



## Land, Legacy and Liberation: Robert Mugabe's Agrarian Revolution and the Sovereignty of National Imperatives

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines Robert Mugabe's fast track land reform programme (FTLRP) in Zimbabwe. It analyses its role as a tool for asserting national sovereignty, challenging neo-colonial economic structures while redressing historically unjust colonial legacies. Drawing from secondary sources, the paper argues that Mugabe's approach to land reform transcended mere redistribution. It embodied a dynamic nexus of anti-imperial ideology, economic decolonisation, and the assertion of post-colonial state power. The FTLRP is situated within the broader context of African nationalism and the ongoing struggle for economic independence in the post-colonial era. The paper explores how the FTLRP simultaneously addressed historical injustices but created new socio-economic challenges. The immediate consequences of Mugabe's policies and the FTLRP which included agricultural disruption, international isolation and Zimbabwe's position in the continental and global political economy, are looked at. Central attention is given to the tension between national imperatives and global norms as Western-backed economic models and international legal frameworks were challenged. The paper posits that while Mugabe's approach was costly in the short term, it represents a significant moment in the articulation of post-colonial African sovereignty. As it examines the dynamic legacy of Zimbabwe's land reform, it looks at the ongoing impact on current policy dilemmas. The paper also contributes to broader debates on African development. It explores the dynamics of government-led economic transformation and highlights how land remains a crucial battleground for political and economic power contestations in Africa's post-colonial landscape.

**Key words:** agrarian revolution; land reform; national imperatives; post-colonial development; transformation; sovereignty; Robert Mugabe

### Introduction

In the landscape of modern post-colonial African history, few initiatives have sparked as much debate and transformation as Robert Gabriel Mugabe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) in Zimbabwe. Launched at the turn of the millennium, this radical agrarian reform can be seen as having gone beyond simply redistributing land. It represents a dynamic response to colonial legacies by intertwining anti-imperial ideology with economic decolonisation and state power. The FTLRP challenged conventional ideas about property rights and sovereignty in a post-colonial context, positioning itself as a moment of resistance against neo-colonial economic structures. In just over a decade, the FTLRP resettled approximately 182,000 beneficiaries under the small-scale A1 model and 22,000 under the medium-scale A2 model, with 13 million hectares of land acquired and redistributed (Matondi 2020). The program led to significant outcomes, including the emergence of a diverse agrarian class, a trimodal agrarian structure, and a shift from private property rights to state-allocated land user rights (Moyo 2011a, 2013).

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While the FTLRP represented a watershed moment in Zimbabwe's pursuit of economic sovereignty, it has faced considerable criticism. Framed as addressing historical injustices, the program is accused of perpetuating ethnic tensions and class disparities through preferential land allocations. It fostered ethnic mobilisation particularly on both the small scale farms as well as the capitalist-oriented medium-scale farms, reshaping land access amid economic crises (Musanga 2022; Dube 2019; Chambati & Mazwi 2022). It has been argued that it invoked notions of patriotism and honour, complicating the discourse around land ownership and national identity (Mlambo & Zimunya 2022). The program's characterisation by violence and racial exclusivity challenged *Ubuntu* principles and raised concerns about humanity in post-colonial Zimbabwe (Hungwe 2021). The violence which it was associated with, and ideological conflict is seen as having resulted in significant losses which have undermined reconciliation efforts (Nyawo 2023). The FTLRP altered land ownership dynamics, leading to socio-economic upheaval and neglecting local communities' rights in formal restitution processes (Rusenga & Ncube 2021). Its politicisation eroded social capital and agricultural livelihoods, enabling politically connected individuals to manipulate land allocation (Ncube 2021). Though intended to rectify colonial imbalances, it sparked human rights concerns and international backlash (Chipuriro & Mkodzongi, 2022). The documented disruption in agricultural production of key crops like maize, tobacco, and wheat has raised questions about the program's sustainability (Runganga 2022).

Despite this extensive scholarship on Zimbabwe's land reform, there remains a significant gap in understanding former President Robert Gabriel Mugabe's historical significance as a continuation of Africa's pioneering nationalist leaders. While much attention has focused on the controversial aspects of the FTLRP, insufficient consideration has been given to Mugabe's role as a transformative figure who, like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Thomas Sankara before him, confronted Western economic interests and hegemony in pursuit of genuine independence. His journey from nationalist and liberation fighter to implementing the most extensive land reform program in post-colonial Africa represents an understudied example of leadership willing to face international isolation and sanctions in defence of national sovereignty and economic self-determination.

Considering the above, this paper critically engages with the FTLRP through national imperatives and as an instrument of sovereignty and anti-imperialist ideals, situating it within African nationalism and the struggle for economic independence. It explores the ideas of Mugabe, who led Zimbabwe from 1980-2017. A revered Pan-Africanist (by some), Mugabe was a key leader in Africa's anti-colonial struggle, who acknowledged being viewed by many as '...one anti-British Marxist African autocrat firebrand, blamed for destroying Zimbabwe' (Mugabe, 2001:30). After limited success with land reform in the 1980s and 1990s, Zimbabwe officially undertook the FTLRP. Under Mugabe's stewardship, it can be argued that the FTLRP transcended conventional economic policy to challenge neo-colonial structures and assert Zimbabwe's self-determination despite global opposition. The FTLRP's implementation was a seismic event with consequences beyond national borders, raising questions about property rights, state power, and tensions between national sovereignty and international norms. As Zimbabwe forcibly reclaimed land from white commercial farmers for redistribution, this paper argues this aimed to reshape the country's agrarian and socio-economic fabric while asserting agency against international economic frameworks perpetuating inequalities.



This paper explores three dimensions: first is the FTLRP's role in asserting sovereignty and advancing decolonisation; second is its socio-economic repercussions on the agrarian landscape; and third is its legacy in contemporary debates on land reform across post-colonial Africa. Through analysis of documentation, policy papers, speeches and secondary literature, the paper unravels Zimbabwe's land reform legacy, contributing to broader discussions on African development and government-led transformation. While examining immediate and long-term consequences, it argues that despite short-term costs, Mugabe's approach represents a significant assertion of post-colonial African sovereignty. The paper highlights ongoing challenges faced by post-colonial states in development amid hostile international environments, offering reflection on the lasting impact and legacy of Mugabe's agrarian revolution on current policy dilemmas and economic decolonisation across the continent.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Political Economy of Agrarian Change (PEAC) theory was considered as being useful in providing the requisite analytical lens for exploring Mugabe's agrarian revolution and its weaponisation against neo-colonial machinations. PEAC reframes agrarian transitions as multifaceted processes embedded within broader political and economic structures. Emerging from Marxist political economy and agrarian studies, this approach examines agricultural transformation, class relations, and interactions between agriculture, industry, and global capitalism (Bernstein, 2017). While initially conceptualised around agriculture as a foundational economic activity emphasising limited wealth, freedom, and social reproduction (Foshee, 1980), contemporary iterations analyse the dialectics of agrarian change through multiple dimensions.

