

Building Transdisciplinary Partnerships: Exploring the Impact of Population Mobility on Nutrition Interventions in Zimbabwe



Credit: Tim Brown

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WORKSHOP REPORT

Tim Brown, Kavita Datta, Exhibit Matumbu

supported by Dexter Chagwena, Shamiso Fernando, Laura Smith

1. Background

For the past several decades, Zimbabwe has faced a food crisis. In the months preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, a UN envoy warned that Zimbabwe, “once the breadbasket of Africa” was on the brink of “manmade [sic] starvation”, with close to 60 per cent of the population regarded as food insecure (UN 2019). The case, they said, was particularly severe for children with 90 per cent aged six months to two years not consuming a minimum acceptable diet (UN 2019).

This multifactorial problem has attracted significant attention across the policy and wider research community. Attention has been focused upon better understanding the drivers of food insecurity, its prevalence among urban and rural communities as well as upon everyday coping strategies and identifying public health and nutritional interventions that mitigate the effects of malnutrition amongst the most vulnerable populations, especially women and young children.

The research project, which this workshop supports, targets two key dimensions of this seemingly intractable problem. Specifically, it adopts an interdisciplinary perspective on food security to further understanding of the role played by mobility and migration and, secondly, to better account for the influence of food norms and practices, or food cultures. Bringing these siloed areas together, we argue, will better help to situate future food and nutrition interventions.

1.1. *Workshop outline*¹

The goals for the workshop were to engage cross-disciplinary researchers and civil society organisations based in Zimbabwe in discussion around three dimensions of food security: how it is conceptualised, the influence of mobility and migration, and the role of ‘food cultures’.

Discussion across these areas was facilitated by the researchers on the project and note-takers were employed to capture the main points for discussion. The workshop was recorded to ensure accuracy and allow for elaboration on key areas.

[Chatham House Rules](#) applied and any direct quotations contained in this report are not attributed to participants.

2. Conceptualising Food Security

Significant definitional work around food security has taken place amongst policymakers, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organisations, and within the wider research community over the past several decades.

Recognising the importance of such framings in shaping how food security is conceptualised as well as how it is enacted, the widely accepted FAO (2010) definition of food security was

¹ Originally intended as an in-person workshop hosted by our partner organisation in Harare, the Zvitambo Institute for Maternal and Child Health Research, the workshop was re-designed to take account of Covid-19 restrictions. A shorter format was adopted (half-day) and the workshop took place on an appropriate digital platform.

shared with participants. The definition was utilised to prompt discussion around three interrelated questions:

- How do you or your organisation conceptualise or understand food security?
- Has this understanding changed in recent years and why?
- Are some processes and/or social relations associated with food security more or less important? What impact did Covid-19 have?

2.1. *Defining food security*

When invited to discuss the FAO definition, there was little, if any, explicit disagreement with the wording. However, participants were prompted to identify those elements that were more or less important to them.

*“We go further [than the FAO definition] to say that, when we discuss issues of food security, there must be an element of **food self-sufficiency**. That is, the ability to produce food for yourself. That ability enhances your ability to be food secure”*

“I think the word food security is loosely used around considering the actual lives people are living on the ground ... I’ve seen a point where some families go with just one meal a day”

*“We are **eating to survive** or to see the next day. Whether it’s a balanced diet, it’s nutritious..., I think we are saying we have something in our tummies so we have enough to go on”*

*“We hear in the public domain ... people celebrating that we have a good harvest that is just lots of cereals... that we have food security, but from a nutrition perspective it is about more than availability, **now we are talking about six pillars, and availability is just one of them**”*

*“What is changing in a most significant way is the nutrition side of food security, **nutrition has come on board in a more loud way** ... having sufficient food is not just any food, [but] food which is nutritious”*

For most participants, food access was the key priority for food security in Zimbabwe rather than questions of food availability. Here, however, some important questions were raised about how food security is defined, especially where it involves practices that may place people at heightened risk or are illegal.

*“Food security means that a family can **access the food** that they need for their children to grow healthily, without having any deficiencies in micronutrients or presenting to the hospital with illness”*

*“if people resort to begging, people resort to prostitution, people resort to transactional sex, people resort to stealing, any other means that are not considered, that are out of the ordinary, even if they acquire food in that sense then we still **consider them to be food insecure because of the way that they have procured the food**”*

A further aspect of the discussion around the definition of food security related to its operationalisation within and between households. Gender was especially important in this context, although so too were other issues associated with social dynamics in Zimbabwe.

