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Zimbabwe, Factor 3

Zimbabwe a Country in Turmoil

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 husbands and bear children. Some men have up to ten wives. Wives are often seen as laborers for the farms. Most families in Zimbabwe are extended and include grandparents and children of other relatives. Children in these families are expected to look after their parents when they are old.

In 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 where most people attend at least three years of school. The rural black population is the least well-off socially and economically. Like in many African countries, the majority of Zimbabweans depend on a few staple foods. These include meat, beef, and to a lesser extent chicken, which is especially popular, though consumption has declined under the Mugabe regime due to falling incomes.

An average family needs \$282 per month to supply its minimum needs. However, the commercial farms only pay about \$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 that the entire family is forced to work and provide income.

With the current economic situation, rural families are sending members off the farm to the city for work. This often leaves women to work the family farm. In the past, the clearing of the tilling was taken care of by the men, with the food production being accomplished by the women. Women-controlled households make up thirty-one percent of rural families. They do not have access to technology, nor is it tailored to their needs. Irrigation would allow them better yields, but is expensive for most of these women farmers. They lack storage facilities for their crops, so they 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. Because of the low income this causes many families to suffer from seasonal hunger and food deprivation. However, if the overall structure were improved, other components of the economy would be able to balance these sparse times out. Timely income and fair sales would increase the capability to produce quality crops, thereby reaping the most gains and causing greater household stability.

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. The Grain Marketing Board was created to expand the locations for grain sales so that every farmer was within 45 kilometers of a marketing outlet.

Even with the marketing boards being closer, smaller farmer’s 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. The grading system is unfair and people 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.

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 is available. 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.

Zimbabwe has a high level of undernourishment; 39 percent of the population is undernourished. The number of undernourished people has increased from the 4.5 million to 4.9 million in the last 10 years. Food supply has improved but not enough during the 90's. Agriculture is the mainstay of the Zimbabwean economy, contributing on average about 19% of GDP. About 80% of the country's agricultural production is rain fed; the remaining 20% is under irrigation. The agricultural sector is a source of food security; it provides livelihoods for 70% of the population in the rural areas and employment to about 25% of the labor force in the wage economy.

Achieving food security has been identified as one of the priority national target areas in the Zimbabwe Agricultural Policy Framework for the period 1995–2020. Traditionally, Zimbabwe has been food secure at a national level. Food insecurity was only a household level concern among the poor or those without enough land to farm. However, food shortages at both national and household level have increased over the last five years and the country has had to rely on food aid and commercial grain imports to meet its requirements.

Although the droughts have played a big role in this problem, the general reduction in the economy, the slow pace at which newly resettled farmers have been able to produce and the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic have also been significant contributory factors.

By at least partially substituting biofuels, developing 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.

South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki desires to develop the local biofuels industry, and is taking steps to begin the discussion. Many 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 income for smaller farms in poorer areas of the country. When hunger is reduced, disease is reduced, which also results in fewer wars and less social unrest.

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.

Zimbabwe could be much more successful if they would give the money to farmers to install minor irrigation systems; preventing the economy from being crushed by 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.

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.

Although producing biofuels is one of the many ways to help Zimbabwe's food and economic crisis there are many other strategies and ways to help. Reversing natural resource degradation and adaptation of farming to water scarcity and climate change are other measures that could increase productivity and decrease hunger. Zimbabwe still has many other problems such as securing property rights and access to credit; improving farm marketing infrastructure and institutions; and addressing problems created by globalization and trade policies for subsistence family farmers or urban poor. Starting anywhere is at least somewhere to help raise this country from turmoil.

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