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Zimbabwe: "New Farmers" Fail to Deliver

By Joseph Sithole

Once productive farmland stands idle, becoming overgrown with weeds and reverting to bush.

Six years after President Robert Mugabe sanctioned violent invasions of Zimbabwe's commercial farmland—mostly but not entirely white-owned—by landless peasants, the facts show that the so-called "new farmers" have failed dramatically to produce crops to feed their countrymen.

The poor peasants who led the invasions, at the behest of Mugabe, have since been driven off the best farms. The prime properties have been reallocated to the president and his close relatives, ministers, the country's top judges and armed forces and police officers, and pliant journalists. These farms are mainly used as weekend retreats and, for the most part, have ceased to be productive.

"It looks like land reform was never meant to benefit the ordinary person," said Professor Gordon Chavunduka, a veteran African nationalist and former vice chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe. "Land reform was only meant to benefit a few special individuals, and that may lay the ground for future conflicts."

In a typical example, 96 peasant families who settled on the state-of-the-art Eirene Farm at Marondera, 80 km southeast of Harare, were subsequently forcibly removed when Mugabe allocated the property to his air force chief, Air Marshal Perence Shiri. The farm was the property of Hamish Charters, who was driven from his home and badly beaten up in 2002.

On the remaining land not wanted by Mugabe's favoured elite, the rural people who were the spearhead of the drastic land reform have achieved little success. The revolution designed to empower them, according to Mugabe's rhetoric, has failed.

Recognising the scale of the catastrophe, resulting in the majority of people going constantly hungry in a land that was until 2000 dubbed the Breadbasket of Africa, Mugabe's ZANU PF government launched a seven billion Zimbabwe dollar (28 million US dollar) plan eighteen months ago to kick-start production on land allocated to the new farmers.

The money in the Agricultural Sector Productivity Enhancement Fund, Aspef, was designated for the purchase of fuel, seed, fertiliser, ploughs and tractors and to rehabilitate irrigation equipment vandalised and stolen during the farm seizures. But Mugabe said in an angry speech in early December that 400 tractors released by the government under Aspef had either been stripped of their parts for resale or had simply disappeared.

The return on the Aspef investment has been minimal. Most of the peasant farmers lucky enough to have been allowed to remain on the land they invaded have sold their fertiliser and maize seed on the thriving black market to raise money for immediate needs. Consequently, as the independent weekly Financial Gazette's trenchant columnist Mavis Makuni pointed out, "They are working the huge tracts of land allocated to them under the land reform programme using their bare hands." This season, she said, they could not harvest their winter wheat crop fast enough before the spring rains caught up on them and destroyed the grain.

Makuni added, "It means that for these farmers everything spent on land preparation, inputs and labour, is money down the drain. The farmers will not only lose their wheat, but this failure to harvest will affect their preparation of the land for the next crop."

The so-called "cellphone farmers" given the best former commercial farms have not used the heavily-subsidised fuel allocated to them by the government to maintain productivity. Called cellphone farmers because they visit their farms only at weekends for braais (barbecues), they sell their cheap government fuel on the thriving black market at

huge profit.

While ordinary motorists have been buying scarce petrol and diesel at some 400-600 Zimbabwe dollars a litre for much of the past year, top-of-the-tree new farmers were getting it for 23 Zimbabwe dollars, although this was recently revised to 335 Zimbabwe dollars. They sell their subsidised fuel at black market rates of between 1,600 and 1,800 Zimbabwe dollars per litre. Instead of powering tractors and producing food, they sell it for quick and easy profits.

Finally, attempting to get to grips with the disastrous consequences of this get rich-quick mentality, Gideon Gono, governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, announced in November an end to cheap money for farmers. He said that those who are committed to farming should in future borrow money from private financial institutions.

Unfortunately, this can only mean a further reduction in already hugely depleted production and therefore more food shortages.

Because of the way land was forcibly and extra-judicially seized, and because farmers driven off their land continue to contest the evictions through the courts, Zimbabwe's new farmers—whether from the powerful elite or the peasantry—do not have title deeds to their land. Title deeds are the necessary collateral demanded by banks and other private financial institutions before they will advance loans.

