

The Nexus between Equitable Land Distribution and Poverty Reduction: An Overview of the Zimbabwean Situation

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Abstract

Developments in Zimbabwe at the turn of the new millennium have been characterised by efforts to ensure that the land redistribution exercise takes place across all communities. This was done at a faster rate than witnessed anywhere in the world for the past two decades. The overall aim was to grapple with the rising levels of poverty and unemployment that led to discontent among the populace. Land redistribution represents the desire to increase participation in agricultural activities and place land in the hands of those who till the land. Economically, land redistribution makes a great deal of sense as it leads to a redistribution of income in favour of groups who are expected to spend their money on the domestic rather than international markets. The aim of this paper is to examine the linkage between inequitable land distribution and the socio-economic deprivations underlying poverty in Zimbabwe. The need to investigate arises from the standpoint that other societies have seen the gaps between the rich and the poor closing but having sought other models of reducing poverty other than of land redistribution. The examination provides a basis upon which justification for land reform can be carried out in some developing countries with similar land ownership patterns as in Zimbabwe in the pre-fast track land reform era. It also forms the basis upon which poverty can be reduced. The paper unearths controversies surrounding land reform, to be specific, the fast track land reform and its concerns the poor in Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Emerging from policy-making circles, researchers, academia and donors in developing countries particularly across Africa and Zimbabwe to be specific, is that the structure of the poor has not changed much over the past decades. A record of evidence is indicating that poverty is growing not only in rural populace though being the most affected, but also in urban areas. A search for an answer to the problem of poverty in Zimbabwe has largely evolved around historical and institutional structures depicting the colonial period. This has kept the majority, particularly the black people, largely marginalised in terms of accessing the best arable land that is needed to ensure that they participate meaningfully in the economy and transform their lives positively. It is of importance to highlight that the Zimbabwean economy is dependent on agriculture. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to argue for Marxist principle that any means is justified in pursuing the end but to bring to the fore a mixture of

political, economic and egalitarian motives in changing the distribution of land ownership patterns in favour of small farmers. Although the correlation between equitable land distribution and poverty reduction there is existing evidence of problems that often arise that do not lessen poverty but increase it. It is the purpose of the writer to bring to light these problems and suggest ways of overcoming them, as it is imperative that land reform ought to be carried out.

Conceptualising Land Distribution and Poverty

In trying to conceptualise land redistribution one requires to understand related concepts in the debate and illuminating on central issues. According to Sam Moyo, equitable land distribution relates to the distribution of land, denoting the deconcentration of prime land, the increased absolute number of landholders (Moyo 1999:2). Thus it largely denotes a demography broadly based participation in various commercial uses of rural land (Ibid). It also denotes equal access to urban land for home ownership and that rural infrastructure; agricultural markets and capital markets would be more accessible to a wider range of uses. In this definition one can actually draw the rationale behind land redistribution.

Land reform as a major instrument of policy follows both from the inefficiency theory of peasant decision making under sharecropping, and from concern over its impact on income distribution. It can also be seen as promoting both efficiency and equity goals at the same time. Land reform is unlike most policy interventions, it seeks to alter the economic environment within which peasant production takes place. Property owners that are dominant in the structures of political power in most developing countries are least likely to undermine the underlying bases of their own status. Hence the tendency to result antagonism between the power centres namely those who own the land and the prospective owners. To some, land reform is not marginal or graded shift in the relative prices or access to resources; it involves a major, once for all change in the land ownership structures of a country (Ellis 1998:83-84).

