

ARAC Report to the open session of CFU Congress ,
Thursday 5th July 2012

Ben Gilpin, Manager, ARAC

Welcome and good afternoon Honourable Ministers and Deputies, Members of Government, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have been asked to make a report on the work of ARAC which stands for Agricultural Recovery and Compensation. This association, within the CFU, grew out of the need to find space within its mandate for the representation of a group of its constituency who, though farmers, were no longer able to farm.

We have over time changed our name from FIT “Farmers in Touch” to a broader initiative that seeks to look out more holistically for the interests of those within this group of farmers. I should say there are broadly three categories and their needs and interests are served in different ways.

The principal criterion that distinguishes our members is that of age and the issues that frame them are equally to an extent defined by age. Perhaps they can be classified as Farmers, Past, Present and Future.

I believe it is helpful to start with some perspective about these farmers.

The usual process of establishing and becoming a farm owner, within what was the commercial farming sector, was a rather long and time bound process. Generally young men interested in the business of farming would follow a definite apprenticeship first with a pre-college attachment on an established farm for a number of years. This would be followed by a period at college such as Blackfordby and subsequent employment as a manager. Once sufficiently experienced and with some capital behind them, an aspirant farmer would then seek a lease and after a period of successful operation seek to purchase a farm.

Thus, our constituency encompassed farmers along all stages of a continuum as they developed from farm assistant into competent farm owner; this took a number of years. It is in fact also a reality that many tried and failed along the way.

One might ask, “where, is this is all leading?” If one were to take a snap shot of the commercial farming sector 10 years ago , you would have found a range of competence and engagement. The process of building farmer competence was tried and tested. Once one passed through the necessary hurdles of proficiency, generally, the opportunity to farm and own land opened. These opportunities existed, but, it was not all plain sailing. Unless a farmer knew and practiced the essential principals of, “on time”, “to a high standard” and “with minimum wastage”, he was likely to fail. As proper stewards of the land one would also need to give something back.

Behind all these issues remained the armour of secure Property Rights which enabled a farmer on the land to apply his skills, whilst the collateral support guaranteed the necessary loans to drive the essential short, medium and long term requirements of the business.

Economic factors and the farmer’s skill subsequently resulted in a market related change in who owned and farmed the land thereafter.

The model was successful and the accolades for Zimbabwe’s Commercial Farming reached all corners of the globe. As a group, we felt proud to be Zimbabwean, but, we were also a group apart, with less than a full understanding of the dynamics in the broader contexts of our society. We were riding high and believed that we were indispensable to the economic well being of the country. Our isolation and focus on economics lead us to a sense of invincibility, something in reality that was dependant on other factors.

The Fast Track Land Reform Programme has been with us 12 years now, and as the country’s agriculture sector struggles to recover, so does my constituency which still awaits compensation and continues to face a hostile and excluding environment.

We have many elderly farmers' whose lively hoods have been destroyed; principal to our task is to seek ways to mitigate their circumstances. For some this includes the collection and distribution of food parcels; for others, help with finding affordable accommodation. In some instances it has involved assisting those fortunate enough to own a home, but, now without enough finances to live, to turn that equity into a pension. For others, it involves referral for assistance with medical expenses to other forums such as the Farm Families Trust. We are indeed grateful to entities such as this and others that have so steadfastly assisted in this regard. Notwithstanding this, essential to these farmers is the need to restore dignity through ensuring their claims with compensation are dealt with.

We recognise the current initiatives and limitations with regards to Government of Zimbabwe's budget and have, therefore, put forward proposals to Ministry of Lands and Rural Resettlement and Ministry of Finance, an interim payment proposal that should bring relief until a comprehensive solution is reached. These folks are generally not able to work, but, we know of people who soldier on in spite of age and infirmity, simply to get enough to stay alive.

There are younger farmers, and for some of these, we have facilitated training and orientation towards development work and hope that there are agencies both within Zimbabwe and outside who will use their services and considerable experience. Whilst farmers have been through a lengthy apprenticeship, the changed circumstances have necessitated a change from managing to teaching, but, there remains a depth of skill, available to use in recovery.

There are others, who seek to actively farm, and this covers not only some few still on the land, but others, a new generation, which yearns for opportunity and inclusion, we hope and advocate that a legal and constitutional framework will not discriminate against these people.

In reality, many competent farmers who were at the same time professional employers of large numbers of people, and tax payers who contributed greatly to the country's development, have been lost to neighbouring countries which have greatly benefitted.

We are frequently asked to find more farmers to send throughout Africa and further afield. Sadly for most, they would prefer to contribute positively within Zimbabwe.

In the interim, we do what we can to keep our constituency aware of job and employment opportunities and abreast of developments regardless of where they are now. We are also more specifically looking at ways to directly engage in recovery and at present we have a new and particular interest in developing proposals and projects that focus specifically on such issues as reforestation, clearly a challenge in light of the massive use of indigenous timber for the current expansion in Tobacco production.

We need partners in this and other work such as the transfer of a bundle of skills we have and are willing to share and which are essential to a successful recovery; certainly any recovery requires a fresh look at environment and its sustainable use. We have much capacity to support this within our farmers.

There are a number of crosscutting issues and we have conducted some research on a number of aspects that are particularly relevant to our farmers, and this provides us with useful insight and valuable information that assists us to focus on a way forward.

On a personal note, some years ago I was called to bury a former employee on my farm. Some while later I was asked by her young and orphaned son to ensure that a proper grave was put in place. Whilst returning briefly to the farm to instruct a builder in this regard, I was asked to transport a woman, in the throes of child birth, to the nearest clinic. I left the scene with the thought that whilst I was, to an extent, burying the past, I was also facilitating the beginning of a new life and could perhaps move on from the loss of my farm.

A while later, I was advised that there had been complications with the delivery and I was subsequently notified that not only had the baby died and but that the mother had experienced some enduring disability as a result of the delay in receiving help and the consequently prolonged and inadequately attended process.

I think that on reflection, that this is a metaphor for Agriculture today in Zimbabwe: the past is dead, the present is stillborn and a viable future is yet to be conceived.

It is incumbent on us all, to find and become involved in a life-giving way forward.

I would like to end with a short reflection that touches on the Land issue:

Our history makes a troubled land....

What tragedy, a grief that can't let go... ours now and theirs then...

Land lost and won makes pains in hearts both new and old...

Justice denied a paradox of then and now...

Where God will this all end?

Yearnings give life to a hope well past plain expectation's sell by date...

For foul won victory lives with spite and leaves a bitter taste...

Both for the victor and the vanquished!

God knows, there is another way!!!

It is but ours to find it and with courage to embrace....

In Zimbabwe it is customary, when a woman gives birth successfully, to say "Congratulations" or "Makorokoto" to her. Her stock reply would be, "No, all of us" or "Aiwa Tese", I hope that in the work we all do towards the recovery of Zimbabwe, we will all be able to say "Makorokoto" and "Aiwa Tese".

Thank you for listening.