

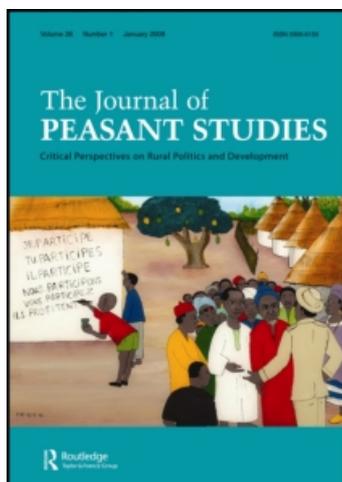
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Contested paradigms of ‘viability’ in redistributive land reform: perspectives from southern Africa

Ben Cousins and Ian Scoones

‘Viability’ is a key term in debates about land redistribution in southern African and beyond. It is often used to connote ‘successful’ and ‘sustainable’ – but what is meant by viability in relation to land reform, and how have particular conceptions of viability informed state policies and planning approaches over time? How have such notions influenced the contested politics of land and agriculture? In southern Africa policy debates have tended to focus narrowly on farm productivity and economic returns, and an implicit normative model is the large-scale commercial farm. Through a review of land reform experiences in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, this paper critically interrogates this influential but under-examined notion. It examines contrasting framings of viability derived from neo-classical economics, new institutional economics, livelihoods approaches (both developmentalist and welfarist), radical political economy and Marxism, and their influence in southern Africa. Through a discussion of alternative framings of viability, the paper aims to help shift policy debates away from a narrow, technocratic economism, a perspective often backed by powerful interests, towards a more plural view, one more compatible with small-scale, farming-based livelihoods.

Keywords: land redistribution; commercial agriculture; small-scale agriculture; livelihoods; viability; Namibia; South Africa; Zimbabwe

Introduction

‘Viability’ is a key term in debates about land reform in southern Africa and beyond, and is used in relation to both individual projects and programmes. ‘Viability’ connotes ‘successful’ and ‘sustainable’ – but what is meant by viability in relation to land reform, and how have particular conceptions of viability informed state policies and planning approaches? More broadly, how have different notions of viability influenced the politics of land in recent years? This paper interrogates this influential but under-examined notion, reflecting on debates about the viability of land reform – and in particular about the relevance of small-scale, farming-based livelihoods – in southern Africa and more broadly.

The authors are members of a team investigating the livelihood impacts of redistributive land reform in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, over a three year period (2007–2009). The project also seeks to interrogate the meanings and impacts of alternative versions of viability within land reform policy frameworks. For details of the project and interim outputs, see www.lalr.org.za. An earlier version of this paper was presented to members of the regional team and the project reference group, and their feedback and advice is gratefully acknowledged, along with the comments of three anonymous reviewers. We would also like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the UK for their financial support for the project (project number RES-167-25-0037).

These questions are not merely of academic interest. How debates are framed and how success is judged is a major influence on the formulation of government policies. With arguments for and against redistributive land reform often hinging on the notion of viability, justifications for public expenditure and budget allocations can be offered if programmes and projects are deemed viable. Conversely, portraying redistributive land reform as 'unviable' provides a basis for arguments that this is a poor use of public funds. Different framings of viability also influence the way that a range of interest groups think about and contest the wider politics of land and agriculture in the region. Yet, despite its centrality in debates about land reform, viability is rarely defined and its precise meaning often remains obscure.

In southern Africa such debates tend to focus rather narrowly on farm productivity and economic returns. An implicit normative model in much usage in the region is the large-scale commercial farm, even when policies suggest that other scales and forms of production, such as smallholder farming, should be accommodated. The dominant framing of viability is embodied in technical recommendations around 'minimum farm sizes', 'economic units', and 'carrying capacities'. Methods and measures for appraisal of land reform – in planning, monitoring and evaluation – are defined in terms of marginal returns on investment or farm profitability. Processes of planning and implementation are framed by standard approaches to farm management and business plans developed for large-scale commercial farms, with the consequence that generalised statements indicating a role for other types of farming, such as small-scale, household-based systems, do not readily translate into programmatic support. This way of framing viability (and therefore 'success' and 'failure') is highly restrictive, but has far-reaching consequences, since the wider benefits and costs of land reform are rarely examined, the social and political dimensions are often ignored, and important cross-scale and linkage effects are not considered. Yet alternative ways of framing viability, drawn from a variety of analytical paradigms, are available, but have been much less influential in the region to date. This article explores a range of different framings evident in both the broader literature on redistributive land reform and in debates in the region and examines their diverse practical and political consequences. For, if policy contestation is in part about struggles over the framing of issues, then being clear about the assumptions and commitments of different alternative framings is essential.

The fact that large-scale commercial farms remain the implicit normative model for viability in southern Africa is of course not accidental and can only be understood in the context of the region's history. Settler colonialism in the region involved large-scale land dispossession, the confinement of the indigenous rural population to densely-settled 'native reserves', massive state support for the development of a white settler farming class, and discrimination against small-scale black farmers in the reserves (Moyo 2007, 60–3). A highly dualistic and racially divided agrarian structure emerged, comprising a large-scale (white) capitalist farming sector, which dominated production for both the domestic and international markets, on the one hand, and a struggling peasant sector, on the other. The reserves functioned as pools of cheap, male, migrant labour for the emerging mines, industries, and commercial farms of the region, since small plots (and in some cases agro-ecological factors), coupled with poor infrastructure and lack of access to markets, meant that peasant agriculture on its own was unable to support the rural population. Although a few peasant producers became successful producers of

agricultural commodities in particular places and at particular times, the generalised pattern was one of rural poverty rooted in the structural features of colonial political economy (Palmer and Parson 1977).

In countries where land alienation by the white minority was particularly marked, as in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, liberation struggles focused on land dispossession as a major grievance. As a consequence, a key policy focus of post-liberation governments in all three countries has been land reform programmes designed to alter the racial distribution of land holdings. But should land reform involve the break-up of large-scale farms into smaller production units allocated to large numbers of the rural poor, with agrarian restructuring conceived of as a key poverty reduction measure? Or, alternatively, should a productive large-scale commercial farming sector be retained but de-racialised, as a contribution to national reconciliation? Both existing land owners and aspirant capitalist farmers have a clear interest in resisting the break-up of large holdings, and this has converged with a seemingly apolitical and 'technical' notion of farm viability to support arguments that large production units need to be preserved rather than restructured. Those advocating the break-up of large farms, on the other hand, have advanced political rather than economic arguments for land redistribution and have often shied away from debating the question of viability.

This article describes the origins of a hegemonic, 'large-scale commercial farm' framing of viability and its influence on policy debates on land redistribution in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The discussion is located in the context of competing analytical paradigms for assessing land reform: neo-classical economics, new institutional economics, livelihoods approaches (and a welfarist variant), radical political economy, and Marxism. Against this backdrop, we propose an approach to thinking about viability that draws on key insights from different frameworks, and we use these to suggest what a re-casting of the debate might imply for policy and practice in southern Africa today.

Modernisation and agricultural development in southern Africa: past and present

Key ideas in policy, such as the notion of viability, must be viewed in historical context. They emerge in particular places in relation to a range of debates and practices that are firmly embedded in historical experience. In southern Africa, discourses around viability have a long pedigree. From the colonial era to the present, dominant views on agricultural development have been based, implicitly or explicitly, on a modernisation narrative, and have survived political ruptures such as the liberation struggle and the attainment of independence. Normative-political constructions of 'good', 'modern', and 'progressive' farmers and farming were implicit in linear models of economic development involving transitions from agriculture-based to industrial economies (cf. Rostow 1960, Schultz 1964, Johnston and Mellor 1961). These constructs were, in turn, influenced by evolutionary views of technical change, in which low productivity farming shifts to intensive farming as a result of demographic pressure, and by technology transfer approaches, in which 'scientific' farming practices and technologies are provided to help modernise and civilise 'backward' farming systems (Scoones and Wolmer 2002).

This narrative has often come to define understandings of agricultural development in Africa in relation to technology (and a shift from 'backward' to 'modern' practices), markets (and a shift from self-provisioning to market-based

production and consumption), and economic productivity and growth (and a shift from 'subsistence' to commercial farming) (Scoones *et al.* 2005). Emphases have varied by setting and period, but a remarkable consistency is evident across time and space (cf. Ellis and Biggs 2001). Striking continuities exist between colonial prescriptions on agricultural development in the 1920s or 30s, for example, and more recent exhortations about the need for a new, business-driven, commercial agriculture to replace older, subsistence modes (World Bank 2007).

State-led agricultural modernisation programmes peaked in the late 1940s and 1950s, just before decolonisation was initiated, and a discourse of economic viability became widespread in this period. In Kenya, for example, the Swynnerton Plan of 1954 identified the ideal model as 'economic farm units' composed of a (yeoman) farmer, together with three labourers on a freehold property with selective credit and extension support (Williams 1996). Land was to be transferred to male farmers in order to boost cash crop production, particularly in the highlands (Throup 1987). In South Africa, the 1955 Tomlinson Report on black agriculture similarly identified 'economic farm units' as the goal, and in Southern Rhodesia the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 was implemented in order to modernise and transform African agriculture and create a class of 'progressive farmers' operating viable economic units (Duggan 1980).

Settlement schemes of different kinds were seen as one route to achieving such goals. Sometimes this involved a major reorganisation of patterns of settlement and land use in native reserves – such as following the Native Land Husbandry Act in Southern Rhodesia, or 'betterment policies' in South Africa (Yawitch 1981). It also involved the creation of new settlements in areas where 'modern', 'progressive' agriculture could be practiced, as in the African Purchase Areas of Southern Rhodesia (Cheater 1984), or irrigation-based resettlement schemes in Kenya (Metson 1979).

In southern Africa, a variety of institutions, such as departments of agricultural research and extension, were given the task of achieving the modernisation of agriculture. These institutions were profoundly influenced by the needs, aspirations, and objectives of white settler farmers, an important political constituency for the colonial and apartheid state (Herbst 1990). In the early period many settler farms did not conform to normative models of commercial farming derived from realities in the American mid-west or in East Anglia in Britain, but these ideal types formed key reference points for policies and programmes. Technical agricultural knowledge imported through colonial connections helped frame knowledge and practice in particular ways, and so came to shape how notions of viability were deployed.

