

Narratives on Land: State-Peasant Relations Over Fast Track Land Reform in Zimbabwe

BEVLYNE SITHOLE, BRUCE CAMPBELL, DALE DORÉ AND WITNESS KOZANAYI

Abstract: In the last few years, slogans have become more elaborate and fervent with regards to promises of delivering land to peasants in Zimbabwean communal areas. Conditions in communal areas suggest that peasants should be highly receptive to the slogans and the narratives from which they are drawn. But empirical data from a densely settled communal area challenges the universality of the slogans and exposes their irrelevance in the context of the realities of household assets, social processes, and production systems. We suggest political relations over land between peasants and political elites in the state have resulted in disengagement by the peasants.

Introduction

The government treats us like dogs. You know how a hunter treats his dogs? When the dogs catch the prey, the hunter chases the dogs away. Then he skins the animal, places the animal skin beyond the reach of the dogs lest the dogs eat it. After cooking the meat the dogs are not given anything. If there is left over meat or soup, the women are told to lock it in the kitchen so that the children can have it the following day. The hunter makes sure that the dogs do not get anything, even left over soup. He says if the dogs taste the meat, they will not hunt, instead they will steal. When the meat is finished, the hunter throws a piece of maize-meal porridge at the dogs and takes the dogs for another hunting episode. That is how the government treats us. During the war we were promised that we would live happily after attaining independence but tell me, is this good life? Where is the good life? I cannot buy any of its programmes.¹

The current narratives by the state suggests that the government acts in the interest of the peasants and speaks for them, but this metaphor of the hunter and the dog is one of many told by peasants – they illustrate the peasant view of current state narratives. Narratives have been described in the literature as a way of developing meaning and organizing experiences.² But

Bevlyne Sithole is a research associate at the Centre for Agrarian Research (SHANDUKO) in Zimbabwe and works on institutions, power relations and conflict surrounding natural resource management. Her work has taken her to all corners of Zimbabwean communal areas. **Bruce Campbell** is the Director of the Forests and Livelihoods program at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), based in Indonesia. He has undertaken research in southern Africa for 20 years, with recent work on issues at the interface of economics, sociology and ecology. **Dale Doré** is the Director of Shanduko. He is an agricultural economist with a particular interest in land reform. He has spent more than 20 years working in Zimbabwean communal areas. He provided substantial input into the land tenure commission and his PhD focussed on land holdings in communal areas. **Witness Kozanayi** is an agricultural graduate working with CIFOR and the University of Zimbabwe. He has extensive field experience in Zimbabwe working on agricultural issues, household livelihoods and institutional arrangements. He has been particularly active using participatory rural appraisal and participatory action research.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a4.pdf>

these experiences are constantly being rethought and repositioned depending on who is narrating it. Narratives are powerful: they validate action, mobilise action, and define alternatives.³ We use this metaphor as a starting point to explore the multiple dimensions of state-peasant relations over land in Zimbabwe.

We explore state-peasant relations by examining slogans, rhetoric in the media, and events leading up to and following the spontaneous invasions of commercial farms near Svoswe and Nyamandhlovhu. We also present data collected between September 2001 and February 2002 from key interviews and focus group discussions in two study areas within a densely populated communal area in Southern Zimbabwe to explore in more detail how state narratives on land are being interpreted.⁴ Peasants who have experienced fast track land reform challenge the state narratives. We suggest that peasants from the study areas are disengaging from the state.

ASSESSING STATE-PEASANT RELATIONS

Research has suggested that political relations can be understood using the concepts of engagement and disengagement. Four forms are recognised.⁵ The first is state-sponsored engagement, where state elites try to regulate behaviour through authoritative means. The second is state-sponsored disengagement, referring to retrenchment of state elites who encounter limits to the reach of public authority. The third form is society-sponsored engagement, which refers to collective action by citizens, in this case by peasants attempting to gain control of state power. Finally, society-sponsored disengagement refers to actions by ordinary citizens to withdraw from the realms of state authority. The choice to engage or disengage in political action is conditioned by the actor's access to power.⁶ Citizens question their relations with the state and experience a sense of disenfranchisement under three conditions: when citizens believe the government is using its power against them or not helping them; when citizens find policies to be ineffective, inefficient or otherwise problematic; and when citizens do not feel part of government, feel ignored, or feel misunderstood by government.⁷