Central to PEAC is examining how social groups namely peasants, landowners, agricultural labourers, and political elites negotiate access to land and resources (Bernstein, 2015; Albertus, 2015). The framework encompasses analysis of social relations, class dynamics, political processes, historical trajectories, and interactions between local agrarian systems and global capitalist structures (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2009). It reveals property rights as social constructions within power hierarchies, showing how neoliberal restructuring transforms rural inequalities and social relations (Akram-Lodhi, 2007). In post-colonial contexts, PEAC provides perspectives into land reform as an intervention of national sovereignty, and it is useful for analysing how redistribution represents anti-imperial resistance and economic decolonisation.

Despite challenges noted by scholars like Bernstein (2017), including tendencies to idealise peasant life and the need for more critical analyses of class dynamics, PEAC remains valuable for this study. It provides a robust framework for examining land reforms as political-economic interventions, emphasising interactions between state power, economic structures, and social transformation. The framework has utility in effectively analysing post-land reform contexts, revealing the structural transformations underlying redistribution processes. PEAC's intersection with decolonial perspectives was seen enabling the understanding of land reforms as interventions into colonial economic structures. As it was used to analyse land as both material and symbolic resource, it could be seen demonstrating how economic policies function as resistance against neo-colonial dependencies. In Zimbabwe's context, this reveals land



reform as encompassing anti-imperial ideology, economic decolonisation, and post-colonial state power assertion, while connecting these processes to broader questions of national identity formation and sovereignty.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative interpretive methodology, positioning the research within a framework that analysed power dynamics and socio-political transformations (see Good & Diem, 2023). The research design prioritised understanding land reform as a socio-political phenomenon, emphasising contextual dynamics and systemic power relations (Gadamer, 2004). Grounded in interpretive inquiry, the study adopted epistemological perspectives recognising social phenomena as dynamically constructed through multiple human experiences (Bhattacharjee 2012; Pervin & Mokhtar 2022). To decode textual sources effectively, the research incorporated content analysis methodology (Krippendorff 2019).

The data collection process unfolded in three stages. First, there was an extensive documentary review across scholarly databases, institutional archives, policy documentation, and media collections, with search parameters refined from broad conceptual frameworks to specific focuses on sovereignty and economic decolonisation. Second, rigorous document evaluation assessed source authenticity, contextual relevance, and potential ideological bias. This was crucial given the politically sensitive nature of Zimbabwe's land reform narratives. Third, there was the implementation of thematic analysis through structured coding protocols and pattern identification.

The analytical framework progressed through preliminary thematic mapping, in-depth cross-source comparative examination, and synthetic integration linking empirical findings to theoretical constructs. Throughout the research, methodological self-reflection acknowledged inherent limitations, including potential biases in official narratives and historical documentation gaps. Verification protocols included review of interpretations and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. This comprehensive approach facilitated understanding of the FTLRP's significance in Zimbabwe's sovereignty assertion project, examining both immediate impacts and enduring implications of this landmark initiative.

## **Historical context: colonial land dispossession in Zimbabwe**

The systematic dispossession of indigenous land in Zimbabwe began with the arrival of European settlers in September 1890. As Robert Mugabe (2001:136) later reflected, this marked '...the darkest phase of our nation so far.' The British settlers, initially attracted by anticipated mineral wealth comparable to South Africa's Witwatersrand goldfields, resorted to agriculture upon discovering limited mineral resources (Sullins, 1991; Lebert, 2006). Through the British South Africa Company (BSAC), Cecil John Rhodes obtained mineral rights through the 1888 Rudd Concession from Ndebele King Lobengula, leading to a Royal Charter that granted 25-year administrative rights over the colony (Utete, 2003; Tidy & Leeming, 2001).

A series of legislative enactments including the Southern Rhodesia Order in Council (1889), Land Apportionment Act (1930), and Land Tenure Act (1969) systematically dispossessed



indigenous populations of their land rights. As nationalist leader Herbert Chitepo<sup>2</sup> emphasised while addressing the National Press Club of Australia in 1973, ‘...the essence of white domination is domination of land... this is the beginning, the base of exploitation in every sector of Zimbabwean (then Rhodesian) society’ (Chitepo 1973). The devastating impact of these policies was evident in the forced relocation of indigenous people to marginal lands in Natural Regions IV and V, known as the native reserves (Mbiba, 2001). Chitepo had further noted that ‘...the so-called 50% of the land that is reserved to the six million African people is actually the poorest, the most barren and the most disease infested because all the best land had already been taken...’ (Chitepo, 1973).

It was against this background that by independence in 1980, this systematic dispossession of land had created stark inequalities. Approximately 6,000 white commercial farmers controlled 15.5 million hectares of prime agricultural land, while over 700,000 Africans were confined to 16.4 million hectares of marginal land (Alexander, 2006; Moyo, 1995), a situation which Joshua Nkomo described as morally unacceptable, economically unjustifiable and politically untenable (Nkomo, 1979). The native reserves suffered from overpopulation and land degradation, with most African farmers restricted to subsistence agriculture (Utete, 2003; Sullins, 1991). This inequality was at the heart of the nationalist movement and the protracted armed struggle which gave birth to independence. What was clear from the beginning was the intertwined relationship between the nationalist movement and the land question in Zimbabwe.

### **The nationalist movement and the land issue**

The nationalist movements in Rhodesia emerged as a direct response to colonial injustices, particularly land dispossession. As Mugabe (2001: 36-37) reflected:

...the main basis of our fight with settlers, a fight which began at the very onset of colonialism, had been the national question of land. It informed Zimbabwe's entire politics, generated solid support base for the armed struggle with all its attendant hazards, and spurred our fighters, right up to the bitter end. Land, land was the cry.

This centrality had also been emphasised by Chitepo in 1973 when he had said that:

...revolution has been about land everywhere in the world... land is the thing on which you live, you build your house on and you get food from it. Life is sustained on the land and without it you are really facing death, that is what revolution is about... (Chitepo 1973).

The nationalist movements in Zimbabwe can be seen as having evolved through several phases, beginning with early 20th-century proto-nationalist activities driven by socio-political grievances and global decolonisation trends (Mlambo, 2014). The Southern Rhodesian African National Congress (SRANC) emerged in 1952 under Joshua Nkomo, advocating for non-violent resistance. This was followed by the more radical National Democratic Party (NDP) in 1959, and later the formation of ZAPU and ZANU in 1963, with ZANU initially led by

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Chitepo (1923 – 1975) was a nationalist and lawyer who led the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) until he was assassinated on 18 March 1975.





