

# Knowledge and Power in a Pastoral Landscape: Agrarian struggles in Southern Matabeleland

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IN THIS paper, I argue that state land redistribution in southern Matabeleland has failed because of the inappropriate hegemonic models of the state and its institutional apparatus. People pin their hopes on livestock for a livelihood and therefore, land re-distribution should address the issue of grazing more than village settlements and crop farming

## Introduction

Development discourse in most Third World countries has largely been shaped by state apparatus. The notion that a development programme or project applicable in one part of the country is applicable to others has seen development programmes imposed on a completely different landscape. Misreading a landscape can either be a coincidence, a misrepresentation, or a misunderstanding of that particular landscape. (Fairhead and Leach: 1996). In some instances, such as southern Matabeleland, this has been done deliberately.

The land reform programmes rolled out by the state in Zimbabwe since independence have been biased toward village settlements and crop farming (Jocelyn 1991, 2003, Marongwe 2003, McGregor 2002). One can argue that geographical research conducted over the last hundred years has classified southern Matabeleland as a dry region falling in climatic agro regions IV and V, basically suitable for ranching (Chatora 2003, Moyo 1995). However, state hegemony and its development apparatus has misrepresented this evidence by exercising power and authority over resettlement models in this region.

The state has constructed an imaginary target population and target area by misrepresenting knowledge in order to consolidate its hegemony. Inappropriate development models such as the A1 and A2 have not appealed to people from this region, but continue to dominate the land redistribution agenda. A

livestock livelihood constitutes a larger component in the way of life of southern Matabeleland residents and it is futile for one to negate this notion. (Ranger: 1999).

Of course recent research has indicated that agrarian livelihoods are dwindling and are fast being replaced by off-farm livelihoods. In southern Matabeleland the effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) coupled with inappropriate resettlement models have driven most able bodied household members into activities such as gold panning and migration as alternatives to traditional agrarian practices (Moyo: 2000c).

Here, I argue that the pursuit of these alternatives is a result of misinterpretation of the knowledge and needs of this target population and target area by the state apparatus. Jocelyn (1991) concluded in her comparative study of the Insiza district of southern Matabeleland and Manicaland, that the limited incidences of squatting on commercial farms in the 1980s into the 1990s was evidence that the target population had no immediate interest in village resettlement. Instead most livestock owners in communal areas reacted to the demand for land by poaching livestock grazing on abandoned, state and commercial farms, showing their preference of a resettlement model that addresses the need for grazing land. The Fast Track Land Reform Programme introduced in 2000 had the capacity to address grazing needs of communal areas as more land was made available through the expropriation of most former commercial farms. I argue that the capacity the FTLRRP had on improving communal area livelihoods has been jeopardized by the type of models implemented. In earnest, the FTLRRP has reduced agrarian livelihoods of residents of southern Matabeleland.

### **The 'lagisa' model and multiple livelihoods**

Even prior to state-driven land reform, people of this region relied on the 'lagisa' system of livestock husbandry (ENDA Zimbabwe 1995: 7, Nyathi 2000). This system entailed livestock owners grazing their livestock on common land along the Shashe and Thuli rivers during winter months. This common land was not part of everyday grazing land around the villages, but a special area for relief grazing. It did not take into account social and political affiliation but was regarded as land for every livestock owner at a particular time of the year. The long distances to Emlageni forced herdsmen to camp out there and probably alternate, depending on the availability of able bodied men in the household<sup>1</sup>. In some cases a group of herdsmen could be hired by a kraal, village or ward to look after the livestock. The introduction

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<sup>1</sup> See ENDA Zimbabwe 1995 study of Mlambapele communal area of Gwanda South

of the FTLRRP was viewed as an opportune moment for communal livestock owners to reduce that distance by occupying acquired commercial farms. As I will argue later on, the adjacent farms where communal livestock owners had leased grazing, poached grazed and which were earmarked for grazing resettlement, ended up either being new village settlements or A2 farms. This in turn resulted in some household members seeking new livelihoods in gold panning and migration.