In relation to peasant farmers living in so-called 'tribal' areas, recommendations to promote integrated, 'mixed farming', which became highly influential throughout the region, were based on models from eighteenth century England, as well as experiments undertaken in colonial northern Nigeria in the 1940s (Scoones and Wolmer 2002). Later, these kinds of technical imports were complemented by 'farm management' techniques and understandings of farming systems derived from mainstream agricultural economics, the classic texts and training models being imported largely from the United States. These understandings and techniques, often based on temperate zone agro-ecologies and production systems very different than those that were being developed in practice by farmers in Southern Africa, became the standardised tools-of-the-trade for planning and implementing agricultural development. Departments of agricultural research and extension tended to replicate

the organisational modes and priorities found in Europe or the US, and opportunities to challenge dominant framings and practices were extremely limited.

Despite numerous re-organisations and notional shifts in priorities after independence, the institutional and organisational infrastructure of African agriculture – though populated by different people, with a very different formal mandate and a vastly expanded target group, but often with a much depleted resource base – has remained remarkably consistent in its biases and assumptions. The continued dominance of an agricultural modernisation narrative is also evident in the design and priorities of such recent initiatives as the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.¹ These are influenced by the versions of agricultural development promoted by globally powerful institutions such as the World Bank, whose World Development Report of 2008 emphasises the need to transform existing systems of production and move them towards a modernised, business-oriented, ‘new’ agriculture (World Bank 2007). These labels and categories carry with them assumptions about transformation, ‘progress’, and development trajectories that influence the specific policies advocated.

A core feature of the colonial period² was attempts by the state to develop a class of ‘commercially viable small-holder farmers’. In southern Africa, however, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Early peasant successes that threatened to compete with emerging white commercial farmers were snuffed out (Phimister 1988, Bundy 1979). For the most part the native reserves continued to function as areas supplying labour to dominant capitalist sectors such as mining and industry, as they were originally designed to do, with peasant agriculture providing a supplement to wages and remittances and thus subsidising low wage levels (Wolpe 1972, Palmer and Parsons 1977). Even strenuous efforts by the Rhodesian state to create a buffer class of small-scale commercial farmers in the African Purchase Areas made little impact on the overall agrarian structure. This remained starkly dualistic in character, with large-scale commercial farming at one pole and so-called ‘subsistence farming’ at the other (although the latter was always more productive than stereotypes of ‘backward peasants’ admit, as well as more socially differentiated). Rural poverty had its roots in both the dispossessions that helped create this dualism, and in the discriminatory manner in which the agricultural sector was managed. This was widely understood, with the ‘land question’ fuelling support for the liberation struggle in all three countries.

Inevitably, a key issue for newly elected democratic governments in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa was whether or not to alter fundamentally the agrarian structure through a large-scale and rapid redistribution of productive land. For a variety of reasons, including doubts about the productive capacity of small-scale producers, this was deemed not feasible in any of the three countries. Instead, policies set out to reform the agrarian structure more gradually, through removing barriers to racial ownership and encouraging the de-racialisation of commercial farming and through versions of market-based land reform. These policies were premised on a particular view of viability and centred on preserving the productive capacity of the large-scale farming sector, while at the same time promoting the growth of small-scale commercial farming, both in communal areas (the former

¹<http://www.nepad-caadp.net/> and <http://www.agra-alliance.org/>

²In South Africa, the periods when the state pursued policies of segregation and apartheid.

reserves) and on redistributed land. A key consequence of this choice is the persistence of agrarian dualism, especially in South Africa and Namibia, and the revitalisation of colonial-era modernisation narratives that see ‘viable’ small-scale farms as scaled-down versions of large-scale commercial farms. These narratives have proved remarkably resilient, and have continued to frame discourses on viability and the future of agriculture across the region.

Despite the centrality of the concept, ideas of economic viability are rarely defined with any clarity. As van den Brink *et al.* (2007) point out, in former settler colonies the notion of viability generally derived from a specified income target, and viable farm sizes were calculated by first setting a target minimum income for white farmers and then calculating the size of the farm. Rather than an objective, technical exercise, this was ‘a social policy which ensured that white farmers earned an income acceptable to white society’ (van den Brink *et al.* 2007, 170). This objective provided the rationale for legislation that restricted the subdivision of farms. According to Moyo (2007, 68), viability was always seen through the lenses of both race and class, Africans being seen to have lower requirements for ‘subsistence’ incomes than whites. Notions such as ‘viability’, despite their seemingly technical origins, carry within them multiple social and political meanings and implications. The tenacity of such concepts within policy discourses on land in the region is striking.

Framing viability: frameworks for assessing land and agrarian reform

While any term has its own location and history, it also must relate to a wider field of debate. What does the international literature on land and agrarian reform suggest is the appropriate way to assess viability? How do debates in southern Africa, informed by particular historical experiences, resonate with these? There are a number of competing analytical frameworks commonly used in assessments of land and agrarian reform (Table 1). The most important approaches are neo-classical economics, recent variants such as new institutional economics, livelihoods approaches (and a welfarist variant thereof), and frameworks of analysis derived from Marxism and traditions of radical political economy. These approaches are associated, to varying degrees, with competing political ideologies and stances, and all have resonances in the southern African debate. Thus neo-classical economists are often associated with neo-liberal policy prescriptions, while new institutional economists often articulate a conservative form of agrarian populism, or neo-populism. In contrast, the sustainable livelihoods approach is associated with either ‘developmentalism’ or ‘welfarism’, a kind of centrist populism, which can be contrasted with the radical populism of the radical political economists. Marxists emphasise the importance of class politics and the socio-economic differentiation of rural populations. Thus a primary influence in assessments of viability in redistributive land reform is the choice of analytical paradigm, whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged. In the contested arena of policy debates on land in southern Africa, this choice of framing is often driven primarily by ideological commitment rather than simply analytical considerations.

We briefly summarise and contrast these six frameworks in order to highlight the importance of intellectual paradigms and their associated theories and concepts in framing issues and problems, as well as their political correlates. There is of course the risk of over-simplification and caricature, since there are many different strands of thought within each of these six frameworks. But our intention is to highlight

Table 1. Paradigms for assessing the 'viability' of redistributive land reform.

	Neo-classical economics	New institutional economics	Livelihoods – a developmentist version	Livelihoods – a welfarist version	Radical political economy	Marxism
<i>Central focus</i>	Well-functioning markets vs market distortions and 'imperfections'	Linking equity and productivity	Development as livelihood improvement and poverty reduction	Poverty alleviation, social protection	Development as agrarian transformation	The Agrarian Question, focusing on the transition to capitalism in agriculture
<i>Key concepts</i>	Efficiency in factor productivity (land, labour, capital)	Transaction costs, the inverse relationship	Multiple and diverse livelihoods; 'de-agrarianisation'	Household food security; vulnerability; social protection	Peasants are a social class exploited by a global corporate food regime	Social relations of property and power (class); dynamics of accumulation in agriculture
<i>Land and agriculture in wider context</i>	Declining role of agriculture in economy; globalisation of agro-food markets is positive in lowering food costs	Unequal land distribution can constrain economic growth	Key role of agriculture in kick-starting growth; globalisation offers opportunities but often negative for the poor	Small-scale agriculture as residual, as safety net	Food sovereignty A global corporate regime dispossesses peasants via market discipline and renders them 'redundant'	Links between agricultural development and industrialisation are a key issue Globalisation is a key feature of contemporary capitalism
<i>Policies advocated</i>	Market-led land reform: reduce market imperfections; register private property rights; provide credit	Market-assisted land reform: reduce policy biases favouring large farms or urban consumers	State action to support smallholder production, e.g. land reform, targeted subsidies	Enhanced and secure access to land for small-scale food production as a safety net	Radical agrarian reform that secures rights to land and resources by peasant farmers	(a) Retain efficient farms and improve conditions of labour, or (b) reforms that promote

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Neo-classical economics	New institutional economics	Livelihoods – a developmentist version	Livelihoods – a welfareist version	Radical political economy	Marxism
	To promote investment	Promote efficient markets; secure property rights; credit; land taxes	Co-ordination of marketing			Accumulation from below, or (c) support struggles for land by exploited classes
<i>Beneficiaries</i>	Efficient farmers at any scale; (often economies of scale apply and larger farms seen as socially efficient)	Efficient small farmers who maximise returns to land	The rural poor with multiple livelihoods; small farmers	The rural poor and unemployed with limited access to jobs or alternative incomes	Peasants (small family farmers); landless farm workers; the rural poor	Landless workers, semi-proletarians, petty commodity producers, emerging capitalist farmers
<i>Measures of 'viability'</i>	Farm efficiency; rates of return on investment; minimum viable farm size	Farm efficiency; distribution of income; poverty impacts; growth multipliers	Livelihood impacts; poverty measures	Levels of household food production that make efficient use of household resources	Rurality, agriculture and food are central to social and ecological sustainability	A function of class relations and dynamics Agriculture's contribution to national economic growth
<i>Key questions</i>	How efficient is production on redistributed land? Returns to land, labour, capital?	What factors and conditions influence the efficiency of different scales of production?	What are the multiple sources of livelihood for land reform beneficiaries?	What difference does food production make to household welfare of land reform beneficiaries?	Does land reform transform exploitative agrarian structures and food regimes?	What dynamics of class differentiation and accumulation occur within land reform?

distinctive features and their articulation with debates about viability, rather than offer any comprehensive review. Clearly there are many overlaps, nuances, and grey areas that we hint at but do not have the space to discuss in any depth. The benefits, we hope, of comparing and contrasting a wide range of perspectives will outweigh these limitations. In later sections we examine the degree to which these different frameworks – or sometimes blurred combinations of them – have framed and influenced viability debates in southern Africa, and with what consequences for policy, politics, and practice.³ We believe that, by making explicit these diverse framings of land and agrarian reform – and thus viability – and by highlighting the associated political struggles over meaning and consequence, the debate about the future of southern African land reform can be enhanced.

Neo-classical economics

The central concerns of neo-classical economics are well-functioning markets and the Pareto-optimal efficiency outcomes that are achieved if market failures and distortions are minimised. Government planning and intervention are viewed as being accompanied by rent-seeking behaviour, and therefore inefficiency. Key concepts in neo-classical theory include the notion of utility-maximising activities by individuals who produce commodities for self-consumption or for sale, operating through a firm (or farm, in a rural setting), in order to maximise profit. Efficiency is evaluated by assessing factor productivity (i.e. the relative productivity of land, labour, and capital).

