

Reframing Social Policy in Africa: Land Reform, Youth and Socio-Economic Welfare in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

At a time when scholars and practitioners in Africa and the broader Global South are rethinking social policy in search of inclusive development and exploring pathways for averting extraversion, focus on youth and land is essential. Both land (with its appended natural resources) and the youth are the facilitators and guarantors of current and future development. The article is based on data gathered through a sequential mixed methods approach in two rural districts of Zimbabwe (Mangwe and Zvimba in Matabeleland South and Mashonaland West provinces respectively) within the “Social Policy Dimensions of the Land and Agrarian Reform in International Perspective” research project. Setting the article apart from the dominant discourse in social policy framed by the Welfare Regime Paradigm or the Social Protection Paradigm, is adoption of the concept of Transformative Social Policy whose thrust are the social policy instruments of countries outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) context and their capability to resolve the structural causes of inequality, marginalisation and poverty. In this context, the article addresses four questions: a) What were the antecedents and objectives of the fast track land reform? b) What are the “youth gaps” in Zimbabwe’s land reform? c) How has access to land by the youth influenced socio-economic wellbeing at individual and household levels? d) How can the transformative outcomes of land reform – redistributive, productive, protective, reproductive and social compact – be improved through and for youth, and all? Overall, the article shows that land reform is a social policy tool, and the youth are central to improving its development outcomes.

Keywords: Development, social policy, land reform, welfare, youth, Zimbabwe

Introduction

In both the Global South and North, emphasis on social policies that invest in people’s capabilities and fuse productivism, and welfare goals is increasing (Tekwa & Adesina, 2025, p. 1; Mumtaz, 2022, p. 394). This is in a context where the conceptualisation of welfare, particularly the international perspective, is characterised by multiple un- and under-explored areas (Chipenda, 2024, p. 89). Policy measures with high potential for triggering, broadening and sustaining people’s wellbeing but existing outside the European sense of welfare state have received paltry attention in hegemonic social policy literature (Adesina, 2011, 2020; Seelkopf and Starke, 2019, p. 1). Yet the traditional state welfare programmes in the European conceptualisation is not the sole or superior pathway to improving people’s wellbeing (Chipenda, 2024, p. 29; Mumtaz, 2022, p. 394). Furthermore, accumulating evidence reveals that the international frame of welfare is riddled with lacunae relating to inclusion, transformation, sustainability among others (Midgley, 2019, p. 29). Unlike the status quo where social policy models of the Global North, especially the Welfare Regime Paradigm or Social Protection Paradigm, are imposed on Africa (Adesina, 2020) and influence the framing of Africa’s policies, reframing is important to improve relevance, impact and sustainability.

In this context, the article centres the social policy dimensions of Zimbabwe’s land and agrarian reform relating to youth. It interrogates the well-being achievements, challenges and options for improving the role in and benefits of youth in agrarian reform and agriculture. Three

standpoints underline the approach adopted in this article. Firstly, despite the lens adopted, the intention of social policy that is, enhancement of human well-being and welfare, is central to research on social welfare. Secondly, policy instruments and mechanisms for achieving wellbeing and welfare outcomes should be established. Thirdly, land and agrarian reform, as proven empirically (Adesina, 2023; Chipenda, 2023, 2024, 2025; Tekwa, 2023, 2025; Tekwa and Adesina, 2018, 2025), perform social policy functions including redistribution, production, protection, reproduction and social compact/nation building. Despite youth being variedly conceptualised – relating to biology (age), cultural context, political dimensions (Honwana, 2012) – they are essential in development. Consistent with Zimbabwe’s Constitution and the African Youth Charter, young people aged 15-35 years are considered youth in this article.

The rest of the article is constituted by five sections. The next section outlines Transformative social policy and its relevance in this article. The methods and materials applied to gather and analyse data are justified in the second section while the third section is a presentation of results. Discussion of the results from a transformative social policy approach is engaged in the fourth section. In the fifth section, the article concludes by recommending ways of improving the social policy outcomes of land and agrarian reform through and for youth.

