Chapter 7

Agrarian Reform and Prospects for Recovery

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Introduction

Since September 15, 2008, when the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations signed an interparty agreement to work together toward a peaceful democratic transition, sustainable development, and the normalization of relations, debates over Zimbabwe’s economic recovery and development strategy have intensified. Various donors, including the Multi-Donor Trust Fund1 managed by the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Harare,2 the “Fishmongers”3 donor group, and key “think tanks”4 have proffered strategies. The Government of Zimbabwe’s (GoZ) budget5 and monetary statements6 have also charted a new path of economic liberalization. A few Zimbabwean policy groups—Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ), African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS), and Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD)—have weighed in with sectoral proposals.

The longer-term issue in Zimbabwe remains how to resolve the agrarian and national questions, with democratization being an intrinsic requirement. Zimbabwe’s agrarian question today (as elsewhere) concerns its transition from a poorly developed agrarian society to an industrial society through the transformation of the roles and capacities of the various agrarian actors (including peasants, agricultural workers, landowners, and agrarian capitalists) and the state, and improvement of the social relations of production. The development of agriculture’s productive forces and its enhanced contribution to national accumulation are central.7 The immediate purpose is to “create the conditions for a rise in [agricultural] productivity, such that [the] raw materials and wage—goods needs of a growing manufacturing sector...
can be met, while labour is released." Agrarian reform should thus entail the incremental diversification of industry and improved wage employment. Other supplementary sources and mechanisms of accumulation, however, include the mining, tourism, and services sectors. Since “national” commodity and capital flows intersect with, and are shaped by, global processes of production, and various markets—involving transnational capital, agricultural trade, and related foreign financial flows (and aid)—shape the nature of the agrarian question, in terms of integration into the world economy.

The issue is how to address Zimbabwe’s agrarian question, and specifically the food crisis given Zimbabwe’s restructured agrarian and food systems, within the evolving global financial and food crisis. After all, the recent world food price and food aid crises have hurt Africa the most, given its poor agricultural performance and dependency on food imports.

Much of the controversy over Zimbabwe’s Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) since 2000 has been over how and to what extent the reforms adequately redressed inequalities and have been socioeconomically beneficial. Greater emphasis has been placed on “elite capture” in the land allocations, the abrogation of rule of law and violence in the land transfers, the marginalization of farm workers, the decline of agricultural production, and food insecurity. During the course of Zimbabwe’s fast track land reform since 2000, the debate shifted from the land transfers to issues such as good governance, as well as agricultural productivity and the humanitarian “crisis.”

Few scholars have recognized that the recent land redistribution had been historically progressive in so far as it yielded structural reforms in the agrarian sector, in spite of its various shortcomings. Indeed, Zimbabwe’s land reform has largely been discussed in terms of the problems of its democratic deficit, characterized mainly by the violence that occurred around elections since 2000, and the violence and human rights transgressions that accompanied the land redistribution.

A rigorous understanding of the outcomes of the fast track land reform program is critical to any assessment of the prospects for sustainable agrarian reform within a process of democratization, for the promise of deeper forms of substantive democracy in a society pervaded by deep racial and class inequities can only be meaningfully achieved through structural changes. As we show later, despite the casualties of the land reform process, such as the economic decline (estimated at a 30 percent) experienced in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 2000, it has created the socioeconomic foundation and potential for broad-based development and democratization. Indeed, the focus needs to be on addressing the persistence of critical deficiencies of the land reform outcomes, particularly regarding land use and agricultural productivity, while rebuilding democratic institutions toward the goal of sustainable agrarian reform.

The complex issue of land and agrarian reform has not been handled methodically, as emotive analyses and distortions are common. Some scholars label any non-mainstream views of the long term as gullible victims of Robert Mugabe’s anti-imperialist script and vilify the whole land occupation movement by equating it with extreme human rights violations. Moreover, debates on the pitfalls of land reform tend to be based on commonly held misperceptions about the performance of