Land Reform in Southern African Countries:

What factors push government officials (colonial or post-colonial) to embark on land reforms? Why do local communities sometimes resist land reforms?

According to Warriner (1969) a simple way of defining land reforms is to name it “the redistribution of property or rights in land for the benefit of the landless, tenants and farm labourers”. Land reforms are mainly characterised by the government’s change of laws, regulations or customs regarding land ownership. Land reforms deal with the government in power distributing property which is in most times agricultural land. In some instances it also involves the distribution of land from the more powerful or wealthy group of people such as nobles and bourgeoisie and giving potions of the land to the less powerful in society especially during the start of the post-colonial error in most countries in Southern Africa. During the pre-colonial period, land or pieces of land belonged to different ethnic groups, clans and lineages but now in the post-colonial land reform programs were to introduce individual ownership of land. There are many reasons why the government (both colonial and post-colonial) embark on land reforms and some of the factors influencing them include political reasons such promoting communism or socialism, social reasons such as separating the blacks from the whites and creating social stratification and economic reasons such as facilitating private investments and raising the country’s economic growth of the agricultural sector just but to mention a few reasons. Though some of the government’s reasons to embark on land reforms appear to be noble, local communities refuse these land reforms since they create social stratifications, at times increase poverty, destroy the matrilineal societies and are more political in nature rather than a means to better the people’s lives especially during the colonial error. The essay below will vividly portray why the government embarks on land reform programs and why local people resist these reforms using examples from both colonial and post-colonial Southern African countries.

To begin with, land reform programs have been practised by various governments of Southern African counties both during the colonial and post-colonial period. Governments have been prompted to carry out land reforms mainly for both political and social reasons. For instance in South Africa the colonial government enforced the Land act of 1913 which became the backbone for the Apartheid. According to Bernadette Atuadene (2011), “under colonialism and apartheid, the ruling white minority stole vast amounts of land from Black Africans in Zimbabwe and South Africa”. This land act declared that all black Africans were to be given land in the reserves and making it illegal for them to work as share croppers. In 1958, Dr Hendrick Verwed got into government as Prime minister and he had the aim to update the Apartheid policy further into a system he named “separate development”. The black south Africans were then named the “Bantusans” and the government eradicated the black South Africans from their rural land or area and distributed it among the whites. The blacks were forced to sell their land to the white farmers at very low prices, between 1961 to 1994 more than 3.5 million people were forcibly removed their homesteads only to be placed in the Bantusans area were they had to languish in poverty. This now brings to light why local communities resist land reforms as they do not promote liberty, equality and fraternity. The black South Africans could not bear with the conditions of the land reform as it worsened their economy and as part of their response in 1955 a Freedom Charter was released which stated that South African land belonged to every race either black or white that took residence in the country.

Furthermore, another cause of governments enforcing land reforms is because of economic factors or reasons. Most of the countries located in Southern Africa depend on agriculture as a very paramount means of production not only as subsistence farming but also as commercial farming. In a bid to better the economy, many governments have embarked on the task of land reform by giving large tracts of land to investors so as to boost the economy. For instance in Zambia, according to Augustine Ngombe and Ramin Keivani(31st January 2013) customary land was given away to facilitate private investment in Zambia. According to the two anthropologists, “in 1995 the government enacted a pro-investment law to attract investment form abroad; consequently large tracts of customary land were converted to private tenure as increasing foreign investments were made in the country”. Some of the customary land that was given to the investors led to the rise of mines such as Lumwa and Kanyashi opened up in Solwezi. With this point in mind, it is also clear why local communities refuse these land reforms as the governments take away customary land or land that was inherited by the local people from their ancestors only to give it away to whites for investment from abroad and this becomes a very sensitive event to the community. Though it is aimed at benefiting the entire country, most uneducated or illiterate people refuse this idea as they do not clearly understand its main objective.

In addition, governments also have not only seen the reason to embark on land reforms for political motives after the post-colonial error. Looking at the situation in Mozambique, the government has enforced a land reform that benefits the local community, country and foreign investors. This has been accomplished through the establishment of partnership between investors and rural communities. According to Devereusc and Palmero (1999), “by encouraging partnerships it is hoped that land tenure security of both communities and investors will be strengthened, mutual beneficial relationships will develop leading to a better environment for investment by both outside investors and rural communities”. This is beneficial to the local community as a subsistence farmer can practise the modern farming systems in his own fields from what he has learnt in the large commercial farms. A family can also upgrade itself if most of its members are able to work with the foreign investors to earn a wage. However some local communities refuse to be part of these land reforms as they despise to work with the whites after their experiences with them during the colonial era. The local residents of the areas are usually very cultural and perform traditional rituals before and after harvests to appease the ancestors and the white investors are in most cases likely to bring modernity and the western culture that will end up destroying their culture. In most cases when Africans from rural backgrounds work in farms or mines of the foreigners they are given low wages and this ends up leading to manipulation and oppression of one race by the other which is what local communities try to shun from through refusing these land reforms.

Moreover, basing on the situation in Malawi, governments embark on land reform programs with the objective to promote equal gender rights between man and woman. According to Pauline E. Peters and Daimon Kambewa (2007:454), “the aim of the land policy is to shift inheritance from the lineal patterns to bilateral, that is, for all children irrespective of gender to inherit, will have the effect of dispossessing women of their land rights in the matrilineal-matrilocal areas...”. The government of Malawi is very dependent on the agricultural sector for its economic growth as it largely depends on exports of tobacco, tea and sugar. Farming is not only essential on large commercial farms in Malawi but it is very important as it is the means of production of most of the families in the country as they practise subsistence farming in their customary land. 84% of the country’s population live in rural areas and this has led to land becoming very important for the survival of the families. The land ordinance of 1951 categorised land as public, private or customary land. According to (GoM 2002: 4.7.2c) “customary land is given as 'land with secure tenure by families, corporations, organisations and individuals' (ibid. 4.7.2a), hence, the unit for titling is not specified”. In Malawi societies such as Zomba and some of its surrounding regions practise matrilineal inheritance in their customary lands. The government has then taken action through land reform programs as a means to promote equal gender rights between the male and female children. Though this sounds as noble idea, local matrilineal societies resist these reforms as they soil their culture which promotes matrilineal inheritance. Since most of the locals do not understand why equality is important between different genders, they often miss-interpret it as prejudice of the government against their culture and as an attempt to save their culture they resist the land reforms imposed by the government.

