



Considering the multiple purposes of land in Zimbabwe's economic recovery

Charles M. Chavunduka^a, Daniel W. Bromley^{b,*}

^a Tetra Tech ARD, Juba, South Sudan

^b University of Wisconsin-Madison, 427 Lorch Street, Madison, WI 53706, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 August 2010

Received in revised form 2 May 2012

Accepted 6 May 2012

Keywords:

Zimbabwe

Land reform

Economic recovery

Belonging

Livelihoods

Productive asset

ABSTRACT

A preoccupation with the idea of land as a productive asset continues to dominate donor policy prescriptions imposed on poor nations of the world. The presumption is that a view of land as a productive asset implies security which then induces investment and improvements in agricultural productivity. Emerging evidence from Zimbabwe's fast track land reform programme shows a nuanced and complex picture whereby land has multiple and often conflicting meanings to individuals, groups, and the state: as a productive asset, political instrument, symbol of belonging, and as a safety net for the poor. Any policy to support a revitalized agricultural sector in post – crisis Zimbabwe will need to take account of the multiple meanings of land and build on emerging trends of land reform beneficiary, white farmer, and private sector collaboration; as well as livelihoods diversification.

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The urgent imperative

Since 2009, a coalition government in Zimbabwe has been working to stabilize the economy and create the necessary conditions for much needed economic recovery. However, because “the land question” has not been resolved, it uneasily sits atop the development agenda. This represents a substantial danger because international development assistance in sub-Saharan Africa continues to suffer from conceptual incoherence and durable colonial ideational prejudices (World Development Report, 2006; Bromley, 1989b, 1991, 2008a,b; Sjaastad and Bromley, 1997, 2000; Peters, 2009). Economic recovery in Zimbabwe will fail if donors do not grasp the fundamental distinction between land as a productive asset, and land as place—the locus of belonging. To ignore this fundamental distinction, or to wish it away, will lead to continued political turmoil and economic decline over the coming decades. Our purpose here is to offer much-needed conceptual assistance to the international development community so that future chaos in Zimbabwe might be averted.

The contending purposes of land

What do we mean by the contending purposes of land? Our point in raising this matter is to stress that land is not—and cannot be—just one thing. The meaning of land changes over time and these

differing meanings can both co-exist and yet come into conflict with each other (Bruce, 2008). Land as with much of our natural world is what we make of it, and as with an economy, is always in the process of becoming (Bromley, 2003, 2006, 2008a,b).

Land as an asset

The idea of land as an asset has its philosophical origin in Locke's labor theory of property (asset) acquisition. In this theory Locke argues that one's labor is one's personal property. When one mixes one's labor with capital (land) to make it productive, he imagines that he is now the owner of the land. This expectation then translates into the wish to exclude others from a claim on that asset. But rather than having to defend that claim as an individual, it is much preferred to demand that the collective authority of the state be motivated in that purpose (Becker, 1977).

Notice that prior collective consent is not a prerequisite for individual expropriation of this valuable asset. Indeed, Locke assumed that prior to this act of applying labor, land belonged to no one. The individual takes it upon himself to mix his labor with land regardless of the interests of others, yet then expects absolute protection from the interests of others who have not been consulted in this matter. This presumption of prior appropriation derives from the obvious value for all to secure their sustenance, and from the ideational presumption of the social legitimacy of the fruits of embodied labor. These two conditions allegedly justify the private appropriation of valuable assets prior to any social contract (Bromley, 1991).

Crucial to Locke's argument is the socially constructed notion that individual property is necessary as an inducement to labor

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 608 262 6184; fax: +1 608 238 9640.

E-mail addresses: cmchavunduka@yahoo.com (C.M. Chavunduka), dbromley@wisc.edu (D.W. Bromley).

(Bromley, 1989a). But of course this is simply a necessary assumption held by those with a bias for thoroughgoing social individualization firmly in mind. Notice, however, that the justification for acquisition and holding of land has a very different conception in those parts of the world that so aggressively carried a contrary mental model to Africa. To quote the historian Tawney:

Property was to be an aid to creative work, not an alternative to it. . . The law of the village bound the peasant to use his land, not as he himself might find most profitable, but to grow the corn the village needed. . . Property reposed, in short, not merely upon convenience, or the appetite for gain, but on a moral principle. It was protected not for the sake of those who owned, but for the sake of those who worked and of those for whom their work provided. It was protected, because, without security for property, wealth could not be produced or the business of society carried on (Tawney, 1978, p. 139).

Notice that exclusive rights in land have been granted to individuals by the civic community—through its legislative and judicial entities—because of the larger social benefits to arise therefrom. It serves all members of the community that those who own might contribute to the social provisioning that secures a better life for the rest. Thus, the grant of ownership is predicated upon the eternal virtues of the larger social good. This entails a society organized on the basis of function under a social order in which the mass of the people are the masters of the holdings which they plough (Tawney, 1978).

