Agriculture
Zimbabwe: A disastrous experiment
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Africa’s own leadership is often responsible for land grab at an even larger scale. Zimbabwe’s disastrous land redistribution programme (1992 to 2010), which eventually destroyed its most productive sector, illustrates the importance of security of ownership that is able to unlock land as a bankable asset and the implications of land expropriation without due process.

Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe’s predecessor, unilaterally declared independence in 1965. By that time most of the high-potential agricultural land had been seized and was farmed by white settlers. At the time that Rhodesia declared itself a republic, a few years after independence, the vast majority of the black population had been relegated to so-called tribal trust lands, generally in the lowlands, areas which were significantly less productive and often disease ridden.

After a violent struggle that involved liberation forces operating from a number of neighbouring countries, Zimbabwe was eventually born in 1979. The Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, led by Robert Mugabe, subsequently won the first elections in 1980 and embarked upon a land reform programme that steadily became more chaotic and violent.

Between 1960 and 1990, Zimbabwe exported about 10% more food than it consumed and consistently outproduced China on a per capita basis. But production per capita dropped rapidly in the early 1990s (Chart 6). Although agricultural production recovered somewhat later in that decade, it has never regained previous levels of production.

In the early 2000s, Mugabe evicted more than 4,000 white commercial farmers from their land. Later his party embarked upon centralised ‘command agriculture’, which dealt a further blow to Zimbabwe’s agricultural sector. By 2010, yields per hectare in Zimbabwe were below the levels seen at the time of its Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 although, due to the expansion of land under cultivation, total production was significantly higher.

Agricultural production in Zimbabwe seems to be on a terminal decline. Despite Emmerson Mnangagwa initially appearing to embark on a different approach after deposing Mugabe in a military coup in November 2017, he soon reverted to the same policies that had brought disaster in the first place. By 2019, Zimbabwe was importing close to 22% of its total food demand. When Mnangagwa half-heartedly sought to reverse course in 2020, fewer than 300 white commercial farmers (mostly dairy farmers) were estimated to be left in the country. Much of the land violently acquired had, in the meanwhile, been handed to party officials. Ham-fisted efforts at land and agricultural reform in Zimbabwe have therefore accentuated poverty.

A different approach in Zimbabwe would have yielded very different outcomes.

The World Bank finds that agricultural markets regularly fail African farmers, generally because ‘the pattern of market failures is general and structural, and not related to the head-of-household’s gender, or to geographic characteristics such as distance to roads or to large population centres.’ African farms are less productive because farmers are chronically unable to access the finances (or credit) that would allow them to purchase critical inputs that could improve yields, such as fertiliser and seed.


5. T Lewis, *Transatlantic slave trade*, 2018


14. World Bank, *Aggregated LPI*

15. World Bank, *Aggregated LPI*

16. Embassy of the DR Congo, *Invest in DRC, Agriculture*


19. In 2003, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (now called the African Union Development Agency) published its Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, with ambitious goals, namely to: allocate at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture; reach rural growth rates of 6% annually by 2015; integrate and invigorate regional and national agricultural markets; significantly increase agricultural exports; transform Africa into a ‘strategic player’ in global agricultural science and technology; practise sound environmental and land management techniques; and reduce rural poverty (see: M Fleshman, *Boosting African farm yields*, 2014).

20. The commitment to devote at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture and rural development was also included in the 2003 Maputo Declaration by African heads of state and reiterated in the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation in Africa.

21. On aggregate, Africa spends only 5–7% of national budgets on agriculture, although a 2018 study found that 11 African countries did manage to allocate 10% or more of their budgets to agriculture in some years since 2005, with Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Sierra Leone achieving 6% agricultural...

22. AllAfrica, *Communique: Africa food security leadership dialogue*, August 5, 2019

23. IPPMedia, *Value add in Africa: First steps in a long journey*, 2019; also see: African Cashew Alliance, *About us*

24. The world cocoa industry is worth more than US$100 billion annually; also see: Y Adegoke, *Why Europe dominates the global chocolate market while Africa produces all the cocoa*, 2018; D Philling, The African farmers taking on big chocolate, *Financial Mail*, 16 December 2019; H Fofack, *Overcoming the colonial development model of resource extraction for sustainable development in Africa*, 2019


31. World Bank, *Agriculture in Africa: Telling facts from myths*


33. World Bank, *Agriculture in Africa: Telling facts from myths*

34. In contrast to the tripling in growth cited earlier, this was an improvement across the entire country, so the growth is understandably much smaller; see: JY Lin, *The Household Responsibility System in China’s Agricultural Reform: A Theoretical and Empirical Study*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 36:S3, 1988, S199–S224

35. China-Africa Project, Chinese and African agriculture have a lot more in common that most people think: *Interview with Xinqing Lu, Associate Programme Officer for Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa*, 3 December 2019

36. OEC, Brazil


38. L Abboud, *The robot revolution down on the farm*, 2018


40. R Kimani and P Bosire, *FarmDrive*, 2019

41. In most of rural Africa, precise location of a farm is objectively unknown so the location is determined via a series of SMS questions (e.g. time to walk to different primary schools). The more schools a farmer is familiar with in their area, the easier it is to hone in on their specific location.

42. J Bird, *‘Smart’ insurance helps poor farmers to cut risk*, *Financial Times*, 5 December 2018; also see, for example, https://agrocenta.com/ and https://www.zenvus.com/.

44. S Gebre, AGRA plans to invest $500 million in African seed companies, Bloomberg, 7 September 2016

45. The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and its allied organisations argue that ‘AGRA has unequivocally failed in its mission to increase productivity and incomes and reduce food insecurity, and has in fact harmed broader efforts to support African farmers.’ See: Various co-signatories, Open letter: The Green Revolution in Africa has unequivocally failed, 15 September 2021


47. Ammonia manufacturing contributes 1% of worldwide carbon dioxide emissions. See LK Boerner, Industrial ammonia production emits more CO2 than any other chemical-making reaction. Chemists want to change that, Chemical & Engineering News, 15 June 2019


49. Indorama Petrochemicals, About IEPL, Port Harcourt


54. Food and Agriculture Organization, Food Wastage: Key Facts and Figures

55. InspiraFarms, Our Team

56. The improvements in yields are similar in magnitude to the improvements seen in South Asia between 1980 and 2020, and in a similar timeframe. Indeed, South America achieved a much more rapid increase between 2000 and 2010, moving from roughly 7.8 tons per hectare to about 11.8 tons.

57. Chart 14 presents the reduction in extreme poverty in African countries across the low- and middle-income categories. The reduction in extreme poverty in Seychelles, Africa’s only high-income country, is negligible.

58. The contribution of agriculture as a proportion of the Seychelles’ economy, the continent’s only high-income island state, was about 4% in 2019.

59. Some of these constraints can be overcome through technology, such as the use of precision irrigation and application of precise amounts of fertiliser exactly where they are required. Then there is also the potential of vertical farming, which could produce 180 m tons of food globally, according to some analysts.


61. Food and Agriculture Organization, Government Expenditure on Agriculture, 2019


63. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Working Group II: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, 2018


65. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture does particularly impressive work in this regard. See: https://www.iita.org/
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