Agriculture remains key sector in the economy

Before the Bantu migration from East and Central Africa, the denizens of this part of the world were nomadic hunter-gatherers. According to Wikipedia, “the San or Saan peoples are members of various Khoisan-speaking indigenous hunter-gatherer groups representing the first nation of southern Africa, whose territories span Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and South Africa.” The San, or Bushmen, were gradually pushed out of present-day Zimbabwe by the Bantu people.

Remnants of the San can still be found in the drier parts of southern Africa where they eke out a living in the harsh deserts of the south. The Bantu people who supplanted the San were livestock herders and were also engaged in crop production. They were mainly subsistence farmers, growing sufficient food for their needs and upkeep.

The idyllic life of the Bantu people shattered

For centuries the Bantu people thrived on a sustainable way of life. However, as the European powers expanded their empires in Africa, they brought new diseases and technologies that disrupted the balance of the native societies. The introduction of cash crops, such as tobacco and coffee, led to a shift away from traditional food production. This, coupled with the forced removal of many Bantu people to work on European plantations, caused a loss of cultural identity and a decline in traditional ways of life.

Agriculture remains a key sector in the economy

Agriculture has remained the mainstay of our economy since pre-colonial times. In fact, before colonialism, agriculture was the main economic activity. As Zimbabwe modernised and industrialised, agriculture became a key component of this modernisation and industrialisation process.

Agriculture provides food for the population, raw materials for industry, employment for the people and is a source of foreign currency on account of exports. Prior to the fast-track land redistribution exercise of 2000, agriculture accounted for 41% of exports and it constituted about 18% of the country’s GDP. A third of the population was engaged in agricultural activities in the 1990s. This was to change when...
people enjoyed a life of abundance which was punctuated now and again by hardships associated with crop failure on account of locust infestation or drought or intrusion of warlike interlopers. The idyll of this predictable and rustic life was brutally shattered by the arrival of the settler colonists, who grabbed the best land and relegated the indigenous people to marginal and peripheral lands characterized by poor soils and low rainfall patterns.

The colonials also started mining and industrial enterprises which required manpower. Thus began the inception of the working classes and wage earners or proletarians. The farming operations of the settlers required workers. This process and other developments in the service industries formed the basis of the diversification of the Zimbabwean economy and gave impetus to the urbanisation process.

The well-connected got the best farms
Farmland was distributed to those who could influence the distribution of resources. This included the wealthy and influential. Those who had connections and access to power were able to secure the best farms.

I think there is merit in adopting a landholding policy which says "use it or lose it." Also charges on modest land rental could be helpful in weeding out time-wasters who will voluntarily give up the land because of cost considerations. But I guess it is a forlorn hope to expect bureaucrats and policymakers to do anything about the under-utilisation of the land because they are conflicted. They are the ones guilty of under-utilising the land.

Robert Mugabe, the then-presidential candidate, saw his political fortunes waning after he lost the referendum on the adoption of a new constitution. In a desperate attempt to ward off impending political oblivion, Mugabe initiated the land redistribution programme. It was a knee-jerk reaction to what he perceived as his loss of political support, the exercise was unplanned, ill-thought out and carried out in a haphazard manner. The result was chaos on the farms. Marauding gangs were unleashed upon unsuspecting black (non-Zanu) and white farmers alike. Valuable farming equipment and infrastructure was vandalised or loot ed. Some farmers lost not only land and property but also life and limb in the process.

Zimbabwe needs to move on and reclaim its place as a breadbasket of Southern Africa. The major reason why Zimbabwe does not have a currency of its own is because there is no production in the country. For the country to have its own currency it needs to produce both for domestic consumption and for export.

Agriculture remains the low hanging fruit in terms of resuscitating production in the country. Zimbabwe's land is in abundance but the water, knowhow, human resources and so on. Farmland is a finite resource which should be allocated carefully so that we can reap optimal benefits from its usage. Ordinary market forces take care of resource allocation but given our circumstances where title deeds are no longer respected a deliberate policy to allocate land optimally should be followed. The land policy should be well thought out and enacted so that there is transparency and predictability.

To my mind command agriculture is a short-term knee jerk administrative mechanism which needs to be replaced by a comprehensive, well thought out agricultural policy which takes into account matters such as, the land tenure system, training/extension services, financing, marketing etc.

In most places around Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa, countries took in the farmers Mugabe was chasing away. Shamelessly, Zimbabwe went on to buy maize from these very same farmers chased away, in the process expelling scarce foreign currency and paying higher prices than would have been paid had the farmers remained in Zimbabwe.

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