Conceptual Underpinnings – Transformative Social Policy

Transformative Social Policy (TSP) shown in Figure 1 below, is the guiding lens of this article. TSP was developed through a research programme of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) – Social Policy in a Development Context, 2000-2006 (UNRISD, 2010, p.24). Its emergence was shaped by the narrowness of the neo-liberal conceptualisation of social policy (Tekwa & Adesina, 2025, p.7; Adesina, 2015, p.100). This conceptualisation is characterised by the paltry and, in some cases, vacuity of the social policy instruments of non-core OECD countries. This operates within the international perspective of welfare, hegemony of the OECD social and development models in Africa particularly the Social Protection Paradigm, and its failure to guarantee people’s wellbeing (Adesina, 2020; Mkandawire, 2006). The narrow and impoverished neoliberal conceptualisation of social policy, particularly social protection, is exemplified by targeted and means-tested cash transfers. Setting Transformative Social Policy apart is its potential to address the structural causes of inequality, poverty and marginalisation (Mkandawire, 2007; Adesina, 2009, p. 38, 2011, p. 466, 2021). Undergirding transformative social policy are norms of equality and solidarity, multiple functions, various instruments and development outcomes (Adesina, 2011, p.465; Hujo, 2021; Mkandawire, 2006; Yi, 2015).

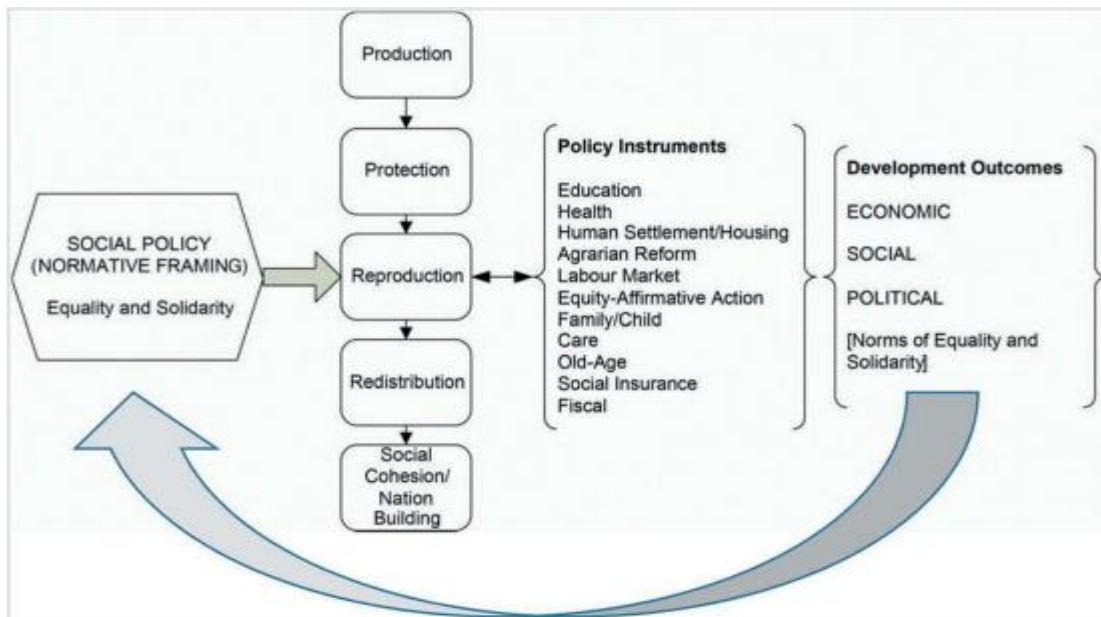


Figure 1: Transformative Social Policy: Norms, Functions, Instruments and Outcomes
Source: Adesina (2011, p. 463)

Land and agrarian reform, within which youth and reframing social policy are explored in this article, is among the corpus of instruments that can and has improved people’s lives in multiple ways. While scholars may vary in relation to philosophical and epistemological orientations, they have shown that Zimbabwe’s land reforms have had positive outcomes regardless of the challenges (Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2019; Moyo, 2011; Muchetu, 2019; Munemo et al., 2022; Tekwa & Adesina, 2023, 2025; Chipenda, 2024, 2025). Clarifying the importance of land and agrarian reform as a tool of transformative social policy, Adesina, 2015, p. 113 argues:

While land reform may be inspired by efforts to redress historical legacy of land expropriation and colonialism, it can simultaneously address the different tasks of social policy. Inherently a redistributive process, land reform enhances the productive capacity of rural beneficiaries. In doing so, land reform (again, with appropriate agrarian support, upstream and downstream) addresses the protection task of social policy, *ex-ante* by smoothing household consumption and enhancing accumulation.

