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Land Reform, Economic Fragmentation, and the Dynamics of Peacebuilding in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) fundamentally reconfigured the country's political economy, yet its implications for sustainable peace remain insufficiently theorised. This article interrogates how the economic fragmentation resulting from the FTLRP has shaped peacebuilding trajectories in Zimbabwe. The study draws on an integrative secondary data synthesis of existing datasets. Sources include Afrobarometer surveys, World Bank governance indicators, Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project conflict event data, as well as national economic and environmental statistics. The analysis adopts a critical peacebuilding framework grounded in Johan Galtung's distinction between positive and negative peace and Mushtaq Khan's political settlements theory. The evidence suggests that the post-FTLRP economy is organised into three interrelated spheres: a politically dependent agrarian sector, a politically contested extractive sector, and a dominant informal economy comprising over 76% of enterprises. This configuration is associated with a form of negative peace. It is characterised by the absence of overt conflict but appears to be maintained through a coercive stability arrangement that selectively distributes land and economic rents to politically aligned elites and segments of the rural middle class while marginalising broader populations. The study concludes that achieving positive and sustainable peace requires a renegotiated political settlement centred on land tenure security, economic formalisation, and restorative justice.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; land reform; peacebuilding; political economy; negative peace; political settlements

1. Introduction

In June 2000, the government of Zimbabwe, under President Robert Mugabe, launched the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), a chaotic and often violent process that resulted in the forced occupation and redistribution of over 4000 commercial farms, most of which were owned by white Zimbabwean farmers [1]. The government justified the programme as the long overdue correction of colonial land imbalances rooted in the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and subsequent legislation that had concentrated the most fertile land in the hands of a white minority. However, within a few years, the FTLRP precipitated a cascade of crises: economic collapse, international isolation, deep political polarisation, and a humanitarian catastrophe. Two decades later, the land question remains the foundational pillar upon which the contemporary Zimbabwean state is built and the central fulcrum around which its politics and economy turn.



Academic Editor: Bindong Sun

Received: 22 May 2026

Revised: 24 June 2026

Accepted: 27 June 2026

Published: 24 July 2026

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Existing research on the FTLRP is rich. Early work focused on the violent nature of the process [1], its catastrophic impact on agricultural production and the formal economy [2], and its role as a political tool for regime survival [3]. More recent studies, particularly the landmark contributions of Scoones et al. [4], have complicated the narrative by highlighting the emergence of a new class of smallholder and medium-scale black farmers and the surprising resilience of agriculture in certain areas. This body of work convincingly argues that the FTLRP was not simply an economic failure but a profound social transformation [5,6]. Subsequent research has continued to document agrarian differentiation, contract farming dynamics, and the linkages between farming and artisanal mining in post-reform resettlement areas [7–9]. Recent work further cautions against a singular failure narrative by identifying welfare, resilience and livelihood gains alongside persistent inequalities and implementation deficits [10].

Nevertheless, a critical gap remains: the explicit analytical connection between the structure of the post-land-reform economy and the quality of peace has been under-theorised. While scholars such as Raftopoulos [11,12] have explored the political economy of the post-2000 crisis, and LeBas and Munemo [13] have examined elite polarisation and authoritarian resilience, they have not systematically linked land-driven economic fragmentation to peacebuilding outcomes through a comprehensive secondary data synthesis. In this article, economic fragmentation refers to the weak institutional integration of agrarian, extractive and informal spheres, each governed through different combinations of formal rules, political brokerage and survival practices. The article therefore asks: how is the economic fragmentation associated with the FTLRP related to the contours and sustainability of peacebuilding in Zimbabwe?

This article advances a central argument: the available evidence suggests that the FTLRP may have contributed to a fragmented political economy associated with patterns consistent with a system of negative peace—defined as the absence of widespread civil war—that appears fundamentally unstable and potentially incompatible with long-term human security and development. This condition appears to be sustained through a fragile coalition of interests: a political elite that controls the state apparatus and its rents; a new agrarian bourgeoisie that gained land through the FTLRP and is now invested in the status quo; and a vast, informalized workforce whose livelihoods depend on precarious activities that intersect unevenly with state regulation and illicit markets. Using secondary data from multiple verifiable sources, the article examines evidence suggesting that the state’s strategic deployment of land and economic patronage has tended to exclude and marginalise other groups, particularly in regions such as Matabeleland, creating simmering grievances that periodically erupt into localised violence and dissent.

The article begins with a historical overview of the FTLRP before laying out the theoretical framework that guides the analysis. The methodology, which draws on secondary data, is then explained, followed by the empirical findings across three spheres of economic fragmentation. From there, the focus shifts to how the state manages this fragmentation, and what that reveals about the broader dynamics at play. The article closes by drawing out the implications for peacebuilding and offering concluding reflections.

2. The Fast Track Land Reform Programme and the Origins of Economic Fragmentation

To understand the current impasse, a brief historical overview is necessary. The FTLRP was not a sudden event but the culmination of decades of unresolved colonial land dispossession codified in the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and entrenched through subsequent legislation. At independence in 1980, approximately 6000 white commercial farmers owned roughly half of Zimbabwe’s arable land, including the most fertile areas [14].

The Lancaster House Constitution of 1979 embedded a willing-seller, willing-buyer clause that severely constrained the pace of land redistribution in the first decade of independence. By the late 1990s, widespread frustration with the slow pace of reform, combined with the ruling party's need to manage political challenges from the newly formed MDC and a restive constituency of liberation war veterans, created the conditions for a radical departure from the market-based model.

