5 Zimbabwe's agriculture and food security: past, present and future (1960–2050)

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1 Introduction

Once the breadbasket of southern Africa, exporting food to neighbouring countries, Zimbabwe's recent history is one of food imports, recurrent food shortages and hunger. This chapter analyses the country's pattern of agricultural change and its fluctuating food security situation since the 1960s, and will project the identified trends into the future, towards 2050. To understand food system change in Zimbabwe requires a focus on agriculture as the sector was and continues to be the mainstay of the economy (Nyandoro, 2007). We start our analysis with the 1960s, as this decade marks the emergence of institutionalized food relief as a response to droughts. Until the 1960s, recurrent droughts had sometimes caused food shortages – and severe shortages too (like in 1949) – but until then government had not systematically provided food aid to the poor (Iliffe, 1990).

Two processes are key in our understanding of food system change during Zimbabwe's colonial era: rapid population growth and the racial division of land. When settlers of European descent started to appropriate land in the late 19th century, Zimbabwe was a sparsely populated country with an estimated population of about 1 million people (Zinyama & Whitlow, 1986). A racial division of land was institutionalized in the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, which severely restricted land ownership for the indigenous African population. They were increasingly evicted from the large, privately owned farms of the settlers, and relegated into 'reserves'¹ (Nyandoro, 2019; Phimister, 1993).

Thus, by the 1960s, a rapidly growing African population farmed predominantly on sandy soils that are inherently infertile and prone to rapid degradation under continuous cultivation, and where rainfall is often erratic (Andersson, 2007). A much smaller proportion of the African population was granted privately owned, small-scale commercial farms, in the so-called Purchase Areas, a half-hearted attempt of the colonial government to create a yeoman class of African farmers (Green & Nyandoro, 2024). By contrast, (the descendants of the) European settlers – a minority comprising 2% of the population – occupied 40% of all farmland, the most fertile red loam and dark loam soils found on the highveld, where rainfall is generally more stable and higher (Lima and Lessard, 2023).

Agriculture became the settlers' main occupation and the core of colonial Zimbabwe's economy. The white settler farmers initially struggled, but with unrelenting government support – which also fended off competition from African farmers (Keyter, 1978) – a strong commercially oriented large-scale farming sector was formed. The white commercial farmers could draw on government credit, subsidized fertilizer, seed distribution and marketing systems (Tawonezvi & Hikwa, 2006). The sector was further supported by infrastructure development such as road networks, fertilizer industry support (Minde et al., 2010) and the construction of

dams, enabling water and irrigation development (Nyandoro, 2007). Government-funded agricultural research further contributed to the sector's success. For example, already in the 1930s, soon after the development of the first hybrid maize varieties, Southern Rhodesia (as Zimbabwe was then called) initiated its own research into hybrid maize. The research resulted in the release of the high-yielding, SR 52 hybrid maize variety (Musimwa & Derera, 2017; Eicher & Kupfuma, 1998). Similarly, government investment stimulated the expansion of Southern Rhodesia's major export crops: tobacco and cotton. Support was mainly given to white commercial farmers as they dominated politics; it was a white commercial farmer, Ian Smith, who became prime minister and unilaterally declared independence (UDI) from Britain in 1965.

By the early 1960s, our point of departure in this chapter, colonial Zimbabwe had become an early-industrializing economy (Andersson, 2002), dominated by the commercial farming sector that employed thousands of (foreign) workers. Immediately after the Second World War, an urban industrial sector had developed, attracting African labourers from rural areas and abroad. In the 1960s, tobacco production was the country's largest foreign currency generator, accounting for 10%–43% of the country's GDP (Nyambara & Nyandoro, 2019). Cotton was exported but was also an important raw material for the expanding domestic manufacturing industry, for example, textiles, cooking oil and livestock feeds (Nyandoro, 2007). In Zimbabwe's dualistic agricultural sector, it was the highly productive commercial farming sector that dominated the production of tobacco, cotton and food crops such as maize and wheat, although new areas were opened up for the production of cotton by African smallholders in the Zambezi valley in the 1950s and in the Sanyati-Gokwe frontier regions since the 1960s (Nyambara, 1999; Nyandoro, 2022; Baudron et al., 2011). Meanwhile the concentration of Africans on the degradation-prone lands of the 'reserves', and the imposition of destocking and land management policies there, put African farmers' food production in these areas increasingly under pressure. More and more rural families had to rely on wage labour (remittances) to make ends meet and to sustain their farming activities. But as long as the wage labour employment was secure, so was food security for urban and rural families – either directly through food purchases, or indirectly through investments in smallholder farming in the African reserves.

