

Zimbabwe and the problem of food insecurity

In recent months, Zimbabwe has experienced massive shortages of the mealie meal.

Maize is the staple food across Southern and Eastern Africa. So, Zimbabweans toil to access the precious commodity for use at both subsistence and commercial levels.

It has become a common sight in various parts of the country to see meandering queues of citizens anticipating to buy the now commonly subsidized 10kg packets of roller meal. Enterprising businesspeople in South Africa, Malawi and even Mozambique are sending truckloads of mealie meal to Zimbabwe. The imported products have been pegged at USD 7, or at parallel local market rates. This has affected the generality of workers earning in local currency.

Several Whatsapp groups have mushroomed as citizens seek to share information about where best to buy the coveted product.

Zimbabweans wake up as early as 3am to join roller meal queues just as they do for fuel. In some cases, retailers with the commodity in stock have had to call for security reinforcements to contain the situation.

Evidently, maize has become a security issue. In his song *Them Belly Full (We hungry)*, Bob Marley and the Wailers sang; "a hungry mob is a angry mob."

That is the prevailing situation in Zimbabwe.

For a country which occupied a critical position in the global political discourse courtesy of its land reform exercise some two decades ago, these recent developments portray a serious problem of food insecurity. These developments are antithetical considering that this is a country which featured

as a success story of agrarian reform.

In 2010 Professor Ian Scoones released a study titled *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities*. For someone who was writing from the belly of the "beast", (i.e., the United Kingdom) which the Zimbabwean government accused of wanting to "effect regime change" in the country after the land reform exercise, Scoones became a useful and handy conduit through which Harare preached its touted agrarian success. That Scoones was writing from the heart of Western academia became very useful to portray an endorsement of an exercise which was largely coming from developing countries, especially those having difficulties to replicate Zimbabwe's land-redistribution exercise.

Without doubt, the land reform which is touted as a success has not transformed Zimbabwe's agricultural productivity. What sustained the exercise largely was the political posturing and reference to tangible historical grievances of land alienation to justifiably validate the undertaking which redefined Zimbabwe's political economy. While some resettled farmers have done immensely well, there are others who have of course misused the land. In the end livelihoods have been affected and efforts to address the problems of poverty and vulnerability have hit a brick wall.

The fact that the Zimbabwean government announced plans to streamline all individual farms in the country's five ecological regions depicts what everybody else knew: the farms were ordinarily huge and underutilised by the coterie of "cell-phone farmers". This move will ensure the downsizing of some 12 million hectares of arable land, which indirectly gives validity to [assertions](#) that Zimbabwe's productivity reduced after the land reform exercise.

For all the ills of the racist system which prevailed in Rhodesia, white farmers ensured that they resided on the farms all year round. They only visited the towns when necessary.

Unfortunately, when the land reform exercise was conducted, some of the beneficiaries included powerful politicians, servicemen, top bureaucrats and others who had positions of power and money, but lacked the know-how for the farming business. There is no doubt that this lot constituted a bulk of the cell-phone farmers.

Last week, the government announced that its move to streamline the land was intended to improve access to land by the generality of citizens, who were in any case presented as the beneficiaries of the redistribution exercise, notwithstanding the glaring double standards of multi-farm ownership and freeriding of the state resources by connected and underproducing heavies. Government further announced that the new measures would seek better capacity utilisation, following "some concerns" that the land was being underutilized.

While the government may have come to its senses, it finds itself making a somersault to its denialist tendency and propensity to deflect criticism of the land reform exercise as purely Western-instigated. Robert Mugabe was the master of this art.

With the ongoing mealie meal challenges in the country, Zimbabwe is reminded that much as land was a symbol of the racist white capital, it is much more a matter of productivity. Unfortunately, most of the farmers have failed to wean themselves from several government support schemes which have bled the *fiscus*. The government may have intended to give support to its resettled farmers, just as the colonial state had done, but there hasn't been a commensurate output to change the nation's capabilities in this direction. A story is often told about the ever "new" crop of farmers who sell farming inputs, as opposed to productive use. There is another similar tale about top bureaucrats who used their political power to get tractors, combine harvesters and irrigation systems for their personal use. That is quite tragic.

At face value, the move by the government to downsize underutilized land is commendable. However, there is another likelihood of potentially perpetuating the country's food insecurity status. There are now some deserving farmers without the land, and that is understandable. There is however a problem of segmentation, which will mean having a bigger beneficiary base which is more than the initial one, but having dire consequences on actual productivity. This was the dilemma which the government faced from the start. Even Namibia and South Africa may continue to face this problem. The land however has to go to its rightful owners, who need to realise the business side of the land outside the political arguments.

