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Zimbabwe: A Country Trapped

Located in South Africa, the country of Zimbabwe is literally trapped. Physically, it does not touch Africa's outer waters; it is bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique. Inside of the country, with a population of almost 13,000,000, men, women and children are confined to African land that is useless to them. Useless only because they are not allowed to use it. When these Zimbabweans are hungry and ill and out of work and missing school, all they've got to feed their families is one meal and dozens of empty supermarkets. Citizens don't hesitate to flee from their deserted country, but many are caught at the borders by determined guardsmen. They are trapped inside, with no food, virtually no freedoms, no support from their government, no help from the outside and no hope.

In 1980, Robert Mugabe won the February elections in Zimbabwe, shortly after the "willing buyer, willing seller" principle was introduced during the three-month long Lancaster House conference held by the British. The conference was held in order to clean up the messy land situation, which began in 1930 when the Land Apportionment Act was constructed. The Land Apportionment Act created a severe racial imbalance over time; one where Caucasian Zimbabweans owned more than 70% of the country's arable land despite only making up 1% of Zimbabwe's population. Instead, the "willing buyer, willing seller" principle was unsuccessful. The government's initial idea to purchase land for redistribution to landless people failed when the costs escalated over their budget.

Twelve years after being elected President, Mugabe passed the Land Acquisition Act and removed the "willing buyer, willing seller" principle with hope to speed up the land reform process. Following the Land Acquisition Act—corruption. As families waited to be resettled, hundreds of abandoned and commandeered farms were instead handed over to cabinet ministers, government officials, wealthy businessmen and colleagues of Mugabe. Thus began the turmoil for the Zimbabwe people. Today, citizens pass by empty supermarkets and are lucky to savor more than one meal a day. Thousands are fleeing across the border to South Africa in order to escape a country of at least 44% suffering malnutrition and starvation.

There was a period of time, before the Land Acquisition Act was introduced, when Zimbabwe was an African "breadbasket". So prosperous, in fact, that it fed many of its neighboring countries. Since then, the country has fallen a long way and its people are in the line of fire. Since 1994, the average life expectancy has fallen from 54 to 37 years for men and from 57 to 34 years for women. Of the 12,700,000 inhabitants in Zimbabwe, at least 5,600,000 are undernourished. A typical family of Zimbabwe, urban or rural, not only has to worry about each family member receiving their on-average one meal per day, but in most cases, also lives with at least one person infected with HIV/AIDS; in most cases, introduced into the family by the husband or male figure. An approximation of 3,500 Zimbabweans die each week from combined effects of malnutrition, AIDS and poverty.

When an average household has at least one person diagnosed with an HIV-related illness, the economic impact on that family is brutal. In most cases, families must give up food in order to pay for the ill person's expenses, such as medical costs, and when death occurs, funeral expenses. A Zimbabwean funeral can cost as much as Z\$4,500, not including the tombstone, which most families cannot afford. With these expenditures, and families missing school or work

in order to take care of a family member infected with AIDS, Zimbabwean families can become impoverished quickly. In 1995, shortly after President Mugabe initiated the Land Acquisition Act, 62% of the country's population existed below the national total consumption poverty line, and 46% existed below the national food poverty line. A large amount of those percentages include households handling expenses for, and sacrificing for family members infected with AIDS.

More than 50% of Zimbabwe's population reside in rural areas and are dependent on commercial farming for their major source of food production and security. Along with the issues brought upon by the Land Acquisition Act, Zimbabwean farm families are also stuck down by the effects of AIDS. In the 1997-1998 season studies reveal a decline in cultivated acreage in direct relation to farmers and/or workers suffering from HIV/AIDS related illnesses. Such elements that relate to loss of money and/or poor crop management include: shortage of labor, lack of essential inputs, frequent funerals for workers and/or farm owners, etc. In that same time period of study, Zimbabwe experienced significant losses in marketed output of more than 50% in maize, cotton and sunflowers. Livestock are also at high risk for neglect because of, again, loss of laborers, loss of herders and frequent funerals. Neglect leads to increased thefts, death among the cattle and exposure to tick born diseases. Zimbabwean farmers and their families receive nothing when their crops go bad or they lose livestock, and those who depend on healthy farming for food receive nothing as well.

When children and adolescents aren't missing school because of illnesses and/or duties at home, they attend either independent or government-run schools, depending on their level of wealth. School is a reasonably good experience for the average Zimbabwean child, who will begin attendance at the age of six and continue with seven years of primary schooling and six years of secondary schooling before possibly applying to universities. In 1980, education was free, but since then, the government has increased costs for schooling in independent and government-run schools, which students mostly of color and from families with lower incomes attend. Zimbabwe once had a 90% adult literacy rate, one of the highest in Africa, which reflected positively of its schooling, but since 1995, that rate has steadily decreased.

Living in Zimbabwe, no matter at what location, is like walking on glass. As mentioned before, thousands flee every day to South Africa, with hope for security—for their bodies and their minds. Why would you choose to live in a country listed as the 90th poorest country out of 94 countries in the world, with an unemployment rating over 80%? Meanwhile, as the former well-structured economy has plummeted, the black market thrives. Illegal, the black market feeds off of trading in scarce commodities, foreign currency and hyperinflation. Ironically, the government uses the black market's successes and twists them into an "achievement" for the country whenever any fingers are pointed at them.

