Beyond Neoliberal Paradigms: Integrating Ubuntu and Sam Moyo's Political Thought in Zimbabwe's Land Reform Policy

Thabiso Jeremiah Musendame

University of Johannesburg

and

Emmanuel Matambo

University of Johannesburg

Abstract

Land reform in Zimbabwe remains a deeply contested and symbolic issue entwined with historical injustices, cultural identity and socio-political power. Conventional neoliberal paradigms that frame land primarily as an economic commodity have failed to address the multifaceted realities of land dispossession and agrarian transformation. This study proposes a humanistic land nexus framework grounded in the political thought of Sam Moyo and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, which reconceptualise land as intrinsically linked to human dignity, justice and communal identity. Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of diverse stakeholder perspectives, the study reveals critical tensions between policy intentions and lived experiences, highlighting issues of elite capture, marginalisation, disconnection from spiritual land values and inadequate state support. The findings affirm the necessity of integrating culturally grounded and participatory governance mechanisms, reparative justice and sustainable livelihoods into land reform policy. This framework challenges dominant neoliberal approaches and offers a normative roadmap for reimagining land reform in Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa, emphasising the restoration of both land and humanity.

Keywords: Land Reform; Ubuntu; Sam Moyo; land reform in Zimbabwe; postcolonial justice; Zimbabwe

1.   Introduction

Land reform in Zimbabwe remains one of the most contested and symbolically potent issues. At its core, the redistribution and restitution of land represent more than mere economic transactions; they reflect profound struggles over identity, justice, power and nationhood. Land in Zimbabwe is not simply a resource to be exploited for profit, but a deeply embedded cultural and historical anchor. It functions as a repository of historical trauma, cultural belonging and social dignity. The colonial conquest and subsequent settler dispossession fundamentally disrupted indigenous relationships with land, instituting racialised systems of ownership that entrenched inequalities and marginalised the majority Black population for over a century. The protracted struggle for land recovery was central to Zimbabwe's liberation war (1950–1980), underscoring land's centrality to political and social emancipation. The war was not only about sovereignty from colonial rule, but also about reclaiming access to ancestral lands that sustained livelihoods and symbolised identity. Post-independence, the new government faced the monumental task of redressing historical land imbalances while navigating a complex political economy and international pressures.

As a result, the Zimbabwean government sought to redress historical land inequities through various policy instruments. The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), launched in 2000, marked a radical and accelerated effort to redistribute land to indigenous Zimbabweans. However, the programme was marred by elite capture, inadequate planning and limited support for beneficiaries. While it succeeded in dismantling the settler land monopoly, it also generated a range of unintended consequences including agricultural decline, food insecurity and socio-political instability. These outcomes have cast a shadow over the promise of land reform and sparked intense debate over policy effectiveness and justice. This study argues that the shortcomings of Zimbabwe's land reform cannot be fully understood or addressed through dominant neoliberal paradigms. Neoliberal approaches tend to reduce land to a tradable commodity and prioritise market efficiency and economic rationality over social justice, cultural legitimacy and historical redress. Such narrow frameworks overlook the profound social and spiritual connections Africans have with land, thus, undermining reform's transformative potential.

This study draws on the political thought of Sam Moyo (2013), a seminal scholar of agrarian transformation in Africa, and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, to propose a humanistic land-nexus framework. This framework reconceptualises land as intrinsically linked to human dignity, identity and justice. It emphasises a culturally grounded and participatory approach to land reform that recognises land as a site of historical redress, social cohesion and sustainable livelihoods. The objective of this study is to critically engage with Zimbabwe's land reform history, analyse the disjuncture between policy and lived realities and offer a normative model that situates land reform within a holistic understanding of land-humanity relations. This humanistic perspective underscores land as a foundational axis of identity and community, challenging technocratic paradigms and fostering transformative justice.

2.   Literature review: Comparative perspectives on land in Africa

On examining land reform trajectories across Africa reveals diverse models and outcomes, illuminating important lessons and persistent challenges. Mozambique's post-conflict land reform has emphasised community governance and collective tenure, providing space for local control, though implementation has been uneven and sometimes contested (Manji, 2006). Rwanda's tenure regularisation programme has prioritised formalisation and state control, with efforts to clarify land rights, however, this has sometimes alienated customary systems and local authority (Ansoms and Murison 2013). Ghana and Zambia represent pluralistic tenure systems, combining statutory and traditional governance, however, grappling with tensions around power, legitimacy and inclusion (Lund, 2011). Common across these cases is the marginalisation of rural voices in reform processes and the insufficient integration of cultural and spiritual land meanings. Murisa (2017) and Chipenda (2021) stress that meaningful and sustainable reform requires embedding land governance within local epistemologies and participatory structures that honour communal values and histories.

Global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have historically promoted market-led land reform (MLLR), characterised by individual titling, privatisation, and economic liberalisation (Deininger 2003). Moyo and Yeros (2005) critique this approach as epistemologically narrow and epistemically unjust, imposing Western land concepts that marginalise African knowledge systems. This "epistemic injustice" silences indigenous perspectives and perpetuates colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power (Fricker 2007). These frameworks neglect the affective and symbolic dimensions of land, vital to African lived experiences where land is a source of identity, ancestral connection and social cohesion. The failure to recognise these dimensions fuels reform failures, social alienation and rural disenfranchisement.

