Land and Natural Resource Redistribution in Zimbabwe: Access, Equity and Conflict

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the emergence of a complex socio-political and economic conflict over unequal land and natural resources control in Zimbabwe, focusing on the post independence period from 1980. Colonial expropriation of agricultural land and vast natural resource reservoirs, such as indigenous woodlands, water systems and wildlife resources, established a dualistic political-economic landscape characterised by competing resource ownership structures and multi-faceted conflicts. Race dominance of natural resources by a white settler minority class of 4000 commercial farmers with an average of 200 hectares and large scale tourists operators, alongside large state controlled but leased forest and wildlife conservancies marginalized about 1.5 million peasants families, and other sub-alien classes from the access to key resources. The latter depend on natural resources for most of their basic livelihoods needs. Throughout the first 20 years of independence this extractive system remained unchanged and was worsened by increased demand for land by a growing rural and unemployed urban population. Neoliberal land reform and environmental management policies based on private property relations applied to commercial farmers’ land rights vis-à-vis ‘communal tenure’ and partially decentralized land and natural resources management systems, with limited financial and infrastructural investments failed to assuage historic grievances over resource control and the growing fragility of livelihoods among the poor. An export oriented structural
adjustment programme, favouring elite natural resources utilization and which led to wide economic decline, ignited popular struggles to regain land. A combination nationalist elite interests and peasants movements challenged the existing property relations of white minority and the ‘rule of law’ on which these inequities were founded, through a lands occupation or seizure process. A radical land redistribution programme based on land expropriation was initiated by the state in 2000, leading to the reallocation of the prime commercial lands to over 150 000 peasants and about 1600 new black sized farmers. While the redistribution resolved overarching inequities it has led to a series of political, economic and resource conflicts underlain by economic decline, and a second generation of inequities. Resolving these new resource conflicts remains a key challenge.

**Introduction**

Many conflicts in Africa are structured by socio-economic dominance over land and national resources. These resources are the key direct source of livelihood and wealth for the majority. They are also the means through which the poor pay for their education, health services, and hence a critical means to attain non-agricultural employment. The intensity of such conflicts however varies from one region to another, depending on specific histories of land concentration, the farming systems and political-economic structures that sustain resource inequalities (Moyo, 2004a).

The land and natural resource distribution and access question as a source of class, ethnic, racial and other political conflicts has tended to be underplayed in sub-Saharan Africa. This source of conflict has received some attention in former settler colonies (Zimbabwe, Republic of South Africa, Namibia) and in some mineral rich enclaves (Nigeria, Angola, Sierra Leone, etc.). Yet, this is the reason conflicts tend to be a common problem in many African countries, including in relatively stable economies and democracies. Resource conflict between populations in different regions, or ethnic groups is quite common throughout the continent. For example, pastoral groups compete for the control of grazing lands and water supplies, in various parts of the Sahel and Eastern Africa.

The land questions facing Africa are dominated by the negative effects of distorted settler-colonial decolonization, and the associated failure to address the national question, sustainable development and democracy, within the context of incomplete national democratic revolutions. While important differences exist in the nature of the African countries’ land