Connected to the term equitable land distribution is the term agrarian reform, which is largely used to refer to changing of the production and social relations in agriculture (Hadjor 1993:18). Another closely used term is land reform, which is a government initiated or government backed transfer of ownership of agricultural land (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/landrefom>)

It refers to the transfer from ownership by a relatively small number of wealthy owners with extensive land holdings, for example plantations, large ranches/farms, or agri-business plots to individuals or collectives without land. Of importance to note is that the transfer of ownership may be with/without consent or compensation of the losing side (Hadjor 1993: 18). According to Hadjor has taken place in many third world countries particularly in Latin

American countries of Cuba, Uruguay in the 1960s and in Mexico 1934 to 1940, and more so the land invasion and revolts in Peru, Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, Chile, and Venezuela in the 1960s (Ibid 175-176). This was also noticeable in some South Eastern Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan. Land reform has been popular in Africa as part of struggle for decolonisation, where it has been part of the programme for African/Arab socialism and a crucial step in achieving economic development.

Sam Moyo prefers the term egalitarian land distribution, which refers to the desired state of affairs in which the inefficiencies of underutilised land in their various forms of speculative landholdings and trading of parochial land market transfers allows for different land based sustainable livelihoods using varied sizes of land in agricultural, wildlife, tourist, environmental enterprises to emerge. (Moyo 1992:3). Thus land reform builds the prosperity of the country from bottom rather than for the top as those at the grassroots owns the means of production.

In defining poverty it is difficult to ascertain which definition is appropriate because of arguments that are often raised. A description by Clayton seems to provide a clear enunciation of problem,

Poverty is not free from ambiguity, in its absolute sense, its dependent in the personal judgement relative to minimum needs. In its relative sense, it becomes totally elusive and highly politicised and it is not enough to assert that development objectives should be concerned with the reduction of absolute poverty that will be difficult to achieve. The notion of relative poverty reflects a particularly attractive of western man...is less evident in small farming community of most LDCs (1983:29).

Poverty can be simply defined as a state of ill-being. For the purpose of this paper it is important to consider a definition by McGreeves that relates poverty to income levels (1980:126), the different dimensions of poverty by the UNDP report which covers various spectrum of human life i.e. political, economic and socio cultural variables (1998:3). Todaro defines the poor as having no or little shelter, inadequate food, their market is poor, they cannot read nor write are unemployed and their prospects for better life are bleak or uncertain at best (1982:1). The closer working definition for the problem under investigation would be the one provided by Moyo quoted from UNDP which defines Human Poverty as more than income poverty encompassing such things as denial of choices and opportunities for a better living (1998:15). This qualifies the orbit surrounding land distribution in Zimbabwe where a cycle of poverty includes issues of social exclusion, lack of freedom as well as deprivation of income. Lessons are learnt from other developing countries that the gap between the rich and the poor has been narrowing for the past quarter of the century in Taiwan, and the country has prospered greatly under the influence of land reform (Harrison 1980:3). Narayan quoted an interviewee who remarked, "... all our problems derive from the lack of land. If we have

enough land we will be able to produce enough to feed our households, build houses, and train our children” (2000:47).

Poverty reduction makes a great deal of sense. According to Robert Chambers poverty is a strong determinant of others. It contributes to physical weakness through the lack of food, small bodies, malnutrition leading to low immune response to infections, and inability to reach or pay for health services. He also noted that it leads to isolation because of the inability to pay the cost of schooling, to buy a radio or a bicycle, to afford to travel to look for work, or to live near the village centre or the main road; to vulnerability through lack of assets to pay large expenses or to meet contingencies; and to powerlessness because lack of wealth goes with low status (1982:112).

Equitable Land Distribution and Poverty Reduction: The Linkage

Access to land in Zimbabwe has largely been influenced by settler colonialism. Policies were designed to alienate land from the indigenous population and weaken their control over the resource. The net result was that prior to land invasions or occupation and fast track land reform less than 10% of the population had become the dominant class controlling land and related resources (Moyo: 1999). The indigenous population having been conceptualised in the framework of being not owners of land but function as in former Prime Minister Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) Garfield Todd’s words: “We do not want native peasants. We want the bulk of them working in the mines and farms and in European areas and we could absorb their families”(Bond 1998:92).

