

## **‘The future is bright’ versus ‘The future is bleak’: A comparison of recent documentaries on land reform in Zimbabwe.**

Blazio Mavedzenge, Felix Murimbarimba and Ian Scoones (producers), *Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Voices From the Field* (Harare, 2011).

Simon De Swardt (director), *House of Justice* (Harare, 2009).

Andrew Thompson and Lucy Bailey (directors), *Mugabe and the White African* (Stroud, 2009).

### *Introduction*

In 2011 Blazio Mavedzenge, Felix Murimbarimba and Ian Scoones produced a series of eight short documentaries entitled *Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Voices From the Field* to accompany the book *Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Myths and Realities*.<sup>1</sup> The findings and conclusions of this book have generated a great deal of controversy for their positive assessments of the fast track land reform programme (FTLRP) and this documentary series does nothing to dampen the enthusiasm with which they portray the benefits of land reform. The series follows closely on the heels of two other documentaries about the land reform process and the effect it has had on peoples’ lives: *Mugabe and the White African* and *House of Justice*. *Mugabe* focuses on the SADC Tribunal case of Mike Campbell and Others versus the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) and what Campbell and his son-in-law, Ben Freeth, endured in taking the case to the Tribunal. *House* looks at continued abuses in the rural countryside after the SADC Tribunal’s rulings against the GoZ, which ordered the government to protect the rights of the white farmers and allow them to continue to occupy their land. These documentaries cover the three main groups at the centre of the land reform process: the white farmers, the farm workers and the resettled farmers. Taken together, these documentaries reveal not only the vast differences in experience in Zimbabwe’s countryside, but also how polarised interpretations and representations of the FTLRP are.

### *Overview of the documentaries*

The *Voices From the Field* series focuses on seven newly resettled farmers operating in various parts of Masvingo Province. These farmers are involved in a number of activities ranging from

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<sup>1</sup> Scoones *et al*, *Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Myths and Realities* (Oxford, James Currey, 2010).

those concerning farming (cotton, sugarcane, horticulture, maize and cattle) to other services such as welding, beer sales and general dealerships. The documentaries set out to counter several prevailing ‘myths’ about the FTLRP and show that there have been abundant successes in the resettlement areas. As well as a general introduction and overview, the series interviews a range of land beneficiaries, both A1 and A2, all of whom claim to be benefitting as a direct result of the FTLRP. Having given a snapshot of these people’s lives on their new land, the series concludes:

*Voices ...* have clearly shown that land reform was not a total failure. Beneficiaries were not just political cronies. There has been considerable investment in the resettlement. The rural economy has not collapsed. Problems and difficulties remain but the future looks bright.

Directed by Lucy Bailey and Andrew Thompson, *Mugabe and the White African* has won a host of international awards, including an Oscar nomination. The documentary follows the tribulations Mike Campbell and Ben Freeth underwent to bring their landmark case against Robert Mugabe and the GoZ to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal. In November 2008 the Tribunal ordered the GoZ to protect the rights of Mike Campbell and 74 other applicant farmers to occupy and utilise their farms. The GoZ failed to comply with this ruling and was twice held in contempt of the Tribunal.<sup>2</sup> Disregard for the Tribunal is evident throughout *Mugabe*, right up to the successful ruling for Freeth and Co in 2009. Freeth stressed the importance of the precedent set, and the documentary concludes that this was the first time an “African citizen has had their rights upheld through an International Court”.

The title for *House* was taken from a SADC Tribunal judge’s quote about ‘building a house of justice in the region’, and is a direct appeal to the leaders of SADC to uphold the judgements of the Tribunal and protect farmers and farm workers from continuing violence. The documentary focuses on three farms in Chegutu that came under assault after Tribunal ruling in November 2008: Stockdale farm, Usasa Seedlings farm and Mt Carmel farm. It vividly illustrates the nature and level of violence wrought upon the farm owners, and crucially, the farm workers too. To enforce the fact that the documentary’s central focus is the plight of farm workers, Gertrude Hambira - the then General Secretary of the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) - narrates the film. A number of senior farm workers from Mt Carmel are interviewed, all with their identities hidden for fear of reprisals. One foreman, after being assaulted because he was assumed to be an opposition supporter, encapsulated the despondency of the farm workers interviewed: ‘with what has happened at Mt Carmel, the future is bleak’.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Matyszak, *The Dissolution of the SADC Tribunal* (Harare, Research and Advocacy Unit, 2011), p. 2.