Ndabaningi Sithole before Robert Mugabe's leadership (Mugabe, 2001; Stapleton, 2011). The nationalist movement gave birth to the armed struggle known as the *Second Chimurenga* or Rhodesian Bush War from July 1964 to December 1979. In this war, the land question remained central to the struggle, as Joshua Nkomo (1979) pointed out: '...the war in Zimbabwe is about land...where we find Britain unable to yield to the popular demand of our people so popular that they had to sacrifice their lives.' This sentiment was shared by Mugabe (BBC 1997), who justified the liberation struggle and land reform as white farmers '...occupied the land illegally, they seized the land from our people.' Mugabe also strongly felt that white farmers '...historically...have a debt to pay...' (CNN 2009), it was this idea that was to drive land reform in Zimbabwe in later years. The nationalist movement was therefore the root, and it mobilised around the concept of '*mwana wevhu/umntwana womhlabati*' (child of the soil), with land dispossession serving as a primary catalyst for independence (Moyo et al., 2009; Utete, 2003).

Utete (2003) notes that land was a critical obstacle in all pre-independence negotiations, including the Geneva (1976) and Malta (1978) talks. The near collapse of the Lancaster House Conference in 1979 hinged entirely on land redistribution, with the Patriotic Front<sup>3</sup> arguing that land recovery was the fundamental purpose of the liberation struggle. The impasse was broken when British and US governments pledged to establish a fund for land reform. The legacies of colonial land dispossession and nationalist movements can be seen as having intersected to shape post-independence Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape. Land dispossession and supportive social and economic policies had worked to enhance prosperity for British colonialists while marginalising the black majority. These colonial-era policies created persistent inequalities that required significant attention in post-colonial land reform efforts.

### **Land reform in Zimbabwe: A dialectical trajectory of restitution and systemic transformation.**

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited an asymmetrical agricultural landscape where approximately 6,000 white commercial farmers monopolised more than a third of the national territory (Weiner, et al 1985). The Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, while granting political sovereignty, failed to adequately address the land question. As Mugabe (2001:37) later observed, '...the Lancaster House Conference gave us political sovereignty with many conditions and entrenchments... (it) failed to solve the principal grievance of land, which had caused the war of liberation in the first place.' The constitutional framework strategically protected white agricultural interests through the 'willing buyer, willing seller' principle and mandated market-rate compensation in foreign currency. To safeguard white interests, particularly land ownership, the Lancaster House Agreement ensured continued white political influence through reserved parliamentary seats. Mugabe saw it as a racist provision as he reflected:

...even Ian Smith, we allowed him to continue to sit in Parliament... the British had said the whites will have their representatives alone... the Constitution stated that their constituencies will not be contested the whites alone should be left to have 20% of

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<sup>3</sup> This was an alliance of the liberation movements of ZANU led by Mugabe and ZAPU led by Joshua Nkomo



Parliament...it was a racist provision but Nkomo and I said fine...we will amend it after 7 years' (SABC News, 2015).

This institutional arrangement effectively created barriers to comprehensive land reform. Nkomo (1979) was critical of this approach and said '...Britain has placed land as a property and used the bill of rights as a bill of privileges... they never bought the land, they acquired it by force of arms... we could not be expected to pay for that land.'

The government's ambitious resettlement targets evolved from 18,000 families on 1.5 million hectares in 1980 to 162,000 families on nine million hectares by 1982 (Chitsike, 2003). By 1999, however, only 71,000 families had been resettled on 3,498,444 hectares (Kinsey, 1999; Utete 2003). This limited progress was due to insufficient international support. While Britain provided £44 million for land reform in the 1980s (£17 million as a Land Resettlement Grant and £27 million in budgetary support), this fell far short of requirements (Mlambo, 2010). As one British commentator admitted,

...had Britain been more generous, there might not have been a land distribution problem. Our meanness, compounded perhaps by an unwillingness to undermine the white economic hegemony, perpetuated Zimbabwe's racial segregation (G. Moinbot, 2002 cited by Mlambo 2010).

The 1990s marked a critical shift in land reform discourse, catalysed by the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association's emergence and reframing of land redistribution as revolutionary justice (Sadomba, 2013). By 1997, the government abandoned the 'willing buyer, willing seller' model as Mugabe (2001: 37) pointed out that: '...the colonial power has reneged on its promise to provide funds to support the acquisition of land.'

### **The Lancaster House Constitution and the British Position on Land Reform**

As indicated in the preceding section, the Lancaster House Constitution's land clauses protected white interests at the expense of the black population. It established a framework around concepts like rule of law, social justice, equity, property rights, and market-led reform. An important historical moment occurred when the British government abandoned its earlier commitments. In November 1997, Claire Short, then UK Secretary of State for International Development under Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Government, wrote to Zimbabwe stating:

I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe. We are a new government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers... (Lobel 2003).

This British position can be seen as having exploited escape clauses while appropriating colonial victimhood to undermine Zimbabwe's compensation claims. This was to influence the subsequent land reform trajectory. Due to this position, the FTLRP then emerged as a watershed moment in Zimbabwe's agrarian transformation. Initially characterised by spontaneous farm occupations led by war veterans and landless peasants, it marked a break from incremental land



reform approaches. These occupations expressed historical grievance while serving as a mechanism for economic restructuring (Moyo 2011a; 2011b; 2013; Mazwi, et al 2020; Mazwi, et al 2021). The FTLRP can thus be seen as having been triggered by various factors including the British response to reform demands, constitutional referendum rejection, declining ZANU-PF support, and reform frustrations. It introduced two resettlement models namely the villagized A1 model for subsistence farming and communal area decongestion, and the commercially oriented A2 model, transforming the land tenure system from a bimodal to a trimodal agrarian landscape (Moyo 2011a).

The reform process was institutionalised through legislative modifications. The Land Acquisition Act was modified, while Constitutional Amendments 16 and 17 nationalised land and placed compensation obligations on the British government (Moyo, 2013). Strategic exemptions protected specific properties, including church properties, Export Processing Zone properties, and farms under bilateral investment agreements (Moyo 2011a, 2011b). The reform saw the provision of comprehensive agrarian support mechanisms, including technical extension services, input provision schemes, and market integration initiatives.

Diplomatic initiatives became crucial battlegrounds, exemplified by the 2001 Abuja Meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers. While Mugabe initially viewed this positively, noting its recognition of historical injustices, he regarded subsequent efforts like the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting and Zimbabwe Joint Resettlement Initiative (ZJRI)<sup>4</sup> with suspicion. He accused the British of lobbying against Zimbabwe's reform to provoke Commonwealth condemnation. Regarding the ZJRI, Mugabe stated:

...this disposition does not include everyone, with many, if not the majority still believing that they can continue to resist land reform in the hope of some rescue formula from the British-led western coalition against ZANU PF and the Zimbabwe government. This group... is sponsoring and directing the opposition MDC... For them, ZJRI affords them a truce, a duplicitous interlude while they regroup... (Mugabe 2001:98).

