

**Rural poverty: Commercial farm workers  
and Land Reform in Zimbabwe**

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## **Introduction**

Zimbabwe's colonization in the 1880s created the conditions that still influence the pattern of income and wealth distribution in the country. A settler minority took control of the country's resources of wealth, in particular land and the associated mineral resources but also access to income generation and wealth, especially through education. The creation of native reserves in 1898 gave birth to the dual agrarian structures that exists today and which remains a major source of poverty and inequitable income and wealth distribution. The Land Apportionment Act of 1931, which divided the country into white land and black land and native land, further consolidated this.

The acquisition of large-scale commercial farms was a central component of the colonization process. The recruitment of African farm workers and their working conditions were largely determined by that colonial paradigm. The legacy of that paradigm is that commercial farm workers, although the largest proportion of Zimbabwe's proletariat, form one of its poor segments which has no access to land and housing rights. The present and future of farm workers is therefore indissolubly bound up with how the land question is resolved. The number of large-scale white and corporate-owned large-scale farms increased from 545 in 1904 to a peak of 6 255 in the mid-1950s, declining to 4 500 in 1990 (ZHDR' 1998). The large scale commercial farms, the largest employer of formal labor employ 450 000 full time workers who together with their families make up about 2 million people or 20 % of the country's population.

The difficulties encountered by the settler regime to recruit labour for the commercial farms led to a policy of recruitment from neighbouring Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. By 1966 an estimated 54 percent of male labour in the agriculture sector was foreign. A study by the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) in 1999 put the figure of "alien" farm workers at 30 percent of the total farm worker population. However, a lot of migrant workers have integrated themselves into the Zimbabwean society. Some were able to acquire rights to land in communal areas through local Chiefs and some were resettled in the first phase of resettlement in 1980. (Rutherford 1996)

However because of illiteracy and lack of understanding of many issues, migrant workers do not apply for citizenship even though they may have been resident in the country for more than five years<sup>1</sup>. As a result these workers do not qualify for social or medical assistance. Migrant workers form a significant proportion of casual and seasonal workers who live in worst conditions, have the lowest levels of literacy and social security and the highest levels of ill-health.

Both the 1995 Poverty Assessment Study Survey and the Central Statistical Office (CSO) Poverty in Zimbabwe, 1998 study noted that 57 percent of farm workers are poor. However some researchers argue that this is an under estimation of poverty in the commercial farming sector. A GTZ study of poverty in 1999 notes that other factors need to be taken into account when interpreting poverty data according to the type of land use. Thus the statistical result for the large scale commercial farming areas is misleading in so

far as there are relatively high proportion of single person households in these areas. An in depth analysis of the CSO shows that the “poor” farm workers with their families, are actually closer to the “very poor” poverty line and that the “very poor” live further beneath the food poverty line than elsewhere.

The markedness of poverty amongst farm workers is both more severe and more homogenous than in other land utilization areas. The picture deteriorates further when access to drinking water, sanitary facilities and electricity is taken into account. Farm workers live with pronounced insecurity about their future. By reason of their origin and biography most have little access to extended family, “safety nets” and have no claim to land in the communal areas. They are extremely dependent upon their employers to satisfy their basic needs, to an extent unlike any other group of employees in Zimbabwe.

### **Policy issues on farm workers in the land reform discourse**

Many authors have noted that the disadvantages faced by farm workers in their living and working conditions, and with respect to their political and social rights, derive from their lack of land rights in Zimbabwe. (Loewenson, 1992: Amanor-Wilks 1995, Moyo et al 2000).

Farm workers were not considered as a relevant category in the land division during the colonial era. Most were of foreign origin and were viewed as completely tied to the white farmer and were thus ignored. During the immediate post independence period farm workers were not considered as a specific category in the resettlement programme, though they did fall into the broad category of “poor and landless” who were the main targets of the initial programme. (Kinsey 1999: Moyo et al 2000).

Although a number of farm workers managed to resettle themselves on abandoned farms and State land in different parts of the country, and were officially recognized as resettlement farmers *ex post* at independence. (Herbert 1990: Alexander 1993: Moyo 1995: Rutherford and Worby 1999). A shift in land policy in the mid 1980s towards more “efficient” and “productive” farmers resulted in a negative official policy towards farm workers, who became characterized as foreigners, as unproductive and *persona non grata* on resettlement farms. (Moyo 1995: Rutherford 1996)

It was only in the 1990s when government was reformulating the land policy, that due to the advocacy efforts by the farm workers union, NGOs and academics, that farm workers have come to be accepted as a category to be resettled. (Moyo et al 2000). This resulted in the incorporation in the draft Land Policy Document of 1999, issues of land rights by farm workers, both in terms of residential rights and rights to resettlement under the land reform programme. (Moyo et al 2000).

