



# Disrupting Rural Transformation: Systemic Agricultural Failures and the Emergence of the Extractive Economy in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's rural transformation agenda has long centred on agriculture as the engine of development, food security, and poverty alleviation. However, systemic failures in the agricultural sector have undermined these aspirations, giving rise to an alternative survivalist mode of economic engagement, the extractive economy. This study investigated how deep-rooted structural weaknesses, including policy inconsistencies, underinvestment, land tenure insecurity, and climate vulnerability, have eroded agricultural productivity and displaced rural populations from farming into informal and extractive activities. Anchored in deagrarianisation theory, this study explored the gradual retreat from agriculture as a way of life and as a source of identity, income, and social status. Using a desktop approach, this study uncovers how rural people navigate and negotiate new livelihoods in the face of agricultural collapse. The findings reveal that while the extractive economy offers short-term relief, it contributes to environmental degradation, social instability, and long-term development stagnation. The informal nature of these economic alternatives also excludes rural populations from state support and formal social-protection mechanisms. The article concludes that rural transformation in Zimbabwe has been disrupted not by the absence of effort but by the failure to create enabling agricultural systems that are inclusive, climate-resilient, and youth-centred. The need to reinvest in rural infrastructure, secure land rights, integrate informal activities into policy frameworks, and promote diversified rural economies beyond monocrop agriculture is recommended. Without these shifts, rural Zimbabwe risks being permanently trapped in an unsustainable mode of survival. This study deepens the understanding of rural transformation in Zimbabwe by revealing how systemic agricultural failures driven by policy inconsistencies, market distortions, and declining productivity foster an extractive economy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's rural transformation has long been anchored in the promise of agriculture as a vehicle for economic empowerment, food security, and sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the agricultural sector

<sup>1</sup> Robert K Hitchcock and Melinda C Kelly, "Borders, Boundaries, and Livelihoods in Western and North-Western Zimbabwe, 1890–2021," in *Lived Experiences of Borderland Communities in Zimbabwe: Livelihoods, Conservation, War and Covid-19* (Springer, 2023), 85–99.

was not only the largest employer in the country but also a key contributor to national GDP and exports.<sup>2</sup> However, over the last two decades, Zimbabwe has experienced a structural shift in its rural economy, marked by a decline in agriculture and an increase in extractive activities, particularly mining.<sup>3</sup> This shift has disrupted traditional agrarian livelihoods and exposed systemic weaknesses in the agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup> The failure of agriculture to drive meaningful rural transformation can be attributed to a combination of policy inconsistencies, underinvestment, institutional collapse, and sociopolitical interference.<sup>5</sup> While land reform initiatives, especially the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP), sought to redress colonial land inequalities, they often lacked the complementary support systems (credit, inputs, infrastructure, and secure tenure) required to sustain agricultural productivity.<sup>6</sup> The collapse of extension services, erratic agricultural financing, and elite support schemes has further eroded the sector's capacity to support rural livelihoods.<sup>7</sup>

As agriculture stagnated, the mining sector emerged as an alternative source of income and livelihood, particularly in resource-rich rural areas.<sup>8</sup> Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has become a dominant feature of the rural economy, attracting youth and displacing farming as a primary livelihood strategy.<sup>9</sup> Although mining offers temporary economic relief, it has also introduced new challenges, such as environmental degradation, labor displacement, and heightened social inequalities, without delivering sustainable development outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

This study examines the intersection of systemic agricultural failures and the extractive turn in Zimbabwe's rural economy. It draws on the de-agrarianisation framework, which explores the processes through which rural populations disengage from agriculture as their primary livelihood.<sup>11</sup> Through this lens, this article analyzes how agricultural collapse and the expansion of extractives reshape rural livelihoods, undermine food security, and deepen rural poverty. By unpacking the structural and policy failures within the agricultural sector along with the socioeconomic impacts of the extractive economy, this study aims to contribute to ongoing debates around rural transformation, land reform, and inclusive development. Ultimately, it argues for the rethinking of rural development strategies that balance resource extraction with the revitalization of agriculture as a foundation for equitable and sustainable rural futures.

## METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the data sources (e.g., Scopus, Google Scholar, and government policy documents), methods used, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing a desktop-based literature review to examine systemic failures in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector and their implications for rural transformation. The primary aim was to identify structural, policy-related, and environmental constraints shaping the agricultural landscape, as well as the socio-economic responses of rural communities, particularly their shift toward informal and extractive livelihoods. Data

<sup>2</sup> Mandivamba Rukuni, "Revisiting Zimbabwe's Agricultural Revolution," 2006) *Zimbabwe's Agricultural Revolution Revisited*, Harare, Zimbabwe: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2006; Sam Moyo, "The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe, 1990-1999," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 5–28.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, December 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241295629>.

<sup>4</sup> Hitchcock and Kelly, "Borders, Boundaries, and Livelihoods in Western and North-Western Zimbabwe, 1890–2021"; Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>5</sup> Soul Washaya, Prince Dieter Muchaurawa, and Dorine Dorcas Washaya, "Drought Coping Strategies by Smallholder Cattle Farmers in Zimbabwe," *Tropical and Subtropical Agroecosystems* 25, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities* (James Currey Oxford, 2010); P. B. Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform* (Zed Books, 2012); Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>7</sup> Admos Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm," *Land Use Policy* 81 (2019): 897–903.

<sup>8</sup> G. Mkodzongi and V Zano, "The Political Economy of Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Zimbabwe: The Problem of Formalisation," *Resource Insight* 19 (2020): 1–34.

