LAND REFORM FOR POVERTY REDUCTION? SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND FARM WORKERS IN ZIMBABWE

BY

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‘’You want to know to how I define poverty. How can you ask that question when you yourself see that I live in poverty? The definition of poverty is right in front of you. Look at me, I stay alone. I don’t have enough food. I have no decent clothing or accommodation. I have no clean water nearby to drink. Look at my swollen leg. I can’t get to the clinic which is too far for me to walk. So what kind of definition do you expect me to give you which is better than what you are seeing with your naked eyes?’’[1]

‘’ The story of farm workers is the story of a people excluded, exploited and poor. A farm worker spends 50 hours a week toiling. He lives and works on the farm. He has no pension or medical aid cover. A farm worker is among the least paid workers in the country. At the end of his working life, he must go somewhere, away from the farm which was his home. There is no package to facilitate this transition. And often, there is no other home except the farm [2]’’.

1. INTRODUCTION

Land reform has historically been one of the major instruments of addressing poverty, particularly rural poverty, in addition to stimulating the wider development process. Proponents of land reform have also claimed that land reform is an instrument for the pursuit of social equity, and the experiences of East Asia are often cited in this respect. Zimbabwe is one such country that implemented a comprehensive, if chaotic and controversial, land reform between 2000 and 2002. The country’s leadership justified the reform on the grounds of the imperative to bring about equity through poverty reduction. The broader context was one in which it was argued that land reform would represent redress of historical injustice in which 4 500 white commercial farmers owned a greater proportion of the prime arable land while the majority of small farmers were confined to congested and drier communal areas.

This paper represents a provisional attempt to assess whether Zimbabwe’s land reform coherently addresses the issue of poverty reduction. It examines the short-term outcome(s) of the reform programme in relation to its initial objectives. More specifically, it examines its impact on farm-workers. Historically, a vulnerable social group, the farm-worker population was marginalized in the land reform process. The majority of farm workers lost jobs in the process as well as access to housing and social services such as health care and schools. Thus the outcome of the programme has been the loss of jobs and livelihoods by farm workers on the one hand, and the acquisition of land as a resource by several hundred thousand small farmers, and black commercial farmers. This mixed outcome of land reform deserves critical analysis. The paper argues

that social exclusion explains the historical and contemporary marginalization of farm workers with profound social consequences for this group.

After laying out an analytical framework for the discussion, the paper draws on recently gathered empirical material on farm workers' incomes, access to basic social services and food security (Sachikonye, 2003). These aspects have invariably been adversely affected by the land reform process. Applying the concept of "chronic poverty", the paper considers the conditions of the more vulnerable sections of the farm worker population, the impact of HIV-AIDS on them, and their coping strategies.

2. The Analytical Context

The inspiration for this paper draws from both the sweeping character of the land reform process and the attempts at conceptualizing poverty in terms of 'poverty dynamics', rather than simply in terms of 'poverty trends'(Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). After a long hiatus, Zimbabwe's land reform was executed between 2000 and 2002 with vigour, considerable violence and chaos. When it was completed in August 2002, an estimated 300 000 small farmers had been provided land ranging between 5 and 10 hectares. In addition, land was set aside for 51 000 black commercial farmers. Only about 600 white farmers remained in full production on land at the end of 2002. A total of 11,5 million hectares of land had changed hands within two and a half years. The government had passed laws for compulsory acquisition of land and transfer to both the black small and large commercial farmers.

Some of the immediate consequences of the land reform process were the displacement of up to 200,000 farm worker households from the acquired farms. (There were an estimated 320 000 farm worker households on the farms prior to land reform). About two-thirds were thus affected by the reform in terms of job losses and diminished access to shelter and basic social services. Furthermore, crop production was particularly affected following the eviction of white commercial farmers. There were significant declines in the production of maize (the main staple), tobacco (a leading foreign exchange earner), wheat, soya beans, beef and horticulture. A drought in 20001-02 and 2002-03 compounded the decline. There developed a food shortage crisis during this period. Most farm workers who lost jobs were not absorbed into the land reform programme; less than 5 percent of them were granted land. The combination of loss of jobs and income, shelter and basic social goods such as health care made farm workers even more vulnerable at the completion of land reform.