Many post-colonial states are weak, as they do not command legitimacy in the eyes of the population.⁸ In many countries, the state has yet to engage peasants in mutually advantageous situations.⁹ This has resulted in wholesale peasant disengagement from the state.¹⁰ For most part, the interactions between state and peasants have amounted to reciprocal disengagement rather than joint engagement. Often state-peasant relations are an ongoing struggle with many dimensions and which have a long-term historical origin.¹¹ However, state-peasant relations should not be viewed in overly combative terms because quite often either side seeks and finds ways of accommodation. Often, the state may dominate with willing acquiescence from the peasants. Similarly, peasants may assert their claims by staking non-negotiable demands and sticking to them.¹²

Land reform remains a central issue in the politics of Zimbabwe and a critical defining factor of relations between the state and the peasants. Communal areas have long been acknowledged as the stronghold of the ruling political party. However, recent events (e.g. the constitutional referendum, presidential and parliamentary elections) have reflected a growing withdrawal of peasants' support for the state. Peasants have become weary of politicians, and

have taken various actions to make their dissatisfaction known. We focus our analysis in this section on the rise in dissatisfaction over the land reform program and explore how relations between the state and peasants play out in the farm invasions.

Many communal areas are located in highly marginal areas of low agricultural productivity. These areas tend to be highly sensitive to fluctuations in environmental conditions. For example, cropping and livestock systems are highly susceptible to drought. Some communal areas have experienced successive crop failures, decline in livestock population, and lack of cash to purchase inputs. Generally, one can describe peasants as resource poor with limited opportunities to intensify production. These characteristics would suggest a communal population ready and to accept state narratives on land and to clamour for more productive land. Empirical results from the two study areas suggest otherwise.

FARM INVASIONS AND RISING DISSATISFACTION OVER LAND REFORM AMONG PEASANTS

We start our analysis of changing state-peasant relations over land with the spontaneous invasions of white commercial farms by impatient peasants around the country. We focus on the Svoswe and Nyamandhlovhu farm invasions. Media reports from July to September 1998 flag these invasions as 'landmark events' that accelerated or enhanced processes of disengagement between the state and the peasants. These invasions expose the growing rift between the state and the peasants, as illustrated by media statements cited below. Other invasions that followed the initial Svoswe/Nyamandhlovhu invasions indicate widespread disenchantment with the state and political elites.

Villagers from Svoswe communal land who forcibly occupied four commercial farms last week, yesterday demanded a written undertaking from government promising them resettlement on the farms in question before they can vacate the properties¹³

Unfulfilled promises by Zimbabwe's political leadership are beginning to backfire as some landless peasants forcibly occupy white owned commercial farms, threatening to plunge the long delayed resettlement programme into further disarray... firing the latest salvo on the government's resettlement policy are communal farmers in Nyamandhlovhu in Matebeleland North and those in Svoswe in Mashonaland East who have made clear that they have had enough of empty rhetoric about land redistribution¹⁴

It has taken us 18 years to be given land, the primary factor which forced us to go to (the independence) war... We have decided we will camp here until the government gives us land because we are tired of their empty promises¹⁵

Sixty Nyazura villagers disgruntled by what they perceive as the slow pace of land acquisition excise have followed in the footsteps of the Svoswe clan and resettled themselves at Beestkraal farm in Odzi. This is the fourth mass exodus by land hungry villagers who have taken the land resettlement programme into their own lands... They accused the government of letting them down twice...¹⁶

Impatient peasants, clearly tired of promises from the government have been moving onto commercial farms will-nilly in the past two months to try to force the government to act, particularly now that the next season is only two months away¹⁷

Initial comments made by key politicians were uncompromising and called for the state to 'reassert control' over the peasants:

People who have forcibly occupied commercial farms in Svoswe in Mashonaland east Province and in Nyamandhlovhu in Matebeleland North province must vacate the farms immediately... all these people are now squatters they must be removed forthwith¹⁸

They will be treated like any other people. If we allowed this kind of behaviour it will spread like veldt fire. The law will take its course if irregular settlers refuse to move back to their villages. Policy cannot be compromised¹⁹

President Mugabe yesterday re-emphasised the need for orderly land resettlement and warned that action will be taken against villagers who continued to invade farms. Comrade Mugabe said although the Government was committed to the resettlement programme it did not condone the invasion of farms. 'Government will be forced to take action against such people. We admit we have been slow in implementing the programme but I must tell you resettlement of the land hungry people is forthcoming'²⁰

