

Rural Folks – The Neglected Lot of Zimbabwe

ANNIE BARBARA CHIKWANHA-DZENGA *

ABSTRACT

The majority of Zimbabwe's population (70%) resides in harsh subsistence economic conditions in the communal rural areas. Their main preoccupation is basic survival and their efforts are concentrated at producing food for consumption. All the determinant factors: access to land, water, credit and energy are largely absent, yet they are critical for one to meet the basic needs of survival. In the immediate post-independence period, the government assumed wrongly that its local government institutions would deliver development to the rural areas, but due to a lack of strategic planning and foresight, development has not taken place. The task to cater for the welfare of the rural poor was thus shifted to the Non-Governmental Organisations. The government's neglect of the rural poor can be attributed to its failure to perceive poverty as a national problem as evidenced by the absence of poverty eradication strategies in the national development plans.

Background of the Rural Poor

Before independence there were some legal formal restrictions which inhibited the growth of income-generating activities in the communal lands for groups and cooperative based enterprises. The system of racial exclusion practised by the previous government ensured that the majority of the country's population had little opportunity to participate in entrepreneurial activity (Robinson, 1995:27). Such activities were only allowed after independence and in communities where the party was strong and organised, decentralised government institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and churches committed themselves to assisting such groups.

Proposals to redress the historical rural-urban imbalances were first introduced in 1978 in the Integrated Plan for Rural Development through the development of growth centres. In 1988 the 'Intensive Rural Development Areas' policy called for the establishment of growth points, rural service centres and business centres. The strategy intended to establish 25 new towns in rural areas which would serve a large rural community with the aim of concentrating economic growth in the centres.

* PhD Fellow, Lecturer, Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Zimbabwe, P O Box MP167, Mount Pleasant, Harare. Tel: 263-4-303211, Fax: 263-4-333407, email: dzenga@polad.uz.zw

The assumption was that the provision of infrastructure would successfully link the rural folk and encourage growth of these centres and that the benefits of the urbanisation process would ultimately filter to the poor. This meant that urbanising and industrialising selected areas in the rural communities continued as the main strategy for alleviating the plight of the poor.

The Intensive Rural Development Areas policy emphasised heavy capital expenditure on infrastructure in order to promote rural industries development within selected areas (Reynolds, 1988). It maintained the growth points, and introduced district service centres. The 'district service centre' concept was eventually implemented and the centres were tasked with the administration of each district and promoting light industrial and commercial activities. Growth points would then provide the institutional and structural support for the development of the district centres into market towns.

These growth points and district service centres developed into a bottomless pit that consumed national resources without generating any benefit for their communities. Politics determined the location of some centres and growth points and this did not augur well with the rural folk who simply shunned some of these white elephants that were established to benefit them. The rural people perceived these points as serving different segments of society and so they remained alienated from participating in their economic growth. Most importantly, the rural folk were largely divorced from what was going on and they felt there was no need to comply with these new developments which bore little resemblance to their aspirations. They viewed these developments as not being for them, but for the already affluent. The few retail outlets that sprung up at these centres and growth points were owned by indigenous businessman who already own grinding mills or bottle stores elsewhere and emergent businessmen of the current era – the politicians and bureaucrats.

The failure of this economic growth strategy led to the adoption of a welfare approach to rural development. The need to preserve the party electorate intact in the rural areas also contributed to this strategy. Although local government institutions existed throughout the country, central government made frantic efforts to distribute seed packs, food handouts and in some cases establish clinics and schools in sometimes not very strategic locations. This could have led to the development of a fatalistic culture amongst the rural folk who came to believe that government would see to it that they did not starve and it also fostered dependence on handouts.

The task to cater for the well-being of Zimbabwe's poor in the rural areas has thus been left largely to the NGOs with the government frequently alleviating immediate suffering through seed packs and drought relief food. This has made government's assistance in the communal drought-prone areas non-sustainable

because it lacks consistency, even though it clears the government's conscience. Development can only be sustainable if it is geared to the entire living and working conditions of the people concerned, if it takes account of their spiritual, social, and economic needs; if it is addressed to all actors at all levels and in particular to the women as they contribute up to 80% of all work done in the developing countries in the rural households (Munkner, 1996:7).