### *Against the Grain*

Together these documentaries offer the viewer an excellent opportunity to understand the immediacy of land reform issues for those who have suffered and benefited. However, there is an obvious conflict between the three documentaries, with *House* and *Mugabe* on one side, both illustrating the abuses of power by ZANU-PF and the suffering of farmers and farm workers, and *Voices* on the other, depicting the successes of land beneficiaries. Trying to reconcile the images of success and joy in *Voices* with the violence and disregard for law and order in the other two is a difficult exercise. The dichotomy between the two, ‘the future is bright’ vs. ‘the future is bleak’, inevitably invites questions of the validity of each.

*House* and *Mugabe* both peddle a very well versed story, accompanied by the requisite images of state involvement, intimidation and violence. Indeed, for *Mugabe* this was obviously a deliberate ploy that attempted to tie into the international sympathy for the plight of white farmers in Zimbabwe, most present in Britain and the USA. Bailey and Thompson have stated:

We felt that the white farmers’ story was one that was repeatedly overlooked, but really needed telling. The film serves as a window into what is happening in Africa right now. The SADC court case represents a watershed moment in Southern Africa, where Africa really has an opportunity to stand up and be counted. At its core it is a story of good versus evil, of justice, bravery and faith - things all of us can relate to and question from anywhere in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This justification points to a number of shortcomings. Firstly, ‘the white farmers’ story’ is one that has received a phenomenal amount of sympathetic coverage in the West. To claim otherwise is a blatant misrepresentation of the coverage Zimbabwe has received over the last decade. Secondly, the film is framed as an ‘African’ issue, with the SADC Tribunal offering ‘African’ solutions to ‘African’ problems. In addition, Bailey has claimed that the film ‘resonates internationally because it is about big issues of human rights. It is about humanity and you do not have to understand Africa to get it’.<sup>4</sup> This uncomplicated use of ‘Africa’ is hugely problematic, and by approaching ‘Africa’ in this way, the film ties into a range of stereotypical representations of an apparently homogeneous ‘Africa’ and its problems that severely limits the film’s potential. Thirdly, *Mugabe* fails to confront the historical significance of the land issue in Zimbabwe. Campbell states he ‘moved’ to his farm in 1974, but there is no discussion of or comment on the colonial legacies of land ownership. Nor are the early years of majority rule discussed, years which were remarkable for the reconciliation offered to white farmers by Mugabe. The CFU and the ZANU government had a close working

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<sup>3</sup> ‘How Mugabe and the White African was Made’, available at <http://www.mugabeandthewhiteafrican.com/images/general/how-mugabe-and-the-white-african-was-made.pdf>, retrieved on 8 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

relationship for much of the 1980s and 1990s, yet this is totally absent from the film. Covering some of this historical context need not have diminished the revelations of the SADC Tribunal case, and would protected the film from accusations of misrepresentation and lack of contextualisation.

Scoones, on his personal blog, offered a scathing review of *Mugabe*:

It is an extraordinary and at times shocking account. But it is also very ill-informed, on multiple accounts ... the absence of history and any reflection on the inequities in land and wealth created by colonialism is striking ... But it is the perceptions that come over again and again that are most extraordinary, and in some ways give a clear but disturbing insight into some of the extreme, delusional positions taken by some members of the white farming community.<sup>5</sup>

These ‘delusional positions’ are not expanded upon, and, while this may be valid criticism of *Mugabe*, it is rather bold coming from Scoones, considering the scope of his own documentary series. *Voices* contains even less historical background than *Mugabe* and no commentary on the political context of the FTLRP. There is no mention of the violence surrounding the land allocations, of the processes of political patronage in land allocations or, most problematically for Scoones *et al*, the displacement of earlier land beneficiaries for new groups deemed more worthy. By criticising *Mugabe* for its lack of context, Scoones not only highlights the inadequacies of his own production, but lays *Voices* open to other avenues of critique.