According to Human Development Report, between 1923 and 1953 white settler hegemony was extended over the black population through series of discriminatory political and economic laws and policies. In particular, fingers point at the Land Apportionment Act of 1931, the Maize Control Act and the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 which consolidated minority control over land and agricultural market, and confining of the black majority to increasingly overcrowded areas with poor soils and low erratic rainfall (UNDP 1998:81-82). This cement the view that social exclusion and lack of freedom in relation to land has been rampant in Zimbabwe throughout the colonial period and connects to the prevalence of poverty particularly in rural areas. Political independence in 1980 came but rural poverty and environmental degradation was at its most with resources stretched to their limit as most rural areas are located in marginal areas.

The need to redistribute land as a way of reducing poverty has been noted in academic circles and among policy makers. The World Development Report of 1992, the United Nations Development Programme Poverty Report of 1998, the Donor Conference of 1998 and the Human Development Report of 1998 and 2000 have reported of the need to redistribute the land in Zimbabwe. Notable is the fact that inequitable land distributions created a situation in

which deprivation has persisted particularly in rural areas, which have suffered basic food, health and water insecurity. This is because most native areas that were created during colonial rule are in rocky and sandy areas with low rainfall. Areas such as Chivi district of Masvingo province and Svosve in Mashonaland East province depict such characteristics (Ankomah 2002:23). Thus, land redistribution enables those living in marginal areas to access better land that will increase yields as most areas owned by large commercial farmers have good soils and rainfall. It has to be borne in mind that inequitable land distribution is retrogressive to any society. Latin America provides an example of how land redistribution was carried out. According to Hadjor, in the 1960s pressure for land reform came from the USA when president Kennedy recognised that unless something was done to ameliorate the position of Latin America peasants the whole continent would explode (1993:175) This testifies the need for such move in Zimbabwe where land reform is imperative for the provision of basic human needs. According to Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), access to land is crucial factor in the eradication of food insecurity and rural poverty. The worlds poorest are usually land-poor, and FAO emphasised that improved access to land provides shelter and food allowing households to increase food consumption and increase household income if surplus food is produced and sold (www.fao.org/documents)

In urban areas shortage of food and its correlation with poverty is seen from the increased use of open spaces and marginal areas in most cities and towns for agricultural activities. This is done to increase food stocks such as maize and vegetables, giving an indication for the dire need for land. SARDC reports that food shortages in rural areas have a ripple effect in urban areas as most people migrate to town where employment is hard to come by resulting in food shortages and not enough space to find sustenance (Report No.12: 3). Important to poverty reduction in urban areas could be enhanced by industrialisation that it is likely to emerge. An example is South Korea where agriculture did through compulsory food procurement in the 1950s and 1960s made an important contribution to industrialisation. It has been noted again that high levels of productivity per hectare were achieved that fed into the agro industry and today South Korea boasts of the highest rice yields per hectare in the world (Wade 1982:1).

As Sam Moyo noted, large commercial farmers, both white and indigenous elites occupy best farmland (1998:55). According to a report by Ankomah 78% of all Grade 1 and 11 lands belong to this group of people (2002:2) thus making them the pivot of the economy of the region especially in terms of exports. Compared to the native areas which have low-grade lands barely able to support even subsistence farming. Hence the need for equitable land distribution that will ensure that the poor access better land with greater productivity expectations. This will reduce poverty since there is a tendency as Human Development report has noted that human poverty index to increase from wetter areas to drier zones (UNDP 1998:25). Thus distribution of land in wetter areas to those from drier areas mostly

native reserves created in the colonial period will see the improvement of the lives of these people. In Taiwan, for example incomes were brought closer to equality, not by exterminating the rich but by empowering the poor through land reform.