The judiciary was not exempt from Mugabe's critique as he suspected some Justices of being sympathetic to the white commercial farmers or were an impediment to the land reform process. This was in a background where Mugabe's view of the farmers was that they were...the most racist of the white citizens in the country...and the white farmer has been the crudest of the whites in this country, the most backward in terms of enlightenment and education...the majority of them are racist' (Mugabe in 60 Minutes 2001). When it came to the judiciary, he described some of its Justices as '...legal spillovers from the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) era.' His position was unequivocal hence he stated '...ironically, the courts have chosen such an infamous role over a matter of natural, economic justice... let it be known that all the courts in independent Zimbabwe do belong to the people... they will not be allowed to go against our quest for full sovereignty' (Mugabe 2001:110).

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<sup>4</sup> ZJRI was a collaborative effort established in the early 2000s to improve land reform and resettlement. It involved white commercial farmers, the government, civil society, and international partners. It was aimed at ensuring equitable land redistribution, enhancing agricultural productivity, supporting the resettled farmers, and promoting social cohesion.





Mugabe thus viewed the land issue as fundamentally political, asserting that no 'sane' judge could resolve it through conventional legal means. He emphasised that the land acquisition program aimed for equity and justice and at the height of the FTLRP he emphasised that no white farmers were being hounded out of the country and said:

...we are getting land from them that is all...not their land, our land...because they are British settlers...citizens by colonisation, seizing land from the original people of the country...they knew about it, they knew we had this programme of land acquisition and reform...the British knew about it... (CNN 2009).

This and other narratives were critical as they transformed the FTLRP from a simple land redistribution effort into a symbolic struggle for national identity, sovereignty, and decolonisation, framing land reform as essential for economic justice and historical redemption.

The discussion above is important for several reasons. Land reform in Zimbabwe can be seen representing an important case study of historical rectification, revealing the challenges of addressing systemic inequities. It shows that the FTLRP was not merely an economic policy but a social and political process of reimagining national identity and economic relationships. The narrative of this article is thus premised on providing a detailed examination of the dialectic between historical injustice, political agency, and economic restructuring, challenging simplistic narratives on the FTLRP and exposing the realities of post-colonial societal transformation.

### **The struggle for land: Mugabe's vision of sovereignty and identity**

As highlighted in the sections above, the nationalist movement in then-Rhodesia was instrumental in the fight against colonialism, racial segregation, and structural inequalities. Central to this struggle was the quest for self-determination and control over natural resources, particularly the land, which emerged as a key grievance. Understanding Robert Mugabe's legacy regarding land and liberation requires an examination of his perspectives as a nationalist and liberation fighter on the African condition under colonial rule. In the 1950s, Mugabe developed strong perspectives on the African condition in colonial Rhodesia which were shaped by his observations of pervasive inequality. He believed their desire to change the status quo was justified, a sentiment echoed by many nationalists committed to dismantling colonialism. He described colonial Rhodesia as a 'wasteland,' reflecting on widespread land grabbing by the colonial elite (Mugabe 2001). Indigenous populations were confined to exhausted reserves requiring 12-15 years for soil restoration and economic crop production (Utete 2003). Mugabe found alignment of his views with those of the former Catholic Bishop of Umtali Donald Raymond Lamont's 1959 critique of land inequality, who questioned how Africans could resist 'subversive propaganda' while struggling on poor soil adjacent to 'hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile soil' left unused for speculation by colonial elites. In 1957, Lamont had urged others to 'go into the (native) reserves and see what they live on, and you will understand,' a sentiment which Mugabe frequently referenced to highlight the moral crisis of land dispossession (see Utete 2003, Mugabe 2001).



Mugabe's opposition to the racist Rhodesian regime was rooted in his belief that the land question was urgent and needed redress. He consistently linked post-land reform initiatives to the struggle for independence and national sovereignty, particularly after 2000 when the land issue became critically significant following the FTLRP. He stated, '...we delivered political independence... we could not deliver the freedom you had no power... others, the very people we fought against, remained in control of our economies ...throughout Africa it is the same. That is why there is no industrialisation in Africa (SABC News 2015). Addressing the 45th Ordinary Session of the ZANU PF Central Committee in 2000, Mugabe had emphasised that '...our perspective on the land reform programme derives from our struggle for sovereign independence... We died and suffered for our land. We died and suffered for sovereignty over natural resources of which land... is the most important' (Mugabe 2001:109). This rhetoric is an example of how on numerous occasions, Mugabe consistently linked land reform to the independence struggle and national sovereignty. This was particularly common following the FTLRP.

When addressing the Church, Mugabe had argued that the land question shared a 'siamese closeness' with national independence and sovereignty, tracing this struggle through multiple resistance movements from King Lobengula's fight against British encroachment in 1893 to the First Chimurenga led by Nehanda and Kaguvi, through to the Second and Third Chimurenga. Mugabe thus viewed the land question as central to the liberation struggle, emphasising its importance in achieving genuine national sovereignty. Mugabe initially claimed that land reform efforts were not intended to displace white farmers entirely. On this issue he had asserted that: '...we have said it as we acquire our land, we will not deprive the white farmers of land completely...everyone is entitled to at least one farm, but they continue to have more than one farm 15,20,35 farms one person...these are not figures I am just getting out of my mind these are real figures' (AP Archives 2002). The land reform approach thus sought to balance historical injustices while ensuring that Zimbabweans could reclaim ownership of their land. While accepting the Chairmanship of the African Union in 2015 he had said, '...we need to ensure that they (people) have access to land, and that Africa's vast agricultural potential is fully harnessed' (AU 2015).

For Mugabe, the land had political, economic, and cultural implications. It was on this that he had declared that '...we single-mindedly pushed for the resolution of the land question... after all, the land is ours by birth, right, and struggle (Mugabe 2001:118). Mugabe's views can be seen aligning with broader decolonial theorists Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, who conceptualised land as a complex entity that transcends its mere economic value. Mugabe was aware of this hence an unwavering commitment to historical transformation and a revolutionary spirit which was encapsulated and exemplified by a declarative statement which he made at the 48th Ordinary Session of the ZANU (PF) Central Committee when he said this on the land reform programme: '...we will win, we are winning for at no stage and time in history of mankind has colonial occupation ever lasted forever' (Mugabe 2001:93).

