

# **A Failed neo-Britain: Demography and the Labour Question in Colonial Zimbabwe c.1890 – 1948**

**Simeon Maravanyika**  
University of Pretoria  
Pretoria  
[simeon06@yahoo.ca](mailto:simeon06@yahoo.ca)

**and**

**Frans D. Huijzenveld**  
The Free University  
Amsterdam

## **Abstract**

Cecil John Rhodes, Southern Rhodesia's founding father, and early settlers envisaged the creation of a country that mirrored the image of Britain in terms of its demographic composition and good economic health. Because of this, the colony invested in attracting 'good quality' settlers from Britain, and tried to shut the door on settlers from a 'bad class'. Against this backdrop, this paper argues that this dream never materialised as the exclusionist approach to immigration shut out many potential candidates from other destinations. Indeed, on the economic front labour shortage was endemic and the colony was never able to acquire adequate labour in the period under review.

## **Introduction**

Alois Mlambo (2000) has argued that Cecil John Rhodes and successive colonial governments in Southern Rhodesia (hereinafter, colonial Zimbabwe) had a dream to mould the colony into a white man's, particularly British, country. This dream was not realised as the colony was never able to attract the preferred calibre of settlers in adequate numbers. Most settlers with skills and resources elected to emigrate to better established territories in other parts of the world such as Australia and New Zealand. David Hughes (2006:269) has characterised colonial Zimbabwe as a "failed neo-Europe". This, according to him, is because the white population in the colony never exceeded five percent of the national total, making it different from places that successfully became "neo-Europes" such as the United States of America where the issue of belonging dissipated over the years as white people there attained demographic, political and economic dominance over indigenous people.

The Labour Question was another critical factor in the colony. Political and economic success could not be on any other basis other than demographic dominance and increased control of the economy and its productivity, especially considering that the colony's neighbor in the north, the Union of South Africa, was ahead both in terms of its white population and the size of its economy. This is especially true after the discovery of diamonds at Kimberly in 1867 and gold at Witwatersrand in 1886. Colonial Zimbabwe was never able in the period under review to elevate itself to the standard of South Africa which, because of the profitable mines, managed to draw

extra-territorial labour from much of the sub-continent. This paper examines the two major problems the colony grappled with in its first fifty years: white demography and labour shortage. These two factors played a major role in hindering the colony's development to the intended neo-Britain.

### **Context: White Immigration and Black Labour**

White immigration was one of the major cornerstones of colonial Zimbabwe. Both the British Imperial government and the colonial state, during both the British South Africa Company (BSAC) period (1890–1923) and the Responsible Government period (1923-1953), played a significant role in facilitating such migration. White immigration, particularly from Britain, was, in fact, advocated throughout the entire colonial period. It was only on this basis that the country could develop purely as a white man's country. This dream had two problematic elements to it, which in a way made it a terrible nightmare. First was the notion that white people of British extraction could actually take over the country and establish dominance in demographic, political and economic terms as had been the case in other places such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America (Mlambo 1998).

This idea was so entrenched in the colonial mindset to the extent that at one time it was actually thought to be possible to populate the colony till white people out-numbered Africans. This was a bad dream that never came true. Hughes (2006) and Kennedy (1987:2-3) sum it up concisely; "Having conquered the territory in the 1890s and alienated the fertile Highveld in ensuing decades, whites never approached demographic superiority vis-à-vis native peoples. Neither – given that race is socially constructed – did they reconstruct it in a more multiplex fashion. Europeans married Europeans, breeding 'whites' whose population never exceeded five percent of the national total." A 'Britain' was thus never achieved or built in any way imaginable. On the contrary, it appears in all settler colonies white people were never totally 'at home' as, being a minority, they always had to superintend over the majority, with the use or threat of force and other coercive devices such as imposition of taxes and hindering African competition on agricultural markets to drive locals into the colonial labour system. This meant the colony was sitting on the ticking time-bomb of African resistance and possible rebellion from the outset. As Wagner (1994:171) describes it, in reference to South Africa, white people also always had an "emotional and moral unease with the fruits of conquest."

The second problem was that the preferred settler was British. Colonial history has in many instances emphasised the discrimination the colonised black majority faced in the hands of the colonial system, without unpacking relations between the 'European' class. Mlambo (2000) has noted that white groups in Zimbabwe were not only violently antagonistic, but were also highly suspicious of one another. Settlers originally from Britain not only perceived the Portuguese, Greek, Polish and Boers, among others, as 'foreigners', but also as of a lower calibre. With such a state of affairs there were concerted efforts to keep such people out of the colony. According to Kosmin (1977) the first line of defense to meet this objective was immigration laws.

The labour question was another foundational element to the quest to make colonial Zimbabwe succeed as a neo-Britain. There was always labour shortage in the period under review, and this was of great concern in all sectors of the colonial economy, especially agriculture. W. J Barber (1961), in his analysis of Northern Rhodesia (hereinafter, Zambia), colonial Zimbabwe and

Nyasaland's (hereinafter, Malawi) transition from a traditional to a capitalist mode of production, suggested that the supply of labour at low cost to farms and mines was achieved using market forces as Africans left their traditional economic activities, opting for more rewarding jobs in terms of remuneration in the capitalist sector. This view has been strongly criticised by Giovanni Arrighi (1954) who has shown the extent to which non-market forces were utilised by the colonial administrations. Arrighi argues that in the case of colonial Zimbabwe, coercion and economic pressure were employed to ensure that Africans joined the wage-labour system until the 1920s, when the peasant sector went into irreversible decline. The colonial state thus used its political muscle to undermine the peasant sector, in the process creating labour for its economic sectors. Market mechanisms only assumed dominance in the 1920s, thirty years after the colony had been pacified.

