

OPINION PIECE

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Land Markets in Zimbabwe's Rural Areas: implications for tenure reform¹

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1. An Exploding Land Market

In the period after 2017, the land market across Zimbabwe's rural areas has exploded. This has important implications for thinking about tenure security and the type of interventions that are appropriate.

A number of factors have contributed to the massive expansion of land markets in this period. The post-coup regime under President Mnangagwa starting in late 2017 has promoted a narrative of the country being 'open for business'. This has included the relaxing of restrictions on joint ventures and even a formal, if complex, route for regularising these. Although land rentals and purchases within land reform areas are notionally illegal as this is state land, there seems to be a general acceptance that this is happening and may offer opportunities for bringing underutilised land into production, especially in A2 areas.

The volatile economic conditions experienced in Zimbabwe have made investment in land and agriculture a (relatively) reliable option, even if challenging. Many have sought to diversify businesses to include land. Meanwhile, others whose precarious jobs in town or abroad have become increasingly unviable due to the collapse of the formal economy have sought land-based livelihood options, continuing the flow of people from urban to rural areas. Rural to rural movements have occurred too, as people seek better land, moving from areas increasingly affected by drought and far from markets.

This short paper reflects on on-going work being carried out in A2, A1 and communal area sites in Mazowe, Gutu, Masvingo and Matobo districts. The following sections first identify broadly three types of new entrant, where land purchases or formal lease arrangements are occurring, before moving to an assessment of new land titling proposals in this context.

2. New Entrants Claiming Land Through Markets

Migrants to communal areas

Echoing the large movements of communal area people in the 1980s and 90s from areas in the dry south of the country to areas such as Gokwe, a new flow of people is evident with people in search of land, better soils and good rainfall. For example, in Chiweshe communal area in Mashonaland Central province, there are many new homes being established in what were previously grazing areas. As the local residents have contracted their farm areas, focusing more on homestead gardening rather than extensive outfield farming, other areas of land have become available in the farming areas too.

In Chiweshe many new residents come from Mount Darwin and Muzarabani areas, where continuous drought has encouraged them to move to seek better options. They have been joined by former farmworkers who following land reform lost their jobs, with many remaining resident in the compounds. While some have managed to secure livelihoods through a combination of piece work and small-scale farming, others have sought more secure options in the communal areas. Farm workers have also come from the compounds on A1 farms, A2 medium-scale farms and still-existing large-scale commercial farms complaining of poor conditions and low pay.

Like the earlier waves of rural-rural migration in Zimbabwe, these movements have been linked to booms in certain crops. In the 1980s, it was cotton, but today tobacco is a major attraction, with farm workers also coming with considerable skills in its cultivation. The new settlers in Chiweshe have been allocated often very small plots of land, just sufficient for a homestead and a small garden. These illegal allocations have been made by sabhukus often with surreptitious payments for plots. Going rates range from US\$250 to \$800, depending on the size of land and its quality. The land areas are often insufficient, and this has spurred a land rental market as newcomers rent parcels of land, often from multiple households, to be able to farm.

In other communal areas across our study areas, we see young people acquiring land near their parents' original homes. These may be children of land reform settlers who are unable to get land in the land reform areas, or do not want to have to be reliant on a subdivided plot but want their own homestead and farmland. For example, in Serima communal area in Gutu, there are plots being offered for around US\$450 to US\$800 (see Case 1).

Case 1: I was born in 1999 in Renco and grew up there. For the last 5 years, I have been working as a farmworker for Mr MT in Stanmore B, doing horticulture. I then left in August, and I am now working for Mrs M who is doing horticulture here in Wondedzo Wares. I recently got married, and I have one child. My wife is from Wondedzo Wares. Last year, I bought a 'stand' in Serima communal area from a war veteran for US\$450. Initially, I wanted to use the money to get a driver's licence, but I thought investing in a piece of land was a much better option for now. I asked people on WhatsApp groups if they knew anyone who was selling land. The sabhuku in the area then advised that I should get a 'transferring' letter. Fortunately, the sabhuku in my area offered to write the letter for me in order to expedite the transaction, given that he had known me for a very long time when I was working and living there.

Migrants to communal areas

In a number of our sites commercial irrigated horticulture has really taken off (Scoones et al. 2019). This has attracted interest from many, especially as the cost of irrigation continues to decline. Many start with a small pump and a few pipes on a plot near a river or a dam but quickly expand. This results in a growing demand for irrigable land, alongside demand for new and larger pumps, borehole drilling services, greenhouse equipment, vehicles for transporting to markets and so on.

