

## **Myths, reality and the inconvenient truth about Zimbabwe's land resettlement programme**

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November 13, 2012

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### **Executive Summary**

Ian Scoones and his co-authors caused a splash with the publication last year of their controversial book *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities*. Accompanying the book were a series of 8 videos, *Voices from the Field*, as well as downloadable summaries, YouTube debates, blogs, and interviews with BBC World TV. Articles were serialised in *The Zimbabwean* newspaper and a website was set up, replete with congratulatory sound-bites from distinguished professorial colleagues. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. This review therefore assesses the evidence behind this mass of publicity for the study's findings. It begins with a synopsis of the book as told by its lead author. It then examines some of the book's main themes. The first is the authors' insistence that their study is based on solid empirical evidence that is used to analyse the complexities of resettlement. Second, it reviews the study's research methods, especially the analysis used to dismiss the so-called 'investment myth'. Third, it looks into the book's assumptions, objectives and narrative to explain the gaps in their story of resettlement. Finally, the conclusion discusses whether there is any substance to the hype, and it compares two visions of land policy in Zimbabwe.

(For ease of reference, page numbers for quotes from the paperback edition, published by Jacana, are given in parenthesis.)

### **The Scoones' story**

Ian Scoones has told his story to many different audiences, but always in the same well-practiced and carefully scripted way. In essence, he claims that the realities on the ground reveal a far more positive picture of resettlement than the negative images or 'myths' portrayed by the media. He begins his story by noting that the issues surrounding resettlement are complex and nuanced. He then disarms his audience with certain caveats by admitting, with hand on heart, that the story of resettlement is mixed. Yes, he says, the process was deeply problematic. Violence, abuse and patronage certainly did occur, and Masvingo Province's experiences were of course different to other parts of the country. But these contentious issues are quickly shelved as he deftly steers the debate towards the study's main objective, which is to find out how the livelihoods of those who were resettled had been transformed. 'To be honest,' says Scoones in all sincerity, 'we were surprised. We had a whole set of unexpected results.'

Contrary to the myths that there was no investment in resettlement areas and that a rural economy had collapsed, their research revealed an important and as yet untold story of land reform. They found that new patterns of mixed small-scale farming based on crops and livestock had transformed the dual agrarian economy. He tells how resettlement has benefitted a broad set of people: the land hungry from nearby communal areas, townspeople making a go of farming, and civil servants investing their skills. One of his main claims was that two-thirds of the settlers were just ordinary people. Only a few were cronies. In sum: they found hard working and entrepreneurial new farmers who made significant investments to create a vibrant and dynamic rural economy.

But he goes further. Just as commercial farmers were assisted in the 1950s, and smallholders supported in the 1980s, newly settled farmers deserve external support and investment to build on their entrepreneurial dynamism. Given this opportunity, he claims, new farmers will rise to the occasion by contributing to local livelihoods, national food security and broader economic development.

### **Empirical evidence and complexity**

There are two key facets of their study that the authors emphasise. The first is the strong empirical foundations of their work. Their research, they say, was based on detailed, solid evidence bought to light by real, on-the-ground facts involving 400 households across 16 survey sites over a 10-year period. Moreover, they aver that their study was both objective and balanced because they were "agnostic to the diversity of theoretical positions". (14) The second facet they emphasise is the complexity of resettlement issues. One of their stated aims was to challenge simplistic generalisation (or myths) with solid data on complex realities. For Scoones it was therefore indefensible for the BBC to treat his 'mountains of research evidence' (reality) as if they were equivalent to an 'unsubstantiated commentary' by the Commercial Farmers Union (myths).<sup>1</sup>

But is Scoones claiming too much for their study? Is it plausible for a study to be both detailed, empirical and objective as well as also being capable of analysing complex systems? Noam Chomsky (a famous scientist and human rights defender) recently said that "As you deal with more and more complex systems, it becomes harder and harder to find deep and interesting properties."<sup>2</sup> He believes that research needs to confine itself to simple questions to find credible and convincing answers. Not surprisingly, Scoones struggles hard to sustain the contradiction between analytical rigour and complexity. Good examples of this difficulty are the book's chapters on labour markets (Chapter 6) and 'real' markets (Chapter 7).