Let us see how useful the concept of chronic poverty would be in the assessment of the present conditions of Zimbabwean farm workers. The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is its extended duration. It affects people who remain poor for much of their lives, and who may 'pass on' their poverty to subsequent generations. Chronic poverty may be viewed as occurring when an individual experiences significant capability deprivations for a period of five years or more (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). According to this perspective, a five-tier categorization for the study of chronic poverty can be made:

> " this recognizes the "always poor" whose poverty score (income, consumption, nutritional status, humand deprivation index etc) in each period is below a defined poverty line; the "usually poor" whose mean poverty score over all periods is less than the poverty line but are not poor in every period; the "churning poor" with a mean poverty score around the poverty line but who are poor in some periods but not in others; the "occasionally poor" whose mean poverty score is above the poverty line but have experienced at least one period in poverty; and the "never poor" with poverty score in all periods above the poverty line" (Ibid.).

These categories could be further aggregated into the 'chronic poor' (always poor and usually poor), the 'transient poor' (churning poor and occasionally poor) and the non-poor (the never poor, continuing through to the always wealthy).

Historically, Zimbabwe's farm workers have constituted the 'usually poor', with a small minority of them making up the 'churning poor'. How did farm workers 'descend' into these categories of poverty? There is a wealth of studies which have documented the historical origins of poverty amongst farm workers (Clarke, 1977; Loewenson, 1992; Amanor-wilks, 1995) The commercial farming sector provided the lowest wage and living conditions and job security . For many decades, the bulk of farm workers were migrants imported from the neighboring countries of Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia.

Until the 1960s, indigenous Zimbabweans shunned farm labour due to poor wages and working conditions. By the beginning of 2000, however, they constituted about 75 per cent of the labour force while migrants and their descendants made up the remainder. The bargaining power of farm workers has often been weak, and it was not until independence in 1980 that labour unions were allowed full rights to extend their activities into the sector with the repeal of the Master and Servants Act. The difficult spatial reach of the farms and plantations made it difficult to organize farm workers into unions. Quasi-paternalist (almost feudal) relationships between farm owners and workers were often the norm (Rutherford, 2001; Tandon, 2001) The citizenship rights of migrant farm workers were ignored. It was not until 1998 that farm workers gained the right to vote in local elections.

In sum, farm workers (both migrant and local) encountered social and political marginalization. They wielded little power in social and economic terms. Their level of dependence on the land-owner for livelihood was deep. They depended on him/her for income, shelter, food, access to school and clinic and recreation facilitites. The phenomenon of compound housing on the farms and plantations reflected this dependence. As we have already observed, farm workers received the lowest wages, and on retirement had meager gratuities or pension. Since they had no tenure security on the farm, they were expected to find a place elsewhere for retirement. This was particularly difficult for elderly retired workers especially migrants. With little or no education, farm-workers-as a social group – were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty

However, we need to situate our assessment of farm workers' conditions in a broader context of poverty in Zimbabwe. These have been two broad types of poverty studies in Zimbabwe. The first type has concerned itself with determining the level of income or consumption below which a family is deemed poor (CSO, 1998), without quantifying national poverty as such, these studies construct a poverty datum line (PDL) and have

been used by policy-makers to target assistance to the poor as well as to determine appropriate wage and price policies. The second type of poverty studies seeks to quantify national poverty but such studies have been few. A major national study of this type was the Poverty Assessment Study Survey (PASS) conducted in 1995.

