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**Ecolonisation and the Creation of Insecurity Regimes: the meaning of
Zimbabwe's land reform programme in regional context.**

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POLICY BRIEF

According to a variety of commentators humanity now exists in, and reproduces itself through, a global informational economy. However, from continent-wide land grabbing to Zimbabwe's recent experience, land retains its centrality in African political economy. As the majority of the population of the continent derive their livelihoods from agriculture - in the Zimbabwean case 70% (Pazvakavambwa 2011) - this is perhaps not surprising. The land question is a fundamentally bio-political one, intertwining as it does power with survival. The classical agrarian question revolved around the extent to which capitalist social relations of production would penetrate agriculture. The round of large-scale land acquisitions currently taking place across the continent would appear to answer this question, however Zimbabwe's recent experience seems to offer a counterpoint. This paper explores the extent to which Zimbabwe's experience can be considered unique, as it underwent a process of deindustrialization and reagrarization, or the extent to which it is representative of broader political power dynamics and processes of ecocolonisation at play in the Southern African region.

In terms of lessons for Irish Overseas Development Assistance Policy, the paper suggests that despite the recent reorientation towards trade and foreign direct investment promotion the composition of these and how they are generated are important. Large-scale (foreign) agro-investment may result in population displacement, with attendant negative consequences for livelihoods, poverty and inequality. On-the-other hand despite many negative consequences and impacts, Zimbabwe's downward redistributive land reform has also had some benefits for landless and land poor peasants, even if these were incidental to its fundamentally political logic. In terms of development policy and overseas development strategy this suggests the importance of careful analysis, attention to local agro-ecological conditions and the importance of asset redistribution, not just capital accumulation.

“The future of Zimbabwe is absolutely vital to the future of capitalism in Africa” (Iliffe 1983, p. 43).

Introduction

African development is increasingly defined by a variety of meta-trends. Two of the most

significant of these are “land grabbing” and climate change. Much has been written about the recent massively increased interest in African land and the drivers of this (Cotula, 2013). These drivers include recent food price increases, driven by changing

diets, particularly more meat intensive diets in Asia, population growth, global urbanization (glurbanization) (Hodson and Marvin 2007), in addition to climate restructuring and substitution effects from food to biofuels (Smith 2010a). Increased land concentration would then seem to be a feature of current African development, although some caution should be exercised about the scale of reported land deals (McGrath 2013).

On-the-other-hand Zimbabwe's fast track, redistributive land reform is sometimes held up as a counterpoint to these trends, as it was generally redistributive "downwards" to small farmers (Scoones 2010). This paper argues that despite the sometimes different logics and impetuses of the land tenure reforms in Zimbabwe from elsewhere in the continent that they also share some common underlying (bio)political motivations – a politics of bodies, as well as "bellies" (Bayart 1993). Also Zimbabwe's land reform shares other similarities with "upward" land reforms elsewhere on the continent given the extent of land grabbing by domestic elites; often unremarked in the international media. This paper argues that these trends across different African contexts are reflective of the on-going tensions and complementarities between accumulation (partly for state elites) and strategies of rule combining legitimation with insecurity. In order to analyse these dynamics I draw on a number of theories from the literature, particularly biopolitics, and develop the idea of "ecolonisation", explored below in more detail. However before exploring the political dynamics behind the Zimbabwean "land grab", it is worthwhile examining the broader drivers of recent large-scale land acquisitions in

Africa, in order to reflect on their similarities and differences.

Land "grabbing" in Africa

There are a variety of drivers of climate change and land "grabbing" operative at different scales in Africa. According to the Oxford English Dictionary grabbing is to take something quickly. In relation to recent large-scale land acquisitions and leases in Africa this term may be more or less appropriate depending on the particular situation (See Boamah 2013) and consequently it is important not to overgeneralise. Nonetheless there have been recent instances where large parcels of land have been taken quickly for transfer to foreign investors, as in Ethiopia, or for redistribution domestically to peasant farmers and state elites, as in the Zimbabwean case. Why have these different types of large-scale land reform taken place recently and what do they share in common?