The Neglected Rural Poor

More than 70% of Zimbabwe's population lives in harsh subsistence economic conditions in the communal areas. Their main concern is basic survival and their efforts are all directed at producing food for consumption. The little surplus sold is immediately ploughed back into the food production process and the leftover is then spent on other needs only if it is absolutely necessary. All the determinant factors – access to land, water, and energy are largely absent, yet they are essential for one to meet the basic survival needs. Other aggravating factors are the prevailing socioeconomic and political structures, especially the inequitable distribution of wealth and power.

A critical issue in any socioeconomic development process is the substantial accumulation of capital by the majority of the citizens, but for Zimbabwe's rural folk, the majority have not been given the capacity to improve their living conditions. Most reside in drought-prone areas and farming is a permanent nightmare. The government has not paid attention to the removal of barriers to food production in the rural areas. Issues such as rural financing, food processing and inputs are largely absent.

Access to the previously white agricultural extension, input, credit and marketing system initially led to dramatic gains for about 70% of peasant farmers who had adequate land to utilise complementary inputs, but this advance drew to a halt in the absence of a rapid breakthrough on land reform (le Roux, 1992:191). The costs of failing to transform the rural areas is felt at the national, regional and continental level as urban-bound migration continues to increase at an alarming rate. Zimbabwe has also largely failed to shift to a labour intensive, modern productive informal sector.

In the immediate post-independence period, the government assumed wrongly that its local government institutions would deliver development to the rural areas. The government aimed to transform rural areas economically and socially by resettling the landless and those with insufficient or economically unviable land, establishing and extending a variety of irrigation schemes, carrying out several policy and strategic studies, guiding the development and growth of the coopera-

tive movement and replacing capital equipment of the estates run by the government agencies (Transitional National Development Plan, 1982-1985:3).

The objective was to achieve growth with equity and transformation, but the approach utilised did not incorporate a *modus operandum* for alleviating poverty in the communal lands. Combining growth with equity proved to be an insurmountable task and those at the bottom lost absolutely. Adelman & Morrison (1993) observed that the absolute position of the poor tends to deteriorate as a consequence of economic growth. The government clearly lacked the political will and commitment to transform the backward rural areas and bureaucratic inertia contributed to the stagnation of positive developments.

The rural folk were all lumped into one group which resulted in the intended strategy benefiting a few 'articulate' persons who knew how to manipulate the system to their advantage. Nineteen years later, resettlement and the essential land reform programme are yet to be effected. Modest adjustments have been made with regard to resettlement but it remains to be seen whether any targets will be set for the programme and if they will be met. (1) This is complicated by the fact that arable land is getting scarce in the rural areas and this scarcity goes hand-in-hand with the changing concept of land. Land is increasingly being viewed as a commercial asset and a major factor of production.

The benefits of the resettlement exercise have been captured by top government officials and influential politically connected elites. Another new group of beneficiaries is composed of persons with agricultural expertise. (2) Their productivity is not a critical and determinant factor, for what matters most to the government is the paper qualification – a clear misconception of what empowering the people means to the government because this group with expertise can afford to acquire farming land through various government-organised institutional mechanisms and not through direct resettlement programmes. On the other hand, the rural folk genuinely need the assistance to organise and develop a sustainable way of living, and yet empowering the rural folk has negative consequences for the politicians as it deprives them of the strong grip they have over the hero-worshipping party electorate. The issue is complicated by opponents of land redistribution who are against allocating land to peasants whom they consider to be unproductive (Moyo, 1994:37).

(1) Between 1991-95, only 52 000 had been resettled out of the originally targeted 162 000. See the Second Five-Year National Development Plan, 1991-1995, p5.