Materials and Methods

Data were gathered through fieldwork in 2024 (April-June) anchored to the “Social Policy Dimensions of the Land and Agrarian Reform in International Perspective” research project. This is a leading project of the XXX at the YYY. A sequential mixed methods approach was applied in two rural districts – Mangwe (Haygrange, Syringvale and Wilfred’s Hope farms, Marula) and Zvimba (St Lucia, Wannock Glen and Lion Kopje farms, Barket)–in Matabeleland South and Mashonaland West provinces respectively. This entailed distribution of questionnaires (a quantitative component) followed by in-depth and key informant interviews (qualitative components). As emphasised by scholars of social science research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the application of this approach enriched data and is an acknowledgement that the youth-related social policy dimensions of land and agrarian reform have both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The participants, sampling strategies and data collection methods are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample, sampling strategies and data collection methods

Category	Number Selected	Sampling Strategies	Data Collection Methods
Youth with formal access to land	20	Random	Questionnaires
	10	Purposive	In-depth interviews
Youth with informal access to land	100	Random	Questionnaires
	15	Purposive	In-depth interviews
Parents and guardians	15	Purposive	Key informant interviews
Senior official in the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Fisheries and Rural Development	1	Purposive	Key informant interviews
District Agritex officers	2	Purposive	Key informant interviews
Social policy dimensions of land and agrarian reform expert	1	Purposive	Key informant interviews

Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Ethical approval was provided by the YYY, College of Graduate Studies (Certificate RERC Ref: 1057). The ethics that is, informed consent, confidentiality, avoidance of harm in its diversity, member checking and responsible use of data among others recognise the importance of the participants, results and their role in influencing policy. Meaning of data is generated through analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Excel were useful in analysis of quantitative data. Basic methods (thematic and discourse) were applied to analyse qualitative data.

Results

Land - A Productive Resource and its Redistribution

Land is a productive resource with multiple functions including protection, reproduction, redistribution, nation-building and other essential purposes. Its transfer to the black majority through the first and second phases of land acquisition and resettlement, and the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), symbolises a state pursuing an active policy – a concept also engaged by other scholars (Seelkopf & Starke, 2019, p. 7) – to improve the lives of people whose lives were impoverished by colonial accumulation by dispossession. For instance, the FTLRP reconfigured the agrarian structure from bimodal to trimodal. Approximately, 13 million hectares of land were transferred to 180 000 families, making the FTLRP the most redistributive phase (Scoones et al., 2019; Shonhe, 2019). Compared to the earlier phases of land reform, the fast track was the most redistributive. Compulsory acquisition of land from the whites was facilitated by Constitutional Amendment Act Number 5 of 2000 and the introduction of the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) 15 of 2000 (Tekwa & Adesina, 2025, p. 8). The amendment allowed for freehold titles to be converted into state land. The government redistributed the acquired land under permissory tenure for A1 farms – the granting of land use rights, often through permits or leases, rather than outright ownership (freehold title) and leasehold tenure for A2 farms. Statutory Instrument 419/1999 guided the reallocation of land and prescribed farm sizes according to Zimbabwe’s agro-ecological regions (Matondi, 2001, p. 2). Table 1 shows the stipulated land sizes.

Table 1. Officially prescribed farm sizes under the Fast Track Resettlement

Natural Region	A1 Farm Size (ha)			A2 Farm Size (ha)				Access Difference	
	Arable	Grazing	Total	Small scale	Medium scale	Large scale	Peri-urban	Ha	Actual
1	5	7	12	20	100	250	2-30	238	20
2a	5	10	15	30	200	330	2-30	335	23
2b	5	15	20	40	250	400	2-30	380	19
3	10	20	30	60	300	500	2-30	470	16
4	10	30	40	120	700	1500	2-30	1450	29
5	10	60	70	240	1000	2000	2-30	1930	25+

Source: Matondi (2001, p. 2)

Youth Gaps in Zimbabwe's Land Reform

Among other factors, access to land is essential to facilitate the realisation of the social policy functions of land reform. Yet since attaining independence in 1980, the government of Zimbabwe did not prioritise youth access to agricultural land. From the first phase of land acquisition and redistribution to Fast Track Land Reform Programme, the government largely focused on redressing racial injustices that translated to large-scale expropriation of land from the indigenous people. While the FTLRP was the most redistributive phase compared to the earlier phases, and land reforms in other African countries (Chambati, 2022; Moyo, 2011), the youth gap is pronounced in Zimbabwe's land questions. Across the study sites and at national level, there are several gaps relating to youth access to land, agrarian support, participation in land governance, decision-making relating to the use of land, produce and income. For instance, access to agricultural land in the specific study sites in Mangwe and Zvimba reveal that few youths have formal access to land (Figure 2).