<sup>9</sup> Showers Mawowa, "The Political Economy of Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Central Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, no. 4 (2013): 921–36.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Auty, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis* (Routledge, 2002); Richard Saunders, "Crisis, Capital, Compromise: Mining and Empowerment in Zimbabwe," *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie* 12, no. 1 (2008); Douglas Nyathi et al., "'Mining Farmers' or 'Farming Miners': The Dynamics of Livelihood Diversification in Rural Agricultural Communities of Insiza District, Zimbabwe," *TWIST* 20, no.1(2025):12–20.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Fahy Bryceson, "Deagrarianization and Rural Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sectoral Perspective," *World Development* 24, no. 1 (1996): 97–111.

was drawn from multiple reputable sources to ensure comprehensive and credible analysis. Academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were systematically searched using key terms including: “agriculture Zimbabwe,” “land tenure insecurity,” “climate change rural livelihoods,” “artisanal mining,” and “rural transformation in Zimbabwe.” In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, gray literature was included, particularly government policy documents such as the Zimbabwe National Agricultural Policy Framework (2018–2030), Land Tenure Policy (2019), and reports from the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water, and Rural Development. Publications from international organizations such as the FAO, UNDP, and World Bank were also consulted to provide global and regional contexts.

The inclusion criteria for the review encompassed literature published from 2000 onward to capture developments following the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). Studies were included if they specifically addressed Zimbabwe's rural economy, agricultural systems, land reforms, and rural livelihoods. Preference was given to empirical studies, national reports, and policy analyses with a clear methodological framework. Exclusion criteria included sources not written in English, publications lacking full-text access, and those with only peripheral relevance to the topic (e.g., focusing on urban agriculture or agribusiness in non-rural settings). News articles and opinion pieces were excluded unless they were supported by empirical evidence or cited in peer-reviewed studies. The data was analysed thematically, focusing on recurring patterns related to governance, resource access, institutional support, and livelihood diversification. This methodological approach provides a rich, multidimensional understanding of Zimbabwe's rural transformation in the context of agricultural decline and the rise of extractive economic activities.

### Historical Context of Agriculture in Zimbabwe

The history of agriculture in Zimbabwe is deeply intertwined with the country's political, economic, and social transformations.<sup>12</sup> From pre-colonial subsistence systems to post-independence land reform programs, agriculture has been both a livelihood foundation and a politically contested arena.<sup>13</sup> Understanding this history is crucial for analysing the systemic challenges that continue to affect the sector. In the pre-colonial era, agriculture was predominantly subsistence-based and organized around communal land tenure systems.<sup>14</sup> Indigenous communities, such as Shona and Ndebele, practised mixed farming, integrating crop production with livestock rearing. Land was not privately owned, but allocated according to lineage and clan authority, ensuring access to all members of the community.<sup>15</sup> These systems are generally sustainable, resilient, and adaptable to local ecological and climatic conditions.<sup>16</sup> The colonial period ushered in profound transformations, beginning with the British South African Company's occupation of Zimbabwe in 1890. Land alienation policies systematically displace African communities by transferring fertile land to white settlers.<sup>17</sup> The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 institutionalized racial land segregation, allocating over half of the arable land to less than 5% of the population (white commercial farmers), while the African majority was pushed into overcrowded and ecologically fragile reserves.<sup>18</sup> These reserves lack adequate infrastructure, extension services, and market access, stifling productivity and breeding poverty.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sam Moyo, “Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011): 493–531.

<sup>13</sup> Julius Museveni and Barbara Chibvamushure, “Land Reform and Social Differentiation in Zimbabwe,” in *Inclusive Urban Development in the Global South* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021): Routledge, 2021), 91–104, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041566-7>.

<sup>14</sup> Beauty Zindi and Emmanuel Ndhlovu, “Land Reform Policy Formulation in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Implications for Socio-Economic and Political Development,” *Journal Of Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (October 15, 2024): 6–24, [https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7\(3\).01](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7(3).01).

<sup>15</sup> Robin Palmer, “Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-1990,” *African Affairs* 89, no. 355 (1990): 163–81; Museveni and Chibvamushure, “Land Reform and Social Differentiation in Zimbabwe.”

<sup>16</sup> Ian Phimister, “An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890-1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle,” 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Moyo, “Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe”; Museveni and Chibvamushure, “Land Reform and Social Differentiation in Zimbabwe.”

<sup>18</sup> Mandivamba Rukuni, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems: Under the Chairmanship of Professor Mandivamba Rukuni* (The Government, 1994); Moyo, “The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe, 1990-1999.”

<sup>19</sup> Zindi and Ndhlovu, “Land Reform Policy Formulation in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Implications for Socio-Economic and Political Development.”

The dual agrarian structure that emerged featured a modern, well-capitalized commercial farming sector dominated by white farmers and a marginalized communal sector largely reliant on manual labor and rudimentary tools.<sup>20</sup> While the commercial sector contributes significantly to exports and GDP, communal areas provide most of the country's staple food and support the majority of the rural population.<sup>21</sup> In 1980, the new Zimbabwean government inherited this deeply unequal land distribution.<sup>22</sup> Although land reform was a central pillar of liberation struggles, post-independence efforts at redistribution were initially constrained by the Lancaster House Agreement, which enshrined a "willing buyer, willing sellers" principle that limited the state-led acquisition of white-owned land.<sup>23</sup> As a result, early land reform between 1980 and 1997 was slow and modest, redistributing only approximately three million hectares to black farmers.<sup>24</sup>

