

Africa

Zimbabwe seized white farmers' land. Now some are being invited back.

By [Kevin Sieff](#) September 14 at 7:34 PM

HARARE, Zimbabwe — When Tracy Mutinhiri struggled to get her tobacco crop to grow, she turned to some of the country's most experienced farmers for help.

There was only one complication: They were white.

In Zimbabwe, farmland has been a central issue in the African nation's violent struggles over race. Fifteen years ago, the government began [seizing property](#) from thousands of white farmers and giving it to blacks as recompense for the abuses of colonial rule. But now, as agricultural output stalls, black landowners are quietly reaching out to white farmers who were thrown off their land.

“The problem now is that we have the land, but they have the experience,” said Mutinhiri, a black landowner. “We need to help each other.”

[President Robert Mugabe](#) has warned that forging ties with white farmers is a step backward. He initially won fame as a guerrilla fighter against white minority rule, which ended with Zimbabwe's independence in 1980.

“We can't have another war to liberate a country we have already liberated,” Mugabe said last month, speaking about the increasing number of white farmers now advising or managing black-owned farms.

[\[How whites retained their grip on Zimbabwe's farms for decades\]](#)

For whites who were stripped of their property, Mugabe's policy of land reform amounted to theft. For [blacks who profited](#) from the redistribution, it was justice after nearly a century in which a small group of British settlers and their descendants controlled the country. The rift between those perspectives has long appeared unbridgeable.

But with the economy spiraling downward, the “joint partnerships” are becoming more common. Black landowners retain their rights to the property but share the profits with whites, who live and work on the farms as managers or consultants, sometimes bringing their equipment as well.

For decades, Zimbabwe's land ownership was sharply skewed in favor of whites. In 1980, the country was home to about 120,000 whites and more than 7 million blacks, but whites owned about half of the arable land. Blacks worked the farms as low-paid laborers. In most countries in East and West Africa, white minority rule ended more than a half-century ago, but Zimbabweans' experience is relatively recent.

[Ian Smith](#), a prime minister who fought to preserve white rule in the years before independence, was himself a farmer.

His regime, deemed racist and undemocratic by most of the international community, funded itself largely through agricultural exports. In the 1960s and '70s, some of the key battles of the country's war against white rule took place on farms. Smith said he was fighting for "a whiter, brighter Rhodesia."

When the Mugabe government started redistributing farmland in 2000, the biggest tracts [went to](#) supporters of the ruling party, even if the recipients [didn't know](#) how to work them. White farmers, many of whom said they were ready to participate in a more orderly process of land reform, received no compensation when their property was seized.

"If white settlers just took the land from us without paying for it," Mugabe said, "we can, in a similar way, just take it from them without paying for it."

Driving around Zimbabwe today, it's hard to miss the acres of farmland lying [fallow](#). In 1997, the country's economy was among the strongest on the continent. This year, its growth rate is predicted to be 1.5 percent, according to the government, lower than that of any of its neighbors. Between 2000 and 2009, agricultural revenue declined by \$12 billion, according to the commercial farmers' union. The nation, once called "the breadbasket of Africa," relies on international aid to feed 25 percent of its population, according to the World Food Program.

But in a country still plagued by racial tensions, turning to experienced white farmers is hardly a simple solution to economic woes.

To some Zimbabweans, allowing whites onto the country's black-owned farms, even as managers or consultants, is a tacit recognition that land reform has failed.

"The whites had their turn," Savior Kasukuwere, the minister of local government, said in an interview. "It's time for our people to have a chance."

For white farmers, many of them now landless, the partnership offers are rolling in.

"Every week they're asked, 'Wouldn't you like to come back to the farms?'" said John Robertson, an economist in Harare, the capital.

But taking those jobs, many whites say, would legitimize a land-reform system they see as unjust and politically driven.

"There's no one who disagrees with social justice, but instead we watched as land reform was used as a tool of political patronage," said Peter Steyl, the head of the country's commercial farmers' union.

Extensive unemployment

After their land was seized, many white farmers left the country. But hundreds remained, either moving to cities or clinging to slivers of their former farms. There are roughly 300 whites still operating their own farms (compared with 6,000 in 1980). Many have struggled financially.

Even if they don't like the idea of returning to farming as advisers, they have few other job prospects in a country with

widespread unemployment.

“It’s become an incredibly hard place to work,” said Ian Ferguson, a white farmer who has held on to some of his property.

After trying and failing to make her farm profitable, Mutinhiri was \$200,000 in debt. She had 460 acres but no way of paying back her loans. Her bank had a suggestion: recruit professional white farmers.

The manager she hired came from a company called Mashonaland Tobacco, the Zimbabwean arm of U.S. tobacco giant Alliance One International.

When he arrived on Mutinhiri’s farm last year, it quickly became clear that the partnership was going to be difficult. The farmer accused Mutinhiri of stealing land that belonged to whites, she said, and he refused to work with her son.

“He kept saying, ‘You stole our land,’” Mutinhiri recalled. “And I told him, ‘No, I’m indigenous. This land belongs to us.’”

Mashonaland executives said the company no longer employs that farmer.

“I’m aware that there was some friction,” the company’s managing director, Kenneth Langley, said of Mutinhiri’s case.

Langley added: “I do believe Zimbabweans want to overcome that history.”

The Zimbabwean government has vacillated when it comes to the joint partnerships.

“Joint ventures can be black to black, black to white, black to yellow or red,” Douglas Mombeshora, the minister of lands and rural resettlement, [told](#) Zimbabwe’s NewsDay newspaper in January, “as long as people agree on terms of the contract.”

But two weeks later, Mombeshora appeared to [change his mind](#). Some Zimbabweans suggest he was brought in line by Mugabe.

“Joint ventures with white, former commercial farmers, we say no to that. We have never allowed that,” he then told NewsDay.

For both white farmers and black landowners, it has sometimes been difficult to divine the government’s stance.

“It’s discouraging. We have no intention whatsoever of trying to reclaim the land,” Langley said. “What we’re trying to do is get agriculture in Zimbabwe up and running again.”

For her part, Mutinhiri received approval from the government to bring the white farmers on. She and many others say that without assistance and equipment, their farms will go to ruin.

“There’s a recognition among black farmers that there’s a lack of capacity,” said Temba Mliswa, a former member of parliament who received his farm under the land-reform program, “even if the government doesn’t want to acknowledge it.”

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