

Economic Transitions and Land Reform: Comparative Case Study in Zimbabwe and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the post-colonial economic development and land reform policies in Zimbabwe and South Africa, two countries with similar histories of colonial oppression, economic inequality, and land distribution inequity. Using a comparative case study approach analyzing historical evidence, existing literature, and modern economic data, the paper draws conclusions upon the diverging economic transitions each country adopted: Zimbabwe's initial socialist transition and eventual capitalism shift is contrasted with South Africa's sole acceptance of capitalism. Despite the differing pathways, both countries face economic crises and land inequality post transitions that still perpetuate poverty upon the marginalized, indigenous communities. The paper explores the difficulty in reversing colonial legacies by governments of developing countries, which often face economic restraints, social class conflicts, international criticism, and a combination of internal and external political opposition. It further examines the intellectual and material value of land, emphasizing its importance in recognizing indigeneity and fostering senses of belonging. Lastly, the paper investigates how the structural integration of capitalism in the agriculture industry entrenches land disparity while supporting the elite white minority. By highlighting the growing inequality decades of economic restructuring, the study contributes to the understanding of potential pitfalls to capitalistic economic development and land reform policies in African nations, providing lessons for further legislatures aimed at economic growth and land redistribution in regions surrounding Zimbabwe and South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In 1776, the global economic landscape would be revolutionized by Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith. The first "foundational study in economics" was created in "*An inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*", becoming the first piece of literature to formulate a "comprehensive study of political economics" (Heilbroner). Smith's ideas of division of labour and invisible hand would be sculpted into the modern economic system of capitalism. Yet, while capitalism created prosperity for some countries, it crippled the economies of others. Global north countries experienced prosperous growth at the expense of the global south. Zimbabwe and South Africa are such examples, undergoing economic transitions post-colonialism toward capitalism. This paper examines the trajectories of both

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countries' post-independence economic restructuring, paying special attention to the importance of land reforms in addressing the unequal distribution of land and the intellectual value of land to indigenous communities. The paper argues that while Zimbabwe initially began with a socialist transition, both Zimbabwe and South Africa ended with a capitalistic system because of internal conflicts and the structural importance of capitalism, a system that perpetuates economic crises which outlast independence. Such comparative study may help narrow the causes of economic instability by identifying shared patterns and systemic problems.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a historical comparative case study to examine the economic transitions in Zimbabwe and South Africa, with an emphasis on land reforms in shaping policies. The comparative design was chosen due to the two countries' similarities in the history of colonialism, unequal land distributions, and post-independence economic restructuring while following different political ideologies. The different economic approaches despite the shared environment provides an opportunity to study how similar structural challenges produce divergent resolutions and concurrent implications today.

While quantitative data is utilized in comparing economic outcomes, the study heavily adopts a qualitative framework in its analysis focused on social, intellectual, and economic impacts. The comparison focuses on four dimensions: historical environment post-colonialism, the value of land beyond its material scope, the political philosophy and its resulting economic policies, and the modern implications. Specifically, the second dimension recognizes the importance of land as an intellectual asset. Land possesses cultural values tied to belonging and indigeneity. Such dimensions allow for patterns to emerge from the similar historical contexts while highlighting how each countries' unique circumstances shaped their distinct development and the lived experience of their ethnic communities.

Sources for this paper were identified primarily through Google Scholar using engine search terms like "land reform Zimbabwe", "economic transitions South Africa", and "intellectual value of land Africa". The primary focus was peer-reviewed research papers and journal articles to compile the historical, modern, and economic analysis, but was supplemented by government archives, international organization data, and other news/think-tank articles to provide the most recent statistics and modern background information. Sources were selected based on contextual application to Zimbabwe and South Africa's post-colonial land reform history, credibility of institution and author, and relevance to argumentation.

The historical and argumentative analysis were cited by five peer-reviewed academic research articles (Karodia et al.; Koot et al.; Moore; Mudaeu et al.; Weiner). The remaining sources are either general-audience or recent reference sources, such as encyclopedia articles (Britannica), government and international organization records (U.S. Department of State, South African Department of Justice, FAO, International Monetary Fund), think-tank articles (Chatham House, Brookings, Global Living Wage

Coalition), a working research paper (Korstanje), news agency (Zimbabwe Independent, Deutsche Welle), and a statistical database (Statista, The Heritage Foundation). Such articles were primarily used as a supplement by providing current economic data and modern context/background information in the status quo current peer-reviewed literature has not covered.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on secondary sources like research papers, government publications, and reports from international organizations. Arguments are entirely concluded based upon existing scholarships rather than primary documents. Second, the comparison is extended to only two countries, Zimbabwe and South Africa. While the paper can serve as a lens to guide the study of other post-colonial African nations, with similar patterns emerging, it should not be interpreted as a complete representation. Lastly, the paper primarily focuses on agricultural land reform, discussing mining industries only in the context of international aid and economic production. Examining rare earth mineral governance would provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the implications of the post-colonial economic restructuring.