Mounting political pressure and the failure of market-based reforms culminated in the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) initiated in 2000. Under the FTLRP, over 11 million hectares of land were seized by white commercial farmers and redistributed to black Zimbabweans through A1 (smallholder) and A2 (commercial) resettlement schemes.<sup>25</sup> While the programme addressed the colonial legacies of land inequality, it also triggered widespread disruption. Lack of planning, support services, and secure tenure undermines productivity. Many new farmers lack access to credit, mechanization, and markets, leading to declining output, particularly in key sectors, such as tobacco, maize, and horticulture.<sup>26</sup> The abrupt nature of land reforms has resulted in the collapse of agricultural institutions. The dismantling of research and extension networks, weakening of commercial financing, and erosion of property rights have contributed to macroeconomic instability and a sharp contraction in agricultural GDP.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, political interference and elite capture characterize the redistribution process, with reports of land allocations to politically connected individuals at the expense of capable and landless rural households.<sup>28</sup> Despite these challenges, land reform has created a new agrarian structure and changed the social dynamics of rural Zimbabwe.<sup>29</sup> Many former farm workers and communal farmers have transitioned to landholders, creating opportunities for smallholder-based agriculture. However, without sustained investment in infrastructure, irrigation, inputs, and land tenure security, the sector has struggled to fully recover or drive broad-based rural development.<sup>30</sup> The historical evolution of agriculture in Zimbabwe reflects the complex interplay between colonial injustice, post-independence aspirations, and contemporary governance failure. While land reform remains a crucial milestone in addressing historical inequality,<sup>31</sup> the broader agricultural transformation agenda remains incomplete.<sup>32</sup> Structural reforms, institutional rebuilding, and farmer support systems are essential for reviving the sector and positioning it as a driver of rural livelihoods and national economic recovery.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Moyo, "The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe, 1990-1999"; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>21</sup> Terence O Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study*, vol. 37 (Univ of California Press, 1985); B. Mavedzenge, J. Mahenehene, and I. Scoones, *Dynamics of Rural Livelihoods in Zimbabwe* (Institute of Development Studies, 2008); George T Mudimu, Ting Zuo, and Nkumbu Nalwimba, "Inside an Enclave: The Dynamics of Capitalism and Rural Politics in a Post-Land Reform Context," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49, no. 1 (2022): 101–28.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Elich and George T Mudimu, "The Dynamics of Rural Capitalist Accumulation in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe," *Monthly Review-An Independent Socialist Magazine* (Monthly Review Foundation 122 West 27th St, NEW York, NY 10001 USA, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Moyo, "The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe, 1990-1999"; Elich and Mudimu, "The Dynamics of Rural Capitalist Accumulation in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe."

<sup>24</sup> Rukuni, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems: Under the Chairmanship of Professor Mandivamba Rukuni*; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe"; Elich and Mudimu, "The Dynamics of Rural Capitalist Accumulation in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe."

<sup>25</sup> Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe"; Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Richardson, "The Collapse of Zimbabwe in the Wake of the 2000-2003 Land Reforms," (*No Title*), 2004.

<sup>27</sup> J. Mutambara, "Financial Exclusion of Rural Farmers in Zimbabwe," *African Journal of Economic Policy* 26, no. 2 (2019): 35–54.

<sup>28</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*.

<sup>29</sup> D., Chikodzi and T. Madzima, "Women's Economic Agency and Rural Social Change in Zimbabwe," *African Journal of Economic and Social Transformation* 3, no. 2 (2025): 135–52.

<sup>30</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

<sup>31</sup> Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>32</sup> Chikodzi and Madzima, "Women's Economic Agency and Rural Social Change in Zimbabwe."

<sup>33</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

## The De-agrarianisation hypothesis and rural transformation

The de-agrarianisation hypothesis refers to the gradual process through which rural populations shift away from agriculture as the main source of livelihood, income, identity, and social structure.<sup>34</sup> This transformation is not merely about diversification but also reflects a deeper erosion of the agrarian base in rural societies.<sup>35</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, and notably in Zimbabwe, this phenomenon has become increasingly evident due to structural, environmental, and political-economic pressures that have rendered smallholder agriculture unreliable and unsustainable for many rural households.<sup>36</sup> De-agrarianisation is driven by multiple factors, including declining agricultural returns, climate variability, shrinking access to productive land, weakening rural institutions, and market failures.<sup>37</sup> These forces have pushed rural populations, especially youth and women, to seek livelihoods beyond the farm, engaging in informal trading, artisanal mining, cross-border vending, weaving, and wage labor.<sup>38</sup> As a result, agriculture has become a residual or seasonal activity, often practiced primarily for subsistence rather than for commercial benefits.<sup>39</sup>

Bryceson argues that rural Africa is undergoing de facto de-agrarianisation, as farming becomes less central to economic survival and identity.<sup>40</sup> Instead, rural people are becoming increasingly embedded in multilocal, multioccupational livelihoods.<sup>41</sup> This is particularly evident in Zimbabwe, where land reform, economic crises, and environmental degradation have contributed to a loss of confidence in agriculture.<sup>42</sup> Many rural communities have reoriented their economic strategies toward informal and often extractive economic activities, signalling a departure from the classic agrarian development trajectory.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, de-agrarianisation is not synonymous with rural development. While diversification can increase resilience, it may also exacerbate vulnerability if new sources of livelihood are unstable, unregulated, or exploitative.<sup>44</sup> The shift from farming often occurs under conditions of distress rather than opportunity, revealing the failure of state support and agricultural policy frameworks to enable viable farming futures.<sup>45</sup> As such, the de-agrarianisation hypothesis challenges policymakers and development practitioners to rethink rural transformation beyond agriculture.<sup>46</sup> It calls for integrated rural development strategies that recognize informal economies, support non-farm enterprises, and ensure social protection for those transitioning out of farming.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Nyathi, Joram Ndlovu, and Munyaradzi Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment," *Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy (The)* 16, no. 1 (January 10, 2025): 25–51, <https://doi.org/10.4314/jsdpl.v16i1.2>.

<sup>35</sup> Bryceson, "Deagrarianization and Rural Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sectoral Perspective"; V. A. Cramer, R. J. Hobbs, and R. J. Standish, "What's New about Old Fields? Land Abandonment and Ecosystem Assembly," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 23, no. 2 (February 2008): 104–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2007.10.005>.

<sup>36</sup> Gundula Fischer et al., "Sustainable Agricultural Intensification and Gender-Biased Land Tenure Systems: An Exploration and Conceptualization of Interactions," *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 19, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2021): 403–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735903.2020.1791425>.

<sup>37</sup> F. Ellis, *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Deborah Fahy Bryceson, "The Scramble in Africa: Reorienting Rural Livelihoods," *World Development* 30, no. 5 (2002): 725–39; Annie Shattuck et al., "Life on the Land: New Lives for Agrarian Questions," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50, no. 2 (2023): 490–518.