The ideology associated with contemporary neo-classical orthodoxy is neo-liberalism, with its stress on getting the state out of markets (to reduce market ‘distortions’), ‘getting the prices right’, and structural adjustment measures such as deregulation, currency devaluation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity. The state’s necessary role in providing public goods is recognised, as is the role of law in underpinning property rights and contracts. These reduce perceptions of risk and thus ‘stimulate profit-maximising firms to invest, utility-maximising households to save, and hence economies to grow’ (Lipton 1993, 642). This means that neo-classical economists are ambivalent about unequal distributions of property rights based on ascription (e.g. inheritance) rather than achievement, and hence about land reform, which can create the conditions for an optimal, cost-minimising, distribution of farm sizes (1993, 642).

Byres (2006, 227–9) suggests that in the post-war period neo-classical development economists accepted that planning and state interventions, including land reform, were necessary in poor economies before the market could come into its own. Byres distinguishes this ‘old’ neo-classical economics from the strongly anti-state views that eventually came to dominate mainstream development economics from the 1970s until the late 1990s, and is often tagged the Washington Consensus.

As Byres notes, in the Washington Consensus there was no place for land reform of any kind (2006, 226).⁴ The beneficiaries of structural adjustment are seen to be

³We have chosen not to discuss approaches to viability or sustainability that stress the ecological dimensions of land reform and agricultural systems, since these have not been so influential in the southern African context to date. For a review of some of the central issues, see Boyce *et al.* 2005.

⁴See, for example, Lal (1983, 162–3).

efficient farmers at any scale, and this can include large-scale land owners engaged in production, with economies of scale relevant in relation to capital, farm machinery, or chemical inputs. The declining role over time of the agricultural sector within a successfully developing economy is accepted as necessary and inevitable. Trade liberalisation is seen as improving incentives to agriculture through the removal of protections for the urban, import-substituting sector, and agricultural price increases are expected, leading to a switch from subsistence to cash crops, improvements in agricultural productivity and output, and hence the incomes of the rural poor (Deraniyagala and Fine 2006, 52–3).

In a neo-liberal perspective the growing role of agri-business in global agro-food regimes is viewed as an outcome of market-efficient processes based on the logic of comparative advantage, leading ultimately to socially optimal prices for both producers and consumers (Weis 2007, 119). The inconsistencies involved in wealthy OECD countries promoting structural adjustment in the South, while simultaneously providing massive subsidies to their agricultural sectors and keeping in place protectionist tariffs on processed agricultural goods, is one reason why critics see neo-liberalism as ideology rather than respectable theory (2007, 119).

In terms of neo-liberal ideology, then, viability must be assessed simply in terms of farm efficiency and the rate of return on investments in land and agriculture. Large farms and a declining rural population can be ‘socially efficient’, as can an agrarian structure dominated by large farms and global agri-business corporations. A viable land reform must promote market and business efficiency as its primary goal.

New institutional economics

For new institutional economists the neo-classical paradigm and its associated policy prescriptions are inadequate, and institutions assume a much more central role. In this view, while both peasants and large landowners are seen as rational decision-makers, real markets are often absent or ‘thin’ because of the existence of inadequate information or high transaction costs (such as the costs of supervising hired labour or enforcing contracts). To reduce the risks associated with imperfect information and high transaction costs, institutions such as rural money markets or share-cropping come into being. These can include interlocked markets, which are explicable as an ‘endogenous’ response to market imperfections. Property rights are seen as endogenous rural institutions that help reduce transaction costs (Lipton 1993, 641–2).

Power relations and structures are recognised as important in the new institutionalist paradigm, since groups or coalitions seek to use or alter their property rights and resources to their advantage (Lipton 1993, 641). Power structures, despite being ‘endogenous’, can thus lead to sub-optimal outcomes for society. For Lipton (1993, 643), this is often the case when large land owners prevent land markets from optimising farm size and allowing the economic strengths of labour-intensive, small-scale agriculture to be realised. Where an inverse relationship exists between farm size and output per hectare, the redistribution of land from large to small, family-operated holdings can ‘accelerate and to some extent “equalize” the (long-run endogenous) institutional outcomes of agricultural factor and product markets, technologies and power structures’ (1993, 642). Since highly unequal distributions of land can constrain economic growth, effective redistributive land

reforms can make large contributions to development, as well as underpin industrial take-off (as in parts of East Asia).

To achieve these aims, Lipton (1993, 642–3) argues that land reform must be market-oriented and ‘incentive compatible’, and aim to replace existing economic entities that perform endogenous economic functions (such as credit provision, security, technological innovation, processing, marketing, etc.) with effective new institutional arrangements. It must also find a ‘power compatible’ path in order for it to be politically feasible. Both criteria are met by what he terms ‘new wave’ land reform, which should replace the state-led, land-confiscating approaches of the past that often involved the (forced) formation of inefficient collective or co-operative forms of production (1993, 650–5).

In this version of land reform the major beneficiaries should be efficient, small-scale farmers, who are enabled by appropriate rural development policies to maximise returns of land and contribute to rural non-farm economic growth (Lipton 2009). The key focus of viability assessment is farm efficiency, as well as overall economic efficiency (‘general equilibrium effects’). Assessing the potential for growth multipliers and backwards and forwards linkages to farming is important, too, because these help contribute to rural poverty reduction.

Lipton is a key exemplar of this type of new institutional economic thinking on land reform. The World Bank’s 2003 policy research report on land, authored by Deininger, presents similar arguments in favour of ‘new wave’ land reform, but places greater emphasis on policies to secure land rights and promote land markets (and rental markets in particular) than on redistribution. The cornerstone of these arguments is once again the inverse relationship, arising most fundamentally from that fact that farms worked by family members do not incur the high supervision costs incurred by large farms hiring in labourers, and also have higher incentives to provide effort, giving the former a ‘productivity advantage’ and ‘general superiority’ (Deininger 2003, 81). However, imperfections in credit, input, product, and insurance markets can overwhelm the inherent productivity advantages and give rise to a positive relationship between farm size and productivity leading to ‘undesirable outcomes’ (2003, 82). State policies to reduce these imperfections and promote rental markets are recommended, with a strong emphasis on strengthening property rights and tenure security in order to facilitate long-term rental contracts.

For the World Bank redistributive land reform is required where ‘the extremely unequal and often inefficient distribution of land ownership’ is the result of ‘power relationships and distorting policies rather than market forces’ (2003, 143). Since market forces cannot be expected to lead to land redistribution ‘at the rate that would be required to maximize efficiency and welfare outcomes’, state interventions are required (2003, 143). Complementary policy instruments include secure land rights for beneficiaries, expropriation with compensation, progressive land taxation to increase the supply of underutilised land, divestiture of state land, foreclosure of mortgaged land, promotion of rental and sales markets, decentralised implementation, training and technical assistance, and ensuring the rule of law (2003, 155–6). Grants or loans should be provided ‘on a scale that is sufficient to establish economically viable undertakings, while at the same time striving to accommodate a maximum number of beneficiaries’ (2003, 156).

New institutional economists thus assess viability in redistributive land reform in terms of three main criteria: productive efficiency, higher levels of equity, and contributions by land reform to both wider economic growth and poverty reduction.

Arguments along these lines were made in the Soviet Union in the 1920s by the agrarian populist Chayanov, who advocated agricultural development on the basis of co-operative peasant households organised as an independent class and driven by the technical superiority of peasant household-based production systems (Chayanov 1966). Given their strong emphasis on peasants/small-scale farmers and the (mostly undifferentiated) rural poor, new institutional economists are sometimes seen as 'neo-populists' or 'neo-classical neo-populists' (Byres 2004).

Livelihoods

A livelihoods perspective to development has influenced policy advocacy in relation to land reform, as well as the framing of many donor policies on land. The emphasis is mostly on reducing the vulnerability of the rural poor by securing their access to productive assets and resources (tenure reform), and sometimes reforms that result in greater equality in the distribution of land. Here land reform is strongly associated with mainstream developmentalism, as embodied in donor policy frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (DFID 2007).

A key concept in this approach is multiple and diverse livelihoods that combine a range of capabilities, assets, and activities in order to off-set risks and cope with stresses and shocks such as drought, disease, and loss of employment (Chambers and Conway 1992). Another is the classification of material and social assets (including social relationships) into natural, human, social, physical, and financial forms of 'capital' (Carney 1998). A third is the notion that livelihood strategies are institutionally and organisationally mediated, influencing the vulnerability or robustness of livelihood strategies. Land is a form of natural capital, access to which is mediated by institutions, such as land tenure, and policies (Scoones 1998, 2009).

The 'sustainable livelihoods framework' is seen by its proponents as providing explicit recognition that the livelihoods of the poor are complex and dynamic and combine formal and informal economic activity. The holistic and integrative aspects of the approach have made it attractive in comparison to approaches that focus more narrowly on production, employment, and household income (Ellis 2000, Shackleton *et al.* 2000). Criticisms of the livelihoods approach include its neglect of power relations (Murray 2002) and of structural inequalities rooted in class and gender relations and their complex interconnections (O'Laughlin 2004).

In rural economies land is seen as 'a basic livelihood asset, the principal form of natural capital from which people produce food and earn a living', and comprises cropland, grazing and common lands from which a range of natural resources can be harvested (Quan 2000, 32). Land also 'provides a supplementary source of livelihoods for rural workers and the urban poor' and 'as a heritable asset, land is the basis for the wealth and livelihood security of future rural generations' (2000, 32). Caste and gender inequality in land access are problems that need to be addressed, as is the dampening effect of high levels of inequality on economic growth (DFID 2007, 1–2). Land reform may be required to secure equitable and efficient land use and promote pro-poor economic growth. Land can be used as collateral for loans, providing opportunities for investment and accumulation and encouraging the growth of business activity in general (2007, 6).