There is no agreement as to when the peasant sector began to decline. Palmer (1977) argues that this happened around the time a white agricultural policy was launched in 1908, while Mosley (1983) and Phimister (1986) subscribe to the view that the African peasant sector prospered in some parts of the country till the 1920s. Johnson (1992), however, argues that coercion remained a critical factor in making labour available into the 1940s and beyond. He further argues that the colonial administration did not succeed in restructuring the African peasant sector to a point where there was an abundance of labour. Ranger (1978) shares this school of thought. Using the Makoni district as an example, while acknowledging that a good number of Africans was coerced in diverse ways to join the capitalist sector, he argues that some African peasants survived the depression in the 1930s, and continued with their own mode of production with relative success well into the 1970s.

Arrighi (1970:207) has noted that the establishment and expansion of the mining industry in the absence of an accompanying white farming sector prior to 1908 that resulted in favourable market opportunities for a significant proportion of the local peasantry. The Masvingo (then Victoria) province is an example of an area where some peasants were doing well agriculturally in the 1890s. Because of this prosperity, many men chose not to offer their labour to the farms. The settlers in line with their perception of indigenous people at the time felt that only a very small proportion of indigenous men were engaged in meaningful employment. Indeed, one colonial official remarked: "They are a contemptible race of men, weak, cowardly and indolent, relying on their wives to till their fields, gather their crops and earn for them the hut tax which they are too lazy to earn for themselves" (Phimister 1974:226). However, the opening of the Gwelo-Salisbury railway line in 1902 undermined peasant production as it became possible to send grain to the Selukwe mines by rail from Salisbury and the Charter district. This had the effect that by 1907 the price of grain had dropped by 50 percent.

This situation did not, however, obtain in all areas. Proletarianization across the country did not take place at a pace as fast as settler farmers wanted. In Bubi for example, the number of ploughs used by peasant farmers doubled between 1912 and 1915, prompting the Native Commissioner for the area to report in 1916 that the economic conditions of the natives yearly improve to the extent that there are very few kraals, no matter how small, which do not possess small herds of cattle and small stock of clothing. Implements and household utensils of European manufacture were also widely used. In another area, Bulilima-Mangwe, "1 000 ploughs were purchased in a single year at the enhanced price of fully 100 percent" by cattle owners who benefitted from war-time prices during the First World War. In Mazowe, in spite of

the fact that settler farmers by 1910 owned 90 percent of the district's land, resulting in large scale competition from the large scale farmers, peasants still produced everything the mines needed, "beans, monkey nuts...and even kaffir tobacco" (Phimister 1988:79).

One thing is clear though, that the capitalist economy, especially the commercial farming and mining sectors, were never able to quench their thirst for labour on the local market, in spite of the use of coercive and non-market interventions to impoverish locals and make them wage labourers. The colonial state had to enter into agreements with administrations of neighbouring countries such as Zambia and Malawi to acquire extra-territorial labour. A major stumbling block to this arrangement was that Africans from these territories preferred to work in South Africa where the mines offered better wages. Colonial Zimbabwe was forced by this situation to enter into an agreement with the Union of South Africa in a bid to slow the flow of labour from the colony.

### **Building a Second Britain**

White people in colonial Zimbabwe did not view themselves as invaders. Their view was aptly summarised by a Rhodesian settler in 1949: "Don't regard the country as a Black Man's country, where the white man is the intruder, an exploiter of Black labour, a superior; look at it as an empty country (which it practically is for what are 1 750 000 millions in a country three times the size of England?) to be settled with (a) white population ...." (Mlambo 1998:131). Such sentiments were expressed even in the high echelons of the government. Premier Coghlan, for example, told the all-settler legislative assembly in 1927, "This is essentially a country where the white man has come and desires to stay, and he can only be certain of doing so if he has certain portions of the colony made his exclusively" (Machingaidze 1991:559). This position was further echoed by the *Committee of Enquiry into the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry* (1934:1), which had been appointed in 1933 to investigate the impact of the depression on agriculture. The Committee reported that it would not be possible to "build up a white colony on any basis other than a white agricultural population." It is in this context that the creation of Native Reserves must be understood to ensure an abundance of land and labour for the projected huge number of white settlers.

The state publicised opportunities available in the colony in Britain, offered "safe passages to immigrants, provided land at cheap prices and put in place legislation to ensure that Africans were shut out of the capitalist economy" (Mlambo 1998:132). This on one hand increased chances of settler success in agriculture as African competition was reduced, and on the other hand ensured the availability of cheap manual labour on the farms. The Rhodesia Immigration and Information Office was established in London in 1906 and in Glasgow in 1908 to publicise the colony. Agents were also created in South Africa. In 1908 the Estates Department was set up to promote colonisation, and to deal with issues pertaining to allocation of land to new settlers. The conditions in the early period were very attractive: new settlers had twenty years to pay for their farms, free medical and hospital fees for ten years, free arms and a Rhodes Pioneer pension or early settler pension after the age of 60 (Mlambo 1998).