Globalised capital accumulation results in both the demand for, and depletion of, source resources such as minerals and land, in addition to pressure on sink resources such as the oceans and atmosphere. Deepening globalisation and the ecological contradiction (O'Connor 1994) which results from this lead to a search for new sources of supply of these sink and source resources. For example Zolli and Healy (2013) detail how Hurricane Katrina, which was perhaps associated with climate restructuring, knocked out oil supplies from the Gulf of Mexico for several months. This, in-turn, resulted in Congressionally mandated targets for renewable energy production in the US – one of the primary drivers of the global "land rush" (Li 2012).

Based on Sassen's (2013) calculations from the Land Matrix database, 40% of the land acquired in recent years in large scale land deals in Africa was for biofuels, 25% for food and much of the remainder for forestry, carbon sequestration and other uses. Geographically Friis and Reenberg (2010) divide recent major investors in African farmland into: 1) oil rich Gulf States, 2) capital rich and populous Asian countries such as China and India, 3) Europe and the US and 4) private companies from around the world, although the division between the third and fourth categories is arguably porous.

In addition to resource depletion and scarcity resulting from economic growth there are a variety of other drivers of interest in large scale land acquisitions in Africa, including global population growth and the change towards more meat and environmentally intensive diets in Asia in particular. Land and also "green" grabbing, for carbon sequestration projects for example (Fairhead *et al.* 2012) are however fundamentally driven by the ecological contradiction between an almost constantly growing global economy and (relatively) fixed amounts of "natural" resources. The first order "global" drivers of the land rush result from the interaction between ecological scarcity and the opportunities this provides for capital accumulation – a form of insecurity, if not a manifestation of fully formed and broad scale "disaster" capitalism (Klein 2008). However such dynamics may result in localised disasters for people who are dispossessed of their assets and livelihoods. Land tenure and reform not only entail access but also rely on "powers of exclusion" from other potential claimants (Hall *et al.* 2011). While the global drivers

of increased interest in African land have been well described (Pearce 2012; Cotula 2013), for our purposes it is also important to note that there are also other second and third order drivers operative at national and local scales.

Land and Biopolitics

As a basic input into the sustenance of human life, land is an implicit source of biopolitical power (Carmody 2013). Biopolitics refers to the power of life and death (Foucault *et al.* 2004). I am using the term somewhat more broadly here to refer to not only these powers, but the powers of population displacement and control through access and denial to the means of subsistence – land, in the case of much of Africa.

In some African countries political regime maintenance, such as Zimbabwe or Ethiopia, is tied to the exercise of biopower through granting and denial of access to land. This may represent coercion informed by consent which is essential to the construction of state hegemony (Marais 2008). In both of these cases consent on the part of some, such as land settlers in the Zimbabwean case, was mirrored by coercion for others, particularly "white" farmers and some farmworkers. Together then this represented a form of violent hegemony, whereby disorder was instrumentalised (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

Another way of thinking of this is as a form of biopower. Granting of relatively larger parcels of land to regime loyalists, in Zimbabwe for example (Scoones *et al.* 2010), served to promote political accumulation and regime legitimacy in those networks, at the same time as land became state owned this subject them and

new settler farmers to potential discipline by the state. These political dynamics are also evident in large-scale land acquisitions across the rest of the continent, rather than them representing just the power of transnational land investors. How the “global” drivers of land grabbing are refracted, expressed, or resisted through states depends on the balance of social forces and the possibilities such land acquisitions open up for political accumulation (“power and money”) for state elites.

At national scales across much of Africa the attractions of increased tax revenue and exports, enhanced political control, perceived developmental impacts, ideologies of development, in addition to population growth often combine to make large-scale land acquisitions attractive to both foreign and domestic “investors” and political elites; creating spatialised investment demand from them. National elites may also engage in land banking on a speculative basis in anticipation of increases in land prices or the potential discovery of minerals¹.

