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The impact of land reform on women's livelihoods in sub-division A of Clonmore farm - Mberengwa district in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

After independence in 1980, Zimbabwe faced the predicament of addressing the colonial legacy of imbalances in accessing land and other productive resources between the country's white people and black African population. Whites held most of the productive land in the agro-economic Regions I, II and III while black Africans were predominantly located in overpopulated, marginal and arid land which was unsuitable for crop production in Natural Regions IV and V. While land reforms were implemented immediately from independence, these however yielded very minimum improvements in access to land by black Africans. This was further exacerbated by the acute need for land reform, the expectations of the freed majority of the population (black Africans) and the economic collapse in the early 2000s. These put insurmountable pressures on the government to redistribute land to the poor and vulnerable households to ensure food self-sufficiency. The above conditions inadvertently led to the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) from 1999 - 2015. The FTLRP led to the redistribution of vast swathes of large-scale commercial farms to the landless poor majority. This wave of land distribution triggered renewed interest and global debates in the productive efficiency of smallholder farmers and their capability to generate sustainable rural livelihoods including equitable gender land ownership, as well as women empowerment in particular.

A case study of selected households from Sub-division A of Clonmore Farm was used to investigate and contribute to the debate on women empowerment through land reform, particularly FTLRP. The research investigated to what extent the FTLRP had empowered rural women and improved their livelihood portfolios and choices. The research also assessed the mechanisms and barriers that women face to realise women empowerment as well as the implication of the application of FTLRP to other regions of the world facing similar land challenges. The study focussed on women's livelihoods, their knowledge of land reforms, how they feel about their new land and what they think needs to be done to improve their access to land and empower them to take charge of their lives and households.

Findings of the study indicate that the FTLRP has not only improved women's access to land but their ownership independently or jointly with their spouses. Available evidence also shows that some women who gained access to land through social networks or marriage are insecure especially if the land was bequeathed to them by in-laws and the husband died before the land permit was transferred into

their names. Women were empowered and were engaging in productive farming and no-farming activities on the land. Most households were food self-sufficient because the majority of women were producing more than a tonne of maize (the staple starch) in a season, enough to feed themselves and their families in a season as well as selling the surplus, indicating the successful outcomes of the FTLRP.

However, most households remained vulnerable to long spells of drought because the study area is in the predominantly dry zone, which receives scarce rain. Off-farm activities, especially mining, cross-border and petty trading as well as a wide range of services at Yorks Business Centre provided some relief in the form of financial capital flow which mitigated against adverse weather throughout the year, particularly in drought years. New farmers, apart from getting assistance from government and local leaders, accessed social capital from family and friends because they moved in social groups from the surrounding communal areas (CAs). The redistribution of land was integrated into the wider government economic development programme that enhanced rural livelihoods although funding and support was still inadequate.

Evidence showed that the hybrid model of legal and customary administration of the land under FTLRP had greatly improved women's access to land and security of land tenure compared to their counterparts in the communal areas. More still needed to be done, especially in targeting women if their empowerment was to be maximised. Areas that needed to be improved to assist women included gender sensitive laws, improvements in secular and customary laws particularly inheritance laws, implementing programmes specifically targeting women. Evidence also showed that there is still a lot that needs to be done in terms of policy formulation and implementation, training, input support, etc. to ensure the FTLRP achieves its maximum potential. However, the 2016–2017 harvest demonstrated the productive success brought in by smallholder farmers as they contributed significantly to the surplus sold on the market.