

# OPINION PIECE

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## **Foiled Inclusive Development? State-backed Neoliberal Land Policy, Equitable Land Redi- stribution and Prospects for Resolving Land Questions in Zimbabwe**

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## Abstract

Against a backdrop of colonial accumulation by dispossession and constrained equitable land reform post colonialism, the fast track was a major achievement in resolving Zimbabwe's land question. Fully acknowledging challenges, amongst the achievements of this phase of land reform were high redistributive outcomes, improved household reproduction, enhanced social protection and accumulating social cohesion. Nevertheless, the shift in land policy from people-orientation to neoliberalism, particularly in the New Dispensation/Second Republic headed by Emmerson Mnangagwa, has led to increased risk of reversing the thrust and inclusive gains of Zimbabwe's land reforms. At the helm of the state-backed neoliberal land policy is the current controversial issuance of title deeds targeting the A2 model and land grabbing. Within this context and anchored to transformative social policy, this opinion piece answers six questions based on review of the current issues and literature, and proffers recommendations for enhancing the inclusive and transformative capacity of land and agrarian reform: How is Zimbabwe's land question evolving? What is the motive for adopting state-facilitated neoliberalism and elitism in the land and agriculture sector? What are the politics of inclusion and exclusion associated with current developments? How are the neoliberal policy regime and elite bias affecting different groups? What is the potential of improving land distribution through the release of the National Land Audit? How can land questions be resolved and national development guaranteed through lucid and inclusive land policy?

**Keywords:** land distribution, elitism, neoliberalism land policy, inclusive development, State, Zimbabwe

# Introduction

Land is an enabler and guarantor of sustainable development (Moyo, 2011a; Banjwa, 2022). The associated land and agrarian reforms broaden and secure human wellbeing and welfare, a dimension that is widely acknowledged in literature (Chambati, 2022; Chipenda, 2024; Tekwa & Adesina, 2025; Shonhe, 2022). Accordingly, land continues to be an essential resource globally and across generations. Zimbabwe – as with other African countries with a history of colonial accumulation by dispossession – engaged land and agrarian reform to address racial imbalances, deepen inclusive development and expand human wellbeing (Chambati & Mazwi, 2020; Mkodzongi, 2018; Moyo, 2011b). Empirical evidence showing that the reforms have enhanced socioeconomic wellbeing and national development is accumulating (Scoones et al. 2011; Chipenda 2023, 2024; Muchetu 2019; Shonhe & Scoones 2021). Accordingly, the current neoliberal drive adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ), represented by farm titling and freehold, implies privatisation of land tenure in the A2 resettlement areas and a direct degradation of inclusive development. The key aspects of the new land policy are freehold land tenure, bankable and transferable land documents (title deeds) and using land as collateral. The new policy is anticipated to increase access to finance, boost agricultural productivity, improve economic growth, and empower farmers. However, a land policy shift from majority-orientation to elite-bias and freehold reverses the gains of land redistribution and the associated agrarian reform. In

other contexts where neoliberal land policy has been adopted or maintained such as South Africa, Kenya, Namibia etc, it stood in opposition to human wellbeing flourishing and capability expansion. From a transformative social policy standpoint, the policy shift anchored to elitism and exclusion, foils broader human wellbeing and welfare, hence, should be reviewed and halted.

This opinion paper interrogates the current intensifying shift in land policy from majority orientation to privatisation and elitism, which are dimensions of neoliberalism. This is based on experience of working with communal, A1 and A2 farmers, through a decade of research in the land and agriculture sector in various rural districts and within the remit of the “Social Policy Dimensions of Land and Agrarian Reform in International Perspective” project. The objectives of this research project encompass ascertaining the potential of land reform in transforming social relations and institutions, reducing social inequalities, enhancing the productive capacity of households, individuals and communities, and the significance of land reform in averting poverty, enhancing food security and guaranteeing employment. The empirical insights drawn from this research project are complemented by a wide corpus of land and agrarian scholarly literature. This opinion article is organised into three sections. The ensuing section outlines Zimbabwe’s land questions, land reform and current farm titling.

