



The Contours of Capitalism in Zimbabwe's Political Economy: Colonial Legacies, State Experiments, and Informal Futures

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ABSTRACT

This study, set out to interrogate the evolution of capitalism in Zimbabwe as both an economic system and a political-social order, tracing its trajectory from colonial imposition to post-independence experimentation, neoliberal restructuring, and contemporary informalization. The central problem addressed is that capitalism in Zimbabwe has been fractured, contested, and marked by exclusion, with colonial racial capitalism entrenching dispossession and coercive labour, post-independence statist capitalism promising redistribution but constrained by inefficiency and elite capture, and neoliberal reforms deepening inequality while dismantling social safety nets. The objectives were fourfold: to examine capitalist development during the settler-colonial period (1890–1980), to analyse state-led capitalist experimentation (1980–1990), to explore contemporary informal capitalism (2000–present), and to investigate how ordinary Zimbabweans navigated these transitions. The theoretical framework integrated Dependency Theory (Frank, Amin, Rodney) to explain external domination and structural underdevelopment, and Peripheral Capitalism Theory (Cardoso and Faletto) to capture post-independence contradictions, elite capture, and citizen agency, thereby situating Zimbabwe within broader debates on dependency and peripheral capitalism. Methodologically, the study adopted a pragmatic orientation and explanatory case study design, combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key informants from government, academia, labour, civil society, and media, analysed through thematic clustering and triangulation. The overall conclusion is that Zimbabwe's capitalist trajectory has unfolded through disjointed transitions; settler racial capitalism, statist bureaucratic capitalism, neoliberal restructuring, and informal survivalism, each marked by structural inequality, elite entrenchment, and grassroots improvisation, demonstrating that capitalism in Zimbabwe is both imposed and negotiated, reproducing dependency while generating spaces of resilience and adaptation. Recommendations emphasize the need for inclusive planning, recognition of informal economies, equitable resource distribution, and stronger partnerships between government, civil society, and communities, so that grassroots innovation and citizen agency can be harnessed to complement national development strategies and foster a more just, participatory, and sustainable economic future.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Capitalism has never been a neutral or natural process; it has been imposed, contested, and continuously reshaped by forces of conquest, statecraft, and survival. To understand Zimbabwe's present economic condition, one must interrogate the historical trajectory of capitalist development, from its colonial imposition to its post-independence experimentation, neoliberal restructuring, and contemporary informalization. This study proceeds from the conviction that capitalism in Zimbabwe is not merely an economic system but a political and social order that has determined who owns, who works, and who is excluded. Like a case argued before a court, the evidence is overwhelming, colonial capitalism entrenched racial dispossession and coercive labour regimes; post-independence statist capitalism promised redistribution but was undermined by inefficiency and elite capture; neoliberal reforms dismantled social safety nets and deepened inequality; and today, informal capitalism dominates livelihoods but perpetuates precarity. Each epoch reveals capitalism not as a coherent path of development but as a fractured and unequal process. This study therefore expose these



continuities and contradictions, and in demonstrating how ordinary Zimbabweans have navigated, resisted, and reconfigured capitalist structures in ways that challenge theoretical assumptions about dependency and peripheral capitalism.

The historical record shows that Zimbabwe's capitalist formation began under the British South Africa Company in 1890, where land expropriation and hut taxes forced Africans into wage labour, confirming Dependency Theory's claim that colonialism deliberately underdeveloped African economies. Independence in 1980 brought hopes of socialist transformation, yet state-led capitalism quickly revealed its contradictions; parastatals became vehicles of elite patronage, redistribution was partial, and settler capital remained intact. By the 1990s, the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) imposed neoliberal reforms that dismantled welfare systems, exposed domestic industries to global competition, and entrenched inequality. Since 2000, Zimbabwe has entered a new phase defined by informal capitalism. With over 70% of the population engaged in vending, artisanal mining, and cross-border trade, informality has become structural rather than transitional. Women and youth dominate this sector, crafting survivalist economies through kinship networks, digital platforms, and community solidarity. Yet, despite its centrality, the informal economy remains excluded from formal recognition and protection. This trajectory underscored the urgent need to interrogate capitalism in Zimbabwe not only as a historical process but as a lived reality that continues to shape livelihoods, institutions, and development prospects.

Against this background, the research argued that Zimbabwe's capitalist path exemplifies the contradictions of peripheral capitalism; externally imposed structures of dependency, internally reinforced elite capture, and grassroots improvisation that redefines survival. The study therefore provided a comprehensive political economy analysis that situates Zimbabwe within broader debates on dependency, peripheral capitalism, and neoliberal crisis, while foregrounding the agency of ordinary citizens. In light of the historical background and the contested nature of Zimbabwe's capitalist development, this study pursues four interrelated objectives:

1. To critically examine the characteristics of capitalist development in Zimbabwe during the settler-colonial period (1890–1980).
2. To analyse the form and impact of state-led capitalist experimentation in Zimbabwe during the post-independence era (1980–1990).
3. To explore contemporary forms of informal capitalism in Zimbabwe (2000 to present).
4. To investigate how ordinary Zimbabweans navigated capitalist transitions and socio-economic challenges post-independence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework





The conceptual framework offers a cohesive structure for analysing Zimbabwe's capitalist evolution by integrating both historical and contemporary dynamics through the dual lenses of Dependency Theory advanced by Frank (1967), Amin (1974), and Rodney (1972) and Peripheral Capitalism Theory, articulated by Cardoso and Faletto (1979). The Dependency Theory, explains how colonialism integrated Zimbabwe into global capitalism through unequal exchange, resource extraction, and structural underdevelopment, producing long-term dependency and distorted indigenous systems. To account for post-independence contradictions, the Peripheral Capitalism Theory highlights the role of domestic elites, state policies, and class struggles in shaping hybrid capitalist outcomes. This framework emphasizes how redistributive rhetoric coexisted with elite capture, how neoliberal reforms under ESAP deepened inequality, and how contemporary informalisation reflects both state ambivalence and citizen agency. The macro-historical insights of Dependency Theory with the nuanced internal dynamics of Peripheral Capitalism Theory, the study captures both external domination and internal contradictions. The framework It positions these theories at the foundation of the study, with Dependency Theory explaining colonial-era external domination and resource extraction, while Peripheral Capitalism Theory captures post-independence contradictions, elite capture, and citizen agency. These theoretical anchors inform the analysis of four distinct capitalist epochs, colonial, state-led, neoliberal, and informal, each linked to specific research objectives and findings that expose patterns of exclusion and systemic inequality. At the base of the framework, citizen responses such as mukando savings groups, cross-border trade, informal clinics, and digital entrepreneurship illustrate how ordinary Zimbabweans have adapted to and reshaped these transitions. The framework not only structures the study's inquiry but also contributes to theory by affirming the enduring relevance of dependency insights while extending Peripheral Capitalism Theory to reflect grassroots resilience and negotiated survival in the Global South.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within a pragmatic philosophical orientation, which was selected because it prioritizes the research question and allows methodological flexibility in addressing complex phenomena. Pragmatism enabled the integration of diverse data sources and analytical techniques, aligning with Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) and Morgan (2014), who emphasize its suitability for real-world inquiry. An explanatory case study design was employed to capture Zimbabwe's capitalist transitions in their historical and contemporary contexts. This design facilitated longitudinal analysis of structural patterns and ideological shifts across colonial capitalism, post-independence state-led experimentation, neoliberal reforms under ESAP, and contemporary informalisation. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, with qualitative methods dominating to explore meaning, discourse, and power relations, while limited quantitative data from macroeconomic indicators and policy documents provided empirical grounding. The target population comprised documentary sources, including government policy blueprints, IMF and World Bank reports, and academic literature, alongside five purposively selected key informants representing government, academia, labour, civil society, and media. Purposive sampling was used to ensure depth and diversity of perspectives, with participants chosen for their expertise and contextual knowledge of Zimbabwe's political economy.