Fanon viewed land as a site of geopolitical colonisation, where spatial relations reflect power dynamics. He argued that colonization is fundamentally about the organization of space, which alienates the colonized from their land and identity (Ouassa, 2015). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon posited that true revolution involves not just reclaiming land but creating a new political world. This emphasised the foundational role of land in establishing a liberated



identity (Fanon 2001). Complementing Fanon's perspective, Mbembe's (2001) postcolonial discourse explored how land is intertwined with postcolonial trauma and identity. In *On the Postcolony*, he argues that understanding land goes beyond material possession to encompass cultural memory and historical narratives. Mbembe emphasises land as a canvas for cultural expression and a site of collective memory, shaping the postcolonial experience and identity formation in Africa (Mbembe 2001). With Mugabe's approach to land in Zimbabwe, there are many overlaps. Mugabe's narratives when he spoke of the land was to transform it from a colonial commodity to a sacred national resource, challenging power structures inherited from the colonial era. His perspective was to present an understanding that land was more than just a resource, but it was a site of historical reclamation, cultural restoration, and national rebirth.

The land question in Zimbabwe when viewed from Mugabe's perspective thus represents a dynamic narrative of resistance, sovereignty, and the ongoing struggle to redefine national identity in the aftermath of colonial occupation. It is worth noting that for Mugabe, it was more of a regional question, affecting other post settler countries in the region. On this he said:

We have within our national neighbourhood African countries who share our predicament as far as their land is under occupation. Namibia has such a situation, so does South Africa. Further afield, Mauritius faces similar contradictions, as does many former colonies on the continent and beyond (2001:119).

With post settler and non-settler countries in Africa and beyond facing unprecedented challenges over land, Mugabe believed global capitalism was shifting its focus down into real estate and land had become crucial to control. These dynamics had seen the strengthening of ties by former liberation movements whom Mugabe saw as feeling and sharing the same problem over global capitalism on land. The liberation movements had come in support of Zimbabwe as it dealt with its land question while they also became a buffer against imperialism. This is why he said:

Liberation movements ANC, PAC, SWAPO, MPLA, FRELIMO and their governments. They have done much more than support us, they have stood by us in what is in fact a bruising fight against very powerful, very vicious and vengeful nations of imperial dominance. (Mugabe 2001:119)

Mugabe's vision of sovereignty transcended mere land redistribution, embodying a fundamental challenge to colonial power structures and racial hierarchies. His conception of genuine independence necessitated dismantling economic relationships that perpetuated racial inequalities. He said:

It cannot be equality when as we look at each other...say you have land, that you have big business and I do not have it and I see myself as a labourer as a worker looking for jobs every day and you all the time remaining a Master, an employer, there is no equality that has to go (SABC 2016).

For Mugabe, true liberation required transforming the material conditions that sustained colonial-era racial and economic inequalities. This relates to and can be aligned to the dynamics articulated by Fanon and Mbembe, whereby his land reform strategy overtly and covertly



sought to heal the psychological wounds of colonialism, restore cultural dignity, and create a new political landscape that challenged the epistemological foundations of colonial land ownership with economic outcomes. In the next section we engage with Mugabe and imperial and neo-colonial dynamics.

### **Anti-imperial rhetoric and the FTLRP**

The FTLRP has been a focal point of international criticism, framed through narratives of agricultural decline and economic disruption. Studies emphasise decreased agricultural output, particularly in maize, soyabean and wheat production, alongside commercial agriculture's collapse and its connections to manufacturing sectors (Runganga et al., 2022; Mpofu 2018). Critics highlight market instability, chronic food shortages (Kapuya et al., 2013), and a low-equilibrium trap worsening hyperinflation and unemployment (Muchara & Obi, 2011). International portrayals suggest land allocation benefits were skewed toward politically connected individuals within a top-down governance framework (Ncube, 2021; Simpson & Hawking, 2018). This narrative requires examination as it perpetuates neo-colonial perspectives, privileging certain success metrics while sidelining discussions of historical justice and sovereignty. Scholars increasingly recognise that focusing solely on agricultural productivity overshadows potential benefits in addressing land inequities (Mkodzongi, 2022; Chipenda 2019). The FTLRP has shown resilience, granting land access to marginalised groups and potentially improving rural livelihoods, incomes, and agricultural output in various regions (Mkodzongi, 2020; Moyo 2013).

It can be argued that the program transcended its policy origins to become an ideological movement positioning land redistribution as a mechanism of national liberation and anti-imperial resistance. Mugabe's rhetorical approach transformed the FTLRP by cultivating a narrative emphasising self-determination and resistance against colonial influences. This is evident when Mugabe (2001: 94) declared:

It is only when we make sacrifices, when we demand and determine the pace of transformative change that we get the results we wish and deserve. This is what the FTLRP means. It is an economic correlative of the liberation struggle, and we refuse to negotiate its legitimacy or even parameters.

Mugabe passionately believed that hostile neo-colonial forces, primarily Western countries led by Britain, were actively attempting to obstruct the land reform process. His interpretation of the 2000 Draft Constitution's rejection exemplified this perspective, noting how whites rallied local and international support in opposing the Constitution due to clauses that would have expedited land reform. He argued substantial financial resources had been mobilised to form an opposition movement (the Movement for Democratic Change) aimed at defeating the process of correcting historical injustices (Mugabe 2001). He said that when Zimbabwe assumed ownership of the land, it had experienced '...practical demonisation... from those who had selfish and vested interests in our land...' (AU 2015). The confrontation with Blair whom Mugabe called 'B-Liar', and government became particularly significant in his anti-imperial narrative. His 2004 address captured this tension:



Regime change, Mr Blair? Who are you? Who are you to talk of regime change in Zimbabwe? One of us, by what connection sir, do you hear me? Ancestral connection? And who were these ancestors, can we know? No, Zimbabwe is for Zimbabweans. And only Zimbabweans can determine who shall rule them and who shall not... (AP Archive 2004).

Mugabe thus consistently framed the land issue as a struggle between rightful indigenous ownership and colonial dispossession. At the 2002 Earth Summit, he articulated this perspective:

...indeed, ours is an agrarian economy an imperative that renders the issue of access to land paramount. In our situation...this fundamental question has pitted the black majority who are the right holders and therefore primary stakeholders to our land against an obdurate and internationally well connected racial minority largely of British descent and brought in and sustained by British colonialism now being supported and manipulated by the Blair government" (AP Archive 2002).

His defiance reached its peak at the World Summit on Sustainable Development with the now-famous declaration: ...we are not Europeans. We have not asked for any inch of Europe, any square inch of that territory. So, Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe! (Mugabe quoted by Staff Reporter 2002). At the 2003 Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Mugabe broadened his critique to attack imperialism more generally. As noted by Phimster & Raftopolous (2004), he condemned the ‘...war-like disposition... of the new imperialism’ and characterised the United States and Britain as ‘...fierce hunting bulldogs raring to go, as they sniff for more blood, Third World blood.’ His warning to Britain against attempting ‘...to undermine the sovereignty of my country and introduce neo-colonialist rule’ resonated with the audience, reflecting broader anti-colonial sentiments.

