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# Racism and Public Policy

*Report of the UNRISD International Conference  
3–5 September 2001, Durban, South Africa*

The third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was held in Durban, South Africa, from 31 August to 7 September 2001. World leaders examined progress made in the fight against racism since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related conventions and resolutions; discussed ways of improving the application of existing standards and instruments to combat racism; reviewed the social, economic, political, cultural and historical factors that drive racism and racial discrimination; and recommended measures to be adopted at the national, regional and international levels for combating racism, xenophobia and intolerance. While the preparatory meetings and the Durban conference itself exposed sharp differences among countries and groups on some of the core agenda items, they also underscored the need for a better understanding of racial cleavages and discrimination in formulating development policies.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) invited 30 high-level scholars from various regions of the world to prepare papers and lead discussions at a parallel UNRISD conference held from 3 to 5 September. More than 500 representatives of governments, international agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia and the media participated in the meeting. The conference provided participants with research findings, insights and

policy debates on some of the core issues of racism, xenophobia and intolerance as they affect different groups, countries and regions; and examined the opportunities, problems and challenges of public policies devised for overcoming racist and xenophobic practices in different settings. It focused on four broad themes: the social construction of race and citizenship; the social dynamics of racism and inequalities; organized responses to cultural diversity; and the impact of public policies on race relations. There was an opening, a keynote address and 10 sessions.

Two important public policy issues were highlighted throughout the three days of discussions. The first is the complex ways racial cleavages have influenced the evolution of citizenship, especially in countries with deep ethno-racial divisions. Much of the history of efforts to construct a responsive and accountable public sphere can be seen as struggles to demolish racial barriers and incorporate previously excluded groups into the system of rights and obligations that define citizenship. Struggles for universal citizenship underscore the need to respect cultural diversity and its underlying values of tolerance, accommodation and human solidarity. The second issue is the promotion of social justice and equitable governance, which is seen as a fundamental requirement for achieving stability and consolidating the values of citizenship. However, reforms that seek to promote social justice and equita-



ble governance are often fraught with difficulties as they deal with redistributive issues. They may be seen in zero-sum terms by some citizens. Potential losers may resist or undermine reforms, while those who stand to gain may not be strong enough to defend them. These issues were discussed in 10 sessions and covered a wide range of countries and regions: the Afro-Arab borderlands, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, the United States, and Western Europe.

In their opening statements, both Thandika Mkandawire and Mary Robinson stressed the importance of the UNRISD conference in providing a neutral platform for reflection and discussion on issues of identities, inequalities and justice. A disturbing feature of the current world order, Robinson noted, is the rise of inequality between as well as within nations. As she explained it, the World Conference “has helped bring into sharper focus the linkages between inequality of treatment—in terms of status, identity, prejudice, and discrimination—and inequality of outcomes—in income, wealth, education, political power, health, housing, marriage and family formation, and other social goods”. She challenged researchers to engage fully in the implementation of the commitments made in Durban.

## The Social Construction of Race and Citizenship

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance are worldwide problems. Genetic research has discredited the practice of classifying humans according to distinct races. On average, 99.9 per cent of the genetic features of humans are the same; and of the remaining percentage that accounts for variation, differences within groups are larger than between groups. However, a gulf exists between scientific knowledge and popular beliefs about race. Trivial as physical differences may be, scientifically, they structure perceptions and constitute a significant source of prejudice in social relations. Thus discussions on racism generate strong emotions, as they often touch on issues of identity, honour, dignity, justice and historical violations. As a social construct, the key attributes of race are fuzzy and open to multiple interpretations. A coloured person in South Africa may be classified as black in the United States even if he or she has more white than black grandparents, and the designation may be

meaningless in West Africa or South Asia where the racial system that gave rise to such classification does not exist. Even people with roughly the same colour and physical appearance may be categorized as different races in certain contexts. This has been the experience of groups such as the Irish and European Jews in Europe and the United States. And some racial classifications do not account for mixed offspring or recent immigrants.

