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NOTES ON ZIMBABWE RIVER BASIN LAND TENURE ISSUES
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SABU RIVER

The Zimbabwe case is somewhat special, because the colonial division of the land gave fifty per cent of the land to one per cent of the farmers, the whites. After Majority Rule was attained in 1980, resettlement of black farmers from the Communal Areas (Tribal Trust Lands under the British) was a high priority of the new government. The idea was to expropriate with compensation land that was "suboptimally used" by its owners and was also convenient to overcrowded Communal Areas. Some expropriation without compensation was done of farms judged to be abandoned, as quite a few were in the aftermath of the war (land values in dryland Commercial Areas are pretty low, about Z\$60 per hectare, so abandonment of land may have not been as costly in Zimbabwe as it would be, for example, in Iowa).

According to Dr. Liberty Mhlanga, Director of ARDA (the Agriculture and Rural Development Authority, which is the parastatal in charge of irrigation in the middle and lower Sabu River valley), the government's philosophy of resettlement is thoughtful and compelling, but it contains a serious contradiction: in principle, land is to be held by the peasants who work it, but the government's ultimate aim (at least rhetorically) is to claim state ownership of all land. There are three models of resettlement proposed, but only the first has been implemented on any scale:

a. Purchase of one or more contiguous "white" farms, cut up into much smaller individual holdings (about 4-5 ha) for crops, and large communal grazing areas surrounding (supposedly 50-60 ha per household). This is the typical, moderately dry areas, where most of the target farms are located.

b. Purchase of the farm(s), formation of a cooperative with no title to the land, cooperative operation of whatever farming is to be done.

c. The irrigation model of ARDA: creation of a large core estate, circled by associated small-scale individual irrigation farmers on plots (with eventual freehold title) ranging from 0.1-0.2 hectares (the so-called "comma-hectare" plots) to 10 ha.

The reason why the cooperative model has not been popular so far, in spite of the government's ideological preference that this be the ultimate form for the entire country, is that people just simply aren't interested in cooperatives, but prefer individual title. The few co-ops that have been started are composed of young political activists who have bought the ideology, but not yet the farm. The irrigation model is being tried out on a modest scale at several of the ARDA estates, including Chisumbanje and Middle Sabi, but further implementation will await the government's formulation of a national irrigation policy, which, it seems, is not for tomorrow.

Aside from resettlement policy, there is much to be learned from Zimbabwe river basin development, notably the group of small-scale communal-area irrigation perimeters which date from the thirties. Since the time of Alvord's "gospel of the plough" in the twenties, the authorities in Zimbabwe have tried to intensify and drought-proof the agriculture of the communal areas. In the driest areas, like the Sabi catchment in the Southeast, irrigation was the only way to induce farmers to change from unreliable and unproductive shifting cultivation, as well as to introduce cash-crop production. In the early years the people themselves, egged on by Alvord, dug the canals and levelled the land. In the forties the Government took over the schemes, and since then has expanded the irrigable area and added more and better canals, pumps and

engines. There are now nine schemes, totalling about 2000 hectares, on which about 2200 farmers are working.

The division of rights and responsibilities is as follows:

--Each scheme has an Irrigation Manager, along with 1 to 6 extension assistants to ensure that a high standard of efficiency is maintained by the ploholders.

-- All land development, operation of the irrigation system by "water controllers" -- salaried employees, and maintenance of the distribution system are carried out by government staff.

-- Farmers pay maintenance fees (formerly called water rent) on a per-hectare basis, graduated by the amount of time between water allocations.

-- Farmers are allocated plots of 0.4 to 2 ha., on which they are responsible for all farming operations. SINCE THE SCHEMES ARE IN THE COMMUNAL AREAS, IN WHICH TRADITIONAL TENURE RULES ARE MAINTAINED, FARMERS DO NOT HAVE TITLE TO THE LAND, BUT RATHER HAVE USE RIGHTS -- INDEFINITELY ONCE OBTAINED -- SUBJECT TO OVERSIGHT BY TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND SCHEME MANAGERS.

-- Farmers have formed "cash groups" to purchase agricultural inputs in bulk and to sell their output, but otherwise do not cooperate in any formal way in farming.

In fact farmers have not been required to pay water charges (really called "water rent") since the war, i.e. since about 1975/76. The government last year decided to begin making them pay, at a rate of Z\$145 per hectare (which is about 25% of scheme operating and maintenance costs); according to the Irrigation Manager at Nyanyadze, one of the larger schemes at about 500 ha., all those with good crops this year (why do people not have good crops?) are in fact paying this year. Newly-established farmers' committees are supposed to establish authority, and to have the power to expel those who

refuse to pay or who are otherwise bad farmers, but thus far they have been reluctant to exercise their power, hoping that the government will take action instead of them. But it probably will not, at least until national political tranquility is restored. Thus plotholders have security of tenure until then, whether they pay or not, whether they produce the "right" crops with the "right" methods or not.