<sup>38</sup> Cramer, Hobbs, and Standish, "What's New about Old Fields? Land Abandonment and Ecosystem Assembly"; Nyathi, Ndlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>39</sup> Paul Hebinck, Nosiseko Mtati, and Charlie Shackleton, "More than Just Fields: Reframing Deagrarianisation in Landscapes and Livelihoods," *Journal of Rural Studies* 61 (July 2018): 323–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.01.004>.

<sup>40</sup> Bryceson, "The Scramble in Africa: Reorienting Rural Livelihoods."

<sup>41</sup> Nyathi, Ndlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>42</sup> Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe"; I. Scoones, "Land and Labor Dynamics after Land Reforms in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Development Studies* 55, no. 10 (2019): 2145–61.

<sup>43</sup> Hebinck, Mtati, and Shackleton, "More than Just Fields: Reframing Deagrarianisation in Landscapes and Livelihoods."

<sup>44</sup> Pauline E Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict over Land in Africa," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4, no. 3 (2004): 269–314; Nyathi, Ndlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>45</sup> Bryceson, "The Scramble in Africa: Reorienting Rural Livelihoods."

<sup>46</sup> Nyathi, Ndlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>47</sup> Fischer et al., "Sustainable Agricultural Intensification and Gender-Biased Land Tenure Systems: An Exploration and Conceptualization of Interactions."

## **Systematic failures in the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe's agricultural sector, once regarded as the cornerstone of national development and rural livelihoods, has experienced a prolonged crisis due to deeply embedded systemic failures.<sup>48</sup> These failures have hindered the sector's ability to support rural transformation and national food security.<sup>49</sup> The crisis is multifaceted, stemming from policy inconsistencies, infrastructure collapse, land tenure issues, environmental stress, governance deficiencies, and institutional underfinancing.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Policy Failures and Inconsistent Governance***

The agricultural policy environment in Zimbabwe has been marred by inconsistencies, short-termism, and political interference. Post-independence efforts to support communal farmers were initially promising, but successive policy shifts, particularly during the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) in 2000, created a fragmented agricultural landscape.<sup>51</sup> Policies have often prioritized political expediency over sustainability, leading to abrupt changes that make farmers and investors uncertain. Scoones et al. argue that the lack of a coherent, long-term agricultural strategy has weakened institutional support structures and disincentivised private sector investments.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Lack of Infrastructure and Agricultural Inputs***

Zimbabwe suffers from chronic underinvestment in the agricultural infrastructure. Irrigation systems are either outdated or non-functional, especially in the drier southern and central regions, where they are most needed. As the Food and Agriculture Organization notes, only approximately 5% of the agricultural land is under functional irrigation, leaving the sector heavily dependent on erratic rainfall.<sup>53</sup> Farmers also lack reliable access to seeds, fertilizers, and mechanized equipment, which reduces productivity. According to Mutambara, input markets are often inaccessible to smallholders because of their high cost and monopolistic distribution channels. In addition, poor road networks and market infrastructure prevent farmers from accessing lucrative markets, leading to post-harvest losses and reduced income.<sup>54</sup> Mavedzenge et al. observed that smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe often face physical and economic barriers to market participation, reinforcing cycles of rural poverty.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Land Tenure Insecurity***

One of the most destabilizing systemic issues in Zimbabwean agriculture is land tenure insecurity. The FTLRP redistributed land, but failed to provide clear and transferable land rights. Most beneficiaries hold 99-year leases or permits that lack full legal security, limiting their ability to use land as collateral for loans.<sup>56</sup> This insecurity not only discourages long-term investment in land improvements but also perpetuates the uncertainty that deters commercial agricultural activity. Without secure tenure, landholders have limited incentives to invest in soil conservation, irrigation, or agroforestry systems that could improve long-term productivity and sustainability.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Climate Change and Environmental Degradation***

Zimbabwe's agriculture is overwhelmingly rain-fed, rendering it highly vulnerable to climatic variability and extreme weather events. Over the past two decades, the country has faced recurrent droughts, mid-season dry spells, and cyclones, all of which have contributed to declining agricultural output and food

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<sup>48</sup> Mavedzenge, Mahenehene, and Scoones, *Dynamics of Rural Livelihoods in Zimbabwe*.

<sup>49</sup> Fischer et al., "Sustainable Agricultural Intensification and Gender-Biased Land Tenure Systems: An Exploration and Conceptualization of Interactions."

<sup>50</sup> FAO, "Zimbabwe Country Programming Framework (2016–2020)," *Food and Agriculture Organization*, 2017; Scoones, "Land and Labor Dynamics after Land Reforms in Zimbabwe."

<sup>51</sup> Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>52</sup> Scoones, "Land and Labor Dynamics after Land Reforms in Zimbabwe."

<sup>53</sup> FAO, "Zimbabwe Country Programming Framework (2016–2020)."

<sup>54</sup> Mutambara, "Financial Exclusion of Rural Farmers in Zimbabwe."

<sup>55</sup> Mavedzenge, Mahenehene, and Scoones, *Dynamics of Rural Livelihoods in Zimbabwe*.

