Zimbabwean Farmers in Nigerian

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Agriculture in colonial Nigeria was dominated by smallholder peasants. Though this sector was the motor for the economy, very little was done to improve peasant productivity. Efforts by Nigerian governments in the 1950s and 1960s to bring 'development' to rural areas through the establishment of agricultural settlements, cooperatives, and farming schools failed woefully to help peasants improve their productivity. Equally, from the mid-1970s upwards, government interventions in the form of irrigation projects and river basin development projects failed to modernize peasant agriculture.

It is against this background of government failures to modernize Nigerian agriculture that we can appreciate the attempts on the part of administrations in Kwara and Nasarawa States of Nigeria to attract the expertise of White farmers, who had been forced off the land in their native Zimbabwe. Much focus has been on those farmers in Kwara State's Shonga area; a torrent of accounts concerning their potential and actual impacts toward transplanting commercial agriculture in the country surfaces in several news paper reports and periodicals both in Nigeria and beyond. Some headlines read: 'White Zimbabweans Bring Change to Nigeria;' 'White Zimbabwean farmers highlight Nigeria's agricultural failures;' and 'White farmers from Zimbabwe bring prosperity to Nigeria;' and so on. The impression thus far created is that of a massive agricultural transformation driven by the ingenuity of foreign farmers, and without financial and other support schemes from Nigerian governments. But is this really so?

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Kwara State and the Zimbabwean farmers tells a different story. In the first instance, it committed the government to provide adequate land—and so roughly 1289 local farmers in 28 communities were uprooted from their farms to make way for modern agriculture. Each of the initial 13 Zimbabwean farmers received a 25-year lease of 1000 hectares. Compensation package to facilitate the enterprise included N77m (US$513,333) for the displaced local farmers. Basic means of local transportation (bicycles) were also distributed among local farmers, including agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and seeds. The provision of additional long sought after communal infrastructure like electricity and classrooms in local schools helped to defuse local protests. At the moment, the Zimbabwean farmers are teaching subsistence farmers and fresh university graduates new techniques of modern commercial farming in a government established Commercial Agricultural Institute at Shonga.

Though the Zimbabweans were originally classified as 'investors,' the MOU committed the Kwara State government to providing finance directly to the Zimbabwean farms and to helping farmers access other private sources of funds. On this point, the MOU stipulates that the government shall provide each of the investors 'the sum of US$250,000 and also provide a guarantee for a private sector loan in the sum of US250,000 to each farmer… The state loan shall be interest free.' Furthermore, the State House of Assembly passed a resolution (March 5, 2006) guaranteeing loans

of US$5 million taken by the Zimbabwean farmers from the Nigerian Agricultural, Cooperative and Rural Development Bank. Meanwhile, Nigerian farmers are denied even the barest minimum financial support (US$1225) for their enterprises.

Under the MOU, the government was committed to providing sundry facilities and amenities to accommodate the Zimbabwean farmers: thus the government invested over N400 million (US$2.6m) on roads, housing and electricity; 600 kilometers of farm roads, 16 electricity transformers for the grid, and many bore holes. Each farmer received a bungalow of up to 2,500 square feet, complete with a generator, storage sheds, and fencing for farmland. Additional N870 million [US$5.8m] was spent on irrigation by the Federal government, and N1 billion [US$6.6m] more was set aside to expand electrification.

Increasingly, Nigerian governments are turning to the promotion of foreign and indigenous commercial agriculture under public private partnership arrangements such as the one in Shonga. While this might be good for improved agricultural productivity, we are still left with two key questions: is this pattern of agricultural investment any more sustainable than the failed state-led pattern of the 1970s? Secondly, what will happen to the bulk of the peasantry left outside the main thrust of government policy?

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