This chapter argues that since the early 1960s, food security in Zimbabwe is dependent on a thriving wage labour sector that supports both (urban) livelihoods and agricultural investments in the Communal Areas (the former reserves). It shows how the locus of food production has shifted between the commercial and smallholder farming sectors, and how this has made food security more dependent on government intervention and vulnerable to climate variability. The remaining discussion is divided into five periods. First, from 1960 to 1980 the country progressively became an inward-looking economy following international sanctions imposed on its white minority regime. Although increasing numbers of people could no longer provide for their own food and required government food relief, the country managed to keep net food imports to a minimum (Figure 5.1). Second, the decade following independence in 1980, the period of Zimbabwe's smallholder production revolution, was characterized by widespread food security. During this decade the locus of food production shifted to the smallholder sector, making food production increasingly dependent on the vagaries of the weather and government intervention - yet the latter's resources were rapidly dwindling. Third, in the 1990s, an emergent crisis in the wage labour sector manifested itself. Increasing numbers of rural and urban households started to face food insecurity, necessitating food imports. Fourth, the deepening economic crisis culminated in a politically motivated fast-track land reform and economic collapse in the 2000s. Zimbabwe's agrarian structure radically changed, but without investment from either government or rural households' wage labour incomes, smallholder production declined. Food imports and donor-funded emergency food relief became the new normal.



Figure 5.1 Import dependency ratio = imports/(production + imports - exports) and net import dependency ratio = (imports - exports)/(production + imports - exports) for (colonial) Zimbabwe, 1961–2020. Taken from Joshipura (forthcoming).

Lastly, we discuss the past decade and the period towards 2050. Although food insecurity and import dependency remain high, domestic food production is picking up again. Yet, without jobs, urban consumers and smallholder producers will be unable to buy the food and invest in smallholder food production in the Communal Areas. Returning to a path of economic growth is Zimbabwe's major challenge; whether it can or should fuel another smallholder food production revolution is a moot point.

2 Food production in a dualistic agricultural sector: 1960–1980

Although the country recurrently suffered from droughts and famines, Zimbabwe's early colonial period was not marked by massive starvation and hunger-induced deaths (Iliffe, 1990). The drought season of 1959/1960 did, however, mark a turning point. While in previous droughts grain trade had often mitigated food scarcity, in 1960 malnutrition was more widespread and more people needed government food aid, especially the poor.

The 1950s had witnessed agricultural growth in both the African rural areas – where grain production per capita increased – and the settler farmer sector, which more than doubled maize deliveries to the maize control board, while tobacco had become its engine of growth (Iliffe, 1990). Also, the urban sector had grown rapidly after the Second World War. But by 1960 this post-war economic boom was over. Following several seasons of bad rainfall, a looming crisis of smallholder farming in the African 'reserves' became apparent. A growing population concentration in these areas and, in some areas, the imposition of the Land Husbandry Act and its destocking measures (Machingaidze, 1991; Phimister, 1993) had undercut agricultural productivity in these areas.² Also, the wage labour economy was doing badly. It could no longer absorb the ever-growing number of job seekers, resulting from rapid population growth and the progressive eviction of Africans from land appropriated from them. The settler-dominated capitalist economy was in crisis, and there was growing urban opposition against the white minority

government (van Velsen, 1964). Over the course of several decades, it had created a category of marginalized people who could no longer sustain themselves through farming in the absence of wage labour income (Iliffe, 1990). These people could no longer resolve food scarcity by bartering assets for food. Thus, food shortages, and the need for government intervention to mitigate them, became endemic.