According to the study, the researchers found a "variety of origins of labour circulating through a number of relationships and connections. This is a highly complex labour market. For example, we have new in-migrants to households, attracted by the new opportunities of the new settlements." (139) They then go on to describe the circulation of labour in detail, including all the combinations and permutations relating on kinship, gender, age, and so on. But to what end? Because the labour markets they describe are typical of most rural areas, and because there is no analysis of their complexity, their detailed description is neither novel nor revealing. Similarly for 'real' markets, which are described as a "complex web of connections, and a very informal market - illegal and legal." (152) Real markets for maize, beef and sugar are illustrated by way of 'spider' diagrams. These consist of lots of little boxes all connected to one another in various ways, but few if any of the linkages are analysed. So, apart from being complex, the diagrams add little to our understanding of 'real' markets.

Of course, it is not possible to analyse every relationship in detail. To resolve Chomsky's conundrum, researchers usually first develop a conceptual framework where a few key relationships, based on strong theoretical foundations, are analysed in depth. The conceptual model helps reduce the complexity into hypotheses that can be tested rigorously using empirical data to draw generalised but illuminating conclusions. Without this model, the researchers have been left floundering with piles of detailed data that cannot possibly be analysed properly. Inevitably the researchers have had to rely on a more discursive approach. Rather than allowing the data and analysis to speak for itself, the researchers 'interpret' their data to convince readers of their veracity.

### **Empirical research methods**

The investment myth

One of the most common research requirements is to have a benchmark or baseline against which to measure and evaluate performance. This becomes all the more necessary if the criterion - in this case, the level of investment - has been blown up to the proportion of a 'myth'. In Chapter 4, Investing in Land, the study measures the value of all kinds of investments, from clearing land and purchasing equipment to housing and transport. However, the study has no criteria, benchmarks or statistical methods by which to assess the significance of their data, which consists of absolute numbers and dollar values of investments. This difficulty can be illustrated by their analyses of investment in sanitation (latrines) and farm equipment.

The facts were these: 68 toilets were constructed across all study sites by 2008, representing 38.4% of households. To some minds that might seem rather low. The study then estimated that the average cost of constructing toilets was \$77 per household. Without a benchmark - of, say, the cost of building a Blair toilet - this level of investment is not possible to evaluate. So the researchers help us decide. We are told that in the absence of external support the investment has been "substantial" and that "people showed a real determination to improve their sanitation facilities." (85) Throughout the chapter indiscriminate praise is lavished on each and every investment, however small. For farm equipment the average investment was \$198 per household, or just \$25 per household per annum. Insignificant? Not at all. "Across schemes and success groups," we are told, "investment in equipment for farming has been significant." (82) Undeterred by its misleading methodology, the researchers simply added up the investments, came up with a figure of \$91 million, and claim it is a "substantial amount by any calculation." They then triumphantly declare that, "The myth that there is no investment on the new resettlements can thus be safely dismissed." (86)

In truth, the figure of \$91 million is quite meaningless. But, leaving aside the study's lack of scientific method, the researcher's construction of the myth deserves further comment. The first is the genesis of the myth. Whoever claimed that there was absolutely no investment in new settlements? We are not told. Was it - as some suspect - a straw man invented for the purpose of the book's narrative? Another concern is the phrasing of the myth. By setting their benchmark at zero (i.e. 'no investment') the researchers could dismiss the 'investment myth' by showing only there was at least some investment, however meagre. The notion of an investment myth - let alone dismissing it - is therefore sheer nonsense. It only serves to make the study team look like patronising academics who use the epithet of a 'myth' to unfairly denigrate the views and experiences of others.

### **Resettlement: for better or worse?**

The problem of the study's methodology goes deeper, however. It is not only a matter of having benchmarks for the investment assets, but for having an evaluative standard or criterion for the study as a whole. How can the success or otherwise of resettlement be judged unless researchers have similar areas by which to measure and compare data from their own study sites? Two immediate options spring to mind. One is to use the communal areas from whence many of the settlers originated. The other is the old resettlement areas where families were also allocated plots based on Model A schemes. But, here the researchers are quick to trump any such analysis with their well-worn reference to complexity. According to the researchers, these new resettlement areas, with new people, and different livelihoods and production systems, are very different from either the communal areas or the old resettlement areas. As such, claim the researchers, the new resettlement areas deserve an analysis which does not carry the assumptions from elsewhere. (223) This reasoning lacks credibility. Were they afraid, perhaps, that comparisons may throw up evidence that spoilt their narrative? Either way, this methodological misstep further diminishes the integrity of the study.

