The Political Economy of Land Reform and Agricultural Development in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique

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Settler colonialism and agricultural development in Southern Africa have left a deep and negative legacy that remains one of the subcontinent's greatest challenges to economic and political development to date. Land tenure regimes, developed and influenced by the British in Zimbabwe, the Portuguese in Mozambique, or the Germans (and then South Africans) in Namibia, reflected highly skewed ownership patterns that largely continue today. The backbone of many settler colonies was settler-dominated large-scale commercial agriculture, and game and stock farming that rendered the majority populations in countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia nearly landless. Before Zimbabwe's controversial 'fast track' land reform programme, skewed land holdings in the country showed that 4,500 white farmers owned some 11 million hectares of the best farmland, while one million black Africans owned about 16 million hectares. Today, land patterns in other countries in the region, including Namibia and Mozambique, are similar.[2]

Upon independence, countries in Southern Africa generally embarked on various land reform programmes aimed at addressing skewed land tenure rights. These programmes address common concerns and not surprisingly have encountered similar obstacles. Land reform is a difficult endeavour, especially in Southern Africa, where traditional power structures tend to be defined by landholding. Women's access to land has been as contentious an issue as redefining land tenure regimes to grant land, and therefore control over commercial agriculture and often the export economy, to black Africans. Redefining how land is held and owned has also been a particular issue of contention in Southern Africa, where control over tenure has customarily been in the hands of chiefs and other

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[2] Peters BL, 'Land reform in Southern Africa', *South African Yearbook of International Affairs 2001/02*. Johannesburg: SAIIA, 2002, pp.159–164.

non-elected officials. In an era of democratic reform, declaring property as private or state-held often complicates issues of decentralisation and ultimate control over the economy.

Zimbabwe

These and other issues, including the premises of the Lancaster House Agreement, stalled the land reform process in Zimbabwe for decades after the country's independence in 1980.[3] The upwards of 71,000 families that were resettled on some 3.5 million hectares from 1980–96, although a drop in the proverbial bucket, received little extension or other support from government. Land tenure was generally not granted to women, and holdings were insecure in the face of *de facto* government control over the land. Corruption and politics delayed funding from the United Kingdom,[4] which in turn further stalled land reform in the largely agricultural-based economy of Zimbabwe.[5] Rather than develop and fund a comprehensive land reform programme, the government of Zimbabwe stalled further, eventually adopting a structural adjustment programme to meet balance-of-payments requirements.[6] The government continued to use land reform as a political tool for years, finally culminating in planned invasions and the so-called fast track to land reform in February 2000. Although the invasions, fast-track policy, and previous issues of corruption and mismanagement have clearly led to internal dissent against the Mugabe government, there is little criticism of the need for land reform in the country.

Given the subcontinent's economic dependence, the situation in Zimbabwe is bound to have contagious effects in the rest of the region. Of particular concern is the economic impact in the region, including trade, foreign investment and refugees. Zimbabwe has the second most developed economy in Southern Africa after South Africa, and as such plays an important role in regional trade. If the economic situation in Zimbabwe continues to worsen, as it has over the past five years, trade among SADC nations could suffer as a result. In addition, land invasions

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[3] Several think-tanks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) lobby and conduct research on issues of land and land reform in Zimbabwe, including Rudecon Zimbabwe (PL) and the Women and Land Lobby Group (WLLG).

[4] Arguing that Zimbabwe's land reform would need to be funded by several donors, the UK did not pledge a specific sum for this purpose during the Lancaster House Agreement. The country donated some £44 million in the 1980s for Zimbabwe's land reform programme, and in 1996 cancelled a 1981 donation of £3 million as the funding had remained unspent for more than a decade.

[5] Martin M, *Robert Mugabe: Power, Plunder, and Tyranny in Zimbabwe*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2002.

[6] Bond P & M Manyanya, *Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism, and the Search for Social Justice*. Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2002.

have rendered Zimbabwe, and by default other countries in the region, a foreign investment liability. Indeed, countries such as Malawi have experienced declines in foreign investment since 2000, probably in part as a result of foreign investors who do not necessarily distinguish between the two states or who now question the consequences of similar land reform issues in that country. Articles in newspapers and business magazines portray an ongoing question as to whether foreign investments in the subcontinent are safe, given the need for and stalling of land reform. Refugees further compound regional economic and human development issues. Economic refugees continue to be a problem in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, which is now host to a growing number of Zimbabweans seeking work.

The subcontinent's shared history also gives rise to questions regarding the state of neighbours' land reform policies. It is fairly safe to assume that no country in the subcontinent that experiences significant land tenure disparities has dealt with the problem adequately. Two such countries with significant land tenure issues are Namibia and Mozambique, both of whose land reform issues have been affected in different ways by the situation in Zimbabwe.

