

Gender Implications of Decentralised Land Reform: The Case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

A bolder policy approach and more vigorous implementation are needed to support women's empowerment, transfer of land rights to women, and to ensure their productive utilisation of land. The land reform programme focussed on racial imbalances of highly skewed landholdings and discriminatory land tenure systems while failing to mainstream the interests of women.

Introduction

Colonial land policies, such as the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Land Tenure Act of 1969, alienated indigenous people from much of the land into the marginal areas of Zimbabwe, imposing a racially differentiated land tenure system. Land was arguably the single most important reason leading to Zimbabwe's liberation war and at Independence in 1980, expectations of land reform were high. The land reform programme focussed on racial imbalances of highly skewed land holdings and discriminatory land tenure systems while failing to mainstream the interests of women.

An estimated 86% of those who work the land are women, and land is a major source of women's livelihood strategies and food security. Yet, the current Fast Track Land Reform Programme continues to privilege men as primary recipients of resettlement land, and the involvement of traditional authorities in the land reform process continues to marginalise women (Goebel, 2005). Women generally failed to access

land and those who did are failing to utilise it productively. Decentralisation processes such as the Jambanja (literally meaning 'havoc' or 'angry argument') land invasions and the A1 villagisation model of the Fast Track Land Reform tended to disadvantage women.

Land reform: Perpetuating patriarchal land policies?

The first phase of the land reform, from 1980 to 1998, while alleviating poverty to some extent (Kinsey, 2000), perpetuated patriarchal land policies that favoured men over women. Research by Gaidzanwa (1991) indicated that the percentage of resettlement permits issued to female-headed households was less than the percentage of female-headed households that held land in communal areas. In the early stages of land reform, government policy was that a settler had to be either married or widowed, thereby discriminating against married women (since permits were issued in the name of the husband) and single, unmarried women (Ruswa, 2007). However, this did provide strategic spaces for some women, especially widows, to improve their access to arable land.

Fast Track Land Reform: Decentralisation or recentralisation?

Despite decentralisation in Zimbabwe having been on the agenda since the early 1980s, the process of transferring

functions and authority from central government to Rural District Councils has resulted in little effective power being decentralised and the 'command-and-control' approach has not essentially changed (Murphree and Mazambani, 2002). The process has been widely criticised as being 'phoney decentralisation producing Rural District Councils lacking in power and resources with unfunded mandates' (SLSA, 2003:82). Despite the legal powers endowed to local authorities and strong government statements about decentralisation, many ministries and stakeholders pursued different agendas through land reform and, in reality, the District Councils were sidelined (Matondi, 2005).

Jambanja: Power shifts from the centre to the periphery

The Fast Track Land Reform Programme was preceded by land invasions precipitated by frustration over the slow pace of land redistribution, increasing political tensions and worsening poverty. It started with isolated invasions in 1998, particularly in the Svose and Goromonzi commercial farming areas. By 2000 the invasions, primarily by frustrated peasant farmers, war veterans and youth, had become countrywide. Although supported by government, these land invasions were mobilised at the local level. Murphree (2004:8) says that: 'for all its negative components, fast track resettlement seems to have found a lever for devolution' and the 'foot soldiers of resettlement (during *Jambanja*) have seized the initiative and shifted the balance of innovation in the centre/periphery power equation'. The process dramatically altered the physical and political landscape in rural Zimbabwe and changed the dynamics of local government. The District

Land Committee emerged as probably the most powerful institution in the district.

Chiefs played a leading role in mobilising for land occupations, often in the context of repossession of ancestral lands (Murisa, 2007). For example, people in Chiweshe communal area, Mazowe District, organised themselves into different groups such as the Hwata and Mbari clans, who laid specific claims to particular farms as restitution, on the basis that they had been removed from these farms in the past (Matondi, 2005).

The nature of *Jambanja* was rapid, often violent, with no legal framework, and characterised by uncertainty. During this period state authorities did not intervene to prevent the invasions or protect the commercial farmers. Movement onto the farms was risky and there was no guarantee that this lack of intervention by the authorities would continue. People with assets to lose were cautious about moving too many of them onto the newly occupied areas. Nevertheless, organisational structures and committees were established and, even during the most violent and chaotic farm invasions during the time of *Jambanja*, there was 'order beneath ostensible disorder' (Chaumba et al., 2003:17).