The economic stagnation of the early 1960s was accompanied by growing anti-colonial protest. The Federation (1953-1963) of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (Malawi) was dismantled (Mlambo, 2014). But in Zimbabwe, this did not result in independence. Instead, the white settler government led by Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence (UDI). Faced with economic sanctions, the Smith government embarked on regulating the financial sector and a policy of import substitution. Aided by instituted low wages and the suppression of labour protests, it was the manufacturing sector that drove economic growth in the period 1965–1975. Meanwhile, government stimulated domestic agricultural production to increase 'imperial self-sufficiency' in raw materials, particularly cotton (Nyandoro, 2007, 2022; Munro, 1976). National food security gained significance in policy making of the white-minority government. In 1975, the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), which had hitherto served the white settler farming sector, extended its buying depots to the African 'reserves'. At the same time, food production was increasingly hampered by guerrilla insurgence from Mozambique and Zambia. White settler farms were sometimes attacked, causing an interruption of operations, while African farmers – in an attempt by the colonial government to stop their support of the guerrillas – were forced into 'protected villages' where farming became impossible. Hence, the liberation war caused widespread food shortages (Nyandoro, 2007).

3 Zimbabwe's smallholder agricultural boom and bust, 1980–2000

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited an inward-looking economy, with an outdated manufacturing industry that had been starved of productive investment for more than two decades. The government of Robert Mugabe sought to redress the institutionalized racism and socio-economic imbalances of the colonial period, by more fully integrating African farmers and rural areas into the mainstream economy. Massive government investments, supported by the international donor community, were made in schooling, health facilities and infrastructure (electricity, roads, water) in the former reserves – now referred to as Communal Areas. In 1982, Mugabe announced a ten-point policy plan (Rukuni, 1984; Nyandoro, 2007) which meant massive government support for smallholder farming, including irrigation development, agricultural credit, marketing facilities, a re-orientation of agricultural research towards the smallholder sector, an expansion of agricultural extension for smallholder farmers and price support. As a result, Zimbabwe experienced a boom in smallholder maize and cotton production by the mid-1980s (Rukuni and Eicher, 1994). Touted as a 'miracle' that should be replicated elsewhere, the country succeeded in producing food surpluses in most years (Cliffe, 1988) and became known as the 'food basket' of southern Africa. Rural accumulation and affluence were exhibited by smallholder farmers who were able to build brick houses under asbestos roofing, buy cars and accumulate livestock (Nyandoro, 2007).

The large-scale commercial farming sector – as settler agriculture became known after independence – also recovered fast from the disruptions of the liberation war. Although the number of such farms decreased from some 6,000 in 1980 to about 4,000 in 1990 (Muir and Blackie, 1994), the sector flourished through increased tobacco production and diversification into emerging export markets for horticultural products like flowers, fruit and vegetables (Muir and Blackie, 1994). The commercial farmers could remain on the land, as land redistribution

was based on a policy of 'willing buyer, willing seller' (Moyo, 2006; Nyandoro, 2012). As part of a 'growth with equity' policy, some 11% of the total farmland was used to resettle over 70,000 families during the 1980s. While well short of the planned 160,000 households, this poverty-focused *minda mirefu* (long fields) resettlement programme was still one of the biggest land redistributions in Africa. A decade later, the resettled farming families often did relatively well as compared to their Communal Area counterparts: they cultivated more land, had higher incomes and accumulated more assets (Hoogeveen & Kinsey, 2001).