The FTLRP occurred in three overlapping phases: the initial *jambanja* (struggle) farm invasions from 1998 to 2000, the formalised Fast Track phase from 2000 to 2002, and a consolidation phase thereafter. The period was marked by a severe contraction and restructuring of the formal agricultural economy. Tobacco, a major foreign currency earner accounting for approximately one-third of export revenues, collapsed from approximately 237 million kilograms produced in 2000 to around 48 million kilograms by 2008 [15,16]. This collapse triggered a domino effect: the de-industrialisation of the urban economy, hyperinflation that reached an estimated 89.7 sextillion percent in November 2008 [17], and the implosion of the formal financial sector. Subsequent years have seen a partial recovery in tobacco production as a new class of smallholder farmers entered contract arrangements with multinational tobacco companies [7,8], but the structural transformation of the agrarian economy had fundamentally altered the political economy of the country.

This economic contraction had a profound social geography and produced a differentiated agrarian structure, as documented extensively by Scoones et al. [4–6]. The A1 resettlement model provided small plots of five to ten hectares intended for the landless poor in a villagized format. In practice, allocation was politically mediated, with war veterans, public officials and party-connected applicants often advantaged in particular localities [3,18]. The A2 model was designed for medium- to large-scale commercial farming and targeted indigenous entrepreneurs, civil servants and other applicants with productive capacity. Research documents politically connected access to some A2 holdings, but also substantial variation in acquisition routes, investment and productivity across districts [9,18,19]. Recent work on peri-urban reform similarly shows that redistributive gains coexisted with informal transactions, elite capture and planning failures [20]. Crucially, redistribution was not accompanied by a coherent tenure framework: overlapping offer letters, disputed boundaries and the absence of transferable title created insecurity that may facilitate political control, although institutional weakness and slow bureaucratic consolidation remain plausible alternative explanations [2,19,21].

3. Theoretical Framework

To understand the nexus between land, economics, and peace, this article employs a critical peacebuilding framework anchored in Johan Galtung's foundational distinction between positive and negative peace [22]. Negative peace is defined as the absence of direct, organised violence, the silencing of guns. Positive peace, by contrast, is a more holistic concept encompassing the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice, equity, and institutions capable of addressing the root causes of conflict. Galtung's concept of structural violence is particularly apposite here: it refers to avoidable harm embedded in social structures, including poverty, land dispossession, environmental degradation, and health impacts, that injures human beings without the need for direct physical violence [22]. Lederach [23] further extends this framework by arguing that sustainable peacebuilding requires transformation at multiple levels of society, not merely elite-level agreements.

Much of the international community's engagement with Zimbabwe since 2000 has been predicated on achieving a form of negative peace. The Global Political Agreement (GPA) of 2008, which ended the immediate post-election violence, was a classic negative peace agreement: it halted overt conflict but did little to dismantle the structural drivers of

violence [24,25]. Several scholars have noted that power-sharing arrangements of this kind may entrench rather than resolve underlying political economies of conflict [26,27]. This article therefore examines the post-FTLRP economic architecture as a possible generator of structural violence and asks whether technocratic peacebuilding interventions have adequately addressed the political–economic foundations of instability rather than treating the problem solely as a governance deficit.

This analysis is underpinned by a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) approach, which emphasises the interplay between political power, economic processes, and institutional outcomes. A PEA lens moves beyond formal institutions to examine how power is distributed, how resources are allocated, and how formal and informal rules shape incentives for different actors. In Zimbabwe, this is crucial. The FTLRP was not just an agricultural policy; it was a dramatic renegotiation of the political settlement. Khan [28,29] defines a political settlement as the balance of power between contending social groups and the institutions that manage this balance. A substantial body of peer-reviewed research suggests that the FTLRP functioned, among other things, as a mechanism through which the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), dismantled the economic base of its primary political rival, the commercial farming sector, while constructing a new constituency of economic dependants whose continued access to land and state resources was tied to the party’s continued rule [13,18]. This interpretation is contested—some scholars emphasise the redistributive and anti-colonial imperatives driving the reform [4,6]—and both dimensions are likely operative in practice.

By combining Galtung’s peace theory with a PEA framework informed by Khan’s political settlements approach, it is possible to dissect how the structure of the post-FTLRP economy actively works against the conditions for positive peace. Three key mechanisms are identified through which this occurs. These mechanisms are treated as analytical propositions to be assessed against heterogeneous evidence, not as uniform or fully coordinated state strategies. The link between these two frameworks operates as follows: where Khan’s political settlement concentrates productive assets among a narrow coalition of loyalists and excludes rival groups from economic participation, the resulting distributional asymmetries constitute precisely the structural violence that Galtung identifies as negative peace—a condition in which organised armed conflict is absent but systematic harm to life chances and human potential persists through embedded institutional arrangements. Each of the three mechanisms below is, in Galtung’s terms, a channel of structural violence produced by the coalition dynamics that Khan’s framework analyses. First, patronage and co-optation: land redistribution may create relationships of dependence where farmers rely on the state for inputs, finance and tenure security, potentially shaping political compliance. Second, exclusion and grievance: the violent and partisan nature of the land redistribution process excluded supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and created localised conflicts over boundaries, water rights, and historic land claims, particularly in Matabeleland [30,31]. Third, economic informalisation and illicit networks: the collapse of the formal economy forced millions into the informal sector, and the available evidence suggests the state has not only tolerated but, in the interpretation of several scholars [32,33], may have actively cultivated a parallel economy of artisanal mining, smuggling, and cross-border trade that serves as a revenue source for the security apparatus and a safety valve for political loyalty. Whether this reflects deliberate state strategy or opportunistic capture by individual actors within the security sector, however, remains debated. Recent research on Zimbabwean ASM similarly depicts an institutionally complex field in which subsistence, elitism, coercion and regulatory evasion coexist [34–36].