The construction of race as identity may be linked with ethnicity, especially when variations in physical characteristics coincide with assumed cultural, linguistic and religious differences. Examples include relations between people of Indian and African origin in Guyana and Trinidad, indigenous Fijians and Indians in Fiji, North and South Sudanese, Tutsi and Hutu in Burundi

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and Rwanda, and Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. In Burundi and Rwanda, despite the fact that the two groups share skin colour, language, religion and names, variations in height, body structure and nose shape are used to establish difference. In some contexts, a group may identify itself as a separate race even if there are no clear physical differences between it and groups it seeks to categorize as the “other”. Thus we have concepts such as the “Yoruba race” in Nigeria, the “Italian race” in Europe and the “Chinese race” in Asia. Even when groups do not practice overt forms of discrimination, subtle differences in physical characteristics that may not be visible to outsiders, may be used to construct ideas about the “other”.

Racial ideas may influence discourses on social integration or accommodation, encourage insular or xenophobic practices, and distort perceptions about rights and citizenship. Citizens are supposed to be carriers of equal rights and obligations. In polarized racial settings, however, social solidarity, the cornerstone of citizenship, may be embedded in racial—not civic—networks, affecting the way the public domain is governed. However, it is instructive to note that all communities,

whether based on racial identification or ethnicity, are complex, undergo change, and experience internal diversities and conflicts. Race, in other words, is not only constructed: it is also contested.

Rodolfo Stavenhagen's keynote address and the first two sessions—on race, caste and citizenship and on minorities, indigenous peoples and citizenship—discussed these issues as they relate to experiences in the United States, South Africa, India, Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Afro-Arab borderlands. Stavenhagen traced the historical evolution of ideas and policies on race and citizenship since the establishment of the United Nations. Before the founding of the world body, racism was closely identified with the Nazi pseudo-scientific ideology of racial purity and superiority, which was deeply rooted in numerous strands of Western thought. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 upheld the principle of universal rights and freedoms and barred discrimination on the basis of race and other human cleavages. The next phase of the struggle against racism encompassed the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. The right to self-determination was proclaimed in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples of 1960, incorporated in the Human Rights Covenants adopted by the General Assembly in 1966. This represented a distinct shift from racist attitudes and ideologies to people's rights and the construction of an equitable world order. However, racism emerged in new forms during the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the industrial societies of the North, affecting the fortunes of racial minorities, migrant labourers and refugees from the South. Changes in the composition of societies affected conceptions of race and race relations: biological distinctions meshed with perceived cultural differences, giving rise to the concept of multiculturalism or the right to be different. The notion of interculturality has also emerged, seeking to strengthen diversity through flexible modes of governance that are not restricted to any one model of the "nation state".

In the United States, George Fredrickson reported, commitment toward universal human rights coexisted with a strong historical tendency to exclude non-white groups from citizenship. The American Revolution appealed to universalistic values of human rights, but the Constitution of 1789 excluded African-Americans and indigenous Indians from citizenship. The immigration law of 1790 limited the right to naturalization

to "free white persons". Throughout the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, as the debate on slavery intensified, pseudo-scientific racist ideologies were used by defenders of black servitude to prevent blacks from enjoying equal rights with whites. This culminated in the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision of 1857, which declared

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all blacks ineligible for citizenship. However, the Civil War and use of black troops to defend the Union represented the first major effort to extend citizenship to African-Americans. This gain was undermined in the South during the Jim Crow era lasting almost a century, when blacks suffered discrimination, disenfranchisement and torture. Struggles for racial equality intensified between the 1930s and 1960s, culminating in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, which made citizenship rights more enforceable. However, formal equality has not led to social citizenship: a substantially higher proportion of blacks than whites are likely to be unemployed, imprisoned, in poverty or destitute.

Fredrickson discussed the experience of the United States in comparative perspective. In the main, the commitment of the United States to a universal human rights tradition distinguishes it from the German tradition of ethnic nationalism, which produced the horrors of Nazi rule and the Holocaust. Also, the US acceptance of multiculturalism sets it apart from the culture-coded ethno-racial intolerance in France, despite the fact that the latter has not established colour bars to protect white privilege. He concluded that since race has been socially constructed, it should not be seen as natural or inevitable. A process of deconstruction of race is already under way in the United States, as can be seen in the demolition of legalized segregation, racially inspired voting restrictions and discriminatory immigration quotas.