Although livestock are regarded as the main units of agrarian livelihoods, crop farming has not been forsaken, but has been limited to small fields as a result of the unpredictable rainfall in the area. Development agencies have encouraged the growing of small grains that are drought tolerant, but have met little success in preventing these farmers from growing maize. Maize is generally regarded as a staple food<sup>2</sup>. Literature reveals that people of southern Matabeleland engage in other activities to earn a living. Remittances from household members working in urban factories, mines and outside the country constituted and still constitute a large portion of livelihoods (Nyathi: 2000). It is a fact that because of the economic melt down and dwindling urban jobs, there has been a reversal from the rural-urban migration of the 1980s and early 1990s to the now common place urban-rural migration. Migration to other countries is enormous in southern Matabeleland, probably because of its proximity to South Africa and Botswana. In the study area, 85% of households had more than one member working either in South Africa or Botswana.

### **State hegemony in southern Matabeleland**

Alfred Stepan in his studies of authoritative regimes mentions five groups in the regime. The first group is the core supporters of the regime who are characterised by a siege mentality and will see opposition as a 'clear and present danger' to their interests. These will actively support repressive measures against any opposition (Stepan cited in Sithole 2000:68). The coercive apparatus that maintain the regime in power forms the second group of the regime supporters. In this group are the military and security forces that tend to strongly identify the interest of their organisations with those of the political regime. In the case of Matabeleland, the fifth brigade (Gukurahundi)<sup>3</sup> acted in that fashion. The third group identified by Stepan is the regime's passive supporters, these will submit to authoritarian hegemony under the weight of the first two groups. Here rests most of the middle class and they will remain

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP Vulnerability Assessment 2006

<sup>3</sup> Gukurahundi is a traditional Shona word that refers to early rains that wash away the chuff, and in this presentation refers to the army brigade that was unleashed in Matabeleland in the 'overt sphere' of fighting dissidents and in the 'covert sphere' of eliminating the Ndebele ethnic group.

‘quiescent and pliable’, and may even be used by a ‘cohesive and self confident authoritarianism (2000:68). The last two groups identified by Stepan are the active opponents of the regime and the passive opponents of the regime that are regarded as the regimes detractors or the opposition.

From Stepan’s typology, most residents of Matabeleland fall predominantly in the last two groups and this created uneven development between Matabeleland and Mashonaland. The Fast Track Land Reform programme did not spare residents of Matabeleland this hegemony as productive farms were allocated to the active and coercive supporters of the regime at the expense of deserving residents. Although the fast track land re-distribution provided residents of Matabeleland with an opportunity to increase their land holdings after government expropriated former commercial farms; the model of redistribution was designed at central level and did not consider the geographical, cultural differences, and preferences between Mashonaland and Matabeleland. People in Southern Matabeleland are generally pastoralists and any land reform programme should address live-stocking needs.

The land tenure system in Matabeleland South province prior to the 2000 Fast Track Land reform programme was the same as the rest of the country. There were communal areas (including common grazing land), resettlement areas, irrigation schemes and white commercial farms. Commercial farms owned by whites and blacks were regarded as private property whereas other models were regarded as state land. In an effort to address colonial imbalances and to be seen as non-partisan, the state bought resettlement farms for re-distribution in Matabeleland. People in Matabeleland believed the village resettlement model was not suitable for their livelihoods as they depended on livestock for a living; and raised their skepticism of the resettlement model and demanded a resettlement model that gave preference to grazing land.

Unlike Mashonaland, where a large number of people had already settled on commercial farms as squatters, squatter occupations of commercial farms were rare in Matabeleland. Jocelyn concludes that Matabeleland as a cattle economy was not suitable for squatting; and in an endeavor to show discontent with the resettlement model communal cattle owners responded to a perceived shortage of grazing, by poaching grazing on neighbouring farms (Jocelyn 1991:582). The drought also presented a strong argument for residents of this province as they demanded more grazing land to cushion their cattle from dwindling pastures in the communal grazing areas. Jocelyn (1991) observed that even the Deputy Minister of Lands and Resettlement, a descendant of Matabeleland, stressed that making land available for grazing would benefit people with cattle at the expense of the landless without cattle (Herald, 1982). “Cattle raising is our life blood”.

