

Transformations in Environment and Society in Makonde District, Zimbabwe: 2000–2015

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My study at the Rachel Carson Center seeks to investigate the socio-ecological impacts of land reform in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2015. This work addresses the question: What transformations have taken place in environment and society due to land reform in Zimbabwe? My work focuses on the transformations in environment and society in the Makonde District of Mashonaland West, contemporary Zimbabwe, 2000–2015. Makonde is worthy of study owing to its diverse people, environment, and socio-economic activities. Several studies have been carried out on the issue of land in Zimbabwe. My study differs from the existing literature, however, by offering pioneering contributions on the recent human-habitat interactions in Makonde. There is a dearth of information on the interrelationship between environmental and social changes, and in particular the reasons—the social, political, cultural, and environmental factors—behind these transformations. This study will make key contributions in this important field by using environmental and socio-economic history concepts and data. The existing works are important in providing the present study with background information, context and analysis.

Land remains the dominant issue in modern Zimbabwean history. Land rights and land possession are powerful cultural symbols of independence because land is crucial to the lives and livelihoods of most Zimbabweans. At independence in 1980, six thousand white farmers retained 39 percent of land or 15.5 million hectares of prime agro-ecological farmland. In contrast, a million black households remained confined to 41.4 percent of the generally poorer land. This generated much controversy and debate around congestion in communal areas and the underutilization of some white commercial farmlands. For these and other reasons, it was considered necessary to fast-track a large-scale politically motivated land reform in 2000. The chaotic nature of land reform was transferred to natural resources, ignoring environmental ethics. Indeed, such transformations in environment and agrarian society provide salutary reminders of the interlocking relationships between politics, production, property, poverty, and conflict.

The new A1 villages and A2 farms in Makonde have led to the clearing of woodland and grassland for settlement, cultivation, and energy consumption. This has reduced vegetation cover, resulting in lowered biological diversity and reduced productivity, and has impacted on soil conditions and standards of living. Furthermore, household livelihood strategies in response to the resettlement process, climatic variability, and macroeconomic environment have been used to engage in the sale of firewood, gold mining, gold panning and sand abstraction. These activities are likely to impact negatively on runoff processes, particularly the transportation of sediment, triggering gully erosion and, if unabated, they are likely to lead to land degradation and to negative effects on livelihoods in the long term. The situation is exacerbated by competing political power bases in which traditional leaders, land committees, and government conservation officers clash over natural resource exploitation and conservation.

Preliminary findings show the resettled Makonde farmers to be both a transitory and transforming society. They face major risks with the logistical and financial difficulties of pioneer farming. Most of these farmers focus on cash crop production—notably tobacco—which is fuelled by increased mechanization and chemical and fertilizer use—inputs often supplied freely by the state. Their major threat is the systematic insecurity generated by Zimbabwe's multiple forms of land tenure and bundle of rights. The state is hamstrung by fears of a reversal of land reform. Insecurity deters farmers from investing in long-term social relationships and conservation measures because there are widespread migrations, land disputes, conflicts, and evictions. Farmers lack basic infrastructure (schools,

hospitals, roads etc.). Many hold onto both the new farms and old communal plots, generating split households.