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The Foundation is There: Good Governance in Zimbabwe

Subsistence is defined as the action or fact of maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimum level. Subsequently, subsistence farming is farming that provides for the basic needs of the farmer without surpluses for marketing – a livelihood where families are deprived of all luxury. In Zimbabwe, however, subsistence farming is normal. The urban population is 38.6 percent of the total population and the rate of urbanization is three percent. Most of the Zimbabwe’s population consists of subsistence farmers. Typical subsistence farm families in Zimbabwe farm just enough crops for their family to eat, and no more. Six people – a husband, wife, and children – support themselves with small-scale homestead farming on only a few acres of land, making barely enough to eat. For supplemental income, subsistence families “use practically any available material to make crafts to be sold to tourists” (Coleman). It is even harder for women to make a living – women do not typically inherit land, and therefore have no way to sustain themselves and their families. All families survive mainly on a diet of maize, which is used to make mealie meal. Mealie meal is then used to make a porridge called sadza, the staple food of these families. They also supplement their diet with crops such as sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and pumpkins. Most subsistence families also keep chickens, cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, used for eggs, milk, and meat. Since there is no refrigeration in the villages, milk and other dairy products are eaten as soon as collected.

Most subsistence farm families are able to read and write, though. In an E-mail describing Zimbabwean literacy, Relly Coleman remarks, “Zimbabwe has a very high literacy rate...might even be the highest in Africa, possibly one of the highest in 3rd world countries...Certainly I would expect everyone under the age of 40-50 to be literate” (Coleman). Although most Zimbabweans can read and write English, the schools they attend do not have desks, pencils, or books. ““One child has to finish his work, and then he lends his pen to another child,”” a deputy headmaster explains in a New York Times article detailing the setbacks of the Mugabe reign (Kristof).

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights states, “There is no single and exhaustive definition of ‘good governance,’” (“Good Governance and Human Rights”). However, the office does acknowledge that good governance must portray key attributes. Good governance must have transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, and responsiveness to the needs of the people. The people need to know what the government is doing. The government has an obligation to do the best they can for their people and be held to a standard. The people need to be able to participate in making the decisions of the government. Lastly, the government needs to know and be willing to address the needs of their country effectively.

The government can help these subsistence farmers. “The world produces enough food to feed everyone... The principal problem is that many people in the world do not have sufficient land to grow, or income to purchase, enough food” (“2013 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics”). Or, if they have land and income, they do not have a way to care for their families if they fall ill. Although ninety percent of the Zimbabwean population is literate, no one in rural villages has health care, a way to get to a clinic or hospital, or a way to pay the clinic for their treatment. A story about a twenty-nine year old, seven months pregnant woman with malaria, who walked more than four miles to the nearest clinic that refused to give her life-saving antimalarial medicine because she could not pay the \$2 fee, is common in these rural villages. Moreover, the clinics themselves are in no position to heal patients. They are “desperately short of bandages, antibiotics, and beds...to survive, [the clinics] impose fees for seeing

patients, for family planning, for safe childbirth — and the upshot is that impoverished villagers die because they can't pay” (Kristof).

Zimbabwe is known for its agriculture, and “despite the growth in industrialisation, land, and specifically agriculture, continues to be the mainstay of the economy” (Mushunje). Tobacco is its main export product, and most farmers still support themselves by growing tobacco to sell and maize to eat. “The whole economy depends on a stable agrarian growth” (Mushunje). However, if these farmers cannot produce enough food, there will not be stable agrarian growth. The economy will collapse. And these farmers cannot produce enough. They have the land, but they do not have tools to grow crops and they do not have access to a market to sell their meager harvest of crops in. Good governance has the potential to change this situation.

Communication is the first step in ensuring food security in Zimbabwe. The people need to know what the government is doing – most importantly, what the government is doing to help them. Rural subsistence farm families have no cars or motorcycles. They do not have televisions or radios and rarely have bicycles. They have no way of knowing news. If the government is beginning a project that will help subsistence farmers – giving them the tools they need to use all their land effectively, for example – subsistence farmers will not know this. The only solution to this problem is for the government to send representatives into these rural areas to tell the people what is going on.

Responsibility comes next in the list of key attributes of good governance. The government has an obligation to do the best they can for their people: namely, help rural subsistence farmers use their land efficiently. They can fulfill that obligation by setting and meeting standards. This goes along with the third key attribute in good governance: accountability, or the government's being held to a standard to provide for their people. Right now, there is a standard: the requirements of the United Nations' The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration outlines the freedoms and rights of all people, regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status, sex, nationality, or any other status a person possesses. However, most subsistence farmers in Zimbabwe do not hold these rights. Roads are impassible, health care is virtually nonexistent in rural areas, schools are being shut down because the teachers have migrated out of the country, and, most importantly, agriculture is declining. Standards need to be met. The foundation, the standards, is there; now the government just needs to meet that standard. They need to develop reasonable goals to fulfill their obligation to their people. Of course, the Zimbabwean government, like all governments, wants to improve its economy, agriculture, and exports. But they do not have a specific plan to go about improving their economy, agriculture, or exports. The Zimbabwean Ministry of Lands and Rural Resettlement website only says:

The Zimbabwean Agrarian Reform involves restructuring of access to land, and an overall transformation of the existing farming system, institutions and structures. It includes access to markets, credit, training and access to social, developmental and economic amenities. It seeks to enhance agricultural productivity, leading to industrial and economic empowerment and macro economic growth in the long term (“Land Reform Programme”).