Kydd *et al.* (2000, 18–9) agree that while globalisation and liberalisation are undermining the relative efficiency of small-scale farming there are still grounds for

supporting smallholder farming as a central feature of rural development, because it is multiplier-rich, accessible to the poor, and creates the basis for eventual ‘good exits’ from agriculture. Since it is ‘unwise to automatically assume that settlement of previously large farms by small farms will lead to “win-win” equity and efficiency gains’ (2000, 19), the case for redistribution must be made on an area by area basis. Kydd *et al.* see potential for redistribution at the ‘quite extensive’ margins of large farms (2000, 19), but also emphasise legislation to facilitate leasing of land and encouraging endogenous evolution of tenure systems towards clearly defined property rights. Government support will be crucial, and elite capture must be avoided, so that these policies do not ‘erode the livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable’ (2000, 20).

Some analysts who use a livelihoods lens to examine agrarian change stress the de-agrarianisation of rural economies in recent years. Bryceson (2000)⁵ argues that livelihood systems in Africa have been profoundly transformed over the past two decades. Many households have diversified their livelihoods, shifted to non-agricultural income sources, and individualised their economic activities. Bryceson questions whether agriculture should remain the core focus of development policy, but notes that ‘African rural dwellers ... deeply value the pursuit of farming activities. Food self-provisioning is gaining in importance against a backdrop of food price inflation and proliferating cash needs’ (2000, 5). Rigg (2006, 196) notes the rapid diversification of rural livelihoods in the Asian contexts and suggests that ‘sustainable livelihoods ... are increasingly likely to be divorced, spatially and occupationally from the land’. In his view policy should support people’s efforts to leave farming, permitting the amalgamation of land holdings and the emergence of agrarian entrepreneurs.

In a livelihoods perspective, viability thus relates to a combination of assets, activities, and social relationships that are robust and resilient, and which together reduce the vulnerability of poor households and individuals to shocks and stresses. Ecological sustainability is also stressed. However, in many livelihoods analyses an inherent tension is often revealed – between emphases on poverty alleviation via enhanced livelihoods of the poor (a form of welfarism), on the one hand, and on promoting economic growth and increased market access, on the other.

Welfarism

Contemporary arguments for land reform on welfarist grounds are also often derived from the livelihoods approach. An emphasis on ‘poverty alleviation’, and a strong focus on household food security, is often proposed as a rationale. Tenure reform that secures access to land for food production and self-consumption is usually the main focus, but welfarist rationales for land redistribution are sometimes offered, too. For example, the World Bank’s 2003 report on land policies (Deininger 2003, 148) argues that ‘access to relatively small amounts of land, in some cases not even owned land, can provide significant welfare benefits...’. The Bank’s primary

⁵It is important to note here that Bryceson’s work is influenced as much by materialist political economy as by the livelihoods approach, which illustrates the difficulty of using this typology to try to pigeon hole individual authors. Our intention is to highlight the influence of key concepts and analytical paradigms in assessments of viability, rather than to try to classify everyone within a wide range of nuanced positions on land reform and agrarian change.

emphasis, however, as discussed above, is on ‘productive efficiency’ as a rationale for land redistribution, which should aim to maximise efficiency and welfare outcomes (2003, 143).

Welfarism in relation to land currently takes a variety of forms. In recent years there have been calls for agricultural development and ‘livelihood promotion’ in poor countries to be more explicitly linked to social protection policies and programmes, such as pensions and other forms of cash transfer, employment guarantee schemes, and microfinance (Ellis *et al.* 2009). Social protection measures could be designed to strengthen the resilience and reduce the vulnerability of poor households or individuals, and agriculture is inherently risky. But smallholder farmers in Asia and Africa are exposed to ‘exceptional risks’ (Farrington *et al.* 2004, 2), many resulting from ‘over-hasty’ privatisation of service-delivery or reductions in public investment, and market mechanisms are unlikely to deliver social protection. In relation to land, Farrington *et al.* mention land redistribution only in passing, and identify various tenure reforms as important policy interventions: reform of tenancy arrangements, reform of inheritance laws that discriminate against women, improvements in documentation of freehold and leasehold rights so that land records can be used as collateral for loans, and enhancing poor people’s security of access to common pool resources (2004, 3).

Viability is thus defined in terms of the ability to protect poorer people from shocks and stress, the alleviation of poverty (according to a range of measures), and the reduction of vulnerability of those most at risk. While such definitions overlap with the concerns of those focused on livelihoods, here a viable land reform is aimed much more specifically at social protection and welfare goals.

Radical political economy

Radical political economy is very diverse, and here only one strand is discussed: that which tries to theorise contemporary forms of radical agrarian populism (McMichael 2008, Rosset *et al.* 2006).⁶ Radical populists see rural poverty as the result of an unequal agrarian structure, and emphasise the oppression and exploitation of workers and peasants by powerful land-owning classes and agri-business interests. Unlike Marxists, however, radical populists place less emphasis on class and other divisions amongst the rural poor, and instead the convergence of the interests of groups who live on the land is stressed. Peasants are seen as under threat of dispossession by policies and actions that support an emerging global food regime dominated by large corporations. Since the mid-1990s, however, these threats to family-based farming have been resisted by resurgent peasant movements, including some that are transnational in scope. The leading example is Via Campesina, the ‘peasant way’, that advances the concept of food sovereignty as a radical alternative to conventional agricultural and food policies (Borras 2008). Implicit in this notion is a very different conception of viability.

Redistributive land reforms are seen as a key component of a broader agrarian reform that seeks to restructure class relations in the countryside (Rosset 2006). Agrarian reform includes a range of complementary policies alongside land

⁶Bernstein (2002, 441) distinguishes between oppositional (anti-capitalist) and accommodationist (to neo-liberalism) varieties of neo-populism. We classify the former as radical populists.

redistribution, aimed at supporting peasant farmers and enhancing agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods, and food sovereignty. Sometimes the inverse relationship and the contribution of equitable distributions of land to economic development more broadly, as in East Asia, are appealed to when arguing for radical land reform (Rosset 2006, 315–17).

Peasants as both beneficiaries and as agents of change are the main focus of contemporary rural radical populism, although social movements often suggest that agrarian reform should benefit other groupings as well.⁷ The precise meaning of the term peasant, however, is often somewhat unclear. Borras (2008, 274) describes the heterogeneity of Via Campesina members, who include landless peasants and rural workers, small and part-time farmers in Western Europe, family farmers in the global South, middle to rich farmers in India, and the semi-proletariat in urban and peri-urban settings. These kinds of class-based differences between members, and the conflicts they might produce (for example, between the interests of small-scale capitalist farmers and the landless labourers they employ), are often ignored or down-played in radical populist analyses.

McMichael argues that contemporary peasant movements are reframing the classical agrarian question and formulating an alternative version of modernity. Mainstream development, it is argued, is complicit with neo-liberal globalisations and an international food regime overseen by the World Trade Organisation, which is dominated by corporate interests from the North and leads to 'peasant redundancy' (McMichael 2008, 209). Peasant movements reject this ideology and trajectory, pointing to its disastrous effects on food production by small-scale farmers in the South. The global dominance of industrialised farming and agri-business interests in the North, underpinned by rich country state subsidies, is fuelling cycles of dispossession in the South, and de-peasantisation is leading to the massive growth of a displaced, casual labour force, it is argued. In addition, such analysts argue, farming systems that rely heavily on artificial fertilizers, chemicals, and fossil fuels are much less ecologically sustainable than the peasant systems that they are replacing.

Movements such as Via Campesina propose a notion of food sovereignty, 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity' (cited in McMichael 2008, 210). Corporate agriculture entails securing the conditions for capitalist accumulation by lowering the cost of labour worldwide, and 'rules out a place for peasants, physically expelling them from the land, and epistemologically removing them from history' (2008, 213). In contrast, the food sovereignty movement is grounded in 'a process of revaluing agriculture, rurality and food as essential to general social and ecological sustainability, beginning with a recharged peasantry' (2008, 213).

Conventional criteria for assessing viability in terms of efficiency and productivity, drawn from an economic logic that fetishises growth in quantitative terms, are rejected. These criteria externalise ecological effects such as chemical pollution, discount energy costs and subsidy structures for agri-business, and

⁷A civil society statement issued at the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2006 calls for agrarian reform that will benefit 'communities of peasants, the landless, indigenous peoples, rural workers, fisherfolk, nomadic pastoralists, tribes, afro-descendants, ethnic minorities and displaced peoples, who base their work on the production of food and who maintain a relationship of respect and harmony with Mother Earth and the oceans' (cited in Borras 2008, 143).

undervalue the economic costs of agro-industrialisation (2008, 214). While conventional criteria based on the ‘spurious logic of monetary valuation’⁸ lead to small-scale agriculture being viewed as inefficient, food sovereignty emphasises the ‘incommensurability of diverse agri- and food-cultures’ and an ‘agrarian identity based in a value complex weaving together ecological subjectivity and stewardship as a condition for social and environmental sustainability’ (2008, 215).

For this strand of contemporary radical populism, viability in land reform thus means the ability of productive small-scale farming to secure peasant livelihoods, but also to promote ‘broad-based and inclusive local, regional and national economic development, that benefits the majority of the population’, as well as ecologically sustainable methods of farming (IPC for Food Sovereignty 2006, cited in Borras 2008, 144). Viability in this conception must be assessed at a scale beyond the individual farm or land reform project, and seen in the context of a new agrarian order that embodies social justice, socio-economic transformation, and ecological sustainability.

Marxism

Marxist analyses of land reform and agriculture are very diverse and disagreements over nuance and interpretation are common. They, however, share a central focus on class relations, class structure, and the dynamics of capital accumulation in agriculture. Key concepts include the social relations of production, the unequal distribution of property rights between classes, and class power (both economic and political). A key issue is the contribution of agriculture to capitalist accumulation and industrialisation more broadly (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009a, 5). This was a central concern in classical framings of the ‘agrarian question’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and is debated today in the very different context of neo-liberal globalisation.

The ‘classic’ agrarian question is usefully summarised by Bernstein (2004, 198–200). In pre-capitalist societies the surplus labour of peasant producers is appropriated by landed property through rent. The transition to capitalism involves a process of primary accumulation that sees the formation of new agrarian classes (capitalist landed property, agrarian capital, and proletarian agricultural labour). The logic of capitalist social property relations establishes the conditions of market dependence and drives the growth of agricultural productivity through technical innovation. If emergent industrial capital is strong enough to secure its interests, the enhanced agricultural surplus can be mobilised for industrial accumulation. Primary or primitive accumulation involves the dispossession of peasants, who are ‘freed’ to work in industry and other non-agricultural enterprises. Increased agricultural productivity helps lower the costs of reproducing the urban proletariat, contributing to capitalist accumulation in general.

