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Hope for Zimbabwe

Introduction:

Once nicknamed the “breadbasket” of Africa, Zimbabwe boasts fertile soil and typically excellent climate. Despite lowlands on the southeast side and mountains on the east, it is mostly located on a plateau, covering an area of 151,000 square miles. Unfortunately, due to droughts and farm seizures at the hands of President Robert Mugabe’s government, Zimbabwe can no longer feed its citizens and many find themselves living in poverty. In order to improve the conditions in Zimbabwe, it will be necessary to allow property rights to general citizens, allow access to financial resources, and see improvement in the farm marketing and trade policies.

While the economy is based on agriculture, with most of the population in that field, mining and manufacturing also support the country, as well as a small amount of tourism. Family members not working directly with agriculture are able to make enough money to live a minimal lifestyle. Current times show Zimbabwe in an economic meltdown with the highest inflation in the world; more than 10,000 percent. The agricultural structure of Zimbabwe must be revisited for success.

Through contributing to the making of bio-fuels, Zimbabwe will hopefully work its way out of poverty and become yet again the breadbasket it once was. Giving grants to need farmers would be a necessary step in being able to produce food in the quantities needed and once produced. Once more food is produced and their country folk are cared for, there ideally would be surplus to contribute to biofuels, resulting in stabilizing the country.

Understanding History:

Zimbabwe, a former British colony known as Rhodesia from 1896-1980, was founded on April 18, 1980. Ethnically, the population is divided among African, European, Asian and mixed-race lines, with the greatest numbers being African. There are at least ten different ethnic groups in the African population. Early on, white colonists were given the prime farm land to grow the staple crops of corn, cotton, tobacco, wheat, coffee, sugar cane, and peanuts. The blacks, meanwhile, were given poor, overcrowded land to farm. A small country in Southeastern Africa, its labor force is divided among in industry at ten percent, service industry at twenty-four percent and agriculture at sixty-six percent. Unemployment has been estimated at approximately fifty percent.

Zimbabwe experienced a drought in the early 1990’s. All areas had an extreme low amount of rainfall, and lacked rain even more in the important months of the year for crops, such as October and November. Due to the entire economy depending on the agriculture, the Zimbabweans were very susceptible to the damage of droughts. A drought was experienced again in the mid-nineties, but only affected the eastern parts of the country.

Because of the lowered crop yields, the entire country suffered. As a result of the drought there was lowered domestic food production and lowered incomes all throughout the country. The poverty and unemployment rates rose. Urban businesses were hurt because of the decreased amount of money that farmers were spending, resulting in a decreased economy. Zimbabwe, as a result, slid further and further into poverty, which has made growth seem impossible.

Family Life and Social Classes:

A typical family in Zimbabwe consists of two or more children and a husband and wife. The husband is normally the leader of the family. The wives are expected to serve their husband and bear children. Some men have more than one wife; even up to ten wives. Wives are often seen as free labor for the farms. Many have extended families including grandparents and children of other relatives. Children are expected to look after their parents when they are old.

Under some circumstances, entire families have been hired to work for commercial farmers. Many children work in coffee and tea estates and attend “earn and learn” schools. Zimbabwe has an education program and most people have attended at least three years of school.

The rural black population is the least well-off socially and economically. The urban black educators and business owners are better-off than the rural blacks, but the European and Asian classes are at the top. In the city women are the worst off and are treated unfairly in employment opportunities. Rural white farmers are experiencing terror tactics to remove them from family farms for distribution to rural blacks.

An average family needs Zim \$28 million (U.S. \$282) per month to supply its minimum needs. However, the commercial farms only pay about Zim \$600,000 (\$6) per month. This is enough to buy a bar of soap and cooking oil. Therefore, when the family is faced with these financial issues, the result is the entire family being forced to work and provide income.

The Government:

President Robert Mugabe has been in power since the country achieved independence from Great Britain. Problems exist in transportation, health care, standards of living and discrimination, as well as the practices of Mugabe’s government. In 1991, the government implemented an Economic and Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), which included a reduction in the budget in public enterprise, price decontrol and deregulation of foreign trade. It also passed the Land Acquisition Amendment Act that allowed the government to seize farms owned by white farmers. This was supposed to redress the balance of ownership of farms in Zimbabwe.

