DV435 Economic and Political Geography of Zimbabwe

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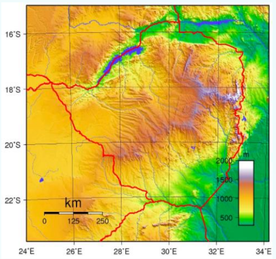
This poster analyzes the economic and political geography of Zimbabwe systematically. It has four main groups of analysis, starting with the location, physical geography, colonial economy and institutions, and leading to the contemporary economic structure and political institutions and competitions. Within each group, it pays attention to two dimensions of comparison: subnational spatial differences and changes over time.

Location and Endowment



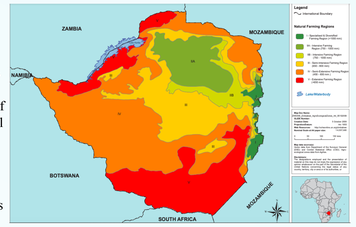
Source: Mapsland.co.uk

I. i Location

Zimbabwe is landlocked in southern Africa, spanning 39m ha (FAO, 2018). Lying within the tropics, it enjoys subtropical conditions because of high average elevation. Highveld (a broad ridge) runs across the country, accounting for 25% of Zimbabwe's total area. Arable land area increased from 2m ha (1972) to 4m ha (2017), and the total area cultivated rose from 6.4% (1972) to 10.5% (2017) (FAO, 2018). The main road system follows the line of colonial white settlement, along the spine. WW2 brought improvements in certain areas, although there has been a lack of investment and maintenance since the mid-1990s. Zimbabwe has one of the densest rail networks in SSA, constructed to facilitate development through connections: the Bulawayo area was connected to Mozambique in 1898 and South Africa in 1897.

I. ii Agro-ecological zones

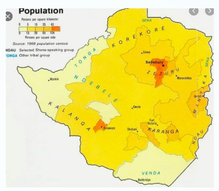
Zimbabwe has 6 agro-ecological zones, recognised on the basis of elevation and rainfall. Rainfall reliability decreases from north to south and also from east to west, thus constraining crop farming; eastern regions receive the heaviest annual rainfall. 60-70% of Zimbabweans are employed in the agricultural sector, yet it contributes only 15% to annual GDP (FAO, 2016). Smallholders occupy the same total area as the commercial sector, but on considerably less fertile land (a colonial legacy), although smallholder productivity has largely exceeded that of commercial farmers since the mid-1980s.



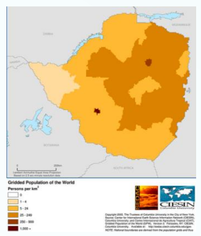
Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2009)

I. iii Natural resources

Zimbabwe has rich mineral resources: 60% of the land surface is composed of granite rocks which are hosts to gold deposits (alluvial gold is also present). Mining occurred in the area for over 1,000 years before colonialism, but capitalist mining dates back to Cecil Rhodes' arrival in 1890. The first mining legislation was designed to promote large firms funded by European share markets, while 50% of profits were captured by Rhodes' British South Africa Company. Mines were sites of raids and uprisings against colonial authority after the realisation of the region's comparative low profitability of gold reserves (IMF, 1964). Today, the mining sector accounts for 50% of FDI and exports: in 2018, Zimbabwe exported $1.96bn in gold, the most exported product that year (OEC, 2019).



Source: Mappery (2009); using 1969 population census



Source: Columbia University (2005)

I. iv Population

Population of 5.5m in 1972 has increased to 16.5m in 2017 (FAO, 2018). Within this, the rate of rural population growth has consistently exceeded that of urban populations, with the gap broadening over time (4m:1m ha to 11m:5m ha (FAO, 2018)). Zimbabwe's population density increased from 14.2/km2 (1972) to 42.3/km2 (2017) (FAO, 2018). The maps show that population distribution patterns have remained similar to that of colonial occupation (1969-2000), with most concentration around the cities of Bulawayo and Harare. Meanwhile the western region has been continuously (and considerably) less dense. The white settler population of Zimbabwe peaked in 1976 at 300,000, and there was mass emigration after the fall of Rhodesia (FAO, 2016).