In Wondedzo A1 land reform area near Masvingo the original group of horticultural entrepreneurs, mostly linked to the Apostolic church, has expanded significantly, as others have arrived. Land purchases and rental arrangements have expanded, both in Wondedzo and nearby farms. There has been an expansion of irrigated land along the Mtirikwe river, with the area now covered in greenhouses with irrigated fields full of a huge variety of vegetables. Marketing is sophisticated, with contracts with supermarkets and others ensuring a steady flow of income.²

In these cases, access to land can be negotiated through informal land markets within A1 areas. There are purchases and rentals mediated by local leaders, but there is usually a close connection between existing farmers and the new entrants. They may be linked through church groups or are close relatives interested in farming, having missed out on earlier land allocations. They come with money, skill and an investment drive, and are commercialising agriculture in the new resettlement areas boosting production. A case from Gutu, where a new investor acquired an A1 plot, drilled boreholes and established an irrigation plot illustrates this dynamic and some of the challenges.



Case 2: I was born in Chivhu in 1968 and grew up there. I worked as a secondary school teacher in Botswana, where I have been working since 2008. When land reform started in the year 2000, I was not much interested in gaining access to land in the new resettlement areas.... It's only later in life that I realised that I needed land. I managed to get this place by chance. I bought this place for US\$7000 in 2014. I later discovered that the owner of this place was selling it for US\$6000 but the middleman added US\$1000 for himself. There was no structure and no fence on the farm. The plot is now in my name. The problem with land sales is that there are a lot of scammers these days. But I was lucky as my relative was working as a District Lands Office, and he handled the whole process for me. It hasn't been easy coming here. At one point, a villager told my herder that "we will chase him out of this farm. If we managed to chase away white farmers, we can do the same thing to him". The problem with people here is that they involve politics in everything they do.

External business investors seeking land

In parallel, there is another process that is happening in both A1 and especially in A2 land reform farms. This involves new business investors with limited prior connection to the area. They come with capital, often investing rapidly in building up irrigation infrastructure or livestock rearing facilities, for example. They tend to be quite focused on a particular type of commercial farming – one type of crop or a particular type of livestock production. Some start with renting land in order to establish a base, but many are now seeking to secure more permanent access through purchasing land. Again, this may be backed up by an affidavit, although the legal standing of such documents is unclear and in practice deals are struck based on trust and social relationships.

Who, then, are these new investors? Many are businesspeople from urban areas wishing to diversify their investment portfolio. The economic context for much business is dire, so having a diversity of options is essential. Other businesses can be used to finance agriculture in the absence of loans and other forms of financing, a continued problem in Zimbabwean agriculture. Diaspora money is also important, with intermediaries offering a route to those based in Europe, North America or South Africa for investing at home. Such investors focus on particular projects – beef cattle, a pig production facility, a fish farm or a certain type of crop – while others are buying land speculatively as they cannot manage a project. A Lands Officer in one of our sites commented, "Some people in the diaspora are seeking land for speculative reasons. They are afraid that the land is running out, and there won't be any land left when they return home upon retirement." Case 3 is an example of a businessperson who has developed a cattle-rearing business across a number of land parcels involving leasing and finally purchase.

Case 3: I was born in 1963 in Mutoko and grew up there. After completing Form 4 in 1978, I came to Harare to seek for employment. In 1980, I then obtained an apprenticeship with National Railways of Zimbabwe where I worked as an engineer until I resigned from the job in 1998. On leaving formal job, I then set up my own car sale business, which I am operating to this day. In 2013, I decided to venture into cattle farming. When land reform started, I was not interested in farming. Over the years, I have imported a vast number of cattle from South Africa. At one point, my cattle herd increased to over 1000. Today, I own over 300 head of cattle. When I started cattle farming, I was renting farms from A2 farmers in Mashonaland West for US\$1.20 per animal per month. In 2020, I then bought an A1 plot from the sabhuku in Mazowe. The sabhukus were selling in the grazing areas. I now have access to 80ha. I use this as my 'base'. I am renting additional grazing land from an A2 farmer for US\$1.20 per animal per month. In 2023, I also bought another A1 plot nearby where I keep over 30 head of cattle. Cattle farming has a potential to generate money, but currently it doesn't pay very well. But if you are old like me, with no children in school anymore, you can generate enough to pay your medical bills.

Others establish more formalised 'joint venture' arrangements – either through the government approval process, or through informal bilateral deals. Former white farmers are important investors, many of whom have continued within the agricultural sector, but not on the land. Joint ventures have really taken off as A2 farmers have struggled to raise funds to invest in their farms.³

Many such people had not considered land reform areas before. They may have shunned the land reform process earlier as being ‘too political’ and so necessarily insecure. As black opposition supporters and former farmers they may have actively disapproved. Among the former farmers many were hoping that the land would be returned and that their title deeds would be upheld. Meanwhile, others were away and out of country and did not have the networks to gain access to land, especially in the A2 areas. Chinese investors were early movers in joint venture arrangements, especially in the tobacco areas. They often moved between mining and agriculture, and many are now quite established with joint ventures on A2 farms. Today, attitudes to land reform areas have changed. Although still seen by some as ‘contested areas’, in practice no political grouping believes that the land reform can be reversed. While there remain hot politics in such areas, the room to manoeuvre is far greater today, including for outsiders and increasingly white former farmers, as well as Chinese, Indian and other investors.

