
Reflections on ‘the Zimbabwe crises: Towards a Just Economic Recovery’

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The author reports back on an IFAA forum in which pan-African feminist scholar activists, socialists and a trade unionist critically analysed the roots of the current crises in Zimbabwe. The discussions focused on fossil fuels and Fast Track Land Reforms. The analysis drew attention to the impact of structural adjustment programmes, economic recovery programmes and austerity budgets combined with the climate crisis aggravated by aggressive

investment in coal-based energy, and state bias towards less productive large-scale farmers. These trends are not peculiar to Zimbabwe but are also relevant in other countries in Africa, and the global South. All these factors have produced the perfect storm in Zimbabwe, strengthening the export oriented extractivist development model and intensifying the current multiple crises, and offering sobering lessons to countries like South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A global economic recession is underway as the world reels from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is urgency around determining the form of the economic recovery. The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published a global report that highlights how fiscal measures instituted by governments have reduced the contraction in the global economy. These positive projections mainly arise from measures instituted by China, Europe and the United States, while emerging economies like South Africa are projected to experience deeper contraction and mounting debt.¹ As was the case during the 2007/2008 global economic crisis, this emphasises the importance of state intervention to resolve market failure.

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This is particularly significant for economies in Africa that have been in a condition of persistent crises. With specific reference to the Southern African region,² mining has historically played a critical role in state formation and extreme dispossession of the land and natural resources.³ Therefore, addressing the land and agrarian question remains critical. The structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and economic recovery programmes (ERPs), with persistent austerity budgets, have continued to erode the ability of states to invest in social provisioning and infrastructure that can absorb the shocks arising out of such crises.⁴ In confronting these circumstances pan-African feminists have sought to turn the post COVID-19 economic response into an opportunity to reimagine our political economies.⁵

Reflecting on the above, IFAA considered it important to convene a webinar on the crisis in Zimbabwe. The country is not only facing deepening and persistent crises, but is also one where radical reforms have been pursued in the recent past. The webinar attracted a mix of scholar activists and trade unionists. Mela Chiponda, coordinator of the Centre for Alternative Development and PhD scholar, analysed the implications of the prioritisation of coal mining and fossil fuel energy



projects. Ian Beddowes from the Zimbabwe Communist Party provided historical analysis of the Fast Track Land Reform programme focusing on smallholder farmers. Austin Muswere, Secretary of the General Agriculture and Plantation Farmworkers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) and Dr Janet Munakamwe from the University of the Witwatersrand analysed the situation of farmworkers.

SUMMARY OF DELIBERATIONS

The discussion opened with an acknowledgement of the critical debates that occurred during the 1980s, when Africa was in a period of economic decline and political instability. Notably, IFAA was formed in this historical moment by radical political economists seeking to advance heterodox economic approaches in Africa. From that period to date, a debt crisis, food security, energy and a care crisis continue to plague the continent. Meanwhile, the imposition of SAPs and ERPs have deepened the export oriented extractivist development model.

In the last three decades, there has been exponential growth of corporations, financialisation and a significant widening of inequality, (even in the face of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic) and mainstream

economic policy thinking doggedly insists that fiscal austerity and economic liberalisation will resolve structural problems.

On the other hand, Jayati Gosh⁶ insists that developing countries urgently need to implement broad-based spending as interim measures to deal with the pandemic, bolster household incomes and ensure employment generation. Capital controls should be placed on the agenda again to prevent capital flight to ensure domestic policy space is protected as interim measures. Longer term steps should include higher corporate tax rates for companies that experience higher rates of returns, especially in the digital economy.

Africa needs to be strengthening its production capacity, especially in agriculture where smallholder farmers continue to be marginalised in support programmes such as access to finance, inputs and appropriate extension services. The climate crisis continues to have an impact on food security, bringing severe drought and at the same time Cyclones Idai and Kenneth. Even while we witness the coronavirus pandemic spreading through a weakened social infrastructure that is a legacy of SAPs/ERPs, the prevailing thinking remains that we must continue to focus on dirty fossil fuel energy >>

projects and prioritise commercial farming, especially agribusinesses. It is on this basis that we turned to the specificities of the Zimbabwe crisis.

Chiponda drew attention to how electricity generation based on coal mining is deeply implicated in the climate and energy crisis. While there is a global trend towards renewable energy, Zimbabwe is expanding fossil fuel-based energy dependence with new investments in coal. Despite the devastating drought, which has disproportionately affected the poor, coal mining and power plants continue, even though they draw on significant water resources. The Sengwa coal plant investment of \$3.2 billion is going to exacerbate the water scarcity problem. The debt being incurred as a result of this project is a multi-generational justice issue. The paradox is that Zimbabwe is utilising only one percent of its solar energy potential. Meanwhile, coal investments are being pursued aggressively, causing the displacement of thousands of people in Sengwa. Even with increased energy capacity derived from coal, the urban bias of the distribution of electricity is striking and will further consign the rural poor to energy poverty.