*Voices* claims to complement the larger research project of Scoones *et al*. It is worth looking a bit closer at the land beneficiaries focused on in *Voices*. Four of the seven filmed are A2 farmers, and only three are A1. According to Scoones *et al*, by 2008 there were over 33,000 A1 households in Masvingo and only 1,351 A2 households (ratio of approximately 25:1). Nationally, there were 145,000 A1 households and 16,000 A2 (ration of 9:1). Why then are the majority (almost 60%) of the beneficiaries in *Voices* A2? Furthermore, all of the A2 farmers in *Voices* were previously employed or had other sources of income before getting land. Mr Rwafa used to be a shoe cobbler and already owned a house in Zishavane; Mrs Mazando was previously employed, owned cattle and started a general dealership before she received land; Mr Nago owned a general store and mill; and Mrs Dauramazi was still a teacher (married to a retired member of the army). All these people had alternative access to income and were not the ‘asset and income poor people’ who have ‘accumulated from below’ as the book and documentaries claim. Furthermore, other research has shown that the allocation of land to A2 farmers in other areas of the country has been fraught with

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<sup>5</sup> I. Scoones, ‘A White Farmer, Robert Mugabe and Some Archbishops’, personal blog (16 September 2011), available at <http://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/2011/09/16/a-white-farmer-robert-mugabe-and-some-archbishops/>, retrieved on 8 February 2012.

complications and most beneficiaries were from the governing or local elite.<sup>6</sup> It would be remarkable if there were not similar processes in Masvingo, yet *Voices* makes absolutely no reference to this.

With regards to the A1 farmers in *Voices*, there are further issues. It seems clear from the documentary that Mr Kondongwe (Sanangwe A1 villagised settlement) makes much more of a living from his welding and repair work than he does from growing maize. It is also apparent that Mr Chidhangure in Uswaushava does not earn enough money from his cotton to support the family. Indeed, it is his wife, who runs a roadside beer sales business, who supports the family. As she commented in the documentary, 'we decide what to eat and we buy our food using the money we make from beer sales'. It is only Mrs Mussiwa, of whom we are given no background information, who seems to be making a go of farming a market garden. Of the seven individuals looked at in *Voices*, it is only she who could be labelled as 'accumulating from below' because of her activities on the land.

By the end of *Voices* the viewer is left wondering why these seven were chosen for the documentary as they do very little to support the claims and statements of the book and larger research project. Success is the only focus of Scoones *et al*, at the cost of any other contextualisation and interpretation. Ultimately, Scoones *et al* are as guilty as Bailey and Thompson (and to an extent Freeth) in refusing to acknowledge the tortured processes of land transfer in Zimbabwe, past and present.

The violence that has been a constant presence in Zimbabwe since 2000 is the most notable absence in *Voices*. After watching *Mugabe* and *House*, this becomes even more apparent. *House* very clearly depicts Mugabe and ZANU-PF's total disregard for domestic and regional law by their refusal to acknowledge the rights of white farmers and commercial farm workers. *House* is essentially an advocacy film targeted at SADC leaders, and as such is focused solely on the violations of the SADC Tribunal ruling committed by the state in 2009. The testimony of a range of farm workers sets the film apart from *Mugabe* and adds another very important voice to discussions on the process of the FTLRP and its impact. What is most troubling about *House* is that Hambira, due to fears over her safety, has been forced into exile for her part in the film. Hambira attended a meeting at Police Headquarters in Harare in February 2010, just after the film's release, and was told the

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<sup>6</sup> Marongwe N., 'Who was Allocated Fast Track Land, and What did They do With it? Selection of A2 Farmers in Goromonzi District, Zimbabwe and its Impacts on Agricultural Production', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38, 5 (2011), p. 1069.

documentary ‘contained very serious allegations for which Ms Hambira should be “behind bars”’.<sup>7</sup> Hambira was released from that meeting but shortly afterwards went into hiding and exile.