The illicit situation became formalised by the Fast Track Land Reform Programme launched by the government in July 2000. The *Jambanja* invasions experience forced the government to adopt an approach to resettlement that greatly speeded up the pace of land acquisition and resettlement by the immediate identification for compulsory acquisition of not less than five million hectares. Over the years that followed the legal framework was revised several times, culminating in

the 17th Constitutional Amendment, August 2005, which nationalised all commercial farming land in Zimbabwe. Under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme application procedures for resettlement were established by the government and a number of policy documents were developed. One such policy document was the Integrated Conservation Plan for the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, which advocated for sustainable use of land and natural resources (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2001).

What happened to the women from the Jambanja invasions?

Although *Jambanja* was male dominated, some women were involved, both as invaders and also in supporting the men. In the Chiredzi District farm invasions, for example, Chaumba et al. (2003) noted that at night men and women were segregated and also that some settlers were visited regularly by their wives, who would bring food and do their washing.

Little is known or documented, however, about women's role in *Jambanja*, and even less is known about what happened afterwards to the women who joined in the land invasions. What were the problems and challenges for women? How many of these women remained on the land? Recent research by the authors indicates that many of the women who participated in *Jambanja* at the beginning but subsequently dropped out were not allocated land under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, while those who persevered to the end were allocated plots (Manjengwa and Mazhawidza, 2009). What strategies did they use? It would be useful if these experiences were documented so that lessons can be drawn from them.

Fast Track Land Reform

Under the Fast Track Land Reform programme the two different models for resettlement are A1 villagisation and A2 commercial. Under Model A1, each household is allocated residential and arable land. Common land such as grazing land, woodlots and water points are shared by the resettlement group. Under the Model A2 commercial farm settlement scheme, each household was resettled on individual farms, or subdivisions.

Application procedures for the two models were different. District Administrators selected A1 Model applicants from lists made available by kraal heads and village headmen, who had selected the applicants from landless persons within the congested communal areas. These lists prioritised successful candidates selected from the Rural District Council waiting lists (including women) in the area where the scheme was found, successful candidates selected from other districts in the Province, ex-combatants and former detainees selected by the local chapter of the War Veterans' Association, and other landless Zimbabweans from elsewhere in the country. For the A2 model, the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement placed advertisements in newspapers inviting people to apply for the scheme. Land was then allocated through the office of the Provincial Governor, with an offer letter provided by the Minister of Lands and Land Reform to the successful applicants. The application form states that: 'Applicants who provide proof of availability and/or ability to mobilise adequate resources to support the proposed farming programme will have an added advantage', and therefore it was expected that qualifying applicants

had their own resources for farming with minimum government support.

Women's access to land in the land reform process

Mismatch between policy rhetoric and practice on the ground

Numerous policy statements recognise the need for women to have fair access to land and for the land reform process to be gender sensitive, ranging from international conventions to which Zimbabwe is party to the recent statement by the 'unity government' agreement in September 2008, which addresses the issues of land and recognises the need for women's access and control over land in their own right as equal citizens.

In addition, the 17th Constitutional Amendment adopted in 2005 states that '... in implementing any programme of land reform the Government shall treat men and women on an equal basis with respect to the allocation or distribution of land or any right or interest therein under that programme' (Section 23(3)).

The various policy frameworks on land reform, however, fall short of mainstreaming gender and, despite policy rhetoric, implementation and practice is weak, and women, particularly in rural areas, have few rights to the land they work. Men, even if absent, are the decision makers who control the decisions about the land, agricultural activities and produce. This mismatch between policy and practice is an issue that needs further research to determine the current situation on the ground.

Lobbying for more land for women

At a donors' conference held in September 1998, which intended

to enlist international participation and support for the land reform programme, a quota of 20% of land for women was adopted. This quota, however, did not become formal policy and was not included in the Inception Phase Framework Plan 1999–2000 or put into statute. To date, there has been no sound mechanism to ensure that women are indeed benefiting from the land reform process.

The government estimates that, overall, about 16% of land recipients were female-headed households. This is less than the 20% of all redistributed land that has been promised. According to the Presidential Land Review Committee in 2003, 18% of beneficiaries under the A1 model were female-headed households and 12% of the beneficiaries under A2 were women. However, patterns vary greatly throughout the country. Matondi (2005) found that in Mazowe District, an area of prime agricultural land, only 13% of the beneficiaries were women in the A1 resettlement model, while 11% of the A2 beneficiaries were women. Women fared better in Zvimba District, as research by Murisa (2007) found that 25% of the A1 and 22% of A2 beneficiaries were women. These figures are actually higher than those found by the Presidential Land Review Committee (2003). It is difficult to determine the extent of women's access to land, as exact figures are not known due to the dynamic nature of the process – which is still ongoing – as well as continuing conflicts over double allocations.