According to a new survey by the independent Mass Public Opinion Institute, MPOI, Zimbabweans believe Mugabe's land reform was flawed, hurried and unplanned. Those farmers still producing maize, Zimbabweans' staple food, refuse to sell it through the government's monopolistic Grain Marketing Board, said the MPOI survey. They instead prefer to sell illegally to private traders. They complained to survey compilers that the 33,000 Zimbabwe dollars (132 US dollars) per tonne offered by the marketing board is a pittance, which does not cover their costs. In addition, payments from the government agency are frequently heavily delayed and come in the form of bank cheques, requiring expensive travel into town. Black market buyers, they told MPOI, pay immediate cash at a rate of 51,000 Zimbabwe dollars per tonne.

Coming as near as he has ever done to admitting his land reform policy has been a disaster, Mugabe, in the same speech in which he revealed the saga of the disappearing tractors, said, "Not everyone can be a farmer." He hinted that the government might launch a new land audit designed to ensure that only those committed to farming would be given land.

Last year, Zimbabwe produced only 700,000 tonnes of maize despite good rains and predictions by Agriculture Minister Joseph Made of a bumper 1.8 million tonne crop.

But surveys are unnecessary to tell the sad story of Mugabe's land reforms. The evidence everywhere is of once productive farmland standing idle and becoming overgrown with weeds and reverting to bush.

IWPR drove south from Harare towards the southern town of Masvingo. What used to be lush tobacco fields, earning bountiful foreign exchange, have been reduced to tiny isolated plots of stunted maize. New farmers have built pole-and-mud huts along the road beyond Harare South golf course. Most have no interest in farming. They are engaged in wholesale felling of trees that they stack along the road for sale as firewood to Harare residents who are constantly hit by power cuts and have reverted to wood burning stoves and fires.

Lloyd Phiri, a new farmer in the Mahusekwa area, about 50 kilometres south of Harare, told IWPR he would like to farm properly but the government's buying prices made agriculture unprofitable. "Why should I risk my money ploughing a piece of land when I can sell the fuel I get from government and get money for my immediate use?" he said. "Money is money, it doesn't matter how you make it. If I want a house or a car it doesn't matter whether the money is from farming or from selling fuel."

Phiri said he runs a few cattle, but grows no crops, on the 200 hectare-farm allocated to him by the government. He said that with the country's inflation level having reached 1200 per cent and forecast by the International Monetary Fund to rise next year to more than 4000 per cent, "it only makes sense to buy what you want today—after all, there is no guarantee that I will reap what I sow with these unpredictable weather patterns".

Samson Tigere, another Mahusekwa new farmer, said serious problems are caused by the uncertainty about future land tenure or ownership, which currently is subject to the arbitrary decisions of Lands and Security Minister Didymus Mutasa, one of Mugabe's closest lieutenants. "Today I am here, but there is no guarantee that I will be here tomorrow," he told IWPR. "Mutasa can issue an offer letter to somebody else soon after I invest my money in the land. It is risky business. I would rather buy moveable assets and be ready to move at short notice."

The most fundamental lesson of Mugabe's failed land reform programme is that revolutionary rhetoric and zeal do not put food on the table. Until order is restored to agriculture and secure title given, backed by an uncorrupted legal system and judiciary, Zimbabwe's once fruitful land producing prolific crops will remain dead capital.

Makuni commented, "While one sympathises with new farmers who now openly admit that commercial farming is a mission impossible without the appropriate machinery, one wonders how they were allocated land in the first place and how they thought they could succeed as large-scale commercial producers when all they had were their bare hands. After six years on the land, they cannot continue to be called new farmers."

Describing Mugabe's land policies as an unrelenting vicious cycle of chaos and confusion, she added, "The authorities must decide whether taking land from a productive white farmer for its own sake is in the national interest when it results in perennial food shortages and hunger for the majority of the population."

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