The PASS survey based its national poverty study on a calculation of two poverty lines, the food poverty line (FPL) and the total consumption poverty line (TCPL). The FPL gives the amount of income required to buy a basket of basic food commodities needed by an average person per annum. For its part, the TCPL estimates the amount of income required to purchase both a basket of food and non-food items such as clothing, housing, education, health and transport amongst others. Those persons whose income is not enough to buy the food basket are "very poor" whilst those whose income is below the TCPL but above the FPL are "poor". In the Zimbabwean context, poverty has therefore been defined as "the inability to afford a defined basket of consumption items (food and non-food) which are necessary to sustain life" (PASS, 1997). In the 1995 survey, the national FPL was paged at Z$1289 while the CPL was set at Z$2132 per annum. Breaking down the poverty lines further, the rural FPL was pegged at Z$1180, and the TCPL at Z$1924 with the urban FPL at Z$1511 and TCPL at Z$2554.

The PASS findings were of major social and policy significance; they showed wide variations in poverty lines at provincial levels. The overall conclusion of the study was that:

> "poverty in Zimbabwe very high with about 61 per cent of the population living in households with income per person below a level sufficient to provide basic needs. About 45 per cent of the households are living below the FPL, that is, they are not able to meet basic nutritional needs. Poverty is more prevalent in rural areas with 75 per cent of the households in total poor category compared with 39 per cent of urban households" (Ibid.)

In sum, PASS showed that at the national level 57 per cent of persons were "very poor", with the survey showing that the incidence of poverty was higher in rural areas (84 per cent) than the urban areas (with 16 per cent)

However, the PASS findings basically relate to the state of poverty in the mid-1990s. They are somewhat dated therefore, and so it would be useful to have a snapshot of what the poverty trends were before and after this period. There was a picture of an unambiguous increase in poverty between 1990 and 1996 (CSO, 1998). A higher percentage of people in 1995 were below each level of real consumption expenditures than in 1990. About 61 per cent of households were deemed 'poor' in 1995 compared with about 40 per cent in 1990. Furthermore, the prevalence of extreme household poverty doubled between the two survey periods. What has the trend in poverty since the PASS survey? One estimate is that the trend has decidedly been upward since then with the proportion of the poor having increased to about 75 per cent in 1999 (ZHDR, 1999). This can be largely explained in terms of a deepening economic crisis between 1997 and 2003. For three years in succession (2000-03), there has been a significant contraction in the economy. In addition, political authoritarianism has been the rule of the day during this period. This is wider context in which we assess poverty amongst farm workers in the country.

3. Employment, Incomes and Livelihoods.

Prior to the start of the "fast-track" land reform in 2000, some 320 000 farm worker households making up a population of between 1, 8 to 2 million lived on the farms. The PASS study estimated that about 60 per cent of this population was "poor". At the completion of land reform in 2002, about two-thirds of farm workers (about 200 000) had lost their jobs and therefore access to a regular income. The massive job losses were due to the eviction of almost 90 per cent of white commercial farmers from the land. The new small farmers and commercial farmers who gained access to this land had little capacity to absorb the jobless farm workers.

The situation of Zimbabwean farm workers illustrates a progression from a state of poverty for some (not all) to one of chronic poverty for those displaced due to land reform. The loss of a regular income and access to shelter and menial food security has ensured that those who lost jobs have joined the "chronically poor". Loss of these incomes is perhaps the largest single factor that affects their present capacity to sustain their livelihoods. Not that the incomes for the majority of farm workers were substantial in the first place. Nevertheless, the incomes made a big difference between extreme or chronic poverty and starvation on the one hand, and survival and continued access to basics such as food on the other. The incomes had enabled them to escape becoming "the poorest of the poor" (PASS, 1997)

In a recent survey, most farm workers earned the minimum monthly wage of Z$4 300 with some earning much more (Sachikonye, 2003). (In 2002, the official exchange rate was Z$ 55 to 1 US$, and on the parallel market it was above Z$ 1000 to 1 US$; in March 2003, the official rate was pegged at Z$824 to 1US$). The wages were based on grades that were determined by a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) reached in the commercial agriculture sector. In some provinces, such as Manicaland and Mashonaland East, wages were much higher at Z$7500 and Z$8 500 respectively. Specialist workers such as drivers, clerks and foremen earned between Z$9 500 and Z$15 000 per month. The wide range of the minimum wages paid on different farms was reflected in the mean monthly of Z$6 510 for the workers sampled in the above-mentioned survey. The level of these incomes is undergoing a downward change as a result of the drastically scaled-down production by commercial farmers. One estimate was that the annual wage bill paid out to farm workers was about Z$15 billion a year, and that the exodus of commercial farmers would lead to a loss of Z$13 billion in wages per year (Financial Gazette, 17 October 2002). Even if this may be too permistic a projection, wage losses amounting to between Z$9 billion and Z$10 billion dollars would still be quite significant with regard to the impact both on national income and individual earnings.