How is the government going to transform the existing farm system? How are they going to give rural subsistence farm families access to market, credit, and social, developmental, and economic amenities? How are they going to enhance agricultural productivity? By giving subsistence farm families a chance to participate in government decisions and projects that will affect them.

Participation is the fourth key attribute in good governance. As evidenced by the 2013 election, where “because of the high turnout election officials said people who were still waiting in queues to vote by 19:00 would have until midnight to cast their ballot,” Zimbabweans have some say in their government. However, Article 21 of the United Nations' The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “(1)

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.” (“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights”). The Zimbabwean voters, whose votes can determine who will be president and who will improve good governance in Zimbabwe, complained that they could not find their name on the voting roll. Registered voters taken off the electoral roll violates this article. Participation in government is imperative. When citizens, who know what they need to make secure lives, are allowed to have a say in their government, the country prospers.

The last key attribute in good governance is responsiveness to the needs of the people. The Zimbabwean government, to truly be a good government, needs to not only be responsive, but be responsive swiftly and effectively. There is a basic solution to this problem: knowing the assets of the country and doing something to advance these assets. The undoubtedly biggest asset to Zimbabwe is its agriculture. Zimbabwe’s economy and government do not fare well. Zimbabwe has the 175th freest economy “in the 2013 Index [of Economic Freedom]...Zimbabwe is ranked last out of 46 countries in the Sub-Saharan African region and is the second-least free country ranked in the 2013 Index” (“Zimbabwe”). Seventy-two percent of Zimbabwe’s population is at the national poverty line (“Zimbabwe”). “National infrastructure has deteriorated” (“Rural poverty in Zimbabwe”). In 2009, the Zimbabwean dollar experienced so much hyperinflation that it was worthless and replaced by a combination of the American dollar, South African rand, and Botswana pula. The Statesman’s Yearbook 2013 elaborates:

Since Robert Mugabe came to power in 1980 the economy has collapsed with the country experiencing sustained periods of roaring inflation and heavy unemployment. Shortages of food and other necessities culminated in the authorities making an international appeal for food in July 2001. In Feb. 2000 the country ran out of gasoline because it could not pay the import bills...Political uncertainty remains a major impediment to growth (Turner 1513).

Agriculture, on the other hand, has the potential to thrive. In the 2000 Fast-Track Land Redistribution Programme, 245,000 black farmers replaced only 6,000 white farmers on 45 percent of Zimbabwe’s land. Now more people have more land. This not only gives more rural farmers a chance to make a livelihood, but it also reduces the amount of neglected land. Now the farmers just need to be efficient.

When the government gave land to rural farmers in the 2000 land redistribution program, they did not anticipate the problems it would create for the “lucky” recipients. They were responsive to a need of the people, but they were not responsive effectively. Although they now have more land from which to make a living, the resettled farmers have to deal with “limited farm management skills and experience, poor access to markets and extension advice,” (Mushunje) and social assimilation. The non-resettled farmers contend with the same obstacles, as well as less land to make a livelihood. The population is growing too fast for the agricultural output – the population growth rate is 4.38 percent but the agricultural growth is only 1.5 percent per year.

Agricultural output, though, can be improved. The biggest problems Zimbabwean subsistence farmers are facing are water scarcity, lack of access to markets, and lack of efficiency on their farms. “About 80% of the rural population” lives in water-deficient areas of Zimbabwe “where rainfall is erratic and unreliable” (Mushunje). There is a direct relationship with rainfall in Zimbabwe’s farming areas and agricultural output. When there is no rain, the people starve. The World Food Programme reports “Zimbabwe’s total cereal production for the 2011-2012 production season is one third lower than the previous year. The reduced cereal production was mainly due to a reduction in...the late starts of rains in most areas [and] prolonged dry spells especially in the southern half of the country” (“Overview”). The government cannot change rainfall in Zimbabwe. But water scarcity should not affect good governance, either. Instead, good governance can change the way people deal with rainfall. The World Food Programme reports that “poor access to seeds and fertilizer” and “poor agricultural practices” (“Overview”) damaged agricultural output,

as well. Simply put, the rural subsistence families in Zimbabwe do not have access to or knowledge of efficient way to farm and harvest their crops – and when they do, they have nowhere to sell.

