

Abstract

The idea of communal tenure has formed a key plank in the rural governance of Zimbabwe since independence, but its retention following the Fast Track land reforms of 2000-2002 perpetuates a distinction between 'commercial' land governed by a land market and 'communal' land on which market transactions are illegal. This paper draws on recent research in Svosve Communal Area to examine the dynamics of land access and their implications for rural poverty in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that, as in many other parts of Africa, access to land governed by customary authority in Svosve is increasingly commoditised via informal, or 'vernacular', sales or rental markets. In failing to acknowledge and address this commoditisation of land, the 'communitarian' discourse of customary land rights that dominates the politics of land in Zimbabwe – as elsewhere in much of Africa – undermines, rather than protects, the livelihoods of the rural poor.

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