There was passed a law which stipulated that those farm workers who lost jobs were entitled to a severance package from their employers. The latter were required to pay out those packages irrespective of whether or not they had received compensation from

government for their properties. The majority of farm workers (about 75 per cent) have not received severance packages that could have cushioned them for at least a few months. On those farms where the packages were paid, the packages ranged between Z$18 000 and Z$50 000 (Ibid). Without such lump payments and pensions or other form of social security, the jobless farm workers have found themselves on the verge of destitution. As we will observe below, they have adopted various coping strategies including piece-work, informal trade, gold panning, fishing and hunting for survival.

We noted above that one of the major consequences of land reform was the diminishing access by farm workers to most resources and services. This was the result of change in ownership of farms, and new rules enacted by the new settlers of farmers in relation to access to housing. While the quality of housing varied from farm to farm, workers were at least guaranteed access to it as long as they worked on a particular farm (Sachikonye and Zishiri, 1999; Magaramombe, 2001). With the take-over of the farms, access to housing has become insecure to most. There have been instances of evictions from farm compound houses by the new settlers and farmers. Evicted farm workers have sometimes sought shelter and livelihoods in a growing number of "squatter camps" or informal settlements that have mushroomed near Macheke in Manicaland East, Concession in Mashonaland Central, Chihwiti and Gambuli in Mashonaland West, near Rusape in Manicaland and Esigodini in Matabeleland South.

Loss of shelter on farms has worsened the poverty of ex-farm workers. In the new settlements, their housing is often rudimentary, being made of timber pole and earth material and thatched roof. This is of much inferior quality compared with the brick and iron houses that had been increasing in number on farms prior to land reform. Two other crucial facilities or services were directly affected by the "fast-track" land reform. These were schooling and health care facilities. Although these were in short supply in commercial farming areas, access to them by farm workers and their facilities had nevertheless been improving in the 1990s. For example, a number of early child education and care centers (ECECs) had been set up on some farms. Land reform led to the closure of most of these pre-school facilities which had grown in number by 1999. (It was estimated that about 13 per cent of farm workers' children were benefiting from ECECs in 1999) (FCTZ, 2000). An increasing number of working mothers had begun to take advantage of this facility on farms. The disruptions and evictions associated with the programme have unfortunately led to the closure of most of the centers. Similarly, those farms that ran schools encountered problems when a farm owner was served with an eviction order. When the maintenance of school and payment of teaching staff salaries ceased, the school closed.

However, other factors related to growing chronic poverty affected access to schools. Food shortage leading to hunger adversely affected attendance of children at those schools that were still open or within a walking distance. In the Manicaland province, a considerable number of children did not attend school either due to hunger or lack of fees on the sampled farms (Sachikonye, 2003). In one instance, the nearest secondary school was reportedly 60 kilometers away, and pupils lived in shacks in order to live close to the school. The drop-out rates of infants and children who no longer attend ECECs and

school in the farming areas are up to 55 per cent in some provinces, and this is a source of considerable worry. There are anxieties that some of the children who have dropped out of school may now drift into delinquency, crime or prostitution (Standard, 23 June 2002).

There is also declining access to health care. Even though access to health care in commercial farming areas was limited, there had some progress made through the farm health worker (FHW) scheme. Prior to land reform, nearly 60 per cent of farm workers had access to the services of the FHW. The role of the FHW was multi-faceted: she was responsible for pre-school activities, dispensing of drugs for minor ailments, and educating of communities on health and hygiene issues. With the take-over of most commercial farms, the rudimentary health systems based on farm clinics and FHWs collapsed. FHWs were affected by displacement; where this was not the case, resource constraints prevented them from carrying out their erstwhile functions. In December, a parliamentary portfolio committee on Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement expressed apprehension about deteriorating conditions on the farms and newly-resettled lands (Standard, 15 December 2002).