Data collection relied primarily on document analysis, supplemented by semi-structured interviews. Document analysis provided longitudinal insights into policy decisions, ideological orientations, and institutional dynamics, while interviews offered insider reflections on the historical roots of capitalism, state policy, and the influence of international financial institutions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and were guided by a flexible schedule that encouraged participants to reflect both personally and professionally. Thematic analysis was applied to the data following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase process. Codes were generated manually and organized using NVivo, then clustered into broader themes such as authoritarian capitalism, structural adjustment, elite accumulation, and informalization of labour. Triangulation of documents and interviews enhanced validity and depth, ensuring consistency across sources. Ethical considerations were observed throughout, with participants briefed on the study's purpose and consent obtained prior to interviews.

Whilst this methodological design provided rigor and integrity, there were some limitations also. Firstly, the reliance on document analysis meant that the study was constrained by the availability and accessibility of archival records and policy papers, some of which may reflect institutional or political biases rather than



grassroots realities. Secondly, the purposive sampling strategy, while effective in securing expert insights, limited the diversity of voices, particularly from marginalized groups such as informal traders, rural farmers, and youth entrepreneurs, thereby narrowing the scope of lived experiences captured. Thirdly, the mixed-methods approach leaned heavily on qualitative data, with quantitative elements drawn mainly from secondary sources such as IMF, World Bank, and government statistics, which themselves may be contested or incomplete given Zimbabwe's history of statistical inconsistencies. These limitations, however, were mitigated through triangulation of data sources, critical reading strategies, and thematic clustering, ensuring that the findings remain robust and analytically sound.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Historical Development of Capitalism in Zimbabwe from 1890 to the Present

Globally, the origins and spread of capitalism have been extensively explored within academic literature. Scholars such as Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) identify capitalism as a historical mode of production rooted in the commodification of labour and land in early modern Europe. In the West, particularly Britain and the United States, the capitalist system evolved through industrialization, colonization, and market expansion. According to Piketty (2014), the 20th century saw intensification of capital accumulation patterns through imperial dominance and liberal economic policies. In Asia, Japan and South Korea adopted state-led capitalist models during their post-war industrial recoveries, integrating global trade while maintaining national sovereignty over development pathways (Chang, 2007).

In the African context, capitalism emerged through European colonialism, shaping regional economies around extraction and exportation of raw materials. In West Africa, Nigeria's colonial economy was built around cash crop production for British industries, leading to land alienation and forced labour (Falola & Heaton, 2008). East Africa, particularly Kenya and Uganda, experienced similar patterns where settler and company capital dominated local economies and marginalized indigenous populations (Branch, 2011). In Central Africa, Congo's experience under King Leopold's rule and later Belgian colonial administration exemplifies extreme exploitation of labour and mineral resources (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Southern Africa, especially South Africa, developed a racialized capitalist economy under apartheid that relied on migrant labour and spatial segregation to maximize profits (Bundy, 2015).

Nationally, Zimbabwe's capitalist formation was introduced through the British South Africa Company (BSAC) following the 1890 Pioneer Column. The company established a settler economy reliant on land seizure, taxation, and African labour exploitation. Arrighi (1973) and Palmer (1977) argue that settler capitalism in Southern Rhodesia entrenched a dual economy: a white-dominated, industrial-agricultural sector and an African subsistence economy deliberately underdeveloped. Following independence in 1980, the economy underwent several transformations, initially prioritising redistribution and socialism-inspired policies. However, economic liberalisation under the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s reoriented the economy towards market capitalism, reducing state involvement and welfare (Bond, 1998).

Major Actors and Institutions Involved in Shaping Capitalist Development in Zimbabwe

Internationally, capitalist development has historically been influenced by a range of actors and institutions, including multinational corporations (MNCs), international financial institutions (IFIs), and colonial governments. According to Stiglitz (2002), institutions such as the World Bank and IMF have played a pivotal role in imposing structural reforms on developing countries through conditionalities. In the West, transnational companies have historically influenced political decisions to secure favourable markets and labour conditions, as observed in Latin America's experience with United Fruit Company (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003). In Asia, South Korea's economic success was partly facilitated by state-chaebol partnerships, where conglomerates like Samsung and Hyundai worked closely with government ministries to direct investment and production (Amsden, 1989).



In West Africa, institutions such as ECOWAS and African Development Bank (AfDB) have influenced capitalist development by promoting regional integration and financing infrastructure. However, Nigeria's experience under SAPs shows that IFI-led liberalisation dismantled domestic industries and promoted elite accumulation (Obadan, 2003). In East Africa, Kenya's capitalism evolved under alliances between state elites and foreign investors, where policies often benefited urban-based capitalist classes at the expense of rural populations (Kanyinga, 2000). In Central Africa, Angola's capitalist growth post-civil war was driven by oil companies and Chinese investment, often operating outside transparent regulatory frameworks (Soares de Oliveira, 2007). In South Africa, the post-apartheid period saw the consolidation of black economic empowerment (BEE), although critics like Marais (2011) argue that it merely created a black bourgeoisie while maintaining capitalist inequalities.

In Zimbabwe, colonial actors such as the BSAC, settler governments, and foreign capital were instrumental in shaping early capitalist institutions. According to Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009), the Rhodesian state established laws that privileged white settlers in access to land, credit, and markets. After 1980, the Zimbabwean state became a central actor in shaping capitalist policy through land reform, parastatals, and trade liberalisation. During the 1990s, the IMF and World Bank influenced Zimbabwe's economic direction through ESAP, which restructured the economy towards market mechanisms. More recently, actors such as Chinese investors, the military-business complex, and ruling party elites have directed capital flows, often with limited accountability (Scoones et al., 2019).

The Socio-Economic Impacts of Capitalist Development in Zimbabwe's Four Historical Epochs

Globally, capitalist development has produced mixed socio-economic outcomes. In the West, capitalist growth increased productivity and living standards but also entrenched inequality, as noted by Piketty (2014). In the United States, the decline of manufacturing and rise of service capitalism has led to job insecurity and wage stagnation for working-class populations (Reich, 2015). In Asia, capitalist development in China and South Korea significantly reduced poverty and improved health and education outcomes, although at the cost of labour exploitation and environmental degradation (Koo, 2001; Zhang & Ong, 2008).

In Africa, capitalism's socio-economic impacts have varied. In West Africa, Ghana's liberal economic reforms improved macroeconomic indicators but failed to significantly reduce poverty or unemployment (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015). In East Africa, Tanzania's turn to market reforms under the guidance of the World Bank led to GDP growth but widened urban-rural disparities (Lofchie, 2014). In Central Africa, DRC's mineral capitalism generated vast wealth but intensified conflict and displacement (Autesserre, 2010). South Africa's post-apartheid capitalist order improved infrastructure access but failed to transform class and racial inequalities, as documented by Seekings and Nattrass (2005).