Unlike Mashonaland, land availability in Matabeleland was limited as there were fewer abandoned farms at independence, let alone new ones bought by the state on a willing seller willing buyer basis. Jocelyn (1991) concludes in her study that the lack of abandoned land, the pattern of squatting and the unpopularity of village resettlement models constrained land redistribution soon after independence in Matabeleland. By 1981, the province accounted for only 10% of land acquired, as a result of a small number of abandoned farms compared for example with 583 acquired farms in Manicaland. The resettlement of former farm and mine workers and outsiders created animosity toward the schemes among communal area cattle owners and their clients who claimed the land on the basis of need and historical rights (Jocelyn 1991).

The years 1983 to 1987 were difficult for people in Matabeleland. Although communal farmers were deprived of grazing land in the resettlement farms, the terrorization of resettled people, ranchers, and resettlement officers provided a relief to communal farmers as they could graze their livestock under the protection of dissidents.

Some commercial farmers had reached an understanding with communal livestock farmers; for instance on Hollins Block resettlement in Gwanda, communal cattle owners had been allowed access to the land by the commercial rancher. With the resettlement, outsiders were brought in who tried to exclude communal cattle. Even after the unity accord, residents of southern Matabeleland did not take allotments as expected. They believed a workable resettlement model should decongest communal areas in terms of livestock not in terms of people or homesteads. In an attempt to appease the leadership of Matabeleland, especially senior politicians, the state leased out unsettled farms to politicians, civil servants and parastatals. The delay in apportioning land for grazing to communal cattle owners created largesse for politicians and civil servants who leased out some of the state farms to desperate communal cattle owners.

Pre-occupied with the challenges of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), the state did not vigorously pursue the land distribution programme until the year 2000, when it embarked on the Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme.

### **The dilemma of the Fast Track**

Interviews I conducted in Matabeleland revealed that Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme was rolled out without consulting the local institutions and local residents. One resident commented on the programme as follows:

*“We were deprived of grazing land during the dissidents’ era of the early 1980s. We believed the cessation of hostilities between our party ZAPU and ZANU would at least address our needs for grazing land. That did not happen. Then came the Fast Track in 2000, but alas, the state further promoted villagisation against our wishes. I am very disappointed because the land we thought we have secured when Mr. Hunt’s farm was taken over was turned into a village settlement and the adjacent paddocks which we used to lease grazing in early summer from Mr. Hun, has been allocated to a senior politician who does not understand when we tell him that we used to lease graze our cattle there since Thuli river is the only reliable source of water for livestock during dry months of the year. We were given three paddocks by the land committee as a gesture to silence us but these paddocks are not enough, bearing in mind that the whole of Wenlock communal land has to graze their livestock there. We voiced concern to the authorities, asked for part of Konongwe farm and we were promised. In early 2001 we were surprised to learn that Konongwe farm has been designated an A2 farm that has been allocated to Mr. Mringa from Manicaland province. Really though there has been unity, we feel rejected by the very government that is claiming to care for our livestock needs. Surely without adequate grazing we are nothing as a people.” (Mbhoda Dube-interviewed 15/12/05).*

The sentiments raised by Mr. Dube indicate that although land has been made available after the expropriation of white commercial farms, people of southern Matabeleland have not benefitted as they envisaged. The state’s top down approach to land redistribution has not changed from what happened in the 1980s and 1990s. The state still dictates the type of redistribution models used and in marginalizing the residents of this region. Those active supporters of the regime who do not even come from the region are benefitting at the expense of the rightful local beneficiaries.