Clinics are few and far between. The nearest clinic can be up to 40 km away. There are shortages of clinic drugs. In addition, the growing problem of access to treated (safe) water is compounded by limited toilet facilities on farms. The conditions of health care infrastructure and service were certainly disturbed by land invasions, and it will take time and considerable resources to rehabilitate them. For those workers who have been displaced from farms, the major problem is now of access to alternative health services in informal settlements, and in adjacent towns or peri-urban centers.

As we have observed, farm workers were mostly poor before the start of land reform. But they were not a completely homogenous set. A few earned above-average incomes and graduated from poverty. For the majority of farm workers, a regular income, shelter and access to basic health and schools ensured an existence slightly better than a condition of chronic poverty. They floated above hunger and illiteracy although they remained a vulnerable and dependent social group locked into a quasi-paternalistic relationship. The manner in which land reform was implemented worsened their conditions and exposed them to chronic poverty in the near and medium-term. Let us explore the ways in which this poverty is being currently exacerbated by food insecurity and the HIV-AIDS epidemic.

4. FOOD INSECURITY AND HIV-AIDS

Food security amongst farm workers, like that of other poor groups, has often been elusive. They spent the bulk of their incomes on food whose prices began to rise steeply in the late 1990s due to escalating inflation. In the period 2000-2002, food security was partly by undermined by disruptive “land invasions” and partly by a devastating drought in the 2001-02 season, and which covered the entire Southern Africa region. The production of food, particularly the staple of maize, slumped significantly. In 2001-02, the maize harvest was about 1,8 million tones leaving a substantial shortfall. From about

800 000 tones produced in the commercial farming sector in 2000, there will be a projected steep decline to about 100 000 tones in 2002-03 in the sector. The shortfall will be difficult to make up for from communal and new resettlements and commercial sectors.

For the majority of farm workers, the major resource with which to obtain food was cash income. The other resources basically supplemented this main one. Such was the case with small pieces of land allocated by a commercial farmer to workers to utilize for vegetable and maize production even though the amount of land was often less than 1 acre. This nevertheless did make some difference. The commercial farmer sometimes produced crops for his workforce but this has mostly stopped due to change in ownership. One effect of the eviction of white commercial farmers was that cheaper maize became scarcer for farm workers. Those farmers who grew maize sold it at subsidized price to their workforce. Others ordered maize in bulk from the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) for their workers. In both instances, maize was generally accessible and less expensive than it became in 2001-02 and afterwards.

The land reform process changed the situation drastically. The quasi-paternalistic arrangements on land access and subsidizing of maize supplies came to an end. With the exception of those 600 commercial farms that continue to operate, new arrangements for sourcing food had to be made by farm workers. The new situation was one in which food shortages deepened in 2002 leaving the government and aid agencies with no option except to import large amounts of maize to address a shortfall of over 1,5 million tonnes. Up to 7 million or half the country's population has been experiencing food shortage.

There have been reports of widespread shortage of food amongst farm worker communities. One report observed that:

> "the staple food situation on all farms surveyed was found to be quite critical. What made the situation even more critical was the abandonment of farming by most farmers. In Manicaland province, the unemployed workers are in dire need of food aid because they no longer have alternative source of income with which to sustain themselves…In Mashonaland Central, ex-farmers workers are desperate for food (FCTZ, 2002a)."

As 2002 progressed, the situation grew dire in other provinces as well. In the two Matebelaland provinces, 87 per cent of sampled households stated that they had experienced food shortage in the course of the year (Sachikonye, 2003). The proportions of those who also experienced shortage were 75 per cent in Mashonaland West, 84 per cent in Mashonaland East and 91 per cent in Manicaland. The numbers of those in need of food relief were similarly high in Midlands and Masvingo.

