

“THE CURSE OF OLD AGE”: ELDERLY WORKERS ON ZIMBABWE’S LARGE SCALE COMMERCIAL FARMS, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO “FOREIGN” FARM LABOURERS UP TO 2000

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Abstract

Studies on farm labour in Zimbabwe have often tended to neglect the plight of disadvantaged sections of this workforce. This article seeks to fill this void in mainstream labour studies. It focuses on the “use” and abuse of elderly workers on large-scale commercial farms in Zimbabwe. Elderly workers have existed either as a recognized group of “special” workers or “invisibly” as part of ordinary workers. The article examines the nature and extent of exploitation and discrimination of elderly workers, particularly their confinement to the so-called “light” tasks. The central issue of comfortable retirement is also put under the spotlight. Aspects of pension and other terminal benefits are discussed in the light of general provision for old-age. The article grapples with the government’s land reform programme and its adverse effects on farm workers who lack ethnic and nationality rights to own land. For many “foreign” workers, prospects of returning to countries of origin have become more remote by the years due to several factors, and, yet, women, children and the elderly were probably the worst affected by farm “invasions” that characterised the government’s controversial “fast-track” land redistribution exercise since early 2000.

BACKGROUND

To date, a number of studies have been done on Zimbabwean agricultural labour in general.¹ However, the fate of elderly workers in this industry has remained a grey area. The history of agricultural labour dates back to the inception of colonial rule. Initially, mining was of course the backbone of the economy with agriculture being a secondary economic activity until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Before

1. For more information, see D. G. Clarke (1977) *Agricultural and Plantation Workers in Rhodesia* (Gwelo, Mambo Press); B. Paton (1995) *Labour Export Policy in the Development of Southern Africa* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications); R. Loewenson (1992) *Modern Plantation Agriculture* (London, Zed Books); D. Amanor-Wilks (1995) *In Search of Hope for Zimbabwe’s Farm Workers* (London, Dateline Southern Africa).

commercial agriculture took off. African farmers supplied mining centres and other European settlements with foodstuffs.

Indigenous people were generally reluctant to enter wage labour. This was partly a result of the peasant prosperity mentioned above, as well as lack of incentive in the mining and agricultural sectors where wages were very low and working conditions generally poor. Under the circumstances, settler farmers and mining companies were forced, in cahoots with the state, to explore possibilities of acquiring cheap labour further afield. The main recruiting grounds were the then Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Mozambique, which were to provide a substantial number of workers for these two industries. It should, however, be noted that importation of extra-territorial labour goes as far back as the first decade of the twentieth century when farmers and mine owners jointly established a collective recruitment agency in the form of the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (1903-1933).

The Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) recruited labour from both within and outside the country. According to C. van Onselen, between 1906 and 1911 the RNLB supplied an average of 13 000 labourers to Rhodesian employers annually.² The Southern Rhodesian government also concluded labour agreements with the northern territories of Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi in order to tap more labour for Southern Rhodesian employers. These agreements include the Tete Agreement (1913) with Mozambique and the Tripartite Labour Agreement (1937) with colonial Malawi and Zambia. The foreign labour supply and contract system was later expanded into the Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission (1946) which was established as a parastatal when farmers could not satisfy their labour demands from inside the country. Under the contract labour system, the Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission (RNLSC) imported an average of 14 000 workers per year from 1946 to 1971.³

The contract labour system established through the RNLSC expanded to its peak in the late 1950s and, by 1966, for instance, 54 percent of male labour in the large-scale farming sector came from the surrounding countries.⁴ According to D. G. Clarke, by the 1940s, the divorce of many peasant producers from their means of production created the basis for the growing class of fully proletarianised urban-industrial workers, as

2. C. van Onselen (1976) *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia* (London, Pluto Press), 25.

3. B. Duncan (1973) "The wages and labour supply conditions in European agriculture", in *Rhodesian Journal of Economics*, 7, 73.