This framework builds on a broader literature on hybrid peace and the limits of liberal peacebuilding in Africa [37,38]. Mac Ginty and Richmond [39] have argued persuasively

that international peacebuilding frequently imposes exogenous institutional templates that fail to engage with endogenous political economies. Zimbabwe represents an extreme case of this failure: two decades of international reform conditionality have not disrupted the coercive stability pact that sustains negative peace.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Design

This study is an integrative secondary data synthesis. No primary fieldwork or original data collection was conducted; nor were any inferential or inductive statistical techniques employed. As such, this study does not constitute a quantitative study in the methodological sense. Rather, it triangulates descriptive numerical data from multiple publicly accessible secondary sources alongside peer-reviewed literature and institutional reports to identify patterns and generate interpretive inferences relevant to the study's research question. This design is consistent with the integrative secondary data synthesis approach, which draws on diverse pre-existing datasets to build a composite analytical picture of a complex policy problem [40]. The combination of macro-level conflict event data with household survey data and sectoral economic statistics allows for a multi-scalar analysis spanning the national, provincial, and household levels. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, Table 1 below summarises the key search terms and source categories used to identify secondary datasets and peer-reviewed literature included in the synthesis. Sources were retained where they directly addressed a thematic domain, reported traceable data or peer-reviewed analysis, and were sufficiently detailed for cross-source comparison. No proprietary analytical software or field research was used; the study relied only on publicly accessible datasets, institutional reports and peer-reviewed literature, which were reviewed and tabulated descriptively.

Table 1. Summary of key search terms and source categories used in the integrative secondary data synthesis.

Thematic Domain	Key Search Terms	Primary Source Types
Land reform and agrarian change	Zimbabwe; FTLRP; land tenure; agrarian reform; A1; A2 resettlement; land audit	Afrobarometer; Zimbabwe Lands Commission; UNHCR; World Bank household surveys; peer-reviewed journals (Journal of Agrarian Change; Journal of Peasant Studies)
Conflict and peacebuilding	negative peace; political violence; Zimbabwe conflict; UCDP; ACLED; Matabeleland; Gukurahundi; political settlement	UCDP; ACLED via HDX; ZPP monthly reports; SCORE Index; Fragile States Index; peer-reviewed journals (Journal of Southern African Studies; African Affairs)
Extractive economy and governance	artisanal mining; ASGM; gold; Marange diamonds; illicit economy; security sector; informal economy	FGR production data; UNEP ASGM reports; Global Witness; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime; peer-reviewed journals; WGI

4.2. Data Sources

Data were drawn from six categories of existing sources, as summarised in Table 2. Land and agrarian data were drawn from the Afrobarometer Round 3 survey (2005, $n = 1048$ adult respondents), used as a historical baseline for the immediate post-FTLRP period, the Zimbabwe Lands Commission Land Audit (2023, covering 254,538 farms), and household surveys conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Bank in 2023. Conflict event data were obtained from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) accessed through the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX), and the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) monthly monitoring series [41–43]. Governance data were drawn from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) spanning 1996 to 2024 [44]. Extractive sector data were drawn from Fidelity Gold Refinery (FGR) production statistics [45], United Nations Environment Programme reports on mercury use in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) [46], and peer-reviewed analyses of the artisanal mining sector [32,33,47]. Informal economy data were drawn from the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) Economic Census (2024 to 2025) [48], supplemented by International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates of the shadow economy [49] and International Labour Organization (ILO) labour force surveys [50]. Social cohesion data were drawn from the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index administered in Zimbabwe by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development and the United Nations Development Programme [51], and the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index Group Grievance sub-indicator [52].

Table 2. Summary of secondary data sources.

Category	Source	Year(s)	Coverage	Key Variables
Land and agrarian	Afrobarometer Round 3 [53]	2005	$n = 1048$ adult respondents	Receipt of land under reform
Land and agrarian	UNHCR Results Monitoring Survey	2023	$n = 708$ households	Land tenure security
Land and agrarian	World Bank Joint Assessment	2023	$n = 349$ households	Access to land, documentation
Land and agrarian	Zimbabwe Lands Commission Land Audit	2023	254,538 farms	Allocation, beneficiaries, investment
Conflict and peace	UCDP Conflict Event Data [41]	1989–2024	Country-level monthly	Battle deaths, violence against civilians
Conflict and peace	ACLED via HDX [42]	1997–2024	Country-level daily	Conflict events, displacement
Conflict and peace	Zimbabwe Peace Project [43]	2000–2024	Provincial monthly	Political violence, demonstrations
Conflict and peace	SCORE Index [51]	2019	National ($n = \text{approx. } 2500$)	Social cohesion, trust, reconciliation
Governance	World Bank WGI [44]	1996–2024	Annual time series	Government effectiveness, rule of law, corruption
Extractive	Fidelity Gold Refinery production data [45]	2020–2025	National aggregates	Gold output by miner type
Extractive	UNEP/planetGOLD ASGM source [46]	2023	National estimate	Mercury use, sites, health burden
Informal	ZimStat Economic Census [48]	2024–2025	204,798 establishments	Formal vs. informal status, employment
Informal	IMF Shadow Economy Estimates [49]	1991–2015	National aggregate	Shadow economy as percent of GDP
Informal	ILO Labour Force Survey Zimbabwe [50]	2022	National aggregate	Informal employment rate