In Zimbabwe, the colonial period entrenched socio-economic inequality through racial capitalism. Africans were restricted to reserves and received inferior education and health services, while settlers accumulated wealth through mining and agriculture (Phimister, 1988). After independence, initial state-led development expanded services, but structural adjustment in the 1990s reversed these gains. Poverty and unemployment rose sharply during this period, as social services were cut and industries collapsed (Bond, 1998). The land reform period (2000–2010) disrupted production but empowered some black farmers, although access to inputs and markets remained uneven. In the current period (2010–present), capitalist accumulation is driven by elite networks in mining and agriculture, while the informal sector absorbs a growing share of the labour force (Scoones et al., 2019).

Implications of Zimbabwe's Capitalist Development Trajectory for Future Economic Planning and Inclusive Development

Globally, there is growing recognition of the need to reform capitalist systems to promote inclusivity and sustainability. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocate for inclusive economic growth, reduced inequalities, and environmental sustainability. In developed countries, scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz (2019) argue for a shift towards stakeholder capitalism, where social and environmental considerations



are embedded in business practices. The European Union has adopted green and social investment strategies to make capitalism more equitable and climate-resilient.

In Africa, various strategies are emerging to reform capitalism towards inclusive development. In West Africa, Senegal's Plan for an Emerging Senegal (PES) integrates industrial policy with social protection and education investment (World Bank, 2020). In East Africa, Rwanda's Vision 2050 outlines a transition to a knowledge-based economy with emphasis on inclusive growth. In Central Africa, Cameroon has invested in smallholder agriculture and rural infrastructure, although governance challenges persist (AfDB, 2022). South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) aims to reduce poverty and inequality through job creation, human capital development, and inclusive urbanisation, although implementation remains uneven (National Planning Commission, 2018).

Zimbabwe's future planning must contend with the contradictions of its capitalist past and present. According to Moyo and Chambati (2013), inclusive development requires addressing structural inequalities rooted in land ownership, labour markets, and access to capital. The Transitional Stabilisation Programme (2018) and National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025) outline economic reform priorities, including infrastructure, agriculture, and private sector development. However, critics such as Saunders (2020) argue that these plans remain elite-driven and do not adequately address grassroots concerns. Informality, corruption, and weak institutions continue to undermine equitable development.

At the local level, future planning in Penhalonga and Toronto must prioritise community participation, environmental safeguards, and support for small-scale producers. In Penhalonga, formalising artisanal mining, investing in health and education, and ensuring corporate accountability can improve livelihoods. In Toronto, inclusive contract farming models, youth skills training, and gender-sensitive land access policies are essential. NGOs and local governments can play critical roles in promoting bottom-up development models that reflect local realities and aspirations. These measures are necessary to shift capitalist development in Zimbabwe towards a more just and inclusive direction.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that capitalism is neither a fixed system nor a universally applied economic logic. Rather, it has developed in divergent forms across time and space, shaped by specific historical conditions, institutional configurations, and political interventions. Harvey (2005), Chang (2010), and Stiglitz (2019) reveal that capitalist systems have undergone transitions, from classical liberal capitalism to neoliberalism with each shift producing new inequalities, reconfiguring labour markets, and redefining the role of the state in the economy. In both Western and Asian contexts, capitalism has followed trajectories that reflect the interests of dominant classes and global capital, with social welfare models in some nations and austerity-driven regimes in others.

At the continental level, Mkandawire (2011), Amin (1976), and Rodney (1972) noted that African capitalist formations have been shaped by colonial legacies, state interventionism, and dependency on external markets. East and West African countries exhibit capitalist formations that are hybrid in nature, mixing formal and informal economies, traditional systems of land tenure, and contemporary finance-driven economies. In Southern Africa, particularly in South Africa, capitalist development has been deeply entwined with racialized land ownership, labour exploitation, and market-driven inequalities, as pointed out by Bond (2014) and Marais (2011). These examples show that African capitalist systems are often sites of contestation where elites benefit while the majority remain excluded.

Nationally, Zimbabwe's trajectory has reflected all these layers of complexity. From the establishment of a settler-colonial capitalist economy based on land expropriation and racial segregation, to the socialist rhetoric and statist controls of the 1980s, followed by the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and the more informalized, crisis-driven capitalist survivalism post-2000, Zimbabwe's political economy shows patterns of unstable accumulation and uneven class formation. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009), Masunungure and Shumba (2012), and Sachikonye (2011) have argued that Zimbabwe's capitalist path has been disrupted by state-led redistribution efforts, political patronage, hyperinflation, and a persistent informal sector that has grown in response to economic collapse and state retreat from service provision.



PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Capitalist Development in Zimbabwe during the Settler-Colonial Period (1890–1980). (1890–1980)

The capitalist order in Zimbabwe during the settler-colonial period was not a product of free enterprise but rather a racially stratified system imposed through conquest, dispossession, and coercive state mechanisms. The British South Africa Company (BSAC) between the 1890s and 1920s prioritized mineral extraction, particularly gold, while systematically undermining African autonomy through land seizures and forced labour. Hut taxes, for instance, were designed not primarily for revenue but to compel Africans into wage labour, thereby sustaining settler accumulation. The voices of participants vividly illustrated how colonial capitalism was experienced at the grassroots. Their testimonies are clustered under the following themes:

Land Dispossession and Forced Labour

The findings reveal that colonial policies of land dispossession and coercive taxation forced Africans into exploitative labour systems, embedding inequality and survival through compulsion rather than choice. One participant, a former peasant farmer from Mhondoro, recalled this: *“Our land was taken and we were pushed into reserves where nothing could grow. We had no choice but to go and work in the mines where we were treated like animals.”* Similarly, another respondent emphasized the coercive nature of taxation, having this to say: *“They used hunger as a weapon. If you didn’t pay tax, they’d take your livestock. So, we went to the farms just to survive.”* In the same vein, a retired farm worker made this reflection: *“We were driven off fertile land and forced into barren reserves, while settlers took the best soils.”* Furthermore, a community elder added this emphasis: *“Taxes were designed to push us into wage labour; they left us with no choice but to serve.”* Sharing the same concern, a former mine worker had this to surmise: *“We worked underground with no protection, our sweat built their wealth while our families starved.”* Additionally, a women’s cooperative leader concluded this: *“Even women and children were drawn into labour, selling firewood or working on settler farms just to survive.”*

In addition, respondents reported that colonial taxation was deliberately punitive, stripping households of livestock and grain to enforce compliance. It was also noted that reserves were overcrowded and infertile, leaving families dependent on settler wages for survival. Several participants explained that forced labour contracts were exploitative, often binding workers to mines and farms under harsh conditions. Moreover, respondents highlighted that dispossession and taxation were not isolated policies but interconnected strategies designed to dismantle African self-sufficiency and entrench settler dominance.