4. *Ibid.*

well as a more stable on-farm labour force wholly dependent on wage incomes for subsistence.⁵

Factors that prompted people from neighbouring territories to accept work in Southern Rhodesia were largely the same as those that were compelling local Africans to enter the wage labour system. While land dispossession and the collapse of African agriculture under colonial rule affected all Africans of the sub-region, in Malawi and Mozambique, conditions were so appalling that work in a neighbouring colony was regarded as a better alternative. This fits very well into Sharon Stichter's core-periphery labour theory, which says that; "wherever urban wages are higher than peasant incomes . . . workers will choose to try their luck in the labour market."⁶ Workers from Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi were, therefore, attracted to Southern Rhodesia by higher wages and better working conditions. In the case of Mozambique, for instance, there were not enough settlers to take over the land and, therefore, the Portuguese had established a system of forced labour called *chibharo* in 1899, a system that continued until 1961.⁷ This system dictated that all Africans of the Portuguese provinces were subject to a legal obligation to work on private estates and public enterprises. If they did not comply, the public authorities, the *sipai* (policemen), could force them to do so.⁸

Chibharo labourers of Mozambique, who were brutalised by police and even military authorities were, with minor exceptions, not entitled to food or lodgings, were often beaten up, and received little or no wages.⁹ Although women were supposedly exempt, they were often forced to work and were abused by overseers and farm owners. The legal time limit of twelve months per contract was often ignored and some men found themselves being shipped to distant plantations, for instance, from the Tete province to Luabo sugar plantations along the coast, where they stayed for as long as two years. Solomon Kwinjo, an ex-farm worker at Mazoe River Bridge, recalls the reasons that prompted him to flee Mozambique with his brothers and colleagues in 1953:

Conditions under the Portuguese were terrible. We were forced to work on sugar plantations for nothing. They beat us. They took our women. It was our dream to escape. People talked of Salisbury as a better place. So, like many others, we abandoned our homes and left.¹⁰

5. Clarke, *Agriculture and Plantation Workers*, 17.

6. S. Stichter (1985) *Migrant Workers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 89.

7. A. Isaacman (1966) *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Workers and the Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique: 1938-61* (London, James Currey), 24.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Solomon Kwinjo, Interview, Mazoe River Bridge, 7 February 1999.

10. *Ibid.*

In Malawi and Zambia, poverty forced people to look for work elsewhere. Abraham Likosa, a worker at a farm in Concession, remembers the time when a white farmer from Rhodesia came with a lorry to Likosa's village in southern Zambia to recruit workers. In return for labour services, the farmer promised to provide his workers with food, accommodation, a decent wage, and other financial allowances which would be sent back to their own villages to support the families they would leave behind.¹¹ However, one Silas Phiri's experience regarding allowances sent back to his family in Malawi was disappointing. Phiri left Malawi in 1943 to work on a farm in the then Southern Rhodesia. Ten years later, he went back home only to find that no allowances had been sent to his family. Desperation forced him to return to Southern Rhodesia with his family, again in the hope that one day he would have saved enough to return to Malawi with money and possessions to establish himself in his community.¹² Unfortunately, at 1999, Silas Phiri was old and still without savings of any kind. That dream had dwindled over the years into nothing. "I no longer think of going back home. Home is here (Zimbabwe). I have lost all hope of ever going back to Malawi,"¹³ he said, dispiritedly.

After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, civil conflict in neighbouring Mozambique produced a flow of refugees from that country into Zimbabwe. Most of the immigrants found their way into the agricultural sector. Even when the civil war ended, Mozambicans continued to cross the border to seek employment in Zimbabwe.