4.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive numerical data from these sources were extracted, tabulated, and examined to identify trends over time (pre-FTLRP, FTLRP period, post-FTLRP consolidation) and spatial variations where available, for example provincial differences in conflict events and land allocation. Published time-series values and regional comparisons were examined where available. Qualitative data from reports and secondary sources were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to land patronage, economic exclusion, and state-citizen relations. The reporting of source types, search terms and synthesis decisions follows contemporary guidance for review-based research [40]. It should be noted that while institutional reports and grey literature provide essential empirical breadth, findings from such sources are cross-referenced wherever possible with peer-reviewed studies to strengthen the interpretive robustness of the analysis.

4.4. Limitations

The study is limited by the availability and granularity of existing datasets. Full micro-data for the 2023 Land Audit are not publicly accessible; only summary findings reported in official and media sources could be used. The UNHCR and World Bank household samples are interpreted as sample-specific evidence rather than nationally representative estimates. Conflict data may underreport incidents in remote areas, particularly in Matabeleland North. Afrobarometer data from 2005 provide a valuable baseline but do not capture the full post-FTLRP period; more recent rounds are drawn on where available. The SCORE Index assessment was conducted as a one-time exercise in 2019 and does not provide longitudinal coverage. Several datasets deployed in the analysis, including the Zimbabwe Peace Project monitoring reports, Global Witness reports, and Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime assessments, constitute grey literature produced by advocacy or civil society organisations. While these sources provide data not available elsewhere and have been cited in peer-reviewed research [32,33,47], findings derived from them are treated with appropriate caution and, where possible, triangulated with peer-reviewed analyses. Future research would benefit from integrating primary survey data, mapping the spatial distribution of land reform outcomes across provincial and district levels—ideally using geographic information systems to produce visualisations of land allocation patterns and conflict event density—and from comparative case study designs that would permit more robust causal inference about the relationship between land reform and peace outcomes. These limitations are acknowledged, and the analysis is framed as an integrative secondary data synthesis rather than a primary empirical study.

5. Results: The Fragmented Post-Reform Economy

The secondary data analysis identifies that the post-FTLRP economy is not a single, coherent system but three interlinked spheres, each with its own logic and implications for peace. These are the agrarian sphere, the extractive sphere, and the informal sphere. Together, they constitute what this article terms a fragmented political economy of negative peace.

5.1. The Agrarian Sphere: From Productive Land to Political Asset

The Afrobarometer Round 3 survey (2005, $n = 1048$ adult respondents) provides an early benchmark of reported land access. The data indicate that 18.1 percent of respondents (190 out of 1048) stated that they or a family member had received land under the government's reform programme [53]. Provincial disaggregation shows lower reported receipt in Matabeleland (approximately 6 percent) than in Mashonaland East (approximately 27 percent). This pattern is consistent with regional inequality in access, but the

survey alone cannot establish the administrative scale of redistribution or prove partisan causation [30,31].

The 2023 Zimbabwe Lands Commission Land Audit provides a more comprehensive administrative picture of the post-reform agrarian landscape. Covering 254,538 farms nationwide, the audit examined allocation, beneficiary characteristics, investment and production. Official summaries indicate stratification within the A1 and A2 models and report overlapping offer letters and unresolved boundary disputes. However, because the microdata are not publicly accessible, the prevalence and distribution of these problems cannot be independently estimated.

Recent household surveys provide additional evidence of tenure insecurity within their sampled populations. The UNHCR Results Monitoring Survey (2023, $n = 708$) found that 22 percent of respondents reported improved land tenure security in the preceding year. The World Bank Joint Assessment (2023, $n = 349$) found that 71 percent reported access to land, while 39 percent held documentation such as a title deed or offer letter; these instruments confer different legal rights and should not be treated as equivalent. The findings are consistent with research showing that insecure or non-transferable tenure can restrict investment, credit access and autonomy, while the political effects of such insecurity remain context-dependent [19,21,54].

These data are consistent with the argument that the agrarian sphere is characterised by state-dependent patronage. The available evidence suggests that farmers who received land under the FTLRP face structural insecurity that may render them politically dependent on the ruling party, though the causal pathway from tenure insecurity to political loyalty is complex and mediated by local social differentiation, individual risk calculations, and alternative livelihood options [5,6,9]. Scoones et al. [5,6] and Shonhe et al. [9] document processes of social differentiation within the new resettlement areas, with some A2 farmers accumulating capital while many A1 farmers remain at or below subsistence levels. This internal differentiation sustains the stability pact: the most successful beneficiaries have a strong material interest in maintaining the status quo, while the most vulnerable remain dependent on state benevolence for their continued occupation of their plots.