Marxist analyses of the agrarian question focus on agrarian transitions in specific contexts. Resolution of the agrarian question can be achieved in a variety of ways, including ‘from above’, as in the case of nineteenth century Prussia, where a land owning class metamorphosed into an agrarian capitalist class, or ‘from below’, where peasants differentiate themselves over time into classes of agrarian capital and agrarian labour (the ‘American path’). To destroy the power of pre-capitalist landed

⁸This phrase is drawn from Martinez-Alier (2002, 150) cited in McMichael (2008, 214).

property and ensure a successful transition to capitalism, a redistributive land reform, typically of the ‘land to the tiller’ variety, may be required. In this conception of the agrarian question “[o]nce pre-capitalist landed property – with its predatory appropriation of rent (vs productive accumulation) – is destroyed. . . . *there remains no rationale for redistributive land reform. . . . any notion of redistributive land reform that advocates the division of larger, more productive enterprises (capitalist and/or rich peasant farms) is ipso facto both reactionary and utopian*”⁹ (Bernstein 2004, 199). It is utopian because it is unlikely to ‘achieve its stated objective of “efficiency and equity”, of increasing agricultural productivity and rural employment and incomes on the basis of an egalitarian structure of “family” farms’ (2004, 199). Byres (2004) and Sender and Johnston (2004) are representative of this strand of Marxism.¹⁰

Bernstein (2004, 202) proposes another interpretation of the agrarian question: that in the contemporary world there is ‘no longer an agrarian question of capital on a world scale, even when the agrarian question – as a basis of national accumulation and industrialization – has not been resolved in many countries of the “South”’.¹¹ He argues that a new agrarian question of labour has come into being, separated from its historic connection to that of capital, and manifested in struggles for land against various forms of capitalist landed property. This agrarian question is not centred on the development of the productive forces in agriculture, but on a crisis of the reproduction of increasingly fragmented classes of labour within a capitalist system unable to generate secure employment at a living wage for most people.

In Bernstein’s conception ‘classes of labour’ include those engaged in unskilled wage labour, in insecure informal sector activities, in small-scale farming, and in various combinations of these, often linked across urban and rural sites and sectoral divides (2004, 206). Peasants are best understood as petty commodity producers subject to processes of class differentiation: some succeed in becoming small rural capitalist farmers, some are able to reproduce themselves as small farmers, but others have to engage in wage labour or other forms of activity, such as micro-enterprises, to secure their livelihoods (Bernstein 2006, 454). Fragmentation and differentiation mean that land struggles are ‘likely to embody uneasy and erratic, contradictory and shifting, alliances of different class elements and tendencies’ (2006, 456).

Bernstein questions ‘uncritical attachment to the benefits of large-scale farming’ (2006, 458), partly because the scale and distribution of capitalist property is often speculative rather than productive in character, and also because ‘the productive superiority of large(r)-scale farming is often contingent on conditions of profitability underwritten by direct and hidden subsidy and forms of economic and indeed ecological rent’, as well as the environmental and social costs of modern capitalist farming systems. He is equally sceptical of ‘small is beautiful’ arguments, or indeed any models of ‘virtuous farm scale’ constructed on deductive grounds, and emphasises the importance of agriculture being able to provision the growing urban population of the world (2006, 458).

⁹Emphasis in original.

¹⁰Sender and Johnston argue that in South Africa the redistribution of commercial farms to small farmers will have only negative effects on the employment and incomes of the rural poor, who will benefit most from policies that promote ‘capitalist farming and the growth of decently remunerated agricultural wage employment’ (Sender and Johnston 2004, 159).

¹¹Emphasis in original.

Other Marxists are not of the view that the agrarian question of capital has now been resolved, or can be separated from the agrarian question of labour. Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009b), for example, argue that the core of the agrarian question is the balance of class forces, nationally and internationally, between capital and labour. The balance of forces is contingent and variable, producing substantive diversity across different national and regional contexts, but the nature and trajectory of accumulation within (incomplete) transitions to capitalist agriculture remain a central issue in many parts of the world. They also argue that in an era of neo-liberal globalisation, the agrarian question has assumed new relevance, with food and agricultural production within global circuits of accumulation becoming of increasing concern to capital (2009b, 332) and massive levels of agro-food imports by China playing a key role within the global economy (2009b, 324).

Neo-liberal globalisation is extending the commodification of rural economies, and market-led concentration of land ownership is contributing to ongoing 'accumulation by dispossession' (of the rural poor). The increasing emphasis on agricultural exports as the motor of accumulation means that a key aspect of the agrarian question in countries of the South is now the nature and extent of linkages between the export-oriented sub-sector and the peasant production sub-sector. These linkages deeply influence the character of agrarian transitions under current conditions and thus the capacity of a rural economy to enhance peasant livelihoods (2009b, 324–7).

From a Marxist perspective, then, viability in redistributive land reform is primarily a function of class relations and dynamics, and could refer to successful accumulation by emerging classes of agrarian capital, either 'from above' or 'from below', or the reproduction of peasant farmers as petty commodity producers, or improved prospects for the livelihood security of differentiated classes of labour, for whom farming may be only one source of income. These are often mutually exclusive pathways, which means that the answer to the question 'viability for whom?' is likely to be politically contested. Another key criterion for Marxists, however, is the ability of growth in agriculture to contribute to national economic growth more broadly, which means that for society as a whole, viability must mean increasing productivity via reinvestment of a portion of surplus value.

Viability in redistributive land reform in southern Africa

How, then, have these different perspectives, each framing viability in very different ways, influenced the policy and practice of redistributive land reform in southern Africa over time? As we have seen, the way viability is defined has a major impact on the way land and agrarian reform is conceived, planned for, and politically contested.

As discussed above, modernisation narratives focused on promoting an 'economically viable agriculture' have deeply influenced the framing of policies for redistributive land reform in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. But this has often been in a somewhat ambiguous manner. Indeed, a key feature of land reform debates in southern Africa is a pervasive disconnect between discourses centred on the politics of land reform, often involving heavy doses of populist and nationalist rhetoric and drawing on a variety of arguments with their roots in livelihoods perspectives, agrarian populism, and Marxism, and the more technical discourses of economics, which stress pragmatic adjustments at the margins and draw on variants

of neo-classical and new institutional economics. Across the region, policy coherence has proved elusive (Lahiff 2003). In the following section we offer a brief review of some of the ways in which viability has figured in policy discourses in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, and explore the degree to which the different framings discussed above have influenced the way land and agrarian reform has been thought about, implemented, and reflected in political contests over land.¹²

South Africa

The objectives and scope of post-apartheid land reform are set out clearly in the 1997 White Paper on South African Land Policy, which summarises the goals of land reform: 'to redress the injustices of apartheid; to foster national reconciliation and stability; to underpin economic growth; and to improve household welfare and alleviate poverty' (DLA 1997, v). A number of economic benefits are identified, including food security for the rural poor and opportunities for expanded agricultural production by around 100,000 small-scale and subsistence farmers (1997, 13). Land reform is said to be able to make a major contribution to reducing unemployment, given the potential of small, family-operated farms to generate more livelihoods on high potential arable land than larger farms and through the multiplier effect on the local economy. Implicit in these rationales is the view that small-scale forms of production offer many advantages over large-scale production.

A 'market-assisted' approach to land acquisition and transfer was adopted, based on voluntary transactions between willing sellers and willing buyers (1997, 37). Grants were to be made available to applicants, and 'the poor and marginalized', as well as women, were targeted. Other criteria for prioritising projects included the 'viability and sustainability of projects' defined in terms of economic and social viability of intended land use, fiscal sustainability by the local authority, environmental sustainability, proximity and access to markets and employment, and availability of water and infrastructure (1997, 43). In framing the design of the programme a new institutional economics perspective mixed uneasily with livelihoods and welfare priorities.

By the end of the 1990s progress in land redistribution was very slow, and a major problem was the lack of resources made available for post-transfer support to beneficiaries (Turner and Ibsen 2000). In addition, most redistribution projects involved groups of applicants pooling their government grants to purchase farms as a consequence of the small size of the grant relative to farm size and the general reluctance of sellers and officials to sub-divide farms. Tensions and conflicts within large groups were common. In 1999 a review of the programme was commissioned, and a new policy framework called Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) was announced in 2000.

Under LRAD the previous focus on targeting land redistribution at the poor gave way to an emphasis on promoting black commercial farming, with a separate food security programme aimed at the poor (Jacobs 2003).¹³ Larger grants together with loan finance were offered to applicants, on a sliding scale, and an income ceiling was removed to encourage black entrepreneurs to apply. 'Commercial viability' now

¹²For more comprehensive country overviews, see papers by Lahiff (South Africa), Marongwe (Zimbabwe) and Werner and Kruger (Namibia) on www.lalr.org.za.

¹³The food security programme was never operationalised.

became a key criterion for approving the business plans required for all land reform projects. Agricultural support programmes for land reform beneficiaries were announced, to be implemented by provincial departments of agriculture, but these have been under-funded, poorly planned and ineffective to date (Lahiff 2008). According to Lahiff (2007, 1589), ‘the official emphasis on commercial “viability” has increased considerably since the beginning of the land reform programme’, and ‘the “commercial” logic of LRAD is now applied to all land reform applicants, regardless of their resources, abilities, or stated objectives’. The key mechanism through which this commercial logic is applied is the business plan, which is usually drawn up by private consultants who have little contact with the intended beneficiaries:

Such plans typically provide ultra-optimistic projections for production and profit, based on textbook models drawn from the large scale commercial farming sector, and further influenced by the past use of the land in question. Production for the market is usually the only objective, and plans typically require substantial loans from commercial sources, purchase of heavy equipment, selection of crop varieties and livestock breeds previously unknown to the members, hiring of labour (despite typically high rates of unemployment amongst members themselves) and sometimes the employment of a professional farm manager to run the farm on behalf of the new owners ...