## Land Questions, Land Reform and Neoliberal Land Policy in Zimbabwe

Land occupies a central place in Zimbabwe’s history and development (Gundani, 2003). An outline of Zimbabwe’s land and agrarian reforms is central to understanding the importance of land to people’s lives particularly in the design and delivery of social policy hence, its incorporation in the analysis of the surge in the privatisation of land in the resettlement areas. From 1890 to independence in 1980, British colonialism resulted in massive land dispossession from the black population. The British combined land dispossession with social and economic policies to push the black majority off their land and to enhance prosperity and accumulation by the colonialists. Among the diverse draconian and alienative social and economic regulations and laws that were applied to facilitate widespread land dispossession and impoverishment of the indigenous populations were the Rudd Concession, Native Reserve Order in Council, Native Reserve Areas, Land Apportionment Act, Maize Control Act, Land Acquisition Scheme, Land Husbandry Act and Land Tenure Act (PLRC 2003). The resultant land holding at independence is shown in Table 1.

The phases of land reform were a response to the marginalisation and inequalities that were created by British colonialism in the land and agriculture sector, and the need to improve the socioeconomic wellbeing of the black majority through addressing the land question, which broadly is a social question. The Government of Zimbabwe implemented the first phase of land acquisition and redistribution from September 1980 until 1998 (Moyo, 2011c). Its objectives were to reduce civil conflict by transferring land from Whites to Blacks, provide opportunities for war victims and the landless, relieve population pressure in the Communal Lands, expand production and raise welfare nationwide, and achieve these objectives without impairing agricultural productivity. The Government acquired 3 498 444 hectares of land and resettled 71000 families (PLRC 2003). Based on lessons of the First Phase, the Second Phase of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme was launched in September 1998. The objectives were to redress the inequities in land resource allocations, transferring not less than 60 percent of land from the commercial farming sector to the rest of the population, and providing a more efficient and rational structure for land ownership. The Government of Zimbabwe worked with land reform stakeholders including farmers' organisations comprising of the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU), industrial and financial organisations, the Land Task Force of the National Economic Consultative Forum, and civic organisations, to design this phase. The fast track land reform emerged within the Second Phase. It started as spontaneous occupations of white-owned commercial farms and was formalised in 2000, into the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). Important to understand is that the fast track was motivated by the slow pace of the land reform, constrained capability of the government to address the land question, and deepening poverty. While the fast track has attracted heated academic and policy debates, it reconfigured the agrarian structure from bimodal to trimodal (Moyo & Chambati 2013; Mazwi et al., 2021) and resulted in the resettlement of 180 000 families on 13 million hectares (Scoones et al 2019). This level of redistribution had not been achieved before. Two models were used to allocate land upon formalisation, A1 (villagised model intended to decongest areas under communal tenure and based on subsistence farming) and A2 (the commercial scheme). Land titling is targeting the latter model. Unlike at independence where Zimbabwe's land question revolved around racial inequalities in access rooted in colonialism, currently, there are multiple land questions—gender, generational, geographical etc. Underlying the phases of land redistribution and the current calls for returning to majority orientation in land policy is the recognition of the centrality of land to human welfare and the understanding that broader access and ownership as compared to elitism, contributes to inclusive and sustainable development.

Generally, in Zimbabwe, neoliberalism was entrenched by the Bretton Wood institutions, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). The trends and tendencies of neoliberalism in land policy are more pronounced in the Mnangagwa administration, particularly alignment with local and global capital in search of investment and rebuilding international relations (Mazwi & Mudimu, 2024; Vambe, 2023). Currently, under the auspices of the Land Tenure Implementation Committee, a one-stop Centre for Title