Other initiatives were put in place in the 1920s to bring immigrants from Britain. These initiatives became known as the three Empire Settlement Schemes and they came into being after the enactment of the Empire Settlement Act in Britain (Machingaidze 1980). The state

tried to secure agriculturally competent people. This was meant to avoid the predicament of the early period when, according to Victor Machingaidze (1980:45), most of the settlers on the land were not of the “right stamp” as both their capital possession and their agricultural knowledge were inadequate. Even the few farmers with experience had to battle with a climate vastly different from the temperate climate of Britain. To remedy this situation, the State had embarked on a programme to create key institutions to train white farmers. The Salisbury and Gwebi agricultural research stations were established in 1909, the Rhodes, Inyanga and Matopos Estates were created in 1917 and the Land Bank was established in 1912 to provide finance for settler agriculture (Kwashirai 2006).

In June 1938 the Rhodesian government entered into a Tripartite Agreement with the Dominions Office and the 1820 Memorial Settlers Association for cooperation in promoting migration to the colony from the United Kingdom and Ireland. The colony never got adequate numbers of settlers, though. This was because the colony was not willing to take all whites who were able to buy land in the colony. The intention of the administration was to build a “British White man’s country” (Mlambo 1998:141). Given this preference, the majority of immigrants who settled in the colony were of British stock. In 1921, 31 years after the establishment of the colony, non-British immigrants, “including Greeks, Italians, Russians, Americans, Germans, Swiss, French and Poles remained very few...(accounting) for less than 5 percent of the white population” (Mlambo 1998: 144).

Memmi’s (1965:76) notions on colonial relations deserve consideration. According to him colonial relations were not just about two distinct groups; the coloniser and the colonised. Minority white groups were ‘colonials’, as opposed to colonisers. He argued: “A colonial is a European living in a colony but having no privileges, whose living conditions are not higher than those of a colonised person of equivalent economic position and social status...a colonial is a benevolent European who does not have the coloniser’s attitude toward the colonised...” Needless to say, though Memmi makes the important point that non-British Europeans were considered second class, it is not accurate to say that they had different attitudes towards locals. All white people in colonial Zimbabwe were privileged in one way or another, and as such a colonial as defined as above never existed. Non-British whites, in most cases, sought to elevate themselves to the level of settlers from Britain.

The story of one immigrant from Turkey is a good example of this attempt at gaining social mobility. In 1907, the BSAC government brought fourteen Hellenes from Thrace and Anatolia in Turkey, in pursuit of a programme to promote Turkish tobacco in the colony. The BSAC apologised for bringing in these settlers, arguing that it was only done because they had been “unable to obtain responsible Europeans.” Because of the enormous segregation against them, one of them, Kiriaco, is reported to have become determined that his children would not suffer the same fate, and thus had to be taught to become ‘Englishmen.’ He bought the English newspaper daily to learn English and to teach it to his wife and three children “until they could speak English without an accent” (Venables 2003:111,115)

Dutch speaking South Africans are worth mentioning as they were subjected to a lot of xenophobia in colonial Zimbabwe (Clements 1969). Hodder-Williams (1974) has argued that the hate of Afrikaners was for a number of reasons: politically there was a fear that they would dominate the country if they were allowed to enter the colony in huge numbers. This was because there was a large number of Afrikaners in neighboring South Africa. This was a

justifiable fear as this was after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 which was perceived in colonial Zimbabwe to have been a war fought to prevent Afrikaner domination of British settlers in South Africa. Migration to Southern Rhodesia was thus suspected to be a ploy by Afrikaner leaders to settle a significant number of Afrikaners in the territory with the motive of dominating it over time. Culturally Afrikaners were seen as inferior. As early as 1903, the Rhodesian Surveyor –General wrote that he opposed a situation where any white person who had financial resources to purchase land in the colony was afforded the opportunity as this would attract “a number of undesirables like the ‘bywoner’ class, who would form a compact, bigoted and non-progressive class” (Mlambo 2000).

As early as 1904 there was a policy that “Greeks, Hindoos and Chinamen” were a “danger” to the economy and security of the infantile territory and therefore should not be granted trading licenses (Kosmin 1997:46). It was British settlers that were preferred. As Jollie (1921:10-12), the only female member of the Legislative Council put it in 1921, “the average-born Rhodesian feels that this is essentially a white man’s country, pioneered, bought and developed by British people, and he wants to keep it so.” Because of this, for the few immigrants who were not of British origin “gaining acceptance into the community was difficult, if not impossible” (Venables 2003:109).

The desire to have people of British stock dominate the colony was, however, difficult to accomplish because of the gender imbalance, as a situation obtained where more men came to the colony than young women. Many young British men trekked to South Africa to find wives, as they did not have adequate resources to travel to Britain for this purpose. There were however attempts to get British women from Britain, especially in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Per every 1 000 men in 1904 there were 406 women. The number rose to 515 in 1911 and 796 in 1926 (Mlambo 1998).