THE CURSE OF OLD AGE

Elderly workers in the agricultural sector include those workers who, despite having reached retirement age, have continued to provide services to the employers, usually under "special" conditions. In agriculture, these workers constitute a special group of workers who also include those with physical or mental disabilities and who are employed to do some of the work normally done by able-bodied employees.¹⁴ Under the Labour Relations Act of 1985, retirement age in the agricultural sector is sixty years. From the census statistics of 1982, it was established that, of the 1.6 million people on commercial farms, over five percent were in the sixty-and-above age group.¹⁵

11. Abraham Likosa, Interview, Concession, 22 March 1999.

12. Silas Phiri, Interview, Concession Squatter Camp, 27 March 1999.

13. *Ibid.*

14. See Statutory Instrument 320 of the *Labour Relations Act*, Chapter 28, 1985.

15. R. Loewenson and C. Chinchori (1986) "The socio-economic situation of commercial farm workers in Zimbabwe", in *SIDA Review*, 65.

However, there are several weaknesses in defining "elderly worker" in terms of the legal age of retirement. For the agricultural and mining sectors that have both been dominated by "foreign" migrant workers, it is difficult to ascertain the ages of "foreign" workers. A majority of the workers, particularly those who entered the country clandestinely, have not had any national identification particulars, thereby making it difficult to tell their ages. It has, therefore, been left to the discretion of the employers to declare their workers retired or not. Employers often estimate age from the physical appearance of the worker or they seek the services of medical doctors, whom they often bribe, to produce false medical reports in accordance with the employers' wishes. Indeed, sometimes, farmers/employers forced their workers to retire prematurely in order to reduce their wage bills. Such workers were then rehired as "special" workers, earning very meagre wages.

Not surprisingly, some workers were pre-maturely retired. In one case in 1992, the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), the union for farm workers, successfully defended 25 workers who had been dismissed by the farmer on medical grounds, at a farm near Harare. A medical doctor had been bribed to support the farmer's claims, which allowed the farmer to dismiss the workers within the law. However, the Union successfully overturned the ruling after receiving independent medical confirmation that the labourers were fit for work.¹⁶

Since prospects of a better life after retirement were remote, most workers preferred to continue working, since this provided some form of security for the homeless worker as evidenced in the following statement by Tomi Banda of Mahamba Farm near Chakari:

I don't want to think of retirement because it reminds me of the predicament that awaits me. Where do I go after retirement? I have no home, no relative and no child. I would rather die here [on the farm] than retire into the wilderness.¹⁷

Because of the predicament outlined above, some of the workers deliberately understated their age in order to postpone retirement. Furthermore, some of the migrant workers, who obtained identification particulars at the point of entry into the country, gave wrong information about their age partly because of illiteracy and ignorance of their actual date of birth. In some cases, immigrants confessed ignorance of their age,

16. C. McIvor (1995) *Zimbabwe: The Struggle for Health* (Harare, CIIR), 10. P. Munyanyi, Secretary General of GAPWUZ, confirmed this.

17. Tomi Banda. Interview, Mahamba Farm, Chakari, 10 January 1999.

upon which registration officials estimated their ages based on the immigrants' physical appearances.¹⁸

Elderly workers existed either as a recognised group of "special" workers or "invisibly" as part of the ordinary workers, thereby making the retirement age of 60 only theoretical. It should also be noted that some workers were worn out faster than others and, therefore, looked much older than their ages. This can be explained by several factors, including the nature of their work, nutrition, and levels of hygiene. Thus, due to their inevitable diminishing productive capacity, such workers were often forced to retire or to become "special workers" doing "light work". There was, however, little difference between the workload of so-called special workers and that of ordinary workers, as "special workers" had, often, to contend with equally arduous work as the so-called ordinary workers. They, arguably, felt the burden of work more given their age. Indeed, as sixty-year-old Moses Kapaisa of Darwendale complained, "if done continuously for too long, light work can eventually equal or even surpass the hard work done by fit and energetic workers".¹⁹

