



Zimbabwe's land reform farmers prosper despite difficulties

*Joseph Hanlon**

When the war veterans took the land it was nasty. Farmers were evicted at gunpoint with only what they could carry, losing cattle and all they had invested in the farm. People were beaten; houses were burned.

Those taking the land were white veterans of World War 2 and the land was in the colony of southern Rhodesia. In the decade after the war, 100,000 farm families were violently evicted. There was no compensation and no international outcry – perhaps because the action was simply more violence against Africans.

Fifty years later in independent Zimbabwe, liberation war veterans led an occupation of the land. 4,000 white farmers were evicted, and were replaced by 170,000 new farm families. Zimbabweans took back their land. But this time, there was a global outcry. The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe and demanded that the land be given back to the 4,000 white farmers, or that they be compensated. No one suggested compensation for the 100,000 families evicted 50 years before – only descendants of Europeans count.

Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, but the agreement negotiated at Lancaster House said the government had to buy back the stolen land – and only if white farmers offered the land for sale. There were never more than 6,000 white farmers in the country, and by independence they still used only one-third of the land that the colonial authorities had defined as "European". And of those farmers, 30 per cent were bankrupt; another 30 per cent were just breaking even, living on subsidies from the white government. The remainder were profitable and a few hundred became wealthy. Not surprisingly, it was mostly the failing farmers with poorer land who

offered it for sale at a price the new government could afford. But that was enough to resettle 75,000 families. Three decades later those farmers are doing well – but ongoing research on the 1980s resettlement underlines that it really takes a generation for a farmer to make the land profitable.

The liberation war had been waged to gain both independence and land, and two decades after independence the liberation war veterans were becoming increasingly outspoken about the lack of land reform. The government made speeches about land, but the veterans decided it was all talk, and they organised the occupations in early 2000. Veterans continue to stress that that the land reform was not done by President Robert Mugabe; instead, it was a mass movement against Mugabe and the greedy political elite. Indeed,

in the first months ministers repeatedly gave speeches saying the occupiers could not stay, and went to farms to urge occupiers to "go home". But the occupiers decided this was home, and no one moved. Finally, the government realised that there were more votes from the 170,000 families occupying the land than from the 4,000 evicted white families, and they legalised the occupations as the Fast Track Land Reform.

The political elite also helped themselves to some of the land. Perhaps ten per cent of the former white farmland went to a few hundred people high in Zanu (the ruling party), government and the military. But ninety per cent of the land really did go to small farmers. Most white farms were broken up into about 50 small farms, typically with 6 hectares of good farmland. A few were broken up into 10 larger farms, with 30 hectares or more.

The first decade of the 21st century was traumatic for Zimbabwe, with serious political violence and greed by the elite. There was violence around the 2000, 2002 and 2008 elections with most (but not all) of the blame put on ruling party, Zanu-PF. Government tried to solve its problems by printing money, creating one of the worst hyperinflations in history. Negotiations held under pressure from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2008 between Zanu-PF and the two opposition parties led to the Global Political Agreement and a Unity Government in February 2009. One of the first actions of the new government was the complete abandonment of the Zimbabwe dollar and the adoption of the US dollar as currency. Under dollarization, Zimbabwe loses many powers over its own economy, but it prevents the Zanu-PF led central bank from printing money, and created a stability that lead to a very rapid economic recovery. Most striking, not only have the 170,000 land reform farmers survived the chaos, they have prospered.

In November 2012 the African Development Bank issued a report "Infrastructure and Growth in Zimbabwe: An Action Plan for Strengthened Recover"¹ which noted that Zimbabwe's agricultural production had almost returned to the average of the 1990s,

the decade before the land reform. And Finance Minister Tendai Biti has reported that half the maize and forty per cent of the tobacco is now being produced by land reform farmers. Thus the land reform farmers have become the most dynamic sector of the economy.

Before independence, white farmers were given massive subsidies by the white government. Land reform farmers received very little, and had to find their own money. Some kept urban jobs, some brought cattle from the communal areas, some raised money from families. The World Bank report notes that land reform farmers are still seriously undercapitalised. But those who are succeeding are doing so through reinvestment – putting the profits from each year's harvest into buying inputs and equipment for the next year.

Despite the hyperinflation most of the new small farmers were able to build houses and slowly build up their farms. Since the introduction of the US dollar, production has jumped dramatically, because it is easier to buy inputs and sell produce. Data shows that the new farmers exhibit a pattern similar to the white farmers.

One third is doing very well; they have now become small commercial farmers mainly producing for the market and are earning good incomes. A middle group is comfortable, producing their own food and building brick houses, and selling some crops; with the US dollar, this group is increasing production and sales and many in this group will become small commercial farmers. The remaining third are not doing well – they lacked capital or skills and some are dropping out.

Without significant subsidy or credit, growth has been slow, yet on average they are reaching white farm production levels. Contract farming in crops such as tobacco, cotton, soya beans and barley has grown rapidly since the 2009 dollarization; the contract companies supply inputs and sometimes ploughing on credit and the farmer must sell to the contract company. Former white farmers have moved up the value chain, and many are now running contract and supply companies (and there are still 400 white farmers).

In general, the land reform farmers are less capital intensive than the white farmers, so they are using more land and more labour than the white farmers they replaced. The white farmers employed about 250,000 full time labourers. Recent estimates are that full time family labour is up to about 550,000, but these small commercial farmers are also hiring 350,000 full time workers. Thus the number of full time workers has increased nearly four-fold.

Land reform has also changed the role of women. Women former guerrillas were involved in the occupations, and increasing numbers of women are obtaining land in their own right. Government now expects that when a couple obtains land, that both

names are on the letter giving them rights to the land, which ensures the woman will inherit. And a more subtle change that became apparent in interviews is that increasingly women are taking commercial farming decisions.

With credit and subsidy, the 170,000 land reform farmers could expand more rapidly. But even at the present level of growth, they look set to surpass the white farmers they replaced.

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¹ <http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/southern-africa/zimbabwe/infrastructure-and-growth-in-zimbabwe-an-action-plan-for-strengthened-recovery/>