One British woman, Elizabeth Jane, who was based in South Africa, wrote a letter to the Rhodesian Prime Minister, Godfrey Huggins, in 1938 expressing her concern. “Will you please use your influence at Home in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,” she wrote, “to bring out young women as wives for these young British men... You fill these places with men of British nationality, but they must come to the Union to get wives, the majority with Dutch blood in their veins. They can never be British stock. There are thousands of women today in England who would be only too glad to come out...to get husbands and men are only human, they must have wives” (Mlambo 1998:129). The Rhodesian Immigration Committee and The Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women among others, with the cooperation of the colonial government, however, tried to redress this gender imbalance. Assisted passages were organised for single women and widows who agreed to be placed in employment upon arrival as domestic helps, children’s nurses, school matrons, hospital nurses, governesses, among other duties, depending on their qualifications and abilities. The numbers they sent to the colony were however, few.

The major reason for white people’s failure to form a little Britain in Zimbabwe is that most of the settlers who came to the colony treated it as some half-way station where they could settle for a short while and move to other more attractive places. Mlambo (1998:124) has argued that Rhodesians “were really a society of immigrants and transients, most of whom did not stay long

enough to establish roots in the country.” According to Roberts (1979:55), “for every hundred migrants arriving, between sixty and eighty were always leaving.” The 1969 census documented that approximately 60 percent of the white population, half of whom were under the age of 15, had been born outside the country. Rhodesian-born whites constituted 25 percent of the adult white population. Over 55 percent of settlers born outside the country had come to the colony after the second world war (Kay 1976:43). The white population thus grew slowly from 1890. In 1891, a year after colonisation, only 1 500 settlers permanently resided in the colony. By 1948, the population stood at around 72 000.

### **The Labour Question c. 1890s-1948.**

Hand in glove with the demography dilemma was the Labour Question. Most settlers who migrated to colonial Zimbabwe ventured into farming, a sector that faced a gigantic labour deficit. From the early days of colonial encroachment integrating Africans into the capitalist mode of production was a major challenge for the colonial administration. A number of factors impacted on labour supplies between 1890 and the enactment of the Land Apportionment Act in 1930. First was what has been termed by Palmer (1977) the “era of peasant prosperity.” Many African farmers considerably benefitted from supplying the food requirements of the new establishments such as mines in the early colonial period. This had negative implications on labour supplies. Again, African livestock had steadily recovered from the rinderpest outbreak of the 1890s and for many peasants the stock trade was an easier way of meeting their financial needs, such as payment of taxes in comparison with offering their labour on the farms and on mines.

The second factor is that most Africans who decided to sell their labour to settler establishments kept one foot firmly maintained in the traditional economy, selling their labour only to meet particular needs and targets. As Grier (1994:34) puts it, “regular supply of labour was hampered by seasonal and annual fluctuations in the number of adult African males who turned out to work, the short periods for which the men were willing to work (and) widespread desertion.” The settler agricultural sector was to rely more and more on alien labour as a result of it being more stable than local labour. The distance between the alien worker’s home and the farms of the colony was big, and many workers established a home away from home on the farms, and with time labour was raised on the farm as the workers parented.

Remuneration was also a huge factor in labour supply. Wages on the mines and on farms were low, and as a result offered no attractive incentive to most Africans. This, coupled with the fact that mining and agricultural work is intensive in nature, made cheap labour difficult to find. Hand in glove with this was the use of pre-capitalist methods in settler agriculture such as labour tenancy. Labour tenancy was a relation of production that emerged as result of the fact that many white farmers did not have adequate resources to invest in farming and for wages. While land was plentiful, capital was scarce for the majority of white farmers (Rennie 1978). Most farmers were also technically and managerially unskilled (Machingaidze 1980).

When the farmers took over land from local agricultural people, they would in many cases thus not evict them. Rather they took control of the people and the land, as in some cases locals did not want to relocate and leave behind their homes, fields and graves of their departed loved ones (Rennie 1978). Tenancy was a coping mechanism in the face of the unprecedented tsunami of white land takeovers. The Moodie Trek in the early 1890s provides a good example of how both

the land needs of indigenous people were disregarded, and the extent to which the sequestration went. The trek, composed of Afrikaners, was one of the first immigrant groups to alienate land and to settle on the densely settled highland between the Sabi River and the Mozambican border. The BSAC authorised Moodie to partition the land in the area into 6 000 acre farms. In 1898 there were only 300 settlers in the area, yet virtually the entire highland had been alienated, leaving indigenous Africans with the difficult choice of choosing between migrating to areas they were unaccustomed to, becoming “squatters” or tenants or giving their labour to the farmers (Roder 1964).

This system had several benefits to the farmers. To start with, they benefited from labour that had already been invested on the land prior to their arrival by taking over cleared pieces of land (Rennie 1978). They could also extract rent, either in cash or labour. In most cases rent tenancy and share-cropping was practised by absentee landlords. Many individuals and companies speculated on land, without getting into production in the early colonial period (Hodder-Williams 1983). Share-cropping was a profitable enterprise for white farmers because of the presence of a cornered market for them, protected from African competition. The settler farmer had better access to markets in terms of transport, and he could access local, urban and international markets. Share-cropping was premised on disrupting local farmers’ ability to market their produce. This meant that many locals were able to meet their tax responsibility without partaking in the emerging capitalist economy.