A significant correlation exists between land shortage and poverty especially when one considers the poor's access to land resources. What needs to be borne in mind is that land is everything in Zimbabwe and development stems or ought to stem from it. In fact the political economy of Zimbabwe is driven by the agrarian sector to increase participants' means the increase in beneficiaries. Key sectors such as tourism, forestry and narrow agro industrial complex feeds on the land. For the urban economy to thrive, it requires the full utilisation of the land resources as employment is created thereby curbing rural urban migration. There is a likely increase in jobs available in urban areas with the creation of agro based industries especially those related to mechanisation, irrigation, manufacturing fertilisers and pesticides, plant breeding and processing plants. According to Hador, large technologies related to agriculture in such areas as fish, meat and egg production exist and are organised as huge factories and large multinationals such as Unilever, Nestle and Nabrasco have emerged, which integrate farming activities with food processing and wholesale and retail operations (Hador 1993:22). According to poverty assessment done by the government of Zimbabwe these processes would see the growth of incomes and expansion of the Zimbabwean markets that will see the transformation of the lives of over 60 percent of rural poor hence becoming a meaningful move toward poverty alleviation.

In the same light better land to the poor means a lot in terms of poverty reduction. Land redistribution is actually a tool of emancipation that can remove the entire interlocking deprivation trap that surrounds the poor. Generally, it can see the poor in urban areas managing to get land for residential purposes, few square meters for agricultural purposes and above all employment. To the rural folk better land means the growth of their output that would transform their lives away from what Mhone described as:

A low-income quasi-stable equilibrium trap which is characterised by a vicious circle of low productivity incomes...poor quality of resources, high population pressure, limited access to supportive infrastructure and services and vulnerability of droughts (Moyo 1998:i).

There has been a general agreement that off-farm income can transform lives of the poor, in particular the argument by Villa Issa that off-farm employment is an important source of income for farm people and that off-farm income maybe the only hope for achieving parity on farms in developing countries (in McGreevey 1980:124). However, what seems to exist that as far as Zimbabwe is concerned it's far from being transformed into reality. Presse and Thirstle have noted of this in a research survey carried out in Gokwe and Chiweshe where it was evident that orthodox assumptions that non farm income alleviate poverty are over-

simplistic since in more remote areas with traditional agriculture those who have higher farm incomes tend to be better placed to exploit non farm income opportunities (Mhone 1994:24). Thus a strategy to equitably distribute land can enable beneficiaries to start other projects as they have farm income rather than off farm income.

Criticism has often arisen pertaining to the politicisation of the land reform in Zimbabwe. However, Carol Thompson has argued that land will always be an election issue no matter who runs not only Zimbabwe, but in other Southern African countries until colonial legacies are fully confronted and rectified according to the demands of the people (www.african.ufl.edu/asq).

Land redistribution ought to be seen as a security matter in terms of forging a stable society. Failure normally leads to turmoil and despondency. According to Chen Cheng the Governor of Taiwan in 1960,

Students of Chinese history find that years of civil commotion arising out of the poor harvest far out number the years of peace. Eight or nine out of ten such disturbances have been caused by our failure to find a through-going and permanent solution of the land problem (Harrison 1980:3).

Henry George has noted that monopolisation of economic opportunity results in no uncertain terms to poverty and that that Irish misery in 19th century resulted from grossly unequal access to the means of production not overpopulation.

Points of Concern and Policy Recommendations

The success of land reform is dependent on a number of factors i.e. political, economic, environmental and socio-cultural. Illife alerts of the heterogeneity of those who are poor especially in relation to the resource endowments to carry out farming activities properly (1992:233), and access to land based activities. Most countries which are poor lack the equipment and labour power that is critical in transforming lives of the poor if they access better land. This renders the process not functional and an attempt to consider those who are well up may not improve the lives of those who are poor. Thus, the success of any agrarian reform of this nature requires heavy state intervention to equip the new farmer especially draught power and making funds available to kick-start the whole process. A case of South Korea was embraced by the state where agriculture was based on small-scale farming and where formation of parastatals enabled the ability to implement orders at its lower rural levels (www.idzi.org). Another example is Vietnam where an analysis of the impact of agricultural extension activities and government policies on extremely poor farmers in remote areas showed that very poorest families within those communities managed to increase productivity and income over period 1994 and 1998 (Wade 1982:1). The success was also attributed to a

number of government policies and measures, in particular to modest subsidisation of hybrid seeds, fertilisers, and livestock medicines. The provision of small farms where single-family households were engaged in full time farming enabled efficient use of the land. For Zimbabwe this is a good example to emulate to ensure success of the process.