As an act of sabotage in the opinion of informants and respondents I interviewed, the allocation of A2 farms is also biased toward those aligned to the ruling party, irrespective of whether they have livestock or not. For instance, one old man with 70 heads of cattle in Lushongwe communal area cried foul of the state’s failure to allocate him a farm because he was not an active member of the ruling party. Some informants who are active members of the ruling party also voiced concern on the hectarage offered on these A2 farms. Mr. Mpofo an active supporter of the ruling party had these strong words about his farm size to offer:

*“My son, I actively participate in the land committee meetings and have raised concern on the non-viability of 400-1000 ha per A2 farmer in this region, but what we hear is that the hectarage was decided at National level and there is nothing the Land Officer can do to increase the hectarage. This is*

*unacceptable because surely one can not graze 100 cattle on this hectarage without causing environment degradation. Traditionally we are extensive livestock keepers, hence we need more than a mere 400 to 1000 ha for us to benefit from this land programme; otherwise I see a lot of the new A2 farmers resorting once more to poach grazing like what we did during the era of white commercial farmers. There is plenty of idle land but the state is not forth-coming to alleviate our plight. We used to graze our cattle at 'emlageni' during the dry months and thought the land reform would spare us the burden of travelling long distances to graze our cattle at 'emlageni'. If this issue is not addressed immediately we will be left with no choice but to start over again the 'lagisa' system probably in these unoccupied farms. (Mpofu interviewed 12/08/05).*

### **Policy Deficiency**

The above cases highlight a major policy deficiency toward land distribution in southern Matabeleland. For decades, people of southern Matabeleland had survived on livestock and had developed adaptive strategies to survive on this arid land. Fieldwork revealed that these people use adaptive strategies such as multi-species livestock husbandry, keeping livestock such as cattle, goats, donkeys and sheep. Small stock such as sheep and goats are normally disposed of easily to meet immediate livelihood needs. In this case, communities exchange livestock such as goats and sheep for either cash or grain since the climate does not favour cropping. In some cases small stock could be used to acquire cattle through barter trade.

In order to survive and manage their livestock, southern Matabeleland residents traditionally practiced a grazing system referred to as 'lagisa' implying sending out cattle to common land along the Shashe and Thuli Rivers. As illustrated by Mpofu in the above interview, people grazed their livestock as a unit and managing this was the responsibility of every household head. The chief or headmen would decree that from July to November livestock could be sent to 'emlageni' and that practice was followed. The constraining factor was the long distance to 'emlageni'. It is clear from this response that people would not mind being allocated 'common land' as an alternative model of land redistribution in this area. I therefore argue that the Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme of year 2000 could have increased rural livelihoods of Southern Matabeleland residents had it followed the 'lagisa' principle rather than the current A2 resettlement model. The 'lagisa' principle is accommodative and does not segregate on the basis of political affiliation. Here it is worth noting that livestock are a source of wealth and investment among residents of this region and therefore a programme depriving them access to grazing land is futile.

Another institutional deficiency that has seen residents viewing the land reform programme as adding to their plight are the agricultural extension policies currently in place. In the first 14 years of independence, Animal Health policy was that the department of veterinary services provided animal medicines for free and later on at subsidized costs<sup>4</sup>. Of course this created a dependency syndrome. With the policy shifting to cattle owners paying 100% of medicine costs; and the escalating costs as the Zimbabwean dollar dropped in value, a majority of cattle owners have forsaken dosing their cattle as advised by extension officers. This has resulted in a number of livestock deaths<sup>5</sup>. Here, my informants argued, if the state could provide seed packs as a mitigating measure in cropping regions, why not provide livestock medicines in areas were livestock dominated?