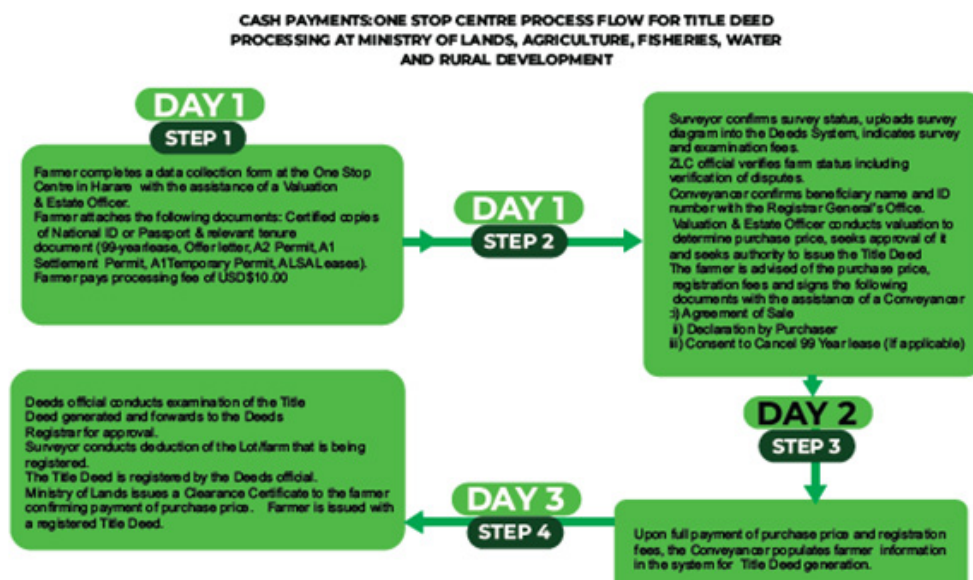


Figure 1. Simplified flow-chart of title deed processing at the One-Stop Centre

Deed Issuance located at the Land Development and Administration Department of the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development (MoLAFWRD), has been established. The application forms are processed within 3 days for farmers who pay cash on the purchase price. Farmers can also pay the purchase price within 90 days and collect their Title Deeds after full payment with no interest rate charged. They can also pay the purchase price within twelve calendar months at a 2.5 percent interest rate, thus saving a 5 percentage rate charged on the mortgage payment. Discounts are as follows: Cash – 15 percent; War veterans – 15 percent; Civil Servants 20 years and above, 5 percent and Civil Servants 10 years and above, 2.5 percent. Cash discounts will only apply to those paying the full purchase price within the 90-day window. The Government is finalising modalities with selected banks for farmers who need mortgage arrangements and will inform the nation when the modalities are completed. Figure 1 is a simplified flow chart of the title deed application and issuance process at the One-Stop Centre.

# Considerations, Issues and Policy Options

## Land reform for broad-based redistribution and inclusive development

Farm titling, particularly when it is informed by elitism and inbuilt marginalisation, foils inclusive development. Privatisation of tenure leads to land concentration and alienation (see Moyo 2007; Moyo 2016; Chambati, Mazwi & Mberi 2017; Martiniello 2017; Tsikata and Yaro 2014; Shivji 2023). Resolving Zimbabwe's multiple enduring land questions such as gender, generational, geographical etc (Chipenda 2020; Munemo et al. 2022; Thebe & Shawa-Mangani, 2023), requires inclusive land redistribution. The ongoing land titling exercise, which lacked transparency from the onset, will deliberately maintain or deepen inequality and exclusion. Reference to landholding in 1980 when Zimbabwe attained independence (shown in Figure 1), which motivated land reform, provides justification for inclusive land redistribution and broad-based development.

Table 1: Landholding by race at independence in 1980

Category	Number	Land size (hectares)
White farmers	6000	15.5 million
Small-scale black farmers	8500	1.4 million
Communal farmers	4.5 million	16.4 million

Source: Moyo (2011b)

The adoption of land and agrarian reform surpassed the goal of redressing colonial imbalances through enhancing inclusive development. For instance, compared to the landholding shown in Table 1, the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) reconfigured the agrarian structure from bimodal to trimodal, resulting in the redistribution of approximately 13 million hectares of land to 180 000 families. Accordingly, the FTLRP was the most redistributive phase not only in Zimbabwe but across Africa. About 170 000 families are peasants (Moyo & Chambati, 2013). While the ongoing title deed issuance process signifying freehold tenure has been portrayed as simple, efficient and effective, it creates profound constraints to inclusion and equity, further excluding prospects for redistributive land reform and consolidation of national development.

## Land and agrarian reform are social policy instruments

Privatisation of land which is an imperative of neoliberalism through the ongoing farm titling programme retards the social policy outcomes of land and agrarian reform. These reforms have been proven empirically to be social policy instruments that is, tools for generating, broadening and sustaining people's socioeconomic wellbeing and welfare (Chipenda 2024, 2025; Tekwa & Adesina 2025). Framed within the Transformative Social Policy perspective (Figure 2), reforming land tenure and agrarian systems facilitates the improvement of human socioeconomic wellbeing. Such reforms have multiple functions including redistribution, production, protection, reproduction, and social cohesion/nation building. Where the normative framing of land and agrarian reform is informed by equality and solidarity as opposed to elitism and marginalisation, they translate to immense positive economic, social and political outcomes. Emphasising the importance of land reform as a social policy tool, Adesina (2015: 113) argues:

While land reform may be inspired by efforts to redress historical legacy of land expropriation and colonialism, it can simultaneously address the different tasks of social policy. Inherently a redistributive process, land reform enhances the productive capacity of rural beneficiaries. In doing so, land reform (again, with appropriate agrarian support, upstream and downstream) addresses the protection task of social policy, ex-ante by smoothing household consumption and enhancing accumulation.