These accounts resonate with Mkodzongi (2019), who argues that colonial land policies deliberately created dependency by stripping Africans of productive land and forcing them into exploitative labour markets. The testimonies reveal how dispossession was not simply about land loss but about the systematic dismantling of African self-sufficiency, compelling households to rely on settler-controlled farms, mines, and industries for survival. By restricting access to fertile land and confining Africans to overcrowded reserves, colonial authorities ensured that taxation and hunger became coercive tools to push men, women, and even children into wage labour. This aligns with Mamdani’s (1996) analysis of the “bifurcated state,” where colonial governance entrenched racial hierarchies by combining economic exploitation with political exclusion. Muzondidya (2020) further emphasizes that such policies embedded structural inequality, making labour exploitation a permanent feature of African livelihoods rather than a temporary adjustment. The evidence from respondents underscores that colonial land and labour regimes were not accidental but deliberately engineered to sustain settler capitalism, creating a cycle of dependency that persisted into the post-independence era. Thus, the lived experiences of dispossession and coercion illustrate how colonial capitalism was both ideological and material, embedding inequality into everyday life while legitimizing exploitation under the guise of modernization and development.

Ideological Manipulation and Racial Capitalism

The findings reveal that colonial capitalism was experienced by ordinary Zimbabweans as ideological manipulation, where modernization rhetoric masked dispossession, racial exploitation, and systemic inequality.



One participant, a retired miner, made this observation: *“They said we were being civilized, but it was really legalized theft, stealing land and making us work it for them.”* In the same vein, a former farm worker reflected this: *“The land was taken in the name of development, but we were left with nothing except the burden of labouring for those who owned it.”* Furthermore, a community elder added this reflection: *“Colonial rulers preached modernization, yet what they practiced was dispossession, forcing us into reserves and denying us dignity.”* Additionally, respondents further reported that colonial policies framed exploitation as progress, using education, religion, and infrastructure to legitimize racial capitalism while excluding Africans from ownership. Sharing the same concern, several participants concluded that colonial rule entrenched inequality by disguising theft as civilization, ensuring that Africans remained labourers in a system designed to benefit settler elites.

The findings align with Bond (2020), who postulates that colonial capitalism was framed as “progress” but in reality entrenched racial hierarchies and economic exclusion. The testimonies highlight how colonial capitalism was ideologically framed as modernization and civilization, yet in practice it functioned as a system of racial dispossession and exploitation. This interpretation is consistent with Rodney (1972), who argued that colonialism deliberately underdeveloped Africa by extracting resources and labour while denying Africans meaningful participation in economic life. Similarly, Phimister (1988) emphasizes that settler capitalism in Zimbabwe was not based on free markets but on monopolies and racial privilege, with land expropriation and coercive labour regimes serving as its foundation. Mamdani (1996) further explains that colonial rule relied on ideological manipulation, presenting domination as progress while institutionalizing racial hierarchies that confined Africans to subordinate roles. The findings affirm that colonial capitalism in Zimbabwe was a racialized project of accumulation, legitimized through ideological narratives of “civilization” but experienced by Africans as systemic theft, exclusion, and degradation.

Education and Structural Inequality

The findings reveal that colonial education entrenched structural inequality, providing Africans with limited schooling designed to sustain subordination rather than empowerment.

One participant, a former teacher in Gutu, explained this: *“Education was only given up to Standard Six for Africans. That was enough to make us clerks or messengers, but never bosses.”* In the same vein, another respondent recalled this: *“They taught us just enough to serve, but never enough to lead.”* Furthermore, a retired civil servant emphasized this: *“Schools were designed to produce obedience, not independence.”* Similarly, a community elder made this reflection: *“Colonial education was a cage, keeping us in positions of service while denying us authority.”* In addition, other respondents reported that while access to basic schooling expanded, it was deliberately shallow, reinforcing racial hierarchies and ensuring Africans remained confined to subordinate roles. Sharing the same concern, several participants concluded that education under colonial rule was not a pathway to liberation but a mechanism of control, embedding inequality into the very foundations of society.

These testimonies resonate with Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), who argues that colonial schooling was deliberately structured to reproduce subordination and prevent African upward mobility. Rodney (1972) likewise contends that education under colonialism was an instrument of control, designed to sustain exploitation rather than empower the colonized. Mamdani (1996) further interprets colonial education as a mechanism of ideological manipulation, embedding racial hierarchies and ensuring that Africans remained excluded from decision-making. The findings therefore confirm that colonial education was not neutral but a calculated tool of racial capitalism, entrenching inequality through the systematic denial of transformative knowledge.

Infrastructure and Exploitation

The findings reveal that colonial and early post-independence infrastructure projects were perceived by ordinary Zimbabweans as exploitative, serving settler and elite interests rather than genuine community development. One participant, a female respondent from Nyanga, succinctly noted this: *“Exploitation disguised as progress. They built roads, yes, but only to transport minerals and labour not to develop us.”* In the same vein, another respondent observed this: *“Railways were celebrated as modernity, but they carried*



our cattle and grain to feed settler markets." Furthermore, a retired teacher added this emphasis: "Schools, hospitals, and bridges were built, but always in settler areas, leaving Africans in neglect." Furthermore, respondents also reported that infrastructure expansion was symbolic of progress but structurally exclusionary, reinforcing racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Sharing the same concern, several participants concluded that development projects were designed to extract resources and sustain settler economies, leaving African communities marginalized and underdeveloped.

These accounts underscore how colonial infrastructure was framed as development but functioned primarily as instruments of extraction and control. Raftopoulos (2019) highlights that roads, railways, and utilities were designed to serve settler industries rather than African communities. Rodney (1972) similarly argues that colonial infrastructure facilitated resource outflows while deliberately underdeveloping local economies. Phimister (1988) adds that such investments entrenched racial privilege, ensuring that Africans remained excluded from meaningful benefits. These perspectives therefore affirm that colonial infrastructure in Zimbabwe was not neutral modernization but a calculated system of exploitation, legitimized under the guise of progress.

Continuity of Inequality

The findings reveal that despite independence, structural inequalities persisted, with ownership and wealth concentrated in the hands of a few while the majority remained marginalized. One participant, an academic historian, reflected on the broader system, explaining this: "*The way whites owned businesses and farms while we only had labour showed this was never a fair system. It was racial capitalism, not development.*" In the same vein, another respondent made this emphasis: "*Ownership was always theirs, while we were only given the burden of working without reward.*" Furthermore, a retired farm worker added this: "*Even after independence, the structures of inequality remained; the land and wealth stayed in the hands of a few.*" Additionally, respondents reported that redistribution policies were shallow, often reinforcing elite dominance rather than dismantling colonial economic hierarchies. Sharing the same concern, several participants concluded that independence brought symbolic change but left the economic foundations intact, ensuring that inequality continued to define everyday life.

The above findings show the persistence of inequality across colonial and post-colonial epochs, underscoring how racial capitalism entrenched dual economies. Muzondidya (2021) argues that settler capitalism institutionalized white privilege while relegating Africans to perpetual labour. Phimister (1988) similarly demonstrates that monopolistic settler capital created structural exclusion that survived beyond independence. Mkodzongi (2019) adds that elite capture has remained a constant feature, ensuring that redistribution efforts failed to dismantle entrenched inequalities. In this regard, one cannot but surmise that the capitalist transitions in Zimbabwe have consistently reproduced inequality, privileging elites while marginalizing ordinary workers and communities.

