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Why the land issue continues to define Zimbabwes past present and future (Part of the Zimbabwe Land Series)

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1 Introduction

This is the first of 12 articles I am going to write on Zimbabwes land issue. The land issue singularly continues to define Zimbabwes past, present and future. The way in which the nation has handled the land issue in the past and present also defines the social, political and economic character of the nation. My articles will therefore take a fairly organic and holistic approach in discussing the issue because I believe that lasting solutions to the issue require an understanding of the issue from all these different angles. I will argue that time has come to put emotional and partial analysis aside, and to work for lasting solutions that help build a free, fair, just and caring society. It is obvious to me that we cannot and should not try to change a 100 years of history. Rather we should put most of our best brains and efforts into creating a new history for Zimbabwe. If the land issue is resolved and handled well moving forward, then it can be argued that Zimbabwe has potential to be a model African society, whose foundation is not only truly African, but also an effective member and contributor to the common global welfare.

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2 The paper series

The 12 papers are divided into four categories as follows:

1. Introduction
 - (a) Why the land issue continues to define Zimbabwe's past, present and future (this article).
2. Past
 - (a) Lost opportunities to de-racialise the land issue.
3. Present
 - (a) Update on preparations for a national land audit.
 - (b) Current law as a basis of land compensation and rehabilitation: experience to date.
 - (c) Land rights, tenure, and what is needed to convert the 99 Year Lease to bankability?
 - (d) How the 1994 Land Tenure Commission can inform the Constitutional making on land.
 - (e) A critique of the Wildlife and Forestry Based Land Reform Programmes.
 - (f) Has the MTP provided sufficient guidance for future priority and investment into the land sector?
4. Future
 - (a) A framework for a comprehensive land and agrarian reform programme.
 - (b) Modernising the traditional land rights system for sustainable development.
 - (c) Prospects for social and racial integration in Zimbabwe's agriculture.
 - (d) My vision of Zimbabwe's land issue 10, 20, 30 years on.

3 Background

In the next article I will discuss the land issue in its broader historical context. In the present article, however, I would like to offer a general framework for addressing the land issue and will therefore discuss the more recent historical context. At independence in 1980, the Government of Zimbabwe operating under the Lancaster House Constitution, established a land reform program, which saw the government acquire about 3 million hectares of land under a willing-seller-willing-buyer basis and settle almost 80,000 families between over the next five years. During this period, the British Government contributed to land purchase on a dollar for dollar basis. But in 1985, land resettlement took a back seat as the government dissolved the Ministry of Lands and incorporated it into the agriculture ministry. The government also reduced its budgetary commitment to land purchases considerably and the British Government correspondingly reduced its funding. The country then went through a phase from 1985 to 1998 when all key players started behaving as if the land issue was resolved.

The [?] Commission summed up the fallacy of a start/stop approach to land reform and the need for a consistent and progressive approach by all concerned. By 1998, two developments, in my opinion, brought the land issue back to centre stage. First was the growing political opposition to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), which eventually saw the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on the back of the labour movement, disgruntled communities in Matabeleland, white farmers and other opposition groups. The second trigger was the refusal by the British Government under Tony Blair to take any more responsibility for land purchase (the famous Clare Short letter in fact). The rest as they say is history.

The period 2000 to 2008 saw the Fast Track Land Reform Programme take place [?]. By 1997, only 20 percent of the large scale commercial farm land had been redistributed. The speedier Fast Track programme led to mass land expropriation based on compulsory acquisition, which was stimulated and accompanied by land occupations led by war veterans and supported by the state, but mobilising various social classes. The government promulgated constitutional reforms and new legislation that legalised compulsory land acquisition with compensation for improvements but not for the land [?]. The intensity, pace and ferocity of land reform precipitated a political and economic crisis.

4 The land issue: a framework for national development

The issue of land and its impact on agricultural development and the economy is still centre stage as agriculture forms the backbone of the Zimbabwe economy. Zimbabwe is an agrarian society with more than 70% of its population still dependent on land and agriculture. In order to place the role of land and agriculture in the transformation of the Zimbabwean society, I am offering three aspects that form a conceptual framework for national development: a) an economic framework; b) political framework; and c) governance framework.

4.1 Economic framework

The economic conceptual framework focuses on the transformation of an agrarian economy to an urban-industrial economy through four stages of development.