In addition, governments also embark on land reform programs with the agenda to keep track of the records of land ownership basing on the situation that was in pre-colonial Kenya. During the pre-colonial period in Kenya, in places such as Embu, local residents of the communities had the authority to cultivate new land in any locality so long as it was not in use by someone else or had not been defined as another person’s own land (Angelique Haugerud 1989:74). In order to identify that the land had been accumulated by someone else one had to place stones or plant a certain type of tree so that no one else could take the land from him. This then became a need for the government to embark on land reform with the motive to gain some of the crown land that belonged to no one so that it could be put to use for commercial farming that would elevate the country’s economy. The government would not take away the land already accumulated by the people but it would require one to have title deeds for his or her land so that it would not be taken or so as to avoid ownership disputes. According to Moris (1970:124), “as early as the 1920s some African political leaders had already demanded that people be allowed title deeds to their land”. However even though this seemed to be a noble idea, when the land reform was carried out in Embu in 1980s, the colonial civil servants and clan elders who monitored the land reform engaged into corruption as they let some individuals of higher social status accumulate vast pieces of land larger than average size where as some people did not get a very small potion that was sufficient. The same problems such as overcrowding and poverty that emanated from this scenario became the same as those that had affected Kikuyu earlier as the whites had obtained much of the land and this had led to the Mau Mau rebellion. This bringing to light that local communities sometimes resist land reforms as they promote inequality since land is rarely distributed equally due to corruption of the government officials and clan elders who are supervising the land reform.

More so, governments embark on land reforms with the political aim to support or engage in colonialism. Looking at the pre-colonial period in Zimbabwe which was then named Rhodesia, the British took the use of land reforms as a means to facilitate the colonisation of the country. According to Angela Cheatah (1990:198) “the quashing of the Ndebele rising in 1893 was followed by the creation of the Matibi, Shangani and Gwaai reserves, apparently 'by the Land Commission appointed by Order in Council in 1894”. The creation of these reserves was a means to separate the blacks from the white populace and also to create room for white settlement. The Gwaai and Shangani reserves were located in dry regions in Matabeleland which only had rainfall during the raining seasons and this was a strategic means to ensure that the Africans would seek work in the mines, farms and manufacturing businesses of the whites for low wages which ended up leading to oppression. This eventually led to the Zimbabweans living in abject poverty and engaging in the First Chimurenga War to fight for the land that they had been robbed off by the whites. This also sheds light as to why local communities refuse land reforms as they fear manipulation, and some of the areas were people are to be relocated are very dry and are not favourable for some means of production such as subsistence farming. Some people also refuse land reforms as they do not want to be controlled by white foreigners as how to live in their own counties.

More so, land reforms are also carried out by governments as a way to restore prestige to the people especially after if they had been colonised. Looking at the situation in Zimbabwe after colonisation everyone was geared up to live the reserves and have a claim to land they had fought for and won in 1980.According to Sam Moyo, by 2009 13 of the 15 million hectares of land controlled by 6000 white families where given to over 240 000 families of local origin. Though this seemed to be a good idea some local communities had to refuse the redistribution of land as they could not get the land due to their race. For instance people such as the coloured who were of African origin but not black could not acquire this land and so did the Shona who were in Matabeleland due to their ethnicity.

In a nutshell, it can be deduced from the above essay that governments embark on land reforms for political, social and economic reasons. The agendas of the government can be both good and bad but it is the bad motives or disadvantages of following the land reforms that makes the local communities refuse to be part of the land reform.

Bibliography

Angela Cheater (1990), *The Ideology of 'Communal' Land Tenure in Zimbabwe*: Mythogenesis Enacted? Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 60, No. 2 (1990), pp. 188-206 published on behalf of the Cambridge University Press Inter

Angelique Haugerud (1989): Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 59, No. 1, Access, Control and Use of Resources in African Agriculture (1989), pp. 61-90

Augastine Ngombe and Ramin Keivani, (31 January 2013), *Customary land reform to Facilitate Private Investment in Zambia*: Achievements Potential and Limitations

Bernadette Atuadene (2011) *South Africa’s land reform crisis*: http:www.foreignaffaris.com/articles/Africa/2011-06-16/south Africa’s land reform crisis

Devereusc And Palmero (1999), *Creating Framework for Reducing Poverty:* Institutional and Process Issues in National Poverty Policy. MOZAMBIQUE COUNTRY REPORT

Government of Malawi (GoM). 2002. Malawi National Land Policy. Lilongwe: Ministry of Lands & Housing

Moris, Jon. 1970. *'The Agrarian Revolution in Central Kenya*: a study of farm innovation in Embu District', PhD thesis, Northwestern University. Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International

Pauline E. Peters and Daimon Kambewa Source: The Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 2007), pp. 447-472 Published by: Cambridge

Sam Moyo, Et’al (2011), Three decades of agrarian reform in Zimbabwe, Journal of Peasant Studies, 38:3, 493-531

Warriner, D. (1969) Land reform in principle and practice. Clarendon Press: Oxford. ISSN: 1356-9228