Although women's groups, notably Women and Land in Zimbabwe (WLZ), lobbied for a better deal for women, and in particular the 20% quota for women, there was no follow up by women's agencies to facilitate women's

access to land in the Fast Track Land Reform Programme.

Constraints faced by women in accessing land

The sources of this gendered inequity in land allocation relate to a number of constraints faced by women in applying for land, including bureaucratic constraints, gender biases amongst the selection structures, which comprise mainly men, the lack of information on the process, and poor mobilisation of women's activist organisations around the issue of applications (Moyo, 2007). Even though the government selection procedure for A2 applicants gives more score points to women, the proportion of beneficiaries who are women remains low. The Presidential Land Review Committee report noted that the marginalisation of women during implementation of land reform is related to the preponderance of men in decision-making structures (Presidential Land Review Committee, 2003).

Allocation of A1 model farms is by a User Permit, which is issued by the District Administrator on recommendation from the village head and the headman or the local councillor. In most cases these people are men who are supposedly the custodians of culture and tradition, which they interpret as prohibiting women's ownership of land, allowing only secondary rights of access but not ownership and control.

Constraints for women utilising the land

Many of the 12% of women who benefited from A2 resettlement are not able to fully utilise the land because they cannot access resources such as finance from financial institutions, which demand collateral in the form of a house or shares, which most women

do not own. Most of these women lack social and economic support, access to information, and they themselves are not assertive and confident (Gunduza, 2008). Furthermore, they have to compete with their male counterparts who already own properties and can access finance and other resources more easily because of the existence of social and economic networks to support them (WLZ, 2006).

Research carried out by WLZ revealed that most of the land allocated to women under the A2 scheme was being used for subsistence farming, with very few women doing commercial farming (WLZ, 2006). Only 10% of the land that was allocated to women was being utilised productively. The research also found that the main challenges facing both A1 and A2 women farmers were access to resources such as finance, inputs, labour, extension services, farming equipment and human capital development (WLZ, 2006).

Who is pushing the agenda for better access to and utilisation of land for women?

WLZ (formerly Women and Land Lobby Group) was formed in 1998 by Zimbabwean women activists and academics committed to the land issue. Since then they have lobbied government to include women's interests in the design of land reform, and have made some inroads in improving women's formal rights to land as stated in policy documents.

Women Farmers Association (WFA) was formed in October 2006 in response to the women farmers' identified need for an association that represents their interests. It is a community-based organisation, whose membership is

made up of women farmers, farming for either household food consumption or for commercial purposes. The Association facilitates women's access to agricultural-related resources, capacity building, policy advocacy and research.

Conclusion: Women beneficiaries of land reform

There is no doubt that government policy has attempted to address some of the historical grievances raised by women regarding access and security of tenure in newly resettled areas. However, 20% was a very modest target to start with, and from available data it seems this has been reached in some areas and nearly reached nationally.

Decentralised aspects of land reform in Zimbabwe have not particularly assisted women to secure land. While more women accessed land than in the past, the kind of decentralisation taking place in Zimbabwe (both through the land occupations of the Jambanja and the later FTLR) did not necessarily create conditions for women and men to access land on an equitable basis, largely because the local institutions responsible (both civil and customary) were not transformed. Women are still under-represented and continue to be marginalised in the land reform process. National policy statements about promoting women's access and control over land are not translated into practice on the ground. The criteria for allocation of land assume that applications would be made by married couples, or that women would only seek land within the family context. The socio-economic pattern of land allocation is embedded within wider socio-cultural relationships and

the succession and inheritance laws of Zimbabwe that perpetuates hostility to women's rights. This has resulted in the perpetuation of marginalised rights for women in land allocation and their insecurity of tenure. It is doubtful that, without a clearly stipulated affirmative action policy that is backed by legal force, women will have a fair chance of access to resettlement land. The need still exists for government policies to take into account how the local-level systems work in practice, including their (in)capacity to deliver more equitable (and especially gender-equitable) resource allocation.

Recommendations

- A bold policy approach is needed, which supports women's empowerment and transfer of land rights to women.
- Women's agencies should not only advocate and lobby for higher quotas for women, but should vigorously follow up and facilitate access to land by women, strengthen their security of tenure and improve their productive utilisation of that land.
- Giving more land to women would help to break the cycle of poverty, as women are the predominant agricultural producers.

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