3. A New Land Tenure Regime?

Given the new land market, there have been many calls for its ‘formalisation’ and the offering of new forms of land tenure arrangement to give land security. Existing residents of communal and A1 areas rarely comment on the lack of tenure security. The lack of formalisation certainly does not prevent investment and the demand for bank finance through collateral arrangements is limited. This is different in the A2 areas, where larger farms attract political interest and those attempting to invest in commercial agriculture at scale are struggling due to lack of financing. New entrants of the types discussed above, may face tenure insecurity as negotiating access is usually through complex arrangements, very often notionally illegal. New land claims may be backed by affidavits and other agreements, but these are largely performative.

The land tenure story is therefore complex, with differentiated experiences across the country (high vs. low potential) and between different land use types (communal/A1 vs. A2) and different people (long-time residents vs. newcomers). It was a surprise to many therefore that on 8th October 2024, there was a cabinet announcement that laid out plans for a completely new tenure regime in the land reform areas. This was confirmed in an announcement at President Mnangagwa’s Precabe farm in December 2024, with a ‘one-stop shop’ set up to provide titles for anyone willing to pay the fees.⁴

The aim is to provide a secure form of tenure arrangement that was to be ‘bankable’, allowing for collateral to support investment. It was to be implemented across land reform areas, with war veterans and women prioritised. The registration and granting of tenure rights was in turn expected to allow for sale and purchase by ‘indigenous’ Zimbabweans, including new entrants and investors central to the land market, allowing the highly informal arrangements to be formalised. The announcement has caused a huge amount of debate, raised many questions around implementation and quite a lot of consternation about the political and financial implications of the plan.

Given the vibrancy of the existing land market that is clearly not preventing investment, sometimes at a large scale, what is the advantage of the current move to formalise systems and offer title? Zimbabwe has a multiform tenure system, with different approaches suited to the context. A completely free land market presents risks of land concentration and elite capture (Mazwi and Mudimu 2024). For many, offer letters, permits and leases – the existing mechanisms – could easily provide the basis for secure tenure if effectively implemented, with records updated. ‘Freehold title’ though is seen as the gold standard in Zimbabwe (by former farmers and war vets alike), but has so many flaws, not least the implications for equity and justice.⁵

However, even with a new tenure system, what is still absent is an effective, transparent and functioning land administration system that provides for low-cost registration, regular audit and the collection of land tax and other revenues (Scoones 2018). For A2 areas, revised forms of land leases in particular could offer the potential for collateral security to guarantee bank loans, and all existing forms of recognised tenure, such as offer letters and permits, should guard against land grabbing and speculation by outsiders if properly recognised. The growth of informal land markets and the de facto existence of land sales/purchases on quite a large and growing scale, alongside increasing numbers of cases of ‘land grabs’ for commercial agriculture, mining and others uses especially in the communal areas, makes this even more imperative.⁶

4. Practical Challenges of Implementation

However, the challenges of implementing the current proposals for extensive titling especially in the A1 areas are huge. Transferring such land from state to private titled land, even with conditions, has major implications. In the A1 areas, a system of land authority has emerged that is quite similar to the communal areas. The dynamic land market reflects that there is more land to exchange, and the value of it for commercial investment is often high. But trying to box the incredible complexity of the multiple informal systems at play into a simple farm-based registration and tenure recognition/titling process seems incredibly unwise. There are many other ways of providing agricultural finance in these areas, with different collateral loan arrangements backed by the state,⁷ and by retaining state ownership even if individual usufruct, these national assets would not be up for sale (Zamchiya 2025).

While land registration systems are certainly needed, these need not be incredibly complex or costly and should not prevent the informal systems that have been evolving. Land markets can provide for a healthy exchange of land through rental and leasing systems, even purchase, and help farmers make use of their land more effectively, as the discussion of new entrants above has shown. The trouble is that nearly 25 years after land reform there remains much confusion over tenure rights, and the practical challenges of implementation are significant.

As a Lands officer explained, “We can’t keep up. We have no transport in the district, so we have not been able to issue final A1 permits except in very few places. They are nearly all temporary, most with different names. There are now so many

disputes, so many different ‘offer letters’. When we issue final permits, we only select those few A1 schemes without disputes, ones that have respected boundaries and carrying capacities”. Commenting on ‘illegals’, he went on “It’s a complicated web. Illegal settlers are too many in the resettlement areas. They do what they want. They know that Lands officers do not visit farms regularly, and if they do pass through the farms, it will take another two years or so before they return to the farm. So, they are doing whatever they want. And when you are trying to evict those illegal settlers, politicians tells us to leave them because they voted for them”.

