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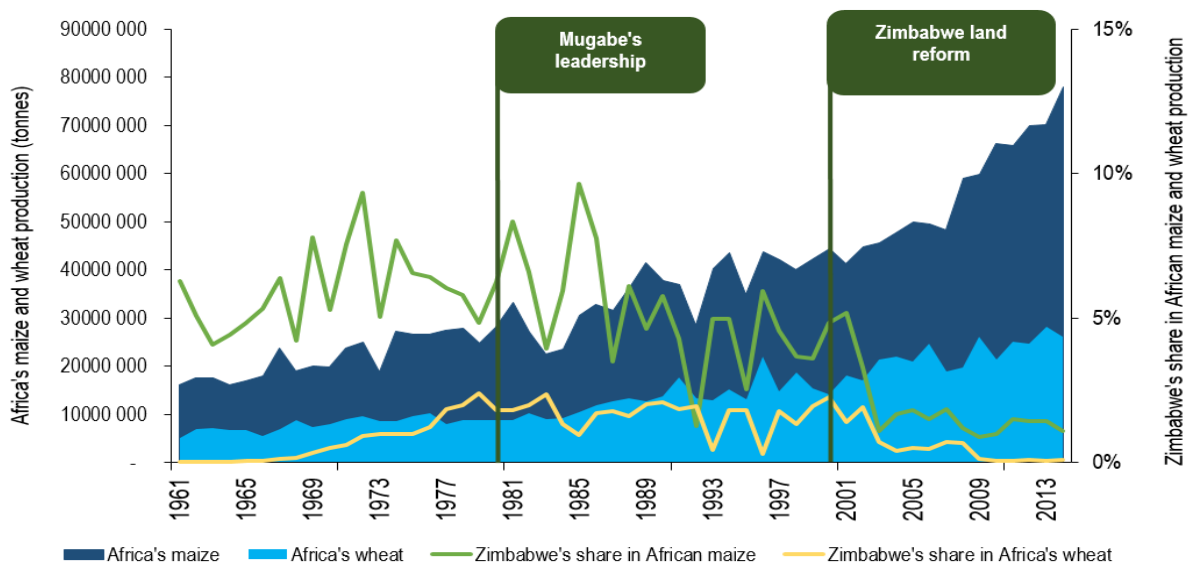
Was Zimbabwe the breadbasket of Africa before its land reform programme?

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There is a commonly held view that Zimbabwe [used to be the breadbasket of Africa](#), although the specific timeframe is unclear.

This vague narrative gives an impression that Zimbabwe lost its “breadbasket” status during former President Robert Mugabe’s tenure. While Mugabe’s land reform programme seemingly contributed to a decline in Zimbabwe’s agricultural output, there’s limited evidence to suggest that the country was a dominant player in Africa’s food production prior to that period - at least from a staple food production perspective.

Chart 1: Africa’s maize and wheat production vs Zimbabwe’s share of the continent’s production



Source: [Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#), [United States Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) and processed by the [Agricultural Business Chamber \(Agbiz\)](#)

Share of maize production dwindled to 2%

In our view, a country should be able to meet its staple food consumption needs and simultaneously command a notable share in exports of the same food commodity to be considered a “food-basket”.

Looking at the production data of key staple foods maize and wheat, Zimbabwe’s production of these commodities has never surpassed a 10% contribution to Africa’s production over the past 55 years ((a period when [FAO](#) started recording African agricultural statistics) 1961 to 2016).

While that is the case, a closer look at the data shows some disparities. For example, in the two decades prior to Mugabe's leadership (1960–1980), Zimbabwe constituted an average share of 6% in Africa's maize production, almost at par with Nigeria, but lower than Kenya's contribution of 7%. During that period, the country's maize production outpaced consumption by an average 400,000 tonnes a year – making it a net exporter.

During the first half of Mugabe's rule (1980–2000), the country's maize production contributed a share of 5% in Africa's output. While it was a net importer in most years, on average, the country remained a net exporter of maize, with a declining maize trade balance (difference between a nation's exports and imports).

This decline in maize production and trade balance worsened following the [introduction](#) of Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform Programme in 2001.

The country's share of maize production on the continent dwindled to an average 2%. During this period, Zimbabwe's maize consumption outpaced production by an average 550,000 tonnes per annum – turning it into a net importer.

Wheat and other grain commodities present a similar trend in Zimbabwe's contribution to Africa's food system.

Fails to fit idea of food-basket

The available data, which covers three distinctive phases in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector, suggests that the country was self-sufficient before and in the two decades after Mugabe came to power.

Even then, Zimbabwe's maize and wheat output were generally modest and volatile. It wasn't sufficient to support strong exports to the rest of the continent and world - which fails to fit the idea of a food-basket.

In the third phase, the country's maize and wheat production significantly declined, which further weakened Zimbabwe's standing in the continent's food system.

Overall, we view Zimbabwe as a self-sufficient food producer prior to the land reform programme. However, there is limited evidence to support the notion of Zimbabwe having ever been the breadbasket of Africa.

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