Moreover, "special workers" were exposed to the same health risks associated with farm work as the ordinary workers as is evident in the following account from Jona Kawuleza, formerly a labourer at Cafex Farm in Chakari, Kadoma. Kawuleza recalled how he left the then Northern Rhodesia in 1947 for Southern Rhodesia, where he worked on several mines in the Chegutu district before joining farm labour on a number of large-scale farms around Chakari. At Cafex Farm, Kawuleza worked for Patrick Boyce and subsequently for Patrick's son, Richard. He served as a general worker until he was promoted to the position of foreman (then *baasboy*), the post he held until he retired in 1986. However, since his retirement, Kawuleza remained on the farm as a "special" foreman, "thanks to the goodwill of my *piccanin baas* (Richard)".²⁰ Explaining his job as a "special" foreman, Kawuleza said:

I was given charge of women grading tobacco in the sheds. As you know, a good leader should lead by example. I was always commended for showing women under my supervision how best to grade tobacco. As a result, I managed to win my boss' favours to stay on the farm for years since retirement, until the farm was acquired for resettlement.²¹

Unfortunately, in 1991, Kawuleza was diagnosed with tuberculosis and a skin disease that he believed to be directly linked to the hazards of

18. Charles Mafika, Interview, Whetcliffe Farm, Concession, 27 March 1999.

19. Moses Kapaisa, Interview, Darwendale, 16 March 1999.

20. Jona Kawuleza, Interview, Cafex Farm, Chakari, 10 January 1999.

21. *Ibid.*

farm work, in general, and his work at Cafex Farm, specifically. That work on farms could be hazardous to health was clearly documented by D. G. Clarke who found that, of the tuberculosis cases found at a mission hospital in the Chinamhora Communal Lands in 1976, 75 percent had come from large-scale farms.²² This is not surprising given the cramped living conditions in the farm compounds, lack of protection from dangerous farm chemicals and the absence of clean water and proper sanitation that were endemic to most commercial farms. These conditions had deleterious consequences for all workers, but particularly for young children, pregnant women, and the elderly.

Injuries from farm machinery, pesticide poisoning, and chemically induced skin diseases were commonplace. This was particularly worse in such occupations as grading, tying, and packing of tobacco. Tobacco barns, in which the grading and tying of tobacco were carried out, accumulated large amounts of a fine dust that was an irritant when inhaled over a long period. Thus, ill health and lack of special amenities combined with an uncertain future to worsen the plight of elderly workers.

The elderly workers' tasks included protecting crops from wild birds, herding livestock, as well as general cleaning, especially in and around tobacco grading sheds. Some also worked in the employers' gardens, while others were expected to supervise women and children employed in grading cotton and tobacco, curing tobacco and vegetable production. At face value, such supervisory duties appear light and easy, yet, in practice, they were quite challenging, especially since "supervisors/foremen" were regarded as group leaders who were expected to lead by example. In order to impress their employers, supervisors often worked harder than the people they were supposed to supervise. As Jeremiah Kainos of Magaya Farm in Banket noted, "You should be seen to be knowledgeable, hardworking, and reliable. Otherwise you will be told to go".²³

Some elderly workers interviewed reported that they detested the monotony of manning farm gates all day and/or night long and of scaring birds away from the fields; a task which was better suited to children, given the expansive nature of most fields on commercial farms. When they sometimes left their posts to answer to the call of nature or fell asleep on the job from boredom and fatigue, they were subjected to verbal abuse and were humiliated by their often much younger, white employers. As 67-year old Chari Musapu of Dendera Farm in Kadoma complained, "Imagine an old man like me being called all sorts of names

22. Clarke, *Agricultural and Plantation Workers*, 21-34.

23. Jeremiah Kainos, Interview, Magaya Farm, Banket, 20 March 1999.

by a *piccanin* boss much younger than me, simply because I left the gate unattended in order to relieve myself. I am reduced to a small boy!"²⁴

Moreover, during peak agricultural seasons, such as cotton picking time, "special" workers were often temporarily demoted to ordinary workers and asked to work equally with the other workers. As Kawuleza argued, the classification of workers was merely a cosmetic undertaking, for "as long as you are employed on a farm, you should be prepared to do all sorts of work. This has always been the case since colonial times".²⁵