But there is an even more compelling comparison to be made - productivity before and after resettlement - that goes to the heart of land reform programme. Indeed, the first question put

to Scoones by the BBC World TV interviewer was, "How does productivity compare to the past where these (resettlement areas) were owned by white commercial farmers." Bill Kinsey, a leading researcher on the resettlement programme, had already predicted the economic consequences of replacing commercial farms with resettlement schemes.<sup>3</sup> He estimated, for example, that the resettlement of 170,000 families would eliminate 177,000 farm workers' jobs, resulting in a \$148 million loss in wages annually. Less than half of this - i.e. only \$70 million - would be made up by the earnings of settlers. He also estimated that the commercial area population of 1.67 million would fall below 1.19 million after resettlement, suggesting that more people would be displaced than resettled, "creating pressures for further rounds of resettlement". A model was therefore ready and waiting to be tested empirically by Scoones' team.

This question did not escape them. As they noted, "A question often posed is whether the resettlements are an improvement on what was there before." (220) They also recognised that, "With land being removed from commercial production, the benchmark for the performance of the new agrarian configuration is high". (233) But they conveniently fall back on their excuse of complexity - full of ifs, buts and maybes. "This is an impossible question to answer easily", they said, "it all depends on what was there before." (ibid.) But there is nothing to suggest that they made the slightest attempt to find out; despite the availability of very detailed information on commercial farms that had been collected for the purpose of estimating compensation. Instead, they lamely claimed that calculating returns are "social and political choices, and so are not amenable to simple economic analysis." (220) Yet this did not deter them from making highly misleading estimates of productivity to suit their purpose. After using per hectare estimates of net revenue from cattle ranching to give them "simple orders of magnitude", they concluded that the "new mixed farming systems of the A1 and informal systems are clearly outperforming extensive cattle or wildlife ranching on a per area basis by a substantial margin." (220) For a study making grandiose claims, this analysis is wholly inadequate.

## **Triangulation**

Triangulation is a social science research method of cross-checking data from different sources to reduce intrinsic biases and improve the credibility and validity of the results. In particular, it is used to more fully explain the complexity of human behaviour and provide a more balanced picture of the situation. Yet, despite the study's avowal of explaining complexity and representing reality, triangulation is conspicuous only by its absence from the study. Virtually all the data, and certainly their advocacy material, comes from a single source: the beneficiaries of land resettlement themselves. The 8 promotional videos, *Voices from the Field*, are evocative images and carefully scripted voice-overs that repeat the study's central storyline of successful settlement by enterprising settlers. We do not hear the voices of those who could not or would not invade the farms, or those settlers who did not succeed. We do not hear the voices of those who were denied the opportunity to acquire farming land fairly and lawfully. In particular, we do not hear the voices of the farmers and their farm workers who were forced to flee their homes and livelihoods. If and when we do hear these alternative voices, the study tends to treat them not just with condescension, but as 'myths'.

Triangulation not only underpins credible research, it also has an ethical dimension. It is a fundamental tenet - even to a layperson unfamiliar with formal research methodologies - that in fairness, everyone should be given the right of reply. To take cognisance only of the opinions of beneficiaries of the resettlement programme, and present them as fact, opens the study to a perception of bias. The researchers' reticence to embrace triangulation therefore does little to reassure the reader about the validity of their findings.

## **The inconvenient truth**

Perhaps the book's most egregious claim, and which is central to the book's discourse, is that "it is simply impossible to say whether the events of 1999-2000 were the result of a ground up social protest movement which took hold, or whether the process was set up and manipulated by ZANU(PF)." (23) Anyone as perceptive as Scoones, or anyone who has followed events or read the Supreme Court rulings during this period, would know that this claim is patently untrue. The entire fast track land reform programme was driven by President Robert Mugabe's Third Chimurenga against white commercial farmers, aided and abetted by the state security apparatus and party-sponsored militia. The Lord Justices of the England and Wales Court of Appeal agreed that farm invasions "were part of widespread systematic attacks against the civilian population of farmers and farm workers, carried out not just with the full knowledge of the regime but as a deliberate act of policy by it, with the intent of advancing its grip on power, suppressing opposition, and helping its supporters." <sup>4</sup> Nothing could be clearer.