Tenancy arrangements also benefitted the farmers because it made the use of family labour possible. The use of family labour involved use of children. The poorly capitalised farmers were, according to Rennie (1978) “unable or unwilling to pay for wage labour if they could avoid it. They might pay their transport riders and skilled workers, but for seasonal and unskilled work – road making, planting, weeding, reaping, herding, making irrigation channels, putting up grain stores and the like – they found it convenient and profitable to use labour tenants.” The High Commissioner’s Proclamation No. 19 of 1896 and the Private Locations Ordinance of 1908 gave legal backing to the practice. Child labour was permitted by colonial legislation, in particular the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1899. The Ordinance which “primarily dealt with written contracts between adult workers and employers, contained provisions for the signing of contracts of service between employers and the parents or guardians of children under the age of sixteen. No age minimum was mentioned by the Act so that children well below the age of sixteen could be contracted out...If a child was “destitute”, that is, found without parent or guardian, a magistrate, acting as guardian *ex officio*, could apprentice the child (Grier 1994:36). The use of child labour was a common feature in the early colonial period.

Taxation was used to coerce Africans into the labour system. In 1894 the Hut Tax Ordinance was proclaimed, requiring every adult male to pay a hut tax of 10 shillings per year. The Ordinance was amended in 1901 to catch African males who were evading paying tax, for example where many adult African males decided to stay together in the same hut to evade payment. The amendment required payment in coin only for every hut used, not in kind (Keppel-Jones 1884:616). The Native Tax Ordinance of 1904 replaced the Hut tax with a head tax of 20 shillings, payable by every adult African male. The Ordinance was accompanied by the Native Passes Ordinance of 1904 which reduced the age of compulsory registration from 18 years to 14. This had the effect of encouraging child labour as even boys below the age of 14 paid the tax so



they could get passes to work. As one legislator reported in 1925, “I know that even before they become 14 years old these piccanins wish to have a registration certificate so that they can call themselves men” (The Native Education Commission Report 1925:88). African men had to go to mines and farms to offer their labour to pay the required taxes.

With the launch of a white agricultural policy in 1908, and the consequent increase of white people migrating to the colony and taking up farming, the demand for labour at the cheapest possible cost increased. Cost minimisation was considered essential for the colonial economy in the first three decades of colonial rule as the mining sector, which the British South Africa Company (BSAC) had expected to be the foundation upon which the colony would be anchored, continued to be plagued by low profitability. The collapse in 1903 of the London market for Rhodesian mining shares and the discovery that the colony’s quartz reefs were not as deep as those in the rand, and therefore could not bear huge capital overheads, among other factors, all weighed heavily on the mining sector, prompting restructuring by the BSAC government in 1903 (Phimister 1976:468).

Reconstruction included, among other measures, initiatives to ensure the abundance of cheap labour. The colony’s Auditor-General noted in 1927, “in Western Australia, where there is no native labour, mines which are of higher grade than ours cannot be worked at a profit though ours, the lower grades, produce profits. The inference is clear. Our mines are profitable only because of the native labour available” (Phimister 1976:481). Labour was thus an important cornerstone to the colonial economy. The Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) was formed in 1903 as a recruiting agency, mostly for Southern Rhodesian mines. Its mandate included recruiting alien labour for the mines, and later this was widened to cover the farms. The RNLB had agents at entry points into the colony such as Mount Darwin, and in Zambia and Malawi (Mtisi 1994). Workers were recruited from neighbouring colonies of Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. These colonies were the source of more than half of the African workforce in colonial Zimbabwean mines in the 1920s (Grier 1994:38). The RNLB used coercive tactics in its quest to recruit more labour. The RNLB ceased its activities in 1933 mainly due to the vagaries of the Great Depression (Clarke 1973). The agency was never able to satisfy the labour needs of the agrarian sector.

In the agricultural sector, the majority of settler farmers in the early period were undercapitalised, and they lacked requisite agricultural knowledge. The need for labour remained one of the biggest grievances of the settlers. The farmers blamed the BSAC for not coming up with policies that would ensure an abundance of labour, with the result that the popularity of the Company administration declined among farmers. At the beginning of the 1911 – 12 farming season, for example, farmers, particularly those in Mashonaland, called for the withdrawal of all advertisements in Britain and in South Africa that sought to attract settlers to the colony. “Under existing labour conditions such advertisements”, they argued, “amounted to false representations...leading not only to untold hardships but in many cases to bankruptcy and total ruin (Phimister 1988). In the face of such opposition the Company was forced to put in place measures to attract African labour to mines and farms. Farmers became even more desperate for labour in the 1920s because of the profitable market that existed for maize and tobacco.

By the mid 1930s, when the colony began to recover from the impacts of the Great Depression, colonial Zimbabwe found itself in a number of problems relating to the acquisition of labour from Zambia and Malawi. To start with, the Colonial Office, which was responsible for the administration of Malawi, was worried about the adverse effects labour migration was having on

the territory. A Committee that had been set up to enquire into migrant labour from Malawi reported in 1935, “We must confess that, six months ago, there was not one of us who realized the seriousness of the situation: as our investigations proceeded we became more and more aware that this uncontrolled and growing emigration brought misery and poverty to hundreds and thousands of families and that the waste of life, happiness, health and wealth was colossal....Something must be done at once to remedy a state of affairs which, viewed from any standpoint, constitutes a fragrant breach of that ideal of trusteeship of native races” (Johnson 1992). This concern was the last thing the Huggins government needed at a time when demand for expatriate labour was peaking.