South Africa is comparable to the United States in terms of its historical commitment to institutionalized racism. According to Bernard Magubane, racism in South Africa was associated with the colonial quest for raw materials and the settlement of Europe's social outcasts. Before apartheid, the subjugation of the African

population took two forms: slavery and peonage. Laws devised for indentured white immigrants, free “coloured” workers and emancipated African slaves provided the backdrop for South Africa’s notorious master and servant laws, which from 1910 were transformed into segregation laws, and from 1948 into apartheid, effectively denying the African population citizenship rights. The 1994 constitution and the new Government of National Unity proscribed apartheid, upheld universal citizenship for all South Africans, and committed itself to both racial and gender equality.

A recurring theme in Southeast Asia, as Lily Rahim reported, is the problematic relationship between the Chinese population and “indigenous” groups. And since

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the economic crisis of the late 1990s, ethno-racial conflicts have also emerged among different categories of indigenous groups seeking rights, autonomy or self-determination. More orthodox Muslims have rejected Indonesia’s *pancasila* (five principles) ideology, raising the spectre of religious intolerance and conflict. Malaysia’s *bumiputera* (son of the soil) policy has narrowed the socioeconomic gap between Chinese and Malays, and in the process helped the country avoid the kind of ethno-racial implosion that occurred in Indonesia. The *bumiputera* policy is, however, challenged by non-Malays as discriminatory. And minorities cynically perceive Singapore’s ideology of meritocracy as a smokescreen for the preservation of Chinese hegemony. Rahim argued that governments have politicized culture, identity and ethnicity. Individuals enjoy full citizenship rights only when they conform to the national imagination of the elite and belong to the ethnic core, which in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are the Javanese, Malay and Chinese, respectively.

Racial discrimination has not always thrived only in societies with laws, policies and practices that classify individuals according to biological differences. In Peru and other parts of Latin America, as Marisol de la Cadena reported, nation builders rejected biological determinism and produced a notion of race based on

morality and reason to defend social hierarchies. In this framework, education was vested with the power to dissolve differences based on physical appearances. It gave rise to what has been referred to as “silent racism”, since the bulk of the non-white indigenous population remained excluded from the transformational benefits of education.

In South Asia, according to Vijay Prashad, caste, which is also not based on physical appearance, is derived from ancient practices associated with occupations, marriage bonds, dietary habits and religious customs. It constitutes a significant source of discrimination, which by many accounts is comparable to social practices under apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in the southern United States. The Dalits, or Untouchables, could “touch” most things owned by the dominant *jati* (ruling groups) if their labour was required, but when they worked for themselves their touch was regarded by the *jati* as social pollution. Caste discrimination has been outlawed in India and, as in the United States and South Africa, affirmative action policies exist to help Dalits bridge the socioeconomic gap. However, the enforcement of laws is lax and discrimination, intolerance and caste-related violence persist. Prashad argued that because 86 per cent of Dalits live off the land and can find work in the formal sector only as public employees, neoliberal policies that advance privatization may constitute “a form of racism”: a large number of Dalits may lose jobs and land.

In the case of countries that straddle the Afro-Arab divide, especially Sudan and Mauritania, Kwesi Prah reported that social relations continue to suffer from the legacy of the Arab conquest of North Africa, fundamentalist Islam, fanatical commitments to Arabization and slavery. War has caused massive population displacement, famine and deaths in much of southern Sudan, where Africans continue to resist Arabization and Islamization. Prah argued that the discovery of oil in the south has complicated the search for a just solution, as vested interests and the central government fight for complete control of the oil resources at the expense of the human rights of the inhabitants. He proposed that Sudanese in general, and southerners in particular, should be allowed to choose freely between two policies for resolving the conflict: separate development or federalism.