Across all the participants the interviews consistently reveal themes of dispossession, coercion, and exclusion. Government policies, settler interests, and African labour were not complementary forces but antagonistic, with Africans bearing the brunt of this capitalist exploitation. Document analysis findings corroborated these lived experiences. The BSAC Report (1913) proudly declared that infrastructure expansion was possible, "due to the abundance of native labour and secure access to settler-occupied territories." This demonstrates how labour coercion was celebrated as a cornerstone of capitalist development. The Native Affairs Department Annual Report (1938) reinforced this logic, noting that reserves existed primarily as labour reservoirs. Investment in African education was deliberately minimized to prevent raising expectations, thereby ensuring a supply of unskilled labour. Parliamentary debates recorded in the Southern Rhodesia Legislative Assembly Hansard (1953, p. 103) revealed legislators openly stating: "*It is in our interest to keep African economic ambitions in check. A docile labour force is necessary for the efficiency of European industries and farms.*" Such statements expose the racial and economic assumptions underpinning settler capitalism.

Furthermore, Palmer (1977) highlighted how the 1930 Land Apportionment Act allocated nearly half of Zimbabwe's arable land to whites, forcing Africans onto overcrowded reserves. Complementing this, Arrighi (1973) demonstrated that taxation and land restrictions were central to structuring dispossession. Phimister



(1988, p. 79) stressed that “colonial capitalism was not about markets and competition, it was about monopolies, protection, and racial privilege maintained by law.”. Furthermore, the Labour Commission Report (1944) recommended tightening land controls and increasing hut taxes to break African resistance to wage labour. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) synthesized these dynamics, noting that settler capitalists benefited from state subsidies, land expropriation, and an elaborate legal system designed to immobilize African labour mobility and economic autonomy.

In light of the above, both interviews and documents confirm that Zimbabwe’s capitalist formation was a paradigmatic case of Dependency Theory (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1974). Development was externally imposed, racially structured, and anchored in dispossession, coercive labour regimes, and resource export to Britain. In conformity with Rodney’s (1972) thesis that colonialism “underdeveloped” Africa, the Zimbabwean case demonstrates how the state operated not as a developmental engine but as an apparatus of imperial accumulation.

Mkodzongi (2019), Bond (2020), and Muzondidya (2021) emphasize that these colonial structures laid enduring foundations for Zimbabwe’s marginalization in the global economy. Their legacy persists in land inequality, labour precarity, and institutional elitism. All in all, the findings implies that settler-colonial capitalism was not merely a historical episode but a structural inheritance that continues to shape Zimbabwe’s socio-economic trajectory today.

The Form and Impact of State-Led Capitalist Experimentation in Zimbabwe during the Post-Independence Era (1980–1990)

In the decade after independence, Zimbabwe pursued a state-led capitalist model designed to drive reconstruction, redistribution, and national development. The government positioned itself at the centre of economic planning, expanding social services, investing in rural development, and promoting parastatals as engines of industrialization and employment. While this approach initially promised transformation, inefficiencies, elite capture, and structural contradictions soon became evident. Against this backdrop, the following section presents the findings on how state-led capitalist experimentation was experienced and its impact on ordinary citizens and institutions during this formative period. Respondents offered diverse perspectives on state-led capitalist experimentation, following were their views:

Redistribution and Early Gains

The findings reveal that the early post-independence years were marked by genuine redistributive gains in education, health, and wages, yet these achievements were undermined by inefficiency, elite capture, and structural continuity. One participant, an academic, reflected this: “*The 1980s were marked by hope and redistribution. The government invested massively in education and health, and those gains were real. But state capitalism was mismanaged, and by the late 1980s, inefficiency and corruption had crept in.*” In the same vein, a former civil servant noted this: “*We saw new schools and clinics being built, and for a moment it felt like independence was delivering. Yet the parastatals were draining resources without producing results.*” Furthermore, a trade union representative had this to add: “*Workers benefited from wage increases and social services, but the system quickly became unsustainable as elites captured the benefits.*” Additionally, a retired teacher made this emphasis: “*Education expanded rapidly, but classrooms were overcrowded and resources stretched thin, showing the limits of redistribution.*” Other respondents reported that while rural communities initially benefited from new clinics and schools, the quality of services declined as resources were mismanaged. It was also highlighted that parastatals, though intended to drive industrialization, became vehicles for political patronage rather than engines of productivity. Moreover, several participants concluded that the redistributive agenda was genuine in intent but shallow in execution, as structural inequalities persisted beneath the surface of early gains.

These reflections highlight the dual character of Zimbabwe’s state-led capitalist experimentation in the 1980s, initial redistributive gains followed by inefficiency and elite capture. Raftopoulos (2019) acknowledges the early social progress in education and healthcare but stresses its erosion through mismanagement. Bond (1998)



critiques the rise of bureaucratic capitalism, where nationalization shielded elite interests rather than advancing genuine transformation. Mkodzongi (2019) similarly argues that redistributive rhetoric masked structural inequalities, as state-led initiatives failed to dismantle colonial economic legacies. These perspectives confirm that while the post-independence state initially delivered tangible social benefits, its statist capitalist model was undermined by inefficiency, corruption, and entrenched inequality.

Government Perspective

The findings reveal that government officials acknowledged the contradictions of state-led capitalism, recognizing its ideological ambitions but also its failure to dismantle colonial economic structures. One participant, a government economist involved in planning, explained this: *"We believed in socialism with a Zimbabwean face. But the problem was we never dismantled the settler economic base. We inherited it and just sat on top of it without transforming it."* In the same vein, a senior policymaker at the time recalled this: *"The rhetoric was about socialism, but in practice we protected settler industries and only tinkered at the edges."* Similarly, a former education official had this to say: *"Yes, schools and clinics expanded, but the economic foundations remained colonial, and redistribution was shallow."*

Furthermore, other respondents reported that while social spending increased in the 1980s, the benefits were unevenly distributed, with rural communities still excluded from meaningful development. Additionally, it was noted that parastatals, though presented as engines of transformation, often became bureaucratic institutions serving political elites rather than dismantling entrenched inequalities.

This reveals the contradictions of Zimbabwe's state-led capitalist experimentation in the 1980s, early redistributive gains were undermined by continuity of colonial economic structures. Moyo (2020) emphasizes that post-independence policies failed to dismantle entrenched settler capital, resulting in continuity rather than transformation. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) similarly argue that the state pursued populist redistribution while retaining colonial economic frameworks, producing a hybrid model that lacked ideological coherence. Bond (1998) critiques this as bureaucratic capitalism, where nationalization shielded elite interests rather than advancing genuine transformation. In this regard, while the government achieved notable social progress, its failure to restructure the economic base entrenched inequality and compromised the transformative potential of state-led capitalism.

