

Reflections on Displacement in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Displacements of various kinds, overlaying one another across time and space, litter Zimbabwe's histories and geographies, while adding new layers to ongoing relationships with neighbouring countries. Physical, social and symbolic landscapes are all powerfully imprinted with the racialised colonial past of violent land disposessions on a massive scale,¹ and with the routinised practices of state evictions and both politically motivated and 'development induced' dislocations in post-independence Zimbabwe.² The normalisation of such practices as an ordinary dimension of statecraft reveals an intimate and sustained relationship between displacement, assertions of sovereignty, and processes of state making.³ This relationship has become further complicated in recent times by the increasingly direct links between party-political affiliation, notions of belonging (to the party, to the nation), and forms of violent displacement and exclusion.

Both threats and actual practices of party-state generated displacement have become a common feature of post-2000 Zimbabwe. Since early 2000, following the constitutional referendum that delivered the first political loss to the ruling Zanu (PF) since independence, there have been several different but related waves of *targeted mass displacement* of Zimbabwean citizens by the state or its various agents and allies (but not forgetting individual targeting of opposition figures). On unprecedented scales, people have been forcibly and often brutally removed from farms, rural

homesteads, informal urban housing, 'illegal' enterprises, factories, local council offices, schools and churches, while selected others have replaced them for longer or shorter periods. In addition, there has been widespread *indirect displacement* resulting from the ever-deepening economic meltdown that has accompanied the political crisis. The combined figures for internal displacements and cross-border 'refugee' movements generated through the different forms of political violence, physical dislocations and destitution — while still difficult to quantify accurately — are estimated to be in their millions but such figures are difficult to substantiate. This brief article provides an overview of some of the dimensions and consequences of both the most overt and less obvious forms of displacement during this period. It concludes by flagging a few amongst the many displacement-related challenges that a new government will have to address, whenever it comes into being.

Dimensions of Targeted Displacement in Post-2000 Zimbabwe

Three major waves of targeted displacement have occurred in Zimbabwe since 2000. While discrete 'operations' in themselves, they are all inter-related in both their political underpinnings and broader political, economic, social and cultural effects.⁴

Farm invasions and evictions, 2000 onwards

The land invasions that began soon after the defeat of Zanu (PF) in the constitutional referendum in February 2000, and the radical Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) that followed, displaced hundreds of thousands of farm workers and thousands of commercial farmers and their

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1. See for example, Alexander et al, 2000; Moyana, 1984; Palmer, 1977; Ranger, 1999.

2. See for example Hammar, 2001; Moore, 2005; Alexander, 2006.

3. See Hammar, 2008.

4. These state-driven mass displacements are often given specific names, such as Operation 'Get Up and Leave' (farm evictions), 'Clean up the Filth' (urban evictions), 'Who did you Vote For' (post-election retribution). I would argue that there is a qualitative distinction between populations forced to flee their homes or countries due to generalized violence and insecurity associated with war, for example, and those deliberately displaced by their own state and its agents or allies.

respective families.⁵ The timing and form of these actions both after the referendum and a closely contested parliamentary election in June 2000, support the argument that they were intended, at least in part, as retaliatory punishment for actual or assumed support for the opposition in the referendum, and as a deterrent against such support in future elections. Yet clearly there was an unresolved struggle for land which was central to the pre-independence liberation war, and which two decades of postcolonial rule had failed to address meaningfully.

Building on sporadic, low-key, spontaneous occupations in the previous decade, the invasions rapidly became widespread and violent towards both farmers and farm workers. Initially appearing to be led and sustained by war veterans of the liberation struggle, those engaged in the early invasions (and reasons for the invasions) were in fact quite varied (Marongwe 2003), but were eventually largely party-state sponsored. This did not diminish the genuinely felt need for land by a cross-section of Zimbabweans (Matondi 2008). The overall project was legitimised politically in terms of Zanu (PF)'s proclaimed radical land revolution and its promised redistribution of mainly white-owned commercial farmland to historically dispossessed black Zimbabweans. A revived nationalism, alongside a strident anti-imperialism — the latter being amongst Mugabe's most frequent and favoured discursive strategies — convinced much of the leadership of the region and continent, as well as some scholars and independent commentators, of the authenticity of Mugabe's radical if flawed claims.⁶

5. On farm worker displacement, see for example Sachikonye, 2003, Magaramombe 2007, and ZCDT 2008. On the displacement of white commercial farmers/farming, see Selby 2006, and reports by farmers' associations such as JAG 2008, as well as various farmers' memoirs such as Buckle 2002.