5.2. *The Extractive Sphere: Artisanal Mining and the Financing of Coercive Stability*

The collapse of formal agriculture was accompanied by the explosive growth of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), particularly for gold. This shift represents one of the most significant structural transformations in the post-FTLRP economy. Secondary data from the Fidelity Gold Refinery [45] show a dramatic and accelerating shift in the composition of gold production. In 2024, national gold production reached 36.48 tonnes, of which artisanal and small-scale miners contributed over 65 percent. By 2025, national gold production had reached an all-time high of 46.7 tonnes, a 17 percent increase over the preceding year, with artisanal miners contributing 34.9 tonnes, representing 74.7 percent of total production, while large-scale mines supplied only 11.8 tonnes [45]. This trajectory confirms what the peer-reviewed literature on Zimbabwe's ASM sector has identified as a long-term structural shift away from capital-intensive formal mining towards labour-intensive artisanal production [32,33,47].

The scale of labour absorption is equally striking and has significant implications for political stability. Estimates of the number of artisanal miners in Zimbabwe range from 500,000 to over 1.5 million, with one million being the most commonly cited figure in sector analyses [55,56]. Mkodzongi [57] documents the intricate linkages between artisanal gold mining and farming in resettlement areas, with many farmers engaging in gold panning during the agricultural off-season as a critical livelihood diversification strategy, illustrating how the agrarian and extractive spheres are structurally intertwined.

The extractive sphere carries substantial environmental and public-health costs. UNEP [46] reports that approximately 96 percent of artisanal gold-mining sites in Zimbabwe use mercury in gold recovery. Steckling et al. [58] estimated a historical burden of approximately 95,400 disability-adjusted life years from chronic mercury intoxication, although an updated national estimate is unavailable. These harms exemplify structural violence in Galtung's sense [22]: they may not register in conflict-event databases, yet they reduce health, livelihood security and human capability, including among women and children in mining communities [59].

Moreover, the sector is characterised by extensive informality, criminalisation and contested regulation. Spiegel [33], Mawowa [32] and Mkodzongi [34] document politically connected control over claims, violent competition and uneven enforcement. More recent comparative research warns that describing artisanal miners primarily as criminals can obscure livelihood dependence and the role of state and corporate actors in producing illegality [35]. Institutional reports on diamonds and illicit gold flows [56,60–62] are therefore interpreted alongside peer-reviewed evidence rather than as conclusive proof of a centrally coordinated financing system. The available evidence is consistent with rent capture by politically connected and security-sector actors, but the magnitude and routing of these flows cannot be established from the secondary data alone; institutional weakness, fragmented enforcement and competing organisational logics also shape the sector [36].

5.3. *The Informal Sphere: The Informalisation of Survival*

Beyond agriculture and mining, the broader economy has become profoundly informalized, representing the third and most pervasive sphere of economic fragmentation. The ZimStat Economic Census (2024 to 2025) [48], which surveyed 204,798 operational business establishments nationwide, provides the most comprehensive recent picture of this informalisation. The findings indicate that 76.1 percent of all establishments are classified as informal, meaning they are not registered with the Registrar of Companies, the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, or the National Social Security Authority. Of the 23.9 percent of enterprises that are classified as formal, 87.9 percent are micro-enterprises employing fewer than five people. Wholesale and retail trade accounts for 73.13 percent of all establishments, while manufacturing accounts for only 8.24 percent; of those manufacturers, only 19 percent operate in the formal sector, indicating deep de-industrialisation and a weak formal manufacturing base.

These findings are consistent with long-run estimates of the size of Zimbabwe's shadow economy. Medina and Schneider [49], drawing on IMF data, found that Zimbabwe's shadow economy averaged 60.6 percent of GDP between 1991 and 2015, the second-largest relative to GDP among the 158 countries in their study, after Bolivia. The ILO [50] reports that informal employment accounted for approximately 80 percent of all workers in Zimbabwe by 2022, having peaked at 94.5 percent in 2014 during the worst of the post-FTLRP economic crisis. Taken together, these data confirm that informality is not a residual category in the Zimbabwean economy but its dominant organising principle.

The fiscal implications of this informalisation are severe for the prospects of a developmental state capable of delivering public services and building positive peace. Earlier analyses have found that only a small fraction of Zimbabwe's informal sector pays taxes and that formal tax compliance is extremely limited among informal operators, constraining revenue mobilisation and the state's capacity to finance public services [63,64].

The state's relationship with the informal sphere is strategically ambiguous. On the one hand, it periodically conducts destructive clean-up operations that demolish informal structures and displace informal traders. Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, which the UN Special Envoy estimated rendered approximately 570,000 people homeless and affected

the livelihoods of a further 2.4 million [65], is the most egregious example. Potts [66], Bratton and Masunungure [67], and Musoni [68] document the operation as an effort that disproportionately disrupted an urban constituency associated with the opposition under the stated objective of urban planning. On the other hand, political and economic actors depend on informal markets. Currency instability and periodic foreign-exchange controls create opportunities for politically mediated rent extraction and arbitrage, while most households navigate volatile informal markets as a means of survival.

5.4. Conflict Dynamics: The Coexistence of Negative Peace and Persistent Grievance

If the economy has fragmented as described, what has happened to conflict? UCDP and ACLED provide complementary but non-equivalent perspectives because they apply different event definitions and coding rules. UCDP records a marked decline in organised lethal violence after the Global Political Agreement of September 2008 [41]. ACLED nevertheless records continuing violence against civilians, demonstrations and riots, with episodic increases around the 2013, 2018 and 2023 elections [42]. Province-level ACLED counts suggest recurrent violence in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South, but population-adjusted rates and transparent cross-dataset harmonisation would be required before making stronger regional comparisons.