While international media privileged coverage of white farm seizures and human rights concerns (Chipuriro & Mkodzongi 2022), this narrative overshadowed deeper questions of historical injustices and resource inequalities. The FTLRP from Mugabe's perspective emerged as a unique decolonization strategy beyond agricultural redistribution to become a symbolic confrontation with perceived imperial structures. When analysed using the PEAC framework, the program represented an intersection of political rhetoric, historical trauma, and nationalist ideology, emerging as a distinctive strategy of decolonization aimed at reconstructing a national narrative to disrupt colonial legacies (see Mugabe 2001).

### **Mugabe and sanctions against Zimbabwe**

Mugabe's reservations and fears of neo-colonial and imperial machinations against Zimbabwe were justified as sanctions were imposed on the country and this reshaped the country's global relationships. The FTLRP precipitated an international diplomatic and economic response that continues to affect the country today. The international community framed the FTLRP as a human rights issue, thereby legitimising a sanctions regime that targeted Zimbabwe's political and economic infrastructure (Chipuriro & Mkodzongi, 2022). The program was considered as marking a significant departure from international financial and economic norms as it prioritised political objectives over economic stability and market principles (Simpson &





Hawkins, 2018). The sanctions mechanism against Zimbabwe was said to be externally driven and orchestrated by Western powers, with Britain cast as the primary antagonist. Mugabe viewed Britain, under Tony Blair, as leading a coordinated effort to defeat ZANU PF and reverse land reforms in favour of their 'kith and kin' who were beneficiaries of colonialism. His articulation of external interference was comprehensive and explicit, with British officials exemplified by Peter Hain, Robin Cook, and Jack Straw singled out as prominent figures in a vicious local and international media and diplomatic campaign designed to preserve an inequitable land system. He had said:

...our enemies and their local lackeys are hard at work, employing every trick in the book to defeat and reverse land reforms by ousting ZANU PF from power. The West led by Britain through the Westminster Foundation, the Americans through certain conduits tucked under USAID, and the Danes and the Swedes through their ruling parties, the Germans and Dutch through Foundations and other NGOs are pouring money into the country for opposition support (Mugabe 2001).

The sanctions regime against Zimbabwe unfolded with the United States enacting the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) in 2001, while the European Union imposed 'smart sanctions' said to target the ruling elite (Dashwood, 2002). These comprehensive measures included travel bans, asset freezes, restrictions on trade and investment among others (Chipuriro & Mkodzongi, 2022). International financial institutions, including the IMF and World Bank, suspended aid and loans, effectively weaponising economic instruments to exert political pressure. Mugabe's response to sanctions wove together themes of African sovereignty, land reform, and anti-colonialism. At the Earth Summit in 2002, he framed Zimbabwe's situation in pan-African terms. He had said:

Let no one who is negative want to spoil what we are doing for ourselves in order to unite Africa...We belong to this continent. We do not mind having and bearing sanctions banning us from Europe. We are not Europeans, we have not asked for any inch of Europe...let our Africans come first in the development of Africa, not as puppets, not as beggars but as a sovereign people (AP 2002).

Mugabe's most comprehensive indictment articulated a broader conspiracy he said:

...the British government which as the colonial master created the problem we are having to correct, an all-round international campaign was mounted to block or frustrate any efforts by our country to do business with the rest of the world...the overriding calculation was to destabilise and aggravate the economic situation here...to create popular disaffection...the goal of unseating ZANU PF and replacing it by a pliant one that would not threaten European interests historically entrenched by colonialism (Mugabe 2001).

As sanctions gripped the economy of Zimbabwe, Mugabe increasingly portrayed them as tools of neo-colonial control. At the 2016 UN General Assembly, he had said that:

...our biggest impediment to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda is the burden of punitive and heinous sanctions imposed upon us by the same hegemonic and neo-imperialist powers among us here... My country Zimbabwe is the innocent victim of their



spiteful sanctions...for some years now they have maintained the sanctions on us. We are being collectively punished for doing what all other nations have done and still do that is possess, own their natural resources...Those who have imposed these sanctions would rather we pander to their interests at the expense of the basic needs of the majority of our people (Mugabe on TimesLive 2016).

This framing of sanctions as Western punishment for African self-determination proved persuasive regionally, garnering support from SADC, the African Union, and the Non-Aligned Movement (Mugabe, 2012). Mugabe was also able to use international platforms to show how they were and impediment to economic development and human welfare and he called on ‘...Britain, Europe, the United States and their allies to remove the illegal and unjustified sanctions against my country and its people (Mugabe on TimesLive 2016). Speaking at the 70<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the United Nations in 2015, Mugabe denounced ‘in the strongest terms’ the illegal sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe, demanding their immediate and unconditional removal and said ‘we do not know what wrong we have done to the United States...can it leave us free and independent to do our own things...we do not want war we do not want interference, we do not want to hear of regime change at all’ (Mugabe on VoA 2015). It is worth noting that the scholarly discourse surrounding these sanctions has remained deeply polarised. While some argue that they were necessary to hold the government accountable for human rights violations, others contend that they worsened Zimbabwe's economic decline (Matondi, 2012; Shulika & Sabi, 2018). The sanctions have contributed to unresolved contradictions in Zimbabwe's developmental trajectory, leading to political polarisation and declining agricultural production (Moyo, 2011a, 2011b). This outcome partially validated Mugabe's rhetoric and highlighted the counterproductive nature of international interventionist strategies in dynamic postcolonial contexts.

## **Discussion**

It can be argued that Mugabe's legacy in Zimbabwe, particularly through the FTLRP, deserves more historical appreciation than it often receives. Through the theoretical lens of PEAC, his contributions to Zimbabwe's sovereignty and agricultural transformation can be understood as interventions into colonial economic structures, marking him as an important figure among post-colonial African leaders. His removal from office and subsequent death left a considerable void on the international stage, where his articulate and forceful challenges to neo-colonial and imperial machinations set him apart.

The evolution of Mugabe's ideological approach reflects a broader pattern of nation-building that characterised many post-colonial African leaders. Viewed through PEAC's framework of social relations and class dynamics (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2009), his administration's journey from socialist principles to market-based approaches, before pursuing a hybrid model, represents the dynamic negotiation of post-colonial state power. This ideological journey was articulated in his 1997 BBC HARDtalk interview, where he reflected that:

We had to accept change should come...we had to revise our own ideology, sadly we had to shed some of our Marxist apparel...in my heart I feel (I am a) socialist (BBC 1997).