However, the depth of food shortages varied widely. In several provinces such as Masvingo and Mashonaland East, there were reports of deaths caused by starvation. Yet both domestic and international NGOs had earlier warned about impending food shortages. Some of the early expressions of concern come from the farm workers' union, the General and Agricultural Plantation Workers of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), but also from international organizations such as SADC's Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) and the World Food Programme (WFP). The WFP confirmed that

about 7 million (half of the country's population) would require food aid before the 2003 harvest was in. More than 150 000 farm worker households (or about 1 million people) faced starvation if they did not receive supplies by mid-October 2002 (Financial Gazette, 12th October 2002).

The situation became so desperate that a supplementary feeding programme was launched for children of farm workers. By November 2002, this programme had benefited about 50,000 under-5 children in the three Mashonaland provinces and Manicaland. The total number of child beneficiaries was destined to rise to 160 000 by March 2003. At the same time, a feeling programme for 10 000 adults was implemented in the same four provinces. Each adult beneficiary received 10 kg of maize meal, 2 kg of pulse and 375 ml of cooking oil per month which was barely sufficient to see them through. Not surprisingly, the demand for food aid amongst the farm workers far out-stripped supplies. For instance, there was no comparable feeling programme for either children or adults in the remaining four provinces.

In sum, the amount of food intake amongst farm workers had significantly declined between 2000 and 2002. An estimated 18 per cent in Matebeleland South, 21 per cent in Mashonaland West, 31 per cent in Manicaland and 39 per cent in Mashonaland East could only afford a single meal per day in October 2002. Focus group discussions during a survey indicated that malnutrition and starvation were spreading among the farm worker community (Sachikonye , 2003). Where farm workers were still able to purchase food, they had to contend with irregular deliveries as well as frequently changing (upward) prices especially of maize.

Widespread food shortages amongst farm workers represent one dramatic effect of their precarious social situation following employment loss. Their descent into chronic poverty was a culmination of a number of factors but principally a chaotic land reform that marginalized their interests. The prevalence of HIV-AIDS makes this precariousness even more acute. Those farm workers still on the farms and those who have been displaced have been caught, like the wider society, in the web of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Food shortage and hunger have worsened the conditions of those living with HIV-AIDS. The deprivation of regular incomes and reasonable access to housing and safe water militates against the capacity of households to provide food and basic care to the sick.

There are few comprehensive data on prevalence rates of HIV-AIDS amongst farm worker communities. However, isolated studies in the mid-1990s indicated that prevalence ranged from 23 to 36 per cent amongst ante-natal clients in the Midlands province, and between 20 and 39 per cent on commercial farms nation-wide (Mutangadura and Jackson, 2001). A reasonable guess would be a 25 per cent prevalence rate among the sexually active population on the farms, with infection levels much higher among causal and seasonal workers (Ibid). The prevalence had affected productivity on the farms themselves, and within farm worker households due to the time spent caring for the sick or attending funerals. Scarce resources were sought to enable the sick to receive treatment, and a patient could go for several years with spells of sickness from time to

time. By the time a husband or wife died from HIV-AIDS, a great deal of resources (income, savings and households assets) would have been spent on their treatment and basic nutrition.

The trends in AIDS – related deaths were reflected in the data on the increasing number of orphans whose parents had succumbed to the epidemic. In our above-mentioned survey, 4 per cent of the sampled households interviewed indicated that they knew of orphans who had lost one or both parents. With a national orphan population climbing to 1 million (or 8 per cent of the total), the evidence on the ground shown that a substantial proportion consisting of children of farm workers. There are a growing number of child-headed households. While an estimated 65 per cent of AIDS orphans attend school, the remainder has dropped out because it has no means with which to pay for their education. AIDS orphans are particularly vulnerable because the extended family system has come under more severe stress as a consequence of the epidemic. They are often last in the "food queue". Farm workers communities are less and less capable of caring for orphans as their own incomes disappear, and as their future on farms becomes less and less secure. There were few community-based schemes to provide care to orphans and AIDS patients.