<sup>56</sup> Richardson, "The Collapse of Zimbabwe in the Wake of the 2000-2003 Land Reforms"; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>57</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

insecurity.<sup>58</sup> However, there has been minimal investment in climate-smart agriculture, early warning systems, and drought-resistant seed varieties. Moreover, the expansion of cultivation on marginal lands has led to widespread deforestation, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss.<sup>59</sup> According to Chagutah, environmental degradation exacerbates rural livelihood vulnerability and reflects a broader failure to integrate environmental sustainability into national agricultural planning.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Corruption and Elite Capture in Agricultural Support Programs***

Agricultural support programs in Zimbabwe have been frequently marred by corruption and elite capture. Initiatives such as the Command Agriculture Program, intended to revitalize commercial farming through state-backed inputs and finance, have been criticized for their lack of transparency and political favoritism.<sup>61</sup> Rather than empowering productive farmers, these programs often benefit politically connected elites who fail to repay loans or effectively utilize resources. This misallocation of public funds undermines confidence in state support systems and excludes deserving smallholders. In the long term, such practices reinforce inequalities within rural communities and limit the sector's developmental potential.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Underfinancing and the Collapse of Extension Services***

Agricultural extension services, vital for disseminating information, improving practices, and connecting farmers to innovation, have collapsed because of chronic underfunding.<sup>63</sup> Once a cornerstone of rural support, extension agents are now few, poorly equipped, and undertrained.<sup>64</sup> Chikazunga noted that after the land reform process, the government failed to scale extension services to match the needs of newly resettled farmers.<sup>65</sup> This has left many producers without guidance on soil health, pest control, climate adaptation, and market strategies. Moreover, limited public-private partnerships and poor digital infrastructure hinder the modernization of extension systems.<sup>66</sup> The resulting knowledge gap significantly reduces farm productivity and resilience to shocks. Systemic failures in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector have rendered it incapable of fulfilling its role as a driver of rural transformation and economic development.<sup>67</sup> These failures are interlinked, with policy inconsistency, land insecurity, infrastructure decay, climate stress, corruption, and institutional breakdown reinforcing each other.<sup>68</sup> Reversing this trend requires a holistic policy approach grounded in long-term planning, institutional accountability, secure land tenure, investment in climate-smart infrastructure, and transparent governance.<sup>69</sup> Without addressing these root causes, rural communities will continue to disengage from agriculture and seek survival in precarious, informal and extractive sectors.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>58</sup> FAO, "Zimbabwe Country Programming Framework (2016–2020)."

<sup>59</sup> Shattuck et al., "Life on the Land: New Lives for Agrarian Questions."

<sup>60</sup> T. Chagutah, *Climate Change Vulnerability and Preparedness in Southern Africa: Zimbabwe Country Report* (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> G. Zhou and E. Masunungure, "The Political Economy of Command Agriculture in Zimbabwe," *African Journal of Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2023): 1–17.

<sup>62</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*.

<sup>63</sup> Zhou and Masunungure, "The Political Economy of Command Agriculture in Zimbabwe"; F. Mazwi, W. Chambati, and S. Moyo, "The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform and Donor Engagement in Zimbabwe's Agricultural Sector," in *Contemporary Issues in African Agricultural Development*, ed. V. Gumbo and T. Maphosa (Springer, 2024), 88–107.

<sup>64</sup> B.C. Chikulo and M. Ncube, "Rebuilding Agricultural Extensions in Zimbabwe: A Review of Constraints and Future Prospects," *African Journal of Rural Development* 8, no. 2 (2023): 112–25.

<sup>65</sup> D. Chikazunga, "Smallholder Agriculture and Extension Services in Southern Africa," PLAAS Working Paper, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Chikulo and Ncube, "Rebuilding Agricultural Extensions in Zimbabwe: A Review of Constraints and Future Prospects."

<sup>67</sup> S. Moyo, "Agrarian Transformation and the Future of Smallholder Agriculture in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 6 (2021): 1210–30; J., Mutambara and D. Matsvange, "Extension Services and Rural Development in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe: Challenges and Policy Options," *Development of Southern Africa* 39, no. 4 (2022): 543–58.

<sup>68</sup> Moyo, "Agrarian Transformation and the Future of Smallholder Agriculture in Zimbabwe."

<sup>69</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>70</sup> Mutambara and Matsvange, "Extension Services and Rural Development in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe: Challenges and Policy Options."

## Rural Transformation: Expectations vs Reality in Zimbabwe

Rural transformation has long been central to Zimbabwe's national development agenda, envisioned as a pathway for poverty alleviation, inclusive growth, and sustainable livelihood.<sup>71</sup> The expectation was that through agrarian reform, infrastructure development, decentralization, and rural industrialization, rural areas would evolve into vibrant economic zones, contributing significantly to national development.<sup>72</sup> However, the lived realities of rural populations have largely failed to align with these aspirations, as systemic challenges have derailed progress and exacerbated rural poverty and inequality. In 1980, there was optimism that land reform and state-led agricultural support would drive rural development.<sup>73</sup> The communal sector is expected to benefit from improved access to land, agricultural extension services, credit and markets. These inputs were envisioned to increase productivity, enhance food security, and promote rural-based economic growth.<sup>74</sup> However, actual implementation is constrained by limited financial resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and policy inconsistencies.<sup>75</sup>

The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) was initiated in 2000, which further heightened the expectations of equitable rural transformation.<sup>76</sup> It promised to correct colonial-era land injustices and empower formerly marginalized rural populations.<sup>77</sup> While the program significantly altered land ownership patterns, the post-reform era was marred by declining agricultural output, tenure insecurity, and a lack of institutional support.<sup>78</sup> Many resettled farmers are left without access to essential inputs, credit, and irrigation infrastructure, undermining productivity and disillusioning communities.<sup>79</sup> In addition, rural infrastructure, such as roads, schools, health services, and energy, has seen limited investment, further isolating rural economies from national and regional markets.<sup>80</sup> These constraints have stifled rural entrepreneurship and limited the value addition to agricultural products. As a result, rural households increasingly depend on remittances, informal mining, and urban migration for survival—signals of de-agrarianisation rather than transformation.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, rural governance structures remain centralized, limiting community participation and accountability. State-led rural development initiatives such as Command Agriculture have often been criticized for elite capture and politicization, rather than being vehicles of empowerment.<sup>82</sup> The reality of rural life in Zimbabwe today reveals a stark divergence from the early hopes of rural transformation. Despite land redistribution and policy pronouncements, the lack of sustained investment, weak institutions, and an unstable macroeconomic environment have stunted rural development.<sup>83</sup> A rethinking of rural policy, centering on inclusive governance, infrastructure development, and robust agricultural support systems, is critical to bridging the gap between expectations and reality.