Kant challenged this labor theory of property acquisition for its comprehensive incompleteness. To Kant, the physical appropriation necessary for something to become personal property in the Lockean conception is insufficient for purposes of establishing ownership. He argued that by claiming ownership to a thing, one would simultaneously be laying a claim against all others who may have an interest in owning the thing. Such claims negate the interests of other members of the community. While one may claim physical possession of something external, this is not the same as having a socially sanctioned authority to make the claim binding on others who might wish to make internal that very same thing. Without the vindication of one's claims to ownership by others, the situation remains unstable and tenuous. The gist of Kant's contribution is that it is only through the consent of others that one can make internal that which is external. In the absence of consent by others who may have an interest in the benefit stream arising from the thing, one's claims to ownership amount to no more than empirical possession (*possessio phenomenon*)—a dog with a bone. True ownership requires intelligible possession (*possessio noumenon*) which in turn requires recognition of a social contract (Bromley, 1993).

We see intelligible possession at work when a community of sentient beings reaches agreement that indeed it is both right (moral) and good (prudential) that someone among them should be able to make internal something that has hitherto been external (Bromley, 2006, p. 189).

It must be acknowledged that individual ownership incorporates aspects of communal ownership, even in some rural western societies where the tendency to regard land as a family and lineage asset remains strong (Bruce, 2004). Bruce (1993) reminds us that the term “communal” as used in the African context has always been confusing because it obscures the fact that in most African systems there exist clearly defined individual or family rights to some types of land use (e.g. arable, residential land), as well as common property resources (e.g. grazing, forest, water). This constellation of individual and community rights and obligations is rarely understood by non-Africa experts.

In communal systems, land rights are held on the basis of accepted group membership. Within the group there will be socially recognized and sanctioned rules and conventions that facilitate the adjudication of individual entitlements (Sjaastad and Bromley, 2000). In this respect, each individual can have interests in land and those interests will find expression in claims made by the individual. When various claims are adjudicated and given formal protection, rules and conventions are established that bestow entitlements on each individual (Bromley, 1989b). Therefore, entitlements are premised on a socially recognized structure of institutional arrangements that both constrain and liberate individuals in their behaviors with respect to other individuals.

In a communal property regime there exist rules defining who is in the resource management group and who is out. That means, some have a right to be in while others have a duty to be out. The group, which is usually defined by common descent, common residence, or some combination of the two principles, may be an extended family, a lineage, or a village and will often restrict alienation of land to outsiders, and thus seek to maintain the identity, coherence and livelihood security of its members. Each member of the group has a duty to obey the rules of the group and a right to expect others to obey the rules in a set up of mutual duties and rights. “It is the rights of the members limiting group size (and hence total use) along with the rights of members proscribing the use that each will make (the stint), that together constitute property (Bromley, 1989b, p. 871).”

Communal property comprises variable bundles of individual, family, sub-group and larger group rights and duties. Because of some degree of group control, individual rights are relative to group rights. Under this arrangement, the bundle of rights which in western society would constitute ownership is divided between the individual and group so that neither of them holds the full quantum of ownership. Cousins and Claassens (2004) describe the overall character of communal property rights as shared and relative, with flexible boundaries between social units, but nonetheless conferring high levels of security of tenure.

We now turn to a discussion of land as a place of belonging.

Land as place: land's multiple meanings

The official document for the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) poses land as a fundamental national question in Zimbabwe and southern Africa (Zimbabwe, 2001). Land is articulated as defining the being of individuals and sovereign nations. In this conception, life is believed to come from, flourish and ultimately end in the land, hence the idiom “children of the soil.” The term children of the soil is central to Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF)’s ZANU–PF’s liberation discourse, with the “children” being all people and their ancestors in opposition to colonialism. A dominant political narrative has been that liberation can only be complete after the recovery of the land of the ancestors. Land—as the place of ancestors—is presented as a national heritage, a birthright, as patrimony as well as a symbol of political and economic freedom. Land is presented as the means of being (Lan, 1985). Interwoven with this discourse is an ideology of land as the commonwealth of the people rather than a commodity, and that the return of the land would restore people’s control over their destiny. It is small wonder that ZANU–PF has yoked state legitimization to the liberation narrative of the “land question.”

Zimbabwe’s land and natural resources are said to be “for” Zimbabweans (Zimbabwe, 2001). But of course this raises the question of who is a Zimbabwean. During the general elections of 2000, Robert Mugabe told his supporters of the need to liberate the land—and that the white man is not indigenous to Africa. Africa is for the Africans (Raftopoulos, 2003). The discourse of national identity questioned the authenticity of white farmers as Zimbabweans.

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