There is no point in rushing the programme through. If we do so the country will go down and end up with sand and patches of grass here and there²¹

I am aware of some political leaders from this province who are actually encouraging people from the communal areas to invade commercial farms, This is very disturbing, because the government is still in the process of resettling people. These politicians must desist from doing so²²

However, faced with declining popularity, question about the allocation of multiple farms to the political elite, and a lack of financial reserves to implement the land reform program, political elites had no choice but to recast their statements in support of the farm invasions.²³ The statements supporting farm invasions showed a growing militancy, especially after events like the loss of the referendum on the proposed new constitution (February, 2000). The new elite narrative suggested that the peasants had a longstanding grievance against inequitable distribution of land between peasants and white farmers, not that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the resettlement programme or lack of transparency in disposal of acquired land. Thus, we find in the current state rhetoric by the state a new interpretation of the purpose for the original invasions.

To sustain the new narratives, the state had to invent peasants who would chant the slogans they were now creating. The peasants of the earlier invasions were chanting different slogans and blaming the state and political elites for failed promises. Thus in the later invasions, we see a gradual replacement of genuine peasants by 'manufactured' peasants comprising state and party-financed militias (unemployed youths, war veterans, displaced farm workers and party supporters) in order to promote systematic invasions throughout the country. The peaceful and spontaneous peasant invasions were transformed into violent and systematic "drive in and set up camp" invasions.²⁴ Thus media and other reports labelled these later invasions as "the war veterans' invasions" rather than as peasant invasions. The rhetoric in support of the 'new' invasions were now being described in one study thus:

As the government increasingly sloughs off its inclusionary/reconciliatory approach and adopts the militant 'radical chic' persona of the liberation group it was 20 years ago, the

situation has become increasingly polarised. The ruling party's current gangster chic rhetoric plays to populist sentiments but at the national expense²⁵

While the involvement of war veterans was necessary for legitimating the slogans drawn from the liberation war of two decades previous, the assumed good relations between war veterans and peasants were in question, just as during the independence struggle.²⁶

PEASANT VOICES ON FAST TRACK LAND REFORM

Some statements from respondents in the two study areas demonstrate a peasant wariness of promises and talk of fast track land reform. As in many communal lands, some people in these two study areas have applied for resettlement. Some have been waiting since 2000, when the government invited applications for land under the fast track resettlement 'program', while others claim that they have been waiting for the land since independence in 1980. None of the applicants have been resettled.

Some statements made below in the village discussions reflect the growing impatience with the pace of resettlement:

Why are they 'fast-tracking' now? What has happened? Do they want to give each other more land before they retire? It is for the election. They think we don't know. We have seen this before. After the election they forget about us and we will be back to square one. I think they may then come and bulldoze people from the farms. I have seen it happen. Then they will start with yes sir, yes sir again and drink tea in the big houses (referring to the big houses on the commercial farms) while we suffer²⁷

The land issue is a smokescreen only, there is no land question there, and they are not serious about it²⁸

The conversation overheard among people attending a funeral ceremony in the study area also reveals the pessimism prevalent among the peasants:

Speaker 1. We must change the government gentlemen, 22 years of unfulfilled promises. Even if you are given the land now, you are already too old, what do you do with the land. We will not be able to work it because we are all old.

Speaker 2: But old man did you not get land? Don't say the government is bad and that it is not sensitive to your needs.

Speaker 1. Who said I was given land by the government? It never allocated me land. What I did was to forcibly occupy part of a commercial farm after waiting in vain for 22 solid years. (Discussion, 20-02-2001).

In general, most peasants do not believe that the majority of the farm invaders are genuine peasants. One respondent in the study site who actually participated in the invasions observed that these militias were not peasants.

Look at us here – do you see anyone missing, you know all of us, even the war veterans are here, so tell me who is there, who are they calling the peasant. Ah that war was finished a long time ago, now we must fight our children because they have not honoured their promises, they want to keep making us fight their battles for them, while they get all the rewards²⁹

In general, the peasants ridicule the new attempts by the state to deliver on unfulfilled promises. Some respondents stated that people are tired of lies and observe that, even if the government were to be serious in its intentions, there has been such a history of broken promises that local people would still doubt the narratives. One respondent described all the slogans as 'fiction for those that are well fed.'³⁰ The general observation made was that narratives full of promises could not be sustained easily, especially where hope has been replaced by mistrust.

