INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The research summarized here was conducted by HelpAge International and its Zimbabwe partners, the Zimbabwe Farmers’ Union, HelpAge Zimbabwe and Centre for Community Development Solutions. The study also enjoyed the collaborative support of key government ministries especially Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, Agriculture Mechanization and Irrigation Development as well as Agriculture and Extension services. It was carried out across eleven carefully selected districts of Zimbabwe with the following objectives in mind:

- Review key policies in the agricultural sector and examine structural and institutional challenges and opportunities for older farmers
- Map key government institutions with mandates relevant to agriculture
- Assess the role of donors and civil society in the agriculture sector where older farmers are mostly found.

THE CONTEXT

A nuanced understanding of the situation of older farmers in Zimbabwe requires a brief background on land dispossession, the liberation war and land reform. This is provided in Text Box 1 opposite.

Text Box 1

Colonialism and land dispossession

One of the results of colonisation in Zimbabwe was the forced movement of the indigenes from fertile to infertile lands. This explains why the land became the rallying point in the nationalist fight for political and other freedoms, and to a large extent, why land reform became a necessity.

Zimbabwe Land Reform

1980 – Zimbabwe inherits a dual agricultural economy in which a few white farmers own most of the better farm land. For a decade, the new government attempts to focus on land redistribution to create more opportunities for black indigenous farmers, but not much progress is made due to funding challenges as well as the slow release of suitable agricultural land by mostly white commercial farmers.

1990 – The Lancaster House Constitution expires and a new National Land Policy is enacted with new targets to be achieved. By 1997, land redistribution is still far short of intended targets.

1998 – A Joint Donor’s Conference to plan for the development and implementation of a second Land Reform and Resettlement Programme (LRRP II) is called. By 2000, the political environment is contested and polarised and LRRP II is abandoned.

2000 – The government embarks on a new land redistribution programme - Fast Track Resettlement without backing of donors. Beneficiaries are settled according to two models: A1 – communal; A2 – Small to Medium Scale Commercial. Selection criteria for Model A resettlement: landless; unemployed; poor; married or widowed with dependants; aged 18-55; prepared to give up all land and grazing rights in communal areas of origin; returning Zimbabwean refugee; experienced farmer willing to give up land rights in the communal areas and wage employment elsewhere.
FACTORs CONTRIBUTING TO FOOD INSECURITY AMONG OLDER FARMERS IN ZIMBABWE

The study concludes that old age in itself is not a hindrance to productive farming and does not necessarily lead to poverty. Figure 1 below illustrates the reasons for poverty in farming communities.

![Figure 1 Reasons for Poverty in Farming Communities](image)

**Location**

According to the study, a farmer's agricultural productivity largely depends on whether a farm is located in a favourable high production area, a mixed conditions location or an unfavourable low production area. Location also tended to influence access to government and donor support. What little remains of Government extension support services to farmers seems to be skewed towards the newly resettled farmers, while donor support, in a bid to steer clear of the political controversy around Zimbabwe’s land reform, appears to be biased towards old resettlement areas and communal areas. The study found that by stipulating the age range of beneficiaries as between 18-55, the Fast Track Land Reform Programme excluded older farmers from accessing more productive land. Effectively this continued to condemn older people to impoverished agricultural land with erratic rainfall. Thus, food and income insecurity is perpetuated in this segment of society. In a way then, changing land tenure systems continue to exclude older farmers.
Health and Nutrition

The study found that the health of older farmers determined their productivity and by extension, their food security. As people get older, they become vulnerable to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, chronic respiratory and bone diseases as well as a host of other ailments. The lack of preventive and curative responses to these in most rural areas, where most of the older farmers are found, makes them vulnerable and lose physical vitality earlier than they would if they had necessary health services and interventions. Debilitation ultimately results in reduced agricultural production. Coupled with NCDs is poor nutrition amongst older farmers, especially males. Owing to knowledge and practice concerning food preservation and cooking, older female farmers tend to have a more balanced diet compared to their male counterparts. This partly explains why with age, older male farmers’ health is more precarious than that of older women.