Struggles over land in Africa centre over the creation and allocation of use, production and exchange values and the different forms of economic, political and biopower which derive from these. How these struggles play out is locally and contextually contingent, but the balance of power favours actors that derive structural power from mobility and capital, such as transnational capital (TNCs), and/or states who often

¹ For example in Kasenyi, Buliisa District in Uganda “villagers here were beaten by hired thugs and detained by police this May after contesting the fraudulent sale of community land, including a plot where Tullow Oil’s Kasmene-3 well is located, according to LC 1 Chairman, Eriakimi Kaseegu” (Musiime and Womakuyu, 2012).

ultimately control access to territory. The power of this assemblage results from the integration of these different forms of power, and their legitimating discourses of climate mitigation, equity, development and conservation, although this may also generate localised resistances. How the Zimbabwean case relates to broader dynamics at play across much of Africa will be explored in more detail later in the paper.

Ecolonisation and Land

Global discourses of climate change mitigation, development, food security and conservation can sometimes result in substantial land dispossession. Indeed these discourses, by and large, feed into a broader process of globalised colonization of ecological space². Both climate restructuring³ and land grabbing, rather than simply being in contradiction are actually a part of a sub-process of globalisation which can be thought of as ecological colonisation (ecolonisation).

Ecolonisation is a primary feature of the current round of globalization, but has not previously been conceptualised as such, despite it largely driving the current global land rush. This ecolonisation is paradoxically taking place in the context of

² Ecological space is “an equitable share of the planet’s aggregate natural resources and environmental services that are available on a sustainable basis for human use” (Hayward 2007, p. 445).

³ The term climate restructuring is preferred to climate change or even climate disruption (Maass 2009) for a number of reasons. Climate as a term implies regularity, in contrast to “change”. Climate restructuring captures the fact that increased unpredictability will be a likely feature of the new climate regime across much of Africa (Toulmin *et al.* 2009).

nominally sovereign territories in the Global South, because state elites benefit from it. For example if people are dispossessed to make way for plantations to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) it is sometimes governments that receive payments for those. Bumpus and Liverman (2008 cited in Nel and Hill, 2013) refer to the process of “accumulation by decarbonisation”.

Under globalisation tracing the scale and dimensions of food, biofuel feedstocks and carbon credit flows is difficult and it could be argued that interdependence has accelerated, rather than there being a new iteration of colonial type relations. However this terminology can be justified if the vast disparities across a variety of metrics of consumption between different people and world regions, whether measured by techniques such as the “ecological footprint” or the fact that the average emissions from someone in Burundi is eight hundred times lower than that of someone in the United States, for example, are considered (World Bank 2014). Secondly there are yet clearer colonial dimensions or resonances to the current round of large-scale land acquisitions and also the recent land redistribution in Zimbabwe.

Colonialism was characterised by unequal social relations and exploitation, land dispossession, the extraction of resources for the benefit of metropolitan powers, and the denial of the rights of property and full citizenship to colonial subjects (Mamdani 1996). It was a system in which certain states claimed sovereignty over people and territory beyond their own boundaries and assumed the right of one set of people to impose their priorities and will upon

others (Brett 1973 cited in Kanji 2008, p. 1). Current land grabs replicate these features in addition to sometimes establishing quasi-sovereignties⁴ over land which has been purchased or leased. The oftentimes denial of rights by land grabbers and governments means that people who are dispossessed are subjects rather than citizens (Mamdani 1996).

Land, along with water, is the source for the reproduction of human life. As such embedded within its ownership and usage is biopolitical power. Regulating or denying access to land can have profoundly disciplining effects on the peasantry in Africa, as has been the case in Ethiopia for example (See Carmody 2013). Land dispossession also results in substantial climate service dispossession, as rainfall to grow crops is effectively denied for example. Consequently the political economy of climate vulnerability is refracted through land regimes and state formations, rather than being a “natural” outcome of processes of climate restructuring.