PROBLEMATIC NOTIONS UNDERPINNING STATE NARRATIVES ON LAND

The state narrative is fashioned on the argument that landlessness exists in communal areas, that people are eager to move to new lands, and that productivity will improve after resettlement. Data presented from key interviews and focus group discussions questions these notions. There is no doubt that in both study areas people are keenly aware of the land question. Land is a popular subject in everyday interactions and negotiations.

Notion 1. That there is acute landlessness in communal areas that will be eased by resettlement

According to our data, 6.5% of the households in one study area lease out land but none do so in the second site. There is evidence of many arrangements over land between households, where exchanges, loans and even cash sales of land occur. This pattern is characteristic of other communal areas where there was similarly a high prevalence among households of land transactions. This suggests that the land shortage as perceived by the peasants needs to be conceptualised in relation to a diverse range of factors.³¹ While some households are land-hungry others have excess land. The land transactions are part of a complex of reciprocal relations or social capital, upon which many people.

Our interviews suggest that landlessness may indeed be a phenomenon of the younger generation (young adults in the 18-30 year age bracket) but given the opportunity, they are more interested in employment in industry and urban areas than being resettled for farming (see below).

Notion 2. Peasants are eager for land reform and will relocate to new areas

Evidence suggests that many peasants are not that interested in relocation because:

- ⊙ they are no longer attached to the lands of their forefathers
- ⊙ the potential new lands are of a similar productivity level to those that they presently have
- ⊙ chaos prevails in the fast-tracked lands
- ⊙ they fear losing social networks or power bases
- ⊙ young people do not desire a farming livelihood
- ⊙ household pressures preclude any major disturbances, such as a shift to a new locality.

The idea that peasants are prepared to relocate is therefore a problematic aspect of the state narrative. In most communal areas, as in the two study areas, the peasants have some experience of relocation. The two study areas are relatively new settlements, most people having arrived from Midlands in the early 1950s. But none of the respondents described the land question as requiring the appropriation or acquisition of the so-called 'lands of the forefathers'. Only 8% of individuals in the study areas are over 55 years and likely to remember their former areas. Furthermore, most acquired farms that are close to the two study areas are in marginal ecological zones with low agricultural potential.

Yes we want land but some of the land being given to people is not suitable; some of the farms are malaria areas, far off such that if one falls ill, no one will afford to visit them and some of the farms are not suitable for crop production³²

The manner in which land is being acquired under fast track land reform has made some peasants wary of the process. As the 'program' is fast-tracked, people believe there is no plan about who goes where. A respondent who claims to have visited the fast-tracked farms described the landscape as chaotic and unplanned (key interview 10-9-2001). Some of the comments indicate that the degree of lawlessness and chaos on some of the fast-tracked farms is so bad then could be described as squatter camps. There appear to be many doubts about whether people that already occupy fast-tracked lands will be given title to that land or whether there will be any security of tenure over claims already in place. Peasants refer to new settlers on fast-tracked lands as squatters because of the temporary nature of the settlement and land use around the settlements. In the past, squatters in communal areas other lands have been reviled and expelled.

Who wants to be called a squatter when you have a perfectly good home here? I have enough land that I am failing to cultivate. Why would I go? Let them go, but I won't go back to sleeping in caves and under plastics³³

Already there are cases (see next section) of people who have been expelled from settled areas, making potential settlers nervous about the long-term prospects of remaining on fast-tracked land.

Local traditional leaders relate stories of alien people being settled on their forefather's lands simply because they are war veterans. Even if it were possible unravel the complexity of who should move to where, this process would take much time and affect fast tracking. There is no indication that whole communities can be settled together, suggesting that resettled people would lose their current social networks, an important facet of survival in communal areas. Most respondents felt that if the people had to move to the new areas, entire villages should move together. One traditional leader states,

If the government says it will resettle us in Midlands where we came from (in 1952), we may consider moving out, only if people say they want to³⁴

However, for the moment reallocation on fast-tracked lands is controlled by war veterans. Relocation therefore implies a loss of control by existing leaders and disrespect for 'traditional' norms, rules and values. In general, there is still much respect for traditional leaders in the study areas. Given the above, traditional leaders are not sure they would remain in control if moved to the land of their forefathers, and would prefer to stay in their current locations.