An expanding body of African scholarship aligns with Moyo's critique, emphasising land's multifaceted role in social justice and identity. Mandizadza (2009) and Chambati (2022) foreground land's centrality in healing historical trauma and restoring dignity. Cousins (2019) and Fraser (2001) argue for reform paradigms prioritising both recognition and redistribution, linking land to human rights and cultural legitimacy. Tsikata (2015) and Cordes (2017) emphasise metaphysical and ritualistic dimensions of land, especially in rural contexts, calling for governance systems that respect traditional authorities and communal stewardship. These contributions collectively advance the humanistic land-nexus as a critical conceptual tool for understanding land reform as a profoundly social and cultural process.

Zimbabwe's colonial land regime, codified through legislation such as the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, entrenched racialised land ownership that dispossessed Black Africans of fertile land and relegated them to marginal communal areas (Baines 1991). This structural violence spurred decades of political struggle culminating in the liberation war, where land reclamation was a core demand. Post-independence reforms initially proceeded cautiously, constrained by political compromise and economic pressures. The FTLRP of 2000 sought to accelerate redistribution, however, was plagued by elite capture, weak institutional capacity and lack of support mechanisms, resulting in uneven land access and declining agricultural productivity (Bhatasara and Helliker 2018). Persistent rural poverty and food insecurity signal unresolved tensions between policy and grassroots realities.

Interestingly, an African philosophical concept of Ubuntu which emphases the interconnectedness, and respect for humanity, offers a compelling lens for land reform. Land, under Ubuntu, is sacred and communal, representing moral and ancestral ties that bind communities. Loss of land signifies loss of identity and belonging (Mbigi and Maree 1995). Moyo (2013) integrates Ubuntu's principles with land reform, advocating culturally relevant policies that honour collective rights and communal stewardship. Cousins (2019) warns that without reclaiming African moral economies, land reform risks becoming a technical exercise devoid of transformative potential.

While extensive literature addresses land reform's economic and political dimensions, there is a paucity of research systematically theorising the land-humanity nexus. Most studies emphasise material outputs such as yields or income, neglecting subjective experiences like trauma, belonging and healing. This creates a critical gap in understanding the ontological violence of dispossession and the restorative

potential of culturally grounded reform. This study contributes to this gap by centring African epistemologies, human dignity and justice in the analysis of Zimbabwe's land reform experience, offering a humanistic framework that bridges scholarship and policy.

3.   Theoretical framework

Sam Moyo's political thought offers a vital corrective to technocratic and neoliberal approaches that commodify land and narrowly focus on economic outcomes. Moyo (2013) critiques the market-oriented reforms that treat land simply as an asset to be bought and sold, divorced from its social and historical contexts. Instead, the author proposes a humanistic land-nexus framework which integrates African ontological principles, notably Ubuntu, a philosophy emphasising relationality, dignity and communal belonging. This framework rests on five interconnected pillars:

Land as a Human Right: Land is foundational not only to economic survival, but to human dignity and identity. Secure access to land enables cultural continuity, social stability, and self-determination. Denial or alienation from land constitutes a form of ontological violence, severing people from their histories and communities.

Justice and Redress: Land reform must actively address historical colonial and settler injustices through reparations, restitution and transformative justice. This means going beyond simple redistribution to tackle systemic inequalities and legacy harms.

Participatory Governance: Empowering chiefs, traditional leaders and local communities as central actors in land management is critical. Such participation ensures reforms resonate with cultural norms and foster local agency, rather than imposing external, top-down solutions.

Redefinition of Land Value: Land's value must be understood beyond market metrics to include social, spiritual and moral dimensions integral to African worldviews. This holistic valuation challenges purely economic paradigms.

Sustainable Livelihoods: Land reform should promote long-term communal well-being, ecological sustainability and socio-economic resilience, recognising the interdependence of people, land and environment.

In essence, this model challenges dominant Global North paradigms and neoliberal logics that treat land as a fungible commodity. It underscores land's embeddedness in social relations and historical memory, offering a justice-oriented and culturally legitimate alternative (Moyo and Yeros 2005).

4.   Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations of land reform stakeholders in Zimbabwe. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to unpacking complex social phenomena such as land reform, where subjective meanings, cultural contexts and human relationships are central. By focusing on rich, in-depth data rather than quantitative metrics, the current study aims to capture the nuanced ways in which land is understood as a humanistic, socio-cultural and political resource. The research is anchored in a constructivist epistemology that recognises knowledge as socially constructed through interaction, discourse and context. This orientation aligns with the study's emphasis on African epistemologies, human dignity and culturally grounded understandings of land.

The study utilised a purposive sampling to select participants who have direct and diverse experiences with Zimbabwe's land reform. The sample includes eighteen participants representing four key stakeholder groups: smallholder and resettled farmers who are direct beneficiaries and custodians of redistributed land; government officials involved in land reform policy and administration; academics and researchers specialising in agrarian studies and land governance and representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working on rural development and land rights. This diversity ensured a multiplicity of perspectives on the successes, challenges and meanings of land reform.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted primarily via virtual platforms, considering logistical constraints and the geographic dispersion of participants. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to explore participant narratives while maintaining focus on key themes such as land access, justice, cultural values and governance. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim. Interview guides were developed based on preliminary literature review and the humanistic land-nexus framework, enabling a dialogue that elicited both descriptive and interpretative insights.

Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, analyse and report patterns within the qualitative data. This approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves iterative coding and categorisation to generate rich thematic representations. The analytical process followed six key phases: familiarisation (repeated reading of transcripts to immerse in the data); generating initial codes (systematic coding of data segments relevant to research questions); searching for themes (grouping codes into broader thematic categories reflecting recurrent ideas); reviewing themes (refining themes for coherence and distinctiveness); defining and naming themes (articulating the essence of each theme and its relevance to the land-humanity nexus) and producing the report (integrating thematic findings with theoretical frameworks and literature). A NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilised to facilitate coding and organisation.