It actually may not seem so ironic that Zimbabwe's government would turn its back to the illegal black market when their policies and plans of action are closely analyzed. The people of Zimbabwe have lived well over two decades under Mugabe's regime. This means hostility and control. Mugabe's government is seen as autocratic and repressive by many of its critics and has no problem suppressing its people from what we would think are basic rights. Zimbabweans have been denied the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly. Just recently, Mugabe set upon almost impossible screenings for any aid organization that wishes to enter the country. If the organization doesn't fit Mugabe's unreasonable requirements, it is not allowed within the borders. With the recent elections, the government has also restricted access to food in certain areas that are known as areas of "opposition"—places where its inhabitants are voting for Morgan Tsvangirai, Mugabe's opponent.

Still, President Mugabe's violence and need for control are not what hurt his people the most. Mugabe sunk his teeth into the people of Zimbabwe and left the most venomous bite in 1992, when he passed the Land Acquisition Act. Slowly, over time, we have seen the side effects: discrimination, poverty, increased costs, severe malnutrition, death, etc. The Land Acquisition Act was put into effect to speed up the land reform process. The Act gave the government the power to purchase any land for redistribution to farm families and fair compensation would eventually be paid for the newly acquired land.

Instead, Mugabe chose to redistribute the abandoned farms to his colleagues, cabinet ministers, wealthy businessmen and certain government officials. The Act was seen in a new light: revenge. In the past, Caucasian farmers had made up more than 70% of Zimbabwe's workable land because of the Land Apportionment Act, but now, experienced white Zimbabwean farmers were denied land and even harassed by the government. At this point, American and British officials, who were involved in the Land Acquisition Act in the beginning, cut their expenses, claiming nothing but widespread corruption.

Robert Mugabe, age 84, has been dictating Zimbabwe since the country's year of independence in 1980, and still stands strong, though there is controversy surrounding the recent elections to whether or not he will actually remain President. In 28 years, Mugabe has managed to waste Zimbabwe's rich agricultural land and sufficient mineral resources and turned his country into a land of famine. Ironically, the Mugabe government has never ignored the land reform issues, in fact, in most years land reform has been the government's top priority. Why, then, are there such immutable consequences? The policies and legal barriers pertaining to land reform and distribution contribute greatly to the consequences and removing these impediments would be the first obvious step in healing Zimbabwe.

How can Zimbabwe return to the African "breadbasket" they once were, not long ago? In actuality, the country can never go back, but it can start over and hope to build a better government, policies and plans of action that are successful and equal opportunities for all Zimbabweans. These three factors are characteristics of a country *without* skyrocketing unemployment rates, unbelievable inflation percentages, decreasing adult literacy rates and frighteningly high death percentages of those suffering from poverty, AIDS and malnutrition. What Zimbabwe needs is change.

Allowing aid organizations entry into Zimbabwe to help those in hospitals and in other situations would have an enormous impact on those suffering. The World Bank is one such organization that, if allowed, would positively impact Zimbabwe and set a plan of action to clean up such situations as AIDS, conflict, corruption, development, employment, education and debt relief. In 2007, The World Bank approved a new policy for an effective and rapid response to emergencies and crisis in fragile states and partners with complementary organizations, including the United Nations. Later in that same year, the new policy was put into affect by granting \$180 million to help fund emergency rehabilitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo's urban and social infrastructure, an area of severe conflict. Aid of this sort could be granted to Zimbabwe; especially for the issue of AIDS. The Multi-Country HIV/AIDS Program (MAP) for Africa—related to the World Bank—has committed approximately \$1.5 billion to 33 countries in five years and could include Zimbabwe, if allowed.

Fortunately, solutions have already begun to take place. International donors related to the World Food Programme have plans to distribute \$80 million over the next five years to boost agricultural production in ten African countries, including Zimbabwe. This will improve food

security in Zimbabwe and other African countries, but only if other factors, such as government cooperation and acceptance remain in harmony with the overall plan of action. “Food security is an issue here in the region,” Vice Chairman of Association for Strengthening Agriculture Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) Ephraim Mukisira told a young African journalist in a September 2008 article. “We want technologies that can tap into our resources including the arid and semi-arid areas.”

Most importantly, introducing new land reform programs and policies to replace the dysfunctional Land Acquisition Act would be the biggest step toward change in Zimbabwe. Allowing for fair distribution of land, especially to knowledgeable farmers—disregarding race—would allow the rich, arable land to be worked and result in a surplus of successes in acreage and crops and healthy livestock. Also, introducing yield-improvement strategies and education to less-experienced farmers would allow for more abandoned farms to be inhabited once again. Those who know little about farming, agriculture and/or livestock, such as wealthy businessmen and government officials, for example, should not waste such rich land. The country would have to become a union of cooperation and understanding. Under a new form of government, with new regulations and acceptance of outside help, say, Morgan Tsvangirai’s democracy, Zimbabwe could work together to raise their country out of the dust.

Zimbabwe’s major issues, including AIDS, government corruption, poverty and malnutrition do not have to be permanent issues. Though there is no such thing as a perfect world, there is such thing as progress. With time, unity and positive changes, Zimbabwe can transform into a prosperous country; with basic freedoms, support from their government, help from outside organizations when needed, food in the fields, food on the table, food in the grocery stores and hope for the future. When you live in a country surrounded by neighbors, with successes and a thriving agriculture, you are not trapped, you are at home.

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