6. Moyo and Yeros 2005, were among those scholars who celebrated the invasions. Critical to some degree of what they defined as the state's co-optation of an otherwise genuine land occupation movement, they nonetheless represent the post-2000 land invasions (and to a lesser

Notwithstanding the moral-political and economic need for effective land redistribution in Zimbabwe, partisan politics ensured that this was by no means a universally inclusive or even-handed project. Of those ordinary citizens allocated land under the FTLR, actual or perceived opposition supporters were largely excluded from receiving smallholder (A1) plots (ZCDT 2003), including the majority of farm workers, a high proportion being of Malawian or Mozambican descent. Not only were they generically accused of supporting white farmers and the opposition, but in addition a xenophobic discourse of denigrating unwanted 'foreigners' came into play in the violence and evictions meted out. Of the estimated 130 000 or so that gained access to A1 plots, few received the needed support from the state (itself financially depleted) in the way of capital or equipment to support successful farming, nor was there any guaranteed security of tenure (Matondi 2008). At the same time, a limited yet significant proportion of the land redistributed under the small-scale commercial farming (A2) scheme, especially in the best farming areas, was either allocated to or grabbed by ruling party-affiliated political, military, intelligence and business élites with varied capacities, available resources or commitment to farm productively. In some cases, this involved evicting war veterans and others who had actively participated in the land invasions.⁷ Paradoxically, in other cases new owners without the resources to farm leased the land out to former white farmers (Matondi 2008).

The overall effect of the invasions, evictions and resettlement — exacerbated by several droughts during the post-2000 period, and the ever-deepening economic crisis more generally — was a dramatic decline in the agricultural sector, with an estimated 50-70% drop in production of the major crops and

extent the Fast Track Land Reform Programme) as part of a 'national democratic revolution'.

7. See for example 'Meant to strengthen, land grab weakened Zimbabwe's Mugabe', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 2008 2008 (<http://www.zwnews.com> accessed 17 May 2008).

only 40% of land being utilised.⁸ Commercial milk production, for example, dropped from 245 million litres in 1999 to 97 millions litres in 2005.⁹ At the same time, both subsistence and surplus production in the communal lands and former resettlement areas declined. The extensive loss of production and livelihoods in all these sectors profoundly undermined food security and deepened poverty and vulnerability in both rural and urban areas, which continue to be closely linked in economic, social and cultural terms.

However, even if the overall picture of decline is undeniable and substantial support is needed to reverse these trends, as Scoones (2008) rightly notes, this is not the only story of the post-2000 land reforms. *Replacement* is the other side of displacement, and in Zimbabwe's case is unlikely to be reversed. This will present any new government with complex challenges. In the meantime, Scoones underscores a much more diverse set of altered dynamics and effects in the agrarian landscape than generally assumed. Drawing on examples from the southwest province of Masvingo, he points out several promising trends including: some private investment and successes in both A1 smallholder and A2 commercial production, but also a blurring of the two types of plots in contrast to the former strictly dualistic agriculture of pre-2000; although political patronage in land allocation has occurred, the majority (up to 60%) are considered 'ordinary' Zimbabweans, yet at the same time the mix of new farmers (including civil servants, teachers, security service personnel and business people) has introduced valuable new networks and innovations into the sector; the rural economy has altered radically with a range of new players entering into both production and supply chains. Elsewhere, in Mashonaland West, Zawe (2006) uncovers the complex and unexpected dynamics of cooperation

on two irrigation schemes between new settlers, ex-farm workers and former white commercial farmers in jointly trying (and to a significant extent succeeding) to sustain and increase production.

Urban removals under Operation Murambatsvina 2005-6

Operation Murambatsvina, which began in late May 2005 but continued well into 2006 and beyond,¹⁰ was a highly militarised nationwide exercise of mass displacement affecting all urban areas. During the operation, close to three quarters of a million people were estimated to have lost homes and/or livelihoods directly — often being forced to destroy their own properties by hand — with an estimated 2.4 million people affected in total.¹¹ Officially it was presented as a campaign to 'drive out the filth' in the urban sector. Street vendors, tuck-shop owners and small-business operators, including many with licenses, were accused variously of operating illegally, stealing foreign currency from the state, creating health hazards, or generating crime and violence. Similarly, people's self-built homes in high-density townships, some of which had been occupied for decades, were suddenly de-legalised in a reversal of the *de facto* acceptance of such structures by the state since independence, and more so since structural adjustment in 1990. Yet much as with the farm invasions, despite official discourse, in practice Murambatsvina involved a more complex and politically partisan agenda. Critics viewed the campaign as combining political retribution against opposition supporters in the cities — which were the hub of key opposition constituencies — with 'a pre-emptive strike' against growing urban discontent in a time of extreme economic hardship for which many blamed the government (Sachikonye 2006).