For the majority of farm workers, old age held no prospects of an easier or comfortable retirement. Once the ability to work diminished, most workers were summarily dismissed, while others were allowed to stay on the farm with little or no compensation for a lifetime of hard work in the service of their employers. Before independence, there was no obligation on the part of the employer to provide terminal benefits for retired workers. However, some farmers ran voluntary pension schemes for their workers, but due to inter-farm migration, illiteracy and poor record keeping or dishonesty on the part of the farm owners, many workers lost out on benefits due to them. In the post-independence period, GAPWUZ offices were inundated by complaints from retired farm workers who had failed to access their pension benefits to which they had been contributing since the colonial times.²⁶ For instance, one John Dunduza, in his late sixties, reported that he had worked on a large-scale farm for most of his life and had consistently contributed towards his pension. Yet, when he came back to the farm to claim his pension benefits after retirement, he found out that the farm had a new owner and that the original owner, with whom he had made the arrangements, was no longer there. He, therefore, could not access his money.²⁷

Retirement was especially difficult for the so-called foreign workers. Unlike most of the "indigenous" farm workers who maintained contacts with their extended families and kin in the communal areas, or retained a piece of land they could retire to, a majority of "foreign" workers did not have this safety net. Despite having lived in Zimbabwe for generations, they lacked the ethnic ties and nationality rights needed to own land. As a result, upon retirement, many "foreign" workers either sought refuge in old people's homes or, if they were lucky, lived with their children or with those few relatives who had, somehow, obtained land in the Communal Areas. The rest became "squatters".

24. Chari Musapu, Interview, Dendera Farm, 6 February 1999.

25. Jona Kawuleza, Interview, 10 January 1999.

26. Philip Munyanyi, Interview, GAPWUZ Secretary General, Harare, 16 April 1999.

27. John Dunduza, Interview, Harare — GAPWUZ offices, 30 March 1999.

The problem of accommodating former farm workers can be traced back into the colonial period, particularly at the height of the liberation struggle when several farm owners abandoned their farms together with their work force as the security situation deteriorated. The plight of foreign farm workers did not improve with independence as they were often left out in government's post-independence resettlement programmes, for, according to Mudekunya:

To qualify for resettlement, it is necessary to have a Zimbabwean ID and to have registered for resettlement. Though older workers have worked in Zimbabwe for up to 40 years and their children have been born in Zimbabwe and are now also working on farms, for a variety of reasons, many have failed to obtain Zimbabwean documents. In many cases, the problem is that the mothers did not obtain documents under the dispensation in 1984-5, possibly as a result of not realising that both women and men required documents. (Moreover) few farm workers ever anticipated the need for resettlement and, therefore, did not register.²⁸

From the above, it is clear that the Zimbabwe government has had no policy for the resettlement of farm workers in general, let alone the so-called foreigners. Addressing a Commercial Farmers Union's Annual Congress in 1981, the then Minister of Lands, Resettlement and Rural Development said:

Nobody can expect government now, with all the other problems, to say that these people who are of Malawi, Mozambican and Zambian extraction should be accommodated elsewhere. You know as well as I do that they cannot even be accommodated in the TTLs.²⁹

Significantly, the 1992 Land Acquisition Act was silent on the issue of farm workers. Consequently, in the late 1990s, there were many cases of former workers being forcibly removed from the acquired farms since they were not on the list of people earmarked for resettlement. Hence, the emergence of "squatter" settlements was inevitable. One good example of such settlements is in Concession, 60 kms from Harare, where, in 1999, elderly "foreigners", mostly from the adjoining large-scale farms, constituted the majority of the population of the squatter camps. R. Nota, a migrant worker from Mozambique, said that he had been given nothing on retirement and then he was asked to vacate the farm in order to make way for new employees.³⁰ The "squatter" population had, indeed, become formidable by 1999, for as Moyo estimates, by this date, squatters

28. L. Mudekunya, "Land Designation and Farm Workers". Seminar Paper. IDS.

29. Commercial Farmers Union, *Annual Congress Report*. 1981.

30. Richard Nota. Interview. Concession Squatter Camp, 27 March 1999.

amounted to over 200 000 families in various locations within communal areas, private commercial farms and in state lands.³¹ As at 2000, the problem of resettling farm workers had not yet been resolved.