A question that often arises is to what extent is equitable land distribution possible? Mostly those who are poor are powerless in the face of policy makers, and powerful indigenous elites who tend to create frameworks that will ensure that they benefit rather than the real poor and destitutes who are in real need of the land to transform their lives. Mexico is a case in point where the 1910-17 peasant revolts led to the introduction of land reform policy in the years 1934 to 1940 but by mid 1970s the situation had reverted back to pre-land redistribution era. There is need therefore as UNDP reported of the process of land distribution to be rational, selection of beneficiaries, land acquisition and project implementation that is transparent and an integrated process which increase production (UNDP 1998:81-82). In general terms the equitable land distribution need to avoid conception of interest that is group oriented especially of black and white elite groups, avoid seeking to expropriate financial and political capital from land reform and at most avoid the transfer of land that is simplistic and emotive process of off loading underutilised marginal lands to poor and small farmers by land owners (Neefes 2000:52). Landlordism over land holding cannot be considered country's only economic problem which if broken lead to poverty reduction.

Important to note is that equitable distribution is but one strategy that reduces poverty, especially given the diversity of those who are poor, Zimbabwe need not only rely on land distribution as a poverty reduction measure. One needs to note that land reform should be taken within the framework of other policies that can transform the lives of those who are poor. The framework developed by the Human Development Report of 1998 need to be taken into the whole process of poverty alleviation. Of particular importance added to land reform there is the need to re-engineer and rebuild the state, re-invigorating the social service sector, export led growth and above all political commitment to development itself (UNDP 1998:82). Thus, it should be borne in mind that land reform is directly linked to performance of other sectors and the growth of South Korea where land reform took place is not only alluded to this one factor but the diversity of policies that are geared to achieving one objective of poverty reduction and development in general. This provides a key lesson for Zimbabwe.

There are concerns regarding environmental degradation caused by newly resettled farmer especially given the connection between poor people and high densities of population. However, according to Koos Neefes, there is growing evidence that some of the poorer people of the world, in particular developing countries, actually restore degraded environments and even create pure natural capital. For example, increased densities of trees are associated with increased densities of people in Kenya, poor people traditionally created

patches of forest in the savannah of Guinea, the poor families in Lung Vai, Vietnam did not take much in environmental change either positive or negative (2000:52).

It has been perceived that without title deeds development is not likely to be seen on new settlers' land holdings and the rights of those who had the rights over the land prior to acquisition. From the onset, it should be highlighted that a conflict exists in the field of human rights particularly with the emergence of the notions of property rights in most societies. Questioning the legitimacy of ownership, and how the property rights are weighed against the right to life and liberty, at most what constitute fair land reform? In Mutale Valley, South Africa plot holders must pay an annual fee of twelve rands to the State. The occupants are given persuasion to use the land but no title deeds exist and the land can be passed to other family members on their death or retirement (Lahif 2000:166). Hence the need for the Zimbabwean government and other stakeholders involved to be innovative in devising ways for the achievement of sustainable management of land as a resource.

However, relying on this as long-term strategy appears retrogressive. There is need for the government to consider in the future ensuring that the land is sold to the tillers as small as it is and ensure that rent is paid. A case of Taiwan reveals that after the land was sold to the tillers farmers doubled their income. According to Fred Harrison,

With a decade much of the island was rehoused, former adobe structures with thatched roofs and dirt floors gave way to brick houses with tile roofs and cement floors...Electricity was extended throughout the country side...Transportation went through stages from rusty bicycles...to small motor cycles to automobiles. With each economic change came a new industry, selling to an indigenous local market, bicycles, electric appliances and later motorbikes (1980:3).