*“Issues of gender, you know **gender practices, gender preferences and gender power relations, are very very critical** when we are talking about issues of food security ... We are [also] talking about societies that are differentiated by class, by ethnicity, by religion, by age, now there’s also more emphasis towards young people and livelihoods and self-sustenance”*

As this participant expressed, it is important, when discussing food security, to consider the multiple aspects of identity together rather than to view them in isolation. As we shall discuss later in the report, religion emerged as a significant point for discussion.

*“So we really need to take that kind of **intersectionality approach** where we are talking about these different groups and their access to sufficient and safe food, but also in terms of how gender is playing out regarding lack of access or availability or the actual consumption in terms of intrahousehold dynamics that are related to issues of food and access to food”*

2.2. Rural versus urban food security and the dynamics of everyday coping

Reflecting longstanding debates about food security in Zimbabwe (e.g., Crush and Frayne 2010; Tawodzera et al. 2016), important distinctions were drawn between rural and urban food security. With regards the former, the discussion of food security reflected debates about access to land and agricultural production capacity.

*“Each individual household, each and every rural household, must be able to **produce its own food**. If each and every household is able to produce its own food, some surplus, that will enhance national food security”*

“I have come across, in the sense of the traditional food we were talking about earlier, people would be in touch with their friends or relatives in the rural areas in order for them to send dried versions of that food or fresh. Particularly, things like butter, groundnuts, and, in some cases, if people have a good harvest and they have enough maize, they will send back to the urban areas in some cases for money or just to help out”

“It’s also been going on for years, your grandmother or your aunt in the village is the one who would send you a bucket of maize, a sack of maize, to sell for your mealie meal. Because the advantage that we have in the village is the amount of land, quite interesting for me is striking a balance between what people grow in the urban setup and what they grow in the village setup”

The emphasis placed upon productivity in rural areas, can be contrasted with that placed upon food security as a reflection of individual and household capacity to procure food from formal and informal markets in urban areas.

*“Even for those who may not have enough land to grow their own food, for example, most people in urban areas may not have a piece of land, there must be a framework or institution where **people are able to buy food**”*

*“Especially when looking at the urban poor, [food security] is about the **ability to procure food**. People should be able to buy the food that they want, when they want it, and the kind of food that they want”*

“I think in the case of urban households and individuals, I always think the first thing that comes to mind is [access to] the informal economy and how that impacts, you know, things like food security”

In addition to the question of rural versus urban food security, emphasis was placed upon people’s everyday strategies for coping during crisis. Here, distinguishing between the rural as a space of food production and the urban as a space for food procurement was a point of divergence between some of the participants.

*“if they grow food in the urban areas because they have no alternative, that urban agriculture practice is actually a coping strategy, it is not an ordinary way of getting food ... they might end up having enough food for the family, enough food for the household, but ... **[p]eople are growing food as a means of coping, which means that the system has failed**”*

*“as much as urban agriculture is a coping mechanism, for me if I find a family that has a little vegetable patch, or that has access to a bigger plot of land where they can actually grow crops ... **I would be grateful for that family that has a source of food that they can grow that they can manage themselves**”*

“when you look at buying food, how with inflation, even when you look at US dollar trends, in the old days you would be able to say if you have 1 dollar you can buy 7 eggs, 8 eggs, you can buy a little milk. The quantity of food that can be bought for a dollar has gradually been going down and so I’m very grateful when I come across a family who has access to some land” (Independent)

According to several participants, the impact of COVID-19 policies, most especially the introduction of national lockdowns, was felt most in urban areas. For those outside of protected sectors of the economy (for example the health-care and food production sectors), this had a direct impact on the ability to procure food from formal and informal markets.

“Last year, most people who were living in Zimbabwe witnessed a bit of transition..., if you are not growing food and if you’re not selling food, or working within the health industry, you were ... of no importance”

“Given the context, for example of COVID, where people weren’t able to sell stuff, if they were vendors and alike, they were unable to do that over the past few months, means they wouldn’t be able to send a little bit of money back to the rural areas ... which had an impact on their food security”

Outside of the negative impact that the national lockdown had on household food security, which has been widely reported elsewhere (Béné 2020; Matsungu and Chopera 2020; Trotter et al. 2020), the participants in the workshop pointed to changes in people's coping strategies. Most especially, a return to farming for those who retained connections to rural homelands as well as to a growth in community gardening.