The discussion that followed these presentations focused mainly on the problems of race and citizenship

in Sudan, Mauritania, North Africa, South Asia, and the United States, as well as on the question of diaspora communities. The view was expressed that the revolution in information technology (IT) has opened up immense opportunities to link up communities or groups that historically have borne the brunt of racial oppression. One participant noted the potential of IT to improve the quality of education in societies such as Brazil, where the history of marginalized racial groups has long been ignored in school curricula. However, it was pointed out by another speaker that diaspora communities could fuel racial or ethnic conflicts in their home states. This was discussed with respect to the caste problem in South Asia. It was argued that Hindu nationalism has been embraced by large sections of the Indian diaspora community whose activities directly feed back into the policies of the Hindu nationalist government in India, making it difficult to confront the problems of caste discrimination.

Discussion on Sudan produced conflicting perspectives. One contribution stressed the need to understand the power of globalization in fuelling population movements and dissolving national borders, making it difficult to construct neat racial categories in describing

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population groups. It was argued that a distinction should be made between government policies, which have in the main proscribed racial discrimination, and entrenched discriminatory social practices that can lead to trauma. Some participants who spoke on experiences in Mauritania and North Africa contended, however, that governments were culpable for the endurance of racial discrimination in those societies: slavery persists in Mauritania; and Berbers are treated as second-class citizens in North Africa.

One participant highlighted the need to discuss the significance of the genocide committed by European settlers against Native Americans or Indians as a basis for

understanding the enslavement of African-Americans and the problematic history of race and citizenship in North and South America. Indeed, Fredrickson had addressed the subject in his paper: “land was stolen so that slaves could be brought to the *United States* by planters, and it is a crucial part of the story of the construction of race in the United States”. Finally, in responding to a question to compare the experiences of Dalits in India and Gypsies (Romany people) in Europe, Prashad challenged the conference to understand racism and the global expansion of capitalism as simultaneous processes rather than separate events.

## **Economic Change, Inequalities and Race Relations**

The third session explored the economic and social processes that drive racism and discrimination. Racism and inequalities may be linked to discriminatory public policies, the way labour markets are structured, and differential access to governance institutions. Labour markets may be racially segmented because of past public policies, unequal development, or efforts by individuals from specific groups to protect advantages in certain lines of activity. Public policies and market segmentation may lead to physical segregation of groups, further reinforcing racial prejudice and antagonism.

Inequalities can also arise from the impacts of development policies and practices on different groups. When “race” overlaps with social class, inequalities may assume hierarchical race-class dimensions—of the type that may breed xenophobia and violence. Such inequalities may mask other cleavages by creating a racially bifurcated society. Many forms of racial inequalities are, however, ambiguous. Individuals in an assumed racial group may, for instance, rank well in socioeconomic terms, but the racial group may be disadvantaged nationally. Inequalities may occur in education, health provisioning, housing, incomes, employment, infrastructure development and asset holdings, such as land. “Race” may become a powerful tool in the hands of elites and politicians in struggles over public offices and resources.

Rapid integration of economies into the world market, advances in IT, and changes in production systems may alter structures of opportunity and shape the dynamics of race relations. Where economies have experienced sustained levels of growth, as in the United

States, employment and incomes may improve even for disadvantaged groups. However, technological change may reinforce inequalities or introduce a new type of segregation—the so-called digital divide—if excluded groups are unable to access the new technology.

These issues were discussed in three presentations that focused on the experiences of the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia and Southern Africa. Sheldon Danziger discussed changes in the relative economic status of “white non-Hispanics”, “black non-Hispanics” and “Hispanics” in the United States, focusing on the 1970s and the long economic boom of the 1990s, which was associated with dramatic technological change, industrial restructuring and immigration. Employment and incomes increased, poverty fell and inequality stopped rising for all three groups. There was a decline of the official poverty rate between 1993 and 1999, from 15.1 per cent to 11.8 per cent of all groups. However, this rate, as well as inequality in male earnings and family incomes, was still higher than it was in the early 1970s. Besides, different racial groups felt the decline in the rate of poverty unevenly: in 1999, this rate was 23.6 per cent for African-Americans and 22.8 per cent for Hispanics, but only 7.7 per cent for non-Hispanic whites. Labour-saving technology and global competition have contributed to massive earning differentials between the most-educated and the least-educated, and most-experienced and least-experienced, workers. As Danziger pointed out, economic growth is important but not sufficient to correct these gaps. Policy needs to focus “on both removing the barriers to equal opportunity and raising the relative education and skills of minority children”.