There has been a quick evaluation of the land reform programme. There has been failure by commentators and analyst to understand that policy like this requires time. It is true that in 2002 agricultural output fell to minus 20.8% from minus 12.9% in 2000 (Shoko 2003:18). However one need not to lose hindsight of the three issues that compounded the problem; drought, reluctance by white farmers to produce in protest to the land reform and the activities of the local seed and fertiliser companies mostly owned and controlled by those disgruntled by the process. Government efforts to make resources available largely failed, as the resources for supporting the farmers were meagre and were received by the few who met the criterion required to access them.

Frank Ellis points the uncertainties that are prevalent to most peasant farmers such as natural hazards, market fluctuations, social uncertainty and state actions and wars (1998:3). There is need to for policy makers and concerned authorities to ensure that irrigation, crop insurance

and emergence of plant resistant varieties to address the natural hazards issue. The marketing uncertainty has to be resolved through provision of adequate information, price stabilisation and credit provision (Ellis 1998:83).

Land distribution in Zimbabwe need not be aimed at producing commercial items, especially where there is a pre-occupation with exports to existing markets. In fact, according to Hadjor, in Africa famines seem to be becoming more common with the spread of commercial agriculture and the most stricken countries have continued to export in times of famine. South Korea provides a good policy for Zimbabwe where its third five year plan 1971-76 was designed to bring rural incomes up to urban levels at the same time to reach self sufficiency in two most important food grains rice and barley (Hadjor 1993:19). Irrigation systems ought to be established and maintained to ensure that environmentally related disasters such as droughts are addressed thus making land a resource that continually sustain lives of those who depend upon it.

Key to the success of land reform is dependent on four main factors. Firstly, proper allocation of resources with diligence to naturally hardworking people needs to be prioritised. Secondly, there is no need for the initial stages to embark on the use of tractors that require greater financial resources in the backdrop of the abundance of labour. Lessons to be learnt from China are that agricultural experts reached correct conclusion that more food could be grown by hand and Water Buffaloes. The logic being that tractors and other farm machinery save many hours of labour, but does little else, and with a country with manpower surplus does not need to do that. When industrializing it makes sense to begin mechanisation to release manpower to industry. Hence, it is advisable never to release the agricultural labour until the industrial sector has developed enough to begin to demand it.

Thirdly, for any state particularly in developing countries there is need for political control over the economy and the populace. Democratisation from below through participating meaningfully in the economy forms the basis and essence of democracy. The Controller and Auditor General Report (1993) indicated some chiefs in the government and in the ruling classes allocated themselves land ahead of the landless. This is a cause for concern that needs to be uprooted in any system of land reform and redistribution as it undermines democratisation in the economic sector.

Lastly, reality has to prevail and those who hold the view that land reform does not lead to development must remember that change is always traumatic. The loss of financial position and social prestige has through history been fought and resisted especially where interests in terms of resources and mind set has been affected negatively by such changes.

Conclusion

Given the historical developments in Zimbabwe, that has seen the displacement of many blacks from better resource-endowed areas in agriculture during the colonial period and also given the nature of the political economy that is largely agrarian it is imperative that transformation of the lives of those who are poor requires altering the structure of land ownership and distribution of the land. However, one need not lose hindsight of the heterogeneity of the poor, thus they cannot be considered in the same schema for their transformation, hence the need for solutions that are not short sighted. There is need to accept that poverty cannot be solved by equitable land distribution alone and also the need to avoid blunders that will make the whole process a foiled one. Thus a comprehensive approach to solving poverty in Zimbabwe is required but it should not be forgotten that the issue of land is not only poverty reduction in pure economic sense but a political issue that haunts the hearts of those who fought the liberation struggle and affected negatively by colonialism as well as an issue of long term sustainable development and justice. Above all, to make land reform succeed marketing, supply and credit facilities must be supplied so that farmers are not driven back into the chuckles of the large scale multiple landowners. Land redistribution as a means of reducing poverty has to be viewed as long term oriented and requires great commitment and hard work of the farmers and the supporting institutions.

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