The ZPP monthly monitoring reports provide provincial detail that complicates the national picture of declining organised violence [43]. They indicate continuing political intimidation and localised violence in opposition-leaning areas, including parts of Matabeleland and Manicaland. This distribution is consistent with the article's exclusion argument, but it does not by itself establish that land beneficiaries were co-opted or that every incident formed part of a coordinated stability strategy. The evidence more securely supports a conclusion of episodic and geographically uneven repression.

However, the absence of civil war does not mean the absence of grievance. The 2019 SCORE Index measured intergroup trust, civic participation and willingness to reconcile and is used here as a historical baseline [51]. Because it was a one-time assessment, the Fragile States Index Group Grievance sub-indicator is used only as a later national contextual proxy, not as a direct longitudinal continuation [52]. Read together, these sources indicate weak institutional trust and persistent polarisation, consistent with Bratton's earlier household-level findings [69].

The Fund for Peace Group Grievance sub-indicator provides national-level evidence of elevated collective grievance [52]. It does not, on its own, identify which regions or ethnic communities experience that grievance. The regional interpretation instead rests on historical and qualitative evidence concerning unresolved Gukurahundi harms and their continuing significance in Matabeleland [70–72]. These older and newer grievances may overlap, but the available data do not permit their separate causal effects to be quantified.

5.5. Governance Indicators: The Institutional Basis of Negative Peace

The capacity of the state to maintain negative peace through coercion and patronage rather than through accountable institutions is reflected in World Bank governance indicators. Zimbabwe's Government Effectiveness percentile rank stood at 11.79 in 2023, meaning the country performs worse than 88.21 percent of all countries globally [44]. This represents a modest improvement from the early 2000s, when the score fell below the 5th percentile, but it remains among the lowest in the world and is consistent with the prolonged weakening of state capacity during and after the FTLRP period. Similarly, the Control of Corruption indicator has consistently ranked below the 15th percentile since 2000, the Rule of Law indicator below the 10th percentile, and the Voice and Accountability indicator below the 20th percentile.

These governance deficits are not abstract: they translate directly into the state's inability to provide secure land tenure, enforce contracts, regulate the informal economy, or deliver the public goods required for positive peace. Instead, the state relies on a parallel system of informal governance: military control over mining, party control over land allocation, and security sector impunity. This is the institutional architecture of negative peace. Bratton [18] describes it as a system of political predation in which leaders extract rents from the economy while providing just enough patronage to maintain the loyalty of strategic constituencies. Khan's political settlements framework [28,29] helps explain why this equilibrium persists: so long as the ruling coalition's ability to maintain order exceeds that of potential challengers, and so long as the economic benefits accruing to coalition members outweigh the costs of continued loyalty, the settlement will remain stable even without the institutional quality necessary for developmental governance.

6. The Political Economy of Peace Management

Synthesising the secondary data, state institutions, ruling-party networks and politically connected actors appear to have adapted to the fragmented economy in ways that support regime continuity and negative peace. This does not imply a single, fully coordinated strategy: deliberate patronage, opportunistic rent capture and administrative weakness may operate simultaneously. This section analyses three mechanisms through which these dynamics are expressed.

6.1. *Land as a Political Settlement Instrument*

The evidence suggests that the FTLRP substantially reconfigured the political settlement, producing conditions in which land can function as both a productive resource and a political asset. Some A2 beneficiaries, including war veterans, senior civil servants and security-sector elites, possess material interests in maintaining existing allocations [3,73]. Official audit summaries and earlier research suggest politically connected access in parts of the programme, but the absence of public microdata precludes a reliable national estimate. Reforms involving compensation commitments under the constitutional and subsequent policy framework, or transferable tenure for current occupants, could therefore alter the incentives sustaining the settlement without necessarily requiring reversal of redistribution.

What Chimhowu [54] and Moyo [21] describe as the functional perpetuation of tenure insecurity—whether as deliberate strategy or as the path-dependent consequence of post-reform institutional fragmentation—is therefore better understood analytically as a governance dynamic whose effects resemble those of a calculated political tool, regardless of whether intent can be conclusively attributed. Chimhowu [54] and Moyo [21] have documented how the absence of formal title restricts farmers' access to credit, insurance, and markets, keeping them trapped in a relationship of structural dependency on the state. This dependency is then mobilised electorally, with threats of farm revocation serving as an implicit sanction against political deviance, a mechanism Young [74] has described as the psychology of state repression operating through economic vulnerability rather than direct coercion.

6.2. *The Securitisation of the Economy*

The security sector has been integrated into parts of the extractive economy in ways that may raise the costs of political liberalisation for beneficiaries. Global Witness [60] and Towriss [61] document security-sector involvement in the Marange diamond fields and the diversion of revenue outside formal fiscal channels. Hunter [62] analyses related patterns in illicit gold supply chains, including politically connected control over access and exchange-rate arbitrage.

The implication for peacebuilding is significant: where security-sector actors possess economic interests in mining and related markets, reforms that threaten those interests may encounter institutional resistance. This creates a potential veto point rather than an automatically unified military position. Analyses of the GPA period similarly show that entrenched security interests constrained the reach of political reform [24,25].

6.3. *The Exclusion of Political Others*

The system of negative peace is predicated on the systematic exclusion of specific political and regional communities. The Afrobarometer spatial data demonstrate that land receipt was profoundly uneven, with Matabeleland provinces receiving a fraction of the redistribution that occurred in Mashonaland provinces [53]. Alexander et al. [72] and Ndlovu-Gatsheni [30,31] have documented how this exclusion is layered onto pre-existing Gukurahundi grievances, creating a cumulative experience of marginalisation that distinguishes the Ndebele-speaking communities of Matabeleland from the ruling party's core constituencies in a manner perceived as both ethnic and regional [70,71].