So why did Scoones and his team feel the need to make such a self-evidently false claim? Because, for the purpose of their narrative, they needed to distinguish the many supposedly hard-working 'ordinary' settlers (accumulation from below) from those few greedy, rent-seeking 'cronies' who grabbed multiple farms (accumulation from above). They wanted to portray smallholder settlers as part of a legitimate social protest movement reclaiming their right to land, as opposed to cronies - the few bad apples - who, through the use of violence and intimidation, supposedly compromised the creditability of the land reform programme.

Only by establishing the legitimacy of the land invasions by ordinary Zimbabweans could the authors claim that resettlement was a *fait accompli* and 'irreversible'.<sup>5</sup> It also allowed them to "chart a way forward, and not dwell excessively on the interpretation of past events." (31) In other words, they could dispense with agonising over the worst excesses of land invasions, such as the forced removal of 150,000 farm workers' families. This left them free to focus on carefully constructing a sanguine picture of committed and deserving settlers. Past events involving gross human rights violations could simply be airbrushed out. Thus, no settlers are held to account for the violence, lawlessness, and impunity that forcibly evicted the owners and workers from the farms. No cognisance is taken of the legality of farm seizures, or of international law, or of the rulings by the SADC Tribunal that Zimbabwe was bound to honour by international treaty. No questions need be asked about the fairness of land allocation and the opportunity cost of allowing party supporters and opportunists to grab land at the expense of Zimbabwe's many trained, experienced and worthy farmers. No concern need be expressed about land allocated to civil servants who already had jobs, who could not possibly farm full time, and who were duty-bound to forswear involvement in such a politically partisan programme.

The study's attempt to heap the blame on only a few cronies in order to exonerate ordinary settlers cannot be sustained. Settlers were, after all, part and parcel of the land invasions led by hardened war veterans acting on behalf of the party's leadership and cronies. Emboldened by the predatory policies of an all-powerful party, it was all too easy for would-be settlers to convince themselves of their entitlement to land belonging to whites. Settlers, like their leaders, were therefore quite willing to break the law and use violence to evict the rightful owners and their workers for a free piece of land. Indeed, one of the tragic ironies of the land invasions, emphasised by Lord Justice Stanley Burnton (quoting Justice Rix) was that:

"By far the great majority of the victims of the invasions were the black employees of the farmers, who together with their employers suffered extreme physical violence and the loss of their homes and livelihoods, but who could least afford to bear their loss." <sup>6</sup>

Even if some settlers did not commit the crimes themselves, they were most certainly accessories and beneficiaries of those crimes. They may have been ordinary people, but they were by no means innocent. Independent and impartial courts of law refute any illusion that

that land invasions were some sort of legitimate and autonomous social protest movement by ordinary people that was somehow disconnected from the wider political violence and lawlessness.

The rulings of the SADC Tribunal, an international court, ruled that the very law underpinning the occupation of invaded farms, Constitutional Amendment 17, violated international law as well as Zimbabwe's Treaty obligations to respect human rights and the rule of law (Article 4(c)). It also held that Amendment 17 discriminated against commercial farmers on the grounds of race (Article 6(2)). Regarding the culpability of those invading land, the England and Wales Appeal Court, quoted earlier, found that an appellant, who had participated in the land invasions, was not only "plainly criminally liable" under domestic law but that the "actions taken by the group in which the appellant participated were acts involving crimes against humanity." It is not just that Zimbabwe's disgraced and corrupted criminal justice system had failed the victims of violence; the England and Wales Appeal Court found that the land invasions, in terms of the Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court, had caused such great suffering that they constituted the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. The land invasions were, in other words, an exercise of state criminality, aided and abetted by senior politicians and cronies, the entire security sector establishment, war veterans, party militia and, let it be said, ordinary settlers. That is the inconvenient truth.