Globalization does not only offer opportunities for positive social change. It also creates economic crises and deprivation. One of the most common forms of crisis may occur in the financial sector. Financial volatility or crisis is associated with the opening of the capital accounts of developed and emerging market economies in the 1980s and 1990s. In Southeast Asia, the economic instability that followed the financial crisis of 1997 has ripped the social fabric of countries as jobs, incomes and welfare protection are lost or undermined. As Khoo Boo Teik reported, this has provoked racial and ethnic riots, especially in Indonesia where the Reformasi movement ended Suharto’s three-decade “New Order” regime. However, Malaysia, which has a history of racial violence, seems to have avoided ethno-racial implosion. Instead, the pres-

sure for change has attracted a coalition of parties and groupings drawn from diverse ideologies and religious affiliations. Politicians and analysts attribute Malaysia’s relative success in managing ethno-racial relations to its pre-crisis affirmative action programme—the New Economic Policy (NEP). This redistributive programme favoured the Malays, who were perceived as disadvantaged vis-à-vis the Chinese. However, NEP incorporated other objectives related to high capacities for policy making, state intervention in the economy and other modes of governance associated with East Asia’s developmental state. The effects of the strategy seem to have been the radical recomposition of Malaysia’s class structure, the alteration of the balance of power between different groups, and the empowerment of the state to deliver economic and political outcomes.

Labour market discrimination is one of the major drivers of racial inequality. Guy Mhone discussed this issue in the context of Southern Africa. Labour market discrimination has assumed three forms: the consolidation of colonial structures that reinforce the reproduction of cheap African labour; the protection of white labour; and the promotion of an alliance of dominant interests that supports the two forms of discrimination. Because of the racially structured labour market, the modern economy has largely been seen as the “other’s” economy with Africans reduced to the role of marginal participants. Whites dominate the formal sector, and in most countries this sector is unable to grow at a pace that is fast enough to absorb the residual African labour force. The informal sector is saturated with

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underemployed labour and grows laterally in a less productive way. And the communal sector, which is dominated by Africans, is gradually unravelling as a residual sector, is marked by very low levels of productivity, and is unable to support the livelihoods of those who depend on it.

Mhone argued that the three forms of discrimination have produced distributive, allocative and microeco-

conomic inefficiencies. Distributive inefficiencies result in unequal access to land, finance, education, training, infrastructure and entrepreneurial opportunities, which are skewed in favour of the formal sector. Allocative inefficiencies are associated with high levels of underemployment in the communal and informal sectors, and high levels of productivity in the formal sector. Microeconomic efficiencies distort resource utilization at the firm and industry levels; because of the weak linkages between the three sectors, market forces are unable to balance the allocation and utilization of resources across them, leading to sharply differentiated prices. Capital-intensive methods of production may coexist with high rates of unemployment and underemployment. The racially segmented labour market produced four types of economies in the region: the settler economies of Zimbabwe and South Africa, and to some degree Namibia; the economies of South Africa's periphery, comprising Lesotho and Swaziland and to some degree Namibia and Botswana as well; the resource-based, rentier, mono-cultural economies comprising Botswana, Zambia and Namibia; and the agrarian economies of Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique. Neoliberal policies of adjustment, which rule out bold state interventions, have been unable to overturn the racially segmented labour markets that have hindered balanced and progressive development.

The discussion following these three presentations addressed two main issues: how to overcome racial inequalities in the United States, and the role of nationalism and patriotism in tackling the problems of race and class in Southern African labour markets. One speaker highlighted the serious educational backwardness of African-Americans and Latin Americans vis-à-vis their white counterparts as the basis for the high racial inequalities in the United States. He bemoaned the contradiction between the large budget spent on armaments by various governments and the limited money made available for the educational development of poor blacks and Latinos. He concluded that current concerns for military superiority might further undermine efforts to tackle racial inequalities. Another speaker stressed the importance of political will and called for discussion of the political strategies that would be required to convince privileged white groups to support racial justice. On the issue of labour market segmentation, one speaker discussed the problems that new racial minorities, such as mixed-race groups

in Zimbabwe, experience when governments and society refuse to recognize their identities.