Zimbabwe: Economic crisis and internal conflicts

In 1980, after years of a grueling guerilla warfare campaign, Zimbabwe won independence (Ray). Most nations recognized Zimbabwe's independence, ending almost a century of colonization from Britain (US DOS). These events marked a shift in Zimbabwe's history from a colony of an imperial power to a developing country. Yet, the country's economic struggle would continue. President Mugabe was tasked with developing an economy that would survive independent of British support, relying on Zimbabwe's agricultural industry. Despite Mugabe and Zanu-PF's bold efforts, Zimbabwe's economy remained in drastic decline due to government policies and internal conflicts.

Government policies that allowed for unchecked bourgeoisie spending and a high export-to-debt ratio led to a decline in Zimbabwe's economy. The bourgeoisie were able to buy cheap luxury imports while paying in foreign currencies, meaning wealth left the country while the domestic economy received little stimulation. As a result, the government was unable to pay off its debt, despite paying the U.S. \$910 million more in "debt servicing than it received in new loans"; Zimbabwe's debt overall still increased from 4.54 billion to 4.72 billion between 1993 and 1998 (Moore 915). A high export-debt ratio means a country spends a majority of its export revenue on debt, leaving it unable to invest in domestic industries and address socioeconomic crises.

Consequently, Zimbabwe was unable to address the internal conflicts that exacerbated its economic decline. The most prevalent example is the War Veterans Association's (WVA) march to the capital. "In September 1997, the WVA marched to the presidential house—meeting no resistance from the Presidential Guard—demanding a meeting with Robert Mugabe alone" (Moore 915). The WVA demanded "Z\$50,000 as a sum of money, and a tax free monthly pension of Z\$5,000 for their 50,000 members, guarantees of land resettlement, with 20% for veterans." Mugabe was forced to accept — he had no power, perfectly illustrated by how easily WVA members were able to march in and demand a meeting. However, because of its existing debt burden, the government was unable to finance the WVA's

demands, and instead implemented a 5% surtax on the rest of the country. While the surtax paid off the veterans' demand, it placed further financial pressure on an already struggling population. Combined with the government's high debt and lack of liquidity, the Zimbabwean dollar faced its worst devaluation in history, and food subsidies dropped, continuing to drive a famine persisting since independence.

Zimbabwe's economic issues continued to inhibit the government's ability to address social and political unrest. For example, demonstrations such as the ZCTU general strike against the WVA demands were able to remove the WVA's demand for levies (Z\$50,000 payment to veterans). However, the strikes were unable to remove the pensions of Z\$5,000 for 50,000 members (Moore 915). The most infamous impact of the demonstrations was the death of Zimbabwean citizens in the chaos that followed orders to use domestic soldiers to put down the strike — marking the first death of a citizen at the hands of the army. In an attempt to distract from growing public resentment, Zimbabwe entered the Congo War; the result was predictable — further economic damage. The government falsely reported the war's spending, resulting in IMF funds being cancelled as well as British aid (Moore 15), worsening the existing economic catastrophe. Lastly, a combination of an upcoming election and the ruling party's (Zanu-PF) loss of popularity threw the country into violence: farms were burned during election campaigns, and many people — from commercial farmers and workers to political opposition leaders at the NCA and trade unions — were killed, theorized as a result of being seen as a threat to the ruling party's power (Moore 915).

In response to this growing crisis, a transition was needed to transform the economy. Zimbabwe's economy was on the brink of total collapse 10 years after independence, from wealth leaving the country through bourgeoisie spending, an inability to pay debt, and the WVA's costly demands. To address these issues, the Zimbabwean government went through different phases of economic transition, ranging from a socialist transition to a capitalist economic structure. Ironically, many of these issues remain today, raising questions about the effectiveness of the country's economic restructuring.

SOUTH AFRICA: GOLD AND SILVER

Similar to Zimbabwe, South Africa faced economic crises shortly after independence, which prompted the government to undergo an economic transition. South Africa gained full independence from Britain in 1961, marking a shift similar to Zimbabwe's: from a colony of the British Empire to an independent developing country (African American Registry). On May 31, a government was created with a prime minister, and the first parliamentary election was held on September 15th, establishing a government similar to Britain's despite gaining independence. Similar to Zimbabwe, South Africa was forced to develop a unique economy not reliant on Britain, but rather on its rare material industry. Unlike Zimbabwe and other neighboring African countries, South Africa's post-independence economy was stable for a short period due to the discovery of rare materials. However, South Africa's growing economy soon suffered the same fate as its neighbors, entering an economic crisis due to apartheid's policies.