Ironically, the smallholder agricultural production revolution of the 1980s laid the foundation for Zimbabwe's increasingly vulnerable food security situation. Massive government investment in smallholder farming had shifted the onus of maize production towards the degradation-prone soils of the Communal Areas, where rainfall is often erratic (Figure 5.2). Maize production thus became more vulnerable to climate variability and to wider macro-economic developments, as crop production on the sandy soils of the Communal Areas requires continued investment in soil fertility – e.g. fertilizers, manure (Andersson, 2007). Meanwhile, the production of food crops like wheat, a winter crop grown by large-scale commercial farmers under irrigation, declined in the 1980s, due to a lack of profitability and increased competition from global markets. These farmers increasingly went for lucrative export crops rather than food crops (Andersson, 2002).

The government's expenditures rose sharply during the 1980s, compromising public investment in rural areas and smallholder farming and government's capacity to buy land for redistribution decreased as land prices rose. By 1990, the land redistribution programme had virtually come to a standstill (Kinsey, 1999) and Zimbabwe's macro-economic ills became increasingly apparent. Unemployment was rising at an alarming rate: on average about 3,000 new jobs were



Figure 5.2 Maize production (× 1,000 tonnes) of commercial (grey-dotted line) and smallholder (blackdotted line) farming sectors and five-year moving averages, 1970–2000. Taken from Andersson (2007).

created per annum, while some 300,000 new jobseekers were entering the labour market (Durevall et al., 1999). Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government launched an economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP) with employment creation as one of its principal aims. However, an outdated technology base (due to isolation during UDI) had undermined the international competitiveness of the manufacturing sector. Industries that had developed based on domestic production of raw materials, such as the textile industry, could not compete with cheap imports, and closed down. Furthermore, high interest rates, exacerbated by large-scale government borrowing on the money market, hampered productive investment. Rather than growing, formal employment declined in the 1990s. With high inflation rates, massive unemployment, a strongly devaluated currency and acute foreign exchange and fuel shortages, Zimbabwe's economy faced a deep crisis.

As ESAP also meant the removal of government subsidies that had bolstered agricultural production in the smallholder farming sector (Muir-Leresche, 2013), a gradual reduction in productivity of this farming sector set in after 1996, when maize production peaked at 2.6 million tons (Maiyaki, 2010). This trend was aggravated by the decline of the (urban) wage labour sector; smallholder farming in the Communal Areas thus lost two major sources of investment. Average maize yields declined, from an estimated 1.3 t/ha in 1986 to approximately 0.8 t/ha in 2004 (FAO, 2007). By the end of the 1990s, Zimbabwe's Communal Area farmers were less food secure than they had been in the 1940s (Nyandoro, 2007).

4 Fast-track land reform, economic meltdown and food insecurity: 2000–2009

The economic crisis of the late 1990s, manifested by fast-growing unemployment, rising food prices and food riots in Zimbabwe's urban centres, demanded a policy response. In early 2000, government supported the invasion of large-scale commercial farms operated by white settlers or their descendants. This was farmland that had been appropriated during the colonial era. This move was politically motivated, as the government of President Mugabe had largely lost its popular support and faced an emergent opposition. The chaotic invasions were hastily formalized into the controversial 'fast-track land reform' policy. Regarded as a 'violation of property rights' by some (Richardson, 2007), and a 'taking back of its land' (Hanlon et al., 2013) by others, the immediate effect of land reform was highly negative (Sachikonye, 2003). Foreign investment stalled, food security declined further, donor support was reduced to merely humanitarian aid and economic sanctions were imposed in 2001 by the USA, the European Union (EU) and Australia on listed companies, some banks, government officials and members of the ruling party.

The fast-track land reforms continued the historical division between smallholders and commercial farms, using two models: A1 and A2. The former was comprised of smallholder farms akin to farms in the Communal Areas. Farm sizes, including communal grazing areas, varied in size, depending on agro-ecological conditions and land quality. The A1 farms often formalized the spontaneous and chaotic land invasions. Most A1 farmers had been Communal Area farmers.