The study adhered to ethical research principles including informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Participants were fully briefed on the study's aims, their rights to withdraw and the use of data. Identifiers were anonymised to protect privacy. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. While the qualitative design allowed for rich, contextualised insights, limitations include the relatively small sample size and reliance on virtual interviews, which may affect rapport and depth. Additionally, given the political sensitivity of land reform, some participants might have been cautious in sharing critical views. Nevertheless, methodological rigor and triangulation of perspectives mitigated these concerns.

5.   Presentation of results

This section presents an in-depth thematic analysis of the data collected from the diverse group of Zimbabwean land reform stakeholders. Using the humanistic land-nexus framework as an analytical lens, the discussion elaborates on the complex realities of land reform on the ground, elucidating how policy rhetoric and lived experiences often diverge. The themes below (Figure 1) synthesise key tensions, challenges and possibilities articulated by participants, advancing a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's land reform beyond the dominant neoliberal paradigms.

Figure 1 shows the dominance of elites in land allocation.

**Figure 1: Perceived beneficiaries of land reform**
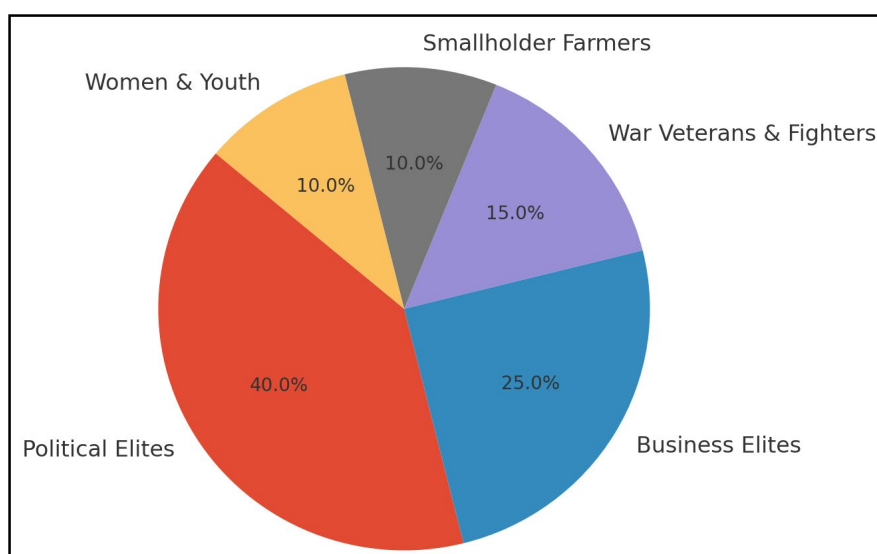
Elite capture and unequal access to land: Pie Chart: Perceived beneficiaries of land reform.

Category	Percentage of Perceived Allocation
Political Elites	40%
Business Elites	25%
War Veterans and Fighters	15%
Smallholder Farmers	10%
Women and Youth	10%

Key Message: Majority of land perceived to benefit elites, undermining equity and justice goals.

Figure 2 is an inclusion bar chart which highlights the gap between policy promises and real inclusion of women and youth.

**Figure 2: Reported inclusion in land access and governance**
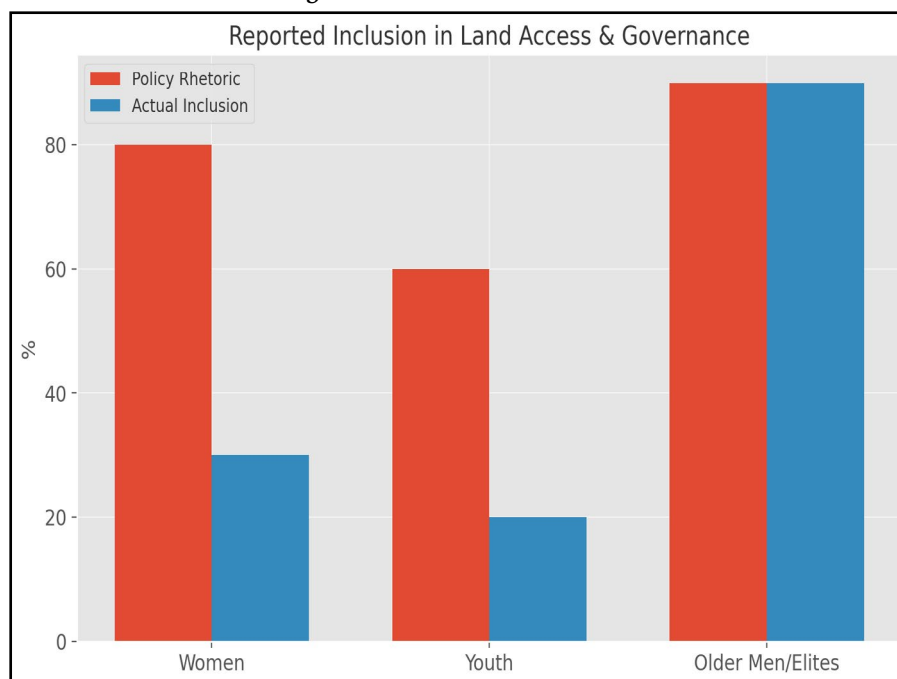
Gender and Youth Marginalization: Reported inclusion in land access and governance.

