

AGRICULTURE

No one in Zimbabwe will ever be hungry again

From every aspect, agriculture always has been, and probably will remain, the cornerstone of the Zimbabwean economy. In addition, the majority of our people are dependent on agriculture for their income and security. In the past it has been the largest employer and exporter in Zimbabwe, and it is expected to resume this status when its rehabilitation and recovery is complete. Without agriculture it is impossible to imagine recovery in industry, where over half of all industrial firms are wholly or partly dependent on the agricultural sector for support.

The State of Agriculture

The agricultural scene is presently characterized by the following factors:

-  A chaotic 'fast-track' land reform that resulted in the widespread violation of property rights of most commercial farmers, a precarious food-security situation, severe deprivation of 240,000 farm-workers and a general increase in political instability.
-  Zero production and large-scale deforestation on much of the expropriated land, with tobacco production falling to 20 per cent of previous levels and maize production declining to 40 per cent or less of national requirements.
-  Severe infringement on the socio-cultural fabric of rural Zimbabwe.
-  Critical shortages in farming input supplies.
-  Poor water management in resettled areas.
-  A collapse in rural infrastructure development, with an inevitable decline in agricultural extension services.
-  Expensive agro-financing owing to the current high-risk nature of the business and a lack of collateral.
-  Distorted marketing and pricing of the commodities produced.
-  A crippling energy and fuel crisis, partly attributable to loss of foreign-currency earnings from agricultural and agro-based exports.
-  A significant, and not generally recognized, fall in output from the communal areas as a result of the collapse of commercial and industrial support services.
-  Sharp declines in agricultural research and extension.

Recovery of the Agricultural Sector

The MDC's vision is to ensure the full recovery of agriculture and place it firmly on the path of enhanced productivity and strong sustainable growth so that Zimbabwe can regain its status as a leading agricultural country in Africa. To achieve this objective the MDC is determined to bring social justice and economic stability to the country by implementing a just, orderly and equitable land-settlement programme,

facilitating the transformation of smallholder (communal) agriculture, and initiating a 'people-centred' agrarian-reform programme to ensure security of tenure, social recovery and the economic well-being of all Zimbabweans.

The MDC's vision is underpinned by innovation and technological change, the revitalization of national agricultural institutions, the provision of investment incentives, and the creation of an enabling regulatory framework. The MDC also fully recognizes that the success of agriculture depends crucially on macro-economic stability, strong agro-industrial linkages, and the structural transformation of the economy.

Social Justice in Agriculture

It is important to stress at the outset of this policy that the MDC's vision extends beyond land reform to a much broader agenda of agrarian reform. By agrarian reform we mean the transformation of rural people's lives to make them fully productive and wealth-generating. Access to land is a crucial dimension, but it is only a starting point. Farmers require capital equipment, finance and all other inputs, and must have markets for their products. They need to produce on a basis that will allow them to generate a worthwhile return for their efforts. This applies as much to farmers in the communal areas as to those settled on what were previously large-scale commercial farms.

The MDC's programmes will be directed not just to the resettlement areas but also to the communal areas and small-scale farming schemes. Contrary to current propaganda and practice, land reform alone is never going to decongest the Communal Lands, which will continue to provide a livelihood and security for the majority of our rural people. For a social democratic party committed to achieving true social justice, agrarian reform, which embraces all rural areas, but with special focus on the communal areas, is a fundamental policy thrust.

Agrarian reform is a key element not just in the MDC's agricultural policy but also in its economic programme. The conventional approach in economics has been to design economic interventions for the formal sector and rely on 'trickle-down' to alleviate poverty in the non-formal parts of the economy (consisting of the informal and the subsistence/communal sectors). The MDC's economic policies are designed to overcome the dualism in the Zimbabwean economy by cutting the links and mechanisms through which the low-productivity non-formal sectors are reproduced. It will thereby also create the conditions for the end of migratory labour, allowing families to be united. This is an important social objective in its own right, as it will also reduce one of the main circumstances in which HIV/AIDS is spread.

POLICY PROGRAMMES

Complementing its policies on land and agrarian reform, the MDC's policies for the agricultural sector aim to restore agricultural production and ensure its future growth. These policies are about gearing Zimbabwe's agriculture towards food self-sufficiency, innovation, enhanced productivity, contribution to exports and to the national fiscus, and restoring the central role of agriculture as the driver of economic and social development for the sustainable creation of wealth. The MDC aims to use agriculture as a springboard for transforming Zimbabwe's rural areas.

While these goals are being pursued, it is also intended to halt the deterioration in natural resources management on all rural land, to enhance the security of all land users, and to strengthen their sense of ownership and worth.

Food Security

It will be an urgent and immediate priority of the MDC government to restore food production to levels that are able to provide Zimbabwe's basic needs. To achieve this, the initial requirement for food imports will be reorganized so as to direct these essential imports to local food-processing companies, who will pay the full import price for all such imports, irrespective of their origin.

Those communities that do not have the resources to buy food at full market cost will be given opportunities to earn the required resources through development programmes in rural areas. Targeted subsidies and income-support programmes for the most vulnerable will supplement these programmes. These safety nets will be put in place before existing subsidies are withdrawn.