## The rise of the extractive economy and its implications for Agriculture

Zimbabwe's economic trajectory over the past two decades has been characterized by a marked shift from an agrarian-based economy to one increasingly dominated by extractive industries, particularly mining.<sup>84</sup> This transformation, driven by global demand for minerals such as gold, diamonds, platinum, and lithium, has profound implications for agriculture, rural livelihoods, and sustainable development. Historically,

<sup>71</sup> Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>72</sup> Rukuni, "Revisiting Zimbabwe's Agricultural Revolution"; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>73</sup> Mazwi, Chambati, and Moyo, "The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform and Donor Engagement in Zimbabwe's Agricultural Sector."

<sup>74</sup> Palmer, "Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-1990"; Rukuni, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems: Under the Chairmanship of Professor Mandivamba Rukuni*; Grasian Mkodzongi and Samuel Spiegel, "Artisanal Gold Mining and Farming: Livelihood Linkages and Labour Dynamics after Land Reforms in Zimbabwe," *The Journal of Development Studies* 55, no. 10 (2019): 2145–61.

<sup>75</sup> Museveni and Chibvamushure, "Land Reform and Social Differentiation in Zimbabwe."

<sup>76</sup> Elich and Mudimu, "The Dynamics of Rural Capitalist Accumulation in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe."

<sup>77</sup> Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>78</sup> Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>79</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

<sup>80</sup> C. Chikozho, "Towards Strategic Use of Water Resources in the Limpopo River Basin: Mapping the Institutional Landscape," *Africa Institute of South Africa, Occasional Paper* 55, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Bryceson, "Deagrarianization and Rural Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sectoral Perspective."

<sup>82</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*.

<sup>83</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>84</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe"; Mkodzongi and Spiegel, "Artisanal Gold Mining and Farming: Livelihood Linkages and Labour Dynamics after Land Reforms in Zimbabwe."

agriculture has been the backbone of Zimbabwe's economy, contributing significantly to employment, GDP, and exports.<sup>85</sup> However, following the economic downturn in the early 2000s, the government increasingly turned to the mining sector as a source of foreign currency and investment. The discovery of diamond fields in Marange in 2006 and rising global commodity prices accelerated this shift, fostering what scholars term the "extractive economy and an economic model heavily reliant on the exploitation of natural resources."<sup>86</sup> One major implication of this shift is the reallocation of land and capital away from agriculture towards mining.<sup>87</sup> In rural areas, such as Chiadzwa and Mhondoro, mining operations, both formal and artisanal, encroach on arable land, displacing farmers and undermining food production.<sup>88</sup> Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), while providing income opportunities, often leads to land degradation, water pollution, and destruction of irrigation infrastructure. According to Mawowa, unregulated mining has rendered large tracts of agricultural land unproductive, particularly in the communal and resettled areas.<sup>89</sup> The extractive economy has also distorted rural labour markets, drawing able-bodied youth away from farming into mining, because of the lure of quick cash. This has exacerbated de-agrarianisation, a process in which rural populations disengage from farming as a livelihood.<sup>90</sup> In Zimbabwe, the decline in agricultural engagement has been particularly evident among young people, who increasingly view agriculture as a low-status, high-risk activity compared to mining.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, the rise of extractivism has reinforced resource nationalism and elite capture. Mining rights are often allocated through opaque processes that benefit politically connected individuals and companies, sidelining rural communities from benefiting meaningfully from local resources.<sup>92</sup> This mirrors the corruption observed in agricultural support schemes such as Command Agriculture and further erodes trust in public institutions. Another critical concern is the environmental degradation associated with extractive activities. Mining leads to soil erosion, deforestation, and contamination of water sources, further weakening the resilience of rural agricultural systems, particularly in the context of climate change.<sup>93</sup> In addition, because the extractive economy is export-oriented, it tends to be disconnected from local food systems, contributing little to rural food security and nutrition. Although mining has provided macroeconomic relief, it has not fostered broad-based rural development. Unlike agriculture, which has stronger linkages with the informal economy, manufacturing, and household food systems, extractive industries are capital-intensive and offer limited employment opportunities.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, rural communities have become increasingly reliant on precarious informal mining and remittances, while traditional agricultural systems continue to deteriorate.<sup>95</sup> The expansion of the extractive economy in Zimbabwe has created both opportunities and risks. Although it has helped cushion the economy in times of agricultural collapse, its unregulated and elite-driven nature has undermined sustainable agricultural development and rural transformation.<sup>96</sup> Without integrating extractive revenues into inclusive agriculture-supportive policies, Zimbabwe risks deepening rural poverty, food insecurity, and ecological collapse.<sup>97</sup>

### **Agricultural policy gaps and missed opportunities**

Zimbabwe's agricultural sector has undergone several policy shifts over the past four decades, yet it continues to experience underperformance, volatility, and declining productivity. Despite the centrality of agriculture in food security, rural livelihoods, and economic growth, a range of policy gaps and

<sup>85</sup> Rukuni, "Revisiting Zimbabwe's Agricultural Revolution."

<sup>86</sup> Saunders, "Crisis, Capital, Compromise: Mining and Empowerment in Zimbabwe"; Mkodzongi and Zano, "The Political Economy of Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Zimbabwe: The Problem of Formalisation."

<sup>87</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>88</sup> Lloyd Mambo Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on Its Citizens: Institutionalized Violence and Political Culture* (Jacana Media, 2011).

<sup>89</sup> Mawowa, "The Political Economy of Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Central Zimbabwe."

<sup>90</sup> Bryceson, "Deagrarianization and Rural Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sectoral Perspective."

<sup>91</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

<sup>92</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*.

<sup>93</sup> I. Chirisa, E. Bandaiko, and E. Mazhindu, "Decentralization in Zimbabwe and Undercurrents of Extractive Capacity," *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* 8, no. 3 (2017): 8.

<sup>94</sup> Auty, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis*.

<sup>95</sup> Nyathi et al., "'Mining Farmers' or 'Farming Miners': The Dynamics of Livelihood Diversification in Rural Agricultural Communities of Insiza District, Zimbabwe."