The frustration of those charged with addressing land issues across the country is palpable. But will a brand-new tenure system make things better or worse? Most people think the latter. In the words of one local official: “if in the A1 areas, it will be chaos, real chaos”. Instead, what is needed more than anything is a low-cost, transparent and efficient land administration system that can keep on top of transfers, inheritance bequests and other changes of use, while limiting the operations of ‘land barons’ and others. Currently the system is not keeping up. As another official commented, “Land seekers are being defrauded by scammers. People are buying land from land barons. These land barons are better-informed than us in terms of what is happening on the farms. They know where spaces are. They are more networked than us. Some land barons have even set up offices in towns. They print very nice offer letters. If you compare offer letters from the Ministry of Lands and the ones that they print, you would think that the land barons’ offer letters are genuine and ours are fake!”

5. Digital Dream Worlds or More Grounded Alternatives?

Many believe that the challenges of land titling can be solved through technical fixes. The World Bank (among others) has become a promoter of digitisation of land systems, providing what is seen to be a cheap, efficient approach. But the challenges are legion. Boundaries are unclear, digital records do not match other registries, disputes are likely to accelerate, and to what benefit. The World Bank’s narrative (like earlier promoters of freehold title) is that this will solve all ills. At the 2025 World Bank land conference, one session offered the storyline:

“Digital land administration systems are a critical form of public infrastructure and a prerequisite for the achievement of a world free of poverty, with shared prosperity for all, on a liveable planet.

*Updated, comprehensive, and digitized land records and digital land administration services enable access to finance, access to land for housing and infrastructure, domestic revenue mobilization, and public land management”.*⁸

But this is a digital dream world, detached from reality on the ground. A totally new system based on land titling (with or without digital fixes) will I fear cause even more delays and confusion. The African experience of formalising land tenure systems through the offering of title (or some equivalent) has not been positive.⁹ The Rwanda experience, often promoted by donors and others, does not always stand up to the hype as following registration most transactions reverted to informal arrangements (Ali et al. 2019). The post-Independence experience of Kenya has not been positive either, with productivity not increasing as expected (Place and Migot-Adholla 1998), with similar results found in Zambia (Sitko et al. 2014). And the recent Tanzania experience, despite huge external investment, seems to be mixed too (Stein et al. 2024). A process of land concentration has often followed titling programmes, with many becoming disenfranchised, with major political and economic consequences (Boone 2019).

Instead of a radical change to the rural tenure regime through complex titling programmes, a focus on boosting the capacity for basic land administration is however essential, and long overdue. This will acknowledge local land markets but allow for registration and prevention of land-scale land grabbing. Before rushing into a new set of tenure arrangements based on what are often vague and politically-driven pronouncements, more reflection and deliberation on what makes sense in Zimbabwe is urgently needed.

Endnotes

- 1 This short commentary draws directly from two blogs published at the end of 2024 on www.zimbabweland.wordpress.com, An exploding land market in Zimbabwe's rural areas | zimbabweland and <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2024/12/02/a-new-tenure-regime-for-zimbabwes-land-reform-areas/>
- 2 <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2023/07/17/booming-horticulture-markets-in-zimbabwe-a-growing-hidden-middle/>
- 3 <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2020/02/17/can-can-joint-ventures-and-sub-letting-unleash-zimbabwes-agricultural-potential/>
- 4 The cabinet statement https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/LAND%20TENURE%20STATEMENT.pdf and the 20 December 2024 launch, <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/president-mnanga-gwa-showcases-agricultural-progress-at-preca-be-farm-ahead-of-land-tenure-implementation-programme-launch/>
- 5 <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2017/07/03/beyond-the-freehold-title-obsession-generating-land-tenure-security/>
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- 7 <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2017/07/10/getting-agriculture-moving-finance-and-credit/>
- 8 World Bank Land Conference, Plenary session: Country Best Practice: How Land Systems Unlock Jobs and Growth, 9am 8th May 2025, <https://web.cvent.com/event/t/d800b930-b64e-4fe4-b031-8b2618c72eb0/websitePage:f3bdbe92-94ad-4deb-969d-1bdec25e8e77?session=8615afc2-8049-4e90-ac01-51ddb60ad8a2&shareLink=true>
- 9 See <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2020/08/27/still-debating-land-tenure-reform-in-zimbabwe/> and <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2024/07/22/land-tenure-reform-in-africa-why-customary-systems-are-important/>

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