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88th Harold Wolpe Dialogue

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Topic:

CURRENT REALITIES IN ZIMBABWE

Panelists and Topics

Prof Ben Cousins: “Impact of Land Reform”

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Mr. Tendai Murisa: “Impact of Land Reform”

PhD Candidate, Rhodes University

Dr. Brian Raftopoulos: “Political Dynamics”

Chairperson, Zimbabwe Institute

Prof. Richard Saunders: “Blood Diamonds”

Professor, Political Science Department, York University, Toronto, Canada

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

Land reform in Zimbabwe is not the disaster it is made out to be

A widely-accepted understanding of land reform in Zimbabwe is that farm invasions and the massive land redistribution that took place from 2000/01 were nothing but a corrupt land grab by ZANU-PF and its cronies. This is said to have initiated a calamitous decline in the agricultural sector from which it has never recovered. The story is that Zimbabwe moved from being the 'breadbasket' of the region to being a 'basket case', dependent on humanitarian aid to feed its people. An oft-repeated phrase in the media is the 'collapse' of commercial farming, conjuring up images of empty farms and a ravaged landscape.

But this stereotype of Zimbabwean land reform is profoundly unhelpful. It is not based on empirical evidence of the impacts of land reform, or an understanding of underlying complexities and trends over time. Seeing land reform as a total failure clouds understanding of complex new realities that farmers, government officials, political parties and other players are grappling with in trying to chart a way forward. In this article I summarize the findings of a three year study in Masvingo Province which will be published in a book later this year (see www.lajr.org.za). The study collected survey data on 400 households on redistributed land, from four sites in the province with contrasting agro-ecological potential. Farmers were engaged in different types of cropping and livestock production, including cotton, grains, oilseeds, sugar cane, cattle, goats and sheep. The sample included medium-sized farms (the so-called A2 model) as well as smallholder farms (A1) in either villages or on self-contained units.

Contradicting the myth of total failure, the study finds that crop yields and output on the redistributed farms, and particularly on A1, smallholder plots, have increased since the early 2000s. From 2006 onwards more than two thirds of households have produced more maize than they can consume, whenever rainfall is sufficient. Cotton production has been a notable success in one of the sites, helped by processing companies providing inputs and a reliable market. Livestock populations in most sites have increased steadily over time. Many of the new 'settlers' are adamant that their livelihoods have improved considerably after land reform, despite four droughts over the past decade. In Masvingo Province, former beef ranches or wildlife farms are now supporting much higher rural populations than they did before redistribution.

National crop production data compiled by FAO clearly demonstrate the misleading nature of images of 'collapse'. Trends vary considerably by crop type, showing significant decreases in yields and total output for maize, tobacco and wheat, but increases in area planted and total output for smallholder crops like small grains, groundnuts and dry beans. Cotton production, dominated by smallholders since the mid-1980s, has seen increases in area planted, yields and total output compared to the 1990s. Export crops such as tea, coffee and sugar have seen significant decreases, but not their total collapse.

Maize, the national food staple, has been badly affected by declining fertilizer production capacity and disruption of seed production. These problems were then compounded by ineffective (and sometimes corrupt) government programmes to supply inputs to land reform beneficiaries. Maize is also sensitive to rainfall patterns. Compared to the 1990s national average of 1.6 million tonnes, the last nine years have

seen shortfalls of between 1.1% (in 2004/05) and 65% (in 2007/08), with the harvest in the good rainfall year of 2008/09 amounting to 1.2 million tonnes (25% less than the 1990s average).

Clearly, agriculture in Zimbabwe has indeed experienced significant problems in the years following radical land reform, but the notion of 'total failure' is inaccurate. A new agrarian structure has come into being, with a much wider range of farm sizes and farming systems than in the past, replacing a highly unequal and dualistic structure. Novel commodity chains for crops and livestock are emerging, with new agri-businesses supplying inputs and buying produce, as in the tobacco sector. Seed and fertilizer production capacity are being restored.

How many farms were seized by the political elite and the securocrats? In the Masvingo study, very few. Three quarters of redistributed land went to small-scale farmers on A1 plots. Half of all beneficiaries were ordinary people from rural areas, and another 18 percent were ordinary people from towns. Civil servants made up 16 percent of the total, security service personnel and business people around 5 percent respectively, and farm workers around 7 percent. Urban residents and civil servants made up the bulk of the A2 settlers on medium scale farms.

The pattern is undoubtedly different on high potential farms in the Mashonaland provinces and around Harare, but even here studies show that much land went to people with low incomes and few assets. Here the big losers in Zimbabwe's land reform were clearly farm workers, some of whom now work for land reform beneficiaries, but many of whom have been displaced to the margins of the economy. Research thus reveals that Zimbabwe's land redistribution has reduced gross racial and class inequalities in land ownership, and has brought into being a potentially productive agrarian structure. This is not to deny that aspects of the land reform process have been highly problematic.

One key feature revealed by our field research in Masvingo is the social differentiation of land reform beneficiaries. Some are doing well, some are diversifying their livelihoods, others are just hanging in, and a proportion is dropping out of productive farming. Women are benefitting less than men.

But it is also clear from the wider literature that land invasions in different parts of the country were often accompanied by violence and human rights abuses. Security force personnel stood by or joined in these abuses, and the rule of law was ignored with the connivance of some judges. Members of the ZANU-PF elite have grabbed multiple farms, particularly on the Highveld, the key problem needing to be addressed in the land audit being designed at present. Many farm workers have been abused and have lost their jobs.

What is the way forward from here? Suggestions that a new Zimbabwean government should attempt to reconstruct the old, dualistic farming sector dominated by large scale commercial farming will encounter strong political resistance from the many ordinary Zimbabweans who have benefited from land reform. In any event, a key component of the Global Political Agreement is that land reform is irreversible.

The central challenge of land policy in Zimbabwe is rather to build on the emerging successes of the new farmers and foster a dynamic and efficient agrarian economy with strong links to industry and the urban economy. Resolving ambiguities and uncertainties around land rights and land administration will be critically important.

These are the issues that media reports, editorials and public debates on Zimbabwe's land reform should focus on, rather than tired stereotypes of 'disaster and failure'.

Professor Ben Cousins holds the DST/NRF Research Chair in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape.