Land reform and farm workers

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Land reform is normally undertaken for the purpose of equitable redistribution and poverty reduction. In Southern Africa, there is usually an emphasis on redressing the historical expropriation of the land of indigenous peoples. In Zimbabwe, land reform can be broadly divided into two phases. First, the slow but orderly phase between 1980 and 1997, when 3.6 million hectares was transferred from large-scale white farmers to 71,000 black small-farmer households. Second, the comprehensive but disorderly and controversial phase between 2000 and 2002 when 11 million hectares were confiscated from 4,000 white farmers and given to an estimated 127,000 small-farmer households and about 7,200 emergent black commercial farmers (according to revised figures that are much lower than exaggerated government figures of 300,000 and 54,000 respectively). This second phase marked the biggest property transfer in the history of Zimbabwe and the whole of Southern Africa to date. It is a phase that has led to chaotic land invasions, extensive food shortages, political power contests and diplomatic rifts. In combination, these represent a cocktail of factors which has made Zimbabwe's land reform complicated, controversial and exceptional. The consequences will be present and felt for years to come.

Employment insecurity and poverty

Prior to the land reform, there were about 320,000 farm workers on the commercial farms, supporting a population of about two million. They constituted about 25 per cent of the country's formal sector labour force. At the end of the reform period, between 180,000 and 200,000 farm workers had lost their jobs. The number of white commercial farmers shrivelled from 4,500 to about 600. Farm workers' incomes amounted to about Z$15 billion a year before reform, and it is estimated they have now declined to Z$2 billion a year. More than 75 per cent of those workers, who lost their jobs due to the eviction of white commercial farmers, have not received severance packages. Most farmers had difficulty in paying out the packages due to delay in being
paid compensation for their land and property; even so, some were threatened by farm workers.

The impact of the loss of regular wage incomes has predictably been severe. Those farm workers who continue staying on farms have lost their permanent worker status and become seasonal or itinerant workers, who now survive on doing 'piece-jobs'. The new settlers have not provided employment opportunities on a significant scale. So it is clear that poverty amongst farm workers has been exacerbated, while destitution is on the increase. Land reform that does not incorporate the needs of farm workers and does not satisfy the criteria of equity and poverty reduction is, at least, questionable.

Tenure security and land access

Equitable land reform programmes should ensure that farm workers who are displaced find alternative employment opportunities, or at least have access to tenure security and land. Trade unions – and in Zimbabwe there is the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union (GAPWUZ) – have insisted that displaced or retrenched workers should be provided with land to sustain their livelihoods. Yet, at the end of the reform period, less than five per cent of farm worker households had been granted land under the A1 model (which allows access to several hectares of land for subsistence and livestock production). Union demands for tenure security did not receive a positive response from commercial farmers before reform nor from government during reform. The denial of tenure security on farms or of access to land resettlement schemes elsewhere has been ultimately discriminatory against farm workers, making them more vulnerable than any other social group in the post-reform era. As already mentioned, some farm workers have stayed on farms as piece-workers, while others have drifted into squatter settlements or, more delicately, 'informal settlements' where access to land is limited or non-existent. Others may have drifted back to communal areas, from which they would have originally come. But the congested conditions in those communal areas make it difficult for them to eke out sustainable livelihoods there.

Land reform should address both tenure and welfare concerns of farm workers. It should not disclaim responsibility for consequences of displacement. Zimbabwe's land reform has made the vulnerability of farm workers more acute. Informal settlements have mushroomed near farming towns in, for example, Concession in Mashonaland Central, Machekwe in Mashonaland East and Nyamandlovu in Matabeleland North.

Food security and farm workers

One of the assumptions behind land reform was that it would lead to enhanced productive capacity and increased food production. The first
phase of Zimbabwe’s land reform was orderly and took care not to undermine food security in the country at large or among the newly settled small farmers. Even before the second phase or ‘fast track’ reform programme ended in 2002, food shortages had become endemic – even within farming communities themselves.