Namibia[7]

Upon independence in 1990, Namibia embarked on a land reform programme that was meant to transfer land to the landless. This programme was part of a greater reconciliation process taking place in the country once controlled by apartheid South Africa. As was the case in Zimbabwe, the new government in Namibia agreed to obtain land under the principles of willing-seller acquisition and just compensation.

Those eligible for resettlement under the programme fell into three separate categories, namely landless formerly disadvantaged Namibians, landless livestock owners, or those with income who did not own land. Those who were resettled under the programme received title to lease the land for a period of 99 years: ultimately 'ownership' of the land rested with the state.

Government set the target immediately after independence to redistribute some 9.5 million hectares to Namibia's rural population. While financing was an obstacle from the start, another challenge was simply land-use possibilities in the semi-arid and pastoral environment in Namibia. Resettling the population also meant acquiring access to water for the inhabitants, something much easier said than done. There was

[7] Several think-tanks and NGOs lobby and conduct research on issues of land and land reform in Namibia, including the Namibia Economic Research Unit (NEPRU) and the Rural People's Institute for Social Empowerment (RISE).

also no clear-cut agreement on what the land policy hoped to achieve: the development of commercial agriculture, poverty alleviation, or land distribution based on need. Neither was there agreement to what extent land reform could be used as a tool for poverty alleviation, given the semi-arid nature of land in Namibia.[8] Ethnic minorities such as the Herero, Nama and Damara, who were dispossessed of land by the Germans, wanted preferential access to land through the programme, despite the fact that the majority population in the country (and in the government) is Ovambo.

It is not surprising that, as was the case in Zimbabwe, land reform in Namibia has also encountered delays; thus far government has resettled only 35,000 of 243,000 landless in the country. Namibia currently has about 4,000 commercial farms. By the end of 2003 it was only able to buy 118 of these farms, encompassing about 710,000 hectares, for resettlement. Given the willing-seller and just-compensation principles, there is actually more land currently on the market in Namibia than the government can afford to purchase through the programme.

Echoing the sentiments of the 1991 national land conference, the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Act of 1995 empowers the government to expropriate land without compensation, thus nullifying the willing-seller, just-compensation agreements made at independence. However, the 1995 act provides for the acquisition by the state of very large, under-utilised, and foreign-owned farms for resettlement. This includes several farms owned by absentee landlords from Germany.

Poor planning and lack of funding have slowed implementation of the land reform programme as outlined by the 1995 Land Act in Namibia. Although government has stated that it will not sanction Zimbabwe-style land invasions, the fact of the matter is that that the rural populations are losing patience with the slow pace of reform. Whereas Namibia has sought outside assistance to fund the land reform programme from Germany, it is more likely that the country may start gazetting and implementing expropriation of mainly foreign-owned farms without compensation as outlined by the 1995 Land Act. The rural landless, who constitute a significant voting block, would almost certainly support expropriation without compensation.

Government also recently implemented a survey to register how much land commercial farmers and absentee land owners own, under the guise of new tax laws. Until now, there has been no accounting mechanism recording land ownership, and without such a mechanism, government in Namibia can neither tax land owners appropriately nor be certain of the

8 Werner W, 'Land reform in Namibia: Motor or obstacle for democratic development', paper presented at a meeting on land reform in Southern Africa, held under the auspices of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 2003.

number of foreign or absentee landholders. Under the recent survey, landowners are required to declare the amount of land they own. Only 60% of farmers have returned the surveys, although government has threatened fines for those late in completing them. It is uncertain at this stage what government in Namibia intends to do with the surveys — whether they are strictly meant for tax purposes or whether they will be used as a tool in implementing expropriation without compensation. Given the criticism of the government's current pace of land reform, the fact that elections are due before the end of 2004, and the respect that Namibian President Nujoma has for the policies of Mugabe, the land reform programme in Namibia could proceed quicker than would be expected otherwise — although likely not in the same way as the invasions in Zimbabwe.

Mozambique[9]

Governed under the Mozambique Land Act of 1997, land reform in Mozambique is revolutionary in that it combines formal and customary law and thus grants legal rights to customary tenure. In theory, this takes land control out of the hands of local non-elected officials, putting it in the hands of customary and family structures. The law stipulates that someone who has occupied a piece of land in 'good faith,' even in customary tenure, for over 10 years has a legitimate claim to cultivate the land. While the state in Mozambique effectively 'owns' all land in the country, leasing it to individuals and even businesses for periods of 50–99 years, traditional leaders maintain the ability to allocate their lands to their subjects for cultivation.