"There was this awareness of people getting to garden some more and the move of other people, who were living in urban spaces, going back to their villages or rural areas to set up gardens. I think for me, even a lot of young people, actually got involved in farming"

"There has been an increase in interest in agriculture for earning a living particularly among unemployed youth but also as a way of feeding your family. even in the urban areas any little plot of land is taken up for farming ... we have definitely seen an increase during the lockdown. As you were saying, people in their neighborhoods, so a lot of informal markets arose in the neighbourhoods and people selling to their neighbours"

3. Food Security and Migration

Everyday mobilities and migrations are critical to understanding food security in Zimbabwe. The multi-directional flows that connect rural and urban districts have long been established in the literature (e.g., Potts and Mutambirwa 1990, 1998; Andersson 2001), and more recent scholarship has generated significant insight into the role that associated remittances play in supporting food security amongst recipient families (e.g., Crush and Caesar 2018).

Recognising the continued importance of these processes, this segment of the workshop sought to address participants in discussion of three interrelated topics. The terms 'mobility' and 'migration' were left loosely defined, although a distinction was drawn between everyday movements and across the borders of neighbouring countries, as well as those that involved overseas destinations such as the UK.

The three questions that participants were asked to consider are as follows:

- What impact does mobility/migration (near/far, within/across) have on food security?
- How far is population mobility and migration reflected in food security discourse and policy?
- How did Covid-19 impact population mobility in Zimbabwe and what are the urgent questions that it raises?

3.1. *Mobility, migration and food security*

The close interrelationship between population mobility and food security was recognised by the participants, especially in terms of the flow of cash and goods within and across Zimbabwe's international borders. Here, it was acknowledged that one of the main drivers of such mobility, whether internal or international, related to the perceived opportunities that were available elsewhere.

*“I understand it going the other way round, where I look at what forces people to move from place to place and in the case of Zimbabwe people move from rural areas to the urban areas. People move across borders for the same reasons as well. So, **better opportunities usually means that you can take care of your families and that usually implies food security.** So in my understanding that is the relationship”*

However, when discussing patterns of mobility and migration more generally, two observations emerged highlighting the continued dynamism of this process. Firstly, the long-term effects of deindustrialisation and the ongoing economic crisis on the flow of cash remittances from urban to rural areas. Secondly, the lack of economic opportunities in Zimbabwe’s urban areas on population movement.

*“We must note that Zimbabwe as a country has moved, it has deindustrialised from the 1980s, we are talking about a different situation, where that urban and rural nexus, where food probably would be sent, those in the urban areas would send their incomes to the rural areas, and food probably would be sent also too, and money to produce crops ... **with deindustrialisation that has changed”***

“When we know a number of companies have closed down, when we know with our economy not being so stable, I think we are at a point where we’ve discovered it’s not as wise, it’s not as what its used to be, that you’re guaranteed a job if you move from the village to the urban settings ... People are now starting to catch up, is it possible to get a small piece of land in the rural areas? How can one get back to a village?”

*“people have been moving from urban areas to rural areas ... instead of settling in urban areas, people are looking for stands and plots outside the peri-urban areas ... because the land there is more affordable and you’ve got more space so you can farm if you want to. I’ve also had very interesting conversations with people who work in the urban areas, so people in health and education, and particularly teachers, and most of them would rather stay in the rural areas because they feel that they are **more food secure”***

The interrelationship between population mobility and food security, was framed in terms of the impact on migrants themselves and not only with regards to the importance of the in-kind or cash remittances that they may send home. This is an important question to consider given the potential impact on the health of migrant communities, including *their* food security, as well as upon their capacity to continue to support families left behind.

*“I think there is also a dimension where we have to look at the end result when people have moved, when people have migrated, either internally or internationally, what is the end result? **Do they become more food secure? Do they become more food insecure as a result of movement?** How do they become integrated into societies where they have gone? Do they have access to the food that they are used to in their areas of origin?”*

There were several potential shocks that were noted, many of which impacted upon their food security either directly or indirectly.