(2) For example, in March 1997 the Ministry of Lands and Water Resources acquired a further 62 000 hectares for resettling 100 agricultural graduates. Each would get an average of 100 to 200 hectares of land for different farming activities. Criteria for this resettlement exercise depended on the candidates' knowledge of agriculture, experience and capital. This settlement scheme was planned by a private consultancy company, Price Waterhouse – which has no interest whatsoever in improving the rural peoples' lot or in alleviating poverty.

The rural folk in Zimbabwe have largely remained outside of the legal framework that sustains the market and democratic system. These people do not acquire and own property in the way that the affluent do which implies that unless the government can democratically give the rural poor the means – ie, land – there will not be much progress in terms of economic development.

The poor will remain poor because they do not have the capacity to cope with the socioeconomic and political environment. There is no mechanism for them to make an input into the policy-making process that determines their economic empowerment. Economic imbalances in Zimbabwe will probably deteriorate as they will be aggravated by the globalisation of the world economies as the country continues to open up to foreign investors.

Defining Poverty in Zimbabwe

All the three development plans formulated and ‘partly’ implemented in Zimbabwe did not pay attention to poverty alleviation in rural areas. The assumption was that the benefits of any national development strategy embarked on would inevitably trickle down to the poor in the periphery. This oversight could have occurred because of the concern with correcting the racial imbalances in all segments of the society. Poverty was thus not perceived as a national problem.

The definition of poverty varies according to one’s social class but the World Social Summit for Social Development in 1995 provided a definition that embraces all the dimensions of human life:

“Poverty has various manifestations including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihood, hunger and malnutrition, ill-health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services, increased morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness and inadequate housing, unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterised by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life.”

The government of Zimbabwe defines poverty as “...the inability to afford a defined basket of consumption items (food and non-food) which are necessary to sustain life.” (Poverty Assessment Study Survey, 1996:iii) This definition restricts poverty to a quantitative concept as it does not stretch to capture the social and political issues of poverty. This narrow definition ultimately affects the policy prescriptions set forth to alleviate poverty in the rural areas. Poverty, being a relative concept, is rather elusive, hence the definitions vary, but for the purposes

of this paper, people can be defined as poor when most of their time and efforts are devoted to issues concerning basic survival. Tied to this is also the lack of knowledge on how to organise for better resource mobilisation.

The Quality of Life in the Rural Areas

Zimbabwe is divided into five natural regions on the basis of soil type, rainfall and other climatic factors. The first three regions are suitable for intensive crop and livestock production, whilst the remaining two regions offer limited scope for agricultural development. The majority of the rural poor live as subsistence farmers in the two lower regions (see Table 1).

Table 1 Present Land Distribution by Sector and Natural Region

Sector	Unit	Natural region					Total
		I	II	III	IV	V	
Large scale commercial	(000HA) %	200 1.8	3690 32.8	2410 21.5	2430 21.7	2490 22.2	11220 100
State	(000HA) %	10 2	10 2	160 32	60 12	260 52	500 100
Small scale commercial	(000HA) %	10 0.7	240 17.4	530 38.4	500 36.2	100 7.3	1380 100
Communal	(000HA) %	140 0.9	1270 7.8	2820 17.2	7340 44.87	4780 29.3	16350 100
Resettlement	(000HA) %	30 0.9	590 17.9	1240 37.7	810 24.6	620 18.9	3290 100

Source: Mukora C.M., 1994, "The Significance of Current Farm Designations in Zimbabwe" in Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly, Vol.7 no. 1 p42.

Seventy-two percent of the rural households in Zimbabwe are poor and the rural folk have come to believe that their poor status is a result of the drought, unemployment and retrenchment. A 1996 national survey of a total of 11 479 rural households in the country's five provinces revealed that 57% are very poor, 15% are poor and 28% are in the non-poor category. Those in the very poor category have incomes that are below the National Food Poverty Line of Z\$ 1 511.77 per person per annum and they cannot afford to purchase a basket of basic food needs; in the poor category they cannot afford to purchase a basket of food and non-food items and they live below the Total Consumption Poverty Line of Z\$2 213.28 per person per annum. Those with incomes above the Total Consumption Poverty Line are classified as non-poor.

