



**SLSA LAND THEME  
RESEARCH BRIEFING 1  
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**The Politics of Land  
Reform in Southern  
Africa**



### Introduction

A range of factors – from the global to the local – have combined to put land firmly on the political agenda in southern Africa. The transition to peace and democracy in Mozambique and South Africa has unleashed pressure for the restoration of land seized by white colonists and for the development of land still in the hands of indigenous communities. Despite considerable progress in land reform in Zimbabwe since independence, the continued domination of the agricultural sector by a tiny white minority has created fertile ground for an increasingly violent agrarian politics.

Cutting across the national specifics are a set of factors associated with processes of liberalisation and globalisation, which, together, are putting severe pressure on the livelihoods of the rural poor. Notable among these are a fall in formal sector employment, privatisation of key resources, reduced levels of state support to agriculture and the continuing marginalisation of the non-commercial or peasant sectors.

The forms of agricultural production being promoted in the region are invariably based on high-input, market oriented models of full-time farming, with little appreciation of more diversified forms of livelihoods that combine agriculture for domestic consumption with other activities. Against this background, the

strategies for land reform and rural development promoted by governments in southern Africa have shown themselves to be inadequate.

#### Key Questions of the SLSA Land Theme Study

- Will the current round of land reform in southern Africa mark a decisive break with the colonial past or will it entrench new forms of inequality?

- What is the impact of globalisation on the livelihoods of the rural poor?
- Do the land invasions in Zimbabwe herald a new phase of agrarian struggle throughout the region?

### Country experiences

In Mozambique, the promulgation of the 1997 Reform Land Law marked a major symbolic breakthrough in protecting the rights of the so-called 'family sector' by granting legal recognition to informal or customary land rights and introducing mandatory consultation with rights-holders prior to changes in land allocation. Nevertheless, the social and economic disruptions wrought by the civil war, coupled with a chaotic system of land administration, has given rise to multiple competing land claims and continuing dispossession of smallholders by national and foreign business interests.

While much of FRELIMO's traditional antipathy to the smallholder sector has abated in recent years - not least because of the support given by peasants to the RENAMO opposition - government policy continues to promote the interests of big business, not only in agriculture but also in the wildlife, forestry and other natural resource-based sectors.

Under pressure from international donors and financial institutions, the Mozambican state is divesting itself of its remaining productive assets and embracing a privatised, free-market model of development. The available evidence suggests that the impact on livelihood opportunities of the rural poor is almost entirely negative. Wild resources, including wildlife and indigenous forests on which rural communities have traditionally relied for much of their subsistence, are being privatised and access denied to local people. Large areas of cultivable land, not only the former state farms and colonial estates, are being transferred to foreign investors over the heads of indigenous cultivators on whom new and often exploitative relations, such as tenancy and sharecropping, are being

imposed. Notable amongst these new settlers are Afrikaner farmers from South Africa who have been granted vast concessions in Niassa and Zambezia provinces.

In Zimbabwe, the unrest leading up to and following the 2000 general election highlighted the slow progress of land reform since independence and the political tensions that surround the land question. To date, attempts at reform have failed to reach the ambitious targets set by the government, but have brought about some redistribution of former white-owned farms and stimulated an impressive rise in production amongst small-scale black farmers.

Reliance on market mechanisms to effect redistribution, coupled with a top-down and technocratic approach to planning, however, limited the pace of reform and left largely intact the dualistic structure of the agricultural economy. Poor quality of support services to resettled farmers, along with government neglect of tenure reform in the Communal Areas (CA's), further limited the benefits accruing to smallholders.

The invasion of white- and corporate-owned farms by a combination of government supporters, war veterans and landless peasants, while bringing the land issue to the top of the political agenda, has disrupted both the agricultural economy and relations between Zimbabwe and foreign donors. As a result, the prospects for a successful reform may have been set back, even as popular pressure reaches new heights.

In South Africa, where dispossession of native peoples was carried to a further extent than any other country in the region, the fruits of liberation have yet to be tasted by the majority of the rural population. Two-thirds of the country, including most of the best quality land, remains in the hands of less than 60,000 white owners, while fourteen million blacks eke out a precarious existence in the former homelands. Falling employment in the formal sector, particularly in mining, agriculture and manufacturing, have dealt a severe blow to the system of migrant labour, forcing hundreds of thousands of workers and their dependants to fall back on the informal sector and subsistence agriculture for survival.