Since the mid-1990s great strides have been made within the policy framework for the provision of farm workers in the land reform and resettlement programme. Thus theoretically farm workers can also benefit from the land reform and resettlement programme. The second phase of the land reform and resettlement programme, the LRRP

Phase II (1998) framework plan noted that the interests of the farm workers had to be catered for. Although silent about the fate of displaced farm workers provision was made for the establishment of rural service centres within the large-scale commercial farms, which would provide off-farm residential accommodation for farm worker communities.

Advocacy on farm worker issues has undergone several phases, which Moyo has termed a nationalist approach: a workerist approach: a welfarist approach and a transformative approach. The various strategies used vary from, advocating for improvements on living conditions, viewing the farm worker as a worker and only concerned with issues of wages and compensation for loss of employment (in land reform) and a transformative approach which focuses on a rights based approach to farm workers. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and tend to overlap at times.

### **Current political realities**

While government had acknowledged the need for incorporating farm workers in the land reform and resettlement programme framework plan (Phase II). This was an achievement in that the debate on land reform had shifted from being dominated by the need to transfer land monopolized by white farmers and its redistribution to small-scale (mainly male) farmers. The inception phase framework plan had provided room for complementary approaches, including the idea of farm settlements for residential purposes by farm workers.

However, the events of the past year have rendered all the above irrelevant. After governments defeat in the February 2000 constitutional referendum a wave of farm invasions gripped the country. This further strained the relationship between government, the commercial farmers and the international donor community, who government had hoped would finance the reform programme. This was subsequently followed by the introduction of the “Fast-Track” resettlement model. This had the net effect of negating all the gains that groups engaged in farm worker advocacy had made, in terms of farm worker rights to land. Currently government is pursuing a narrowly defined land reform and resettlement programme, as it seems to be only concerned with decongesting the communal areas.

The revised Land Reform and Resettlement Program Phase II document of April 2001 reveals that government has gone back on its commitment to the issue of land rights to farm workers. While one of the overall objectives remains that of reducing the extent and intensity of poverty among the communal people and farm workers, through the provision of land, continuing farm workers do not seem to be catered for.

The objectives of the Fast Track phase are as follows:

- ❑ The immediate identification for compulsory acquisition of not less than 5 million hectares for Phase II of the Resettlement Program, for the benefit of the land less peasant households.
- ❑ The planning, demarcation and settler emplacement on all acquired farms.

- Provision of limited basic infrastructure (such as boreholes, dip tanks and scheme roads) and farmer support services (such as tillage and crop packs)

In the fast track programme, farm workers are no longer seen as a specific category to be considered for resettlement, but are viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility, while senior government officials claim that it is not government policy to displace farm workers, and that these would be considered on all fast tracked farms (either for resettlement on that farm or another property) the reality on the ground tends to contradict this. Since the beginning of the Fast Track Land Resettlement Program from July 2000 to February 2001, 347 farms with an estimated 13 800 farm worker households were noted to have been negatively affected while an estimated 738 farms were gazetted which is likely to affect a further 29 520 farm worker households. Table 1 provides a picture of the number of farm workers resettled in the three Mashonaland provinces these make up over eighty percent of the farm worker population in the country. A farm in these areas has an average of 40 households with an average of five people per household.

**Table I**  
**Farm worker communities in the fast track program**

**July 2 000–March 2 001**

<b>Province</b>	<b># of farms fast tracked</b>	<b>#. of communal house holds resettled</b>	<b>#. of farm worker households resettled</b>
Mash Central	56	3 099	216
Mash East	110	9 001	630
Mash West	109	6 184	371
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>18 284</b>	<b>1 217</b>

Source FCTZ documents.

Three Provinces of operation namely Mashonaland East, Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland West show the skewedness in the land distribution programme. Few farm worker households (7.0%) of the total families allocated land are being considered in the programme.

There seems to be a resurgence of the perception that the majority of farm workers are aliens, who have no rights in Zimbabwe other than those, bestowed by their employers. Although this argument has been used by politicians and the media since the late 1980s to disqualify farm workers from securing land rights in resettlement schemes or even communal areas, this occurred as a new land policy was emerging that emphasized efficient, productive and skilled settlers (Moyo 1995). This has even been used to explain the “failure” of resettlement policy in terms of farm productivity, by early resettlement schemes of the 1980s.

Farm workers and foreigners in general have been blamed for the alleged failure of the resettlement policies of the 1980s. (Rutherford 1996). Even though numerous studies have shown that resettlement, including in those settlements with so-called foreign farm workers has had positive results (Moyo 1995: Maposa 1995: Kinsey 1999).

The absence of a holistic approach to land reform is bound to have serious repercussions on marginalised groups as farm workers. As this is bound to create unforeseen problems in the short term and in future.