The A2 model sought to establish larger, commercially oriented farms, cutting three to seven farms out of a former large-scale farm. Applicants for these farms had to go through a more formal selection procedure, and needed to have qualifications, a business plan and their own resources to invest in farming. Whereas the A1 farms were quickly taken into production, the lengthy and more competitive and politicized selection process for the A2 farms was marred by irregularities, political patronage and cronyism (Marongwe, 2011) and caused delays (Utete, 2003). A land audit report in 2006 showed that 'nearly half of the A2 farms were underused or not used at all' (Hanlon et al., 2013). It resulted in a drop in total farm output in areas that used

to be the commercially oriented and forex earning. As the productivity of the smallholder sector declined further due to lack of investment from outside the sector and sharply rising input prices, Zimbabwe's food security situation rapidly deteriorated (Rukuni et al., 2006).

The controversial fast-track land reform remained at the centre of both popular and policy debates, as if Zimbabwe's economic problems had started with it. Meanwhile, studies of its impacts suggested that those who had acquired land – notably the 146,000 small-scale A1 farmers (Scoones et al., 2010) - were doing relatively well, especially when considering the lack of support and the adverse macro-economic environment. The 23,000 large-scale A2 farmers (Hanlon et al., 2013) were struggling initially, but after the dollarization of the economy in 2009, this sector also became increasingly productive. However, comparisons of the A1 and A2 farmers with existing or historical farming sectors in Zimbabwe are inherently problematic. First, the quality of the land and (irrigation) infrastructure on these farms could differ substantially. For instance, although farm sizes of A1 farmers were sometimes comparable to those of the existing smallholder farmers, the latter were often located on much sandier and more intensively used soils with lower fertility. Second, the performance of the new farms was heavily affected by the rapidly deteriorating economic environment of the mid-2000s. For instance, high-input, export-oriented agricultural production became unprofitable due to the rapidly declining exchange rate of the Zimbabwean dollar and government rules that controlled access to forex. Third, highly diverse situations in different parts of the country could only provide a partial picture of the impacts of the land reform. For instance, early studies of Scoones et al. (2010) focused on Masvingo province, one of the driest areas of the country where crop productivity has always been highly variable and lower than in the high-potential zones of Mashonaland (northern Zimbabwe) that are more suitable for maize production. Whereas political patronage played a limited role in land redistribution in Masvingo, reports on the formation of A2 farms in areas closer to the capital provided a different picture (Marongwe, 2011). Fourth, which benchmark does one use for performance comparisons and what contextual factors does one take into account? For instance, Hanlon et al. (2013), who compared A1 farmers with white settler farmers that had farmed in the same area in the 1970s, point out that the latter had large tracts of un(der)utilized land – it was estimated that in the early 1980s the white settler farmers in Mashonaland only cropped 23% of their arable land. By contrast, the succeeding A1 farmers cultivated on average 34% more land. Yet, yields obtained by these A1 farmers were often low. For instance, Zikhali (2008) reported average maize yields of 2.4 t/ha in the Mazoe district (north of Harare) where farmers growing long duration maize varieties can also participate in the so-called '10+ tonnes clubs' (SeedCo, 2024), akin to similar clubs among white commercial farmers decades earlier. While 2.4 t/ha compares well to the average maize yields obtained on the sandy soils of the Communal Areas (0.8 t/ha) – even when compared with yields obtained during the smallholder agricultural revolution of the 1980s - they are rather low for Zimbabwe's red and black clay soils in high rainfall areas. In the white settler farming sector, which had dominated production on these soils, average maize yields were 3.9 t/ha in the period 1970–2000 (Andersson, 2007) and 4.4 t/ha just before the land reform (Zikhali, 2008).

Crop yields are not merely functions of farmer ability and the quality of the available natural resources. They are also highly dependent on the wider socio-economic environment. As Hanlon et al. (2013) point out, white settler farming was heavily subsidized during the colonial era, yet in the 1970s, about a third of these farms were insolvent. Evaluations of the fast-track land reform thus seem marred by problems of comparison, and often disregard the historical realities of underutilization of land and the varying economic success of the settler farms, as well as the low profitability of commercially oriented farming in general (Giller et al., 2021).