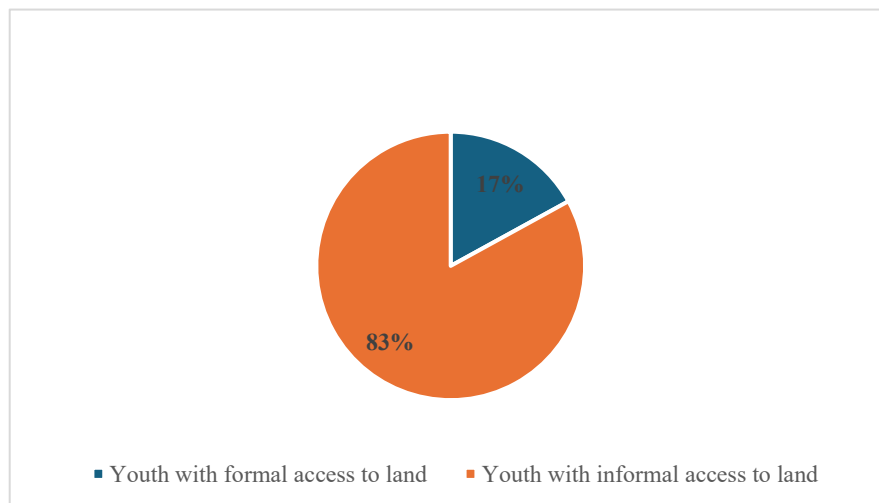


Figure 2. Youth access to land for agricultural purposes

Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Scholars working in other study sites navigated this gap - Chipenda (2020) focusing on Goromonzi district, Thebe (2018) in Matabeleland, and Thebe and Shawa-Mangani (2023) in northern Zimbabwe. At national level, the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Fisheries and Rural Development could not provide cogent statistics relating to youth's formal access to agricultural land. Constraints to formal access to land are not restricted to the youth. A rearview show that since 1980, redressing the racial injustices that were created by British colonialism

through land reform programmes became an over-riding goal. In the process, gender equity was eclipsed (Bhatasara, 2011; Gaidzanwa, 2011; Tekwa & Adesina, 2018). In relation to the FTLRP, 12 per cent and 18 per cent of the land reform beneficiaries in the A1 and A2 categories, respectively, are women (Tekwa & Adesina, 2025, p. 9). Limited adoption of gender equitable approaches also extends to other sectors.

Land Reform, Youth and Socio-Economic Wellbeing

Building on the understanding that research on welfare should focus on the intention of social policy that is, the enhancement of human wellbeing and welfare, and identification of policy instruments and mechanisms for achieving such outcomes irrespective of the type and context in which they are deployed (Tekwa & Adesina, 2025), this section argues that land reform has had positive wellbeing and welfare outcomes among the youth. Further, the benefits of accessing land have a spill-over effect to other groups. If the current challenges are resolved, land and agrarian reform is a vibrant welfare pathway with capacity to transcend the current narrow conceptualisation of welfare. Figure 3 shows the core benefits of land emphasised by both the youth with formal and informal access to land. Furthermore, these were corroborated by the other categories of the participants.