Group	Policy Rhetoric	Actual Inclusion
Women	High	Low
Youth	Medium	Very Low
Older Men/Elites	High	High

Key Message: There is a major disconnect between policy and practice, with women and youth consistently sidelined.

Figure 3 compares policy versus community needs. The pie charts contrast the technocratic policy emphasis with cultural and spiritual community values.

Figure 3: Add a relevant caption
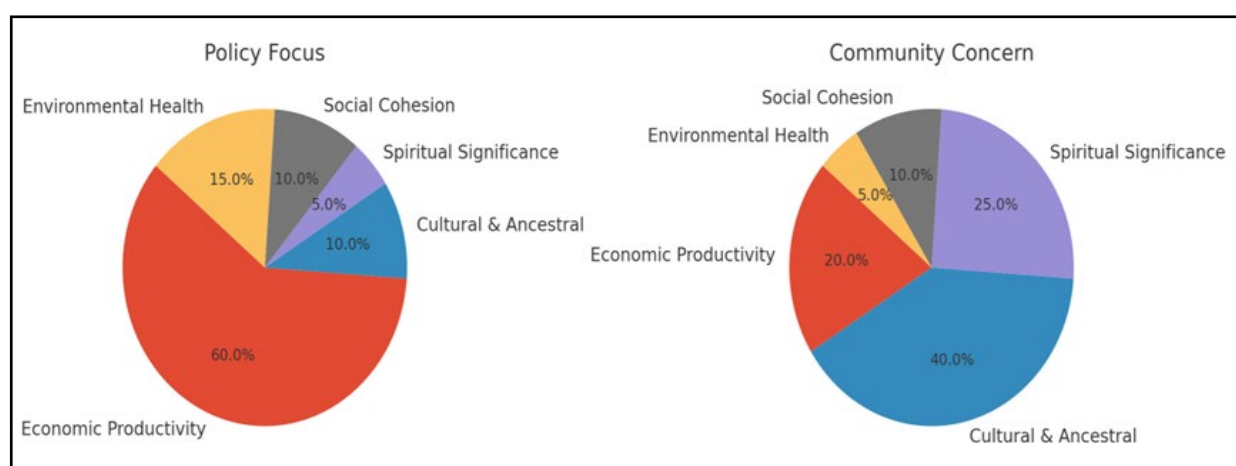
Cultural and Spiritual Disconnection: Pie Chart: Emphasis in Policy vs. Community Needs

Land Dimension	Policy Focus (%)	Community Concern (%)
Economic Productivity	60%	20%
Cultural and Ancestral	10%	40%
Spiritual Significance	5%	25%
Social Cohesion	10%	10%
Environmental Health	15%	5%

Key Message: Policy heavily emphasises economics, while communities prioritise cultural, spiritual, and communal values.

Figure 4 is a post-resettlement challenges bar chart which visualizes the main obstacles faced by smallholder farmers.

Figure 4: Key post-resettlement challenges
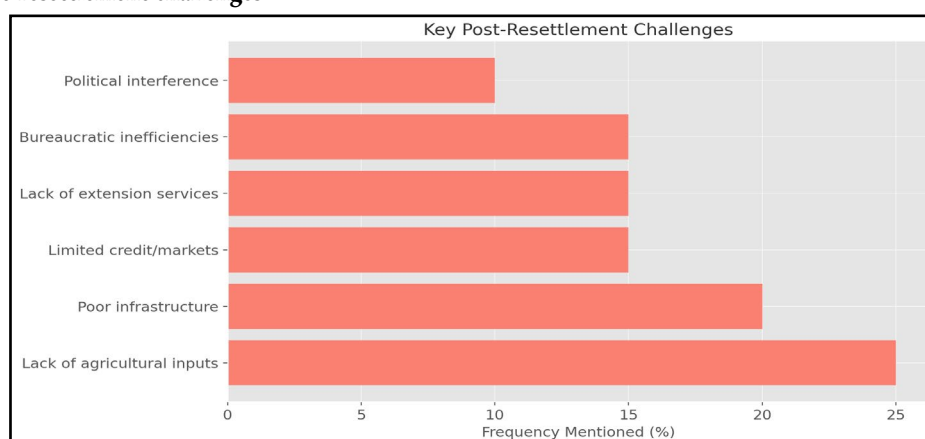
State Support and Institutional Deficiencies: Bar Chart: Key Post-Resettlement Challenges (as reported by participants)

Challenge	Frequency Mentioned (%)
Lack of Agricultural Inputs	25%
Poor Infrastructure	20%
Limited Access to Credit/Markets	15%
Absence of Extension Services	15%
Bureaucratic Inefficiencies	15%
Political Interference	10%

Key Message: Redistribution without strong institutional support undermines agricultural transformation.

Figure 5 is a traditional leadership perception bar chart which shows both positive cultural legitimacy and negative elite favouritism.