This raises serious questions about who has the opportunity to say what about whom in Zimbabwe. *House* and *Mugabe*, both critical of the FTLRP and its processes, were careful to protect the identity of a number of people whose testimonies they included. In addition the process of filming itself was very difficult, with much of it having to be done covertly. The environment in which to produce a film critical of the events in the countryside was oppressive and limiting. Regardless of whether the threat was imagined or not, the producers of these documentaries, and those involved, felt insecure enough to undertake measures to protect themselves and those around them.

It is clear that *Voices* had not such restrictions. Scoones *et al*'s entire research project was supported by Agritex (Department of Agriculture, Technical and Extension Services within the Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanization and Irrigation for Development), who are thanked for their support in the film credits. This collusion with the state is never discussed by Scoones *et al*, nor are the possible complications arising from this partnership. The film and a condensed pamphlet version of the book have been distributed across Masvingo. Their level of access and freedom of movement have not been available to the producers of *Mugabe* and *House*; the very idea of them distributing copies across the country is unthinkable. *Voices* carries a message that is palatable to the ruling elite, and thus enjoys a status and freedom denied to a range of other actors in Zimbabwe. The compromises entailed include a blinkered focus on beneficiaries, ignoring the reform process and its associated violence.

### *Conclusion*

While these documentaries give us insights into the distinct but overlapping voices involved in the processes and outcomes of the FTLRP, differences in assessment and representation mean that they can hardly be compared. Considering the polarized nature of debate over land in Zimbabwe, the representations put forward are artefacts of the standpoint adopted. *House* and *Mugabe*, focusing on violence and misrule, cannot acknowledge the successes of beneficiaries. Similarly, *Voices* cannot discuss the economic, politician and human cost of land redistribution carried out under the FTLRP.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Zimbabwean Union Leader in Hiding After Police Raid', Amnesty International, 24 February 2010, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/zimbabwean-union-leader-hiding-after-police-raid-2010-02-24>, retrieved 14 February 2012.

All the documentaries examined here have an accompanying literature that is equally divided and falls into similar categorisations. As Cliffe *et al* have illustrated, the polarised nature of the debate has meant that there have been remarkably few successful attempts to imagine and discuss alternative outcomes and processes:

Those who condemned the illegality and brutality of the operations were prone to see them as ... ill-advised economically with disastrous effects predicted for agriculture and ... the overall macro-economy. Equally predictably, defenders of radical redistribution and the justice of widely spreading rights to land as 'progressive' ... tended to expect a long-term expansion of land-based livelihoods and more intensive land use ... Other logically possible combinations of views on process and outcomes – for instance, that however repressive the means, increased food security and a wider spread of livelihoods might result, or alternatively, that however justified the ending of a racial basis for land rights might be, it would not deliver at the level of production – hardly seem to figure in debates.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of simple answers and the range of experiences, outcomes and processes make the land question a hugely complicated entity to study. More needs to be done to access the nuances and overlaps, rather than the dramatic and the separate. In part this entails conversations between white farmers, farm workers and beneficiaries. However, the land issue is not a story that can be reduced to the three categories represented here. The failure to take into account the experiences of one or other groups is problematic enough, but the failure to situate land reform in the much wider political struggles of this period, and the history that informs them, is much more of a concern, both for the documentaries above and so much of the current literature on land in Zimbabwe.

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<sup>8</sup> L. Cliff, J. Alexander, B. Cousins and R. Gaidzanwa, 'An Overview of Fast Track Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Editorial Introduction', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38, 5 (2011), p. 908.