“Those of white extraction who happen to be in the country and are farming are welcome to do so, but they must do so on the basis of equality,” said President Robert Mugabe. About 3,900 of the 4,500 white farmers’ land has been taken. The reason Mugabe claims to do this is to balance the amount of land everyone owns in attempt to make everything equal. He also wants to correct the injustices of the British rule by giving the blacks “their” land back. However, the program has been accused of disrupting the country’s food supply and leading to the emigration of former farm owners to other countries such as Australia. “War veterans” are allowed to terrorize white landowners with no consequences.

By 1999, sixty percent of the population lived below the poverty level. Also in 1999, the parliamentary democratic government proposed a referendum to compulsorily seize farms, evict farmers from their land, and place it under the government control. Even though the people, ninety-eight percent of whom were black, voted “no,” Mugabe moved forward with his plan to take control of the farms, even if it required violence to do so. These farm seizures started in the year 2000, and these properties have been given to people favorable to Mugabe. His actions have led to six million of the eleven million people living without enough food.

An example of these seizures is the Selous farm. The Selous farm used to be one of the largest farms in Zimbabwe. It was a 1,500 hectare (approximately 3,600 acres) tobacco farm, but now it is being

farmed by 150 black families. Along with all the land they have also taken the farmer's tractors, fuel, fertilizer, and home. About 100 of the black families that have gained the land are former war veterans. This is just one of the many examples of what is being taken from these families; their land, their homes, their freedom and rights. The overall problem includes the significant inability these new farmers have in knowing how to farm the land properly. Again, the long-time owners not only have lost their land, but the land itself is resulting in lower yields, thereby not improving domestic economy. Logically, any goal should be one that works toward the benefit and increased production and economy in Zimbabwe.

Food Shortages:

With the current food shortages, people have resorted to butchering and eating their pets. Others have surrendered their pets to local vets because they cannot afford to feed them any longer. The vets have run out of food to feed the animals of which they now have possession. They have resorted to ethically and morally killing the animals and destroying the remains. However, the large numbers of animals have caused them to run out of the drugs used to morally kill the animals. They have come to rely on donations from South Africa, the neighboring country to the south.

There have also been food riots in some cities. Maize meal is supposed to be sold at controlled prices so all can afford it. Some millers are trying to avoid the price controls. There are rumors that have accused grain board officials of selling maize to dishonest millers who then charged too high of prices to the consumer. Other rumors report millers only selling maize to government party membership card holders. It is then no wonder why some feel Mugabe is using food to control people and stay in power. As long as he is able to control the insufficient amount of product with an inflated cost, the economy will stay suffering.

With the current economic situation, rural families are sending members off the farm and into the city for work. This often leaves women to work the family farm. In the past, the clearing of the land for tilling was taken care of by the men, with the food production being accomplished by the women. Rural, female-headed households make up thirty-one percent of rural families. They do not have access to farm technology, nor is it not tailored to their needs. Irrigation would allow them better yields, but is too expensive for most of these women farmers. They lack storage facilities for their crops, so they usually must sell immediately after they harvest, which typically brings them lower gain. They also may be forced to buy food at high prices when they have low supplies right before harvest seasons. They have little extra income for this, causing families to suffer from seasonal hunger and food deprivation. One organization, Oxfam America, has been working to distribute seed packs to help these women. However, if the overall structure were improved, other components of the economy would be able to balance themselves out. Timely income and fair sales would increase the capability to produce quality crops at the most economical cost, thereby reaping the most gains and causing greater household stability.

Marketing:

Marketing of farm products in Zimbabwe is under a system that began when it was a British colony and is not favorable to smaller farmers. One need is for training on the marketing system for small farmers in the areas of marketing strategies and pricing. The Grain Marketing Board was to expand the depot network (locations for grain sales) so that every farmer was within 45 kilometers of a marketing outlet. Even with the marketing boards being closer by, smaller farmers still experience problems marketing their surplus crops. They do not understand the grading system of the marketing boards, and use private traders who don't pay much for the commodities. Many do not grow the minimum quantity requirements and cannot trade on the board. They also feel the grading system is unfair and that they are cheated on the weights. If the bag of maize is less than the eighty-nine to ninety-three kilogram range, they are penalized; if the bag is heavier, the farmer is not paid for the extra weight.

The GMB has a central check processing system in which a check must mature for two weeks in a bank before the money is available and many smaller farmers do not have bank accounts, nor could they easily wait two weeks for payment if they did have an account. Farmers end up exchanging the checks at local stores who then ask them to buy items for up to twenty-five percent of the value of the check. They then have even less money to spend on their farming costs.

Some other problems include a low amount of storage. The prices of the crops are often very low during the harvest season. This results in farmers trying to store much of their crops until higher prices arrive, but many of the small farmers have no decent type of storage. This forces them to sell during the lower times of the market.