The second challenge was that though colonial Zimbabwe entered into the Tripartite Agreement with Zambia and Malawi in 1936 with the hope of limiting competition from South African mines, this did not achieve its intended objective. The agreement was signed on 21 August 1936. The agreement was amended in 1942 and 1947. There was nothing particularly ground breaking about this agreement. A number of agreements had been signed before like the 1909 Modus Vivendi, the 1913 Tete Agreement and the 1934 Agreement between colonial Zimbabwe and Zambia and Malawi. What the agreement did show was desperation for labour by colonial Zimbabwean employers, and this was never satiated.

Gold mining expanded rapidly in South Africa from 1933, with the result that the labour recruiting agency of the South African Chamber of Mines, The Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) increased its hunting urge for labour in the region. Unfortunately for colonial Zimbabwe, the contract system offered by the WNLA was found both favourable and more attractive by the administration in Nyasaland as it was perceived to be a solution to unregulated movement of labour from the protectorate, the contract system had guarantees relating to minimum conditions of employment and a deferred pay system which provided capital for the development of the protectorate. In addition to this, the mines in South Africa had better remuneration in comparison with colonial Zimbabwe both in terms of sums paid to the individual employee and the protectorate, and the WNLA contract system which guaranteed the repatriation of workers at the end of their tenure (Johnson 1992).

It is against this state of affairs that Charles Bullock, the Secretary for Native Affairs in 1938 predicted bankruptcy, and a gloomy future for colonial Zimbabwe’s settler farmers and a possible collapse of the colony’s agricultural sector if nothing was done about the stiff competition WNLA was exerting in the labour market. These concerns were a major issue to colonial Zimbabwe to the extent that the Imperial Government of Britain was called in to arbitrate, since Malawi was under the direct control of the Colonial Office, as the general feeling in government was that it was the colony that was more entitled to Malawi’s African labour. The differences between colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa over the Malawi labour market remained unresolved till the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. With the outbreak of the war Malawi suspended labour migration as it geared for the war effort with the recruitment of volunteers for the King’s African Rifles (Johnson 1992).

By the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the number of northern immigrants emigrating to Southern Rhodesia was falling. This downward trend had started well before the outbreak of the war. The number had fallen from 97 421 in 1937 to 71 021 by the end of 1938, and the

number had fallen further in 1939, with the result that employers turned their attention to the Mozambique for labour (Johnson 1992). It is important to note that not all employers were experiencing labour shortages. Bigger employers, such as the Southern Rhodesia Chamber of Mines and the municipalities were able to attract adequate labour on the open market in comparison with the farms.

The farms were hard hit by labour shortages, and by 1939 they were vigorously lobbying for government to intervene. In January 1939, for example, the Rhodesia Agricultural Union (RAU) and the Matabeleland Farmers' Union (MFU), compiled reports which showed that labour shortages on the farms ranged from 15 to 80 percent of farming needs in most districts of the country. With this state of affairs the discourse shifted to labour conditions, with newspaper editorials, government officials and other stakeholders proposed that improving labour conditions in the colony was the only way to deal with the colony's labour deficit. As the Rhodesia Herald put it in June 1939, "The development of the colony cannot advance on a basis of continued expansion of the native labour supply. As far as the native labour supply is concerned improvement cannot be by any large increase in numbers; it must therefore be in the quality of work done. That means, in other words, better pay, better conditions, better supervision and better work with less waste of labour."

The farmers' general perception of local labour was that there were adequate Africans to service the farms, but they were lazy. The image of the African seated in a shade, drinking lots of beer instead of working was common. This, outside showing the racism of the settlers, also demonstrates the desperation for labour in the 1940s. It also shows that, to an extent, the colonial system was not able 100 percent to control every facet of African life. As F. Cooper (1987:1) puts it, "Labelling the African worker as lazy was a way of acknowledging the limits of dominance while attributing these limits to the basic nature of the dominated, rather than the contradictions of exercising power." For J. R Douglas: "In most countries employees give of their best in fear of losing their employment and because of competition, there being thousands of others to take their place. Here no incentive exists, and 'Jim Fish' can find work tomorrow if discharged today – or else spend a pleasant week with a 'brother' in someone's compound." This state of affairs changed in 1942.

The war years were difficult for the colony from a food production point of view. Production declined as most settler farmers diverted their attention to tobacco, where better returns could be acquired, in comparison with maize (Phimister 1986). African foodstuff production, on the other hand, was stifled by the state, which utilised non-market forces to protect settler farmers from African competition. The competitiveness of Africans in the capitalist economy was being undermined in several ways. To start with, Africans were confined to poorer markets and often far away from transport networks. This separation of land, according to Arrighi (1967:42), "made it possible to direct capital expenditures in roads, dams, etc, so as to widen the differential in overall productivity of European and African agriculture. These were indirect checks on African competition. This was not a new phenomena; the government had used this tool successfully many times during the maize control years (Phimister 1988). In the late 1920s maize accounted for approximately 80 percent of the settler cropped area in Southern Rhodesia. The threat of competition from African farmers, who continued to generate maize surpluses at prices below the production costs for most settler farmers, resulted in the farmers lobbying colonial legislators to design and implement marketing systems that would protect them from African competition.

