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 is the fifth article in the series.

BY IAN SCOONES

Most coverage of Zimbabwe’s land reform insists that agricultural production has almost totally collapsed, that food insecurity is rife, that rural economies are in precipitous decline and that farm labour has all been displaced. The truth, however, is much more complex. We need to ask far more sophisticated questions: Which aspects of agricultural production have suffered? Who is food insecure? How are rural economies reconfiguring to the new agrarian setting? And who are the new farm labourers?

These are the sort of questions we have been asking over the past decade in the research carried out in Masvingo province. Of course Masvingo is different to the Highveld, where highly capitalised agriculure reliant on export markets did indeed collapse and where labour was displaced in large numbers. But the picture in the new farms of Masvingo is not unrepresentative of broad swathes of the rest of the country. And here the picture is not so catastrophic. There is much to do, of course, but there is already much that is being done.

A revolution in the making?

Take maize production on the resettlement farms in Masvingo. We tracked production on all farms over seven seasons from 2002/03. The data showed a steady increase in output over time as farms became established, and draught power and other inputs were sourced.

‘There is a sense of optimism and future promise amongst many resettlement farmers’

The trend was not smooth, however, and the major droughts in this period saw low yields. Availability of seeds and fertiliser was also highly variable across years, with various government schemes delivering patchily and unreliably. And patterns of differentiation across households were also very evident.

In the better rainfall years of 2003-06 and 2008-09 the proportion of households producing more than a tonne of maize – sufficient to feed an average family for a year - was significant across all sites. For example, following the 2009 harvest between 68% and 100% of households outside the lowveld sites in Mwenezi produced more than a tonne of maize. If sorghum and millet were added to the tally, more than 60% of households even in the Mwenezi sites produced more than a tonne of grain.

Such surpluses may be sold or stored, providing a buffer for future years. Around a third of households sell crops regularly. For example in 2009 10% of households who self-contained settle-ment sites sold over a tonne of maize, although marketed output was not so high on the A2 farms, by contrast. While across the sites there are of course some who produce little and had to rely on local markets or support from relatives, this is not a picture of production failure, widespread food insecurity and lack of market integration. Markets are key to the redistribution of farm produce, but these are new markets, radically reconfigured by the restructuring of the agrarian economy following land reform and deeply affected by the economic crisis that plagued the country for much of the past decade.

Dynamic entrepreneurialism

The dynamic entrepreneurialism shown should not be underestimated and represents an important resource to build on. Across our sites, we have small-scale irrigators producing horticultural products for local and regional markets; we have highly successful cotton producers who are generating considerable profits by selling to a wide number of competing private sector companies; we have livestock producers and traders who are developing new value chains for livestock products, linked to butcheries, supermarkets and other outlets; we have traders in wild products linked to butcheries, supermarkets and other outlets; and we have others who are developing contract farming and joint venture arrangements, for a range of products including wildlife.

We also have an important group of sugar producers with A2 plots on the lowveld estates who, very often against the odds due to shortages of inputs, unreliable electricity supply and disadvantage pricing, have been delivering cane to the mills, as well as other diverse markets, along-side diversification into irrigated horticulture production on their plots.

The new farmers are also employing labour. This is often casual, low-paid employment, often composed of women, but it is an important source of livelihood for many. The new resettlement sites have become a magnet for others, and household on average have grown by around three members since settlement through the immigration of relatives and labourers. On average, A2 farm households have employed 5.1 permanent workers and regularly employ 7.3 temporary labourers, while those households in A1 scheme and in informal resettlement sites employ on average 0.5 permanent work-ers and 1.9 temporary labourers. Comparing this level of employment with what

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Mwenezi district commented: ‘We are happy here at resettlement. There is more land, stands are larger and there is no overcrowding. We got good yields this year. I filled two granaries with sorghum. I hope to buy a grinding mill and locate it at my homestead’. Comparing the farming life to other options, PC from Masvingo district observed: ‘We are not employed but we are getting higher incomes than those at work’. Despite the hardships and difficulties – of which there are many – there is a deep commitment to making the new resettlement enterprises work, but also a relentless plea for more assistance and support.

Much to build on

There is much to build on in terms of basic investment and the skills and knowledge of the new settlers. The challenge is a new one however for agricultural research and development. As the head of extension in the province put it: “We don’t know our new crops: this is a totally new scenario”. Responding to this scenario requires careful thought. The new resettlement areas are not a replica of the communal areas, nor are they a scaled-down version of the old commercial sector. These are new people with new productive systems engaging in new crop and production systems, often engaged in high profit-able export markets; and we have others who are develop-ing contract farming and joint venture arrangements, for a range of products including wildlife.