The situation is clearly transitional now, and the eventual outcome depends at least as much on off-scheme politics as on the socioeconomic situation of the irrigators. The fact that many of the members of the farmers' committees are ZANU/PF activists makes the link between Harare and the farm just that much tighter. Interestingly, the Irrigation Manager of Nyanyadze thought that such activists were the right kind of people to have on the committees, rather than village elders or members of their families, perhaps because he expects the government to take action -- or hopes that it will, perhaps also because he expects that farmer committees controlled by traditional leaders would give higher priority to farmer interests than to national interests.

The ARDA estates represent the polar opposite case from the small-scale communal schemes. The large core estate, of over a thousand hectares (2,000 in the case of Middle Sabi estate), employs 800 permanent full-time workers and several thousand temporaries during cotton harvesting. The associated white farmers have 160-hectare "plots", and the 50 black settlers have 10 hectares each. The estate leases land to the settlers, and provides services such as plowing and input purchase at average cost and only upon demand from the settlers (i.e. the estate reacts to settlers' requests, and does not force the settlers to take the services). Thus far, the settlers all use whatever central services are available to them; I got the feeling there that this was

so because their tenure is not secure (they have a year-to-year lease with ample criteria on which the Settlement Board can evict them -- the Middle Sabi manager said that he expected to evict two of the 49 settlers within the next year); they minimize the risks of getting in trouble by full cooperation. Except for size of fields and quality of houses, the African holdings were indistinguishable from the White or Estate fields -- to an observer unskilled in visual crop analysis. The experiment is too new to judge how the presumably temporary tenure insecurity will serve to motivate farmers to adopt acceptable techniques. The goal of ARDA is freehold tenure for the Africans, the status already attained by white farmers at the estate, but thus far no arrangements have been made to implement the lease-purchase system envisaged.

The principal questions that must be addressed for the variety of tenure arrangements existing in the Sabi are:

- 1) How hard will it be to restore earlier (though still subsidized) levels of farmer payment for scheme-provided services? Is it necessary to reduce further farmers' security of tenure in order to force compliance?
- 2) Is it possible to design farmers' committees such that they respond to the correct issues and are responsive to farmer concern?
- 3) Is there any way that these schemes could be made self-financing (of all costs other than extension agents)?
- 4) What can be done to reduce the threat to these schemes, in times of low water availability, of unauthorized diversion by upstream spontaneous irrigators?
- 5) Is the communal-area model of smallish plots with tight top-down management supplemented by bottom-up committees sufficiently responsive to both social and economic needs to be a preferred one if Zimbabwe wishes to expand irrigation?

6) Is the core-estate, satellite-settler model a conceivable solution to the apparent contradiction between output and rural development?

The last two of these questions are especially interesting in the Zimbabwean context, because there is a nice wide range of experience to investigate. Small (comma-hectare) plots and large (10 ha for blacks, 200 for whites) exist in the same ecological zone producing the same types of crops. It is thought that the rural development objectives of employment, the encouragement of a new generation of commercially-minded African farmers, and food self-sufficiency are incompatible with the purely commercial farming system represented by the ARDA estates. If there is a substantial yield differential between small and large, new and mature commercial farms, and if the crop mix is less valuable commercially but more risk-avoiding on small farms, then the manager is right: there is a tradeoff between the two objectives and the costs of choosing one strategy must be evaluated in terms of losses on the other dimension. The data show that 1) yields are higher on estates than on communal-area schemes (except, curiously, for maize but there may be measurement problems of the self-consumed portion of this crop on the small schemes) but it is too early to tell if the new 10-ha African commercial farms will be closer to one than to the other; 2) small farmers produce the same set of crops as do the estates, except that the proportions of cash (export) and food crops are different, in the predicted direction.

The incompatibility of agricultural production and rural development glossed over in ARDA's name was explained in another way by the former manager of Middle Sabi. Irrigation agriculture is a specialized skill, requiring full attention of the farmer. Hence "comma-hectare plots" are doomed to failure because they will be neglected a) during the rainy season when dryland agriculture competes for time and labor, and b) during a dry season following

an unusually successful rainy season. The only solution (accepted in principle in the communal-area schemes) is to make the holdings large enough to support a family, and furthermore to require farmers with irrigated holdings to renounce dryland agriculture and livestock raising. From the one hectare of Nyanyadze to the ten of Middle Sabi, or the intermediate 3-6 ha. at Chisumbanje, there is a large range of plot sizes right along the Sabi River, all within a one hundred mile stretch, possibly consistent with total farmer concentration on irrigated agriculture. On the communal-area schemes it is very difficult for "ambitious" or successful farmers to expand their holdings to increase family income; it probably will be equally difficult to do so on the ARDA estates, but at least the initial holdings offer the potential for a fairly good annual income. I believe that this region would be ideal for an in-depth river-basin land tenure research study, perhaps by a couple of graduate students from both Zimbabwe's University Department of Land Management and the UW.