<sup>96</sup> Nyathi, Ndlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>97</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

implementation failures have constrained its transformative potential. These gaps reflect not only technical and institutional weaknesses but also the politicisation of agriculture and missed opportunities to align agricultural policy with broader development goals.<sup>98</sup> One of the most glaring policy gaps is inconsistent and fragmented planning. Successive agricultural policies—from post-independence Growth with Equity strategy to the land reform and resettlement program (LRRP), and later Command Agriculture—have lacked long-term coherence and continuity. As noted by Scoones et al., policies are often reactive, politically driven, and short-term in focus, and lack robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks.<sup>99</sup> This inconsistency has hindered farmers' confidence, discouraged investments, and prevented institutional learning.

In addition, agricultural financing frameworks are weak and exclusive. For instance, public and private credit facilities have historically favoured large-scale commercial farms, with smallholders who produce the bulk of food largely excluded.<sup>100</sup> While initiatives such as the Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC) sought to bridge this gap, they failed because of poor governance, undercapitalization, and high default rates. The collapse of these institutions left smallholder farmers with minimal access to affordable credit and insurance, exposing them to climate and market risks. Another critical gap is the limited support for smallholder innovation and commercialization. While smallholders constitute over 70% of Zimbabwe's farming population, policy attention has often focused on large-scale mechanization, ignoring the need for tailored, low-cost innovations suitable for small-scale operations.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, agricultural research and extension systems, once robust in the 1980s, have deteriorated due to chronic underfunding and brain drain, limiting technology transfer and farmer support.<sup>102</sup>

Another major constraint is the absence of a secure land tenure for resettled and communal farmers. Despite the redistribution of over 10 million hectares of land through the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP), most beneficiaries still lack legal land titles, limiting their ability to access credit or invest in land improvements.<sup>103</sup> This has stalled long-term planning and sustainable land management.

Policy implementations also suffer from elite capture and corruption. Programmes such as Command Agriculture and input subsidy schemes, though ambitious in scope, have been undermined by politicisation, favouritism, and a lack of accountability.<sup>104</sup> These practices have diverted resources from genuine producers and eroded public trust. Furthermore, missed opportunities in value chain development and agro-industrialisation have constrained agriculture's contribution to broader economic transformation. Zimbabwe failed to establish strong linkages between farmers, processors, and markets, leading to high postharvest losses and low-value capture by producers.<sup>105</sup> Rather than promoting inclusive value chains, policies have largely focused on raw commodity production, without adequate support for rural agro-processing or market access. Zimbabwe's agricultural policy landscape has been characterized by inconsistencies, exclusions, and mismanagement. Failure to support smallholders, invest in infrastructure and research, secure land rights, and promote agro-industrial value chains represents significant missed opportunities. A paradigm shift is required for inclusive, coherent, and accountable policy frameworks that prioritize long-term productivity, equity, and sustainability in agriculture.<sup>106</sup>

### Re-agrarianisation attempts and the embedded diversified rural economy

Following the widespread effects of de-agrarianisation—characterised by declining reliance on agriculture as the primary livelihood—Zimbabwe has, in recent years, witnessed policy-driven efforts

<sup>98</sup> Rukuni, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems: Under the Chairmanship of Professor Mandivamba Rukuni*; Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe."

<sup>99</sup> Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>100</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

<sup>101</sup> Mutambara, "Financial Exclusion of Rural Farmers in Zimbabwe."

<sup>102</sup> L Chidzuza, "Towards the Protection of Human Rights: Do the New Zimbabwean Constitutional Provisions on Judicial Independence Suffice?," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 17, no. 1 (May 2, 2014): 368, <https://doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v17i1.09>.

<sup>103</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Gundani, *Changing Patterns of Authority and Leadership: Developments in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe after Vatican II 1965-1985* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2001).

<sup>105</sup> Gideon Zhou and Zvoushe Hardlife, "Public Policy Making in Zimbabwe: A Three Decade Perspective," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 8 (2012).

<sup>106</sup> Chikodzi and Madzima, "Women's Economic Agency and Rural Social Change in Zimbabwe."

toward re-agrarianisation.<sup>107</sup> These attempts aim to revitalise the agricultural sector and reintegrate it into the centre of rural economic life. Re-agrarianisation involves the deliberate re-engagement of rural populations with farming activities, facilitated through land access, input support, extension services, and market linkages.<sup>108</sup> Key re-agrarianisation programs include command agriculture, residential input support schemes, and the livelihoods and food security program.<sup>109</sup> These initiatives seek to increase productivity, restore food security, and position agriculture as a viable economic base.<sup>110</sup> However, their success has been mixed. Some resettled farmers, particularly those with political connections or better access to capital and markets, have managed to reinvest in farming and attained moderate levels of commercial production.<sup>111</sup> However, for many smallholders and communal farmers, access to inputs remains inconsistent, and land tenure insecurity and profits are limited due to price distortions and poor market access.<sup>112</sup>

The re-agrarianisation agenda does not operate in a vacuum; it is embedded within a diversified rural economy.<sup>113</sup> As Bryceson notes, rural African households are increasingly reliant on multiple income streams beyond farming, including petty trade, cross-border commerce, artisanal mining, remittances, and seasonal urban migration.<sup>114</sup> In Zimbabwe, this diversification intensified post-2000 due to economic instability, drought, and institutional failure, which undermined agriculture as a dependable livelihood source.<sup>115</sup> Many rural households now view agriculture as part of a portfolio of survival strategies rather than a core economic activity.<sup>116</sup> Farming is often combined with mining (particularly gold panning), vending, and informal transportation services.<sup>117</sup> Women and youth have driven this shift by engaging in small-scale enterprises and migration networks to supplement household income.<sup>118</sup> This trend reflects both resilience and vulnerability, as diversification can serve as a buffer against shocks but also highlights the inability of agriculture alone to sustain livelihoods.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, efforts to re-embed agriculture in rural economies must consider the multiplex nature of rural livelihoods. Re-agrarianisation should not be seen as a reversal of de-agrarianisation, but as a complementary strategy that acknowledges the evolving socio-economic landscape. Agricultural policies must be integrated with broader rural development strategies that support multiactivity livelihoods, gender inclusivity, and youth engagement. While re-agrarianisation remains a critical pillar in Zimbabwe's rural development agenda,<sup>120</sup> its success depends on addressing structural constraints such as input access, land security, and rural infrastructure. It is equally important to recognize and support the increasingly diversified nature of rural economies. Rather than pursuing a purely agricultural revival, a hybrid approach that integrates farming with other income-generating opportunities offers a more realistic pathway toward inclusive and sustainable rural transformation.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Zindi and Ndhlovu, "Land Reform Policy Formulation in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Implications for Socio-Economic and Political Development."