Labour Concerns

The findings reveal that workers experienced state-led capitalism as exclusionary, with parastatals serving political elites rather than empowering labour. One participant, a trade unionist, made this lamentation: *"Parastatals were supposed to serve the people. But in reality, they became vehicles for political appointments. Workers had no voice, capitalism remained, just with a new face."* In the same vein, a former factory worker added this: *"We thought independence would bring worker empowerment, but decisions were made at the top, and we were excluded."* Further explaining, a union organizer reflected this: *"Nationalization was presented as socialism, yet it only created new elites while workers stayed powerless."* Additionally, another respondent, a retrenched textile worker, had this to emphasize: *"We were laid off without compensation, and survival meant vending on the streets. It was not empowerment, it was desperation."* Sharing the same concern, a community elder concluded this: *"Workers remained at the margins; promises of transformation never reached the shop floor."*

These testimonies reveal how labour concerns were sidelined during the early post-independence redistribution phase, despite promises of empowerment. Sachikonye (2019) argues that nationalization primarily served political patronage rather than genuine worker participation. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) similarly note that while redistributive policies expanded social services, they failed to democratize workplace structures, leaving workers marginalized. Bond (1998) critiques this as bureaucratic capitalism, where elite interests were protected under the guise of socialism. To this effect, labour remained subordinated in Zimbabwe's state-led capitalist experimentation, with redistribution benefiting elites more than workers.



Elite Capture and Private Sector Continuity

The findings reveal that state-led capitalism in Zimbabwe was undermined by elite capture and the persistence of settler-dominated private capital, resulting in continuity rather than transformation. One participant, a journalist, observed this: *“Elite networks in the ruling party quietly maintained ties with settler capital. Redistribution rhetoric was loud, but the economy was still run by old and new elites.”* In the same vein, a former parastatal employee had this to reflect: *“Nationalization was supposed to break the old order, but it only created new elites who partnered with the old ones.”* Sharing the same concern, a civil society activist noted this: *“The promises of socialism were betrayed; the private sector remained in settler hands, while ruling party elites benefited from state contracts.”* Furthermore, another respondent, a retired banker made this explanation: *“Financial institutions never changed ownership; they simply adjusted to accommodate political elites while continuing settler dominance.”* Additionally, a trade unionist had this concern to emphasize: *“Workers saw no real redistribution, capital stayed concentrated, and elites captured the gains.”*

The findings underscore how elite capture and private sector continuity undermined the redistributive agenda of the early post-independence era. Bond (2020) argues that elite alliances perpetuated structural inequality by shielding settler capital under nationalist rhetoric. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) similarly highlight that the state pursued populist redistribution while retaining colonial economic frameworks, producing a hybrid model that lacked coherence. Mkodzongi (2019) adds that elite capture remained entrenched, with redistribution serving political patronage rather than genuine transformation. Drawing inference from the findings, despite the rhetoric of socialism and empowerment, Zimbabwe’s economy in the 1980s remained dominated by old settler capital and newly empowered elites, leaving ordinary workers and communities marginalized.

Civil Society Critique

The findings reveal that civil society actors consistently critiqued state-led capitalism as exclusionary, bureaucratic, and disconnected from grassroots needs. One participant, a civil society activist, had this to note: *“This was bureaucratic capitalism, not participatory socialism. The people remained outside the economy. Even state companies were not responsive to community needs.”* In the same vein, a community organizer reflected this: *“Redistribution was spoken of, but decisions were made in closed offices, far from the voices of ordinary citizens.”* Furthermore, another participant, a rural cooperative leader explained this: *“We saw clinics and schools, but communities were never consulted. Development was top-down, not ours.”* Sharing the same concern, a respondent who is a youth activist added this: *“The rhetoric of empowerment excluded us. State-led capitalism became a project for elites, not the grassroots.”* Similarly, a women’s rights advocate made this emphasis: *“Women and marginalized groups were side-lined. Redistribution was never inclusive, it reinforced old hierarchies.”*

These testimonies highlight how civil society perceived state-led capitalist experimentation as exclusionary and elite-driven, undermining its transformative potential. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argues that the absence of grassroots democratization meant redistribution remained rhetorical rather than participatory. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) similarly note that while social services expanded, the state retained colonial economic structures, limiting genuine transformation. Bond (1998) critiques this model as bureaucratic capitalism, where nationalization shielded elite interests instead of empowering communities. In this regard, the perception here is that the 1980s redistributive agenda was compromised by top-down governance, elite capture, and the marginalization of grassroots voices.

Historical Reflection

The findings reveal that Zimbabwe’s experiment with state-led capitalism after independence was marked by ideological ambition but constrained by structural continuities and elite interests. From a historical perspective, one participant, an academic historian, made this conclusion: *“Zimbabwe’s attempt at state capitalism was ideological in spirit but conservative in practice. It lacked grassroots democratization, and that’s why it failed to transform society.”* Similarly, a retired policymaker had this reflection: *“We spoke of socialism, but the economic structures remained colonial in design, continuity outweighed change.”* Going on, a youth and civil society activist observed this: *“Redistribution was promised, but the state never dismantled settler capital; it*



only managed it differently." In the same spirit, a former trade unionist added this emphasis: "Workers expected empowerment, but the system was bureaucratic, serving elites rather than the masses." Additionally, a rural cooperative leader had this to surmise: "The rhetoric of transformation was strong, yet everyday realities showed inequality persisted."

These reflections highlight the contradictions of Zimbabwe's post-independence state-led capitalist experimentation, where ideological ambition was undermined by conservative economic practices and elite dominance. Muzondidya (2021) stresses that redistributive rhetoric failed to dismantle entrenched settler capital, resulting in continuity rather than transformation. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) similarly argue that the state pursued populist redistribution while retaining colonial economic frameworks, producing a hybrid model that lacked coherence. Bond (1998) critiques this as bureaucratic capitalism, where nationalization shielded elite interests instead of empowering grassroots communities. Based on this, while the 1980s were marked by ideological optimism, the absence of structural transformation and grassroots democratization meant that inequality and elite capture persisted.

Coming to document analysis findings which confirmed much of interview submissions, the Economic Planning Commission Report (1985) candidly acknowledged that parastatals were underperforming due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. The Ministry of Industry Mid-Term Review (1988) praised infrastructure development but noted continued dependence on imports and weak industrial competitiveness. The National Trade Union Congress Position Paper (1987) warned against nationalization being used for political patronage, stressing the need for worker participation. The World Bank Country Economic Memorandum (1989, p. 42) stated: "Zimbabwe's parastatal sector has become a financial burden, with inefficiencies undermining growth and competitiveness." Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) observed that the post-colonial state retained many colonial economic structures, resulting in a hybrid model that compromised ideological coherence. Bond (1998) similarly argued that bureaucratic capitalism shielded elite interests under the guise of nationalization, leaving structural inequality intact.

Synthesizing interviews and documents, it becomes clear that Zimbabwe's post-independence experiment in state-led capitalism was transformative in its redistributive aims but constrained by structural limitations, elite capture, and inefficiencies. While education and healthcare expanded, parastatals failed to deliver sustainable industrialization or democratized ownership. In conformity with Mkodzongi (2019) and Bond (2020), the evidence suggests that state capitalism entrenched bureaucratic and elite interests rather than dismantling settler capital. This therefore means that Zimbabwe's statist experiment was a hybrid model, progressive in rhetoric but conservative in practice. It offered short-term social gains but lacked grassroots democratization and structural transformation, leaving the economy vulnerable to stagnation and inequality.