If land reform aims to address the issues of inequality in access to economic and social opportunities and resources, then farm workers should be considered as a specific target. The “fast track” program has social and economic implications on the livelihoods of commercial farm workers. Farm workers in these situations are one of the most vulnerable groups experiencing displacement, destitution and loss of employment, which cause further hardships.

A vulnerability assessment on the situation of farm workers carried out in March 2001 by Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe together with Save the Children (UK) noted that farm workers were being affected in various ways by the fast track program.

In the case of a farm being designated for resettlement, the farmers were faced with much uncertainty where they were not sure how much time would pass between designation and actual resettlement. There were also legal questions on the resettlement process being carried out and issues of compensation. However, because of the large investments made on the land by the farmers, some continued to operate on their farms in spite of the designation.

The uncertainty in turn is affecting the farm workers in this category as the farmers have difficulties in accessing credit from financial institutions when they could not guarantee harvest of their crops. Because of this, some workers are being laid off, or their working days are being reduced which means less salary as well. Social development work on such farms is at a halt.

Another group of people being affected are the seasonal workers as there is reduced piecework employment opportunities which are being taken over by permanent workers due to the reduction in work. Since this type of work is an important source of income, its loss has a serious impact on their food security and livelihood.

Timing of designation is also a critical issue due to the uncertainty it creates. If resettlement takes time to be carried out before the time the winter harvest is ready, the farmers then reduce operations and lay off workers because of a lack of finance thus causing a great deal of unnecessary hardships. It can be then noted that, if times for resettlement could be officially fixed, then all affected actors including the farmer, farm workers and new settlers can make their plans accordingly.

It is also difficult to get information on the whereabouts and situation of the laid off workers. It was suggested that some would have gone to try to find casual work on other commercial farms, some skilled workers (including drivers and mechanics) may have found employment elsewhere and that others may have gone to communal areas. A survey conducted by FCTZ in 1997 indicated that 27 percent and 40 percent maintained communal area homes in Mashonaland West and East provinces respectively.

Low levels of education make it difficult for farm workers to secure any other form of employment outside the farms. Some then resort to illegally settling on private property or in prohibited areas as a large number have cut ties with relations in communal areas and therefore do not have anywhere else to go.

The loss or reduction of income also affects workers' children who are then deprived of education which they would have otherwise benefited from whilst residing at the farm. These in turn may resort to anti-social behaviour and undesirable forms of trade. However, there has not been any reported large influx of displaced farm workers into peri-urban settlements in the large cities. Further investigation is actually required to gain a better picture of where farm workers who have lost their jobs and homes have actually gone.

The elderly are also a group that was affected, as it is not all who have communal homes. Some farmers allow their elderly workers to stay on the farms doing lighter chores or engaging in their own self-sustaining activities as a form of 'pension.' However, with the "fast track" program, the elderly have become destitute and extremely impoverished as they are stripped off all these benefits including the credit facilities at the farm stores as well. The absence of social safety nets to cushion them from these problems has made life difficult for them.

A significant number of the farm workers are of foreign origin and therefore have nowhere to retire to, except on the farms. These families will have great difficulty meeting any large health expenses that could arise. Some families were used to supplementing their incomes by gold panning but this has been reduced because the places where they were panning are now occupied, new settlers also charge a fee to the workers to access the dam where fishing can be carried out and are also denying them access to firewood. As a result of the cuts on food expenditure and the accompanying reduction in numbers of meals consumed it is estimated that the farm workers are not currently meeting their minimum food needs. In the case of farms where operations have ceased, the 'employed' were facing problems of unemployment especially when they ended up as squatters.

While it is inevitable that some farm workers would be displaced and retrenched by the land reform program, especially older and infirm and piece workers. However if the resettlement program had been carried out in a more orderly and systematic manner it would result in more rural jobs.

## Conclusion

Land reform is one of the key instruments for addressing rural poverty; should therefore be used as a vehicle for emancipating farm workers. This can be achieved through the establishment of permanent settlements with legal tenure, which, will release farm workers and their families from being bound to the world of agriculture labor which perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty that they seem to be locked in. Permanent settlements will enable farm worker communities to be completely integrated into the national economy, not only as a contribution to the GDP, but as part of all national development programs. These settlements will also provide a solution to the problems faced by old and retired workers.

Land reform is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for tackling rural poverty, to be successful land reform has to be accompanied by a host of other reforms, in the marketing of produce, in the provision of credit, in the provision of technical assistance, in the provision of necessary infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools and clinics. In my own humble opinion, land reform in Zimbabwe has only addressed one of the key issues, redistribution without putting in place measures that would ensure its success.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although in 1982 the government extended citizenship to a lot of farm workers, a significant number particularly women did not take advantage of this offer. In addition it is extremely difficult to access civic documents as a result a high percentage of children on commercial farms do not have birth certificates. A study carried out by SNV in one district in Zimbabwe revealed that 75% of the children of school going age did not have birth certificates.

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