The denial, or selective undermining of property and citizenship rights could be seen as a form of “internal colonialism” (Hechter 1975) which results from the operation of the “land grab” assemblage comprised of both “national” and transnational actors and actants (including climate) (Latour 1987),

⁴ Sassen (2013) states that land grabs are “feeding the disassembling of national territory”. However as land in Africa is still typically and ultimately often owned by the state and state laws still apply this is not strictly speaking true. Rather there are “graduated sovereignties” (Ong 2005) which may actually help with state building through the projection of territorial control and greater tax revenues, for example. However this state building is not necessarily associated with the development of rights, but divided citizenship.

which is also operative in Zimbabwe. There is a colonial precedent for this, in Uganda for example, where the British policy of indirect rule meant substantial amounts of land was given to the various indigenous kings, “chiefs” and royals, such as the land grant to the king of Buganda. This “turned the *Bakopi* (free peasants) and *Bataka* (clan leaders) into landless classes... Although land given to the chiefs was supposed to be unoccupied rangelands, the chiefs abused the provisions of the agreement and laid claim to fertile lands in the densely populated areas” (Muhumuza 2007, p. 79). There are resonances of this in the recent Zimbabwean land redistribution.

Ecolonisation is often associated with “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003). In the literature to date this process has been associated with the operation of transnational corporations, however, it is also selectively practiced by other actors, such as state elites, depending on context. In the Zimbabwean case David Moore (2003) argues that the “fast track land reform” (FTLR) was a form of primitive or primary accumulation by state elites, however Davies (2004) argues that primary accumulation had already taken place under colonialism.

Accumulation by dispossession is not only social, but extends to the natural environment which may be depleted of nutrients and biodiversity, which in turn feeds into social dispossession. The beneficiaries of ecolonisation are, perhaps unsurprisingly, TNCs (or their owners) and state elites who are able to leverage their connections with these companies using Regalian theories⁵ and practices of

⁵ These theories hold that land should ultimately be owned by the state.

land to strengthen state power and expand accumulation for elites within its networks. As Hall (2011, p. 205) notes in relation to Southern Africa “media driven depictions of the rush for farmland for food and biofuels by the Chinese and Koreans with the backing of their governments and by Western corporations may be missing the mark, as equally profound but less visible transformations gather pace. As land is often leased, ‘the ‘grabber’ is usually the state rather than foreign investors”.

The geography of these processes is fundamental, as while land grabbing may result in climate mitigation and expanded incomes for some, for others it results in reduced incomes and climate service and land dispossession. The putative purposes of these projects, such as food security, then may be less important than their unstated motive logics of capital accumulation and/or state strengthening.

The ongoing ecolonisation of Africa then has both internal and external dimensions to it. The theory of internal colonialism was developed in relation to South Africa and the “Celtic fringe” in what was then the United Kingdom (Wolpe 1975; Hechter 1975). It examined the way in which certain regions and people within the nation state were exploited and denied the full rights of citizenship in order to facilitate uneven development and capital accumulation (See Nally 2011). Land grabbing is a “polymorphous crystallisation” involving aspect of state building, elite accumulation and transnational ecological colonisation (Mann 1990). Despite the very different outcome, in terms of land accumulation and holding patterns these dynamics are evident across much of Africa and also in Zimbabwe.

Land may serve as a source of political power through a variety of channels. For example, the creation of poverty through land grabbing may serve not only capital accumulation, but political functions. “It is easy to rule a poor man”⁶ and land grabbing fits into a broader pattern of poverty perpetuation to ensure regime maintenance, as poor people are often preoccupied with survival rather than politics (Carmody 2007). On-the-other-hand, in downward redistributive land reforms, as recently in Zimbabwe, land may serve as a source of legitimation for the ruling regime.

The current round of ecolonisation shares similarities, but is also different from formal colonialism. The ecolonial transnational assemblage extends even into Zimbabwe where small-holders who were granted land under the “fast track land reform” are now being dispossessed in some instances to make way for a sugar cane plantation, for example (Hall, 2011). I now turn to examine the specifics of the Zimbabwean case in more detail.