The rural folk are further divided into communal land dwellers, small-scale commercial farm dwellers and resettlement area dwellers and large-scale commercial farm dwellers. In the communal lands, out of a total of 7 528 households, 68% are very poor, 13% are poor and 19% non-poor. In the small-scale commercial farms and resettlement areas, 54% are very poor, 13% poor and 32% non-poor out of a total of 1 048 households.

In the very poor category, only 1% from a national survey of 8 620 households attribute their poverty to the shortage of land (Table 2). This automatically implies that policy prescriptions arising from this observation would not result in structural reforms because land is not recognised as a basic necessity by the rural poor in Zimbabwe. The rural folk give more priority to shortages of food, clothes and lack of draught power and this of course implies the prescription of a continued welfare approach to alleviating the plight of the poor.

Attributing poverty mainly to environmental factors and unemployment (see Table 2) overlooks the fact that some families have lived in poverty for generations and their forthcoming generations may also be locked into a cycle of perpetual poverty. Whereas unemployment is a problem in rural areas, the absence of inputs, adequate land and organisational ability exacerbates the issue. The problem is that 40% blame the drought for their poverty, but it is unlikely that a favourable climate would improve their living standard and successfully shift them from subsistence farming.

Entrepreneurship is apparently low amongst the rural folk because of the options they prefer to alleviate their poverty status. Nine percent of 8 620 households would rather get finance for self-help projects, 19% would prefer affordable agricultural loans and the majority 21% prefer that efforts to create employment be intensified. The rest do not seem to be able to put their finger on the root causes of their poor status. (See Table 3). The continued preference for employment implies the continuation of an industrial development strategy which will lead to another problem of urban poverty. It also indicates that the rural folk have come to rely on welfarism as a solution to their economic crisis.

Table 2 Main causes of poverty by Poverty Categories at National Level, 1995 Poverty Assessment Study Survey

Main causes	Poverty categories				Total Hholds no.
	Very Poor	Poor	Non poor	Total	
	%	%	%	%	
Unemployed/retrenched	25	31	36	30	5685
Low paid jobs	8	16	16	12	2289
Large families with low wages	4	6	6	5	920
Poor parents	2	2	3	3	484
Drought	40	23	17	29	5391
Laziness	7	7	6	7	1289
Prices too high	5	9	10	8	1490
Rural urban migration	0	0	0	0	18
Lack of education	1	1	2	2	340
Ill health	1	1	0	1	104
Poor land quality	1	1	0	1	114
Shortage of land	1	1	1	1	190
Other	3	2	2	2	433
Not stated	0	0	0	0	51
Total %	100	100	100	100	
Total households no.	8620	3096	7082	18798	18798

Table 3: Best solution to alleviate poverty by Poverty Categories at National Level, Poverty Assessment Study Survey

Best solution	Poverty categories				Total Hholds No.
	Very Poor	Poor	Non-poor	Total	
	%	%	%	%	
Finance/self help projects	9	10	10	10	1815
Irrigation water	16	9	6	11	2043
Affordable agricultural loans	19	10	6	13	2386
Salary/wage increase	9	18	20	15	2742
Improve infrastructure	3	2	1	2	383
Create employment	21	25	28	24	4541
Establish training facilities	0	1	1	1	112
More cooperatives	3	5	5	4	755
Provision of land	3	2	1	2	397
Self reliance	3	4	4	4	703
Encourage income generation projects	3	3	4	3	643
Provision of education	2	2	3	2	415
Provision of accommodation	1	2	3	2	398
Provision of better health facilities	1	2	2	2	300
Other	6	6	6	6	1104
Not stated	0	0	0	0	0
Total %	100	100	100	100	
Total households no.	8620	3096	7082	18798	18798

Source: Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare Fund, Poverty Assessment Study Survey, 1996.

This analysis is restricted to a few variables that militate against economic empowerment of the rural folk only partly because the National Poverty Assessment Study did not analyse its findings on the causes and solutions for alleviating poverty according to the various communities that were part of the survey. It is therefore assumed that 61% of the respondents are rural dwellers.