**Figure 5: Perceptions of traditional leadership**
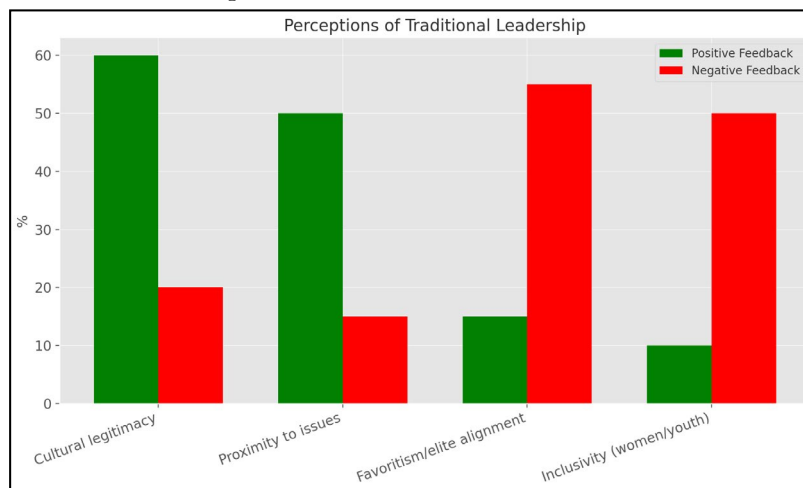
Governance: Role of Traditional Leaders - Dual Bar Chart: Perceptions of Traditional Leadership

Governance Aspect	Positive Feedback (%)	Negative Feedback (%)
Cultural Legitimacy	60%	20%
Proximity to Community Issues	50%	15%
Favouritism and Elite Alignment	15%	55%
Inclusivity (esp. women/youth)	10%	50%

Key Message: Mixed views—traditional leaders are trusted but also seen as part of exclusionary structures.

Figure 6 is a radar chart. This chart maps the disparity between current policy attention and the ideal alignment with humanistic values.

Figure 6: Add a relevant caption
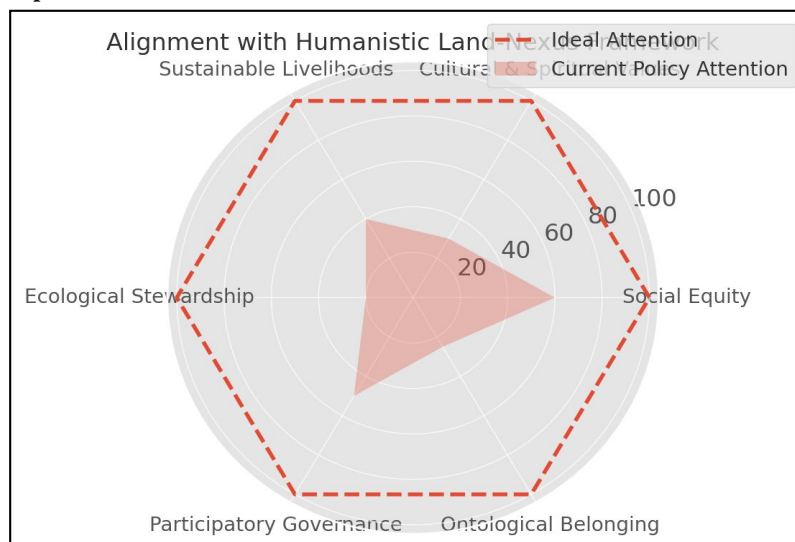
Holistic Land Reform Needs: Radar Chart: Alignment with Humanistic Land-Nexus Framework

Humanistic Pillar	Current Policy Attention	Ideal Attention Needed
Social Equity	Medium	High
Cultural and Spiritual Values	Low	High
Sustainable Livelihoods	Low	High
Ecological Stewardship	Very Low	High
Participatory Governance	Medium	High
Ontological Belonging	Very Low	High

Key Message: Land reform must shift from technocratic to holistic, justice- and culture-centred approach.

6.   Discussion and analysis of findings

This study makes several important theoretical, empirical and policy contributions that enrich scholarship and praxis around land reform in Zimbabwe and comparable African contexts. The contributions include: the theoretical innovation which advances the Humanistic Land-Nexus Framework; empirical insights from diverse stakeholder perspectives; addressing epistemological injustices in land discourse; policy relevance and practical implications and contribution to postcolonial and African scholarship.

The study also holds significant implications for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in land reform not only in Zimbabwe, but across postcolonial Africa. These implications include: reframing land reform as a human rights and justice; the inclusive and participatory governance structures; integrating cultural and spiritual dimensions into policy; building robust support systems for land beneficiaries; promoting multi-level and cross-sectoral coordination; advancing epistemic pluralism and knowledge co-production; addressing structural inequalities through affirmative action; strengthening institutional capacities and anti-corruption measures; integrating traditional knowledge systems in agricultural extension; long-term monitoring and impact assessment and the broader implications for Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa, in which Zimbabwe's experience offers valuable lessons for the broader postcolonial African landscape where land reform remains a pivotal, yet unresolved issue.

One of the most pronounced themes emerging from the interviews is the persistent problem of elite capture during Zimbabwe's FTLRP. Participants frequently highlighted how political and economic elites disproportionately benefited from the land redistribution process, thereby undermining its redistributive and emancipatory goals. A resettled smallholder farmer voiced deep frustration: '*The land was meant to be for the people who fought and need it to live. Instead, it ended up in the hands of politicians and business people with power. We got land but no support to make it work. The land is useless without help.*'

This experience of exclusion resonates with Bhatasara and Helliker's (2018) critique that land reform in Zimbabwe, though radical in intent, became co-opted by networks of patronage and political favouritism. The skewed allocation of fertile land to elites not only perpetuated inequality, it also generated resentment and social tensions within rural communities. Moreover, the marginalisation of women and youth from land access and decision-making emerged as a recurrent concern. Despite constitutional and policy commitments to gender inclusivity, participants noted that patriarchal customs and political marginalisation continued to bar women from meaningful participation in land governance. This exclusion runs counter to the humanistic land-nexus pillar of justice and redress, underscoring that land reform cannot be disentangled from broader struggles for social equity and empowerment of marginalised groups. The findings suggest that without deliberate institutional reforms to check elite dominance and promote inclusivity, land reform risks reproducing the very hierarchies it aims to dismantle.