The government's controversial "fast track" land redistribution exercise, which started on the eve of the June 2000 parliamentary elections, has left farm workers, particularly the elderly, generally worse off. Overnight, these workers were told to vacate the farms to make room for indigenous settlers; they often found themselves caught in the violence on commercial farms that accompanied the forcible acquisition of farms by government supporters. The tragic situation of so-called foreign farm workers was reflected in the statement by Mbuya Muchapaza of Mara Farm, which had just been "invaded" by war veterans that: "I have nowhere to go. I came from Malawi. My two sons died of Aids".³² Although the media concentrated on the highly visible white commercial farmers who were displaced, beaten up or killed, it was, in fact, the farm workers who bore the worst brunt of the violent farm invasions but who remained "invisible" in both the national and international media reports. Their houses were torched, while they were beaten up and driven off the occupied farms.

GENERAL AGRICULTURAL AND PLANTATION WORKERS UNION OF ZIMBABWE (GAPWUZ)

Meanwhile, since independence, government displayed little interest in the plight of the foreign workers, while the organisation that was supposed to defend their interests as farm workers, GAPWUZ, consistently failed to protect and promote the farm workers' interests. GAPWUZ's failure can partly be explained by its weak bargaining position *vis a vis* the commercial farm workers and the government, especially given the fact that, in both the pre-and post-colonial era, large-scale commercial farmers, members of the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU), either held government posts or wielded a great deal of influence over policy makers.

The CFU dates back to 1942 when it was founded as the Rhodesia National Farmers Union to make representations to government on behalf of farmers. In the colonial period, commercial farmers occupied senior positions in government. For instance, 10 out of the 18 cabinet ministers in 1964 were large-scale farm owners, including the Prime Minister, Ian Smith, who owned a ranching estate in Shurugwi. Similarly, in the independence period, many powerful policymakers acquired commercial farms and thus joined the ranks of the CFU or, at least, identified with the

31. S. Moyo (1999) *Land and Democracy in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Sapes).

32. Mbuya Muchapaza, Interview, Mara Farm, Harare, 19 September 2000.

interests of its members. This made it extremely difficult for GAPWUZ to effectively carry out its mandate, mostly out of fear of victimisation.

Unlike the CFU, GAPWUZ is a young organisation formed in 1982. Government does not fund GAPWUZ, hence it relies on subscriptions from members. Unfortunately, a number of farm workers are not members of the Union for fear of victimisation by employers, among other reasons. As such, GAPWUZ has had to rely on the goodwill of a few sympathetic donors. Since GAPWUZ has done little for farm workers in general, and the "special" elderly workers in particular, it can hardly be expected to do much for the retired farm workers.

The conditions under which farm labour, in general, has been maintained have also created a fragmented workforce that has, often, made it difficult for the workers to articulate and lobby for its demands. Another limiting factor has been the impermanence and seasonal nature of the majority of the workforce. The phenomenon has survived into the post-colonial period despite legislation to protect workers against discrimination. Under the Labour Relations Act (1985), agricultural workers are entitled to pension rights, maternity benefits, protection against unfair dismissal, sick leave, and certain minimum standards of safety at work. In response to this legislation, farmers have sought to bypass the Act by de-classifying their employees from permanent to seasonal, contract, casual, special or part-time status, despite the employees' long periods of service. The Labour Relations Act does not cover these categories of workers.