A central weakness of most business plans is that they assume that the land will be operated as a single entity (i.e. as used by the previous owner), regardless of the size of the beneficiary group ... Because of the lack of support for subdivision, beneficiaries are often obliged to purchase properties much larger than they need, and even to expand the size of groups to aggregate sufficient grants to meet the purchase price. This results in widespread problems of group dynamics as former single-owner farms are turned into agricultural collectives ... (Lahiff 2007, 158–89)

Outside of government, the language of viability dominates the discourse of a conservative alliance of landowners, agricultural economists, and officials, which is opposed to changes in agrarian structure and argues instead for de-racialisation of landownership (2007b, 1589), and the establishment of ‘viable and sustainable upcoming commercial farmers’ (Doyer 2004, 8). This vision underpins the Strategic Plan for Agriculture agreed in 2001 between farmers’ unions (representing white and black commercial farmers) and government. The strategic goal for the sector is ‘to generate equitable access and participation in a globally competitive, profitable and sustainable agricultural sector contributing to a better life for all’ (DoA 2001, 3). Enabling black South Africans to become successful in commercial farming and agribusiness requires ‘well designed and targeted efforts to level the playing field and bring about a more representative and diverse sector’ (2001, 8). Land reform is identified as critically important for ensuring ‘broad-based participation in the agricultural mainstream’, not for altering agrarian structure.

Despite the new focus on commercial viability, high rates of failure in land reform continued to make headlines, and in 2005 a National Land Summit involving a wide range of stakeholders called for a fundamental review of land reform policy, including the willing seller, willing buyer principle. Following the Summit, the idea that land redistribution should be embedded within a wider agrarian reform focused on poverty reduction and that creates opportunities for smallholder farmers became common in policy and public debates. However, there has been little clarity on what this might mean for beneficiary selection, programme design, post-transfer support, and agricultural policy more generally (Lahiff 2008).

In 2007 the Department of Agriculture commissioned a study of ‘minimum viable farm size’ in different agro-ecological regions to guide land reform planning (Aihoon *et al.* 2007). This would provide ‘an acceptable level of disposable household income’ to a farmer and a dependent family (2007, 7). The study recommended that the baseline should be a minimum household income of R4000/month (equivalent to the mean income of ‘emerging consumers’), well above the official poverty line of R2275/month. One rationale was that this target group would attract ‘more competent small farmers than the more marginalized and less skilled communities’ (2007, 19). Adding premiums to compensate for risk and responsibility and allowing for reinvestment of some income into the farming business resulted in a targeted minimum net farm income of R7400/month. Farm sizes needed to provide such an income would vary by category of farming enterprise (based on extensive grazing, field cropping, horticulture, tree crops, etc.) and by agro-ecological region, the assumption being that the economics of commercial farming under current conditions would provide the basis for these calculations.

Such visions of viability echo the colonial discourses on modernisation, and are sometimes located in terms of a neo-liberal framing of land reform that emphasises business profitability. This view is expressed by private sector-funded think tanks such as the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE 2005, 2008), as well as organisations representing large-scale farmers. Given the legacies of colonial rule and apartheid, it is acknowledged by such groupings that the commercial farming sector has to be de-racialised, but the beneficiaries will be a few, relatively better-off black farmers and landowners, not the rural poor, because land reform ‘is not the answer to rural poverty’ (CDE 2005, 30).

Political debates on land policy, however, continue to be disconnected. For example, the wide-ranging resolution adopted by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) at its 2007 national conference in Polokwane calls for an ‘integrated programme of rural development and agrarian change’ and for policies that support agriculture and labour-intensive forms of production and in particular expand the role and productivity of small-holder farming by the rural poor and land reform beneficiaries. It also resolves to restructure value chains and promote co-operatives, and review policies and laws that promote ‘capital intensity and farm consolidation . . . and that make it difficult to redistribute land to a modern and competitive smallholder sector’ (ANC 2007). The 2009 ANC election manifesto promises that the ANC will ‘intensify the land reform programme’ and provide the rural poor with ‘technical skills and financial resources to productively use the land to create sustainable livelihoods and decent work’ (ANC 2009).

These statements suggest that viability in land reform needs to be assessed in terms of a wider set of criteria than those derived from large-scale commercial farming, but what these might be is not spelled out. Meanwhile, in the South African context, the dominant technical framings centre not on a broader focus on agrarian restructuring, livelihoods, and welfare issues, but on narrow business and target income criteria of viability.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe land resettlement formed a major element of post-independence government policy. Ambitious targets were set in the early 1980s, as well as a commitment to offer land to war veterans and the extremely poor (Palmer 1990).

In Zimbabwe, welfarist goals for land reform have been combined with those that stress increased productivity and contributions to economic growth. The first post-independence resettlement programme set out to ‘ameliorate the plight of people adversely affected by the war and rehabilitate them’, and to ‘provide, at the lower end of the scale, opportunities for people who have no land and who are without employment, and may . . . be classed as destitute’, as well as to ‘extend and improve the base for productive agriculture in the peasant farming sector’ (Government of Zimbabwe 1980, cited in Gonese and Mukora 2003, 175). The second phase of resettlement, initiated in the 1990s, included the objective of reducing ‘the extent and intensity of poverty among rural families and farm workers’.

In the early period there were essentially two competing ideas about viability in land reform. First, there was the political imperative to address racially skewed patterns of land holding, within the constraints of the Lancaster House agreement. Providing land for former guerrilla fighters was a key part of the demobilisation process, and addressing extreme poverty in the communal areas formed part of a wider commitment by the new independent government to achieving food security for the poor and a more equitable pattern of development. Secondly, in parallel and seemingly not in contradiction with the first imperative was a technical version of agricultural viability to be secured through farm planning and technical models.

Resettlement plans thus proposed a variety of different ‘models’. These included Model A schemes, based on a planned village settlement and land use similar to that promoted in communal areas in earlier decades; Model B schemes, based on a socialist cooperative model; Model C out-grower schemes, linked to state farms; and Model D schemes, based on a village ranch model. In practice the village-based Model A dominated the resettlement landscape. This was a close replica of the vision for re-organised communal areas advocated by the influential American missionary and agricultural extension advisor, E.D. Alvord, in the 1930s (Alvord 1948). It involved separate grazing and arable areas in the context of a mixed farming system, a planned village settlement dividing the two, and full-time farmers engaged in productive and efficient smallholder agriculture, gaining the benefits of new technologies through state-supplied extension. For new settlers who complied with this vision, familiar livelihood strategies had to be fundamentally altered, with links to kin and associated labour and draught sharing arrangements – key features in communal areas – disrupted. A prohibition on external employment reduced opportunities for remittance-sourced investment, and, given the wealth status of many new settlers, there were major capital constraints on the new farms. In this early period resettlement farming was circumscribed by this narrow view of viability.

Over the course of the 1980s, however, a number of shifts in thinking and practice occurred: each had implications for how viability was thought about. First, the strict planning and extension regime was difficult to maintain. Field-level agents realised that its strictures did not always make sense, and, at the margins at least, a certain amount of discretion was allowed (Alexander 1994, 334–5). Secondly, the early rush to do something about resettlement waned. Under the restrictive ‘willing-seller, willing-buyer’ conditions of the Lancaster House agreement, combined with the intensive planning and investment required to establish schemes, the programme was proving expensive. The pace of resettlement slowed and the ambitious targets set in 1980 were revised downwards. Thirdly, with the slowing of the programme as a whole, the range of models of resettlement being promoted was narrowed essentially to the Model A schemes. Fourthly, there was a significant shift in the process of

selection of resettlement beneficiaries over time. While the initial settlers were indeed predominantly poorer (with fewer assets and less land in the communal areas), in the late 1980s asset-rich, skilled farmers became the main target group for resettlement. This was formalised in the government's 1990 Land Policy document (Moyo 2000).

Through the 1980s these trends – and particularly the shift in resettlement beneficiaries – had a significant impact on how the 'viability' of resettlement was viewed. At the beginning, the programme was seen very much in social welfare terms, linked to a political commitment to redress inequality and reward liberation fighters. Except at election times, the programme was out of the political limelight and not seen as a major priority. Indeed, by the mid-1980s, the commercial farming sector was booming, with continued substantial support from the government, combined with a growing number of private initiatives geared to entry into new markets, including horticulture, floriculture, and wildlife. With less – or only sporadic – political interest, it was easy to hand the programme over to the technocrats.

The agricultural extension service, Agritex, was by now the main government agency involved. Tasked with providing technical advice to agriculture, with its previous history largely focused on the commercial sector, planning and extension took on a particular form. In extension manuals and training programmes, viability was defined in narrow, technical, and economic terms and centred wholly on agricultural production, emphasising efficiency metrics drawing on neo-classical economics perspectives. The models used were based on farm management plans, rates of return, and enterprise-specific budgets derived directly from the commercial sector. As the planners saw it, the drift of the land reform programme towards promoting the 'expansion of the communal areas' had to be stopped. If the resettlement programme was to mean anything, they argued, it must provide income and production for the nation and be a model for small-scale, entrepreneurial commercial farming.

At the same time, the early 1990s saw major shifts in economic strategy in Zimbabwe, especially following adoption of the structural adjustment policy (ESAP) from 1991, pushed by an ideology of neo-liberalism by the international financial institutions. An export-oriented, free-market agenda drove government policy, with redistributive land reform now seen as a marginal issue, one which was not going to deliver the economic growth and foreign exchange earning possibilities that a focus on the commercial agricultural sector would. This remained largely in white hands, and efforts to 'indigenise' commercial farming took centre stage. In this period, land acquired for the resettlement programme was often offered on long-term leases to well-connected, black business people, politicians, and security force personnel (Moyo 2000, Alexander 2006). With structural adjustment putting a major squeeze on government resources and donors being reluctant to support it, the pace of resettlement declined, with only 20,000 households being resettled between 1989 and 1996 (Moyo 2000).

By the late 1990s results began to emerge from the long-term monitoring of resettlement households (Kinsey 1999, Deininger *et al.* 2000, Gunning *et al.* 2000, Hoogeveen and Kinsey 2001). Settler beneficiaries were reported as having higher incomes, lower income variability, and more evenly distributed incomes (although higher childhood malnutrition) than their (near) equivalents in the communal areas (Kinsey 1999). Kinsey and colleagues argued that these (mostly) positive results emerged after a time lag, with an establishment phase where people organised

themselves, gained access to services, and accumulated productive assets (Kinsey 2003, Owens *et al.* 2003). In sum, ‘viability’ had to be given a time dimension and was not just the result of efficient production, but also about social organisation, institution building, and coordinated post-settlement support. Emphasis thus extended to institutional and wider livelihoods perspectives, moving beyond the narrow neo-classical economics focus on commercial business models.