The argument raised by residents of this region is valid as Ferguson (1990) argued that the development apparatus failed to achieve their targets because of the failure to identify the interests of the target group – that of raising livestock. One of my informants even suggested that the idea of ‘private buyers’ deciding on the price of livestock had seen a lot of people not selling their livestock in what the state viewed as an ‘open market’. This has been aggravated by the fact that these buyers are usually the same cronies who hold vast tracts of land acquired through the Fast Track land reform programme and their focus is to maximize wealth and exercise power. They tend to forget that people in this region keep livestock for other purposes other than investment or wealth. My informants argued that livestock were also kept for social ceremonies such as lobola and rituals; and are viewed as symbols of ancestral spirits as well. Therefore selling livestock, especially cattle was only done as a last resort.

Ferguson (1990) found that people of Thaba Tseka (Lesotho) would not sell cattle even if the buyer offered more money, the reason being that they value livestock more than money. One of Ferguson’s informants even noted that he would rather engage in some other activity to raise money than to sell his ox (Ferguson 1990:146). Ferguson concluded that “it is clear, then, that the fundamental fact is not that livestock are very useful economic investments ... or that they are greatly loved and valued for their symbolic connotations ... but that livestock and cash are not freely interconvertible. There exists what one might call a one way barrier: cash can always be converted into cattle through purchase; cattle,

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<sup>4</sup> See World Food Programme 2006 livestock report in Zimbabwe

<sup>5</sup> The introduction of dipping levy had seen a lot of communal areas livestock owners avoiding dipping their cattle as they cannot afford the fees charged. During fieldwork I found out that the Department of Veterinary services was literally not running any dip tanks in the study area and had advised keen livestock keepers to buy dip sprays for their individual herds. Literally dip tanks were malfunctioning in most areas visited and major reason being the prohibitive costs of dipping chemicals.

however, cannot be converted to cash through sale, except under conditions, conditions usually specified as great and serious need for money which cannot be raised any other way, a situation arising from an emergency or from poverty". (Ferguson 1990:146-147).

## **Conclusion**

Land redistribution is a programme capable of enhancing rural livelihoods if the state identifies the interests of beneficiaries before deciding on the distribution models. Misreading the landscape and misrepresenting peoples' interests brings a danger of embarking on programmes and projects which are unsustainable and unworkable. People of southern Matabeleland are pastoralists and therefore could enhance their livelihoods more effectively, if more land is made available for grazing than for villages and cropping. The Zimbabwe state and its development apparatus' relationship and interaction with residents of southern Matabeleland in the past twenty eight (28) years has been characterized by mistrust and the politics of domination, a scenario that has resulted in the region lagging behind in development compared to other regions of the country.

The 'lagisa' principle is one of the best resettlement models that can remove these pastoralists from the clutches of poverty and food insecurity. As argued, the lagisa principle, if well applied, is capable of solving the problems of grazing land in southern Matabeleland.

Misrepresenting knowledge and abusive exercise of power has seen southern Matabeleland lagging behind other regions as state apparatus assume that what pertains in Mashonaland, should work in Matabeleland. This has led to continued agrarian struggles in this region even after the state has expropriated massive tracts of land through the Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme.

Development practitioners should be aware that programmes and projects which ignore the felt or real needs of the target population are likely to fail. State hegemony in Matabeleland will only perpetuate the untold suffering the people of Matabeleland have endured since colonization. It is a matter of urgency that state apparatus take cognizance of the realities on the ground in southern Matabeleland as a livestock region and bring on board livestock-related projects to enhance rural livelihoods in this region. Further politicization of land redistribution could lead to further misery and insecurity of Ndebeles; a scenario that may lead to people touting the notion of secession.

The state cannot be guaranteed of active supporters in southern Matabeleland unless the issue of livestock and grazing land is given prominence in state development discourse. Fieldwork data supports

this notion as some active supporters of the regime have raised concerns around the inappropriateness of resettlement models, particularly village settlements (A1) and the so called medium-size A2 farms. People of this region will continue suffering until grazing land is made available. I therefore conclude by noting that land redistribution has a potential to address issues of livelihoods in southern Matabeleland if state apparatus revisit the principle of 'lagisa' as an alternative resettlement model in this region.