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Colonial Economy and Institutions

II. i Colonial Conquest

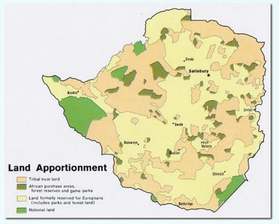
Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company invaded the territory in the 1880s and established a settler colony. The colonial names for modern-day Zimbabwe were Southern Rhodesia (1911-64), Rhodesia (1964-79), and Zimbabwe Rhodesia (1979-80). The British South Africa Company intended to extend the railway system northward to into central Africa, encourage settler colonization, and secure all mineral rights (Britannica).

The indigenous Shona and Ndebele people staged unsuccessful revolts and insurrections in 1896 and 1897 and were ultimately overpowered by the European forces.

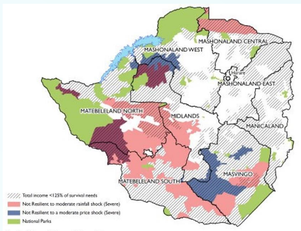
II. i Intensifying Division

European settlers captured the most fertile agricultural land, using it to grow grain for internal markets. Europeans' efforts to drive Africans out of the produce market coincided with their desire to push them into the labor market, resulting in Africans forced to provide cheap labor for European benefit (Austin 2010).

Settlers' "large-scale use of coercion" laid the foundation for a white-ruled economy with high levels of poverty and inequality. The institutions surrounding "pure settler" colonialism impoverished Africans, and only in Zimbabwe and South Africa did rural African living standards decline over periods of longer than 15 years within the 20th century (Austin 2010).



Source: BritishEmpire.co.uk, Map Room



Source: Famine Early Warning Systems Network

II. iii Industry

From 1923, white settlers controlled the Southern Rhodesian government. Starting in the 1930s, the government began a policy of import substitution and industrialization in an effort to produce higher value-added goods, rather than raw commodities. These efforts led to the creation of a larger manufacturing sector than that of other colonies at the time (Austin 2010).

After independence in 1980, Robert Mugabe's government sought to reverse patterns of inequality created by the white minority government. The Mugabe government introduced a widespread land reform program, redistributing farmland to increase productivity. Limited success was achieved, however, as it was commonly redistributed to political favourites who lacked adequate expertise. This contributed significantly to an economic decline in the 1990s and early 2000s. Economic mismanagement, a high debt burden, and rampant inflation and unemployment are some of the factors that have kept Zimbabwe's economy in a state of crisis since (Britannica).

Citations (II)

Austin, G. (2010), 'African economic development and colonial legacies'. *International Development Policy| Revue internationale de politique de développement*, (1), 11-32.
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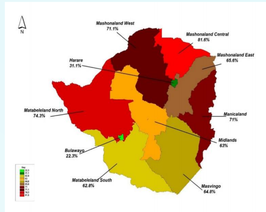
Economic Geography

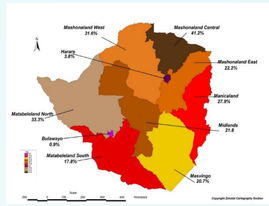
III. i Spatial Inequality: Economic Activities and Poverty Incidence

Mugabe's policies worsened all of Zimbabwe's living standard and economic indicators. Zimbabwe had the world highest inflation rates in the 2000s (Norman, 2008), life expectancy fell to historical lows, in 2005 (Norman, 2008), 80% of the population was unemployed and the once lucrative tourism industry was devastated (Howard-Hassman, 2010).

Following Mugabe's departure in 2017 the overall economic situation remains concerning. Poverty levels in Zimbabwe substantially rose in 2019 and should worsen in 2020. It is estimated that 6.6 million people lived in extreme poverty in 2019, two times more than in 2011. 50% of Zimbabweans were experiencing food insecurity in 2019. Extreme poverty reached 40% of the population in 2019, 7% more than in 2017 (world bank, 2020). On the below maps, we can see that poverty, as well as extreme poverty reaches mostly the north of the country and the border areas especially. The two city-province of the country in green, Harare and Bulawayo seem to escape the creeping levels of poverty witnessed in the country (Zimbabwe national statistics agency, 2019); however urban poverty is rising faster than rural poverty (world bank, 2020).