Zimbabwe’s Fast Track Land Reform

Zimbabwe’s political economy was characterised by a “cascading collapse” from industry to agriculture (Carmody 2001). The dynamics of economic restructuring reconfigured power relations and set off large-scale spontaneous land invasions. According to (Moyo 2011, p. 135) “In the early stages of the FTLR (2000-2003), the leadership of the ruling party struggled to appease and co-opt the land

occupation movement, and used force in the defense of the landless and against the political forces allied to the white agrarian monopoly and Western interests”. Quickly however this redistributive social movement was largely co-opted and steered by state elites for their own purposes – regime maintenance and economic accumulation.

According to Robin Palmer (1998, p. 1) “The specific criticisms of Mugabe’s land grab can briefly be summarised. Lack of funds, lack of planning, lack of capacity, lack of accountability and ... spectacular lack of diplomacy. According to him the trajectory of land reform is influenced by previous colonial history. For example, the fact that South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya had substantial land dispossession associated with “white” settlement gave an impetus to later redistributive land reform in those countries.

There have been a number of studies which have shown how the land poor have benefitted from the land reform programme in Zimbabwe (Scoones *et al.* 2010 and Hanlon *et al.* 2013). However, the allocation of land was not always transparent. According to figures quoted in Sachikonye (2004) less than half of those who applied for land under the auspice of the “fast track” reform received it. The distribution was politically influenced and as the state now owned the land, tenancy also became politically dependent. This was consistent with other techniques of control deployed by the ruling ZANU-PF regime, such as the blocking of food aid to opposition areas in 2002, 2008 and 2013 – years in which Presidential or general elections were held.

The structure of power in rural areas in Zimbabwe was further evidenced in the

⁶ Conversation with respondent (Kampala, September, 2013).

2013 election. “In rural areas 99.97 per cent of voters were registered and 38 per cent of stations turned away voters, compared to 67.94 per cent registration and **82 per cent refusal** in urban areas” (Cendrowicz 2013, original emphasis). Reportedly ZANU-PF also spent €600 million dollars of revenues from the Marange diamond fields to pay an Israeli company to rig the electoral roll (Amoore and Arbuthnott 2013). According to some non-government newspapers in Zimbabwe ZANU-PF has multi-billion dollar businesses through M&S Syndicate and Zidco Holdings (Hill 2005).

In Zimbabwe, such was the state of economic collapse in the 2000s that land serves both accumulation and legitimation functions, or the two simultaneously. According to some reports up to 40% of land which was seized from white farmers was given to ZANU-PF loyalists (ZimOnline cited in Smith 2010b), although these figures are highly exaggerated. The majority of new farms benefitted landless or land poor peasants (Scoones *et al.* 2010). Hanlon *et al.* (2013) estimate that only 5% of beneficiaries, taking 10% of the land were political “cronies”. However, the fast track land reform was then also a fast track land grab by politically connected elites and arguably peasants also. The sizeable farms and tracts of land that were allocated to political elites sometimes resulted in intra-ZANU-PF struggles over land. President Mugabe and his wife were said in the investigation cited above to own fourteen farms of at least 16,000 hectares.

Matondi (2012, p. 6) notes in relation to the fast track land reform that “it is even more confusing when some large commercial farms, which had been subdivided into smaller landholdings by the FTLRP, are

now re-emerging and promoting biofuels and agro-investments that apparently include foreigners”. This further suggests that the initial “revolution from below” has been overtaken by a “revolution from above” (Trimberger 1978). The fact that land which was redistributed in Zimbabwe was granted on the basis of either an “offer letter” or on a leasehold basis made property tenure insecure and people dependent on state tolerance or “largesse”. Land then serves as an important component of both the extraversion and introversion portfolios of ZANU-PF (Peiffer and Englebert 2012), serving both to promote politicized accumulation for state elites, sources of foreign exchange and diplomatic support, from China in particular, and legitimacy/insecurity amongst the broader population. There have been several instances where land which was redistributed has now been reappropriated by domestic elites or given to foreign investors. In one case a resettlement farmer was told to stop farming so that a Chinese-owned brick making factory could access a nearby road (Matondi 2012). The fact that the judiciary has been politicised in Zimbabwe has contributed to these processes.