In this period, however, it was political processes, not empirical evaluation of performance and debates about different versions of viability, which put land reform back on the agenda. Land became central to a reassertion of the Mugabe Government’s populist/nationalist credentials (Hammar *et al.* 2003, Moyo and Yeros 2005, 2007). In 1997, under the powers of the 1992 Land Acquisition Act, the government began a process of designation of 1471 commercial farms for compulsory purchase. As in the 1990 land policy, there were to be two main target groups: poor, landless people from communal areas and entrepreneurial farmers (with college training or a Master Farmer certificate). A dual approach to resettlement was recognised – with welfare goals for the poor and landless and a production and business orientation for others. Implicit assumptions about ‘viability’ were evident: productive use meant making use of the whole farm, and direct involvement in farm management; there was a new emphasis on the entrepreneurial, small-scale commercial farmer. While there were social welfare objectives running in parallel, and quotas set for particular categories of people (female headed households, war veterans) highlight more populist social justice criteria, the main thrust re-emphasised a commercial orientation for resettlement.

In 1998 the government presented the Phase II plan of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme to a donor conference (GoZ 1998). This identified the slow pace of land reform as a problem and the urgent need to scale up the programme. Land reform, it was claimed, would contribute to the economy by increasing the number of commercialised, small-scale farmers using formerly under-utilised land and, through careful planning, would result in environmentally sustainable use. Such a policy, it was argued, would increase the conditions for sustainable peace and social stability by removing imbalances of land ownership in the country (GoZ 1998). A series of model plans for resettlement were presented, including a village model (A1), a village ranch model, a self-contained small-scale commercial farming model (A2) and an irrigation scheme model. Technical designs embodied versions of viability, making a clear distinction between village-based systems, where production was for household food security (A1, again echoing Alvord’s thinking in the 1930s), and commercial systems, where a business model of viability was assumed (A2, echoing the African Purchase Area, small-scale farming models of the 1950s).

Twenty years after Independence, land reform looked set to move forward with a vision of ‘viability’ once again firmly based on a dualistic system of agriculture, with commercial profitability and economic returns the central metrics of success. But it was not to be, as a new political dynamic took hold. An announcement by the government in late 1998 that two million hectares of land were to be acquired upset the careful balance achieved only months before. From 1999, in the midst of political confusion and intense debate generated by a Constitutional referendum and in the run-up to the 2000 national elections, land invasions started across the country. Sometimes these were spontaneous efforts involving only local people, sometimes they were organised by networks of war veterans, and sometimes they involved the

government and security forces (Chaumba *et al.* 2003a, Moyo and Yeros 2005, Marongwe 2009).

In parallel to the government's objectives, based on the commercial viability of the smallholder sector, other visions of the resettlement programme soon emerged – including claims for restitution of 'ancestral lands', compensation for war veterans, and wider social and equity goals linked to a radical political economy argument for the restructuring of the agrarian economy. Each suggested in turn different framings of viability, and the neat if uneasy consensus struck around a commercially-driven smallholder sector linked to a reduced, but still significant, large-scale commercial farm sector rapidly unravelled. The hastily concocted 'Fast Track Programme' confirmed elements of the earlier plans, including the distinction between A1 and A2 models, as well as maximum farm sizes by type of farm and agro-ecological region (GoZ 2001). Large targets for land acquisition were set – initially five million hectares – and were then significantly exceeded as land invasions continued. 'Beneficiary selection' no longer focused particularly on skilled, well-resourced entrepreneurial farmers, but responded to local circumstance, sometimes involving political pressure to offer poorer people land as well as the manoeuvring of elite interests (UNDP 2002, PLRC 2003, Sachikonye 2003, Masiwa 2004, Marongwe 2003, 2009).

The result has been a tense to-and-fro between the technocrats who have tried to reassert their authority and the politicians who have continued to use the offer of new land as a form of patronage (Fontein 2005). Thus technical definitions of viability – in terms of farm size, land use, and business plans – rubbed up against political expediency and processes of local political accommodation. Thus, in any area today, some so-called A1 farms are larger than some A2 farms, with significant numbers of both A1 and A2 farms being smaller than what was deemed the 'viable' economic size for that particular natural region as more people were squeezed in. In many places, disputes and uncertainties persist about the status of new settlements, with some areas still being 'informal', having been settled spontaneously during the invasion period with a wide variety of settlement and land use patterns. And alongside this variety of smallholdings, very large farms do still persist, sometimes held by former owners and sometimes having been taken over by a politically well-connected 'new' farmer.

Fast-track land reform has resulted in extreme diversity, certainly at a national level, but also within districts and provinces and even on single former farms (Chaumba *et al.* 2003b, Moyo 2005, Scoones 2008). The debate about 'viability' in Zimbabwe today therefore is particularly complex and much more contested than elsewhere in the region. At the level of formal policy there remains a distinction between a household food security oriented objective (for A1) and a business-oriented, commercial objective (for A2), reflecting a mix of livelihood and welfarist perspectives and neo-classical and new institutional economics perspectives, respectively. Dualism remains a strong feature of official thinking about the agrarian economy, but the variations within and across these models is such that neat distinctions do not mean much in practice. As people establish themselves on the new farms a large range of trajectories are evident – and with this multiple versions of viability. Different people, with different assets, different connections, and different ambitions are able to do very different things with the land. What happens on new land gained under the Fast-Track Programme is highly dependent on wider livelihood portfolios of individuals and households, as well as social, economic, and political connections. Constructions of viability therefore vary significantly within

the new resettlements and may not tally with those in the minds of the technocrats and planners. Zimbabwean experience thus suggests that a fundamental rethink of definitions and framings of success and viability is required in land redistribution settings.

Namibia

Namibia is somewhat different from South Africa and Zimbabwe, in that white settlers took possession of land that was mostly semi-arid in nature and suitable for livestock production rather than cropping. As a result it was relatively sparsely populated. People living in more densely settled areas with higher rainfall and thus suitability for cropping, found in the north of the country, were generally not dispossessed. White farmers established a commercial farming sector based largely on extensive livestock ranching, with farm size averaging between 5,000 and 6,000 hectares. Land redistribution is focused on these large ranches (Werner and Kruger 2007, 6).

Before independence in 1990, South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) thinking on land reform 'was essentially pragmatic' and its approach was modelled in part on the approach being followed by Zimbabwe in the 1980s in relation to both methods of land acquisition and resettlement models (2007, 6). In SWAPO's view farms in the semi-arid south of the country needed to be kept 'viable and efficient' (2007, 6). After independence, according to Tapscott (1995, 165), the most vocal claims for land redistribution came from wealthier black farmers wanting to increase their access to land. A national conference on land reform in 1991 tried to find a balance between concerns for addressing colonial dispossession, equity, and efficiency. It resolved to base decisions on the redistribution of freehold land on 'scientific data' on issues such as the extent of under-utilised land, multiple ownership of farms, and 'viable farm sizes' (Werner and Kruger 2007, 9).

A land redistribution policy framework was adopted in which the government purchases large scale commercial farms from willing sellers, sub-divides the farms, and allocates the new units to small-scale farmers. The objectives are to redress past imbalances, provide opportunities for food self-sufficiency, create employment in full-time farming, 'bring smallholder farmers into the mainstream of the Namibian economy by producing for the market', alleviate population pressure in communal areas, and allow those displaced by the war of liberation to re-integrate into society. Previously disadvantaged Namibians are specified as the targeted beneficiaries (RoN 2001, 3).

The main resettlement model that has been pursued is the Farm Unit Resettlement Scheme (FURS), in which individual beneficiaries owning not more than 150 large stock units are allocated a 'small' farm (notionally at least 1,500 ha in extent in the north and 3,000 ha in the south)¹⁴ and enter into a long term lease agreement with the government (Werner and Kruger 2007, 13). A small number of group schemes for unemployed farm workers and very poor people have also been implemented, mainly adjacent to communal areas in the north where cropping is feasible. In addition to resettlement, an Affirmative Action Loan Scheme (AALS) provides subsidies for purchase of commercial farms by black Namibians, with the

¹⁴In practice, average resettlement farm sizes have been smaller than these targets: 1,200 ha in the north and 2,138 ha in the south (Werner and Kruger 2007, 13).

objective of encouraging large herd owners from communal areas to 'become fully-fledged commercial farmers' (2007, 14). By 2005 a total of 625 farms had been acquired through AALS, compared to 163 under FURS, or almost four times as many. Around 85 percent of freehold land remained in the ownership of whites (2007, 17).

Although policy documents have occasionally voiced concerns that land reform is not doing enough to address poverty, government planning targets continue to be low. For example, only 36 families per annum were to be resettled under FURS between 2001 and 2006, compared to official estimates that 243,000 people were 'unemployed, homeless and landless' and eligible for resettlement (Werner and Kruger 2007, 20).

The majority of FURS beneficiaries earn most of their income off-farm from jobs or businesses, many are employed in low-level clerical jobs in government, and less than a third regard farming as their main occupation. One study concluded that they can be classified as 'lower-middle income households' (2007, 21). Some studies suggest that the major farming problems facing beneficiaries have been inadequate capital to build livestock herd size to the point where the grazing resources of the farm are fully utilised and lack of sufficient water points (Schuh *et al.* 2006, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 23). Another study found that gross margins per annum from livestock sales in 2003 were around N\$6,799, compared to a 'decent living income' for Namibia estimated by the National Planning Commission at N\$15,000 per annum for a household of five (PTT 2005, 50, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 24). Lack of post-settlement technical support, especially in relation to management skills, has been commonly identified as a major problem.

Few data on AALS beneficiaries are available, but Sherbourne (2004, 16) suggests that the evidence on hand suggests that most are part-time rather than full-time farmers. Many appear to be finding it difficult to repay their loans, in part due to the fact that land prices are much higher than the productive value of the land, and many have had to sell livestock to service loans at the expense of building up herd size (Werner and Kruger 2007, 25).

A notion of 'economically viable farm size' has been central to debates about land redistribution in Namibia, the key reference point being the profitability of commercial livestock ranching. The National Land Policy states that subdivision of large farms should be conditional on the 'maintenance of farming units of an economically viable size' (RoN 1998, 16, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 22). The government's Permanent Technical Team on Land Reform has suggested that 'there is a cut-off point below which a piece of land cannot be farmed on economically viable basis', but 'any size above this absolute minimum depends on the income expectations people have' (PTT 2005, 22, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 22). The Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation has accepted a target income of N\$15,000 per annum for a household of five.