In his response, Danziger elaborated on the problems of reducing racial inequalities in the United States. He asked the rhetorical question: "why do Americans tolerate so much poverty and inequality?". The problem, as he saw it, is not just one of race: there would be more poverty and more inequality in the United States than in Western Europe even if African-Americans and

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Latinos were excluded from the data. The main problem is that Americans put a lot more emphasis than Europeans on attainment of the best service, without thinking about how to protect those who cannot afford the best. In health care, for example, Americans in the top income percentile spend a lot of money to be at the technological frontier, to obtain specialized drugs or surgical procedures and to hire the services of doctors. And in education, even though children in the United States may underperform in maths tests, compared to children in other countries, this may not worry policy makers because American universities can attract the best students from around the world. Danziger argued that there is much distrust of government and a willingness to seek the best for oneself. It is difficult to sustain just social policies in a system that rewards the best, and when people who matter believe everyone is capable of being successful. He further stated that the majority of whites believe that America is in a post-civil rights era; and concluded that the idea of solidarity that underpins discussions of social policy in Western European settings is virtually absent in the United States.

Mhone stressed the importance of elaborating a developmental agenda of transformation in efforts to overcome the legacies of racially defined labour markets. The dynamics of race, gender and class, including the issue of mixed race groups, should not be cast in zero-sum terms: change should not be perceived in terms of who gets the best part of the structures that have been inherited; rather, the interests of all racial

groups should be addressed and the problem should be seen in a regional context.

## Land Inequalities and Race Relations

Session four discussed the issue of inequality in relation to land distribution. Colonization produced sharp inequalities in land holdings between Europeans and the indigenous communities they conquered. In the Americas and Australasia, indigenous communities were almost wiped out, except in some parts of Latin America. In Southern Africa, however, indigenous Africans account for an overwhelming majority of the population; but as in the Americas and Australasia, land distribution is heavily skewed in favour of Europeans. In recent years, the land issue has received increasing public attention as indigenous communities demand redistribution. The problem has taken a dramatic turn in Zimbabwe where, with active government support, individuals who participated in the war of liberation, and peasants, have occupied white-owned farms; and an overwhelming proportion of the white community has joined a multi-ethnic opposition party in efforts to oust the government from power and protect their own advantaged position. Race relations in the subregion are likely to be seriously affected if solutions are not found to the land problem. In Canada, the United States and Australia, the land question has focused on monetary compensation and provision of land or reservations to indigenous groups. The debate in these countries also includes defence of the cultural rights of indigenous communities, raising questions about how to balance individual and group rights in democratic settings.

lion blacks subsist on only 17.1 million hectares, of which only 5 per cent is potentially arable. Whites own two thirds (36.2 million hectares) of all freehold farms in Namibia, or 44 per cent of the total land, whereas 138,000 black households subsist on only 33.5 million hectares (41 per cent of the available land).

Independence agreements and constitutions in these countries protected the right to private property, ensuring continued control by whites of prime lands. Under these agreements, land could only be disposed of on a willing seller-willing buyer basis. Moyo argued that several myths have prevented land redistribution in Southern Africa: the land rights held by whites are not only legally valid but socially and politically legitimate, even though these rights were acquired by forceful alienation of Africans from their land; the freehold land tenure system in which whites predominate is superior to customary tenure; land reform policies are irrational and undermine food security because they place short-term political problems of imbalances over economic stability; large-scale white farmers are more efficient ecological managers than smallholders, who are said to misuse their land; and white farmers contribute more to the economy than do smallholders.

Moyo discussed the limitations of these conceptions as well as the various demands by social groups for land, which he divided into eight categories: war veterans and ex-detainees, communal households, farm workers (whose demands are tied to citizenship rights), black elites, urban males, women, rural district councils and NGOs, and private investors. He noted that most government establishments have tended to underplay the demand for land. The Zimbabwe land crisis and the surge in land occupation in peri-urban

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