

## The real story behind Britain's withdrawal from Zimbabwe's land reform: Exposing corruption and mismanagement

Opinion by Tendai Ruben Mbofana

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As southern Africa approaches another 'SADC Anti-Sanctions Day,' the Zimbabwean government is once again amplifying the narrative that economic sanctions, particularly from Western countries like the U.S. and the UK, are responsible for the country's prolonged economic struggles.



*Tony Blair with Robert Mugabe*

At the heart of this narrative is the claim that Britain, under former Prime Minister Tony Blair, reneged on its promise to fund Zimbabwe's land reform program, forcing President Robert Mugabe to adopt the violent and chaotic land seizures that marked the early 2000s.

The Zimbabwean government uses this claim to justify the land seizures and deflect from the root causes of the economic collapse, placing blame squarely on external actors.

However, this narrative is not only misleading but also deliberately deceptive.

The real reasons for Britain's decision to withdraw from funding Zimbabwe's land reform lie not in an arbitrary betrayal but in serious concerns over corruption, mismanagement, and human rights abuses within Zimbabwe's government.

These issues are rarely, if ever, acknowledged by the Zimbabwean leadership when explaining the breakdown of the land reform process.

This article aims to demystify the propaganda surrounding the UK's withdrawal from land reform funding and highlight the corruption that characterized the program during the time Britain was involved.

It will also expose how the Zimbabwean government has consistently manipulated this narrative to obscure its own role in the country's economic downfall and how the real reasons for Western sanctions extend far beyond land reform.

### **The Lancaster House Agreement: Britain's Initial Commitment**

The roots of Zimbabwe's land reform program stretch back to the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, which facilitated Zimbabwe's transition to independence.

One of the key issues negotiated at Lancaster House was land redistribution, as the white minority owned a disproportionate share of Zimbabwe's fertile land.

The agreement stipulated that land reform would be carried out under a 'willing buyer, willing seller' model, with Britain agreeing to help fund the process by providing financial support to compensate white landowners willing to sell their land.

In the early years, Britain did provide financial assistance, helping Zimbabwe carry out a relatively successful land reform program during the 1980s.

However, by the 1990s, cracks were beginning to show in the way land reform was being handled.

Rather than benefiting the landless poor, who were supposed to be the primary beneficiaries, much of the land was being allocated to political elites, government allies, and Mugabe's cronies, while funds from Britain were being diverted for other purposes.

### **The Rise of Corruption and Mismanagement in Land Reform**

By the mid-1990s, corruption and mismanagement had become rampant within the land reform program.

Reports from independent observers and civil society groups in Zimbabwe highlighted how land was increasingly being allocated to those with political connections, rather than the genuinely landless population.

This elite capture of land reform was undermining the very purpose of the program, which was supposed to correct the historical injustices of colonialism by redistributing land to Zimbabwe's black majority.

Evidence of misuse of British funds also began to emerge.

While Britain was still committed to helping Zimbabwe finance land reform, it became clear that much of the money was not reaching the intended recipients.

For instance, land that was supposed to be redistributed to poor black farmers often ended up in the hands of senior government officials, military commanders, and business elites who were close to Mugabe's government.

This led to widespread disillusionment among ordinary Zimbabweans, many of whom had supported the independence struggle in the hope that they would finally gain access to land.

Britain, through its Department for International Development (DFID), contributed tens of millions of pounds to support land reform from 1980 to the mid-1990s.

However, reports of elite capture and diversion of funds began to surface, suggesting that large portions of these funds were not reaching the intended beneficiaries.

According to some estimates, of the £44 million that Britain initially set aside for land reform under the "willing buyer, willing seller" model, only a fraction was actually used to purchase land for the landless poor.

The remainder was allegedly diverted for supposed "administrative costs" and other purposes unrelated to land redistribution.

### **Specific Cases of Corruption in Land Reform**

Throughout the 1990s, it became evident that land reform was being captured by political elites rather than benefiting the intended rural poor.

A 1994 government audit found that 5 million hectares of land purchased with British funds for redistribution ended up in the hands of senior politicians, government ministers, military officers, and their families.

This included Kumbirai Kangai, the then Minister of Agriculture, who was directly responsible for the program.

Zimbabwe's Agricultural and Rural Development Authority (ARDA) and the Land Bank were supposed to help finance land reform projects, providing loans to resettled farmers.

However, much of the money was loaned to politically connected individuals who never used the funds for farming, leading to a significant portion of these loans becoming non-performing.

This contributed to the overall collapse of Zimbabwe's agricultural sector.

In 2001, Kangai, who oversaw land reform for years, was arrested on charges of embezzling funds related to the land reform process.

He was accused of misusing Z\$228 million (Zimbabwean dollars at the time) earmarked for land purchases.

Although the case became politically charged and eventually fizzled out, it exposed the levels of corruption within the highest ranks of government.

These examples reflect a broader pattern of mismanagement and self-enrichment that plagued Zimbabwe's land reform process, contributing to Britain's reluctance to continue providing financial support.

It is this rampant corruption—largely unaddressed by the Zimbabwean government—that explains why Britain pulled out of funding, rather than the narrative of betrayal often put forward by Zimbabwean officials.