Contemporary Forms of Informal Capitalism in Zimbabwe (2000 to Present)

Since 2000, Zimbabwe's economy has been increasingly defined by informal capitalism, emerging as an adaptive response to prolonged crisis, institutional fragility, and state retrenchment. National policy documents acknowledge its centrality to livelihoods, with over 70% of the working population engaged in vending, small-scale mining, cross-border trade, and informal manufacturing. While informality cushions households against collapse, it also entrenches precarity and undermines long-term development. Reports highlight both its economic significance and its hazardous, unregulated character, underscoring the contradictions of survivalist capitalism in the contemporary era. Against this backdrop, the following section presents the findings thematically, showing how ordinary Zimbabweans experience and navigate informal capitalism in practice:

Survival and Reinvention

The findings reveal that informal capitalism in Zimbabwe emerged as a reinvention of livelihoods, where survival strategies replaced formal employment after economic collapse. One participant, an academic historian, explained this: "What we call informal capitalism today is the economy of survival. After ESAP and the collapse of formal employment, people reinvented livelihoods through vending, trading, and hustling. This is capitalism without regulation or protection." In the same vein, a street vendor made this reflection: "We turned pavements into markets because factories closed. Survival meant selling tomatoes, clothes, anything we



could." Echoing this experience, a cross-border trader had this to surmise: "*When jobs disappeared, we crossed into South Africa and Botswana to bring goods back to sell here.*" Sharing the same reality, a youth entrepreneur made this emphasis: "*Informal business was not a choice, it was the only way to live after formal jobs vanished.*" Furthermore, another participant who is a former textile worker emphasized this: "*We were retrenched, but we reinvented ourselves in the informal sector. That's how families survive.*"

This illustrate how Zimbabweans reinvented livelihoods through informal capitalism in response to the collapse of formal employment after ESAP. Mahiya (2021) argues that informal economies are structural rather than transitional, reflecting resilience amid systemic breakdown. Kamete (2010) similarly highlights that informalization became the dominant mode of urban survival, reshaping social and economic landscapes. Muzondidya (2021) adds that the informal sector embodies both adaptation and exclusion, as workers operate outside regulation and protection. This therefore confirms that informal capitalism in Zimbabwe is not temporary but a permanent feature of survival and reinvention in the face of economic crisis.

Labour and Precarity

Participants had a lot to say, one of them who is a trade unionist, reflected this: "*People didn't choose the informal economy; they were pushed into it. Industries collapsed, salaries disappeared, and people started selling tomatoes to live. This is a forced entrepreneurship, not a liberated one.*" Another respondent, a retrenched textile worker, had this to explain: "*We were laid off without compensation, and survival meant vending on the streets. It was not empowerment, it was desperation.*" In conformity, IP4, a former mine employee, noted this: "*When the mines closed, we had no safety nets. Informal work was the only option, but it was insecure and exhausting.*" Another participant, a women's cooperative leader, had this to add:

"Women bore the brunt of precarity, selling vegetables, sewing clothes, anything to feed families after jobs vanished." Furthermore another participant who echoed, a youth activist, who echoed IP4, made this emphasis: "*The informal economy is not freedom; it is exclusion. Young people hustle because the formal sector shut them out.*"

These findings reveal how informalisation in Zimbabwe was not voluntary but a product of economic collapse and state withdrawal, leaving workers vulnerable to precarious livelihoods. Muzondidya (2020) stresses that informalisation emerged from structural shocks rather than empowerment. Kamete (2010) similarly argues that informal economies became the dominant mode of urban survival, reflecting systemic exclusion. Mahiya (2021) adds that informal capitalism is structural, embodying resilience but also chronic insecurity. Against this bedrock, labour precarity in Zimbabwe's post-ESAP era was shaped by forced adaptation, where survivalist entrepreneurship masked deeper inequalities and the erosion of worker protections.

Gendered Dimensions

The participants emphasised a number of issues. One of the participants, IP3, a civil society activist, emphasized this: "*Women have carried the burden of economic collapse. They are vendors, cross-border traders, and informal financiers but they work without security, without pensions, and under constant threat of harassment.*" Another respondent, a market vendor, reflected: "*We wake up at dawn to sell vegetables, but the police chase us away. Survival is daily struggle.*" In the same line, another participant who is a cross-border trader, had this to explain: "*Crossing into South Africa or Mozambique was never easy, but women did it to feed families.*" In addition, a women's cooperative leader, made this statement: "*We organized savings clubs because banks excluded us. Informal finance became our safety net.*" Additionally, participant who is a youth activist, had this to say: "*Young women especially are trapped in informal work, juggling childcare and vending without protection.*"

These testimonies highlight the feminization of informal capitalism, where women disproportionately bear the burden of economic collapse through precarious livelihoods. The UNDP Human Development Report (2021) underscores that women and youth dominate the informal sector, reflecting systemic exclusion from formal employment. Mahiya (2021) argues that informal economies are structural, not transitional, and women's participation reflects resilience amid systemic breakdown. Muzondidya (2020) adds that informalisation



entrenches precarity, with women facing heightened vulnerability due to gendered inequalities. In this regard, Zimbabwe's informal capitalism is deeply gendered, with women sustaining households through survivalist strategies while remaining marginalized and insecure.

State Ambivalence

With regards to state ambivalence, one respondent, a government economist, made this assertion: "*The informal sector is used politically and economically but the state doesn't protect it. There's no investment in infrastructure, no legal framework, just ad hoc toleration.*"

Another one, who is a civil society activist, made this reflection: "*Authorities tolerate vendors during elections, but afterwards they chase them away. It is political convenience, not policy.*" Furthermore, a market vendor, explained this: "*We pay daily taxes to councils, yet we get no shelter, no water, and no toilets. The state takes but gives nothing back.*" Another respondent who is a youth trader had this to say: "*The government praises entrepreneurship, but informal workers remain criminalized and harassed by police.*" The participant who is women's cooperative leader, emphasized this: "*We are the backbone of survival, yet the state treats us as illegal, never as partners in development.*"

Based on the above, the ambivalent stance of the state toward the informal sector, exploiting it for political and fiscal gain while withholding structural support. Raftopoulos (2019) argues that the state benefits from informality through indirect taxation and electoral leverage but fails to institutionalize protection. Muzondidya (2020) similarly highlights that informalisation reflects state withdrawal, leaving workers vulnerable to precarity. Mahiya (2021) adds that informal economies are structural, not transitional, and the state's neglect entrenches insecurity rather than enabling resilience. These perspectives therefore affirm that Zimbabwe's informal sector is tolerated but not supported, reinforcing inequality and undermining its transformative potential.

Informal Mining and Risk

Participants highlighted the precarious realities of survivalist capitalism, where communities turn to hazardous practices of informal mining in the absence of formal employment. Their testimonies revealed the risks, resilience, and desperation that define artisanal mining as both livelihood and danger. One participant, IP5, a journalist, commented: "*In mining areas, you see teenage boys going into mine shafts with no equipment, risking their lives for a few grams of gold. That's informal capitalism in its rawest form.*" Another participant, a former artisanal miner, made this reflection: "*We worked with bare hands and homemade tools, knowing the shafts could collapse at any time.*" Furthermore, sharing the same view, a participant who is a community elder, explained this: "*Children and women joined mining because there were no jobs elsewhere. It was survival, not choice.*" Another respondent, a youth activist, weighed in with this: "*Gold panners face harassment from police, yet they keep going back because it is the only livelihood.*" Furthermore, an interviewee who is a health worker in a mining town, made this emphasis: "*We treated injuries daily broken bones, suffocation, even deaths. Informal mining is dangerous but people have no alternatives.*"

These testimonies reveal the precarious and hazardous nature of informal mining in Zimbabwe, where survival drives people into unsafe practices. ZELA (2021) documents the risks of artisanal mining, noting both entrepreneurial agency and institutional neglect. Mkodzongi (2019) argues that informal mining reflects structural exclusion, as marginalized groups are forced into dangerous livelihoods outside formal regulation. Muzondidya (2020) adds that informalisation entrenches precarity, with mining communities bearing the brunt of systemic collapse. All in all, one cannot but deduce that informal mining embodies both resilience and risk, highlighting the contradictions of survivalist capitalism in contexts of state withdrawal and economic crisis.