Commodity prices will be raised by this effort to full import parity, and will allow farmers to grow these products for a reasonable return. As domestic output recovers, imports will be allowed to decline and, when exports resume, attention will be paid to mechanisms that will protect farm incomes until such time as the industry has fully recovered and is able to compete on a global basis.

Farming Infrastructure

To reverse the massive collapse of rural infrastructure, the Ministry of Agriculture will encourage strategic public-private partnerships to rehabilitate farming infrastructure. Financial packages will be devised to replace irrigation equipment, electricity connections, storage and curing facilities, communication systems and farming equipment in medium to large-scale commercial farming areas. Rural road and electricity distribution systems will be rehabilitated.

The National Cattle Herd

Successive droughts, disease, stock theft and the ‘fast-track’ land acquisition have depleted the national cattle herd, resulting in shortages of beef and milk. The MDC will focus on intensive rebuilding schemes to return this key component of agriculture to pre-1990 levels in the shortest possible time.

It is recognized that the country cannot ignore the investment in the Cold Storage Company or its critical role within the industry as an export base and a stabilizer in time of drought. In order that the CSC can support the rehabilitation of the national herd, a Commission of Inquiry will be established to examine all possible ways of resuscitating it, and to consider the possible adoption of an arrangement introduced in Namibia, where a similar institution has been successfully privatized and integrated with the cattle industry. This exercise will include the resuscitation of the operations of a financial scheme specifically linked to restoring cattle numbers on farms.

The Development of Forestry

Zimbabwe has significant soft and hardwood development potential in the eastern districts, as well as in other areas presently set aside for indigenous hardwood production. It would be the intention of the MDC government to protect the existing base of the industry by securing the rights of existing forest owners and removing illegal settlers from these areas. It would also be a responsibility of the Land Commission to assess the state of the Forest Reserves and to recommend future action and policy.

At the same time the MDC government will launch a special programme to support out-grower production of forest products using existing forest companies as the base and funding the operation with long-term, low-interest funds secured from international agencies. This will assist rural families in forest areas to make a reasonable living, and will provide the foundations for a substantial forest products’ industry on a sustainable basis for the future. It will also create a ‘carbon sink’ in Zimbabwe that might attract international Kyoto funding.

Agricultural Institutions

Realizing that a sophisticated agricultural industry is achieved only by a supportive institutional infrastructure, the MDC government will invest resources to rehabilitate and reform public marketing agencies, research centres and public agro-based financing institutions. Existing training and education institutions will be expanded into farmer-trainer entities, as opposed to being limited only to training extension workers.

Research

The MDC government will maintain the Agricultural Research Council as an independent, non-political body. The Council will advise government on all aspects relating to agricultural research, will recommend the provision of grants for research by central government, and will also solicit grants from agriculture associations and development partners. Government grants would be tied to agricultural research to benefit the small-scale resettled farmers who may not be able to afford research output of their own.

Training

All agricultural training institutions will be placed under independent councils selected from the agriculture industry. These institutions will be expanded in order to ensure that there are adequate numbers of trained personnel to take the many opportunities to be created in the farming sector by the land and agriculture programmes. Government will support agricultural training through the same facilities that are available to students at universities and colleges. These activities will be the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Extension Services

The MDC government will provide basic extension services to all farming communities through a system of extension agents who will work with local farm communities and research establishments. Particular regard will be paid to extension services in small-scale resettlement and communal farming areas. Private-sector firms with interests in the agriculture industry will be encouraged to support extension services to commercial farmers.

Marketing Services

The Grain Marketing Board will remain a part of central government but will be required to operate on commercial principles and will no longer hold a statutory monopoly over grain and oilseed marketing. However, the GMB will be required to maintain a network of depots throughout the country and to act as residual buyer of food grains and oil seeds. It will also be required to maintain strategic stocks of basic foods and to provide storage facilities to the private sector.

The national system of livestock sale pens will be maintained but outsourced to the private sector under conditions negotiated annually by the Livestock Marketing Trust.

An MDC government will maintain the system of commodity councils made up of representatives of all stakeholders on the production and consumption side of each industry, and will require these councils to publish regular information on stock

levels, prices and general activity in the industry for which they have responsibility. They will advise the ministry on the need for both imports and exports of basic commodities.

Pricing and Marketing

Commodity councils will support a local market for commodities that allows producers and buyers to establish market-related prices for the commodities being traded. Such councils will be required to publish prices on a daily basis in the national press and on radio and television.

Local, regional and international commodity trading plays a crucial role in triggering socio-economic development and wealth creation in Zimbabwe. The MDC government will play a non-interventionist, regulatory role in ensuring a competitive pricing environment that creates conditions conducive to investment in the sector, putting in place, however, mechanisms that will protect vulnerable groups.

Seed Production

Realizing that the quality of a crop depends mainly on the quality of the seed, the MDC government will ensure private-sector-driven seed production through out-grower contracting alliances between seed-production companies and large and small-scale commercial farmers.

Emergency Measures to Expedite Recovery

The MDC government will establish an emergency programme to foster the recovery of production in as short a period of time as is possible. This will include a programme to rehabilitate production and distribution systems for fertilizers and chemicals as well as for all other essential farm inputs.