

# Zimbabwe's land reform: myths and realities

Getting agriculture moving on the new resettlements through building on existing achievements must be the central priority for policy today. Only with land viewed as a source of livelihood and redistributed economic wealth, and not as a political weapon or source of patronage, will the real potential of Zimbabwe's land reform be fully realised.

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 sixth and final article in the series.

BY IAN SCOONES

The past decade of land resettlement has unleashed a process of radical agrarian change. As previous articles in this series have shown, there are now new people on the land, engaged in multiple forms of economic activity, connected to diverse markets and carving out a variety of livelihoods.

The data identify an emerging process of 'accumulation from below', rooted in small-holder farming. But if the new resettlements are to contribute to local livelihoods, national food security and broader economic development, they unquestionably require investment and support. This means infrastructure (dams, roads), financing (credit systems), input supply (fertilizer, seed), technology (intermediate and appropriate) and institutions and policies that allow agriculture to grow.

Sustained support was central to the success of large-scale commercial agriculture from the 1950s, and was critical to the boom of smallholder agriculture in the communal areas in the 1980s. Getting agriculture moving on the new resettlements through building on existing achievements must be central priority for policy today.

## Securing the land

Yet the outcomes of land reform have been highly varied, and so require carefully

attuned institutional and policy responses. What should the top priorities be now?

Security of land tenure is an essential prerequisite for successful production and investment in agriculture. Tenure security arises through a variety of means. Existing legislation allows for a wide range of potential tenure types, including freehold title, regulated leases, permits and communal tenure under 'traditional' systems. All have their pros and cons.

Policymakers must ask how tenure security can be achieved within available resources and capacity; how safeguards can be put in place to prevent land grabbing or land concentration; and what assurances must be made to ensure that private credit markets function effectively. Lessons from across the world suggest there is no one-size-fits-all solution centred on freehold tenure.

Instead, a flexible system of land administration is required – one that allows for expansion and contraction of farm sizes, as well as entry and exit from farming. While the excesses of elite patronage and land grabbing must be addressed through a land audit, a successful approach, overseen by an independent, decentralised authority, must not be reliant on technocratic diktat on farm sizes, business plans and tenure types.

This will mean investing in land governance, building the effectiveness of local institutions to manage resources,

resolve disputes and negotiate land access in clear and accountable ways. Without attention to these issues, conflicts will escalate as uncertainties over authority and control persist.

This will have damaging consequences for both livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Support for rebuilding public authority from below must therefore be high on the policy agenda, linked to a revitalisation of local government capacity.

## Fostering local economic development

Land reform has reconfigured Zimbabwe's rural areas dramatically. No longer are there vast swathes of commercial land separated from the densely-packed communal areas. The rural landscape is now virtually all populated. Links between the new resettlements and communal and former resettlement areas are important, with exchanges of labour, draught animals, finance, skills and expertise flowing in all directions. As a result, economic linkages between agriculture and wider markets have changed dramatically.

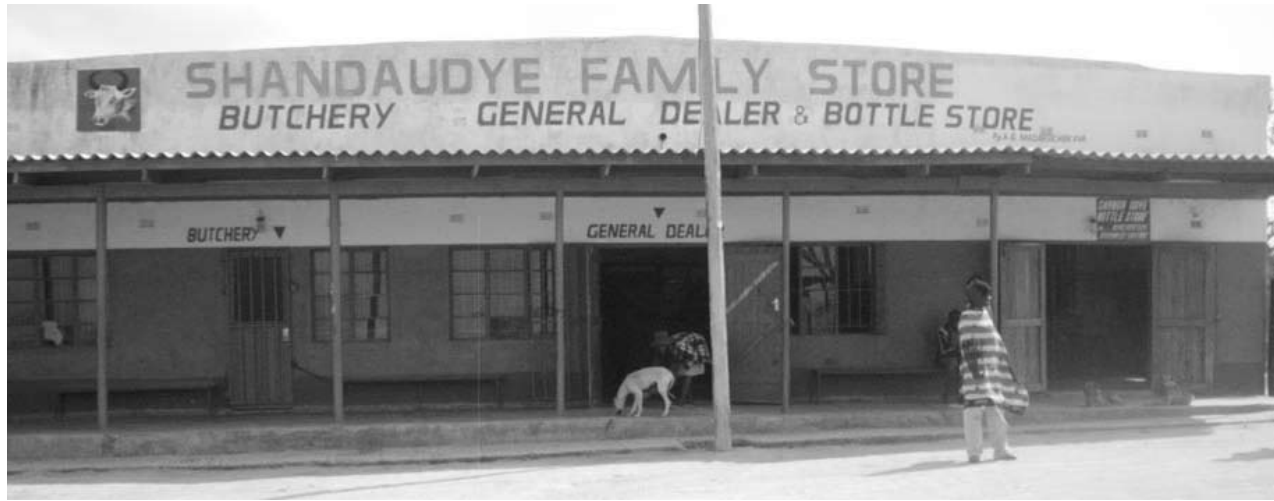
This has given rise to the growth of new businesses to provide services and consumption goods, many only now getting going. Yet the potentials for economic diversification – in small-scale mining, hunting, cross-border trade and a host of other enterprises – are currently constrained by