None of the three main components of the South African land reform programme - restitution of

land rights, land redistribution and tenure reform - have yet made a significant impact on either the highly unequal distribution of land or the livelihood opportunities of the rural population. Both restitution and redistribution have suffered from over-reliance on market mechanisms to acquire land and cumbersome and ineffective bureaucratic processes. Tenure reform has so far failed to address the chaotic system of land administration in the communal areas of the former homelands, prevent eviction of long-term tenants on white-owned farms or halt the encroachment of private business interests onto communal property resources.

Recent shifts in policy, away from the pro-poor approach of the 1994-1999 period towards a commercial farming model, coupled with proposals to privatise communal land, are likely to further diminish the benefits of land reform to the rural poor.

### **Discourses on Land**

Policy debate in the region is characterised by a range of discourses around land and land reform. While each country presents its own particular national characteristics, a set of common themes can be identified. This convergence of policy in key areas can be attributed to the growing exposure of the region to the forces of globalisation, and with it the influence of an internationalised neo-liberal orthodoxy. Of particular importance in this regard is the privatisation of resources, including both communal and state resources, the retreat by the state from key areas of the economy, including both productive activities and services, the pursuit of foreign direct investment and sweeping deregulation of markets of all kinds.

The pervasive discourse surrounding economic reform is being strenuously promoted by donor governments and international financial institutions and has been embraced enthusiastically by the ruling parties in Mozambique and South Africa. Discourses around land and agriculture are thus derived in large part from wider debates around macro-economic policy and structural adjustment. An important sub-theme of this debate is the argument that unequal land distribution is bad for growth. However the implications of this conclusion have as yet to link liberalisation and economic reform policy debates with land policy discussions in the region.

Within the emerging orthodoxy, a number of older discourses, which do not directly challenge the dominant position, live on. These include:

- A technocratic discourse, based on increased output, efficient land use and the modernisation of the peasant sector, all grounded in the farmer settlement discourse of the colonial era;
- A political or nationalist discourse, currently prominent in Zimbabwe, and to a lesser extent in South Africa, that advocates the Africanisation of landholding but does not address equally fundamental issues of class or gender.

The main challenge to the orthodox approaches comes from a range of populist discourses, mainly associated with NGOs and church groups with varying degrees of support from peasant movements. The clearest example of an organised oppositional movement on land is in Mozambique, where the Land Campaign has brought together NGOs such as ORAM with peasant movements such as UNAC, and has succeeded in influencing legislation and government policy in favour of peasants.

In South Africa, NGOs organised in the National Land Committee and the NGO Coalition have campaigned for a more radical land reform with a focus on improving rural livelihoods but have not yet succeeded in their attempts to initiate a rural social movement. Limited opposition to the government's privatisation plans has also come from certain tribal chiefs, anxious to preserve their power base in the communal areas.

In Zimbabwe, strong populist and radical currents are evident in the wave of land invasions and in the rhetoric of the war veterans movement. But the ambiguous relationship between the veterans, the state and the ruling party raises doubts about how far such positions can be pursued.

What is perhaps most remarkable is the absence of any significant counter-orthodoxy in the region. Past discourses, such as collectivisation of agriculture, nationalisation of land or African socialism, have almost entirely disappeared from policy debates in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. A key challenge for the future will be to elaborate the details of a livelihoods focussed perspective on land reform appropriate to the southern African region.

### Issues for Further Research

This preliminary study has identified a number of key issues in the field of land and rural development that will be explored at both national and regional levels in further phases of the study. These include:

- the impact of neo-liberal macro economic policies on land-holding and on land reform;
- the current and future status of communal land, with particular emphasis on tenure arrangements;
- the impact of land reform policies on landholding patterns, rural livelihoods and poverty;
- inclusion of women, youth, the unemployed and the very poor in policy process;
- the evolving roles of institutions of local governance, including elected local government, tribal authorities and popular structures;
- the impact of formal sector retrenchments on rural livelihoods and the demand for land;
- processes of privatisation of land and commodification of common property resources;
- bottom-up or unofficial initiatives to defend land rights, access land or improve rural livelihoods.

#### ***SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONS AND POLICY PROCESSES (SLSA)***

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*Further information can be obtained on the SLSA website*

*<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/env/igpp.html>*