“What are the different shocks that they are exposed to that would have an impact on their food security? I’m thinking of, if you move to a different country, are you able to fit in properly? Are you able to afford the accommodation costs? Are you able to know where the food is bought? Are you able to get a job so that you can maintain yourself and get enough food?”

“So if they move to a new place they may have a food shock, where their system may not be used to the food to that food right away, and which can actually lead them to ill health until they get used to new food in the host community. And that aspect is important to talk about when we talk about food security”

However, this was dependent on context as well as upon the drivers of migration and the social status of the migrants.

*“If you are talking about people who’ve moved, and they’ve got no jobs and they’ve got to struggle to settle into the international country, it is usually that they become more food insecure than they were in the areas of origin ... people who migrate because they can, because they are affluent enough to migrate, those are usually more food secure than they were before, and in some cases even more food secure than the people in the country that they have moved to ... **Therefore it’s contextual**”*

3.2. *Placing mobility in food security discourse and policy*

There was less explicit discussion of policy, this may in part reflect the participants assembled for the workshop. However, the intersection between mobility and food security were recognised to be of vital significance to policy making as it directly relates to household food and nutrition security: “remittances that are coming into the country ... are helping people to survive in times of crisis”, “most urban households rely on in-kind remittances”. Here there was acknowledgement of the distorting effects of remittances.

*“I just want to emphasise what others have said in this area, because you have data, theoretically, pointing at certain tendencies, you know, remittances are more consumptive than developmental, so households are not reaching that level of self-sufficiency. **So our definition of food security is kind of distorted**”*

Outside of these statements, participants emphasised several dimensions of this entanglement between mobility, food security, policy and governance that are also well reflected in the academic literature. Firstly, several participants observed that the scale of cash remittances from the Zimbabwean diaspora is not effectively captured in official statistics, which tend to rely on formal flows through digital banking services, such as the Western Union and Mukuru.com.

*“Officially, using the World Bank figures, we find that an average of US\$1bn are sent from neighbouring countries as remittances, but then you find we have other **cash remittances that are sent which are not well captured**”*

A similar failure was noted of in-kind remittances, which are notoriously more difficult to trace given the informal networks through which they are sent, as well as their association with some people’s more everyday movements (Scoones and Murimbariba 2020). Here, the ability to cross borders to source goods that were either unavailable or cheaper in neighbouring countries was also highlighted.

*“If you go to the border posts most of these kinds of remittances, which are cash and in-kind ... If you look at those taxis, the malaichas, they bring in a lot of cash, they bring in **a lot of in-kind remittances but it’s not captured**”*

“We have been doing business across the borders, where a young woman will go and buy goods in South Africa and come sell them in Zimbabwe to be able to put food on their table and some of them are actually buying foodstuffs or groceries that are actually cheaper, maybe in Zambia or Mozambique. Most households who have been striving to be food secure [do this]...”

The extent to which the failure to capture flows of cash and goods into the country is perceived as a problem, appeared dependent upon the perspective on food security that was adopted. For some participants, the failure to account for flows of food into the country was a failure of the government because it impacted negatively on national food security strategies and especially on local food producers.

*“At a policy level, I would say that although we have noted the migration from Zimbabwe to other countries, the migrants going to work in South Africa, Botswana, other countries, the State did not move early enough to recognise the enhancement of food security ... since then **the State has tried to protect local farmers, local producers against food imports**”*

However, when viewed from a food access perspective, any tightening of regulatory controls at the borders was highlighted as a significant barrier to food security for families heavily reliant on such cross-border flows. This was especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic where cross-border trade was disrupted by the national lockdowns.

“In urban areas, most of the food that they are consuming, they get it through informal food systems. What we observed was that those lockdown measures affected the two systems differently. You find that the informal food markets were closed, so if that was your major source of food, it meant that all of a sudden you were confronted with a situation of food insecurity. You know, those access availability issues were now playing differently”

“It has affected a lot of food transfers from the diaspora back to Zimbabwe because it used to be that you could send food to Zimbabwe when you’re in South Africa or Namibia much cheaper using the old Malaichas and the buses

*and so on. But the fact that the buses are not moving, **there are few avenues to send food back home***

*“Using the few available Malaishas who are now hiking their costs meant that you can’t send what you used to send. I think at a policy level, perhaps the government did not really think through the fact that we actually survive on the informal food transfers rather than the formal. So the formal food transfers are getting in because they are allowed, but the informal system is almost shut down ... **this is the lifeline and yet we are closing it down**”*

4. Culture and Food Security

In the final session of the workshop, participants were asked to discuss the interrelationship between ‘food cultures’ and food and nutrition security. Here, the recent work of Briones Alonso and colleagues (2017) was drawn upon to help frame discussion. As they note, “culture has too often remained on the fringes of discussions on the fight against malnutrition among policy makers and researchers”.