Though there is support for resettling young people, many youth indicate that they would prefer jobs to farming. The general view was that the state should create jobs and opportunities outside of communal areas. One respondent stated during a group discussion,

If we wanted our children to become farmers like us why would we bother sending them to O or A level? To become a farmer like me do you have to have O levels?³⁵

Both study areas experience large outflow of young people from agriculture into handicraft, seasonal migration to South Africa, gold panning, etc. Local people argue that the limited availability of other options force them to stay in agriculture. Given a choice, most would pursue non-farm options whilst still maintaining some links to their communal area.

Both study areas have experienced high mortality to HIV/AIDS. In most cases, the active labour group is being affected, leaving orphaned children under the care of relations. In a number of cases these children are being left in the care of old people. As well as loss of labour, households have spent family income and assets for healthcare, leaving little capital for agricultural inputs. Some households have become destitute. Some respondents indicate that due to HIV/AIDS, they have also lost remitters and this has severely affected their agricultural activities. With these deaths, some land has been freed up for use and the extent of landlessness has declined. Most of the elderly we interviewed are reluctant to move to new lands. They say that they are too old. Further, many households have lost all their resources in supporting family members and relations and have no means to make agriculture viable in a new place. These factors lead us to question who is likely to go to the fast-tracked areas, as many of the intended beneficiaries remain unwilling.

Generally, peasants were hesitant about relocating to fast-tracked farms. The few who went (see next section) left their families, homes and other assets intact in the communal areas. Some families wanted to maintain two homesteads and felt no desire to give up their rights in communal lands. In some cases, people who have gone to the fast-tracked lands only did so to exploit the resources (wildlife and firewood) before moving back to the communal area.

Notion 3. Productivity will improve with moves to new lands

Most households in the study areas rely on income (cash and subsistence) from a diversity of sources, including dryland crop production (all households), gardening (84% of households), livestock production (78%), woodland activities (100%), wage or home industries (82%) and remittances/gifts (91%). Some of the wealthy households suggested, that agriculture in communal areas is rarely viable so one must be versatile and rely on other options. Yet in the current state narrative, there are implicit assumptions that peasants are farmers and wish to remain so. Past peasant experiences with resettlement indicate that resettlement on productive land is undeniably an option but is only feasible when associated with an adequate policy and technological environment to make the enterprise viable. Often, peasants who move to resettlement areas have found themselves isolated from the social networks that guarantee them the labour or technological resources needed to make production viable. Therefore, true poverty alleviation (e.g. lifting people above US\$1 a day) is not simply a matter of access to land.

Respondents also suggest that land quality is not the only issue. They refer to the experience of some peasants on irrigation schemes in the same district. For example, one respondent observed that if land quality were the main issue, people in these communal areas

would have moved out in large numbers when the government established nearby irrigation schemes in the late 1980s. The only two people to be resettled on the scheme maintained their homesteads in the study area and eventually abandoned the irrigation schemes. Accounts from people who have returned from irrigation schemes and other resettlement areas suggest that there is very little government support (e.g. infrastructure, inputs, credit) to start operations on new land. Further, people suspect that the government may pretend to offer them land for free but will eventually charge them, as happened in some irrigation schemes.

Some people are crying for virgin lands but they have failed to work on the land we allocated them here. Do you think they will be able to perform miracles if they are given land on the commercial farms? Yes for sure, soil fertility in the area has gone down, but it is due to continued cultivation over the years. It is the same story on the commercial farms. Without fertiliser you cannot harvest anything on those farms³⁶

PEASANT EXPERIENCES OF FAST TRACK RESETTLEMENT

Out of about two hundred households in the two study sites, only six people went to the fast-tracked lands. Firstly, such a low level of relocation will do nothing to ease landlessness. Secondly, most of the experiences with relocation were negative. The following cases are documented from those who left to resettle in the fast-tracked areas.