Participants across all stakeholder groups emphasised that land in Zimbabwe transcends its economic function. Land is deeply imbued with ancestral, spiritual and communal significance, which formal policy frameworks frequently neglect. This testimony vividly illustrates the epistemological gap between technocratic reforms that prioritise measurable economic outcomes and African worldviews that regard land as a sacred, living entity. The loss of ritual sites and the erosion of communal farming traditions reported by participants result in diminished social cohesion and identity crisis at family and community levels. These observations confirm calls by Tsikata (2015) and Cordes (2017) for land policies that explicitly integrate cultural and spiritual considerations. Failure to do so risks not only policy failure, but also profound ontological harm, disrupting the moral fabric that sustains community life.

Another significant barrier identified by participants is the lack of adequate post-redistribution support for land beneficiaries. Several smallholder farmers recounted challenges including shortages of agricultural inputs, lack of extension services, poor infrastructure and limited access to credit and markets. This deficiency highlights the critical importance of the sustainable livelihoods pillar within the humanistic framework. Land redistribution, while necessary, is insufficient to guarantee agrarian transformation and poverty alleviation. Without systemic support, beneficiaries struggle to convert land into meaningful livelihoods, which perpetuates rural poverty and food insecurity. Furthermore, participants noted that bureaucratic inefficiencies and political interference hindered effective service delivery. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) expressed frustration at the disconnection between national policy and local implementation, emphasising the need for decentralised and context-sensitive approaches that empower communities.

The qualitative data underscored a powerful linkage between secure land tenure and personal dignity, identity and human rights. Across narratives, land was framed not only as a resource, but as a fundamental human right that enables social recognition and survival. This articulation aligns closely with Moyo's (2013) humanistic perspective that land reform must transcend commodification to affirm ontological belonging and reparative justice. The data reveal that land dispossession constitutes a form of ontological violence, an existential severing from community and history that leaves scars beyond economic deprivation. The testimonies reinforce the urgent need to embed constitutional and legal protections for land rights within frameworks that respect cultural identity and social justice.

The role of traditional leaders and participatory governance structures elicited mixed views. Some participants lauded chiefs and local institutions for their custodial role in land allocation and conflict resolution, emphasising their cultural legitimacy and proximity to communities. However, concerns about elite dominance, corruption and exclusion within traditional governance structures were also raised. Several interviewees cautioned that chiefs sometimes perpetuate favouritism and suppress dissenting voices, undermining democratic participation and inclusivity. This ambivalence highlights the complex and pluralistic nature of land governance in Zimbabwe. It suggests that strengthening participatory governance requires reforms that enhance accountability, transparency and inclusion, especially of women and youth, within customary institutions.

The thematic analysis collectively points to a fundamental disjunction between the economic-technical framing of land reform and the humanistic, cultural realities of land in Zimbabwe. While the FTLRP disrupted settler monopolies, its limited attention to justice, cultural values and sustainable support has constrained its transformative potential. The humanistic land-nexus framework provides a vital corrective by foregrounding land as a multidimensional social and moral good. Integrating African epistemologies such as Ubuntu can help restore the spiritual and communal bonds severed by colonial dispossession and neoliberal reforms. Addressing elite capture and governance deficiencies demands inclusive mechanisms that empower marginalised groups and respect local traditions without entrenching authoritarianism. This analysis advances the argument that land reform must be reimagined as a holistic, participatory and justice-centred process, not merely a market transaction or technocratic programme.

One critical aspect that emerged from the data, corroborated by wider literature (Tsikata 2015; Murisa 2017) is the systemic marginalisation of women and youth in land reform processes. Participants consistently reported that despite policy rhetoric emphasising inclusivity, entrenched patriarchal norms and political patronage excluded these groups from meaningful land access and governance roles. This reflects a structural contradiction between formal policy commitments and on-the-ground realities, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive reforms that address cultural barriers and power imbalances. Youth, often seen as politically and economically disenfranchised, similarly face barriers to accessing land due to prioritisation of older elites and a lack of targeted youth programmes.

Another emergent theme is the environmental dimension, often overlooked in policy debates dominated by economic productivity metrics. Participants expressed concerns about land degradation, deforestation and unsustainable farming methods linked to the rushed nature of FTLRP resettlements without sufficient ecological support or training. This underscores the humanistic land-nexus pillar emphasising sustainable livelihoods and ecological stewardship. Integrating environmental conservation with agrarian reform is essential for long-term food security and rural resilience.

The study's participants highlighted how land reform has both disrupted and reshaped social relations in rural Zimbabwe. While redistribution sought to correct historical injustices, it also generated new conflicts between beneficiaries, traditional leaders, and former landowners. This points to the dual role of land as both a resource and a social glue, necessitating governance mechanisms that promote reconciliation and dialogue, aligned with Ubuntu's relational ethics.

6.1. Theoretical and empirical contribution

The current study advances a humanistic land-nexus framework that reconceptualises land reform as an integrative project linking human dignity, justice, cultural identity and sustainable livelihoods. By embedding African ontological principles such as Ubuntu, this framework transcends dominant neoliberal paradigms that narrowly commodify land. This innovation addresses critical gaps in agrarian studies by foregrounding moral, spiritual and reparative dimensions of land reform, thereby broadening conceptual and normative horizons. Through qualitative thematic analysis of eighteen stakeholders spanning farmers, officials, academics and NGOs, this study offers rich empirical insights into the lived complexities of Zimbabwe's land reform. These voices reveal disjunctions between policy and practice, highlighting elite capture, gender exclusion, cultural dislocation and institutional weaknesses. Such grounded knowledge enriches understanding of the socio-political dynamics shaping reform outcomes and points to actionable pathways for more equitable and effective land governance.