South Africa's discovery of gold and silver allowed for a stable economy, revolutionizing it by giving the country a stepping stone to the international economy through "extensive investment from foreign capital" (Cobbing and Lowe). Due to gold and silver's high value as luxury items around the world, their discovery allowed industrialized countries to invest in South Africa — beneficial both for South Africa, which became integrated into the global economy, and for the investors who profited from their mine investments. This influx of investment, along with a stable gold and silver industry, allowed a manufacturing base to develop, helping stabilize South Africa's economy and even leading to some of the highest growth rates in the world (Cobbing and Lowe).

However, despite this initial stability, apartheid policies reversed much of the progress made during this period. After racial segregation policies were passed separating whites and non-whites, the resulting international criticism led many countries "to withhold foreign investment and to impose increasingly severe trade sanctions against it" (Cobbing and Lowe), negatively impacting the growth and stability of the gold and silver mining industries. Even after apartheid began to break apart, the damage remained irreversible for some time, as investors "waited to see what happened [next]" (Cobbing and Lowe) amid uncertainty over apartheid's policies and South Africa's international image. It took until 1994, when democratic elections were first held, for investment to return. While a percentage of investment returned, the damage to South Africa's population remained irreversible, leaving the new government to face the challenge of reintegrating the population into the economy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND: NEED FOR REDISTRIBUTION

For both Zimbabwe and South Africa, transitioning the economy often required land reforms because of the white minority's dominance in land possession and economic industries. Post-independence, Zimbabwe developed into an agricultural economy with a socialist state as a long-term objective, but achieving this goal required redistributing land: the white elite were granted most of it, while the native Black population was deprived (Mudaeu 588). Similarly, in South Africa, white capitalists were able to strip land rights away from Black Africans — white farmers alone controlled 82 million hectares of agricultural land (Mudaeu 582), and the mining industry was likewise controlled by the white minority (Karodia 83). As a result, transitioning the economy in both countries was often tied to redistributing land back to the native populations in order to decrease the white minority's economic dominance.

Historically, Zimbabwe has had a very unequal distribution of land due to the colonial government and its policies. The government under Cecil Rhodes was "characterized by racial dispossession through war, legislature, and racially skewed land distribution and ownership" (Mudaeu 590). Additionally, the colonial government's extra economic regulations — such as travel passes for Black citizens and jobs reserved for whites — along with the dispossession of native land through evictions and forced removal, kept the Black population oppressed and impoverished. In the 1930s, Black communities were forced onto native reserves with "poor, infertile soil" in inhospitable lands, a problem persisting to even after independence in 1961 (Mudaeu 589).

Similarly, in South Africa, the apartheid policies that followed independence from Britain produced the same unequal distribution of land as in Zimbabwe. While 82 million hectares of land were divided into 60,000 commercial farm units — used by white settlers to build wealth — only 135 hectares were divided among 13 million "poverty stricken" South Africans (Mudau 582). Apartheid's priorities were revealed in this distribution: the government prioritized commercial farms that generated money for South Africa at the cost of its own people's living conditions. Furthermore, apartheid policies of racial dominance worsened the issue. South Africans were forcefully removed from native land to the benefit of white capitalists. White commercial farmers were given fertile, flourishing land, while even Black farmers who contributed to the agricultural industry had their interests neglected, as the apartheid government promoted only the interests of white commercial farmers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND: INTELLECTUAL VALUE

Land redistribution was necessary not only for its material implications, but because land is important intellectually. While land is prominently tied to material benefits — as a necessity for shelter, food, and water, and as a key material for the economy — it also intellectually gives people a sense of belonging. "To belong is to have a sense of connection; it implies familiarity, comfort and ease, alongside feelings of inclusion, acceptance and safety. The way people belong to a place is often informed by political strategies, conscious and unconscious, through which access to various rights and resources are sought and contested" (Koot). In other words, land is a commodity tied to intellectual connection, given when access to rights and resources in a piece of land is available. It allows a person's mind to feel secure and comfortable, and when such connection is contested, the intellectual value diminishes. Because land is such a valued commodity both materially and intellectually, the fight for it is especially important in areas such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, where land is so poorly distributed.