Case 1. An elderly farmer, who is considered to have sufficient land (he has more than 10 acres), joined the occupants and settled on a former game ranch about 100 km away from the study site. There he teamed up with others and started a lucrative enterprise selling poached game meat. They trapped the animals using snares and he sold the meat to his village at give-away prices (US\$ 1.5 per kg of roasted meat). He also sold fish poached from earth dams in the commercial farms. Meanwhile, his family remained in the study site, continuing with life as usual. Towards the end of 2001 the government chased away all the occupants of that farm because the farm had been de-listed, and he returned to the study site.

Case 2. A teacher at a nearby school, living in one of the villages in the study site, also went to the fast-tracked lands. His wife is an active member of the ruling party who was recently allocated a farm about 70 km away from the study site. The wife had applied for the land through party structures. When his wife got the land, the teacher thought of resigning from teaching so that he could venture into farming full-time. However, quick counselling from relatives saved the situation. His relatives told him that farming was very risky and at his age (in his forties) it would not be prudent to quit a job that had a constant cash income. The advice came after the teacher had already dismantled some of his houses and sent some of his property to the new farm in Triangle. He hired some young men to work on the new farm. He only went to the farm during weekends to supervise. Meanwhile, the teacher has applied for resettlement in his own name and has already been approved (though this is not certain). It had been going well at the farm in Triangle until a group of war veterans descended on the plot, stating that they suspected that the young men the teacher hired were supporters of the opposition party. They interrogated the young men about their relation to the plot owner, their political affiliation and that of the plot owners. When the war veterans heard that the husband of the plot owner was a teacher, they claimed that he was a member of the opposition who could not get land in

that part of the country. The war veterans then severely beat up the young men, after which they burnt all the belongings of the teacher's family, including clothes, chairs, blankets, pots and farming equipment. This happened even though the teacher's wife holds a key position in the women's league of the ruling party.

Case 3. A war veteran, from one of the study sites also went to occupy commercial farmland. He farms about 12 acres of land in the study area, slightly above average. In 2000, at the height of the farm invasions, he went to occupy a portion of a fertile farm in a nearby district, about 200 km away. He and other war veterans forced the farm owner off the farm. For a year, the war veteran stayed at the farm where he says he was made the base commander. He claimed that a pistol, given by the government, went with his appointment. When the cropping season came (2000/2001), he grew maize and cotton, which consumed more than US\$ 125 for inputs. The average cash income per household per year in the study site is about US\$300, so the input costs were sizeable. Meanwhile his entire family remained at his communal home where they continued to crop as usual. Rumour was rife that the war veteran had taken a second wife to assist him on the new farm. Before the crops were ripe, a political heavyweight in the district, also a businessman, evicted the war veterans from the farm. The businessman owns a farm adjacent to the invaded farm and claimed that he was leasing the farm to the former commercial farmer stating that if the land occupiers kept squatting on his farm it went against the government's black empowerment policy. In disgrace, the war veteran and others left the farm and returned home to join others in the familiar lands. "My brother, there we were tricked. I lost a lot of money. This is politics there is nothing we can do about it". Up to now, the war veteran has not talked about going to the farms again.

Case 4. The case of three brothers illustrate that getting land depends on whom you know. The brothers do not have enough land for farming in the study site. Both have families, but have less than two acres each even though their father was one of the early settlers in the area. The land of their late father was subdivided amongst the many brothers. One of their elder brothers works for the government as a Central Intelligence Officer far from the study site. In 2001, the CIO-employed brother invited the other two brothers to take up land that he had secured for them in a prime farming area. The two brothers rushed for the land, but left behind their families to keep the homesteads in the communal areas going. They are planning to bring the families after they have security of tenure and when they will not disrupt their children's school calendar. The brothers obviously got the farm as a result of political connections. However, the brothers' stay in the fast-tracked farm was recently dealt a heavy blow. The youngest brother in the family, meant to be heir to the lands in the study area passed away. This means that to keep the land in the family, one of the two brothers who went to the fast-tracked farms must come back to the study area.