The study contributes to decolonising land reform scholarship by amplifying African knowledge systems and experiences marginalised by dominant Global North paradigms. It critically interrogates how market-led models impose epistemic injustice by silencing culturally embedded understandings of land. This epistemological pluralism is crucial for crafting policies that resonate with African realities and advance justice beyond technical fixes. Beyond academic theory, the humanistic land-nexus framework offers normative guidance for policy reform. Its emphasis on human rights, participatory governance, cultural integration and sustainable livelihoods informs a comprehensive agenda to redress Zimbabwe's land tenure insecurity, rural poverty and social fragmentation. By articulating concrete institutional and constitutional reforms, the study contributes to shaping land reform policies that are culturally legitimate, socially just and economically viable.

Therefore, theoretically, this study enriches postcolonial political thought by concretely linking land reform to ontological questions of identity, dignity and justice, dimensions often overlooked in mainstream development literature. The humanistic land-nexus framework bridges political economy, African philosophy and empirical social research, offering a multi-layered lens for understanding agrarian change. This framework contributes to decolonising development paradigms, challenging epistemic hierarchies and restoring African-centred narratives. Practically, the study equips policymakers, activists and community leaders with a normative guide for designing land reform policies that are context-sensitive and justice-oriented. By advocating for constitutional safeguards, inclusive governance, cultural integration and comprehensive support, the framework lays out actionable pathways that could enhance reform effectiveness and legitimacy.

Finally, the study contributes to postcolonial and African scholarship by situating Zimbabwe's land reform within broader postcolonial and African debates on sovereignty, identity and development. It aligns with movements for decolonisation and social justice, offering a critical reference for scholars, policymakers, and activists committed to transformative agrarian change grounded in African values.

6.2. Policy implications

The findings of this study hold significant implications for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders engaged in land reform not only in Zimbabwe, but across postcolonial Africa. They reveal that effective land reform requires moving beyond narrow economic paradigms towards frameworks that integrate justice, culture and human dignity. A key implication is the urgent need to enshrine land tenure security as a constitutional human right that transcends individualistic ownership models. Policies must explicitly recognise communal and restitutionary claims, giving legal recognition to the historic and cultural entitlements of dispossessed groups. This human rights-centred approach counters the legacy of colonial exclusion and neoliberal commodification, establishing a legal foundation for reparative justice that addresses past injustices and current inequalities.

Land governance reforms must empower traditional authorities and local communities within transparent, accountable and inclusive frameworks. Mechanisms should be developed to mitigate elite capture and ensure the meaningful inclusion of women, youth and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. Strengthening participatory governance will not only enhance the legitimacy and responsiveness of land administration, it will also facilitate conflict resolution and social cohesion. Policy frameworks must formally recognise and safeguard the cultural, ancestral and spiritual values attached to land. This may include conducting cultural impact assessments prior to land allocation, preserving ritual sites and involving custodians of cultural heritage in land management. Such integration would promote policies that are culturally sensitive and resonate with community worldviews, addressing the ontological harm caused by colonial dispossession and technocratic reforms.

The lack of adequate institutional support for resettled farmers was a recurrent challenge highlighted in this study. Policymakers should prioritise investments in agricultural inputs, extension services, rural infrastructure and capacity-building programmes tailored to the specific needs of smallholder farmers. These support systems are essential to translating land access into sustainable livelihoods, improving food security and fostering rural development. Effective land reform requires coordination across multiple levels of government, sectors and agencies. Flexible policy designs that accommodate local contexts and evolve through participatory feedback mechanisms can enhance adaptability and effectiveness. Collaboration among governmental bodies, traditional institutions, civil society and academic actors will foster integrated approaches that balance economic, social and cultural objectives.

There is a need to bridge epistemic divides by fostering dialogue and co-production of knowledge among policymakers, scholars, and indigenous custodians of land. Encouraging epistemological pluralism will enable the design of land reforms that genuinely reflect African realities and aspirations. This entails institutionalising spaces for indigenous knowledge in policy forums, research agendas and educational curricula. Given the persistent marginalisation of women and youth, land reform policies should incorporate affirmative action measures that guarantee land access to these groups. This includes quotas, targeted support programmes and legal reforms to facilitate women's land ownership and inheritance rights. Such measures will advance equity and intergenerational justice in land redistribution.

The failures related to elite capture and governance inefficiencies highlight the need for institutional strengthening. This includes transparent land allocation procedures, independent oversight bodies, and anti-corruption frameworks to ensure accountability. Capacity building within government agencies and traditional institutions is crucial for effective implementation and service delivery. To address productivity challenges and environmental degradation, extension services should incorporate traditional agricultural knowledge alongside modern practices. This pluralistic approach respects indigenous expertise and supports sustainable land use, fostering innovation grounded in local ecological contexts. Establishing mechanisms for longitudinal monitoring of land reform outcomes will provide critical data to adapt policies over time. Participatory monitoring involving communities can enhance transparency and responsiveness; ensuring reforms remain aligned with beneficiary needs and humanistic principles.