Other studies suggest that small-scale cattle farmers on 1,000 ha could earn gross margins of around N\$27,000 per annum, and sheep farmers on 3,000 ha in the arid southern regions could generate a gross margin of N\$99,000 per annum. However, these potential incomes assumed that beneficiaries owned sufficient livestock, or had access to sufficient off-farm income to finance herd build-up, and had experience of managing medium-scale farming enterprises (GFA 2003, 14, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 23), and it appears that few, if any,

beneficiaries, meet these criteria. In contrast, the Namibia Agriculture Union argues that farming is a business and that the yardstick for viability should be 'medium enterprises' with a turnover of N\$1 million per annum, no more than ten employees and no less than 500 large stock units. This would require farm sizes ranging from 5,000 to 8,000 ha (NAU 2005, 54, cited in Werner and Kruger 2007, 22).

Werner and Kruger argue that current models of resettlement do not accommodate the poor, and that alternative modes of land utilisation need to be developed, such as range management areas used by groups organised into grazing associations, or even the expansion of communal areas (Werner and Kruger 2007, 31). This implies rather different interpretations of viability than those that currently dominate policy thinking, which are all based on scaled-down versions of commercial ranching.

Rethinking viability in southern African land reform

As previous sections have shown, debates about viability and land reform in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia involve contested, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory framings of viability. The result is often extreme policy incoherence and tension, even within political formations which are committed to particular visions of land reform. To move the debate forward, a substantial and informed deliberation on alternative framings – and their conceptual underpinnings – is urgently needed. How to go about this? What are the questions that must be asked? This is inevitably an intensely political process: different framings are pushed by different interest groups with different interests. Consensus on an ideal will always be elusive. But analysis and deliberation remain important, for without this dominant framings always have their way.

This final section therefore explores how the different frameworks introduced earlier define the 'success' of redistributive land reforms. Key elements are summarised in Table 1. The key questions posed at the bottom of the table are all important and complementary and, in our view, need to be asked together to help define an effective, progressive, and holistic approach to land reform.

For example, from the neo-classical economics perspective, the key question is: how efficient is production on redistributed land? A concern with productive efficiency cannot be dismissed; policies that promote the optimal use of scarce land, labour, and capital are important, while not accepting a simplistic emphasis on 'market forces' as the driver of wealth creation. From the new institutional economics perspective, the key question is: what factors and conditions influence the efficiency of different scales of production? Questions of scale of production are highly relevant in the southern African context, and so a focus on factors (including institutions and policies) that influence the efficiency of a variety of forms and scales of production is important, while not accepting the neo-institutionalist premise of a pervasive inverse relationship between scale and efficiency. From a livelihoods perspective, the key question is: what are the multiple sources of livelihood for land reform beneficiaries? In southern Africa, a focus on the multiple livelihood sources of poor people would help avoid an overly-narrow focus on farming alone, while not being blind to the structural roots of poverty. From a welfarist perspective, the key question is: what difference does food production make to the household welfare of land reform beneficiaries?

The potential impacts of land redistribution on household food security and vulnerability are unquestionably significant in southern Africa, while this does not mean accepting the view that this should be the main purpose of land reform. From contemporary radical populist perspectives, the key question is: does land reform transform exploitative agrarian structures and food regimes? In the southern African setting, one might therefore take on board a central concern with the need to reconfigure food production regimes and associated agrarian structures (at both the national and international scale), including the distribution of productive enterprises and associated property rights, and their performance in terms of output and net income, while not accepting an over-emphasis on the common interests of 'peasants' or 'the rural poor'. Finally, from the Marxist tradition the key question is: what dynamics of class differentiation and accumulation occur within land reform? A central concern with evaluating the economics of land reform in terms of a wider concept of social efficiency and the contribution of agriculture to the growth of society's productive capacities would be an important contribution in the southern African context. This would combine with a focus on the class and gender relations that underpin the organisation of production and of the agrarian structure, while not accepting the idealisation of large-scale farming in some strands of the tradition, or an overly-narrow focus on class dynamics to the exclusion of other relevant factors.

Derived from our earlier analysis of experiences from southern Africa – but also a reflection on underlying analytical paradigms – we suggest that each of the above questions must be posed in tandem in any assessment of the viability – or success – of land redistribution or agrarian reform. A debate about alternative framings and their implications for policy could then unfold in a way that would help shift the debate about viability away from the narrow, technocratic economism which has dominated the way such issues have been viewed in southern Africa and beyond to date. Too often this dominant framing has been allied to strong normative assumptions and well-articulated political and commercial interests, hooked into a long history of the assumed benefits of a dualistic agrarian system where modern, large-scale agriculture is seen as the ideal.

We suggest that a more textured and variegated approach to assessing viability, rooted in diverse conceptual frameworks, can provide a more effective – and ultimately more rigorous – approach to the assessment of redistributive land reform. Using the key questions highlighted in Table 1 and discussed above, Table 2 offers a set of assessment approaches that, in combination, could be used to explore these themes, redefining viability – and associated measures of success – in new ways. Each offers a different lens on the questions surrounding 'viability', drawing on different conceptual frameworks, with different foci and scales. Taken together, we argue, these provide a more comprehensive approach to assessing land and agrarian reform.

Eclecticism has its limits, however, and the different 'lenses' in Table 2 have to be integrated into a more coherent and robust alternative model that shows how they link to each other in practice, which will involve trade-offs and prioritisation rather than simple 'combination'. As discussed, this must inevitably be a political process, informed by deliberation about alternative framings, as each analytical framing of viability is necessarily co-constructed with a different politics of land and agrarian reform. In tandem with analyses of empirical data on the livelihoods impacts of land redistribution in southern Africa, the elaboration of such an

Table 2. Assessing land reform and framing viability: six key questions.

Conceptual framework and key question	Approaches to assessing land reform – and framing viability
Neo-classical economics: How efficient is production on redistributed land?	Returns to land, labour, and capital across different farm sizes. Focus on production efficiency – and farm scale.
New institutional economics: What factors and conditions influence the efficiency of different scales of production?	Transaction costs (e.g. labour supervision) and institutional factors (e.g. market functioning) affecting production in land reform areas. Non-market interventions to improve efficiency through coordination. Focus on institutional conditions – and programme-level scales.
Livelihoods perspectives: What are the multiple sources of livelihood for land reform beneficiaries?	Multiple livelihood portfolios, with land access contributing to overall sustainability of diverse and differentiated livelihoods. Focus on livelihoods and local economic linkages – and household, community and regional economic scales.
Welfarist approaches: What difference does food production make to household welfare of land reform beneficiaries?	Role of land – and agricultural production derived from it – as a source of social protection and a buffer against shocks and stresses. Focus on vulnerability – and individual and household scale.
Radical political economy: Does land reform transform exploitative agrarian structures and food regimes?	Changes in agrarian structure, and the position of and relationships between peasants, workers, and large-scale farmers – and the wider agrarian economy. Focus on political economy and (food) sovereignty – and regional scales.
Marxism: What dynamics of class differentiation and accumulation occur within land reform?	Patterns of accumulation (and decline, dispossession) across different classes – and genders – in land reform settings – and the impacts on wider economic growth and class structure. Focus on class – and broader scales.

alternative model is in progress.¹⁵ This prioritises assessing the material conditions of possibility of productive farming on redistributed land, in combination with other forms of income and means of securing a livelihood. It involves the evaluation of a number of critical factors: agro-ecological realities such as soil and climate, the availability of productive technologies appropriate to these realities, the availability of capital for investment in productive enterprises, and the structure and dynamics of agro-food markets and value chains. Our approach also stresses the need to factor in the social organisation of agricultural production and incipient processes of socio-economic (i.e. class) differentiation in (often complex) articulations with other social identities such as gender and age, with assessments foregrounding the socially and politically embedded nature of property rights, production systems, and power relations in land redistribution programmes and contexts.

¹⁵Under the auspices of the 'livelihoods after land reform in southern Africa' programme, www.lalr.org.za.

In sum, we argue that assessments of viability must embrace heterogeneity, complexity, and competition in relation to multiple objectives (what different people want), multiple livelihoods (what different people do), multiple scales (including linkages between local, national, regional, and global economies), and multiple contexts (including the structural dimensions of political economy, as well as local project/scheme settings). In this approach, the politics of land is at the very centre of assessments of viability and arises from the changing significance of land and farming for different categories of people in rural southern Africa. Thus land reform in whose interest remains the core question that viability debates must seek to clarify.

Conclusion

A central challenge – certainly for southern Africa, but also beyond – lies in embracing a new approach to assessing land reform, and thus to understanding viability and success. This must go beyond the narrow technical view that currently holds much debate on land reform in southern Africa in its iron grip. As we have seen, the dominant approach is strongly influenced by project appraisal and farm management techniques developed for the large-scale commercial farming sector, is powerfully informed by ideas about efficiency derived from neo-classical economics, and is rooted in the dominance of a particular type of commercial farming within a highly dualistic agrarian structure. This approach is ideological, rather than technical and ‘neutral’. This paper argues that alternative framings from diverse theoretical and political traditions help to expand and enrich the debate and to clarify a central question: whose interests does reform serve?

The implications are several. One is that an expanded and more diverse set of measures of viability than those used in the past is required, which in turn requires new methodologies for the collection and analysis of data. A more plural, holistic, and integrated set of methods will acknowledge the tensions and trade-offs between different pathways of agrarian change – and so also of different framings of viability and success. A second implication is that analysts and policy makers should be encouraged to make explicit their framing assumptions, underlying values, and larger policy goals when assessing or advocating alternative policy options for redistributive land reform. This will help to locate their assessments and choices within the framework of competing paradigms and approaches, and facilitate consideration of coherence and consistency. It will also make deliberation about alternative policy directions more informed, and the trade-offs – technical, economic, and political – more explicit. Finally, bringing a wider array of perspectives into the picture, and making clear the different assumptions, political commitments, and methodologies for assessment implied by each, could contribute to a more effective and coherent public debate about land reform policies. In southern Africa, in particular, this is urgently needed.

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