasion of the farm where he had worked. Given that in other parts of the country, farm workers were displaced in large numbers, often ending up destitute, living in camps on the farms, this is perhaps surprising. Yet this reflects the extent and nature of labour on the former large-scale farms in Masvingo province. Unlike in the Highveld farms, where large, resident labour forces existed within the communal homes, our Masvingo study sites were formerly large-scale ranches where labour was limited, and workers came, often on a temporary basis, from nearby communal areas.

Across all of these categories are ‘war veterans’. As household heads they make up 8.8% of the total population. The category ‘war veteran’ is however a diverse one. Prior to the land invasions, most were farming in the communal areas, a few were living in town, while some were civil servants, business people and employees in the security services.

‘Only 12% of households had a woman named as the land holder’

However, across our sample only 12% of households had a woman named as the land holder on the permit. The highest proportion of female-headed households were in informal settle- ments, as women often saw the land invasions as an opportunity to make a new independent life and escape abusive relationships or accusations of witchcraft, for example.

So who amongst these groups are ‘the cronies’? Some senior officials, often linked to the security services, were able to gain access to land, often by influencing allocations following the land invasions. The land invasions involved diverse people with multiple affiliations. War veterans, often with an ambiva- lent attitude to the party hier- archy but mostly not aligned to the opposition, were influ- ential in land allocation dur- ing and following the inva- sions, and managed often to secure better plots on the A1 self-contained schemes.

The large group of civil servants, particularly on the A2 plots - and in our sample especially in the sugar estales - were often teachers, agri- cultural extension workers and local government officials. While not being poor and landless from the communal areas, most could not be regarded as elite. Indeed, in simple financial terms many were extremely poor, as government wages had effectively ceased during the economic crisis.

New land, new people

The result is a new mix of people in the new settlements. In the A2 schemes, for example 46.5% of new farmers have a ‘Master Farmer’ certificate, while in the A1 self-contained schemes 17.6% do. 91.6% of A2 farmers have been in education to Form 3 or above, while this proportion is 71.6% and 44.8% in the A1 self-contained and villag- e schemes respectively.

The new resettlements are dominated by a new generation of farmers, with most household heads being under 50, many born since Independence. A2 schemes are dominated by the over 40s, but often include people with significant experience and connections. That over 18.3% of households came from urban areas (increasing to 43.8% in the A2 schemes) is significant too, as connections to town have proved important in gaining access to services and support in the absence of official pro- grammes in the rural areas. This data from Masvingo province is reflected in other studies from other areas of the country. The overall picture is complex, but a simple narrative that land reform has been dominated by grabbing by elites is clearly inaccurate. Land previously occupied by a single farmer, often absent but with a manager and a few workers resident, is now being used by a highly diverse group of people. Overall, the new resettlements are populated by younger, more educated people with a greater diversity of back- grounds, professional skills and connections than their neigh- bours in the communal areas and old resettlements.

The new resettlements are therefore not a replication of the 1980s resettlement schemes or an extension of the communal areas, as they simply expanded conversely large-scale commercial farms. Instead, a wide social and economic dynamic is unfolding, one that has mul- tiple potentials, as well as chal- lenges. – Next week we look at patterns of investment in the new resettlements, and so challenge the myth that they are abandoned, unproductive and a wasted resource.