Alleviating Poverty in the Rural Areas

Rural poverty is to a large extent an outcome of a number of interrelated forces which limit the success of any single action programme. This implies the use of a multi-dimensional approach to address the causal factors. Since new resources are scarce, such an approach would need to work out new means of reallocating the already existing resources.

A strategy for alleviating poverty in Zimbabwe's rural areas would therefore have to include a long-term action plan that outlines a package of interrelated programmes to improve agricultural productivity and opportunities for increased incomes and employment, as well as to strengthen infrastructure, basic services and popular participation in the planning process (Maeda, 1983: 124). Land has become a limiting factor for any proposed agricultural production and so the ever-increasing rural labour force has to generate income and seek for employment opportunities outside the agricultural sector. This implies that "appropriate" industrialisation might be a possible solution to the problem of rural unemployment.

A household income and expenditure survey in 1993 (Muzari, 1993:39) revealed that small-scale farmers or peasant farmers share a preference for manufactured commodities as opposed to goods produced by traditional handicrafts. This bears testimony to the fact that modernisation cannot be escaped. At the same time, products of the cottage industries have to be encouraged because they are labour-intensive and they are consistent with the poverty levels in developing countries. In any case raising the level of household incomes among peasant farmers pushes up the demand for factory products.

Hence part of the solution to improving rural incomes would be to establish manufacturing industries that produce essential goods for a ready market in the same location (Muzari, 1993:47). For example timber industries could produce basic furniture requirements like tables, stools, chairs and beds; clothing industries would also provide footwear; metalwork industries could manufacture household utensils, the food industry would provide basic foods and other household goods like soap, detergents and cosmetics. However, this kind of an approach would only work if the necessary supporting infrastructure and social amenities like clinics, shell factories and navigable roads are present.

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Poverty can also be reduced by income distribution, even though some voices of dissent argue that assisting the poor through income redistribution is self-defeating. The assumption is that narrowing income differences curtails incentives to reduce outputs and therefore leads to an exacerbation of poverty (See Bauer, 1981). But with a combination of asset redistribution, human capital accumulation, appropriate economic incentives and suitable supporting institutions, growth can be attained (Streeten, 1976:403).

The main asset for redistribution in Zimbabwe would be land and consequently, water. The very few peasants resettled since 1980 have experienced deteriorated living standards because of the lack of basic social amenities and lack of water in particular. Since resettlement schemes very often fall within commercial farms, the resettled peasants were denied access to water stored on the commercial farms and worse still, the Water Act of 1974 sanctioned the rich mainly white, commercial farmers' behaviour. The poor peasants could not even capture some of the natural water flowing into private dams.

Redistributing both assets would go a long way towards empowering the rural folk, but such a programme would need to be supported by credit institutions that give a reasonable grace period and low interest on repayments. Farming implements could also be provided in the same way. The main recurrent cost to government would therefore be the provision of agricultural extension officers to provide the much needed technical guidance in production.

The rural folk in Zimbabwe would definitely benefit from an attitudinal change that emphasises entrepreneurial activity as a way of life. Whilst such attitudes are harboured by those who produce surplus agricultural commodities, the majority leave everything to divine intervention to decide their everyday fate. The long months between harvesting and planting are spent doing absolutely nothing as the rural folk rely on food savings from the previous harvest to sustain them until the next harvest. Whilst this is plausible, there is need to invest this profit into more income-generating projects.

The most effective and efficient way would be of pooling their resources as a group or unofficial club, then use the pooled funds to start a home-based production process like knitting jerseys or crocheting doilies. Labour intensive technologies

would naturally be more appropriate as they occupy a large number of people. Clubs or societies like these have catapulted some individuals with business acumen into a different class altogether as they are usually designed to benefit rural folk occupied constructively, even if the profits are marginal and cannot lead to a tremendous change in their lifestyles. It also frees them from a poverty of the mind syndrome that has apparently entrenched its roots amongst the rural folk who have come to accept poverty as a way of life.

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