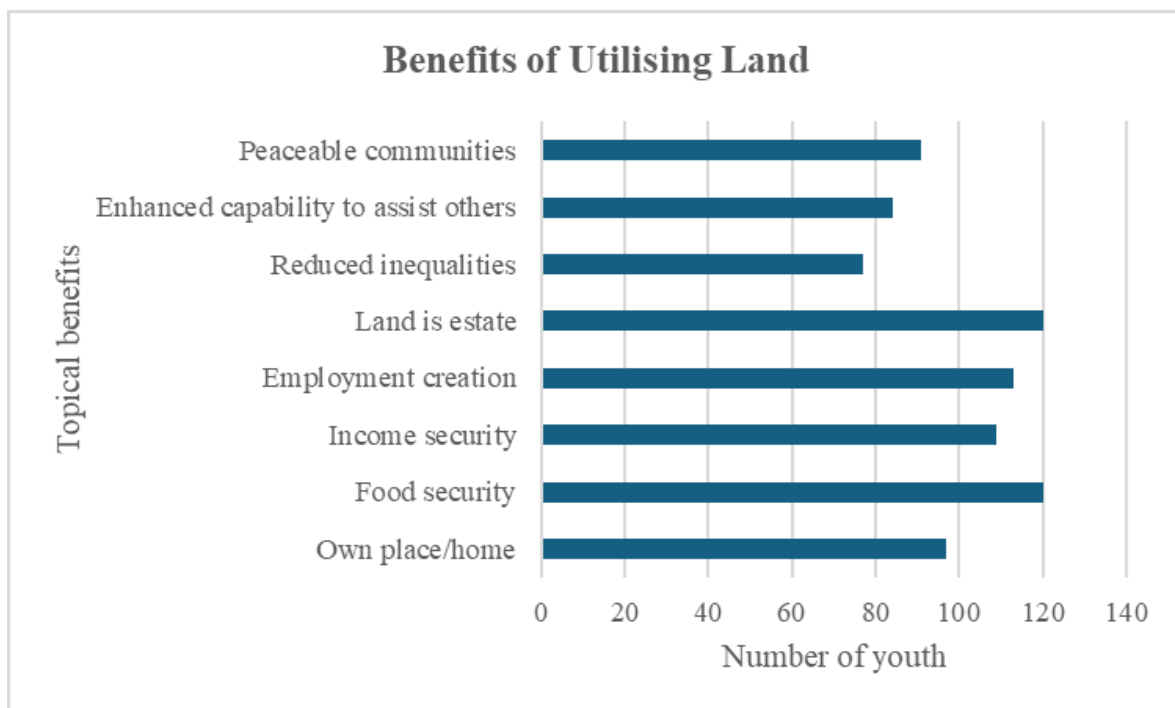


Figure 3. Youth’s views on benefits of utilising land
Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Based on Figure 3, land access for agricultural purposes or settlement has multiple functions to people’s socio-economic wellbeing. The benefits are being realised at a time when Zimbabwe is experiencing macroeconomic challenges (Vambe, 2023). Affecting the youth directly are de-industrialisation, rising unemployment, prolonged waitness, and precarious alternative livelihood sources (Gukurume, 2025; Mate, 2023) for example, informal sector trade and the diaspora. Furthermore, alternative livelihoods are limited.

Improving the Transformative Outcomes of Land Reform: With and for Youth and All

The foregoing, corroborated by multiple sources of empirical evidence, support the importance of land reform as a pathway for improving the wellbeing and welfare of the youth, and all

people. Further, it shows that the youth are central to achieving, broadening and futuring the outcomes of land reform which include, productive, reproductive, protective, redistributive and social compact as outlined in the transformative social policy (Adesina, 2023; Chipenda, 2025, p. 4; Tekwa & Adesina, 2023, p. 76). These outcomes may not be realised at once or uniformly. However, the desired outcomes are achievable if the current challenges and failures are addressed. In other contexts, scholars explore the opportunities and challenges of youth participation in agriculture and agribusiness (Boye et al., 2024; Geza et al., 2021, 2023; Grinin & Korotayev, 2024; Leavy & Hossain, 2014; Magagula & Tsvakirai, 2019; Mulema et al., 2021; Shonhe & Muchetu, 2021). Drawn from the various participants are the following suggestions:

- Improving formal access to land through land audit and redistribution
- Enhancing agrarian support to youth through youth-specific programmes or existing programmes
- Recognising that on its own, land reform is a necessary but insufficient condition for improving wellbeing and welfare
- Improving interest in agriculture by youth but also recognising that not all youth can be farmers
- Incorporating youth in land governance at farm community and national levels
- Including youth in the design of land reform, agrarian support and agricultural mechanisation programmes.
- Linking youth, land and agriculture to rural development.

Discussion

Endogeneity is crucial to the relevance and effectiveness of social policy (Adesina, 2008; Mafeje, 2000). It enhances the capability of social policy instruments to respond to contextual historical and current socio-economic conditions. Social and development policies in Zimbabwe and Africa are largely influenced by models and instruments from European contexts (Aina, 2021; Gumede, 2023; Ouma & Adesina, 2019). At the African continental level, this is rooted in colonialism and foiled policy innovation in the post-colonial era. Coupled with the predominance of neoliberalism and the ascendance of the Social Protection Paradigm in framing policy, the subsequent social policy architecture has failed to reduce poverty, inequality and marginalisation (Adesina, 2011). Further, the “international perspective” of welfare is in fact a way of thinking and practice that embodies selected ideas and contexts including that of the OECD. This calls for the need to re-define and reframe social policy outside its current narrow welfare state conceptualisation. Accordingly, the deployment of more relevant and context specific instruments for enhancing wellbeing and welfare including land and agrarian reform is central to Africa.

