

1 Natural Resource-Based Conflicts in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

This book discusses complex and fluctuating local conflicts in rural Zimbabwe relating to natural resources, focusing on land, water and minerals in particular and covering diverse agrarian sites in different regions of the country. Accessing and using natural resources today, whether in Zimbabwe or elsewhere, typically entail different forms and levels of extraction from nature, or the transformation of nature (as once living, regenerative and vibrant ecosystems) into distinct separated-out and typically commodified natural resources. Over time, as humans increasingly adopted, occupied and justified a position of outright domination over nature, the extraction of resources and the tearing asunder of bits of nature from their wider ecosystems took on more overt, brutal and widespread forms. In the case of the imposition of colonial-capitalism in Africa, violent processes of nature-extraction became embedded in a political economy in which certain categories of humans, namely indigenous people, were depicted as closer to nature and thus deemed worthy of subjugation as well. Following on from this, power relations and inequalities in post-colonial Africa (and beyond) still configure processes of natural resource extraction, access and use, with variegated tensions, contestations and conflicts arising in this context. Examining natural resource conflicts thus provides insights into the social fault-lines animating economies and polities.

Considerable literature exists on natural resource conflicts in Africa (Derman et al. 2007; Bhattacharyya and Mamo 2022; Sini et al. 2021; Anseeuw and Alden 2010; Wegenast and Schneider 2017; Neef et al. 2023). Some of this literature provides important, albeit sweeping, continent-wide or country-level claims, or focuses on major overt conflicts over natural resources at the inter-state level or within states (such as during armed rebellions). As well, there is an increasing focus on a new round of global land and natural resource ‘grabs’ in Africa and the contestations emerging around these, and the deepening nexus between climate change and natural resource conflicts on the continent. There are major debates in the literature, including about the relationship between conflicts and renewable/non-renewable resources, and between conflicts and resource abundance/shortages. Combined, this literature provides crucial insights into the causes, character and consequences of natural resource conflicts in Africa. However, our interest