Zimbabwe’s land reform undermined arrangements that enabled farm workers to obtain cheap subsidised food through their employers. Compulsory acquisition of grain by the Grain Marketing Board worked against retention of stocks on farms for farm workers.¹ Their vulnerability has been partly mitigated by their growing dependence on food relief; organisations such as the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe (FCTZ) and Save the Children (UK) have provided such relief. Children have been particularly vulnerable, and supplementary feeding schemes have acted as the sole lifeline for many. To complicate the situation further, the newly settled small farmers are themselves desperately short of food.

The attainment of food security is intimately tied up with the state of the economy. In situations of economic growth there are often sufficient foreign exchange reserves for adequate food imports. This was the case in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and 1990s, but it is no longer the case during the current deep economic crisis. Drought may have been a contingent factor in the 2001-2 and 2002-3 seasons, but it is not the sole factor in explaining food insecurity in what was once a ‘breadbasket’ in the region. Land reform should not unnecessarily undermine food security.

**Farm workers, HIV-AIDS, health conditions and family structure**

The relationship between land reform and HIV/AIDS may not be obvious at first sight. But, in a region that is an epicentre of the epidemic, its potential impact on land reform should be considered in any reform plan. Although the prevalence rate amongst the population in the 20 to 50 year age group is between 20 and 25 per cent, no consideration has been taken of this.² If about 25 per cent of the 200,000 new settlers are likely to have HIV/AIDS at present, or within the next five to ten years, then their land will be under-utilised. Ille fallow or have new claimants to it. In general, there would not be maximum utilisation of the acquired land.

Amongst farm workers themselves, prevalence rates range between 25 and 27 per cent. These rates on farms and plantations appear higher

¹ A new piece of legislation in 2002 provided the GMB with authority to acquire maize on farms, and to prohibit private sales and retention of stocks. In commercial maize-growing provinces such as Mashonaland West, there were reported seizures of grain by the GMB on some farms.

than in surrounding rural areas and small towns. As parents die, the number of AIDS orphans on farms increases. It is estimated that in Mashonaland East province 16 per cent of children at farm primary schools in 1999 had lost one or both parents as a result of AIDS. These AIDS orphans are particularly vulnerable because the extended family system has come under severe stress due to the epidemic. They are often the last in the ‘food queue’. Farm worker communities are increasingly less able to care for orphans as their own incomes dwindle or disappear, and as their future on farms becomes less and less secure. A survey of nearly 1,000 farm worker households in 2002 pointed to the phenomenon of ‘child-headed households’, and these constituted about 1.5 per cent of the sample.3

The wider impact of land reform in Zimbabwe has been the closure of most farm schools and clinics following the eviction of the white farmers. Very few of these basic social services are now available to farm worker households. The few that still exist are too far for impoverished and undernourished families to travel, as distances can range from five to 40 kilometres.

The family structure itself in farm worker communities is under great stress from the epidemic, evictions, and employment losses. There appears to be a large increase in instances of divorce and separation, and a growth in the number of female-headed households. Land reform should address, or at least plan for, the impact of HIV/AIDS and for changes in family structure and for the specific needs of women.

### Participation, citizenship and migration

It is almost banal to observe that there are powerful social interests involved in the land reform process. There are those, like the landowners, who often resist it, and there are those, like politicians and potential beneficiaries, who press for it. In most instances, farm workers have not been a major force in land reform, nor have they been beneficiaries. In the Zimbabwean case they have been marginalised throughout the reform process.

The question of participation is nevertheless pivotal in land reform. It has a political dimension. Do farm workers actively participate in movements for land reform or are they passive actors? Are they identified

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more with their land-owning employers than with those forces seeking change in land ownership? Under what specific constraints do farm workers operate? In an authoritarian setting such as that in Zimbabwe, where basic democratic rights are under threat, farm workers experienced intimidation and violence for associating with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Historically, they had few political rights and it was not until 1998 that they won the right to vote in local council elections. The Zimbabwean experience shows that there can be land reform in politically repressive conditions, suggesting that there is no necessary connection between reform and democratisation. But this raises the question of the sustainability of such reform.