### **The Role of Tony Blair's Government**

The real turning point in Britain's involvement came in 1997, when Tony Blair's Labour government took office.

The Labour Party, under Blair's leadership, took a more critical stance on how land reform in Zimbabwe was being conducted, especially in light of the corruption and mismanagement that had come to characterize the program.

In a letter to Zimbabwe's Agriculture Minister Kangai in 1997, Clare Short, the British Secretary of State for International Development, explicitly stated that the UK no longer accepted responsibility for colonial injustices and was not willing to fund a land reform program that was being mismanaged and corrupted.

Short made it clear that while Britain was still willing to support poverty alleviation programs in Zimbabwe, it would not provide financial support for a land reform process that was enriching the political elite rather than addressing the needs of the landless poor.

This letter is often cited as the moment Britain formally withdrew from its Lancaster House commitments.

However, what the Zimbabwean government fails to mention is that this decision was driven by legitimate concerns about how the land reform program was being handled.

It was not simply a matter of Britain abandoning Zimbabwe, but rather a refusal to fund a program that had lost credibility due to widespread corruption.

### **Why the Blair Government Pulled Out**

The Blair government's decision to pull out of funding land reform in Zimbabwe was based on several key factors.

As discussed, the land reform program had become deeply corrupt by the late 1990s.

Funds that were meant to compensate white farmers and help black Zimbabweans gain access to land were being siphoned off by political elites.

The UK was not willing to continue financing a program that was being so blatantly misused.

The Lancaster House Agreement had been based on the principle that landowners would be compensated for their land and that land would be redistributed in an orderly, fair manner.

By the late 1990s, this model had broken down, and Mugabe's government was beginning to pursue a more aggressive approach to land seizures without proper compensation or planning.

Alongside concerns about corruption, the Blair government was increasingly critical of Zimbabwe's human rights record.

Mugabe's government was cracking down on political opposition, stifling free speech, and engaging in electoral fraud to maintain power.

Britain, along with other Western nations, was unwilling to support a government that was moving toward authoritarianism.

Zimbabwe's economy was already beginning to suffer by the late 1990s, and the chaotic way in which land reform was being carried out was exacerbating the situation.

The UK was concerned that continued financial support for land reform would do little to stabilize the economy and could even make things worse by encouraging further mismanagement.

### **The Zimbabwean Government's Response and Propaganda**

Rather than addressing the concerns raised by the British government, Robert Mugabe's regime chose to shift the blame onto the UK, framing Britain's withdrawal as a betrayal of the Lancaster House Agreement.

Mugabe and his officials began to propagate a narrative that portrayed Britain as the villain, accusing Tony Blair of abandoning Zimbabwe's land reform program and undermining the country's sovereignty.

This narrative has been repeated ever since, with the Zimbabwean government consistently blaming the UK for the failure of land reform and the subsequent economic collapse.

What is often left out of this narrative is the corruption and mismanagement that prompted Britain's withdrawal in the first place.

Instead, the Zimbabwean government presents itself as the victim of Western imperialism, using this narrative to justify the violent land seizures that followed in the early 2000s.

### **The Chaotic Land Seizures of the 2000s**

In 2000, the Zimbabwean government launched its Fast-Track Land Reform Program, which involved the violent seizure of white-owned farms without compensation.

This marked a dramatic shift from the earlier "willing buyer, willing seller" approach and led to widespread chaos in the agricultural sector.

While the land seizures were presented as a necessary correction of colonial injustices, they were, in fact, driven by a combination of political opportunism and cronyism.

Much of the land that was seized ended up in the hands of senior government officials and military leaders, rather than the landless poor who had been promised access to land.

There are reports that Mugabe's daughter Bona owns about 21 farms, yet millions of ordinary Zimbabweans remain landless or forced to eke a living from the same dry, infertile land of the colonial era.

Who knows how many farms those in the ruling elite and their cronies actually possess today.

Now, with the recently announced new Land Tenure Policy, this elitist clique who benefited unfairly from various land reform programs instituted by the government of Zimbabwe since 1980 are suddenly permitted to sell the farms for their own financial benefit.

The seizures also devastated Zimbabwe's agricultural productivity, leading to severe food shortages and a collapse in export earnings.

### **Demystifying the Propaganda**

It is clear that the narrative propagated by the Zimbabwean government is a deliberate attempt to obscure the real reasons behind Britain's withdrawal from the land reform program.

By focusing solely on Britain's alleged betrayal, the government is able to avoid confronting its own role in the failure of land reform and the economic collapse that followed.

### **Conclusion**

The real reasons Britain stopped funding Zimbabwe's land reform program had little to do with a refusal to address colonial injustices and everything to do with corruption, mismanagement, and governance failures.

The Zimbabwean government's refusal to acknowledge these issues is why Zimbabwe finds itself in an abyss of seemingly unending economic and political mess.

● Tendai Ruben Mbofana is a social justice advocate and writer. Please feel free to WhatsApp or Call: +263715667700 | +263782283975, or email: [mbofana.tendairuben73@gmail.com](mailto:mbofana.tendairuben73@gmail.com), or visit website: <https://mbofanatendairuben.news.blog/>

### **Further reading:**

#### **How UK-Zimbabwe relations went sour - BBC**

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