## **Conclusions**

Scoones, the team's leader, is undoubtedly a gifted writer and an articulate advocate. How else could he have created such a persuasive and idyllic narrative of the resettlement programme? But it also shows that his evidence was necessarily subjective and selective as well as being socially and politically constructed. His empathy with radical social movements and the informal sector, and his aversion to neo-liberalism and globalisation, hardly suggests a study which is "agnostic to the diversity to theoretical positions" (14). Unfortunately, his compelling narrative does not compensate for the methodological weaknesses of the study. Those expecting a robust academic study based on sound research principles and solid analysis will be disappointed. The study's references to understanding 'complexity' based on 'mountains of data' turns out to be detailed descriptions of localised complexity and a reticence to make meaningful and objective comparative analyses. Nor do the study's caveats stop the authors from inappropriately extrapolating their finding from Masvingo Province to cover the entire land reform programme. By the final chapter of the book, Lesson's from Zimbabwe' Land Reform, the study's data and analysis becomes detached from the narrative, as the authors' make wide-ranging but ungrounded recommendations for land policy reforms.

Scoones and his team remind us that the land policy debate is essentially about two different visions for Zimbabwe. The first vision, based on the 'new normal' of realities of Zimbabwe, is captured by their book. It holds that however ugly past crimes may have been, they are now water under the bridge. We should put the past behind us, no matter how grave, and recognise that the land reform was a necessary and irreversible process to correct historical wrongs which ridded Zimbabwe of the dual agrarian structure. We must make the best of a bad job by providing security of tenure and supporting those now occupying the land to improve productivity. With donor assistance, some compensation may even be paid to former white commercial farmers for the assets they lost. It is a vision with an appealing narrative - replete with reconciliation, land rights for indigenous people, a land audit to weed out cronies, political compromise and stability. It is also one that could find traction amongst SADC leaders and certain members of the international community. It would allow them to rid themselves of a festering regional problem and get back to business.

The other view is that a highly partisan and predatory campaign of land invasions that caused such great suffering through gross human rights violations, and which ran counter to

principles of international law, are impossible to ignore. It is unconscionable, adherents believe, to leave land in the hands of those who wilfully, unlawfully and often violently took others' land, while leaving their victims without their homes or livelihoods, without compensation, and without a shred of justice. It also leaves many other potential farmers with the resources, training and skills bereft of the opportunity to make productive use of the land, much of which lies idle in the hands of those who illegally grabbed it. In their vision of the future, the foundations of a fair, inclusive and just land policy must be built on the principles of fundamental human rights and international law. It is a vision based on a legal and institutional framework that provides security of tenure, sound land administration, genuine compensation to all, and a pro-poor strategy to commercialise smallholder agriculture. It involves developing fair criteria and market mechanisms that puts agricultural land into the hands of dedicated Zimbabwean farmers - irrespective of their colour, creed or gender - to bring out the full potential of the land, of agriculture generally, and the country as a whole.

Is it possible to move beyond the poisoned policies based on race and predation, beyond a culture of victimhood and entitlement, beyond the politics of populism and patronage? Is it possible to forge, in other words, a just and inclusive policy on land in which all Zimbabweans can play an active and productive role? In the articles that follow, I explore the various policy options in search of an emerging consensus for a lasting solution to the land question. It involves delving into issues of constitutionality, compensation and a land commission, as well as the requirements of a land audit. It also lays out a vision for Zimbabwe based on secure property rights and a market economy. These are the imperatives that underpin the commercialisation of smallholder agriculture and economic structural transformation. And these, in turn, are the prerequisites for inclusive and sustainable economic growth on which the hopes and livelihoods of generations of Zimbabweans will depend. But any such hope will remain an elusive dream until Zimbabweans rediscover their shared international values by creating a culture of tolerance, by deepening democracy, by defending human rights, and by respecting international law.

*1 Ian Scoones, "A media glasnost for Zimbabwe coverage?" African Arguments. Royal African Society (28 July 2012) <http://africanarguments.org/>*

*2 Noam Chomsky, New Scientist, 17 March 2012 (p.28)*

*3 Kinsey, B.H. (1984) The Strategy and Tactics of Agrarian Reform: Resettlement and Land Policy in Zimbabwe. Discussion Paper 136. University of East Anglia: Norwich.*

*4 SK (Zimbabwe) v Secretary of State for the Home Department (2012) EWCA Civ 807 (19 June 2012)*

*5 Section 5.5 of the Global Political Agreement between Zimbabwe's main political parties signed in September 2008 accepts that land acquisition and redistribution are 'irreversible'.*

*6 SK (Zimbabwe) v Secretary of State for the Home Department (2012) EWCA Civ 807 (19 June 2012) (para. 90)*