The Zimbabwean government, practicing good governance, is not only able to help with this, but they also have a responsibility to help. They can make farms more efficient by continuing projects started by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). According to Abbysinnia Mushunje in a PhD thesis on farm efficiency and land reform in Zimbabwe, “An efficient farm is a farm using less resources than other farms to generate a given output” (Mushunje). Organizations such as the United Nations’ World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), are helping subsistence farmers use fewer resources to generate greater output.

Implemented in 2011, the World Food Programme is just giving food rations to “food-insecure people across Zimbabwe” in the hope that the rations will “promote food access and consumption among vulnerable households” (“WFP Activities”). Certainly, the government can give out food to food-insecure subsistence families. However, that would bankrupt the economy and do nothing to help subsistence families support themselves long-term.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations is taking assistance a step further. In 2011, the Netherlands contracted 1,959 farmers to grow bananas, sugar beans, sorghum, cowpeas, and groundnuts, with the expectation that these farmers would pay their donors back. They also conducted a training program training “a total of 29 extension officers on land use and management, agronomic practices, post-production, farming-as-a-business, post-harvest crop management, marketing of crops,” and more (“Enhancing the livelihoods of emerging rural farmers in Zimbabwe”). Now these 1,959 farmers have a market to sell their crops in and they know how to maximize their output. The Zimbabwean government, meeting a standard set by FAO, can continue to help these subsistence farmers. They can work with the Netherlands to make sure these farmers always have access to these markets. Additionally, the government can send some of these farmers out to teach more subsistence families how to access the Netherlands’ markets.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development is making assistance even more sustainable and effective. IFAD already funds the Smallholder Agriculture Support Project, which is implemented by Africare. This project teaches subsistence farmers in water-scarce areas “conservation farming technologies that will restore degraded soils and conserve water” (“From relief to recovery: conservation farming in Zimbabwe”). Farmers dig ditches in the soil to catch and hold rainwater from the rainy season. They then plant their crops in furrows dug above the ditches, so that there will be “minimal soil disturbance” (“From relief to recovery: conservation farming in Zimbabwe”) and the crops will not drown in the excess water from the rainy season. Then they will use “crop residue” (“From relief to recovery: conservation farming in Zimbabwe”) for mulch, further enhancing the tired soil.

This is a small project, but could easily be turned into a large one with good governance. The Zimbabwean government can again send a few farmers with soil conservation training into rural villages to teach other subsistence farmers how to use their rain effectually. The new recipients of the training can in turn move to other villages close by and teach more farmers. In this way, in a “domino effect,” subsistence farmers in Zimbabwe can learn to work with and possibly overcome the biggest obstacle to successful farming by subsistence farmers in rural Zimbabwe: water scarcity.

Other individual countries in the world can help, too. They can work with WFP, FAO, IFAD, other organizations, and the Zimbabwean government to make more markets available and accessible to rural farmers. They can send teams into water-scarce areas of Zimbabwe to teach rural farmers how to use their water and land efficiently to maximize crop production. The rural farmers can then in turn teach others.

Ultimately, though, the Zimbabwean government must practice good governance in order to make these programs work. Responsiveness to the needs of the people is the most important factor for good governance to effectively reduce poverty and food insecurity in Zimbabwe. The government needs to know what is essential for their people to survive and quickly provide it – for example, access to foreign markets and effective farming tools and irrigation systems. Moreover, if they are not responsive, they need to be held accountable. And the Zimbabwean government can be held accountable – by the United Nations and by the rest of the world. Economic sanctions and withdrawal of foreign aid can be imposed, and NGOs such as FAO or IFAD can step in and implement their projects instead to reduce the effect of the lack of foreign aid on subsistence farmers. This way, the Zimbabwean government can be held accountable for their actions without the punishment having an effect on subsistence farmers.

Good governance is key to improving food security in Zimbabwe. When the people know what the government is doing, they can use that knowledge to help the government act in the people's best interests. When the government has an obligation to the people and standards to meet, and the people know that, conditions can improve. When the people not only know the responsibility and standards but also are able to do something if the government does not fulfill its promises, the situation – food insecurity – can be resolved even faster. Lastly, when the government replies to the people's needs effectively and swiftly, radical change can be made. By continuing the progress of the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Zimbabwean government will meet all the key attributes of good governance and begin to make progress in eradication of food insecurity in Zimbabwe.

In the past, governance has been harmful, intentionally and unintentionally. Despite obstacles, the 245,000 rural families who benefited from the fast-track land redistribution program are using their land wisely and producing more. However, the rest of the rural families that make up Zimbabwe's population of 13,182,908 – typical subsistence families – still go without. But with good governance in Zimbabwe, with transparency, with responsibility, with accountability, with participation, with responsiveness, and with communication, subsistence families do not need to go without. Now, with a new presidential term starting, there is the potential for governance to improve the conditions of subsistence families in Zimbabwe.

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