Historically, indigenous people also used their relationship with land to articulate indigeneity and fight false claims of indigeneity, usually from foreign settlers. Because the governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe refuse to acknowledge native inhabitants as indigenous, many white settlers have been able to claim indigeneity on grounds such as citizenship, birth, political dominance, and economic stewardship (Koot). Consequently, many indigenous people aren't able to use their indigeneity to access land that should rightfully be theirs allows white settlers to use false claims of indigeneity to validate their land claims, stripping power away from indigenous people. The sense of legitimacy that comes from prolonged residence on a piece of land is being lost, as the current distribution of land in Zimbabwe and South Africa continues to favor white commercial farmers over native Black populations (Koot).

The fight for land is becoming increasingly important due to the continuous rise of neoliberalism. As the world becomes more decentralized, with people less attached to any one place, this has "paradoxically triggered a further obsession with belonging; questions around those who belong where, and based on which criteria" (Koot) — particularly from the perspective of natives when newcomers begin living on land in their home country. Furthermore, democracy has also triggered an obsession with ethnic citizenship and autochthony, as political liberalization intensifies the politics of belonging, with the

affirmation of roots and origins becoming a primary criterion for both citizenship and a feeling of belonging (Koot). This idea is growing more prevalent in the struggle between the white minority and native populations in countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. Finally, as capitalism continues to integrate into the economies of many African regions, it has increased inequality rather than reducing it, connecting claims to land, resources, and nature more closely to assertions of belonging and indigeneity, as more native Africans continue to live in poverty, unable to obtain or keep land. This is most prevalent in South Africa and Zimbabwe, where the white minority controls most of the livable land and continues to encroach on the land rights of the Black population.

ECONOMIC TRANSITION: ZIMBABWE'S SOCIALISM

As Zimbabwe's economy declined and social and political conflicts spiraled out of control, various economic reforms became necessary. Zimbabwe's ruling party (Zanu-PF) envisioned a socialist economy with complete land redistribution to the native population. However, the socialist transition failed because of economic reliance on capitalism and internal conflicts, including the loss of support from both the bourgeoisie and the laboring class. Zimbabwe soon undertook a capitalistic transition, especially through liberal land reform policies — but this transition only worsened many issues present since independence, as evident in the country's modern-day economy.

The Zanu-PF party's vision for a socialist transition took shape as the party gained political control and essentially seized the state, attempting to restructure the economy from the foundations of capitalism into a Marxist-Leninist vanguard. The overall message was to "ensure that the whole product of labour belongs to those who produced it," by establishing "producer cooperatives and state farms to support peasant and Black farmers" (Weiner 55). This would not only ensure laborers received their production, but also challenge the dominance of white minority-owned commercial farms, which fueled capitalism's growth in Zimbabwe. Land reform programmes were part of this transition, aiming to "reduce civil conflict by transferring white land to Black people, provide opportunities for war veterans, expand production and raise welfare, [and] maintain levels of agricultural production" (Mudaeu 590) — vital not only for reducing the power of white commercial farms, but for uplifting a native population that largely lived on infertile, harsh land.

Zanu-PF's ideology centered on scientific, or revolutionary, socialism, evident in their belief that a vanguard was needed. They believed a Marxist-Leninist vanguard and complete revolution would allow them to overcome capitalistic structures while rejecting "static public ownership and control" (Weiner 55). Understanding that this shift would likely lower agricultural production, they sought to mitigate the decline by rejecting "unscientific versions such as African socialism and social democracy," assuming instead that "the implementation of socialist principles must be done in accordance with the objective conditions of specific countries" (Weiner 55). Zanu-PF believed there could be no broad, unified socialist economy across Africa, since socialism had to be tailored to each country — an ideology that shaped an economy with unique aspects of socialism.

Despite this vision, early tensions between socialism and capitalism foreshadowed the transition's eventual failure. Mugabe's National Development Plan expressed his desire, and that of the Zanu-PF party, for an economy built on state-owned production and workers' rights, while acknowledging that Zimbabwe's economy was already ingrained in capitalism. Many feared "dismantling of capitalistic structures and a relaxation in labor coercion will precipitate a rapid decline in production, and concerns about hyperinflation..." (Weiner 56). While Zanu-PF claimed to "reject static forms of public ownership and control," uncertainty persisted, largely because the party lacked a clear guideline on what was considered "static" (Weiner 55). Skepticism also grew about the party's true dedication to socialism, as its initial slow transition and characteristics increasingly resembled a regular nationalistic party — skepticism that worsened when Mugabe himself grew unsure about the transition due to the bourgeoisie's rising power.