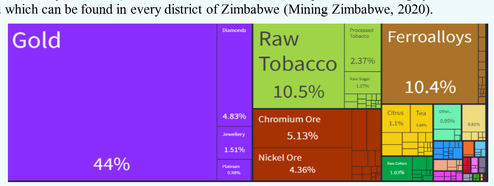
Spatial poverty maps, (Zimbabwe national statistics agency, 2019)



III. ii Sectoral Economies

The land reforms pursued throughout Mugabe's rule impoverished the country. They culminated in the 2000s when Mugabe supported the invasion of lands owned by whites as part of an overall strategy of antagonization of white people, using them as a scapegoat to explains Zimbabwe's problems (Blair, 2003). Zimbabwe maize production fell from two million tons of maize in 2000 to 450 000 in 2008 (Howard-Hassman, 2010). Until the mid-2000s, Zimbabwean principal exports were from agricultural production, however by 2005 and until now, the main exporting products came from mineral extraction activities (OEC.world, 2020).

The tertiary sector is the most important for the Zimbabwean economy it is estimated to represented around 60% of GDP in 2017 (Cia.gov, 2019). It is complicated to make accurate estimates as Zimbabwe is deemed to have the second largest informal economy in the world, 60,6% of it, by the IMF (Medina and Schneider, 2018). Exportations are largely dominated by gold which can be found in every district of Zimbabwe (Mining Zimbabwe, 2020).



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Political Geography

IV. i Administrative Boundaries and Political Economic Significance

The national boundary is unchanged since the colonial 1890s. The splitting of the Rhodesias in 1960 finalised that border, which had been only loosely defined (Best & Zinyama, 1985). There are now eight provinces in Zimbabwe, which have developed out of the two in colonial times: Mashonaland, in the North East, which has 'Shona' people and Matabeleland in the South West, which has 'Ndebele' people. Shona are the majority, with around 70% of the population. It has been argued that the British simplified these two racial groupings, and almost 'created' them (Burgess, 1981). They still have political salience to this day.

Ethnic Groups in Zimbabwe, The Economist

Languages spoken in Zimbabwe, Ethnologue.com

IV. ii Resistance and Political Mobilisation in the Colonial Era

Colonial occupation in the 1890s started with the two Matabele Wars in the 1890s, followed by company rule. The predominantly white Government of Rhodesia from the 1920s and the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1953 were characterised by fighting between different white groups. A white Government declared an unofficial independence in 1965, but a civil war followed in the 1970s before Zimbabwe was declared independent in 1979. The way that colonial land was mostly distributed among white people has been a key political debate.

Colonial languages in Rhodesia map, 1964

IV. iii Geographic Electoral Patterns and Territorial Cleavages

There has been little opportunity for meaningful electoral cleavages, as there have been few fair elections since Independence. Most people are based in Harare and Bulawayo, creating cleavages between urban and rural.

Ethnic tension between Shona and Ndebele people were exacerbated by the Gukurahundi massacres of the 1980s, where Robert Mugabe's Shona-led Government caused the deaths of many thousands of Ndebele people. Shona leaders have dominated political parties. The opposition party (the Movement for Democratic Change) has largely been more successful among Ndebele people in recent years. As the best land was owned by white people, much of political debate has been about the way of redistributing that land, with Mugabe's Government pursuing a policy of fast-track land reforms since the early 2000s, which were popular but caused instability. It has been argued that pressure on white farms has also led to has also led to the destruction of a rare successful economy – agriculture – and that Mugabe's focus on land redistribution in the end was a replacement for alternative development projects.

Ethnic groups and how they map onto voting intention, year 2000, Zimbabwe, mytravelingdays.com

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