The slump in world agricultural markets during the 1930s depression catalyzed the enactment of the 1931 Maize Control Act. This process also happened in Zambia and Kenya. The Maize control Act created maize-buying stations for settler maize without a parallel process for African maize. It also created a two-tier pricing scheme with higher prices for settler maize and established restrictions on grain movement from African areas to demand areas such as towns and mines (Smale and Jayne 2003). These efforts to undermine the peasant sector, compounded by the impact of the war, and successive droughts made the situation difficult, for example in 1941 and 1942 (Samasuwo 2003). The colony was forced to ration maize. It was difficult to procure maize from South Africa, as South African maize was used to contribute to the war effort for troops in the Middle East (Johnson 1992). This led to a re-evaluation of policy, starting with the Food Production Committee (FPC) in March 1942, and a farming enquiry on commercial farms the same year.

A ban was put in place to ensure that no new players would get into tobacco production, and farmers who were already producing tobacco were asked to grow maize on 25 percent of their tobacco land (Masenda 1987). Government was compelled to solve the labour problem that had plagued farmers for a long time. On 1 August 1942 the Compulsory Native Labour Act was put in place. It empowered the State to forcibly conscript African males between the age of 18 and 45. The targeted group was those who had been out of employment for three months. The result impressed the farmers. As the Native Commissioner (NC) for Bindura put it in 1942; “The effects of the Compulsory Native Labour Act are most noticeable in that tremendous numbers of indigenous Natives have come out to work voluntarily from the reserves of this and neighbouring districts. These Natives realise that if they loaf in the Reserves they will be caught sooner or later by the ‘press gang’. They consider it more pleasant to find work on their own. This factor has eased the labour shortage in this area considerably. There was however a lot of resistance, as Africans, especially in Matabeleland, fled to South Africa. In spite of this, the Compulsory Labour Act gave a huge boost to settler farmers.”

Forced recruitment continued for months after victory in the Second World War had been declared by the allied forces. In February 1946 about 4000 conscripts were still on settler farms, and a further 400 had been requested by the farmers to assist with harvesting (Johnson 1992). Compulsory recruitment was only abolished in August 1946, with the result that the supply of labour on the farms dropped, and Africans celebrated the abolition of forced labour by withholding their labour and returning to their economic activities. Farmers responded by pressing government for the formation of a new labour recruiting organisation that would run conscription activities in ways similar to those used during the war.

By 1948 it was becoming clear that migrant labour would be a permanent feature of Rhodesian settler farming. The 1947 Migrant Workers’ Bill was put in place. This Bill was the basis of the 1948 Migrant Workers’ Act. The Bill and the Act, among other things, dealt with compulsory deduction and repatriation of African workers who came into the colony from 1 April 1948. In a country like Nyasaland, where Lydia Potts has noted that every male went to work abroad at least once in his lifetime, remittances constituted an important source of income for the country and at household level (Potts 1990). Farmers benefitted a lot from the 1947 Bill and the 1948 Act. As I.

Phimister (1988:223) puts it, "From 1947 onwards, white farmers were once again cushioned by the labour of thousands of foreign workers recruited from Nyasaland and Mozambique." The Act certainly brought improvements to the labour supply situation in the colony, especially from Nyasaland. F. Sanderson rightly notes that Nyasaland in the colonial period was never a significant "field of economic exploitation," its contribution was its labour (Sanderson 1961:259).

## **Conclusion**

White people who settled in colonial Zimbabwe were just a small minority who arrogated to themselves the right to determine the direction the country took both in terms of its political and economic life. However, it is often not considered that this colonial privilege was intended for whites of British extraction. Immigrants from non-English backgrounds found it difficult to get acceptance into this community. Rhodesian policies militated against large-scale immigration. It is this nature of colonialism that made it impossible for the colony to get white people in adequate numbers, and thus dashed the dream of building a neo-Britain in the colony. The labour question was another stumbling block to the colony. The colony's economy - and this is especially true in relation to settler agriculture - was never able to get adequate labour on the local market. Even attempts at acquiring extra-territorial labour were not a huge success, as the colony was continuously a leaking bucket: a good number of the labourers who came to Southern Rhodesia from other territories all had their eyes glued on South Africa, where the mines offered better remuneration. Colonial Zimbabwe up to 1948 was thus grappling with these two issues; demography and the Labour question.

## **References**

- Arrighi, G, 1954, "Labour Supplies in a Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia", *Journal of Development Studies*, xxii, 139-91.
- Arrighi, G, 1967, "The Political Economy of Rhodesia", ([www.newleftreview.net](http://www.newleftreview.net), downloaded 1 September 2009).
- Barber, W. J, 1961, *The Economy of British Central Africa: A Case Study of Economic Development in a Dualistic Society*, California, Stanford University Press.
- Beinart, W, "Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration 1900-1960", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, 1.
- Clarke, D, 1973, *Black Contract Labour and Farm Wage Rates in Rhodesia*, Seminar Paper Number 2, University of Rhodesia.
- Clements, F, 1969, *The Course to Collision*, London, Pall Mall Press.
- Cooper, F, 1987, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Floyd, B. N, 1962, Land Apportionment in Southern Rhodesia, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 566-582
- Grier, B, 1994, "The Political Economy of Child Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1930", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 1.