The state's strategy towards these excluded groups is one of containment rather than inclusion. The ZPP monitoring reports [43] document patterns of targeted political violence against opposition activists in Matabeleland that serve to suppress political organisation without reaching the level of intensity that would attract sustained international intervention. This calibrated repression, below the threshold of international visibility, is a defining feature of competitive authoritarian regimes of the type that Zimbabwe represents. Masunungure [75] and LeBas [76] have analysed how ZANU-PF has refined this strategy over successive election cycles, deploying just enough coercion to deter opposition mobilisation while maintaining a veneer of electoral legitimacy.

7. Discussion: Implications for Peacebuilding

For over two decades, international peacebuilding efforts in Zimbabwe have focused primarily on three domains: humanitarian aid delivery, governance and human rights advocacy, and technical support for constitutional reform. The Government of National Unity (2009 to 2013) and its associated international support represented the high-water mark of this approach. Aeby [25,26] and Raftopoulos [24] have documented how the GPA period produced genuine improvements in macroeconomic stability and constitutional reform but ultimately failed to alter the underlying political settlement because it did not engage with the land and economic patronage systems that sustain ZANU-PF's hold on power. The findings presented in this article, drawing on a broader empirical base than previous analyses, suggest three fundamental shifts are required in how peacebuilding is conceptualised and practised in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's experience is not without regional parallels. Evidence from southern and eastern Africa indicates that the relationship between land redistribution, tenure insecurity and fragile social outcomes is not unique to Zimbabwe, although its form and intensity vary. In South Africa, Waeterloos [77] identifies policy incoherence and institutional weaknesses that have constrained state-led agrarian reform and limited its transformative reach. In Namibia, Mundia and Haimbili [78] show that market-dependent acquisition mechanisms, legal constraints and the limited incorporation of restorative justice have slowed redistribution and left historically unequal ownership patterns substantially unresolved. In Mozambique, recent research demonstrates that large-scale agricultural investments can reduce local access to land and water and generate adverse livelihood and environmental effects, while failed land deals may normalise and obscure continuing forms of land control [79,80]. In Ethiopia, Ayano [81] shows that state-centred restrictions on land alienability interact with local practices in complex ways, producing both tenure constraints and nego-

tiated adaptations rather than a uniform pattern of political compliance. These cases do not replicate Zimbabwe's FTLRP. They nevertheless show that unresolved land questions, weak implementation and insecure or contested tenure can sustain inequality, grievance and institutional dependence. Zimbabwe remains distinctive because of the speed, coercion and political polarisation associated with fast-track redistribution. Therefore, the comparison supports the argument that the land–peace nexus identified in this article reflects a broader regional problem, while cautioning against treating patronage, exclusion, or negative peace as identical across national contexts.

7.1. From Technocratic Reform to Political Settlement Negotiation

Donors and the international community must move beyond technical programmes designed to improve land administration systems or strengthen formal institutions and acknowledge that the land issue is fundamentally a question of political settlement. The 2023 Land Audit demonstrates that tenure insecurity affects hundreds of thousands of farming families, but no technical fix, whether digitising offer letters or establishing a cadastre, will resolve the insecurity that, as the weight of secondary evidence suggests [19,21,54], may function as a political tool regardless of whether this outcome reflects deliberate strategy or institutional path dependency. What is required, as Khan [28,29] and Paris [82] argue from different theoretical perspectives, is a process of political renegotiation that changes the incentives of the ruling coalition.

Peacebuilding in this context requires the support of processes that could lead to a renegotiation of the existing political settlement, a national dialogue that includes the excluded, former farmworkers displaced by the FTLRP, Ndebele communities excluded from land redistribution, women largely absent from initial allocation processes, and the informal urban poor, to negotiate a new social contract around land and resources. Such a process would need to be grounded in the restorative justice framework that Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Benyera [83] have advocated for Zimbabwe, acknowledging and addressing historical injustices rather than simply managing their consequences.

7.2. Formalisation with Accountability

The informal economy, which accounts for over 76 percent of business establishments and a majority of employment, cannot be wished away or repressed into formalisation through punitive operations such as Murambatsvina. Peacebuilding strategies should instead support accountable livelihoods while reducing coercive brokerage. The artisanal mining sector, which contributes a large share of recorded gold output and supports extensive rural employment, is a prime candidate for sector-specific intervention. Recent research suggests that formalisation must recognise livelihood dependence, unequal power and competing institutional logics; licensing alone may reproduce exclusion or criminalisation if access, finance, safety and community benefit-sharing are not addressed [32,33,35,36,55,56,62].

International actors could support transparent gold-trading systems, community revenue-sharing and due-diligence requirements aimed at reducing illicit flows. Measures directed at individuals or companies credibly linked to abuse may be preferable to broad restrictions, but their effectiveness depends on reliable evidence, enforcement and safeguards for legitimate artisanal producers and vulnerable households. The evidence reviewed here supports carefully targeted accountability rather than a categorical claim that sanctions alone will dismantle illicit resource networks.