Another major issue that land reform raises relates to migration and citizenship. Zimbabwe and South Africa have a significant proportion of migrant farm workers. In the case of Zimbabwe, about 26 per cent of farm workers trace their descent to migrant workers who originally came from Malawi, Mozambique or Zambia. They do not have land rights, and in the event of job losses they lead a precarious existence. It is unclear how the citizenship law that Zimbabwe introduced in early 2003, for workers from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, will benefit these landless migrant workers. It would have been more meaningful and sincere to introduce it before the reform, so that they could have had access to land rights. More generally, the way in which migrant workers could be integrated into land reform programmes is often ignored in planning.

The citizenship rights of white commercial farmers themselves were infringed by long delays in payment of compensation in a context of hyperinflation that eroded the amounts to be paid. Instructively, the government made an exception of farmers of European origin, for instance, French, German and Italian farmers who were, in theory at least, allowed to keep their farms. This suggested a strong punitive element in the land reform process as far as local white farmers were concerned.

**New social relations: farm workers, new settlers and new farmers**

Where land reform involves the resettlement of small farmers on former large-scale farms, they come into contact with farm workers 'with nowhere to go' or those in search of piece-jobs for survival. The small farmers or new settlers are now more powerful than the landless farm workers. Relations between the two tend to be infused with mistrust, jealousy, insecurity and apprehension. There is often an uneasy coexistence between them. The new settlers would like farm workers to 'clear off', vacate the housing on the farm and the small pieces of land that they
previously utilised. The new settlers suspect, or allege, that the farm workers had once 'colluded' with white landowners to resist land reform. Sometimes there are clashes between the two sides. An additional source of tension between the two sides was the experience and memory of settlers' or initial squatters' looting of farm buildings and equipment, and farm houses, including those that belonged to farm workers.

Land reform that lacks strategic planning can lead to such conflicts on the newly acquired lands. In the Zimbabwean case, food shortages have flared into conflicts in some provinces due to an intense competition for access to food aid by the two social groups: the settlers and farm workers. In several provinces, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been challenged for giving preferential treatment to farm worker households rather than providing food aid also to the settlers on a non-selective basis. These conflicts over resources – land, housing, food, and so forth – are bound to persist. Rather than resolving land conflicts, the Zimbabwean reform seems set to generate a variety of land-based social conflicts.

It is not clear whether land reform was intended to encourage farm workers to seek employment opportunities on the new small farms and, if so, how conditions would be made attractive for them. It is also still unclear whether share-cropping and labour tenancy are new arrangements being encouraged on the acquired farms. Some, if not many, new settlers cannot fully utilise their new lands. A proper resettlement programme would take these features into consideration, providing negotiation and mediation services, as required.

Whither advocacy?

Prior to land reform, any advocacy to highlight the interests and problems of farm workers was a relatively straightforward matter. This was an historically marginalised, isolated and impoverished social group in need of visibility, assistance and solidarity. During the land reform process, it becomes much more complicated to put the interests of the farm workers at the centre of national, regional and global attention. The arguments for the interests and welfare of farm workers are also used by landowners against the concept of reform. Then there is the numbers game: are there more potential beneficiaries (the small farmers) than losers (the farm workers)? In the Zimbabwe instance, it was 127,000 settler households – and 7,200 black commercial farmers – compared to 200,000 farm worker households!^a

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Yet there is still an important role for advocacy to play. There is a continuing role for unions and NGOs. The plight of displaced farm workers needs to be expressed with a view towards generating a solution in the short and the long term. There is a humanitarian dimension here that cannot be ignored, even though the government may choose to look the other way for fear of embarrassment. There is also the rehabilitation aspect involving retraining farm workers, finding or creating new opportunities for them in, for instance, crop production, craft work, informal trades, and so forth. Finally, those few farm workers who remain on the farms and plantations continue to require attention and resources devoted to issues such as education and training, health care, and capacity-building at union level, in women’s associations, youth groups, orphan-care, and HIV/AIDS awareness groups. For farm workers, 'the struggle continues', even after land reform and jambanja (violence).