The redistribution of land is a productive resource which results in multiple wellbeing and welfare outcomes. By whatever lens adopted, despite challenges, Zimbabwe’s fast track land reform has enhanced the wellbeing and welfare of the youth. By applying transformative social policy lens (see Adesina, 2011; Mkandawire, 2006), this article prioritised the ways in which land reform as a social policy intervention increased access to land by youth and more importantly, facilitated the transformation of institutional, cultural and generational relations and norms surrounding access to land. Although formal access to land, defined in terms of possession of land access documents including offer letters, leases and others is low, the use of land has had several positive outcomes, linking directly with the tasks of social policy with a transformative agenda which includes productive, redistributive, protective, reproductive and social cohesion. This is corroborated by the expert in the social policy dimensions of land and agrarian reform:

In relation to youth and other groups, reforming land tenure in ways that facilitate broader access and provision of the requisite agrarian support translates to multiple wellbeing and welfare outcomes. This is not restricted to Zimbabwe but is also evident in land reforms implemented in other countries. Whichever way the youth access land, its utilisation alleviates poverty, creates employment, protects them against socio-economic challenges and enhances their contribution to household social protection, reproduction and redistribution of the gains.

Africa's agrarian sectors remain the centrepiece for the continent's development (Adesina & Tekwa, 2025; Boda et al., 2024; Mafeje, 2003). Regardless of the challenges experienced in Zimbabwe's agrarian sector, it remains fundamental to fulfilling the welfare needs of the population. Having established that land reform and agriculture are central to framing social policy in Africa though not prioritised in OECD literature, the associated challenges should be resolved. Linked to this, is the importance of improving inclusion, equity and sustainability by addressing youth issues. While the youth gaps are multiple, urgent attention should focus on broadening formal land access and improving youth-specific agrarian support. This is already on the government's agenda as emphasised by an official in the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Fisheries and Rural Resettlement (and supported by the Agritex officers), but translation to practice is essential:

Youths are an important group in Zimbabwe's economy. The government is aware of low formal access to agricultural land and agricultural support by the youth, and the problems this poses to their wellbeing. The establishment of a Youth Desk in our ministry is an acknowledgement of the government's commitment to resolving the issues. Furthermore, youths and women will be prioritised in land redistribution, informed by the recently concluded National Land Audit will inform.

Tasking land reform and, by extension, agriculture to address the welfare needs of youth and, more broadly, the development challenges in contemporary Zimbabwe, ought to be accompanied by three fundamentals. Firstly, land and agrarian reform should be understood as an innovative social policy instrument emerging from the developing countries – an argument that also features in other social policy literature (Chipenda, 2024; Tekwa & Adesina, 2025, p. 13). Secondly, in relation to youth and other groups, land and agrarian reform can advance human wellbeing by reducing inequalities, including generational disparities in welfare. This can be achieved through enhancing the productive capacities of individuals, households and communities, facilitating social protection and reproduction, redistributing wealth and enhancing social cohesion and nation-building. Thirdly, land reform should be situated within the wider remit of development that is, youth development, rural development and national development. The deployment of land reform and pursuit of national, continental and global visions of development such as Zimbabwe's Vision 2030, the African Union's Agenda 2063 (The Africa We Want) and Agenda 2030 (the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) should be synergetic.

Conclusion

Compared to social policy approaches that are restricted to the Social Protection Paradigm, in relation to youth and other groups, Zimbabwe's land and agrarian reform is performing vital functions of generating, enhancing and broadening wellbeing and welfare. The search for and consolidation of inclusive and sustainable development, which is imperative in Africa due to a history of colonisation and contemporary serpentine neoliberalism, is facilitated by economic

and social transformation through engaging policy endogeneity and policy instruments that question and resolve the anchors of poverty, inequality and marginalisation. Land reform can be tasked to facilitate the realisation of this goal.

Challenges acknowledged, Zimbabwe's land and agrarian reform is improving the lives of youth and other categories of the population. Access to land is performing productive, protective and reproductive functions. Enhanced agricultural production, creation of agriculture-based employment, enhanced food security, income generation and stability, capability to assist others and reduced inequality are evidence of land and agrarian reform as an active social policy tool. The article contributes to literature and policy on redefining and reframing social policy in Africa in search of inclusive and transformative social policy and development.

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