6.3.   *Broader implications for Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa*

Zimbabwe's experience offers valuable lessons for the broader postcolonial African landscape where land reform remains a pivotal yet unresolved issue. The persistence of colonial-era land inequalities and the legacies of dispossession demand that land reform initiatives transcend purely economic rationales. Embedding African epistemologies such as Ubuntu into policy design underscores the necessity of re-centring collective identities, cultural values and historical justice as integral to agrarian transformation. Furthermore, the challenges highlighted by elite capture and marginalisation resonate widely across African nations. This call for deliberate democratisation of land governance that ensures marginalised voices are heard and empowered. The participatory governance pillar within the humanistic land-nexus framework could serve as a blueprint for building more equitable and accountable land institutions continent-wide. Sustainable livelihoods, anchored in ecological stewardship and communal resilience, emerge as another critical dimension. Zimbabwe's agrarian crisis reveals the dangers of neglecting systemic support, reinforcing the need for integrated rural development strategies that combine access to land with extension services, credit and markets. Such approaches should harmonise modern agricultural techniques with indigenous knowledge systems to foster sustainability.

Ultimately, Zimbabwe's land reform saga reflects broader struggles over sovereignty, identity and development in the postcolonial world. Land is not merely soil to be allocated or capital to be traded, it is a living nexus of human relationships, memory and dignity. Recognising this complexity demands moving beyond reductive neoliberal paradigms toward humanistic approaches grounded in African political thought and epistemologies. The vision articulated through Sam Moyo's scholarship and Ubuntu philosophy offers a hopeful trajectory, one where land reform becomes a means of healing historical wounds, fostering social cohesion and building sustainable futures. Achieving this will require political will, inclusive institutions and genuine dialogue among all stakeholders. As Zimbabwe and other African nations continue navigating their agrarian futures, embracing a humanistic land-nexus framework can inspire more just, resilient and culturally rooted transformations that restore not only land, but the very humanity that it sustains.

7.   Conclusion

The land question occupies a central place in socio-political discourse, academic scholarship and policy debates across Zimbabwe and the broader African continent. Colonial land dispossession created entrenched structural inequalities that persist to this day, framing land reform as a critical issue of justice and development. However, despite decades of intervention, mainstream paradigms of land reform remain largely rooted in Eurocentric frameworks emphasising economic productivity, private property rights and market liberalisation. These dominant models frequently fail to account for the cultural, spiritual and ontological dimensions of land that are fundamental to many African societies. This literature review critically examined dominant land reform paradigms and their limitations, highlighting the growing call for alternative frameworks that position land at the nexus of humanity and justice. Central to this critique is the political thought of Sam Moyo, whose scholarship champions a humanistic and culturally grounded approach to land reform. The review further situates Zimbabwe's land reform experience within broader African comparative perspectives and identifies key epistemological gaps in land discourse.

It is in this context that land reform in Zimbabwe remains a deeply complex, historically fraught and politically charged process. This study has demonstrated that conventional neoliberal paradigms, with their narrow focus on market efficiency and commodification, have been insufficient in addressing the multifaceted challenges confronting land reform. Instead, the integration of Sam Moyo's political thought and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu into a humanistic land-nexus framework, provides a richer, more culturally grounded understanding of land reform as a profoundly social, political and spiritual endeavour. The thematic analysis underscored critical gaps in Zimbabwe's FTLRP, elite capture, marginalisation of vulnerable groups (women and youth), inadequate state support and neglect of land's spiritual and cultural significance. These gaps resulted in unintended outcomes such as reduced agricultural productivity, social tensions and erosion of communal identities. By centring land as a human right tied intrinsically to dignity, identity and justice, this study contributes to reframing land reform beyond mere redistribution. The humanistic framework emphasises reparative justice, participatory governance, cultural legitimacy and sustainable livelihoods, dimensions essential for transformative agrarian change.

8.   Recommendations

Constitutional and legal reforms: Enshrine secure land tenure as a constitutional human right that protects communal and restitutionary claims, explicitly prioritising women, youth and marginalised groups. Laws must reflect African moral economies and communal landholding systems, safeguarding against elite expropriation.

Inclusive and transparent governance: Reform land governance to enhance accountability, mitigate elite capture and institutionalise inclusive participation. Empower traditional authorities as custodians within clear mandates that respect human rights, gender equality and youth inclusion. Mechanisms for grievance redress and conflict mediation should be strengthened at community levels.

Cultural and spiritual integration: Develop policies that recognise land's sacredness and social value by incorporating cultural impact assessments and custodial consultations in land allocation and management processes. Preservation of ritual sites and traditional land-use practices should be prioritised to restore community cohesion and identity.

Comprehensive support systems: Invest in robust agricultural extension services that combine modern technology with indigenous knowledge, access to inputs, credit facilities, infrastructure and market linkages. Tailored training and capacity building for beneficiaries, especially women and youth, will enhance productivity and resilience.

Multi-level coordination and adaptive policy: Promote collaboration across local, regional and national government tiers, with flexible policy frameworks that can adapt through participatory feedback and monitoring. Establish platforms for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders to negotiate land reform challenges dynamically.

Epistemic pluralism and knowledge co-production: Foster epistemological diversity by promoting partnerships between policymakers, academics and indigenous custodians. This approach will decolonise land reform discourse, enabling policies that are more culturally resonant and socially just.

In conclusion, this study provides a departure point for future research which should adopt longitudinal designs to assess the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts of land reform framed within a humanistic nexus. Research exploring the evolving roles of traditional authorities, women and youth in land governance will enrich understanding of power dynamics and social transformation. Further interdisciplinary inquiry combining political theory, anthropology and environmental science can deepen insights into sustainable

agrarian development rooted in African values. By embedding land reform within African ontologies and political thought, this study advocates a paradigm shift toward justice-centred, culturally legitimate and participatory agrarian transformation. Zimbabwe's land question, emblematic of wider postcolonial struggles, thus, demands holistic approaches that restore not only land, but the very humanity intertwined with it.

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