The Zimbabwe post-colonial trajectory bears striking parallels to the governance approaches of prominent early African leaders who similarly faced post-colonial nation-building challenges. As observed by Lumumba-Kasongo (2011:70), in Africa the 'national project' was important to state-building, encompassing the creation of new institutions, development of national culture, and implementation of citizen-focused programs. Leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Seretse Khama (Botswana), Modibo Keita (Mali), Ahmad Sekou Touré (Guinea), Patrice Lumumba (Congo), and Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso) rejected European-based market economies, viewing them as colonial constructs, and instead embraced state-controlled systems focused on national development (Gumede 2019). For these early African leaders, the emphasis on agriculture emerged as a key development strategy. I would argue that this later manifested in Mugabe's FTLRP, which in different ways echoed these early post-independence approaches. As noted by Wilfrid & Edwige (2004), agriculture became central to the development agenda across post-colonial Africa, with leaders channelling limited resources toward the sector as a foundation for economic and social development. This agricultural focus was considered important in addressing colonial policies of exclusion and separate development that had historically denied Africans access to agricultural land (Ndhlovu, 2020).

Mugabe's resistance to neo-colonial control through the FTLRP placed Zimbabwe among numerous nations targeted by Western sanctions over the past five decades. Through PEAC's analytical framework, these sanctions can be understood as mechanisms for maintaining global capitalist structures (Bernstein, 2015) and protecting Western economic interests and hegemony. Like Cuba (under US embargo since the 1960s), Iran (sanctioned over nuclear programs in the 2010s), Iraq (comprehensive sanctions in the 1990s), Russia (targeted after Crimea's annexation in 2014, lately on the war with Ukraine), and North Korea (nuclear program sanctions), Zimbabwe faced punitive economic measures from the US and EU (Agarwal, 2022; Ahn, 2019). This was ostensibly for human rights concerns but fundamentally linked to its challenge of Western hegemony through land redistribution. These sanctions, targeting key economic sectors and individuals, mirror broader patterns where the US and EU employ economic coercion against nations pursuing self-determination (Agarwal, 2022; Ahn, 2019). Mugabe, like many leaders who opposed Western hegemony, found himself demonised in international media, joining figures like Lumumba, Sankara, and Touré who faced international hostility for their anti-imperial stances. As Garfield (2002) notes, while sanctions often fail to achieve their stated political objectives, they consistently result in significant civilian suffering (as has been the case in Zimbabwe), reinforcing their role as tools for maintaining global economic control.

The Economic Structural Adjustment (ESAP) period (1991) marked a turning point from Zimbabwe's 'golden age' of 4% annual growth and social progress (Kinsey 2004; Elich, 2002) toward neoliberal policies. These were later framed by Mugabe as a form of Western economic imperialism. ESAP triggered widespread challenges including labour retrenchments which led to increased farm occupations, while communal areas faced land pressures and resource poaching (Moyo, 2000). Currency devaluation and austerity made agricultural inputs unaffordable for peasant farmers, eliminated food subsidies, and reduced social spending. Mugabe positioned these effects as evidence of continued colonial exploitation, later covertly using ESAP's failures to justify radical land reform as crucial for national sovereignty. As Moyo & Nyoni (2013) note, ESAP exposed smallholders to predatory markets, reinforcing North-



South inequalities. Despite theoretical benefits of liberalisation, gains favoured skilled labour over poor households (Moyo, 1995, 2000). Mugabe utilised this to strengthen his anti-Western rhetoric, portraying land reform as essential for breaking Western economic control. As Moyo (2013:34) concludes, ‘...the structural and social contradictions of ESAP and limited land redistribution fuelled the mobilisation of radical land reclamation movements, which influenced state expropriation, while most formal civil society organisations stood aside.’

Mugabe's eventual embrace of radical land reforms, coupled with anti-imperialist ideology, mirrors the sovereignty-focused development philosophies of his predecessors. Rivkin (1969:156) had observed that: ‘...nation building and economic development... are twin goals and intimately related tasks.’ This was reflected in Mugabe's later policies, highlighted above were as ZANU PF they had recognised their ideological shortcomings, with their Marxist rhetoric more theoretical than practical. Considering this mismatch, Mugabe had attempted to balance capitalist economic approaches with socialist principles in social services. Emphasis was support for the peasantry and vulnerable populations. On this he had said:

... so on one hand we (decided) will be capitalist in our thrust but we have to retain a socialist thrust in regard to social services...in regard to the poor, the poor we shall always have and in regard to the peasantry...taking care of the people in times of hardships and in times of drought (BBC 1997).

It was this thrust that was to guide Zimbabwe for decades.

The legacy of Mugabe's land reform program today faces significant challenges through international agricultural investments and shifting governmental ideology. Analysed through PEAC's understanding of property rights as social constructions within power hierarchies (Akram-Lodhi, 2007), these investments have disrupted existing development trajectories and local livelihoods (Moyo, 2016). These international capital acquisitions of African lands, spanning agriculture, livestock, biofuel production, and conservation projects, have had implications for the continent's autonomous development agenda (Chambati et al., 2018). With approximately 70 percent of Africa's population dependent on agriculture for primary or supplementary income, these international investments present serious challenges (Moyo, 2016). They represent a form of primitive accumulation which is characterised by the displacement of peasants from their means of production and the creation of distinct propertied and dispossessed classes (Shivji, 2019). In Zimbabwe, in recent years, there has been an increasing documentation on how such investments have led to displacements (Batisayi & Chipato 2022; Mkodzongi 2022). These investments, regardless of their presentation, typically result in the displacement of African peasantry without meaningful compensation, effectively destroying the lives, cultures, and livelihoods of land-dependent communities.

The Zimbabwe situation has been further complicated following Mugabe's removal from power in 2017, with the President Emmerson Mnangagwa administration pursuing a markedly different ideological trajectory. Under the new administration, there has been an intensification of neoliberal macroeconomic policies, representing a significant departure from Mugabe's revolutionary stance (Mkodzongi, 2022). Under Mnangagwa, ZANU PF has been criticised and accused of suffering from an ideological crisis, abandoning its revolutionary roots and redistributive economic empowerment agenda in favour of neoliberal orthodoxy (Chipuriro &





Mkodzongi, 2022). This shift is evidenced by the Global Compensation Deed, committing Zimbabwe to compensate former white commercial farmers for improvements made on the farms, and the promotion of land grabs especially by countries from the East under the Vision 2030 Agenda.

The new administration's approach has been characterised by what scholars describe as a comprador bourgeoisie with political connections to ZANU PF leadership, facilitating resource grabbing without clear ideological orientation toward national development (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019; Mkodzongi 2022). This represents a stark contrast to Mugabe's era, where ZANU PF positioned itself as a revolutionary party promoting anti-imperialist ideology and black economic empowerment (Mkodzongi 2022). The shift from pro-peasant policies to pro-capital approaches has undermined prospects for food sovereignty and accumulation from below (Ndhlovu, 2022; Tom, 2024). Contemporary challenges have also included unresolved land administration issues that hamper agricultural investment. Mostly affected are A2 farmers who struggle to utilise their newly acquired land for bank loans due to difficulties and limitations of the tenure documents (Moyo & Chambati, 2013; Mkodzongi, 2022). The politics of finance have led to complex collateral arrangements and joint venture partnerships as farmers attempt to boost productivity under challenging business conditions (Scoones & Murimbarimba, 2022). These joint ventures, while encouraged in the post-Mugabe context, often resort to informal arrangements due to complex procedures, creating a racially contested political economy as resettled farmers become integrated within wider capital circuits (Scoones & Murimbarimba, 2022:23; Chipenda 2022).