<sup>108</sup> Moyo, "Three Decades of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe"; Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>109</sup> B. Musonza, "Zimbabwe's Land Tenure Policy Shift: A Path to Economic Revitalization amidst Resistance," *The Zimbabwe Mail*, November 28, 2024, <https://www.thezimbabwemail.com/economic-analysis/zimbabwes-land-tenure-policy-shift-a-path-to-economic-revitalisation-amidst-resistance/>.

<sup>110</sup> M. Mutize, "Zimbabwe's Agric Revolution: President Mnangagwa's Blueprint for Prosperity," *The Chronicle*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/zimbabwes-agric-revolution-president-mnangagwas-blueprint-for-prosperity/>.

<sup>111</sup> Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform*; M. R. Ndebele-Murisa, C. P. Mubaya, and L. Pretorius, *Climate Change Trends and Impacts in Southern Africa: A Synthesis of Key Literature*, 2nd ed. (SARUA, 2020); Musonza B., "Zimbabwe's Land Tenure Policy Shift: A Path to Economic Revitalization amidst Resistance."

<sup>112</sup> Chimhowu, "The 'New' African Customary Land Tenure. Characteristic, Features and Policy Implications of a New Paradigm."

<sup>113</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>114</sup> Bryceson, "Deagrarianization and Rural Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sectoral Perspective."

<sup>115</sup> Scoones et al., *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*.

<sup>116</sup> Nyathi et al., "Mining Farmers' or 'Farming Miners': The Dynamics of Livelihood Diversification in Rural Agricultural Communities of Insiza District, Zimbabwe."

<sup>117</sup> Nyathi, Ndhlovu, and Dzvimbo, "The Socio-Economic Impact of De-Agrarianisation in Sub-Sahara: A Re-Look on Rural Livelihoods and Employment."

<sup>118</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>119</sup> Nyathi, "Diagnosis of the Livelihood Vulnerability from Selected Resettlement Farms in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe."

<sup>120</sup> Mutize, "Zimbabwe's Agric Revolution: President Mnangagwa's Blueprint for Prosperity."

<sup>121</sup> Elich and Mudimu, "The Dynamics of Rural Capitalist Accumulation in Post-Land Reform Zimbabwe."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The state must prioritize securing and formalizing land rights for all farmers, particularly those in resettlement and communal areas, to provide tenure security and encourage long-term investment in sustainable land use. Secure land tenure is also critical for enabling farmers to access credit and financial services that can boost productivity. Simultaneously, there is an urgent need for increased investment in climate-resilient agricultural initiatives to safeguard rural livelihoods against climate shocks. Policies should promote the adoption of drought-tolerant crops, conservation agriculture, and localized irrigation systems to enhance water efficiency and soil health. Strengthening the agricultural extension system with adequate funding, technical training, and decentralization will empower smallholder farmers with the knowledge, tools, and adaptive capacities necessary to thrive in a changing climate.

Moreover, government and development partners should expand support for agro-processing and rural market linkages to increase profitability for smallholders, add value to agricultural outputs, and minimize post-harvest losses. Recognizing the role of artisanal mining in rural economies, the state should shift from punitive approaches to formalization and regulation, integrating environmental safeguards, safety standards, and community education. Such measures can transform artisanal mining into a sustainable livelihood option while mitigating environmental risks. Ultimately, rural transformation policies must be community-driven, participatory, and transparent to ensure that resources and opportunities benefit the intended communities. Only through comprehensive, inclusive, and forward-looking reforms can agriculture regain its role as a cornerstone of equitable and sustainable rural development in Zimbabwe.

## CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined how systemic failures within Zimbabwe's agricultural sector disrupted the prospects of genuine rural transformation. The persistent underperformance of the sector is not merely a product of environmental or natural constraints but rather a reflection of deep-seated structural and institutional deficiencies. Policy inconsistencies, elite capture of state-sponsored agricultural programs, and chronic underfunding of agricultural research and extension services have systematically eroded the sector's capacity to support rural livelihoods. Consequently, instead of serving as a catalyst for development and food security, agriculture has become a fragile and uncertain livelihood option that is highly vulnerable to climatic, economic, and policy-related shocks.

Land tenure insecurity remains a central obstacle to rural transformation. The absence of formalized ownership rights or secure long-term leases has discouraged investment in land improvement, irrigation infrastructure, and climate-smart agricultural technologies. Farmers without collateral or legal recognition struggle to access the credit and other financial instruments essential for productivity growth. This situation is further exacerbated by the growing impact of climate change, including recurrent droughts, floods, and unpredictable rainfall patterns, which have rendered traditional rain-fed agricultural practices increasingly unsustainable. As agricultural returns diminish, rural populations, especially youth, are increasingly diversifying into informal and extractive activities, most notably artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). While ASM provides immediate income opportunities and a short-term survival strategy, it also exposes communities to serious environmental degradation, social tension, and economic instability. This shift signals a broader process of de-agrarianization, in which farming is no longer the primary anchor of rural livelihoods or identity. Ultimately, the study highlights that without institutional reform, secure land rights, and sustained investment in climate-resilient agriculture, Zimbabwe's rural transformation will remain constrained, deepening the cycles of poverty and ecological decline.

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