7.3. Re-Centring Human Security

The current negative peace prioritises regime security over human security. A positive peace framework, in Galtung's sense [22] and as elaborated by Lederach [23], would place

the security and wellbeing of citizens at the centre of peacebuilding strategy. The SCORE Index data [51] and the Fragile States Index group grievance indicator [52] both show that social cohesion is fragile even in areas that nominally benefited from land reform, and that the absence of violence has not translated into the trust, institutional confidence, or intergroup cooperation that characterises positive peace.

Peacebuilding must therefore be grounded in restorative justice processes for the most marginalised groups. Former farmworkers who lost their livelihoods in the FTLRP, and who are among the most overlooked victims of the reform process, require recognition and redress [1,4]. Women, who were largely excluded from the initial land allocation process and whose tenure rights within resettlement areas remain particularly insecure [19], require explicit legal and political protection. Community-based conflict resolution mechanisms that address land and mining disputes without the state's heavy-handed involvement could build resilience from below. Mutanda [84] and Chivasa [85] have both argued for the potential of community-based and indigenous peace mechanisms in Zimbabwe, grounded in Ubuntu values of collective responsibility and restorative justice, as complements to elite-level political negotiations.

8. Conclusions

This article has argued, drawing on an integrative synthesis of secondary datasets spanning land, conflict, governance, extractive industries, and the informal economy, that the Fast Track Land Reform Programme did not merely redistribute land: the available evidence suggests it may have fundamentally restructured Zimbabwe's political economy in ways associated with a durable but deeply flawed system of negative peace. The resulting economic fragmentation—into a politically dependent agrarian sector, a politically contested extractive sector, and a survivalist informal sector—has generated a set of structural incentives that appear to make the ruling coalition resistant to genuine reform, as the beneficiaries of each sphere of the fragmented economy have material stakes in maintaining the status quo.

The findings reported in this article provide empirical grounding for this argument. Afrobarometer responses indicate spatially uneven reported access to redistributed land, with 18 percent of surveyed adults reporting receipt by themselves or a family member and substantially lower reporting in Matabeleland than in Mashonaland East. The cited household surveys provide sample-specific evidence of tenure insecurity, including a World Bank assessment in which 39 percent of respondents held formal documentation. Fidelity Gold Refinery production data reveal that artisanal miners now contribute approximately 75 percent of Zimbabwe's gold output [45], a sector characterised by mercury pollution affecting approximately 96 percent of ASGM sites, significant illicit leakage, and documented security sector involvement. The ZimStat Economic Census indicates that 76 percent of all business establishments operate informally [48]. UCDP and ACLED data indicate a decline in organised lethal violence after 2008 alongside continuing episodic political violence, while ZPP monitoring reports reveal that targeted political violence continues in opposition strongholds. World Bank governance indicators rank Zimbabwe in the bottom 12 percent globally for government effectiveness, and social cohesion assessments indicate fragile intergroup trust even in areas that nominally benefited from land reform.

For Zimbabwe to achieve positive peace, a fundamental renegotiation of the political settlement is required. This would necessitate moving beyond the zero-sum logic of the FTLRP towards a more inclusive, equitable, and economically productive framework. It would require difficult conversations about tenure security for both current resettlement beneficiaries and dispossessed farmworker communities, compensation and recognition for those excluded from land redistribution, formalisation of the artisanal mining sector

with accountable revenue sharing, and the dismantling of the nexus between security sector entrepreneurialism and illicit resource extraction. The path to such a settlement is fraught with obstacles, as every sphere of the current fragmented economy generates interests that will resist reform. However, the alternative, a continued slide into a fragile, coercive stability built on a fragmented and illicit economy, is a poor foundation for the nation's future. As Galtung observed more than half a century ago, the absence of violence is not peace: it is merely the precondition for it [22]. The land remains the unsettled ground upon which Zimbabwe's peace must ultimately be built.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.T.Z., O.M.O. and P.N.; methodology, G.T.Z.; formal analysis, G.T.Z. and O.M.O.; investigation, G.T.Z., O.M.O. and P.N.; data curation, G.T.Z.; writing, original draft preparation, G.T.Z.; writing, review and editing, O.M.O. and P.N.; visualization, G.T.Z. and O.M.O.; supervision, P.N.; project administration, G.T.Z. and O.M.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The data analysed in this study are available from publicly accessible sources. Afrobarometer survey data are available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org> (accessed on 31 March 2026). World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators are available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators> (accessed on 31 March 2026). UCDP conflict event data for Zimbabwe are available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/552> (accessed on 31 March 2026). ACLED data are available at <https://acleddata.com> (accessed on 31 March 2026). Zimbabwe Peace Project monitoring reports are available at <https://zimpeaceproject.com> (accessed on 31 March 2026). ZimStat Economic Census data are available at <https://www.zimstat.co.zw> (accessed on 31 March 2026). Fidelity Gold Refinery production data are cited from publicly reported national gold statistics.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.5 Thinking as an assistive language tool to refine academic expression, improve clarity, and enhance the overall coherence and readability of the text. The tool was used specifically to support sentence structuring, grammatical accuracy, and stylistic consistency in accordance with scholarly writing standards. The authors critically reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

FTLRP	Fast Track Land Reform Programme
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
HDX	Humanitarian Data Exchange
ZPP	Zimbabwe Peace Project
WGI	Worldwide Governance Indicators
FGR	Fidelity Gold Refinery
ASGM	Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ILO	International Labour Organization
ZimStat	Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
SCORE	Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
GPA	Global Political Agreement

MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front
GDP	Gross Domestic Product

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