5. VULNERABILITY, STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES

The combination of a disruptive land reform, jobless-ness and landless-ness has thus forced the majority of farm workers into the ''chronic poor'' category. In particular, certain groups amongst them have proved to be more vulnerable. These are migrant workers, women, the elderly, children and youth. They have fewer resources, rights and opportunities compared to other categories of farm workers.

Migrant workers are mainly second or third-generation descendants of migrants who were imported from neighbouring countries in the early part of the 20th century. They now constitute about 26 per cent of the farm worker population. Numbering between 80 000 and 90 000 households, they support a population of over half a million. Migrant farm workers are more vulnerable than other social groups because most of them do not have homes in communal areas (once called tribal trust lands) to fall back on. Ties with their ancestral homes from which they or their forebears originally came have become very weak at best and non-existent at worst. This means that they are in limbo in the wake of land reform. Several reports have suggested that some of the migrant workers were moved by authorities to border areas in the Mashonaland Central province while others were resettled in a remote area of the Lower Zambezi Valley. But there was scarcely any infrastructure and services in this marginal area.

There has been no conscious planning to meet the immediate and long-term needs of these farm workers. Within this group are elderly retired workers who normally lived on farms till they passed away. There was no social safety net for this group except perhaps a tiny pension, and (now diminished) access to housing and land on commercial farms. Women constitute another vulnerable social group among farm workers. They constituted the bulk of non-permanent workers known as ''casuals'' and ''seasonals''. Constituting

less than 10 per cent of the permanent labour force in commercial agriculture, they were rarely seen or treated as workers in their own right (Amanor-Wilks, 1995). They are often considered as part of a male-headed household yet an increasing proportion of them tends to be single, separated, divorced or widowed. Although women head one in three households nationally, their access to secure employment and land for resettlement has been much more limited compared to men. Given the structural bias against women in access to permanent employment, land and other economic opportunities, this puts women workers at a double-disadvantaged vulnerable position. In this context, it is possible to speak of a process of the "'feminization'' of chronic poverty.

Finally the youth and children nurtured in farm worker households grow in a stressfully difficult environment as a consequence of the uncertainty and insecurity which have been generated by land reform. In one district, about 50 per cent of children under 5 showed signs of malnutrition, and one in three households had lost a child under 5, according to one survey (FCTZ, 2002b). As far as the youth are concerned, with limited education and skills, there are very few, if any, opportunities for employment or self-employment. This has created an environment of behaviour leading to stress, crime, drug abuse, drinking, prostitution and early marriages. Earlier programmes to impart skills and integrate them into society were disrupted by ''land invasions''. Such programmes by NGOs like the Kunzwana Women's Association and the Farm Development Committees (FADCOs) have been drastically curtailed.

What have been the coping strategies of farm workers? It is necessary to view the strategies as part of a response to a fluid, still evolving situation. They include piece-jobs, informal trade, gold panning, fishing and hunting. In one report, 43 per cent of sampled households in Manicaland, 47 per cent in Manicaland, 56 per cent in Mashonaland East and 70 per cent in Mashonaland Central engaged in piece-jobs provided by remaining white farmers and newly-settled black commercial farmers. However, this was confined to the peaks of the agricultural season especially at planting, weeding and harvesting. In one province, a trend was for farm workers to hire out their labour to the new settlers whose work-load had increased to levels they could not cope with. Nonetheless, piece-jobs are neither secure nor remunerated at the same level as permanent jobs. There are no benefits such as leave and medical care.

Another coping strategy related to income-generating activities mainly informal vending of agricultural produce (vegetables, fruit and legumes) and of second-hand clothing. This was undertaken on farms, nearby farming towns and mines. A smaller proportion of ex-farm workers engaged in gold-panning in those districts where gold could be found through shallow mining often along river banks. Rudimentary mining techniques were used in provinces such as Mashonaland Central and West, and in the Midlands. Other activities which that income were the making of craft goods (hand-woven baskets and mats etc.), and making of construction materials like bricks.