Institutional inadequacies and lack of Agricultural Extension Services

The brain drain and fiscal challenges suffered by government institutions during Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political crisis have resulted in the depletion of agricultural extension services to farmers. The study found that “the Ministry of Agriculture is not fully equipped to reach out to older farmers in marginal communal areas through the extension system due to limited financial and human resources” (p.20). Recent attempts at rebuilding agricultural extension services have produced new challenges, for example, a new generation of young agricultural extension workers who do not seem to be well equipped to work harmoniously with older farmers. The most probable reason is the clash of farming ideas held by these different generations.

Farming Technologies

The study found that the majority of donors and NGOs supporting agriculture promote Conservation Farming, which is seen as inappropriately labour and capital intensive by older farmers whose physical strength has diminished and at the same time do not have draught power and adequate tools. The study also questioned the appropriateness of labour intensive technologies and methods such as Conservation Farming given the erosion of
Zimbabwe’s middle generations as a result of HIV/AIDS and out-migration.

Gender – Older Women in Agriculture

The study illustrates that more females than males survive beyond the age of 60. At the same time, there is evidence that a number of legislative and traditional barriers prevent women farmers from accessing land and agricultural support, which in turn makes them more vulnerable in older age. The recent political events, promotion of traditional leadership and valorization of war veterans has given rise to patriarchal militarism which tends to either dispossess women of land, turn a blind eye to, or condone such dispossession. A FAO study led by Izumi (2006) reveals a host of other gender related discriminations against women as shown in Text Box 2 below.

Land discrimination against women emerges as an ill-advised trend given that older women outlive men and end up as heads of households, most of them with the burden of caring for children orphaned by HIV-AIDS.

Text Box 2

1. Land allocation practices in communal areas do not recognise that widows and other vulnerable women need land.
2. Land allocation is not done in a consultative manner in communal areas.
4. Evictions are not monitored.
5. Unregistered customary marriages and explicitly gender biased legislation (Communal Lands Act) militate against women.
6. Local institutions are not consciously working against land dispossession of women.
7. There is low representation of women in local land institutions.
8. Input schemes do not prioritise vulnerable women.
9. There is an absence of extension models or messages for vulnerable producers.
10. Cultural practices e.g. eviction of woman that refuses to be inherited by brother.
AGRICULTURAL TRENDS IN ZIMBABWE AND SOUTHERN AFRICA IN GENERAL

Given rapid population ageing in developing countries with projections that by 2050, above 80 per cent of older people will be found in these countries, the ageing of farm workforces may prove to be a key aspect of the food security debate.

Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)

The predominant discourse of the “young people-agriculture nexus” informing the AU Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) also finds expression at national level policy in Africa generally and Southern Africa in particular. Ironically, prevailing discourse and current dialogue concerning food production and security in the region largely ignore older farmers and overly focus on the youth. In the process, these discourses and policies miss the inherent intergenerational nature of farming in most Southern African countries. Also pointed out by the report is that most policy and programming discussions about agriculture tend to label older farmers as vulnerable and unproductive. Thus, older farmers are seen as a liability in contrast to youths who are viewed as the pillar and future of successful agriculture. This view occludes the fact that according to the report, “There is no detectable difference in the farming performance of different age groups, since farming is generally a collaborative, extended family and intergenerational exercise” (p.4). In any case, even in the absence of official support systems, the research concludes, “older people are still able to contribute labour well into advanced old age” (p.31). The youth on the other hand, tend to migrate to cities in search of job opportunities and a life free of the difficulties of rural living. Thus a vision that privileges youth and neglects older farmers produces a jaundiced view of the farming situation in Africa.

The role of donor-civil society influence

Another conclusion drawn by the study is that NGOs have tended to prescribe “quick fix” solutions such as Conservation Farming highlighted above. This “one size fits all” approach has resulted in the marginalisation of the knowledge and advice of older farmers. Older farmers’ knowledge of their local environment, traditional farming techniques, local resilient seed varieties and understanding of local weather patterns, could potentially play an important role in building more resilient agricultural practices in the face of adverse
climate change and food insecurity in Zimbabwe and the region at large. As such, indigenous farming can be standardised and mainstreamed into agricultural extension services.

