



Agriculture

Zimbabwe: A disastrous experiment

Alize le Roux and Jakkie Cilliers

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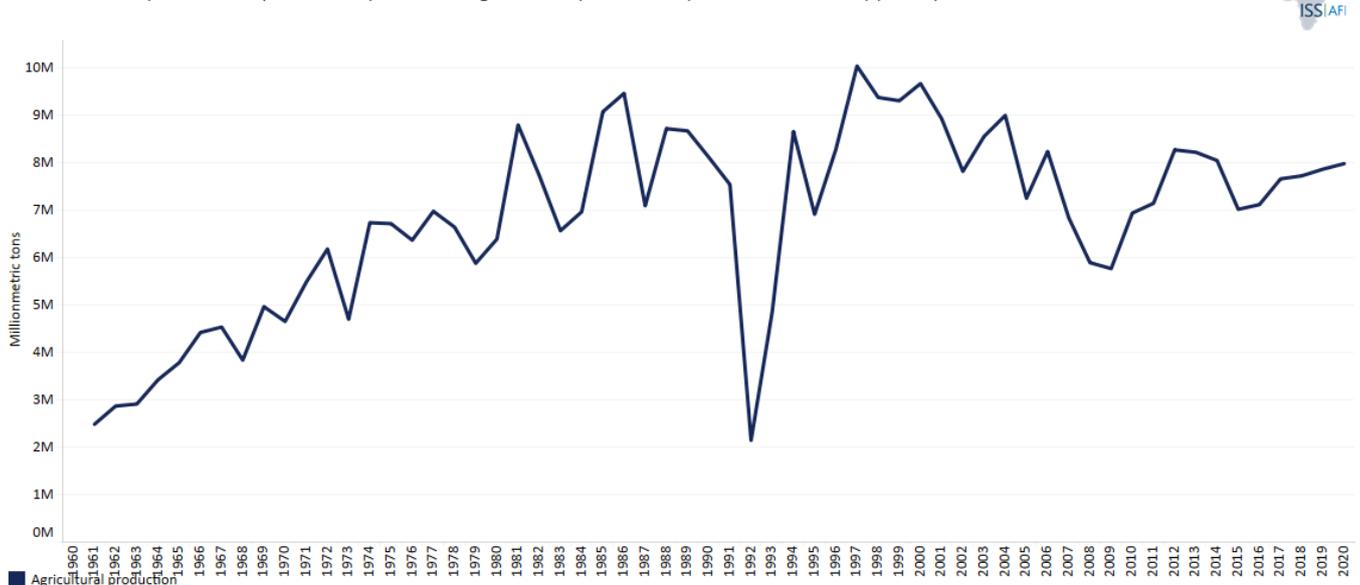
Africa's leadership is often responsible for land grabs at an even larger scale. Zimbabwe's disastrous land redistribution programme (from 1992 to 2010), which eventually destroyed its most productive sector, illustrates the importance of security of ownership that can unlock land as a bankable asset and the implications of land expropriation without due process.

When Rhodesia declared itself a republic, a few years after independence in 1965, most of the black population had been relegated to so-called tribal trust lands, generally in the lowlands—areas significantly less productive and often disease-ridden.

After a violent struggle involving liberation forces operating from several neighbouring countries, Zimbabwe was born in 1979. The Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), led by Robert Mugabe, subsequently won the first elections in 1980 and embarked upon a land reform programme that steadily became more chaotic and violent.

Between 1960 and 1990, Zimbabwe exported about 10% more food than it consumed and consistently outproduced China per capita. However, production per capita dropped rapidly in the early 1990s (Chart 4). Although agricultural output recovered later that decade, the country has never regained previous production levels.

Chart 4: Yields (metric tons per hectare) and total agricultural production (million metric tons) per capita in Zimbabwe: 1960-2020



Source: IFs 7.84, initialising from FAO Food Balance Sheets and FAOSTAT online statistical service

In the early 2000s, Mugabe evicted more than 4 000 white commercial farmers from their land. Later his party embarked upon centralised 'command agriculture', which dealt a further blow to Zimbabwe's [agricultural sector](#). By 2010, yields per hectare in Zimbabwe were below the levels seen at the time of its Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, although, due to the expansion of land under cultivation, total production was significantly higher.

Despite President Emmerson Mnangagwa initially appearing to embark on a different approach after deposing Mugabe in a military coup in November 2017, he soon reverted to the same policies that had brought disaster in the first place. By 2019, Zimbabwe imported nearly 22% of its total food demand. When Mnangagwa half-heartedly sought to reverse course in 2020, fewer than 300 white commercial farmers (mostly dairy farmers) were estimated to be left in the country. Much of

the land violently acquired had, in the meanwhile, been handed to party officials. In 2000, 10% of Zimbabweans lived in extreme poverty. In 2020 that number had increased to 37% of the population living on less than US\$1.90 daily. Ham-fisted efforts at land and agricultural reform in Zimbabwe have worsened the situation.

A different approach in [Zimbabwe](#) would have yielded very different outcomes. The World Bank finds that agricultural markets regularly fail African farmers, generally because 'the pattern of market failures is general and structural, and not related to the head-of-household's gender, or geographic characteristics such as distance to roads or large population centres.' African farms are less productive because farmers are chronically unable to access the finances (or credit) that would allow them to purchase critical inputs that could improve yields, such as fertiliser and seed.

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About the authors

Ms Alize le Roux joined the AFI in May 2021 as a senior researcher. Before joining the ISS, she worked as a principal geo-informatics researcher at the CSIR, supporting various local and national policy- and decision-makers with long-term planning support. Alize has 14 years of experience in spatial data analysis, disaster risk reduction and urban and regional modelling. She has a master's degree in geographical sciences from the University of Utrecht, specialising in multi-hazard risk assessments and spatial decision support systems.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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