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## Grow Maize for Food or Tobacco for Money? the Dilemma of Smallholders in Central Zambia

ANDREW CHILOMBO<sup>1</sup>, DAN VAN DER HORST<sup>2</sup>, CASEY RYAN<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences, Rm 22, United Kingdom*

<sup>2</sup>*The University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences,*

<sup>3</sup>*The University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences,*

### Abstract

Economic diversification to reduce reliance on the mining sector has been Zambian governments' promised path for rural development. Agriculture has been the proposed vehicle given that more than 70 percent of almost 60 percent rural population is involved in it. Agricultural initiatives like the input support programs and the establishment of farm blocks across the country have been aimed at rural development, food security, curbing rural-urban migration and commercialising supposedly idle land. This has entailed converting land tenure from customary to leasehold to pave way for commercialisation of agricultural land. Research into the performance of agricultural policies in Zambia is sparse and often unpublished. Following the long-standing policy to establish farm blocks across the country, this research explores policy performance and how local communities are adapting to the (slow) implementation of the farm block programme in Nansanga. Through snowballing, 17 smallholder farmers growing Virginia tobacco in contractual arrangements with Tombwe Processing Limited (TPL), a leaf tobacco company, were interviewed in Mingomba and Kabundi communities of Nansanga. Tobacco is grown on land allocated by traditional authorities (as opposed to legal title). Farmer-support, the ready market that TPL provides and profit motivate smallholders to grow tobacco. Government failure to operationalise the Nansanga farm block and overall under-performing farmer support programme also account for smallholders growing of tobacco for TPL rather than maize for themselves. With an average 3 year tobacco-maize-beans rotation, tobacco is the leading cause of deforestation and land degradation in Nansanga. It has also led to labour flight from the production of traditional food crops. Results from the field suggest that rural development through agriculture is less likely to succeed in situations of policy uncertainty, and agricultural programs in limbo of development. The evidence from this study questions the Zambian governments' political narrative to use agriculture for rural development. The results suggest that agriculture for rural development and economic diversification needs to be rethought, taking into account the (in)ability and (lack of) political will of Zambian governments to fully implement agricultural programs in which they invest significant amounts of public funds at planning stages.

**Keywords:** Labour-flight, Maize, smallholders, Tobacco, Zambia