Zimbabwe’s Social Protection Framework

Older farmers are placed in the category that receives cash transfers rather than agricultural inputs as they are thought to be agriculturally challenged or unproductive. The challenge is that many countries in the region have not put in place effective social protection measures that ensure that older persons left out of benefiting from agricultural support have adequate food security. An example is Zimbabwe’s proposed social protection framework which has 4 categories. As illustrated in Table 1 below, labour depleted households are excluded from agricultural support and offered cash transfers. The study laments that the potential challenge faced by older persons not only in Zimbabwe, but in the region at large, is that most countries in the region, including Zimbabwe, do not have adequate social protection measures that are accessible to older persons who are excluded from agricultural support in the form of inputs.

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<td><strong>Group A</strong> Poor rural families with no land and/or no labour resources; these households need to be supported through social transfers or safety nets rather than agricultural interventions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group B1</strong> These households have access to land and labour and gain food security through cereal production and/or improved gardening or livestock interventions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group B2</strong> These are emerging small holder farmers who, with some support, can increase agricultural productivity to achieve food security and improve livelihoods though increased cereal production and/or sale of crops and/or livestock.</td>
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<td><strong>Group C</strong> Farmers in this category have the potential to enter into market linkage arrangements with the private sector and produce surplus and/or cash crops.</td>
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RECOMMENDATIONS

- About 80% of respondents in the study valued the labour and knowledge of older persons. As such, agricultural policies should be more inclusive of their contribution and mainstream their knowledge into viable agricultural practices. Social Security Policy should ensure that pensioners have reasonable retirement packages. Most of these packages can be used as an investment in future agricultural activities as the pensioners return to their communal homes and embark on agricultural activities upon retirement from wage labour.

- Given that age is not necessarily a key determinant in successful farming, land redistribution in productive areas should include older persons rather than discriminate against them on basis of labour depletion. Land redistribution policies should take into account the fact that farming by older persons has always been significant to agriculture and that farming has always been intergenerational. Besides, older people have been observed using their land to generate income by packaging and leasing it – activities that contribute to both food and income security.

- FAO agricultural clusters were cited by the study as the most developed, providing opportunity for mobilising older farmers and organising them to influence agricultural policy at national level. This avenue has the potential to promote the cause of older farmers, giving voice to their issues and in the process fight age discrimination. At the same time, this stands to promote agricultural production hence food and income security given that most of the farming in communal and other areas is performed by older farmers.

- The location and quality of land seems to be a key determinant in improving agricultural production and by extension, food and income security. As such, land redistribution should accommodate older farmers in less fertile agricultural areas.

- The health of older farmers is another key factor to agricultural output. As such, government should prioritise improving older farmers’ access to health services and facilities so that they can access preventive as well as curative services to fight non-communicable diseases and afflictions that tend to plague older persons. In addition, the health of older persons should include more comprehensive nutrition programmes as has been the case with maternal and child nutrition.
Given that women tend to outlive men in older age, thereby becoming household heads, agricultural policy and practice should recognise this and proactively create a conducive policy and programmatic environment for women to acquire, till and keep productive land.

Government and its donor and civil society partners need to invest more resources and efforts in restoring and strengthening Zimbabwe’s agricultural extension services given that agriculture is a key contributor to Zimbabwe’s economic prosperity. Ways need to be found to make the extension services responsive to older farmers’ needs given that this segment of the population is largely involved in agriculture and is set to grow in the next couple of decades.

Donors and NGOs should be reflective in their promotion of new farming technologies and methodologies that take the form of “one size fits all.” Genuine attempts must be made to domesticate approaches as well as seek more locally relevant and useful technologies. This might mean channeling more resources toward research and development in this area.

Given the growing importance and popularity of cash transfers as social protection mechanisms to fight poverty among vulnerable groups, there is need to recognise that cash transfers are not a replacement for agricultural inputs. Both mechanisms should be used in an integrated manner to complement each other in a livelihoods mix. As such, civil society needs to engage with Zimbabwe’s proposed social protection framework mentioned above.