

ZIMBABWE'S LAND REFORM

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This book is very topical, but also very detailed. How long has the research taken you and your co-authors?

This book has been long in the making – a ten year project, involving many people. Its genesis was actually before 2000, when we were working in Masvingo province on changing livelihood strategies. And then came 2000, and land invasions started. As researchers interested in agrarian change, we could not ignore what was happening around us. We started to document what was going on; first around Chiredzi and then more broadly across the whole province. For someone who has worked on rural development questions in Zimbabwe for the last 25 years, someone who thought he knew Masvingo's rural areas, I learned – and had to unlearn – a lot of things in the coming months and years.

At that time no-one knew what changes the land reform would bring to the overall agrarian structure of the country. I don't think anyone thought that it would be such a radical change. By 2010, under what became the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, between 8 and 9m ha, formerly around 4000 large-scale farms, have been transferred, benefiting over a million people in 170,000 households. 146,000 hh are in the A1, or smallholder schemes, and 23000 are in the A2, or small scale commercial schemes. Add in the still informal settlements not recognised by the programme it is a substantial area overall, amounting to around a quarter of the country's area – nearly 30% in the case of Masvingo province.

What was the composition of your research team, what were your main research questions, and how extensive was your research sample?

The core team, the co-authors of the book include 3 farmers and researchers who are based in different parts of Masvingo, while 2 are based at the University of Zimbabwe. It's a great team, bringing diverse perspectives and often heated debates about findings. I would also like to acknowledge many others who helped the process, not least the many farmers who discussed their experiences with us over the past years. In Masvingo we have had many people we have debated the findings with; and particularly our colleagues in Agritex whose provincial head has long been a supporter of solid empirical research in the province. And last but not least an acknowledgement of the funding: this effort was mostly supported by the UK ESRC and DFID and was coordinated by Professor Ben Cousins at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, as part of a regional programme on Livelihoods after Land Reform in southern Africa.

We set out to ask a very simple question: what happened to people's livelihoods once they got land through land reform? Of course if you dig beneath the surface such a simple question is not so simple after all, and requires some quite sophisticated answers.

We conducted our research across 16 sites and 400 households on new resettlements – both A1 and A2, as well as informal settlements – across Masvingo province, in a transect from the relatively higher potential areas around Gutu-Chatsworth to the dry lowveld in the south around Chikombedzi.

What we found was often unexpected and surprising. It confounded and complicated the media stereotypes which were constantly being projected. The results tell a story which was complex and nuanced.

Can you summarise your main findings?

We found that the land reform in Masvingo province wasn't the unmitigated disaster that is sometimes portrayed. There were both successes and of course failures. Indeed around half of all the farmers in our sample were, in our terms, "accumulating from below" – making surpluses from agriculture and investing them, generating both income and

employment. In terms of farm labour we found a substantial hiring in of both temporary and permanent labour from surrounding areas. Compared to beef ranches which employed relatively few people, the new farms were generating employment - poorly paid, and with limited labour rights for sure, but nevertheless a source of livelihood for many. Overall, patterns of 'accumulation from below' were more evident in the smallholder A1 schemes, where often a very vibrant farm based economy was emerging. By contrast, the A2 farms, with some notable exceptions, had found it more difficult to establish new commercial farm enterprises under the very difficult economic conditions of the past decade.

We also found that agriculture had not collapsed, but had certainly been transformed. Echoing the national pattern, there were declines in certain commodities, including maize to some extent, definitely wheat and some of the estate crops like sugar. But there was also remarkable stability in some crops, notably cotton that has become an important crop on the new resettlements in our areas. And there was substantial growth in other commodities – for example in traditional smallholder crops, such as the small grains or edible beans. There is certainly room for improvement, however. Yields remain relatively low, and input supply (seeds and fertilisers) has been severely hampered. Yet, while the crop mix has changed, and problems remain, there has been both resilience and a slow pattern of recovery in the agricultural sector.

We found that food insecurity remains a problem for some, yet it was not as widespread as sometimes reported. In our research, we tracked crop production – and especially food grains – over 7 years from 2002 which showed how, as people cleared land and established farms, production increased. Yes, it was highly variable between years and among people, but the proportion of households producing more than a tonne of maize – an amount sufficient to feed an average family for a year – steadily increased. For example, following the 2009 harvest, between two-thirds and 100% of households across our sample had sufficient food, depending on the site. And indeed, around a third of all households regularly sold their surplus, both locally and more broadly, often through informal channels.

Indeed, for agriculture more generally – whether for production or marketing – the national level statistics, and so many of the claims about food insecurity, are simply not capturing what is happening at the local level. The old ways of measuring things are insufficient for the new, transformed agricultural system.

We found that the new farms were not dominated by so-called 'cronies'. By far the majority – over two-thirds – of new settlers were ordinary people, around 50% overall coming from nearby communal areas. These were asset and income poor people in need of land. There were others of course – former farmworkers, civil servants, business people and so on. We argue that this wider mix of people results in a greater diversity of skills, experiences and connections in these new rural settings. And then there were indeed the so-called cronies – numerically small in number, but of course disproportionately influential - and concentrated in the A2 sites. We estimate that 5% of land beneficiaries in our sample could be associated with this category. Overall, then, it is a complex picture, but not one that reflects wider media commentary in any way.