8. See Busani Bafana, 'Zimbabwean agriculture on its knees', *New Agriculturist*, May 2008 (<http://www.new-ag.info/08/03/develop/dev1.php> accessed 7 September 2008)

9. 'Problems in dairy farming cause 60,4% downturn in milk output', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 21 April 2006.

10. See Tichaona Sibanda, 'New Murambatsvina wave hits Kwekwe', *SW Radio*, 18 Oct 2007.

11. See for example Tibaijuka 2005; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2005; Sachikonye, 2006. For a fictional representation, see Tagwira, 2007.

Either way, the operation induced unprecedented scales of poverty, homelessness and vulnerability with both immediate and long-term effects. In the short term, many were forcibly removed to either distant rural areas with which they had few if any connections, or were relocated to peri-urban holding or resettlement camps with barely any shelter or access to food, clean water, sanitation, or the means of earning a living. Others saw crossing the border, especially to South Africa, as their only option for survival, and numbers (measured mostly in terms of deportations) certainly spiked around this time. In Zimbabwe itself, the camps, which were still in place over a year later, were guarded by security 'authorities' loyal to the ruling party which controlled, and reportedly abused, the little humanitarian assistance allowed in. Six months after the evictions began, with conditions worsening for hundreds of thousands, the Mugabe government consistently rejected international offers of humanitarian assistance, denying there was any humanitarian crisis to address.¹² In fact the President claimed that the entire clean-up operation had been well designed and was linked to a "vast reconstruction programme [of] properly planned accommodation, factory shells and vending stalls".¹³ Evidence on the ground strongly refuted such claims (Solidarity Peace Trust 2005).

Involving still further losses of businesses, jobs and informal livelihoods, and spinning the economy into further turmoil, was the introduction of draconian price controls in July 2007. Yet as Bratton and Masunungure (2005) note, despite the constant physical and economic knocks and ongoing threats, much as Scoones (2008) observes in the agrarian sector, the urban informal sector (now incorporating most Zimbabweans in one way or another) has demonstrated great 'adaptability and resilience'. What this has meant more generally is a radical

reshaping of what constitutes 'the urban' in Zimbabwe. Not only have physical spaces been altered through destruction and dislocation, but also through new forms of economic, political and social entrepreneurship. In this context, the value and exchange of cash, things, bodies, and status is being redefined in both positive and negative ways, altering gender and generational relations in particular, but also shifting relationships to the state (Jones 2008, Musoni 2008).

Electoral 'cleansing' and punishment in 2008

The period following the combined presidential, parliamentary, senatorial and local council elections of 29 March 2008 and leading up to and after the widely disputed presidential re-run on 27 June 2008, provides a grizzly and magnified picture of the kinds of politically driven violence and displacement that has underpinned life for large numbers of Zimbabweans for much of the past decade. Ruling party militias, overtly led and/or assisted by senior army officers and key Zanu (PF) political figures, initiated an intense 'war' in both the countryside and in urban areas against those accused of 'voting incorrectly' in March. (As reported by one contributor in the last ACAS bulletin on Zimbabwe in June 2008, a senior government official responsible for safeguarding the public health and well-being of Zimbabwe's children, reportedly told a crowd: "There is no place in this district where MDC supporters will be safe".) That this new campaign was conducted with undisguised impunity created a sense of invincibility amongst those committing atrocities, and in itself added to the effectiveness of the persecutions and their terror effects since there was no meaningful recourse to the law or state protection by those being targeted.

Some commentators termed this a campaign of 'electoral cleansing'.¹⁴ Houses were burned down, close to two hundred people were murdered and

12. See 'In Zimbabwe, homeless belie leader's claim', *New York Times*, 13 November 2005; 'Zimbabwe rejects UN assistance to provide shelter to victims', *People's Daily (China)*, 3 November 2005.