Recognising that ‘culture’ is understood very differently depending on disciplinary perspective, the term was framed only loosely at the start of the discussion. For example, it was noted that culture might be understood as dynamic and that it is argued to affect all aspects of food security - availability, access and choice, utilization and so on.

The participants were asked to consider this in relation to three questions:

- How far is culture accounted for in food security discourse / policy in Zimbabwe?
- What aspects of culture do you think are important to food security?
- How is Zimbabweans’ mobility (within/beyond borders) reshaping food cultures?

4.1. Accounting for culture accounted in food security discourse

For many participants there was a perceived lack of focus on the cultural dimensions of food and nutrition and security, and this was considered to be a wider issue than only a national policy one. It was noted that definitions of food security, such as those promoted by the FAO, do not go far enough.

*“I agree with the definition from the FAO but the **food we are talking about must have a direct connection to the socio-cultural framework of the people who are eating that food**. It does not help me to have lots of food to have access to eat and is nutritious and yet as [a person] I cannot relate to it, that will not help. **Food must have a connection to the socio-cultural compass of the people who are eating it**”*

The extent to which definitions of food security are translated into the provision of food that fits with Zimbabwean’s ‘socio-cultural compass’ was questioned elsewhere in the discussion. Providing a very practical illustration, one participant shared their experience of encountering health-related consequences of foods perceived to be culturally inappropriate that were provided during moments of national food crisis.

*“When food aid comes, they provide sorghum and split peas and that already is a challenge on its own as most of the community members have a running tummy as they **do not know how to prepare it**”*

“it turns out the community was cooking them [split peas] in the same way that we cook black eyed peas or cowpeas, where you can actually afford to sit with a huge mug or huge plate and eat [resulting in widespread stomach upset]”

Outside of such discussions, there was also some focus upon the meaning of culture more generally, and especially here how it relates to ideas of tradition, which as we shall discuss has important implications for food security.

*“**Tradition is the software that underpins what we do, our way of life.** So it is tradition that has a direct bearing to our choices of food and the frequency of eating and the variety of what we eat, culture is the hardware”*

When discussing culture and tradition, there was some sense that the terms are viewed negatively in relation to food security policy. This perspective appears to fit with Fassin’s (2001) argument against ‘culturalism’, which he argues presents ‘culture’ as a barrier to change and as a property responsible for people’s poor behavioural decisions.

*“Generally literature shows that **culture is an impediment to food security.** I strongly disagree as I feel what is lacking is the in depth analysis of the contribution of culture to nutrition so that we can objectively find the positive side of culture and the missing links in an empirical manner instead of just blanketing everything”*

*“So it is taken to mean that you know, traditional communities are not that informed because there's also an added dimension that they are not educated, and it goes on and on like that, that **they are backward**”*

4.2. Culture and food security

The intersection between food and nutrition security and culture, was generally conceptualised as relating to the role those so-called traditional foods played in people’s diets. As noted, tradition was viewed as a property of culture and as something that was passed on within cultural groups and across generations.

*“It's essentially information that is passed down through, through generations, if you grew up in an African family and you consume a lot of these traditional foods, you actually grow up knowing what the value is. **It is not documented in any way but dispersed orally from one generation to the other,** and so it's sort of common knowledge that these are the foods that you need to eat... ”*

Here, there was a sense in which indigenous knowledge systems were not being appropriately accounted for or documented and as a result valuable local knowledges about food-related practices and norms were being lost.