Contrary to expectations, we also found that there was much investment going on in the new resettlements – clearing land, building homes, digging wells, purchasing farm equipment, growing herds and flocks of livestock and so on. Most of this was private investment, without support from outside. At community level too there was considerable group effort focused on building schools, constructing dams and cutting roads, for example. For individual household level investment we estimated that each household on average across our sample had invested the equivalent of US\$2000 – extrapolated across the province this represents US\$90m. No mean sum, especially when compared with the vanishingly small investments by the state, and the absence of any donor/NGO support in the new resettlements. It certainly challenges any assumption that nothing is happening; that the land lies idle and unused.

We found too that off-farm economic and entrepreneurial activity was vibrant. The rural economy had not collapsed. Operating under very difficult circumstances for sure, especially in the period of hyperinflation to 2009, but nevertheless lots was happening, again often under the radar. The net result is a shift in economic activity to new value chains, located in new places, involving new people. The old economy is certainly in decline, but a new one is emerging – on the margins, sometimes illegal, often fragile and never measured, and so again not reflected in statistics.

We have of course found much else besides, but you will have to read the book to find out more.

These findings go very much against the grain of the way Zimbabwe's land reform has been described and the generally accepted assessment of its overall impact on the economy. What have been the critiques of your work?

First, there is the argument that Masvingo is unrepresentative and an inappropriate choice of study focus. As a case study of course data from Masvingo cannot ever tell the full story. But we argue that it's a significant province in many respects, and tells an important story relevant to the semi-arid regions of the country - indeed the geographical majority. We have been careful to point out however that our study sites did not include any of the very highly capitalised farms with large populations of farm labour, like those which were taken over in the Highveld. Here a different story certainly did unfold. But even here, as other studies are now showing, resource poor people did benefit, and particularly on the A1 farms, and the broader more positive picture still holds.

Second, some claim that our sample was biased and that we did not cover all dimensions. My response to this is simply that others must carry out their own empirical work. Our sampling was done very carefully. We chose clusters of sites where there were A1 and A2 areas close by to allow comparisons and to explore interactions. We sampled across an agro-ecological gradient to get a wide range of settings. And we included cases, such as the sugar estates in Hippo Valley, which offered a broader picture of different production systems. And a detailed insight into a population of 400 households over much of a decade is not a minor study by most calculations.

Third, some have argued that we have set up a series of myths which are only 'straw people', easy to shoot down, and that in fact no one believes in these myths anyway. I beg to differ. The myths about Zimbabwe's land reform are live and well – and continue to be peddled in the media, by academic commentators, by donors and many others. Often in very respectable places, by perfectly reputable people – yet without any grounding in solid field data. These myths definitely still urgently need challenging with empirical realities from the ground.

Fourth, some say we have not addressed the wider abuses, corruption and violence that was associated with land reform. This I am afraid is simply untrue. We have been very careful to offer a balanced, rounded picture – and we have pointed out problems and shortcomings where they have been found.

And finally, for those who really find it difficult to engage in constructive debate and have not bothered to read our material, I have been accused of being stupid, ignorant, foolish and (my favourite) a politically-correct twerp, ... One email subject line simply had 'you are a bag of shit' followed by an incomprehensible rant. And in a blog piece on a usually very good website we were called 'apologists of a tyrannical regime posing as researchers'.

To these people and others, I would argue that the challenge now is to address the empirical realities on the ground, to debate the findings rigorously and transparently and seek a way forward for policy based on evidence, not emotion or ideological posturing.

As you say, Masvingo is only part of the picture, and there is very little empirical data of a comparable scale. What future research do you hope to see on this subject?

What we are interested to do overall in the book is look forward, not back. Everyone agrees that land reform was necessary – and most agree that it should have happened earlier and in a more orderly and transparent way. Now we are confronted with a new agrarian structure, with new people on the land and new patterns of production and economy, the big question is: what to do now?

Whether in Zimbabwe within government, among the donors and embassies, across the political parties or in civil society, or internationally in the media, in academic circles or within diaspora networks, I would argue that the debate on land and agrarian issues has been poor – sometimes almost actively avoiding empirical evidence. Yet this is such a critical issue for the future, and we urgently need to define a new narrative on land and

livelihoods in Zimbabwe, based on the realities on the ground – not supposition, posturing or fabrication.

The good news is that we now have a growing body of evidence available. This study is only one among many. For example, there is the very important work by the Ruzivo Trust in Mazowe, Shamva and Mangwe and the six district studies by the African Institute for Agrarian Studies, both excellent research groups based in Harare. What's more there are now numerous smaller studies carried out by Zimbabwean students and others documenting what is going on – for example the 15 very excellent pieces we supported under the LaLR small grants fund, as well as the numerous MA and PhD studies in train.

With this growing body of evidence, a wider, more complex story must to be told – drawing out the vitally important policy implications for the future.

We hope that this book is one small contribution to a more informed debate on this critical issue for Zimbabwe's future.

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