While popular debate has often focused on the land and the controversial land reform, Zimbabwe's largest problem was, however, a broken economy. Government was not only unable to provide support to the newly resettled farmers, but its economic policies often made matters worse. Through state-supported violence against a burgeoning informal sector, threats of seizure of private businesses, corruption and large-scale money printing, the government undermined Zimbabwe's ailing economy. Money printing causing hyperinflation and a plummeting exchange rate were the most visible manifestations of this economic meltdown. Whereas the exchange rate of the Zimbabwean dollar was Z\$55 to 1 USD in the year 2000, by mid-2008, the parallel (unofficial) rate for the US dollar was Z\$10,000,000,000,000 (Hanlon et al., 2013). The situation became untenable. Agricultural (input) trading was completely disrupted and in many areas farmers reverted to bartering, while many left the country driven by poverty and food insecurity, trying to send money to those remaining behind (Nyandoro, 2011). Zimbabwe's economy became remittance-dependent (see Giller & Andersson, this volume). Smallholder farmers, once supported by government investments and remittances obtained through wage labour incomes, could now no longer access inputs and reverted to recycling hybrid maize seeds and the cultivation of sorghum and millets. Fertilizer production dropped from 505,000 mt in 1999 to 166,000 mt in 2007. Without external inputs (manure, fertilizer), many farmers would not bother sowing their most infertile soils, and rather concentrated on their best plots – often near their houses (Zingore et al., 2007). Food insecurity became the new normal. In the early 2000s, 12% of all cereals consumed in Zimbabwe were imported. By 2009, the imported share of consumption stood at 50% (Mudimu, 2020).

5 Post-reform: agricultural policy (2009 to present)

Since 2009, after Zimbabwe had abandoned its national currency in favour of the US dollar, its macro-economic situation has stabilized somewhat. But more than two decades after the start of its controversial land reform, Zimbabwe is still far from regaining its position as 'the grain-basket of southern Africa'. Government tried to regain some control over the economy, amongst others by trying to introduce a new currency, and by different kinds of agricultural interventions. For instance, after the drought-stricken season of 2015/2016, in which maize production had dropped to about a quarter of the country's needs (UNcomtrade, 2017), a Special Maize Programme for Import Substitution (SMPIS) was launched (Odunze and Uwizeyimana, 2019). Popularly known as 'command agriculture', this government scheme stipulated production targets and funded cereal (maize and wheat) production through contract farming arrangements with large-scale farmers (including the A2 model farmers) in Zimbabwe's high-potential areas. The next season indeed saw a much higher maize (and wheat) production in these areas. While criticized for not reaching its ambitious targets, despite benefiting from an exceptionally good rainfall season, the scheme was expanded to include other crops (Mazvi et al., 2019). The SMPIS programme has continued a development that had already started: a more even distribution of Zimbabwe's food crop production over different farming sectors and agro-ecological zones, which makes food production less vulnerable to adverse climate conditions (Figure 5.3).

Next to the 'command agriculture' programme, which benefited mostly A2 farmers, a Presidential Input Scheme was put in place to support the smallholder farming sector (including A1 farms) – still the main producer of Zimbabwe's maize crop (Dube, 2020). Like the SMPIS, this programme aimed to improve Zimbabwe's food self-sufficiency and reduce its growing food import bill.

Other policies, like the *Pfumvudza* programme that started in 2019, promote forms of agriculture that concentrate input use on small areas of land, as a food security and coping strategy.



Figure 5.3 Estimated percentage share of different farming sub-sectors in national maize output, 2010–2017.

Data sources: USAID (2016) and Mutenga (2017).