13. See 'Mugabe defends urban demolitions', *BBC News (online)*, 18 September 2005.

14. See 'Electoral cleansing in Zimbabwe', *BBC News*, 6 May 2008 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7386316.stm> accessed 18 May 2008).

scores of others abducted without trace, thousands were brutalised through beatings, rape or torture, and scores if not hundreds of thousands were forced to flee their homes.¹⁵ Attacks on commercial farmers and farm workers — including assaults, evictions, thefts, and mass psychological torture — escalated significantly, and an estimated 40 000 farm workers alone were reportedly displaced.¹⁶ Individual opposition officials and activists, and their families, were directly targeted, as were thousands of ordinary citizens including those who participated in the official monitoring of the March elections, many of them rural teachers.¹⁷ An increasing number were forced to go into hiding or crossed the borders, fearing for their lives. Civic organisations that offered support and sanctuary to the injured and fearful, including religious institutions, themselves came under attack.¹⁸

Illegal arrests and imprisonment of the opposition, common since 2000, increased in frequency, in themselves constituting double-sided acts of

displacement. Masked as 'legal' forms of removal, they were aimed at physically and symbolically displacing the leadership of the official opposition as well as union leaders, civic activists, journalists and others, and at broadly decimating opposition support in ways reminiscent of the ethno-politicide in Matabeleland and Midlands in the 1980s.¹⁹ In addition, such practices constituted part of a more extensive project of trying to reshape the political, legal and electoral terrain in Zimbabwe in ways that would explicitly favour the ruling party.²⁰ This was timed to forestall any possible (repeat) victory for the MDC's presidential candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai, in an internationally discredited second-round presidential vote at the end of June 2008. In the end, Tsvangirai pulled out of the race due to the levels of violence against his supporters, and Mugabe's 'win', for the first time, received little legitimacy in the region or continent. This would help precipitate more intensive support for South African-brokered negotiations between the ruling party and opposition, culminating in the signing of a 'deal' on 15 September 2008 for a transitional government, albeit one whose future still remained in the balance weeks after the signing.

In the meantime, the flows of legal and illegal migrants crossing over all regional borders during this period, but especially into South Africa, intensified dramatically.²¹ This would contribute to, but by no means be the only cause of, the outbreak of unprecedented levels of xenophobic violence that swept through South Africa in mid- to late May

15. For a comprehensive overview see Solidarity Peace Trust 2008a. For selected media reports, see for example 'Political killings and abductions of MDC activists escalate', *SW Radio Africa*, 15 May 2008 (<http://www.swradioafrica.com/news/150508/killings150508/htm> accessed 19 May 2008); '40 000 displaced in Zimbabwe', *AFP*, 8 May 2008 (<http://www.zwnews.com/print.cfm?ArticleID=18737> accessed 9 May 2008); 'Farm-workers flee Zimbabwe homes', *BBC News*, 8 May 2008 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/africa/7390799>, accessed 8 May 2008); '20 farms seized in Mash West', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 9 May 2008 (<http://www.zwnews.com/print.cfm?ArticleID=187378> accessed 9 May 2008); '8 more MDC supporters murdered', *Zim Online*, 14 May 2008 (<http://www.zwnews.com/issuefull.cfm?ArticleID=187776> accessed 16 May 2008).

16. See JAG, 2008.

17. See 'Zimbabwe teachers face punishment', *BBC News*, 22 May 2008 (Accessed via: <http://www.zwnews.com/print.cfm?ArticleID=18823> 23 May 2008)

18. See Celia W. Dugger, 'Zimbabwe's Rulers Unleash Police on Anglicans', *The New York Times*, 16 May 2008; 'Church turns to UN over Zimbabwe', *BBC News*, 30 May 2008 (<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/newsbbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/742667> accessed 30 May 2008)

19. See 'Another trade unionist arrested in Zimbabwe', *Mail & Guardian (SA)*, 16 May 2008. (<http://www.zwnews.com/issuefull.cfm?ArticleID=1877784> accessed 16 May 2008). In response to the growing political and structural brutalities experienced by those overtly targeted by the party-state, there were an increasing number of violent responses by militant opposition activists. However, this cannot be compared to the scale, nature or intent of ruling party violence against opposition supporters. See Solidarity Peace Trust 2008b.

20. See ICG 2008.

21. See 'Regional Scenario Planning for Potential Outflows from Zimbabwe', Johannesburg 13 June 2008, unpublished report.

2008.²² This led to over 60 deaths, more than 600 injuries, wide-scale looting and destruction of property, and extensive displacement of African migrants living in some of South Africa's most impoverished urban and some rural areas.²³ While affecting a wide range of foreigners, it emphasised the scale and levels of vulnerability of Zimbabweans living in South Africa, and the multiple displacements that they face as the crisis at home continues yet remains officially unrecognised by the South Africa government.