Case 5. One of the farmers in the study area does not have land of his own and is forced each cropping season to lease land from other farmers in the area. He is married and about 40 years old. His parents, also living in the area, do have land but it is not enough to subdivide. In 2000, the farmer was encouraged, like many others, to occupy land on commercial farms. The process of applying for the land was costly, as he had to make several trips to the district capital to get application forms, get technical advice, get cash flow budget forms, and then submit the forms. He assumed that approval would be fast-tracked, as proclaimed by the government. This

was not to be the case. So in 2001, he travelled about 200 km to where some war veterans were 'legally' allocating land to landless peasants. He was allocated a piece of land on a commercial farm that had been 'acquired' by the government. He built some brick and thatch houses. He spent a couple of months on the fast-tracked land establishing his new homestead. In 2001, his wife went to a teaching college. There was now no one staying at the family's homestead in the communal land and the farmer started to look for a buyer for the homestead. But before he could find a buyer, the Government chased the farmers away from their new plots because they had not followed proper procedure in acquiring that land. The farmer came back home and started to renovate his dilapidated houses. Instead of waiting any longer, he has gone to the city in search of employment.

Case 6. This farmer has about three acres of land. He used to work in the sugar estates in Triangle, but returned to the study site after being retrenched during the drought of 1992. When he came home, he could not get a big piece of land. When people started invading commercial farms in 2000, this farmer joined and went to settle in the grazing area of another scheme established by Government in the late 1980s. The invaders claimed that the grazing area of the scheme was under-utilised. Some war veterans co-ordinated the occupation, charging each applicant US\$10. In 2001, the government sent riot police to chase away the invaders. This farmer has now gone to Bulawayo, looking for employment.

These stories challenge the state narrative on land. Some of the peasants whose stories are cited here argue that they (the peasants) should and must tell their own stories about land. They declare that the state narrative on land is a hoax and this was proven at their expense. Their reasons for returning to communal areas varied. These cases suggest that there will not be a surplus of farming land in the communal area, as the population outflow due to relocation is very limited.

REFLECTING ON THE REALITIES OF FAST TRACK RESETTLEMENT

In our introduction, we suggested that the state narrative on land does not truly articulate the stories of the peasants. Any narrative on land must have the concrete backing of a definite class. To push for land reform without a political class base is to initiate a vague process which will have no backing should vested interests resist the program.³⁷ While the early 'spontaneous' invasions by peasants were hailed as the unfolding of a genuinely people-centred story on land reform, the later invasions by war veterans were a politically-motivated story crafted by the state.

Peasants are now beginning to challenge this telling of their story by political elites and to describe state narratives as 'slogans of people who are well fed'. Relations of power are often interwoven with other kinds of relations.³⁸ There is a layering of relations between peasants, war veterans, business elites, political, elites and even commercial farmers who appeared at first glance to be the target of the invasions. Reactions by the state at various points expose relationships in transition. In the end, at the national level we see the replacement of peasants by the 'manufactured' peasants or war veterans, suggesting that the state has disengaged from the peasants. Peasants, by withdrawing from the invasions, have also substantially disengaged from the events and the discussions on the land issue. At the study sites, we saw the return of

the six households that got some fast-tracked land. Such withdrawal, if common to other communal areas, is likely to have far reaching implications for overall state-peasant relations and the legitimisation of the state's narrative on land.³⁹ Thus, it is possible to speak of what some studies have termed reciprocal or mutual disengagement.⁴⁰

Data from the study sites challenges the universality of implicit assumptions made about land and the reform process with regards to peasants. There is probably more local debate now than before about what constitutes the 'land question'. All indications suggest that peasants want the land question refocused. They challenge the key parameters underpinning the state's narrative on land. For example, landlessness may not be easily defined, and many households are unwilling or reluctant to move elsewhere.⁴¹ We found no peasant who has left the communal areas behind completely: the old don't want to leave, the young are finding other options, and those that left for the fast-tracked lands have returned. Why are so few people willing to go to the fast-tracked lands and leave the communal areas? We suggest that they have found out at their own cost that state slogans and narratives on land are just "fiction created by the political elites who are not hungry".

Actors weave innumerable relationships among themselves. These relationships have qualitative differences and can be grouped into special categories. Most importantly, they are experienced in daily life.⁴² There is still a need to challenge the notion that elites monopolise power. Scott, for example, presents a list of what he calls evidence for everyday forms of resistance.⁴³ These forms require little or no coordination and by making use of implicit understandings and informal networks, they typically avoid any form of direct confrontation with authority or elite norms. However, in the data presented here, although the peasant invasions conform to the type of unplanned, spontaneous events described as weapons of the weak, they in fact represent a confrontation with the state. The withdrawal of peasants from the invasions, while suggesting disengagement, highlights a deepening crisis of confidence towards the state. Thus, we suggest that peasants withdraw from the invasions because they are suddenly unsure of the extent of their 'room for manoeuvre' or the likely reaction of the state, which has in the past used systematic violence to stop dissent. But as suggested in some literature, political action is not entirely voluntaristic.⁴⁴ The choice to engage or disengage in political action is conditioned by the actor's perception of power. The key challenge today is to determine just how much political autonomy peasants have in Zimbabwe.