In recent times the greatest threat to Mugabe's legacy can be seen as having emerged in October 2024 when the Zimbabwe government announced plans to issue private title on land held by beneficiaries of the FTLRP through the Land Tenure Implementation Programme (GoZ 2024). This dramatic shift towards privatisation of land acquired during the FTLRP can be seen representing a departure from Mugabe's vision of land as a collective heritage and tool for economic decolonisation. The new policy direction is influenced by neoliberal thinking and right-wing oriented intellectuals who have long advocated for private property rights as the cornerstone of agricultural development. This marks a decisive break from the revolutionary principles that had underpinned the FTLRP. The policy's implementation guidelines prioritise veterans of the liberation struggle, youths, and women; while restricting land transfers to indigenous Zimbabweans and it excludes communal lands under traditional leaders jurisdiction (GoZ 2024). The government's justification centres on addressing challenges in accessing agricultural finance, lack of investment motivation, and issues with loan repayment and inheritance (GoZ 2024). It has been cautioned that this privatisation initiative contradicts genuine calls for decolonization of land tenure systems, with private property rights having been historically weaponised to expropriate indigenous land during colonialism, entrenching inequality and uneven development across African states (Mazwi & Mudimu 2024).

Scholars have expressed serious reservations about this ideological shift. Scoones (2024) for example drawing on collaborative work with the late Professor Sam Moyo and building on Professor Mandi Rukuni's views from President Mugabe's Land Tenure Commission of the early 1990s, advocates for maintaining a multiform tenure system adapted to different contexts. He warns against establishing a completely free land market, citing risks of land concentration and elite capture. Considering these recent developments Scoones (2024) has argued that





existing mechanisms which include offer letters, permits, and leases could effectively provide secure tenure if properly implemented and maintained, questioning the elevation of freehold title to a ‘gold standard’ despite its fundamental flaws regarding equity and justice. A takeaway from this is that the new changes represent within the PEAC's framework, a significant shift in how social groups negotiate access to land and resources (Bernstein, 2015), marking a significant transition in the country’s land tenure system.

President Mnangagwa's rhetoric attempts to bridge the emergent ideological divide, linking the new tenure system to liberation war ideals while embracing market-based solutions. At the programme's launch, he echoed Mugabe's language about land and liberation. He said ‘...we fought the liberation war to get back our land, *ivhu rava nevene varo, vene vevhu vave nevhu ravo.*’ While asserting that ‘...the land reform programme is therefore irreversible,’ he simultaneously promoted a neoliberal vision of land as collateral, arguing that ‘...land tenure is critically important to Zimbabwe's economic growth and development. It encourages investment, improves agricultural production and productivity and lifts many out of poverty into prosperity’ (Mnangagwa quoted by Murwira 2024).

This transformation of land policy, targeting an estimated 23,500 A2 farmers and 360,000 A1 farmers, represents more than just an administrative change. Through PEAC's theoretical lens, this shift reveals the ongoing tension between national sovereignty and global capitalist structures in shaping agrarian transformation (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2009). It signifies a significant shift away from Mugabe's revolutionary land reform principles toward a market-oriented approach to agricultural development. This change, while framed as empowerment through ‘...tenure that will unlock the value of our land allowing it to be used as collateral,’ by President Mnangagwa marks a departure from Mugabe's vision of land as a tool for social justice and economic decolonisation. The influence of neoliberal thinking and right-wing oriented intellectuals in shaping this new direction suggests a broader ideological realignment that threatens to undermine the foundational principles of Zimbabwe's land reform program and a threat to Mugabe’s legacy.

## **Conclusion**

The trajectory of Zimbabwe's land reform under Mugabe's leadership represents a dynamic intersection of post-colonial nation-building, sovereignty assertion, and ideological transformation. As demonstrated through the analysis, the FTLRP transcended mere land redistribution, embodying a fundamental challenge to neo-colonial economic structures while attempting to redress historical injustices. Mugabe's approach, though controversial and costly in the short term, can be seen representing a significant moment in articulating post-colonial African sovereignty, particularly in its defiance of Western-backed economic models and international legal frameworks. Despite extensive scholarship on Zimbabwe's land reform, there has been limited understanding how Mugabe's stance on land reform has fitted within broader patterns of Western response to African economic nationalism and this article has bridged this gap.

It is clear from the narrative that like many leaders who opposed Western hegemony, Mugabe found himself demonised in international media, joining other post-colonial African leaders who faced international hostility for their anti-imperial stances. His willingness to face



international isolation and sanctions in pursuit of economic self-determination represents an understudied example of the relationship between African leadership, sovereignty assertion, and Western opposition. This has made Mugabe to have an unparalleled legacy which will forever be etched in Africa's post-colonial history.

The article has shown how Mugabe's ideological journey from Marxism to a hybrid model reflected the practical challenges faced by post-colonial African states in pursuing development goals. This was evidenced through the ESAP period and its aftermath, which exposed the contradictions between market liberalisation and social justice objectives. The implementation of the FTLRP is of critical importance and significance as it marked a decisive break from conventional approaches to land reform and demonstrated the socio-economic transformation of Zimbabwe's agrarian landscape. The post-Mugabe era presents interesting dynamics and contradictions. It has witnessed a significant shift away from revolutionary principles toward a more explicitly market-oriented approach. The recent move toward land privatisation, coupled with the emergence of international agricultural investments under the Mnangagwa administration, represents a departure from Mugabe's vision of land as a tool for economic decolonisation. This transformation raises questions about the future of Zimbabwe's agrarian structure and the legacy of the FTLRP.

The Zimbabwe case demonstrates how land remains a crucial battleground for political and economic power contestations in Africa's post-colonial landscape. As post-colonial states continue to navigate between national imperatives and global norms, Mugabe's approach to land reform, despite its controversies and challenges, stands as an example of state-led economic transformation and the assertion of national sovereignty. The ongoing tensions between market efficiency and social equity in Zimbabwe's current land policy debates suggest that the questions raised by Mugabe's agrarian revolution remain central to broader discussions of development, sovereignty, and social justice in post-colonial Africa. This legacy continues to inform contemporary debates on land reform and economic decolonisation across the continent. It offers useful lessons for understanding the challenges and possibilities of government-led transformation in hostile international environments.

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