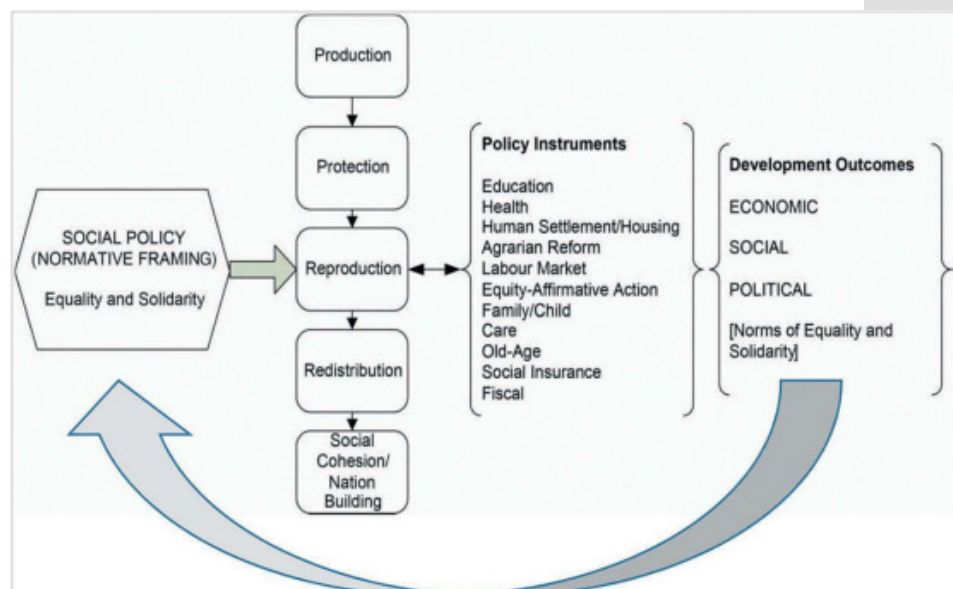


Figure 2. Transformative Social Policy: Norms, Functions, Instruments, and Outcomes Source: Adesina (2011, 463)

Though not acknowledged in mainstream social policy literature particularly in the European sense of welfare and wellbeing, which is often equated to the international perspective of welfare, land and agrarian reforms trigger and sustain human wellbeing and welfare. A review of welfare literature reveals multiple gaps in the conceptualisation of welfare (Béland 2019, 308; Seelkopf & Starke, 2019, 1; Midgley, 2019, 29; Chipenda, 2024, 89). Particularly outside the traditional welfare state in the European sense, there are various policy measures with lasting welfare outcomes including land and agrarian reform (Tekwa & Adesina 2025). While firm evidence supports the centrality of these and other policy instruments to improving human welfare, there is a sustained barrage to alternative social policy thinking. Yet it is essential to understand that the traditional public welfare state programmes, mostly restricted to the social protection paradigm (Adesina 2011, 2020; Mkandawire 2011), are only one of the many potential sources of wellbeing and welfare. Furthermore, these programmes are exhibiting multiple challenges and failure.

Nonetheless, Zimbabwe's land and agrarian reform, challenges acknowledged, is an active social policy that invests in people's capabilities. The Social Policy Dimensions of Land and Agrarian Reform in International Perspective research project has revealed important insights relating to Zimbabwe (Chipenda, 2024; Chipenda & Adesina, 2025; Tekwa & Adesina, 2025). Broadening access to land has enhanced the productive capacity of the land beneficiaries most of whom are peasants. The fast track land reform not only redistributed land but facilitated the redistribution of output and income. Rather than relying on state and non-state social protection programmes, the land beneficiaries are using land as a firm and better source of socioeconomic welfare. Through food production and income generation from the use of land, household reproduction has improved for most of the beneficiaries. Furthermore, by addressing land inequality, particularly the racial dimension, Zimbabwe's land reform has improved social compact. Yet more importantly, the social policy outcomes of land and agrarian reform are determined by the type of land policy adopted. A people-oriented land policy that is buttressed by functional agrarian support is essential if these social policy outcomes are to be improved and sustained. Accordingly, the current farm titling approach that is rooted in neoliberalism is drifting away from the premise, achievements and potential of land reform in improving welfare and wellbeing for all.