[Current information does not cover] lots of the foods that we have in our food systems, and we are not doing much in terms of our knowledge management

systems regarding our traditional customs or traditional dishes in our context”

“Indigenous Knowledge management systems have been very poor and information from the elderly has been lost”

*“very little knowledge about the foods that their parents or grandparents used to eat, so we are..., there's a **risk of loss of knowledge**, as we go forward”*

“Tradition has also been eroded and commodified which has a bearing on how much of these is going to exist, this has resulted in dilution from other traditions that have been in existence”

Despite this failure to adequately account for foods that were conceptualised as traditional, their growing importance to food and nutrition security was identified across the three sessions. Many participants identified a recent shift towards the inclusion of traditional foods in people’s diets, in part as a recognition of their nutritional value.

*“I am also seeing a pattern where the **citizens are revisiting traditional foods** you know in a number of areas, could be vegetables, you know traditional vegetables, traditional tubers, like madumbe and all that. So that pattern of revisiting the traditional foods is quite, is something that I am noticing as a change”*

*“One of the changes that we need to talk about is about the return of most urban families to traditional foods. A few decades ago most urban households would not consider eating those foods because it would be below them ... **it is becoming more a status symbol to be going back to traditional foods and not anything to be ashamed of**. That’s playing a major role in household food security”*

Foods that were identified as traditional tended to be associated with grains other than maize, which has become a staple crop since its introduction in the late-nineteenth century, as well as vegetable crops and other wild foods including insects.

“You notice a shift from a reliance on [traditional] crops such as maize, on food crops such as maize, to other food crops such as sorghum, rapoco and so on, so there have been some noticeable changes when it comes to food security”

“I think you might be also talking about for instance wild leaves, amaranth, blackjack, these are foods that were supposed to be for the poor or being in the village. But now when you talk about nutrition you realise that your amaranth or blackjack has more nutrition value compared to your general kale or rococo that we’ve been growing”

4.3. *Mobility and changing food cultures*

The increased importance of foods characterised as traditional, was presented as a recent urban phenomenon and as a pattern that reflected a degree of class differentiation and was associated with nutritional awareness and health.

“When we were growing up it would be embarrassing to consume traditional

foods in the city”

“the move to traditional foods, is more, is classed based I think. That you know, it's more the higher class or the middle class who are nutrition aware and they are moving towards that...”

It was also noted that cultural practices associated with food varied spatially and was also influenced by other aspects of individual and/or group identity, notably religion.

“Some cultural practices in mberengwa and Chiredzi, there are certain foods that they do not eat especially the ‘vamwenyes’, there is need to separate the geographical locations to arrive at this conclusion”

“Our field work in Matabeleland actually revealed a lot of nuances around issues of religion. Why some people would choose to consume, for instance wild insects, while others do not. Religion was a very important gender marker, you know why some people were harvesting insects and considering that as part of the aspects that are contributing to food security in the household, the others were not. So issues of faith are really important”

In contrast to the above discussion, it was noted that food cultures, especially those in urban environments, were being reshaped by advertising. This reflects wider discussion in the literature about dietary transition, although no explicit connection was made to external influences (e.g., ‘westernization’ of culture). Indeed, culture was viewed as separate from advertising.

“It's not only about culture, it's also about advertising, and advertising is so massive that it is now guiding and directing what we should or should not consume and also in a way”

5. Conclusions

The findings in this report reflect the views of a diverse group of participants, including academic researchers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and representatives of organisations engaged in the praxis of promoting food security in Zimbabwe. The discussions were rich and insightful, reflecting nuanced and varied understandings of the three broad themes the participants were invited to discuss.

There was some broad agreement that widely used definitions of food security, such as that offered by the FAO, while valuable, may not adequately capture the important role that culture plays in people’s access to food nor practices associated with it. However, culture also appeared too broad a concept to engage with and tradition was preferred by many, with interesting observations made about changing attitudes to traditional foods and their growing importance to food and nutrition security especially amongst an urban middle class.

The intersections between food security, mobility and migration were identified as important and especially as they related to food access. Discussion centred around the distinction between the formal and informal food systems and the importance of cross border mobilities. Disruptions to the informal food systems, such as those evidenced during SADC government responses to COVID-19, were identified as a significant barrier to food security. There was a

suggestion here that policy makers and researchers needed to more effectively account for the role of cross-border mobilities in promoting food security.

The perspectives from the participants will feed into a second workshop with Zimbabwean policy makers and parastatals, and also a future publication. We would like to thank the participants for their insightful and thoughtful contributions throughout the workshop.

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