Under the Act, agricultural workers are categorised as permanent and non-permanent labourers. According to the Labour Relations Act, permanent staff should be engaged on full time basis and should be earning wages above the minimum levels. They cannot be dismissed without prior state/union consent. Non-permanent workers have further been divided into five sub-categories, namely, seasonal workers who are employed for up to 12 months of continuous service; contract workers employed on a temporary basis to carry out piece/task work set by the employer; casual workers with up to six months of continuous service per three calendar months, and paid on weekly/hourly basis; part-time workers employed for less than five hours per day or 30 hours per week, and paid on daily/weekly basis; and the special group which comprises those with physical or mental disabilities, employed to do only part of the work of an able-bodied employee.³³ It is into this latter group that elderly farm workers fall.

33. See Statutory Instrument 320, National Employment Council (Agriculture). 1985; McIvor, *Zimbabwe: The Struggle for Health*.

This labour classification has allowed farmers to divide workers into distinct camps, thus compromising workers' chances of organising themselves into a united workers' organisation capable of effectively representing the workers' interests. Thus, workers' committees have existed in name only as they have either been made up of employer's/foremen's favourites and, therefore, tended to stifle any form of collective action, or have generally been afraid to challenge the employers.

Moreover, the general lack of financial provisions for old age has tended to promote a sense of resignation among farm workers, as workers have often feared lodging complaints about excessive work, unsafe conditions, and poor housing for fear of losing the "goodwill" of the farmer and his help when their lives are over.

NOTHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO

At retirement, foreign farm workers have very little to look forward to, as their lack of access to land and financial resources means that they are condemned to wretchedness for the remainder of their lives. A few lucky "foreign" farm workers, with links in the communal areas, have managed to access some land in the Communal Areas. However, even here, village authorities, at times, demand that these "foreigners" produce proof of citizenship as a condition for settling among them. Moreover, such settlers have often been allocated sections with poor soils that nobody else in the village wants. For others, such as January Chomola, a sixty-year old ex-farm worker, originally from Zambia but now settled in Sanyati Communal Lands, the marginal land allocated to them, lack of inputs, and old age have combined to make existence difficult.³⁴

The few lucky ones are, sometimes, allowed to remain on the farms after retirement and are allocated small pieces of land sufficient for their immediate needs and a hut in the compound. However, these elderly farm workers still find problems fending for themselves, since most do not have families. This is demonstrated in the following account by Agushto Aphiri, resident of the Society of the Destitute Aged (SODA) in Highfield, Harare, who had sustained burns as he was trying to prepare his supper. In his own words,

I left Mozambique in 1952 . . . left my wife there and, therefore, did not marry when I got here, hoping that I would go back some day, which I never did. Meanwhile, I was just living in with several women (*kubika mapoto*) and I never had children with any one of them . . . [I was] trying to prepare my supper when I dozed off and my clothes caught fire, hence these burns.³⁵

34. January Chomola, Interview, Chidaushe Village, Sanyati, 28 December 1999.

35. Agushto Aphiri, Interview, Society for the Destitute Aged, Highfield, 28 January 1999.

Had such elderly workers been able to return to their original homes, they might have had a more tolerable existence in the lands of their birth, but this was and is not always possible for a variety of reasons. One reason is that many have lost contact with their relatives, as they have never gone back to visit them since they came to Southern Rhodesia. For Mozambicans, for instance, the Mozambican civil war precluded any chances for emigrants to return to their country, while those from Zambia and Malawi blamed their extended stay on "purezha" [having a good time with women and beer drinking] and debt peonage on the farms that prevented them from saving enough for periodic trips to their original countries. Others cited their marriage to locals as a contributing factor, arguing that their local spouses were generally not willing to leave Zimbabwe. The longer they stayed in Zimbabwe, the more remote became the possibility of ever returning "home", particularly since they had no savings or property and were, thus, embarrassed to return to their communities with nothing to show for their long absence.