- Hodder-Williams, R, 1974, Afrikaners in Rhodesia: A Partial Portrait, *African Social Research*, 18.
- Hodder-Williams, R., 1983, *White Farmers in Rhodesia 1890-1965: A History of the Marandellas District*, Hong Kong, Macmillan
- Hughes, D. M, 2006, Hydrology of Hope: Farm Dams, Conservation and Whiteness in Zimbabwe”, *American Ethnologist*, 33, 2, 269-287.
- Johnson, D, 1992, “Settler Farmers and Coerced African Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1936-46”, *Journal of African History*, 33, 1, 111-128.
- Jollie, E. T, 1921, “Southern Rhodesia”, *South African Quarterly*, 111, 10-12.
- Kay, G, 1976, “Population”, in G. M. E Leistner, *Rhodesia: Economic Structure and Change*, Pretoria, Africa Institute, 43.
- Kennedy, D, 1987, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Keppel-Jones, A, 1884, *Rhodes and Rhodesia: The White Conquest of Zimbabwe 1884-1902*.
- Keyter, C. F, 1975, *Maize Control in Southern Rhodesia, 1931-1941: The African Contribution to White Survival*, Salisbury, Central African Historical Association.
- Kosmin, B. A, 1973, a Note on Southern Rhodesian Jewry 1890-1936, *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 15, 2, 205-12.
- Kosmin, B. A, 1977, “Ethnic Groups and the Qualified Franchise in Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1922”, *Rhodesia History*, viii, 33-70
- Kwashirai, V. C, 2006, Dilemmas in Conservationism in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1930, *Conservation and Society*, 4, 4.
- Machingaidze, V. E. M, 1980, *The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Role of the State 1908-1939*, PhD Thesis, University of London. (unpublished).
- Machingaidze, V, 1991, ‘Agrarian Change From Above: The Southern Rhodesia Native Land Husbandry Act and the African Response’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 24 (3), 557-589.
- Masenda, A, 1987, *The FPC and State Food Policy in Colonial Zimbabwe during the 1940s*, M. A Thesis, Department of History, University of Zimbabwe.
- Memmi, A, 1965, *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, London, Earthscan.
- Mlambo, A. S, 2000, “Some are more White than Others”: Racial Chauvinism as a Factor in Rhodesian Immigration Policy, 1890 to 1963”, *Zambezia*, XXVII (ii), 2000, 139-160 and
- Mlambo, A. S, 2000, *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation*, University of Zimbabwe Publications, Harare.
- Mlambo, A.S, 1998, ‘Building a White Man’s Country: Aspects of White Immigration into Rhodesia up to World War II’ in *Zambezia*, 25:2, 123-146,

- Mosley, P, 1983, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia*, 1900-1963, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Mtisi, J. P, 1994, *The Political Economy of Labour in Southern Africa*, Economic History Department, University of Zimbabwe (Unpublished).
- Palmer, R, 1977, "The Agricultural History of Rhodesia," in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (Eds), *Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, London.
- Palmer, R, 1977, *Land and Racial Discrimination in Rhodesia*, Berkeley, University of California Press,
- Phimister, I. R, 1974, "Peasant Production and Underdevelopment in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1914, *African Affairs*, 73, 291, 217-228.
- Phimister, I, 1986, "Commodity Relations and Class Formation in the Zimbabwean Countryside 1898-1920", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13, 4, 240-57
- Phimister, I, 1986, "Discourse and the Discipline of Historical Context: Conservationism and Ideas about Development in Southern Rhodesia 1930- 1950", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12, 2.
- Phimister, I, 1988, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890 – 1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle*, London, Longman
- Phimister, I. R, 1976, "The Reconstruction of the Southern Rhodesian Gold Mining Industry, 1903-10", *The Economic History Review*, 29, 3.
- Potts, L, 1990, *The World Labour Market: A History of Migration*, London, Zed Books
- Ranger, T, 1978, "Growing from the Roots: Reflections on Peasant Research in Central and Southern Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 1, 99-133. .
- Rennie, J. K, 1978, "White Farmers, Black Tenants and Landlord Legislation: Southern Rhodesia 1890-1930, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 1, 86-98.
- Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry*, 1934, Salisbury.
- Roder, W, 1964, "The Division of Land Resources in Southern Rhodesia", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 54, 1, 41-52.
- Samasuwo, N, 2003, "Food Production and War Supplies: Rhodesia's Beef Industry during the Second World War", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 29, Number 2, 487-502.
- Sanderson, F, 1961, "The Development of Labour Migration from Nyasaland: 1891-1914, *Journal of African History*, 2
- Smale, M and Jayne, T, 2003, *Maize in Eastern and Southern Africa: Seeds of Success in Retrospect*, EPTD Discussion Paper No.. 97, International Food Policy Research Institute 1-90
- The Native Education Commission Report*, 1925
- The Rhodesia Herald, 7 March 1941.

Venables, E, 2003, 'Recollection of Identity: The Reassembly of the Migrant', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Issue 77, 109-116.

Wagner, K, 1994, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, Indiana University Press.

Zhira, 2002, *Drought in Zimbabwe: The Case of Gutu District in 1947*, B. A Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, Department of Economic History.