Zimbabwe's economic overdependence on capitalism was a major factor in the transition's failure. Fears of a production decline and hyperinflation grew as the economy continued to rely on cheap African labor — a result of "racially-based land use" — which kept production costs down for industries reliant on capitalism (Weiner 57). Under socialism, this cheap labor source would not exist, as workers would instead work on regulated state farms. Zimbabwe relied heavily on the production of raw minerals through mining, agriculture, and luxury goods for foreign consumption, all dependent on a capitalistic structure for their large-scale production. Socialism would mean a decline in these industries, replaced by production from agricultural state farms, while Zimbabwe's overdependence on foreign imports and markets made both a shift off capitalism and land reforms enabling socialist state farms difficult. Land appropriation would likely trigger foreign capital outflows and constrain investment by other capitalist countries, sending shockwaves through production, exports, and foreign support (Weiner 57).

Additionally, internal conflicts such as the Lancaster House Agreement severely hindered the transition. Passed in 1979, the agreement's land reform provisions would govern the first 10 years of reform, but because Britain was included in negotiations — likely due to Zimbabwe's need for British foreign aid — many provisions were made to protect British interests, including "various safeguards built into the constitution to protect the rights of the white minority" (Mudaeu 590). This guaranteed the white minority protection of their commercial farms, preventing the government from seizing land for state cooperative farms. Land could only be transferred "on a willing-seller, willing-buyer basis", meaning Zimbabwe couldn't "appropriate land, mines, [and] factories" without risking the loss of "badly needed foreign aid" (Weiner 57). Additionally, it raised the possibility of white flight, which would devastate the economy due to the integral value of their skills and foreign capital.

Another internal conflict was the resistance of the Black bourgeoisie, who benefited from the existing capitalistic economy and viewed the "white-settler [as] a source of potential wealth," since surpluses from white commercial farms "finance[d] the import of luxury goods and [served as] a market for local manufacturing goods" (Weiner 65). In other words, Black bourgeoisie bought imported luxury goods and partially owned some local manufacturing markets. Because the shift to socialism would decrease agricultural production, it directly threatened this financing, as the "historical relationship between large-scale capitalistic agriculture and the state continue[d]" (Weiner 65) — leading to resistance from

both white commercial farmers and the Black bourgeoisie. This internal conflict, combined with the Lancaster Constitution and the loss of bourgeois support, meant the end of the transition.

Lastly, the laboring class ensured that any resurgence of a socialist transition was impossible. The shift away from capitalism meant "chronic unemployment, rapid urbanization, and class polarization", rural tensions rose, and the transition eventually lost the support of the common people (Weiner 71). Political dissatisfaction with Zanu-PF grew alongside this miserable agrarian transition, meaning the laboring class no longer supported the socialist vision, even though it would have improved their lives. Economic transitions — especially socialist ones — often require worker support, and fail when that support is lost. An alliance grew between the Black bourgeoisie and white farmers during this same period, sealing the transition's fate.

Zimbabwe soon began to stabilize a more liberal, capitalistic economy through land reforms that followed the socialist transition's failure. Its "willing buyer, willing seller" market-based approach marked the beginning of this shift: "65% of the Zimbabwean land acquired on the market was procured in 1985 through the National Intensive Resettlement Programme", a set of liberal land reforms addressing the unequal distribution of land prevalent since colonialism, aimed at "reducing conflict by giving land from white to Black, [providing] opportunities for veterans and landless people, relieving populations on communal land, expanding production and welfare, [and] maintaining high levels of agrarian production" (Mudaeu 590). While the government's intentions were positive, reform was relatively slow — only 430,000 hectares of land were redistributed between 1980 and 1985, a small fraction of Zimbabwe's 39 million hectares of total land, especially given that much of the distributed land was abandoned by white farmers (Mudaeu 590 and Fao). This was likely due to the willing buyer, willing seller policy itself, under which white commercial farmers were rarely willing to sell, making redistribution incredibly difficult.

Zimbabwe developed a Fast Track Programme to speed up this slow process, becoming "at the center of political and social discourse since 2000" by challenging the notion that "transfer of land could only be done under a free-market system" (Mudaeu 591). The programme aimed to transfer white commercial farmland to poor, middle-income, and landless Black Zimbabweans, resettling around 162,161 families and giving more than 200,000 people access to land (Mudaeu 591). Yet despite its positive intentions, the programme's impacts were substantially negative for the economy overall. It "[has] not delivered the outcomes that the government intended", falling short of the redistribution targets set in 1980, while causing violence, a lack of legitimacy in land ownership, and chronic weakening of the country's agricultural infrastructure (Mudaeu 591). The agricultural industry, which had relied on high production from white commercial farmers, soon collapsed: when land shifted to peasants and Black farmers who lacked the capital for the technologies white farmers had used, production could not be sustained. The programme's catastrophic collapse of agricultural output still affects Zimbabwe's modern-day economy.