Some two decades after independence, it was quite ludicrous that some 4500 commercial farmers literally had the foothold of the means of production, while the indigenes remained landless. Politically, this cast aspersions on the whole liberation project, which had largely been premised on the centrality of the land question as the heart of the aspirations of the locals.

The current food shortages which Zimbabwe experiences are a reminder of the increase of vulnerability, which the country has seen in the past two decades. A reflection of the social and economic decay was the massive brain drain especially across the region. The attainment of independence had brought new expectations to Zimbabweans, who had grown up in rural areas courtesy of a racist system and only relocated to Harare and other towns from the 1980s. Then, industry was functioning and thousands of jobs were created across sectors. However, in the past twenty years, the nation has seen massive unemployment and a rise of informal economic activity which has been a microcosm of the deindustrialisation of the country in recent times.

The obtaining conditions have made it difficult even for the working class, whose salaries average USD\$50 per month. Even

with Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube preaching about a “mono-currency”, which is a de-dollarization from the earlier multicurrency system dominated by the USD, there is ample evidence that the market forces have resisted it and continue to favour the greenback. With citizens pushing and shoving each other on queues, there is a reminder about the devaluing of salaries in Zimbabwe’s transition from the multi-currency to the local currency, which has a variety of names such as the Zim Dollar, bond notes and the Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS) dollar. In 2016 the government introduced bond notes, which it intransigently claimed were equal with the USD. The cap was finally removed in 2019 after authorities pronounced an interbank rate of 1:2.5 which has now spiralled to between 20-25 in exchange. This is what has caused the growing vulnerability in Zimbabwe, which is linked with the land reform exercise. That the workers’ salaries have been eroded is without doubt. The seriousness of the matter is however underpinned by the fact that there has been no meaningful rise in salaries. Rather a raft of “measures” coated as “hardship allowance”, “food basket” and even the “cushion allowance” have been put in place to augment the meagre earnings both in public and private sectors.

This is precisely why the government responded by subsidising maize meal, for the increasingly vulnerable Zimbabweans. After the cost of mealie meal ballooned to the point of almost becoming a security threat as citizens could not afford it, government responded by issuing a subsidy which would see a 10kg bag go for 50 RTGS. The wide variance between the prevailing market rate and the subsidized mealie meal however created several arbitrage opportunities which saw the commodity being sold at higher prices on the parallel market. The response by the government was to increase the cost of a bag of mealie meal to 70 RGTGs (about USD \$3.5). Last week, it was further announced that “food coupons” would be issued to deserving vulnerable families after the realisation that the subsidy did not improve the situation.

The fact that all such measures are being considered even within towns depicts the growing informalisation of the economy and the vulnerability which has migrated to the capital of the nation, Harare! The government has even extended its food mitigation programme to urban areas as the situation worsens. The World Food Programme (WFP) and other agencies have been scurrying for resources to provide food assistance programmes to persons in urban areas.

The problems leading to food insecurity have been further exacerbated by climate change, which has seen erratic rainfall patterns across the country. Natural disasters, especially Cyclone Idai which ravaged the region last year compounded an already precarious situation. However, they do not fully account for the growing problem of food insecurity in Zimbabwe, which was authored two decades ago as land was largely parcelled out to the privileged elite who have no mind to farm.

Despite Robert Mugabe's fiery speeches touting the success of the land reform, Zimbabwe continues to face food security challenges. That a country which was formerly exporting food to the point of being called a "breadbasket", now scurrying for all manner of food aid and devising disingenuous subsidies and archaic coupon systems in urban areas depicts the extent of the problem. We were told that all forms of foreign aid undo our freedom, independence and self-belief as a nation. Even the great Thomas Sankara once said he who feeds you controls you. As a nation whose politics were catapulted to the global centre stage despite our minute contribution to the global political economy, Zimbabwe ended up having a problem of posturing as citizens continued to be disempowered, while the nation's boldness to take its land was touted as a success story.

Even with billions poured into the Command Agriculture Scheme, now christened Smart Agriculture, billions of dollars have been put into the pipeline. Yet, there is no commensurate

productivity. Even with the touted success of the programme, which has been put to question giving the surrounding corruption allegations especially on local businessman Kuda Tagwirei, there is some evidence of a persisting problem, even with massive financial injections. That is the dilemma which Zimbabwe continues to face in its bid to address food insecurity.

As government scurries for measures to address the epidemic problem of food insecurity in the country, there is growing evidence of a persistent question, which continues to dog the country if those with the farming know-how, who are a key contributor to Zimbabwe's economy, have no access to land.

A resuscitation of the county's agricultural sector will address these and other related problems, which Zimbabwe has grappled with in recent months.