Zimbabwe’s Experience in Regional Context

There is a dialectic of land concentration and dispersion at play in Southern Africa. Processes of deindustrialization, in relative if not absolute terms, across the continent (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2012) have given land greater, not less, political salience despite rhetoric around Africa’s information revolution (See for example

Smith *et al.* 2011) or the discourse of “Africa Rising” (Mahajan 2008). In the context of rising values, consequent to higher food prices and demand for biofuels, land has assumed greater importance for maintenance of political power and opportunities for accumulation for state elites, the two of which are inter-twinned. Thus, while exceptional in some respects, Zimbabwe’s recent experience is reflective of a broader politicisation of land taking place across the continent.

The land insecurity regime which has been created in Zimbabwe is fundamental to the maintenance of the ZANU-PF regime in that country. The ZANU-PF government has sought to create an insecurity regime across the different sectors of the economy through land invasions, Operation *Murambatsvina* in 2005 (directed against the informal sector), Operation No Return (directed against informal miners), and the Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act which affected manufacturing. The creation of insecurity regimes is also in evidence in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Ethiopia for example.

According to a farmer displaced by the massive investment by the Indian conglomerate, Karuturi in Ethiopia, “when they first came they told us an investor was coming and we would develop the land alongside one another. They didn’t say the land would be taken away from us entirely. I don’t understand why the government took the land (Gemechu cited in Rugman 2012). His spouse noted “since the land was taken away from us we are impoverished. Nothing has gone right for us since these investors came.” However, the dispossession has a profound disciplinary effect in Ethiopia as large-scale land acquisitions serve as “a

constant reminder of the danger hanging over small farmers and pastoralists and their way of life” (Rahmato 2011, p. 5), thus creating a new land (in)security regime.

In Zimbabwe “a few land-reform farmers have 99-year leases, most only have a permit or letter (usually called and “offer letter”) allocating land to them, and many have nothing and officially are still “squatting” on their land” (Hanlon *et al.*, 2013, p. 200). This insecurity makes them dependent on the state which has adopted a neo-feudal form of rule (Carmody, 2007).

Feudalism was a social system which revolved around usufruct rights to land being exchanged for service or labour. According to David Moore (2001) Zimbabwe is “approaching a feudal mode of political rule – in which problems of leadership succession have society-wide consequences”. In the Zimbabwean case usufruct rights to land are held in exchange for political quiescence. The vesting of ownership of land in the state was done under the pretext that freehold tenure would be insecure for the poor as circumstances might force them to sell it thereby reversing the land reform process (Matondi 2012).

Conclusion

Zimbabwe’s fast-track land reform came about as a result of different motivations and a short-term confluence of interests amongst different state and non-state actors. This has also been the case for other “upward” recent land reforms elsewhere in Africa, although the “land grab” assemblages have had different social configurations elsewhere.

According to Sam Moyo (2013, p. 49) in Africa “the agrarian accumulation model continues to be based on an outward-looking agricultural strategy, except in the case of Zimbabwe, which is veering towards internal markets, food sovereignty and autonomous development”. The argument of this paper is different. It is that the increasing politicisation of land in Zimbabwe is reflective of broader trends across the continent. The Zimbabwean state, while always having to negotiate and create various channels of regime maintenance, orients itself more externally or internally depending on the particular conjuncture (Carmody and Taylor 2003).

There are many new agrarian questions in Africa. These include ones around the sustainability of agriculture on continent and the extent of commodification of land. This paper has argued however that the primary new agrarian question in Africa revolves around the politics of land. For Kautsky (1988) the agrarian question centred on the political orientation of the peasantry based on the social relations of production in agriculture. In Africa the central new agrarian question is the role which land plays as a resource in political struggles for regime maintenance and change.

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