Pfumvudza, which refers to the blooming of new tree leaves that signal the onset of a new farming season, is a form of conservation agriculture (CA) (Mavesere & Dzawanda, 2023). Like earlier promotion of conservation agriculture under the banner of donor-funded humanitarian aid (Andersson & Giller, 2012), this free input support scheme stresses the efficient use of resources on a small area of land (Mavesere & Dzawanda, 2023). Promotion of sorghum and millets cultivation, small-grain crops that are better suited to the semi-arid conditions prevailing in many Communal Areas constitute another attempt to boost food security with very limited resources. However, Zimbabwe's food security situation remains precarious; after the 2022/2023 agricultural season, more than 4.1 million people faced food insecurity (WFP, 2023).

6 From structural transformation in reverse to food security by 2050?

Looking at the sharp economic downfall immediately after the start of the fast-track land reform and the burgeoning literature on the reform and its impacts, it may be tempting to see the land reform as the cause of Zimbabwe's current food (in)security situation. However, as this chapter has shown, the country's food security problems did not start with the land reform programme. Rising food prices, urban food riots and mounting food insecurity had already started in the 1990s (Andersson, 2002). Figure 5.1 shows this; food import growth already started before 2000, when Zimbabwe's employment crisis manifested itself.

During the 1980s, it had been the smallholder farming sector that had become the chief producer of Zimbabwe's main food crop, maize, while the large-scale commercial farming sector

increasingly abandoned food production. Government support and the wage labour economy fuelled smallholder farmer productivity, making food production increasingly vulnerable to climate variability as it was re-located to the Communal Areas, which are characterized by low and erratic rainfall (Andersson, 2007). Conversely, when government support came to an end with ESAP and unemployment rapidly increased in the 1990s, investments in smallholder agriculture decreased and productivity of the sector declined. Bad agricultural seasons now had an immediate effect on the country's food security situation, necessitating large-scale food importations and humanitarian aid.

Zimbabwe's economic crisis of the 1990s was thus not rooted in agriculture, but in its (urban) wage labour economy. After independence in 1980, a rapidly growing workforce could not be absorbed into a slowly growing industrial sector. As a result, Zimbabwe's economy witnessed a process of structural transformation in reverse; instead of shifting resources from low to high-productivity sectors of the economy, primary sectors such as agriculture and mining gained in relative importance. The share of manufacturing in the country's GDP fell from 26.9% in 1992 to 11.7% in 2014. Formal employment declined and the share of informal employment in total employment increased from 80.0% in 2004 to 94.5% in 2014 (Kanyenze et al., 2017).

6.1 Towards food security by 2050?

The fast-track land reform and the economic meltdown have had a profound effect on Zimbabwe's agrarian structure. While the racial division of land was ended, the historical division between large-scale and smallholder farming sectors has remained – albeit with fewer very large farms. Yet, the adverse economic circumstances forced farmers, including the beneficiaries of the land reform programme, to concentrate on food crop production – as export-crop production became unprofitable. While dollarization in 2009 made export-oriented agriculture possible again, government's high budget deficit, attempts to re-introduce a national currency, forex problems and inflationary pressures continued to contribute to a volatile macro-economic situation.

The more even distribution of food crop production and command agriculture over the country's different farming sectors and agro-ecological zones is cause for optimism though; if a larger share of Zimbabwe's most productive lands can be used for food production, its production will become less vulnerable to adverse weather and climate change. It would enable Zimbabwe to reduce its import dependency for food. Recent figures show that cereal productivity at national level is increasing (World Bank, 2024). And although Zimbabwe's food import dependency ratio is still high, it appears to be stabilizing (Figure 5.1). However, whether Zimbabwe's food security situation is going to substantially improve in the coming decades is probably more dependent on developments outside the agricultural sector than within it.

Notes

- 1 Known as 'Native Reserves' until 1962, when they were renamed Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs). At independence in 1980, they became known as Communal Lands or Areas.
- 2 The Land husbandry Act of 1951 was a comprehensive policy that sought to create individual land and livestock holdings in the 'reserves' and forced African farmers to implement soil conservation measures (like contour bund construction). Lack of implementation capacity and strong opposition (especially against destocking measures) limited the Act's implementation, and led to its abandonment in 1961 (Phimister, 1993; Andersson, 2002).

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