Generally, government gives local interests 99-year leases for investment, while foreign interests are given 50-year leases. The state remains in control of land access, however. Although leases are renewable, the government decides whether to renew leases or not. This aspect of the land reform programme remains questionable to many neo-liberals, who predict that business will not invest in the land if they are aware that they only hold and not own it. Although empirical studies have not shown that this aspect of the land reform programme has an influence on investment trends in Mozambique, limited short-term leases may have more of an effect on the type and scope of investments made in the country.

The 1997 act also allows for partnerships between large-scale commercial agriculture and communities in an attempt to attract needed

[9] Several think-tanks and NGOs lobby and conduct research on land reform in Mozambique, including the *União Nacional de Camponesses* (UNAC) and Mozambican Land Forum.

capital into the agricultural sector. As such, government realises the importance of the development of the agricultural sector, in addition to the need to address rural poverty and landlessness in the country. Facilitating partnerships between the rural population and the commercial agricultural sector is a unique way to address human and economic development concerns in the country, and has vast potential in Namibia's arable regions.

Although government has targeted the sugar-producing sector for such community–investor partnerships, offering various incentives and extension programmes, a lack of a proactive policy to promote these partnerships means that investors are developing sugar plantations and production facilities without the active participation of the rural population. Even with the government's desire to develop commercial agriculture, such bureaucratic delays result in big business benefiting at the expense of the rural population who may not have access to land. Indeed, control over large areas of arable land in Mozambique, including both colonial commercial farms and currently uncultivated lands, has been transferred to foreign interests to develop. Whether this is simply a missed opportunity for rural development or a potential catalyst for land conflict in the rural areas, which have not experienced the threat of land invasions, remains to be seen.[10]

Where Zimbabwe alienated its largely white commercial farming sector through land invasions and the government's gazetting of farms, Mozambique granted these very Zimbabwean farmers mainly 50-year leases to farm commercially in Mozambique and thus develop that country's farming sector. Ironically enough, numerous Zimbabweans now farm commercially in the Chimoio region of Mozambique, cultivating tobacco for export to the auction market in Harare.

The invitation has not stopped with Zimbabwean farmers, however. Government in Mozambique has also granted numerous South African farmers leases to farm commercially, especially in the Niassa and Zambezia provinces. These farmers term the policy 'GPS' or *gaan plaas soek* (going to look for a farm). Farmers travel a certain distance from a road, calculate the GPS co-ordinates of the plot they wish to farm, and take the co-ordinates to a local administrator, who then checks them against the records to ascertain if there is any reason why the land should not be leased to the farmer. The farmer receives a temporary permit to cultivate the land, while the final lease is approved by the provincial and national authorities. Although data on exact numbers of Mozambique's farmers from Zimbabwe and South Africa do not yet exist, numerous farmers have started cultivating on the basis of the temporary permits.

[10] Marini, A, *Partnership between Local Peasants and Large Commercial Investors: The Case of the Sugar Sector in Mozambique*. Rome: FAO, 2001.

Generally given a 50-year lease to cultivate the land by the authorities, these South African farmers are also producing tobacco like their Zimbabwean counterparts.

Considerations

Land reform is difficult at the best of times. The management of the process itself, including infrastructural development and extension services to farmers, is one of the biggest challenges countries can undertake. Within the context of Southern Africa, where the colonial legacy renders land reform crucial to economic and human development, it is particularly difficult, because it challenges the basis of power in society. Whether challenging commercial farming interests or traditional authorities, new land tenure regimes in countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique must take into account the needs of largely rural populations.

Delays in land reform in Zimbabwe, coupled with a corrupt, mismanaged government, have rendered that country's fast track to land reform a likely disaster. Whereas Namibia could be following suit, especially given the politics in the country, lack of water limits the number of rural people who will benefit from potential reform. In the case of Mozambique, the government's delay in encouraging partnerships between the rural poor and commercial agriculture has meant an influx of foreign agricultural interests. Zimbabwean farmers and many of their South African counterparts are now farming independently in Mozambique, often sending their tobacco crops to Harare for processing. Whereas Mozambique is definitely taking advantage of the knowledge of foreign farmers, the ramifications of the development of commercial agriculture at the expense of the continued landlessness of the rural poor remain to be seen.

The situation in Zimbabwe is indicative of the region's real need for land reform, despite the difficulties in implementing the process. Although government there definitely uses land reform as a political tool, the reality of the situation is that the rural populations in Zimbabwe are hungry for land. How the land tenure crisis in Zimbabwe affects other countries in the region that are clearly aware of their own land tenure problems is open for debate. Although the land invasions in Zimbabwe led governments in countries such as Namibia and Mozambique to make renewed commitments to land tenure reform, it is still unclear whether these countries have the capacity and financing to implement such policies.