## **Land reform as an enabler and guarantor of national and continental aspirations**

Equitable land policy and governance are paramount to the pursuit and realisation of the national and continental aspirations, goals and frameworks. Various scholars explored the importance of land and agriculture to development (Boda et al., 2024; Chambati & Mazwi 2020). Land and agrarian reform is among the strategic pathways that are central in this regard. For instance, land and agriculture are essential to Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 espoused by the Mnangagwa administration, that of becoming a prosperous and empowered upper middle-income economy by 2030. Agriculture is a component of the Inclusive Growth Pillar of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030. The thrust of agriculture under Vision 2030, is to "create a self-sufficient and food surplus economy that will see the re-emergence of Zimbabwe as the 'Bread Basket' of Southern Africa". This is achievable through various initiatives including improved land utilisation, farm mechanisation, agricultural research and development, agricultural financing and farmer incubation, extension services, marketing, climate change mitigation, irrigation development, horticulture and livestock, etc. However, without equitable land access – which is under threat due to the current neoliberal land policy and consolidation – the role of land and agriculture to the achievement of the Vision, National Development Strategy 2 (2026-2030), and further development strategies – will be piecemeal and unsustainable.

In relation to agriculture and other sectors, Zimbabwe feeds into the continental and global goals and development pathways including the African Union's

Agenda 2063 (The Africa We Want) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, agriculture is a vital cog of the AU Vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena". This is the overarching guide for the future of the African continent. Aspiration 1 of Agenda 2063 (A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development) acknowledges the importance of inclusively transforming African agriculture to enable the continent to feed itself and be a major player as a net food exporter. Furthermore, land and agriculture are central to the AfCFTA's aspiration for a continental market with free movement of persons, capital, goods and services, which are crucial for deepening economic integration, and promoting agricultural development, food security, industrialisation and structural economic transformation. Moreover, at a transnational level, land and agriculture crosscut a significant number of the seventeen SDGs – SDG1 No poverty, SDG2 Zero hunger, SDG5 Gender equality, SDG8 Decent work and economic growth etc. Yet the contribution of the land and agrarian sector is greater when land is broadly accessed and multiple categories of the farmers service the agro-value chains. These aspirations are partly hinged to equitable land distribution and access, which are thwarted by a neoliberal agenda adopted by the government of Zimbabwe.

## Policy considerations, issues and options

Land policy as with any other policy, should be formulated and implemented based on empirical evidence. An evidence-based comprehensive assessment of privatisation of land tenure was essential prior to implementation. Key considerations and options that should have been the basis for strategic decision making were not prioritised. Nevertheless, the adoption of a neoliberal stance in Zimbabwe seems not to have followed cogent policy formulation processes. This is a questionable anomaly particularly where the government emphasises leaving no one and no place behind on one end and the current developments surrounding land titling on the other. The following questions summarise the key issues and considerations that could have been the basis for decision making:

- Is the new land policy consistent with the goals of the land and agrarian reforms and inclusive development?
- Whose interests are represented by the new land policy?
- How will the new policy affect different categories of the land beneficiaries/farmers?
- Is the new policy addressing previous land and agrarian issues – multiple farm ownership, gender and generational gaps?
- How will the new policy be implemented and administered?
- What are the future implications of the current policy?

Policy options may include:

- **People-orientation and endogeneity:** The land policy and any other policy should centre the majority. Moreover, while globalisation cannot be avoided, the land policy should be “home-grown”. Externally determined and controlled policies have failed to improve inclusive development in Zimbabwe and other African countries.
- **Policy making process:** Privatisation of land tenure through title deed issuance should undergo the policy making process prior to implementation.
- **Participative decision making:** This ensures transparent policy formulation, implementation and review, and ownership of the policy.
- **Using Land Audit results:** Results of the 2018 and 2022 land audits should be used as an empirical base for land acquisition and redistribution. This will be problematic if land tenure is privatised through farm titling.
- **Agrarian support systems:** Effective and transparent agrarian support should complement land reform.

## Conclusion

This opinion paper explored state-backed neoliberal land policy in Zimbabwe that is associated with titling of farms in the A2 model and how this relates to equitable land redistribution and prospects for resolving enduring land questions. The overarching goal is to show that the stance adopted by the government of Zimbabwe foils inclusive development. The paper is crystallised around the understanding that neoliberal land policy trajectory in Zimbabwe in the form of A2 farm titling is and will continue to sideline the peasants and various categories of the people who were not equitably included in the land reform – women, youth, people with disabilities etc. Exclusion and inequality are obstacles to redistributive land reform and sustainable development and directly limit the function of land and agrarian reform as instruments of transformative social policy. The neoliberal drive should therefore be reviewed and revised or discarded.

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