ECONOMIC TRANSITIONS: SOUTH AFRICA'S CAPITALISTIC LAND REFORM

Similar to Zimbabwe, South Africa needed economic reforms after racist apartheid policies ended international support and land inequality persisted. In contrast to Zimbabwe, South Africa's economic transition was solely capitalistic due to the overall political direction, and its land reforms — while promising redistribution to native populations — largely favored white commercial farmers instead. The legacies of this negative transition still persist in modern South Africa, where the economy remains in decline and land inequality continues to drive poverty among the native population.

During the apartheid period, South Africa's economy took a heavy hit after losing international support due to its segregationist policies. South Africa soon adopted a capitalistic economic transition centered on land reforms; however, the reforms it attempted — such as the Freedom Charter and the CODESA negotiations — all failed under this capitalistic landscape, due to both the political direction of the time and internal factors such as the constitution. As a result, South Africa's economy remains in a situation similar to that after independence, and the unequal distribution of land continues to be an issue today.

Capitalism first emerged through the actions of political parties during the CODESA negotiations. The "African National Congress adopted a neoliberal approach instead of a programme towards the transformation of the social, economic and political systems of South Africa" (Mudaeu 585), meaning the ANC did not support changing the system, but instead continued to uphold it — most likely because party members benefited from the status quo. Most economic transitions that followed were the result of compromises between an ANC that supported neoliberalism and the country's powerful elites, meaning nearly all policies of this period — privatization, reduced public spending, and reduced public employment — were designed to keep the elites in power. In terms of land reforms, the National Party and the Freedom Front were the main parties responsible for redistribution, yet both instead lobbied on behalf of white commercial farmers (Mudaeu 585). As a result, little changed to benefit the poor, as politics and corruption allowed the elites to flourish while the poor continued to struggle.

The earliest land reform policies only worsened land distribution. The Natives Land Act, passed in 1913 by the apartheid government, was described as "a segregationist and racist piece of legislation that increasingly entrenched the discriminatory foundations of South African Law", disallowing natives from living on "white land" (Mudaeu 584). This intensified poverty, as fertile, farmable land was given to white commercial farmers while native populations received barren, dry land unable to support farming. Many policies that followed relied on the idea of "willing buyer, willing seller," just as in Zimbabwe — a market-based system unable to redistribute land, since the poor native population lacked the capital to purchase land "at a market price without government assistance" (Mudaeu 583). Consequently, the native population remained trapped in a cycle of poverty on unfarmable land.

The Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955, was a promising statement created to address this unequal distribution, attempting to solve the structural causes of poverty — namely, land — by advocating for equal ownership (Mudaeu 583). It argued that "Our [South African] people have been robbed of their birthright to land and that South Africa belongs to all who live in [it], both Black and white", aiming to

rectify the colonial legacies intensified by policies like the Natives Land Act. Despite existing within a capitalistic economy, the Charter had socialist elements, advocating for equal land ownership and provisions for the state to help the poor access new technology, such as tractors. However, little change was ultimately produced, as the CODESA negotiations that followed "neglected the founding mandate", shifting focus away from the Charter (Mudaeu 583).

The CODESA negotiations, which took place after apartheid's collapse, largely ignored the issue of land as the Freedom Charter lost support; those in rural areas were neglected as negotiations instead focused on reconciliation and nation-building. Political parties such as the ANC ignored land altogether, while parties such as the National Party and Freedom Front lobbied against land redistribution by advocating for policies benefiting white agricultural commercial farmers (Mudaeu 583). The negotiations followed the trend of most previous policies — ignoring land or further entrenching inequality — allowing white commercial farmers to continue profiting while the native Black population remained in poverty.

The small land reform policies that did pass only further entrenched inequality, as South African elites were included in the negotiations, producing an "elite transition" in which most policies ultimately benefited only the elites (Mudaeu 583). Promises to "invigorate competitiveness, promote exports and make the country attractive to foreign investments" instead led to "privatization, cuts in public spending, a reduction of public employment and increased unemployment of the poor" (Mudaeu 583). Elite influence further persuaded parties such as the National Party and Freedom Front to support policies benefiting white commercial farmers, turning these compromises into a tool for the wealthy to preserve a bureaucracy and divide the masses rather than help the people.

Even after CODESA, politics continued to hinder future land reforms: if a party such as the National Party or Freedom Front rejected a policy, it would be buried immediately. The most notable example is land expropriation without compensation, under which white commercial farmers' land would be taken and given to the native population without payment (Mudaeu 583). This concept was strongly opposed politically, with opponents citing examples such as "Makgoba Tea Estate and Zebredius Citrus Estate, in which farming collapsed" (Mudaeu 583). While land expropriation led to declines in farming production in some examples, others, such as the "Nodunga Communal Property Association (NCPA) in KwaZulu-Natal, which struck a deal with a sugar-producing company, TongaatHulett, and the Mkhuzane community in Mondi(Mudaeu 583)." Both settlements continue to maintain productive farming. If implemented correctly, land expropriation would allow for both the redistribution of land and the maintenance of high production levels.