In the metaphor cited at the start, it is tempting to believe that the dog is powerless and passive. Peasants are not weak, nor passive, they are able to define their room for manoeuvre when necessary and challenge the monopolization of power by political elites.⁴⁵ Thus, some would argue that if peasants decide to organise, power can be aggregated beyond the reach of the state and be used as a counterbalance to excessive political centralisation.⁴⁶ The weak have weapons with which they challenge elites, define their own spaces for manoeuvre, and mould authority within the limits of their abilities.⁴⁷ In the Eastern Highlands in Zimbabwe, there are many accounts of resistance to the state by the Tangwena people.⁴⁸ Recent literature suggests that state-peasant relations over the last few years, and even during the liberation struggle, were far from harmonious.⁴⁹ Since independence, the state has wielded tremendous power over the peasants and monopolised the creation of narratives. To some degree, it has also perpetuated the myth that the state speaks with peasant voices. The wholesale resuscitation of

the liberation war narrative on land and its slogans forces us to reassess its meaning and interpretation by peasants in communal areas in Zimbabwe. Thus, we challenge the universality of these slogans and expose their irrelevance in the context of the realities of household assets, social processes and production systems in smallholder systems. We suggest that the indications of peasant disengagement with the state highlighted here will intensify as land reform progresses.

Our story of the hunter and the dog at the beginning of this paper seems at first glance to appropriately describe the relationship between peasants and the state. The state may tell the story about peasants and land, but they don't live it. Peasants tell their stories better.

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Notes:

1. Interview 21-2-2002.
2. Roe 1991.
3. Roe 1991.
4. Due to the high sensitivity of discussing land issue, many of these interviews were held in private and we promised anonymity to our respondents. Names of the study area and the district have been withheld to honour confidentiality agreements, especially given the current state-sponsored violence in the country.
5. Bratton 1994.
6. Bratton 1994.
7. King and Stivers 1998.
8. Healy and Robinson 1994.
9. Bratton 1994.
10. Bratton 1994; Moore 1998.
11. Moore 1998.
12. Bratton 1994.
13. Staff Reporter, *The Herald*, 24-06-1998. *The Herald* is a state run newspaper.
14. *The Financial Gazette*, 25-06-1998. *The Financial Gazette* is a privately owned newspaper.
15. Ibid.
16. Crime Reporter, *The Herald*, 01-07-1998.
17. Staff Reporter, *The Financial Gazette*, 02-09-1998.
18. Minister of Agriculture in an interview with *The Herald*, 19-06-1998.
19. Minister John Nkomo cited by Nyandima in *The Herald* 23-06-1998.
20. Agricultural Reporter, *The Herald*, 20-09-1998.
21. Ibid.
22. Governor Chanetsa cited by Staff Reporter, *The Herald*, 31-09-1998.
23. Moyo 1998.
24. Sibanda 2000; Chitiyo 2000.

25. Chitiyo 2000:2.
26. Ranger 1985; Krieger 1992.
27. Interview 19-02-2001.
28. Ibid.
29. Interview 10-09-2001.
30. "slogan i politics dzevakaguta".
31. Sithole 1999; Woomer and Scoones 2000.
32. Interview 02-01-2000.
33. Ibid. The label squatter has unfavourable connotations in communal areas where social groups and land use are relatively well defined.
34. Interview 07-02-2001.
35. Village Meeting, 01-2002.
36. Interview 19-02-2002.
37. Ranger 1993.
38. Villareal 1992.
39. In other studies conducted in the study area, researchers have argued that the study area is typical of large portions of communal areas in Zimbabwe.
40. Bratton 1994.
41. See also Sithole (1999), Dore (1994) and Woomer and Scoones (2002) on landlessness and land transactions.
42. Marquet, 1971.
43. Scott 1985.
44. Bratton 1994.
45. Scott 1995.
46. Bratton 1994.
47. Scott 1995; Villareal 1992.
48. Moore 1998.
49. Krieger 1992; Ranger 1993.

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