Indirect Modes of Displacement and Exclusion

In addition to the overt displacement of targeted populations, there has been less direct yet widespread displacement resulting from the extreme conditions of Zimbabwe's sustained economic and political crises. Among other things, hyperinflation (officially pegged at over 11 million per cent in September 2008), over 80% unemployment, and shortages of all basics including food, fuel and cash, has led to deepening impoverishment and desperation. Even those in formal employment cannot afford to feed their families, let alone send children to school or pay for the costs of essential medicines. The loss of livelihoods, of homes and social networks, of security, certainty, dignity and belonging, has forced large-scale movement both internally and across borders in search of resources for survival and hope for the future. The media have been full of such stories of cross-border journeys, often taken at great risk and with limited chances of success, yet this does not deter those who are desperate to flee and help their families survive.²⁴

All this has been compounded by the party-state's neglect of the majority of its citizens, including the prioritisation of public spending on state security services and the armed forces rather than on food,

health care, shelter, education or agricultural inputs for the general population. In addition, just prior to elections in June 2008, the party-state officially withheld essential humanitarian aid to large numbers of vulnerable populations, accusing donors and non-governmental organisations of trying to use this to influence the elections in favour of the opposition. (This anti-aid policy has since been reversed.) Yet there is substantial evidence of the overt politicisation of food by the party-state itself since 2000, with the persistent exclusion of opposition supporters deemed 'enemies of the state' (HRW 2003). Such practices, together with an overall decline in food production and economic crisis, have contributed to growing levels of hunger — the estimated figure for those that will need food aid by January 2009 is around 5.5 million²⁵ — and a general exodus of both skilled and unskilled labour to neighbouring countries as both documented and illegal migrants. A recent report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2008) noted that while the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Zimbabweans produced by the campaigns of mass displacement discussed above, are in a particularly desperate situation and in need of substantial humanitarian assistance, "it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between IDPs and the general population in Zimbabwe" in terms of such needs.

Conclusion: Confronting displacement-related challenges in a new era

Following a recent 'consultative tour' of various sectors of the economy, Prime Minister Designate, Morgan Tsvangirai, identified some of the urgent political, economic and humanitarian actions that need to be taken to avert an even worse humanitarian crisis than is already at hand.²⁶ Any transitional or long-term government in Zimbabwe

22. See SAMP 2008 for an overview of xenophobic trends in South Africa in recent years. See also Hammar and Rodgers, 2008.

23. See 'Call for commission of enquiry into xenophobia attacks', *Mail and Guardian*, 17 July 2008.

24. For a relatively recent example see 'Zimbabweans flee with hope and US\$50', *IRIN (UN)*, 20 Feb 2008

25. See 'Tsvangirai on the situation in Zimbabwe', *Politicsweb*, 27 Sept 2008, (http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/sep28_2008.html accessed 29 September 2008)

26. *Ibid.*

will be faced with a host of profound challenges arising from almost a decade of deep political, economic and social crisis. However, a number of particular challenges, and paradoxical opportunities, arise as a consequence of both deliberate as well as indirect displacements on a mass scale. In this regard, millions of people have been affected in a wide range of settings and circumstances by, among other things, physical dislocation and violence, material losses (and gains), psychological and symbolic wounds, institutional change and uncertainty, altered social and cultural dynamics, and the reshaping of both economic and political domains and practices.

Some of the specific yet overlapping dimensions of displacement that will need to be addressed (taking into account their diverse, complex and often paradoxical effects) include the following: ensuring access to land and/or secure livelihoods and shelter, and secure citizenship, for the hundreds of thousands of displaced farm workers; similarly, exploring fair options for thousands of former commercial farmers to access land and/or other livelihoods, including looking into possible roles they may play either collectively or individually in productive partnerships in the agricultural sector; rethinking urban planning and allowing and supporting hundreds of thousands of displaced urban residents to recover and rebuild their homes and retrieve their livelihoods in safety; confronting the material, physical and psychological effects of wide-scale political violence and displacement, including through carefully considered truth and justice processes; facilitating the (voluntary) repatriation and reintegration of displacees/refugees based in neighbouring countries, while simultaneously recognising and building on the positive aspects of the new regional networks and social and economic dynamics that this has produced; related to this, with regard to both the region and the more distant diasporas, developing creative and flexible strategies (including the possibility of accepting dual citizenship) to regenerate key public and business sectors affected by the professional brain drain, and to make

remittances a more integral part of the economic recovery strategy. At the same time, attention needs to be given to productive and sustainable ways of supporting the new settlers, or 'replaces', providing appropriate inputs and incentives, and strengthening relevant marketing, extension, and research and development support for both smallholder and small-scale commercial agriculture.

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