Underlying this is a modernisation agenda that presumes that the only developmental path requires large-scale, top-down interventions and the displacement of communities and smallholder producers as an essential precondition. However, there is a significant body of evidence that shows smallholder producers, especially farmers, play a significant role in production in our economies. The Fast Track Land Reform programme, discussed by Moyo, Jha and Yeross,⁷ was identified as “...the most important land reform after the Cold War”.

Beddowes, from the Zimbabwe Communist Party (ZCP), reflected on the history of the national liberation movement and the significance of the

different positions held on the land question in Zimbabwe. The divergent interests of the white settler minority in Zimbabwe and British imperialists had a bearing on the land question. The former, similar to their counterparts in South Africa, sought to protect their nationalist interests by building their own economic power on the basis of an autonomous economy. Meanwhile, Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the opposition Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), took a firm position on the land question with a focus on support for reorganising productive capacity with provision for smallholder producers’ organised cooperatives in agriculture, commerce and industry.⁸ Nkomo happened to be Ndebele and although prior to 1963, ethnicity did not matter in Zimbabwe, divisions on the basis of ethnicity and race were exploited by imperialists who did not want to see an independent Zimbabwe based on an autonomous economy.

Sanctions against Zimbabwe began in 1999, before the War Veterans-led land occupations. The process of expropriating land under the Fast Track Land Reform programme set farmworkers (who included migrants who could not claim entitlements to land), against the War Veterans. The brutal form that land expropriation took put farmworker-trade unions and white farmers on the same side, and pitted them against the implementation of the Fast Track Land Reform. There have been mixed results from the implementation of the land reforms in the last two decades.

On one hand, there is a policy bias of government support for large-scale farmers, but these farmers have not been as productive. The fairness in allocation of large-scale farm plots has been questioned since it appears that well-connected elites have taken over those lands. Meanwhile, despite this bias, there is empirical evidence that smallholder farmers are diversifying

their investments and expanding their productivity, largely on their own initiative. Significantly, the government has decided to specifically compensate white farmers with \$3.9 billion which has been questioned since, not only are some of the farmers in question no longer in Zimbabwe, but also no compensation has been offered to the farmworker victims of the land reform, and to the victims of the Gukurahundi massacres carried out by the Zimbabwe army between 1983 to late 1987.

Dr Muswere described the harsh conditions facing farmworkers. He emphasised the disruption of the livelihoods of migrant workers in particular by the imposition of the Fast Track Land Reform. As the lowest waged workers in Zimbabwe, farmworkers struggle to access food amid precarious employment. Those who had the legal status of aliens in Zimbabwe had to either return to their countries of origin, or remain in Zimbabwe as stateless persons, or migrate to South Africa.

Dr Munakamwe, from Wits University, explained that those who remained in Zimbabwe without the entitlements ascribed to citizens were excluded from the formal sector, and had to resort to informal work such as artisanal mining. Farmworkers also had to contend with a lack of social protection. A rise in sex work and HIV/AIDS cases exacerbated the problems. Workers do not benefit from social security, social protection or access to quality health care which has further eroded their living conditions. In this context, the coronavirus pandemic is a deadly threat. The Zimbabwean Farmers’ Union, who represents employers, recognises that the need for “ensuring social distancing and hygiene on farms will increase production costs”. It was further emphasised that there is a need to consider what has happened to workers in the midst of these land conflicts and what the relationship is between smallholder

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farmers and workers, which includes women smallholder farmers.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The meeting concluded that there is a need to advance just economic alternatives to the crisis facing Zimbabwe based on the principles of climate and energy justice. Nonetheless, the country must be careful not to take up corporate-driven models for renewable energy. This has bearing on reliance on independent power producers in South Africa.⁹

There is also a need to critically assess the manner in which the industrial focus of economic policy-making is biased towards largescale production, to the detriment of smallholder producers. This must take into account how economies in Africa are largely informal and where women smallholder farmers play a critical role. Women perform this work largely on their own initiatives and develop informal networks of exchange and trade that support food systems within and across borders.

Zimbabwe needs to strengthen



its productive capacity by prioritising smallholder farmers, especially women. Decent work and a living wage should also be a crucial part of economic planning for a consumption-driven wage economy with investment for a transition to a renewable energy economy. At this historical juncture, there is an urgent need to back demands for radical Pan African feminist responses to the crisis which simultaneously address the just transition agenda on the basis of the creation of decent work, gender equity and investment in social infrastructure.¹⁰

What remains to be addressed is the kind of industrial policy frameworks that can complement this process in a manner that integrates smallholder producers as a ‘component’ of a broader national development planning processes that is oriented to domestic economies,¹¹ breaking from the dominant extractivist export oriented model. The extent to which an environmentally sustainable path can be created for economies that are likely to depend on low-end labour-intensive technology is also of concern. The deliberations on clustering in South

Africa, and industrial parks in Ethiopia and Kenya, provide empirical evidence that can be critically assessed. This is a topic that requires dedicated and robust deliberation.

ENDNOTES

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