

“surround” Africa with fibre-optic cable – an issue which has given rise to a great deal of debate: the “pro” (not mentioned in this Briefing) being that this would give Africa access to telephones and significantly decrease that proportion of humanity which has never made a call. One thing which is not quite made clear in the Briefing is the difference between the Net (or the Web) and Email: throughout the report Email is sometimes mentioned, sometimes the Internet, without adequately distinguishing between the two, even at the end of the Briefing under “*your Internet guide.*” Even SARDC in its own review of the Briefing does not clarify this distinction for the lay person.

Ultimately it will be the policy-makers’ will or resistance to technology which will make it more widely available. The Internet is there, it has only to be made accessible. Governments can facilitate the spread of information, as in Zimbabwe’s AIDS education campaign, or it can obstruct, as in the issue of cellular phones. Part of the problem is the phenomenon widely observed in Africa of the higher echelons of management, those who make the policy decisions, being the least familiar with the technology – often to the extent of being resistant to it. If development is conditional on transforming the economy to a “knowledge-based” one, as in the OECD countries, then such factors will hold Africa back, and the Internet will be no Superhighway but will remain a plaything of the elite academic class.

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In Search of Hope for Zimbabwe’s Farm Workers, Dede Esi Amanor-Wilks & Contributors, Dateline Southern Africa and Panos, London 1995, 70 pp.

“Management only bothers with us when they want something done or when we make noise over something. They do not care less how we survive.”

Amanor-Wilks and contributors chronicle the lives of farm workers living and working on Zimbabwe’s mostly white-owned commercial farms and the unacceptable conditions they continue to endure. The writers’ honest pens outline the dismal lives of about 1.8 million commercial farm workers and their children who provide cheap labour to 4,500 white commercial farmers who own and control 12 million hectares or 70% of Zimbabwe’s land.

The book relates the hardships farm labourers experienced during the era of colonial rule, moves through their hopes and aspirations for a better life in the liberation struggle and independence phase until the present time. Nine main chapters of text broken with boxes of oral testimony which give voice to farm workers, present research based on past and current legal provisions, the political situation and historical background to show how farm labourers experience life.

The haunting image of the white master who drives a Mercedes Benz and practices rifle discipline reflects the master-servant relationship between farmers and workers, illuminating a slavlike existence for workers.

The book points out that the power commercial farmers wield is based on how produce grown on their sprawling hundred-acre farms makes an important contribution to Zimbabwe's agricultural based economy. This translates into an inequality in access to land ownership and control for workers and the spiral effect, as one farm worker interviewed states, "...we are the driving force behind the firm, but we get peanuts. We are paid a pittance."

The opening chapter, *Relations Between Farm Owners and Workers* displays the 1990s, characterised by land designation and economic deregulation, as a decade which has pushed farm workers into a deeper abyss of job uncertainty, poverty and distress. This theme reemerges in chapter eight called *Farm Workers and the Global Economy*, examining how regional and world market forces have worsened the working and living conditions of farm workers.

Chapter two picks up a point made earlier, "*The working conditions of farm workers have never been a leading topic on the political agenda,*" and examines the *Wages and Working Conditions* for farm workers. Looking at the pay cheques workers take home and how these meagre incomes are useless in relation to the current cost of living, what comes out here is a stark reality of the desperate conditions farm labourers work and live in.

Anderson's voice brings chapter three *Amenities and Environmental Health* to life. "*Some doesn't see his value,*" says the farm worker, "*he just lives like a momba (cow). He works and eats and sleeps. They just want us to be down down down, until we die.*"

For many workers malnutrition, poverty, lack of education and health facilities are the natural order of the day. The life of female workers is captured in *Female Workers, Wives and Daughters*, which shows how women on farms, who are mostly wives of permanent or casual labourers there, are seldom seen as workers in their own right and are often asked to trade in sexual favours for employment.

For most women, life on commercial farms is an ugly web of prostitution, AIDS, punishment for getting pregnant, beer brewing, no education, with widows, especially migrants the most insecure, because they can be thrown out onto the streets once their husbands die, to a life of begging or destitution in cities and towns. Although the most hard-working group, women earn much less than male workers, and under prevailing economic conditions seem likely to be replaced by men as casual labour.

As mothers, women workers can only spend limited hours away from their homes and family and must do farm work by day and house work by night, leaving them with little time to themselves.

In chapter five the growing problem of *Child Labour* and children living on commercial farms which needs urgent attention, comes to the fore. Children born

and growing up on commercial farms do piece jobs and more serious work during peak season. They do not have schools, have limited career prospects as unskilled farm and domestic workers and are caught in a trap of malnutrition, disease, hunger, poverty and most recently, AIDS.

Chapter six says little attention has been paid to lack of *Education for Farm Workers* and as a result the large majority of workers, except maybe the younger ones, cannot read and write. High levels of illiteracy among farm worker communities mean many do not know or understand the kind of rights that exist for them and generally feel they cannot fight for any rights. High fees coupled with the costs of examination fees, uniforms, books and stationary, transport, plus cultural preferences for boys means secondary schools are out of reach for most farm children, especially for girls.

Chapter seven explores the lives of the large population of *Migrant Workers* on commercial farms who originally came from neighbouring Malawi and Mozambique as refugees in search of work. Although many migrants have been integrated into local communities, they do not have Zimbabwean citizenship and as such do not qualify for social or medical assistance. Retired migrants, who are now at the end of their working life pose a growing problem on commercial farms which is yet to be addressed. Single aged migrants, especially women are at the mercy of individual farmers and can easily be thrown off farms, becoming homeless, stateless and destitute.

The conclusions offered in chapter nine show that while the past century has created impressive wealth for commercial farmers, the ugly side to the agricultural success story is shown in how 15 years after independence farm workers are still invisible from Zimbabwe's social and political structures

The book notes that, "*conditions of farm workers today reflects a huge failure of policy and a distressing willingness of all but a few groups involved in the development of activities in Zimbabwe to turn a blind eye to their plight...The voices of Zimbabwe's farm workers heard in this study need to be given a platform to influence groups such as donors and to translate individual voices into practical programmes.*"

The final section of the book lists seven recommendations and actions for various sectors of society to take up.

In the current climate of land debate and redistribution, this book clearly has an activist agenda. It is a must-read for all those who want to push for change and bring true hope to the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who live and work on Zimbabwe's commercial farms.

And as the book points out, "*It is not just Zimbabwe's image abroad that is at stake but the lives of more than one million people caught in a terrible trap of labour uncertainty, illiteracy, ill health and immeasurable poverty.*"

Reviewed by Isabella Matambanadzo, Freelance Journalist. Acknowledgement to Woman Plus, Vol 1, No 1, 1996, Zimbabwe Womens' Resource Centre & Network, P O Box 2192, Harare, where this review was first published.