legal and regulatory restrictions. While a regulatory framework will always be required, it must not be excessively and inappropriately restrictive. Businesses must be encouraged to flourish in support of rural livelihoods, capturing synergies with local agricultural production.

To make the most of the new mosaic of land uses and economic activities, an area-based, local economic development approach is required. This would facilitate investment across activities, adding value to farm production. Today, with a new set of players engaged in local economic activity many possibilities open up. An area-based approach needs to draw in the private sector, farmer groups and government agencies, but with strong leadership from a revived local government, with rethought mandates and rebuilt capacities.

## Giving farmers a voice

Reflecting a wide range of interests, the new resettlement farmers are highly diverse in class, gender and generational terms. This diversity has many advantages, adding new skills and experiences, but it is also a weakness. Formal organisation in the new resettlements is limited. The structures that formed the basis of the land invasions – the base commanders and the Committees of Seven, for example – have given way to other arrangements, and there is often limited collective solidarity.



New businesses have sprung up fuelling area-based economic development

There are of course emergent organisations focused on particular activities – a garden, an irrigation scheme, a marketing effort, for example – but these are unlikely to become the basis of political representation and influence. Because politics has been so divisive in recent years, many shy away from seeing political parties as the basis for lobbying for change, and there are few other routes to expressing views.

Building a new set of representative farmers' organisations, linked to an influential apex body, will be a long-term task, and will be highly dependent on the unfolding political alliances in rural areas. The new resettlements are characterised by an important and numerically large 'middle farmer' group. There is also a significant group of less successful farmers with different needs and interests. And there are those elites reliant on political patronage who, despite being relatively few in number, are disproportionately influential.

*'There is no one-size-fits-all solution centred on freehold tenure'*

In contrast to the past when smallholders could easily be marginalised and were courted only at elections for their votes, the new farmers – and particularly the burgeoning group of middle farmers – now control one of the most important economic sectors in the country, and must be relied upon for national food

supply. Today, the politics of the countryside cannot be ignored.

Zimbabwe's rural politics has taken on a new form, and organised farmer groups may exert substantial pressure in ways that previously seemed unimaginable. How the new configuration of political forces will pan out in the future is a subject of hot debate, but the role of diverse agrarian interests, including new small-scale farmers, will certainly be important.

## Reframing the debate

Land and politics are deeply intertwined in Zimbabwe. The current impasse cannot be resolved by technocratic measures alone: plans, models, audits and regulations are only part of the picture. A reframed debate must encompass redistribution and redress, as well as rights and responsibilities. The recent divisive debate on land in Zimbabwe has seen these as opposites, creating what has been called a 'dangerous rupture' in Zimbabwe's political discourse. But of course a focus on rights need not emphasise only individual private property rights, while an advocacy of redistribution must also accept appropriate compensation for those who lose out.

Bringing a broad perspective on rights together with a continued commitment to redistribution must therefore be central to Zimbabwe's next steps towards democratic and economic transformation. Only with land viewed as a source of livelihood and redistributed economic wealth, and not as a political weapon or source of patronage, will the real potentials of Zimbabwe's land reform be fully realised.



Successful agriculture based on secure tenure can drive local economic growth

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