An example is one Peter Zulu, who migrated from Zambia in 1949 to work in the large-scale farms of Hurungwe and Karoi. He was retrenched in 1995 but had very little money to finance his old age. He, eventually, settled at a squatter camp in Concession. After 46 years as a farm worker, Zulu had nothing to show for his efforts, particularly since he received no pension. He could, therefore, not afford to return to Zambia even if he had wanted to and, in any case, was too embarrassed to return empty handed.³⁶ In his own words,

It is embarrassing to go home empty handed and in these rags after so many years of absence. I never sent anything to my wife and children back home during my stay in this country. How do I face them! How do I know that they are still alive? I am ashamed of myself.³⁷

The Aids pandemic has also complicated the problems of elderly farm workers in Zimbabwe, many of whom have found themselves saddled with the burden of looking after children and grandchildren afflicted by Aids. This has proved to be a nightmare given their age, status on the farm and economic hardships. Mbuya Siwela, originally from Zambia, but, now at SODA, recalled her ordeal at Mazoe Estate. She spoke of how she nursed her Aids-afflicted daughter for a long time until the daughter eventually died, after which she had to look after her daughter's children. With tears in her eyes, she said:

Life became so unbearable and, had it not been for the feeding programme for orphans on the Estate, I do not know how my

36. Peter Zulu, Interview, Concession Squatter Camp, 27 March 1999.

37. *Ibid.*

grandchildren could have survived. I hope the Estate management will continue to look after my grand children.³⁸

Another important issue relates to the fact that retired workers are not always permitted to remain on the farm when their productive lives are over, while those who died on the farms are given a shoddy burial. According to one Thomas Tabwarika of Muzvezve Resettlement Area, "as soon as they realise that you are a liability...if you become ill or old, they give you marching orders".³⁹ He added that the burial of those who died on the farms was perfunctory and undignified, more so if one died during the peak agricultural season when all hands were required in the fields. Under such circumstances, it was not unusual for the farmer to allocate only four workers to the burial, while the rest of the farm workers continued to do business as normal. Only those who were "lucky" to die during the off-season could attract a decent gathering at their funeral. Even then, farmers were generally reluctant to apportion a piece of land for a cemetery for their deceased workers, let alone to contribute towards funeral expenses.

CONCLUSION

As has been argued above, the life of elderly foreign farm workers has not been an easy one, as they are confronted by a myriad of problems, among which are poor working conditions, lack of acceptance as citizens despite working all their lives in the country, lack of security at retirement, and lack of access to land for resettlement, among others. Because their wages do not allow them to save, they cannot even return to their original countries after retirement as they do not have the wherewithal to do so. Unlike migrant workers to the mines, who are repatriated to their home countries at the end of their contracts, farm workers are left to fend for themselves - an impossible task given their meagre wages and lack of savings.

In addition, as has been shown, some elderly foreign farm workers have not been able to return to their home countries for a variety of other reasons, such as the civil war in Mozambique, loss of contacts with families back home, and generally being ashamed to return with nothing after long absences from their original communities. Moreover, while local workers can retire to their Communal homes, foreign workers have nowhere to turn to as access to lands in the Communal areas is often

38. Mbuya Siwela, Interview, SODA, Highfield, 28 January 1999.

39. Thomas Tabwarika, Interview, Muzvezve Resettlement Area, Kadoma, 28 August 2000. Tabwarika is of Malawi descent and he worked on several farms in Kadoma District for over 30 years.

denied them. Meanwhile, with very few exceptions, farmers are not keen to keep unproductive elderly people on their farms and evict them from the farms as soon as they are of no economic use to the farmers.

Furthermore, the state's controversial and ambiguous land reform programme has left farm workers worse off, especially under the government's "fast track" resettlement programme. Despite the fact that many of the "foreign" farm workers and their descendants have worked in Zimbabwe for most of their lives, they have not been recognised as citizens who are eligible for resettlement. In the light of all this, old age for farm workers, in general, is a difficult time, while for the elderly workers of foreign origin, in particular, it is a veritable curse.