1. In the first stage, the population is involved in primary production, after a period of capital formation the surplus money generated by agriculture goes into other investments. Agriculture has been adequately nurtured and starts growing and creating new wealth at a rate that allows direct and indirect taxation and this feeds into other major public assets and infrastructure. Because the majority of the population is rural (70+ %), it follows that economic growth is greater by emphasising economies of scale (meaning many small family farms, traders and businesses form larger industries). In Zimbabwe over 70% of the population are directly dependent on the land for their livelihood; this contrasts with around 3% in developed economies of industrialised nations.
2. In the second stage, agriculture develops strong links with industry as the market economy develops. Agriculture remains the backbone of the economy as agricultural growth becomes a direct contributor to overall economic growth through greater links with industry, improving efficiency of product and factor markets, and the continued mobilisation of rural resources.
3. In the third stage, most of the population is urban based (80+ %) as

agriculture is fully integrated into the market economy. Prices of food and the share of food in urban budgets continue to decline.

4. In the fourth stage agriculture is part of an industrial economy and 90+% of population is urban. Because less than 10% of population is rural economies of size kick in due to shortage of labour; farms get bigger to be viable. Productivity and efficiency of agriculture is a major issue, and environmental and other concerns assume greater significance.

4.2 Political Framework

The political framework concerning land is both important and controversial, particularly when the vast majority of the population is land dependent; it becomes a crucial part in the dynamics of power, and access to it determines both social and economic status. The dynamics of land reform in Asia and South America are essentially different in that the former relates mostly to change from feudal or traditional systems whilst the latter to post colonial redistribution. Africa has both traditional and post colonial models to deal with. In Zimbabwe the process has been inherently political as the process moved from *willing-buyer willing-seller*, to compulsory acquisition.

The key elements of the political framework relevant for Zimbabwe are:

- Colonial legacy dictates that political freedom will be converted to economic freedom by the previously disadvantaged groups;
- Land reform is mostly a political process and one means of transferring power from the one social group to another;
- Land is power, both economic and social; land denotes prestige and social status; Gaining resource rights is the basis of building local economic institutions that link with the main economy;
- Where land is a contentious issue it is difficult to progress from Stages 1 and 2 of economic transformation. The concentration of land in fewer hands with one social group having overall political power results in conflicts and delays broad based economic participation at early stages of development.

- Asia resolved most of its land issues earlier after colonisation; Asia was also able to complete land reforms quicker than South America and Africa because feudal land ownership systems are easier to reform than colonial and plantation type systems.

4.3 Elements of governance framework

Land rights and tenure: Policies that determine who owns what and is allowed to do what on the land becomes more and more important as economy moves into higher stages of development, as this determines links with main economy;

Land administration: that facilitates registration and transfer in an accountable way. In Zimbabwe the provincial and district committee structures installed for land distribution now need reform as the government endeavours to develop professional systems of land administration;

Compensation for acquired land (according to current law, dispossessed farmers have to be compensated for improvements only. This forms the basis for quittance before the same land can be issued a legal ownership through say a 99 year lease.

A dispute resolution system and access to the Administrative Court and other courts. In an agrarian society the judicial system is out of reach for most rural inhabitants due to their location and also the dual legal system that exists in the country. The administrative court that deals with land is only found in Harare and makes it difficult for access.

Land use and development planning and access to capital and the need for the provision of guidance from government.

Land taxation generally aimed at limiting the number and size of holdings and or generating revenue mainly for local development.

Environments protection and the need to promote sustainable development.

5 Conclusions

The frameworks above form the key concepts for subsequent articles. The next article will be the only deeply historical. In the next article, I will discuss the how the issue of race has been poorly handled over the last 100 years and how this continues to be unresolved. This alone is in my opinion the source of great sensitivity and emotional energy that has delayed resolution and rehabilitation. In the same article I will provide some fresh insights into the real politik aspects of land in Zimbabwe. I have decided to invest 6 out of 12 of the articles on the present, and there articles will deal with the various elements of land governance as indicated in the framework. I then turn to the last 4 articles on the future, and these articles will address the economic elements of my framework. In concluding this introductory article, therefore, I would like to remind the reader to take a broad and holistic view that encompasses politics, economics and governance. The social aspects are also crucial as will be dealt with in the next article where I argue that the failures in racial integration in Zimbabwe will continue to hound the nation into the immediate future. This unfortunate legacy has to be overcome if Zimbabwe is not only going to overcome historical baggage, but more importantly if Zimbabwe has to harness its true potential and transform into the dynamic and leading nation on the African continent and globally.