Some households, at least 11 per cent of one sample, supplemented their incomes through receipt of remittances. This was in those circumstances where household members or close relatives engaged in employment or other economic activities at mines, plantations

or in towns sent remittances. In some instances, child-labour was drawn upon to augment incomes. However, a small number of households reported they had children less than 15 years engaged in an income-earning activity. Other coping strategies included illicit brewing and sale of alcohol made from grain.

Finally, one other strategy of ex-farm workers to cope with the changing situation has been to construct or join ‘’informal settlements’’ also called ‘’squatter camps’’. These camps often act as ‘’as a last resort’’ for those farm workers without jobs and shelter. The ‘’squatter camps’’ are thus home to the landless and homeless who include not only ex-farm workers but also former mine workers. At the ‘’settlements’’ of Chihwiti and Gambuli in Mashonaland West province, ex-farm workers constituted the ‘’poorest group’’, sold their labour for food, and about 30 per cent of their children had dropped out of school (FCTZ, 2002c). Although the conditions in these ‘’settlements’’ were bleak, they provided a sanctuary for a growing number of farm workers. There was, at least, one theoretical advantage of belonging to such a settlement: the ex-farm worker was within reach of donor organizations and authorities that could witness their desperate conditions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a snapshot of a process which has inaugurated a profound change in the status and livelihoods of one social group. This change is leading to conditions of chronic poverty. Within a short time frame of three years, Zimbabwe’s farm workers have witnessed an arbitrary and inexorable decline in their fortunes and status, from being ‘’poor’’ to being ‘’chronically poor’’.

Although Zimbabwe’s land reform (from 2000 to 2002) was partly premised on poverty reduction, one of its principal outcomes so far appears to be poverty exacerbation instead. This is primarily the case with farm workers whose households represent a population of nearly 2 million. Completely marginalized in the land reform process, the majority of them have lost jobs, incomes shelter and entitlements to farm-based social services and safety nets (never mind how rudimentary). Although this social group had consisted of people who were occasionally poor, it had not experienced chronic poverty levels before land reform. The paper has therefore devoted its primary attention to explaining and describing how the method of land reform implementation ignored and undermined the interests and welfare of farm workers. There was no contingency planning for the estimated 200 000 farm workers who lost jobs, regular income, shelter and access to social services. Largely displaced and now leading a precarious existence on the fringes of farms and in ‘’informal settlements’’, they have little to shield them from descent into conditions of chronic poverty. The paper shows that in such situations of radical and disorderly land reform and bad governance, the descent into chronic poverty can be accomplished in a much shorter time frame than five years.

However, the paper also explained the historical basis of the social and political exclusion of farm workers as a social group. Until the 1970s, the bulk of farm workers were migrants recruited from outside Zimbabwe, and there were restrictions on their citizenship and political rights till recently. Even when indigenous Zimbabweans later

constituted the majority of the workers, the process of social exclusion did not abate significantly. It was observed that with little or no literacy and education, they were trapped in a cycle of poverty. Migrancy and isolation in farm compounds had contributed to enhance the socially vulnerable status of farm workers.

It was possible that land reform might have had a different effect on the fortunes of farm workers if it had been carried out in a better planned, equitable and transparent fashion. It would have been possible to avoid the chaotic form that it took to disrupt production, economic activities and livelihoods. The paper then chronicled the significant decline in incomes and food security, and the profound impact of HIV-AIDS on farm worker communities. In particular, the vulnerability of elderly workers, migrants, women and children was highlighted.

Coping strategies that are being pursued to stem a descent into chronic poverty were then examined. In a context reminiscent of an evolving humanitarian crisis, large numbers of farm workers were falling into absolute poverty unless the national and international response becomes more committed, substantial and sustained than at present. There is a role for civil society especially NGOs, international aid agencies and governments to play in averting the evolving crisis. For its part, the Zimbabwe Government should review its land policy and explore how it can provide land and tenure rights on acquired but under-utilized farms to those farm workers who need it for their livelihoods. Other opportunities should be created to enable them to re-train for other jobs, skills or livelihoods in the formal and informal sectors.

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