Another significant hurdle is that road infrastructure is horrible. Most roads in rural areas are in horrible conditions. They often consist of poorly paved roads, and typically no modern style of transportation. These problems worsen during the rainy seasons. The infrastructure problems often force farmers to sell their products to a private buyer for a very low price. Not only are the roads insufficient, but the transport facilities are very poor too. There are very few transporters to move the products of the farmers. These things all create problems for farmers wishing to sell their crops in higher markets.

Solution Through Biofuels:

Biofuels are renewable resources produced in different ways; commonly we'd think of ethanol being created by using the industrial processing of agricultural or food products. It can be blended with petroleum fuel to create a biodegradable, non-toxic source for transportation. While there are other kinds of biofuels, predominately the use of surplus crops will be the most beneficial in helping domestic economies. By at least partially substituting biofuels, developing or slipping societies, such as Zimbabwe, can invest their capital in their own farms and industries rather than exporting it. Contributing to economic stability and self-reliance, not only do biofuels promote a healthier atmosphere, but in Zimbabwe's case, could serve to revive the country to its once-blossoming state.

Interestingly enough, while the topic of biofuels seems overwhelming to implement in Zimbabwe and other disparaging parts of Africa, just this year marked the first annual Biofuels Conference in South Africa. The final weekend of September 2007, senior experts from the global biofuels industry convened in Durban, South Africa. Panel discussions included biodiesel, ethanol and biomass production, developments in the transportation industry, and cutting-edge technologies in second generation biofuels.

South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki desires to develop the local biofuels industry, and is taking steps to begin the discussion. Other African countries look to Brazil's progress in this industry. Ideally, a biofuel industry would create new jobs. In Brazil, for instance, the biodiesel program created more than a quarter of a million jobs. This especially applies to new and continued generated income for smaller farms in poorer areas of the country. Biofuels will aid in population control, which goes hand in hand with poverty. When hunger is reduced, disease is reduced, which also results in fewer wars and less social unrest. And, on top of that, there is surplus and gain among the citizens.

Biofuels are still new. Research is still being done. Programs are still being implemented. However, great strides are being made in the area of biofuels and technology, and progress can directly affect the state of Zimbabwe and other countries struggling. South Africa, a neighboring and sometimes sustaining force for Zimbabwe, has participated in the discussion of biofuels. It may seem overwhelming to begin rebuilding in Zimbabwe, but steps are necessary to replace current policies and procedures and make small changes towards rebuilding the economy and infrastructure back to where it was and beyond.

Conclusion:

Zimbabwe was forced to discontinue its ethanol production due to the drought situation in 1992. This has led to a gasoline shortage and a look towards reestablishing ethanol production. If the Zimbabwean government could give the farmers grants to do the following Zimbabwe could be much more successful. Giving money to farmers to install minor irrigation systems to avoid the economy being crushed from another drought is one place to start. The government should quit allowing the taking of land from the people who know how to farm it, and allow them to run the farms again, or at least fully and properly train others under their charge. This would result in much higher yields overall, as well as more educated farmers in the society.

If they could balance the gender-oriented markets, the hard working women would get more profit, leading them to be more able to live a decent lifestyle. If the government could repair and develop better roads or infrastructure, then small farmers could access higher priced markets much more easily. Also, if the Zimbabwean government could develop more biofuel plants around the country, they would give small farmers an increased chance to make more money, leading to food security and less dependence on gasoline.

Suggestions on ways to achieve these changes were made by an independent study looking at the problems in Zimbabwe. The government costs include those necessary to smooth resettlement and the return of agricultural improvement. This includes grants of \$100 to each family during the first year for expenses such as: farm inputs, living costs, etc. Infrastructure improvement costs would include building schools, farm road construction, building clinics, water, sanitation, electricity, and animal health facilities. This will cost \$350 in the first year, \$200 the second year, and \$100 in the third year. The government will also need to give a \$600 dollar loan the second year for animals, and a \$300 dollar loan the third. Half of the loan would be expected to be paid back with 10% interest and a two year grace period.

If the government can decide to set aside and give appropriate money to needy farmers, have the land returned to the farmers who are knowledgeable, and take all steps necessary to increase the economy and its revolving pattern, Zimbabwe could again become a productive country. Biofuels could be a strong component in the path to getting Zimbabwe back on its feet. Through working together and finding solutions that benefit the country as a whole, change is inevitable and hopeful.

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