Additionally, lobbying and external influence inhibited the passage of land redistribution policies. Many right-wing organizations in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia opposed policies of land expropriation without compensation (Mudaeu 583), lobbying South African political parties to oppose such reforms — likely motivated by political leaders who benefited from white commercial farmers' production as a source of imports.

Even as late as 2017–2018, South Africa remained unable to pass land reform policies due to constitutional issues. When the 54th National Congress overcame domestic and foreign resistance to

advance a policy of land expropriation without compensation, it was blocked by the 1996 Constitution, which allowed land to be expropriated only "subject to compensation" (Mudaeu 586) — a provision heavily criticized by scholars and politicians. Although parliament has since adopted a motion to consider amending the Constitution regarding land expropriation without compensation, the matter has only been referred to the Constitutional Review Committee, with no amendment or draft bill produced at the time of writing (DOJ).

Even hypothetically, without this constitutional barrier, no "proper governance structure" was in place to allow for a transition (Mudaeu 586). In Mozambique, by contrast, the 1997 land law "gave the power to the state to allocate land for commercial purposes" (Mudaeu 587), delegating land reform responsibility to smaller governments and easing the national burden. South Africa, by contrast, faced many unanswered technical questions that hindered progress. For example, South Africa had land bonded to both the state and commercial banks through day-to-day loans, raising questions of true ownership and rights over land intended for redistribution. South Africa also had "untraceable land claims, an inadequate post-settlement support system, disputes between landowners and claimants, and a lack of archival information regarding registered land rights" (Mudaeu 586), making it likely impossible to accurately validate land ownership — and even if land were properly allocated, native populations would lack the tools to cultivate it successfully, likely triggering further conflict between former apartheid-era owners and new claimants.

MODERN ECONOMIES: DECLINE AND INEQUALITY

Forty years after transitioning away from colonial influence into capitalism, Zimbabwe's economy remains in heavy decline. The country is forecast to have an unemployment rate of 11.92% in 2025 and a labor productivity of just \$2.35 (Statistical Offices). The average inflation rate has reached 81.44%, the third highest in Africa (International Monetary Fund). Combined with low wages (\$309 per month) and high inflation, over 4.07 million Zimbabweans are food insecure, with 33,000 children suffering from malnutrition (Global Living Wage Coalition and Chitoyo). Zimbabwe is ranked nearly last in the world in economic freedom — 172 out of 184 countries (Statistical Offices) — a result of political volatility and economic mismanagement. The failure of land reform policies has left native populations on infertile, unlivable land, keeping them in poverty even decades after independence.

Similar to Zimbabwe, South Africa continues to suffer an economic crisis despite years of restructuring. While Africa's average unemployment rate is 7%, South Africa's stands at 30% (Galal). Even employed South Africans face extreme inequality rooted in the power of the elites: in industries such as mining, chief executives make 7 million USD a year — 51,000 times more than someone living in poverty on a child support programme — plus bonuses of up to 15 million, while their workers earn R4,000 (around 220 USD) a month, a "slave wage" (Karodia 38–39). Compounding this burden, high taxes trap many in a cycle of poverty: South Africa has an 18% income tax rate but a 57% tax rate on transportation costs, meaning a worker earning 1,000 USD a month would keep only around 400 (Morisset). However, it is important to note South Africa's inflation rate is relatively stable, sitting at an average of 3.22%

(International Monetary Fund). The focus of future change in South Africa should center on this growing inequality and widening wage gap.

Table 1 summarizes key economic indicators discussed throughout the paper, demonstrating patterns of economic decline, inequality, and the progress in redistribution of land across both countries

Table 1. Key Economic Indicators, Zimbabwe and South Africa

Indicator	Zimbabwe	South Africa	Source
Unemployment rate	11.92%	30%	Statistical Offices; Galal
Average Inflation rate	81.44%	3.22%	International Monetary Fund; Statistical Offices
Economic freedom rank	172th	100th	The Heritage Foundation
Average worker monthly wage	\$309	R4,000 (~\$220)	Global Living Wage Coalition; Karodia
Hectares of land redistributed	7-11 million (rough estimate)	9-10 million (rough estimate)	Deutsche Welle

Taking the data together, the countries share similar patterns of economic instability with different alarming measures. For example, while South Africa has managed to control the inflation rate in the past few months, its unemployment rate is skyrocketing. In contrast, Zimbabwe faces high devaluation of their country but a relatively more stable unemployment rate. Both countries, despite pursuing different economic transitions, have similar outcomes from the unresolved issue of land redistribution.

DISCUSSIONS

Even though Zimbabwe and South Africa pursued philosophically different approaches to post-colonial economic transitions, both countries in the end adopted capitalistic, market driven economics, implying the influence of structural constraints of existing systems outweighed political ideologies in shaping modern day outcomes. Zimbabwe's transition began as a socialist one, evident in Zanu-PF's attempts to create producer cooperatives and state farms ensuring laborers received the fruits of their labor. However, the importance of capitalism to Zimbabwe's economy, combined with internal opposition from white farmers, the Black bourgeoisie, and eventually the laboring class, pushed the country toward capitalism instead. South Africa's transition, meanwhile, involved restructuring an already capitalistic economy, driven by the power of political parties and the political direction of the period. Despite the differing beginnings, both governments in the end began to align with the international capitalistic system. Neither

political philosophy, socialism nor capitalism, determined the modern day state of the two countries. Rather, existing colonial institutions and the simple reality of the power of capitalism pushed both countries towards retaining the same form of economic systems despite the different ideological approaches.

The comparative analysis contributes to the broader discipline of post-colonial political economy by analyzing how economic transitions cannot be understood through just the perspective of ideological orientation. Existing scholarship studies Zimbabwe, South Africa, and other neighboring countries as independent cases, isolating historical conditions and unique societal circumstances. However, comparing the two countries reveals that distinct political philosophies produce extremely similar outcomes, highlighting the patterns behind their historical conditions and the power of structural constraints. In both countries, attempts to redistribute land and address economic inequality were blockaded by the institutional barriers powered by capitalism that fought back against attempts to redistribute land equally. Rather than viewing Zimbabwe's socialist transition and South Africa's capitalist transition as independent, opposing cases, the comparison indicates that different responses to the same structural challenges results in similar modern day outcomes. Therefore, successful post-colonial economic transitions may depend less on following an ideological framework and more on addressing the constraints built by the system of capitalism, the institutions that exacerbate inequality. Furthermore the comparison between Zimbabwe and South Africa makes it possible to isolate potential variables in order to identify patterns that drive inequality and economic decline across Africa post-colonialism. The similar historical and geographical conditions revealed land inequality as an emerging pattern for economic instability in the region surrounding Zimbabwe and South Africa.

While this paper primarily focuses on agricultural land reform, future research should analyze how the mining and resource sectors influenced the development of new economic structures in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Particularly, rare earth minerals like gold and silver played a significant role outside the context of international investment. Furthermore, expanding the comparative framework to the surrounding region like Namibia and Mozambique would build on determining similar patterns in land distribution and economic transitions given similar historical conditions but under distinct government and community circumstances. Such research would be able to solidify the extent to which historical conditions and structural barriers of capitalism reflect the characteristics of post-colonial African development in general, rather than just the case study of Zimbabwe and South Africa alone.

CONCLUSION

While capitalism continues to expand and create wealth for some countries, it has in turn created inequality and economic decline in others. This paper demonstrates that although Zimbabwe and South Africa pursued different ideological paths post-independence to restructure their economies, both countries converged towards a capitalist economy because of internal social crises and the structural integration of capitalism. It suggests that economic transitions cannot be analyzed through the sole lens of political ideology, but rather the weight of structural constraints built upon the legacy of colonialism.

Land reform was central to this restructuring — not only for its role in the economy, especially agriculture, but for the sense of belonging and indigeneity it created for those living on it. Both countries had extremely unequal land distribution favoring white commercial farmers, and both saw their reform attempts fail for similar reasons: white commercial farmers maintained levels of production that native farmers, lacking comparable capital and technology, could not sustain. Reform legislation had positive intentions but faced consistent opposition, evident in Zimbabwe's Fast Track Programme and South Africa's Freedom Charter, and both countries ultimately settled on a willing buyer, willing seller policy that left most of the native population on poor, infertile land.

This issue is not unique to Zimbabwe and South Africa; it extends to many countries where capitalism has produced market-led economic failures, corruption, and insulated wealth for the rich (Korstanje). Countries such as Mozambique, Namibia, and Botswana experience comparable land inequality, suggesting these issues are evident across many African nations after colonialism. Change is needed, either through further economic restructuring or land reform policies. Otherwise, the legacies of colonialism will continue to persist, forcing Africa's ethnic communities to continue to endure poverty, food insecurity, and political instability rooted in economic inequality.

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