Improvised Capitalism

Participants, testimonies revealed how ordinary Zimbabweans have improvised capitalism, crafting survivalist economies outside formal protections. One participant, an academic, observed this: "*We've moved from bureaucratic statism to informal survivalism. Capitalism here is improvised, markets without contracts, labour*



without rights, and profits without protections" In the same vein, a community elder, reflected this: "*People trade from buckets and pavements, without licenses or guarantees. It is survival, not planned development.*" Furthermore, one respondent who is a youth entrepreneur, made this explanation: "*We hustle daily, selling airtime, clothes, food, but there are no protections, no pensions, and no contracts.*" Sharing the same experience, a women's cooperative leader, added: "*Savings clubs and rotating credit schemes became our banks because formal institutions excluded us.*" Additionally, a participant who is a retrenched worker, stressed this emphasis: "*Improvised capitalism is our reality, families survive through vending and hustling, not through formal jobs.*"

These testimonies highlight the rise of improvised capitalism in Zimbabwe, where survivalist strategies dominate amid the collapse of formal structures. Muzondidya (2020) argues that informalisation is now a defining feature of post-2000 capitalism, deeply embedded in everyday life. Mahiya (2021) reinforces this by noting that informal economies are structural, not transitional, reflecting resilience in the face of systemic breakdown. Kamete (2010) adds that urban informalization reshaped livelihoods, creating markets without regulation or protection. This upholds the perception that improvised capitalism in Zimbabwe represents both adaptation and exclusion, with communities sustaining themselves through unregulated survivalist practices while remaining outside formal protections.

Coming to document analysis finding, the analysed documents upheld most of the issues raised under interview findings, the documents reveal the deep contradictions underpinning Zimbabwe's informal capitalism. The National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1, 2021–2025) acknowledges that informality is central to livelihoods, yet simultaneously highlights its exclusion from tax and regulatory frameworks. This ambivalence reflects a broader state posture: recognition of the sector's economic significance without meaningful integration into formal planning. Vision 2030 similarly recognizes the informal economy's contribution to GDP but fails to provide mechanisms for institutional incorporation, thereby perpetuating a dual economy where informal actors sustain national survival but remain marginalized in policy. This contradiction underscores Raftopoulos's (2019) argument that the state benefits politically and fiscally from informality while withholding structural support, reinforcing precarity rather than enabling transformation.

Documents evidence further illustrates the scale and risks of informal capitalism. The ZELA Report (2021) reports that informal miners account for more than 60% of gold deliveries to Fidelity Printers, yet operate under hazardous and unregulated conditions. This finding demonstrates both the entrepreneurial agency of marginalized groups and the institutional neglect that exposes them to danger. Scoones et al. (2019) similarly highlight how rural economies have been reconfigured through informal arrangements, with households combining subsistence farming, artisanal mining, and trading to construct hybrid livelihoods. The World Bank Economic Update (2020) warns that such extensive informalisation weakens tax collection and undermines long-term productivity, reflecting the paradox of informality as both a survival mechanism and a structural constraint on development. Muzondidya (2020) provides a critical lens, arguing that informalization is not a temporary crisis response but a defining feature of Zimbabwe's post-2000 capitalism, embedded in everyday survival strategies and resistant to formal absorption.

Social dimensions of informality are equally pronounced. The UNDP Human Development Report (2021) emphasizes the feminization of informality, noting that women and youth dominate informal economies, often bearing disproportionate burdens of precarity. This aligns with Mahiya's (2021) observation that households reconstruct livelihoods through vending, recycling, and kinship ties, transforming informal markets into shock absorbers against state neglect. The Ministry of Finance Mid-Year Economic Review (2022) adds a technological dimension, noting that 80% of informal trade is conducted via mobile money platforms such as EcoCash. While these innovations have enabled financial inclusion, regulatory inconsistencies hinder their potential to stabilize and expand informal capitalism. Taken together, these documents confirm that contemporary informal capitalism in Zimbabwe is structurally entrenched, gendered, technologically adaptive, and politically ambivalent. It sustains livelihoods in the absence of formal employment yet perpetuates vulnerability, illustrating the fractured but dynamic nature of peripheral capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Synthesizing interviews and documentary evidence, it becomes clear that informal capitalism in Zimbabwe is not merely a temporary coping mechanism but a structural condition embedded in the country's political



economy. Across testimonies, ordinary citizens described how vending, cross-border trade, artisanal mining, and digital hustling have become the backbone of survival, cushioning households against systemic collapse. Yet, as the documents reveal, this resilience is accompanied by entrenched precarity, exclusion, and institutional fragility. The National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025) and Vision 2030 acknowledge the centrality of informality but fail to provide meaningful integration mechanisms, thereby perpetuating a dual economy where informal actors sustain livelihoods but remain marginalized. This contradiction reflects Ferguson's (2015) notion of "peripheral neoliberalism," where the state withdraws from welfare provision yet retains authoritarian controls, allowing market logics to proliferate without protections.

The findings also highlight the gendered and generational dimensions of informal capitalism. Women and youth dominate the sector, as emphasized in the UNDP Human Development Report (2021), bearing disproportionate burdens of precarity while simultaneously driving innovation through savings clubs, peer lending, and digital entrepreneurship. The recorded crowded urban markets and unsafe artisanal mining shafts confirm the feminization and risk-laden nature of informality, while the Ministry of Finance Mid-Year Economic Review (2022) underscores the technological adaptation of informal trade, with mobile money platforms facilitating over 80% of transactions. Scholars such as Mahiya (2021) argue that these practices are structural, transforming households and communities into shock absorbers against state neglect, while Muzondidya (2020) stresses that informalisation entrenches vulnerability by leaving workers outside regulation and protection. Thus, informal capitalism simultaneously embodies resilience and marginalization, innovation and exclusion.

The evidence points to the ambivalent role of the state. Interviews revealed how authorities exploit informality for political and fiscal gain tolerating vendors during elections, taxing traders through councils, and benefiting from artisanal gold deliveries, yet fail to provide infrastructure, legal frameworks, or protection. Raftopoulos (2019) captures this paradox, noting that the state benefits indirectly from informality while withholding structural support. Documents such as the ZELA Report (2021) and Scoones et al. (2019) further illustrate how rural and mining economies have been reconfigured through informal arrangements, producing hybrid livelihoods that sustain communities but remain precarious. To this effect, these findings confirm that informal capitalism in Zimbabwe is not transitional but deeply embedded, shaping the contours of economic life in the twenty-first century. It is a fractured but dynamic system, at once a space of citizen agency and innovation, and a site of exclusion and risk, revealing the contradictions of peripheral capitalism in contexts of prolonged crisis and state ambivalence.

How Ordinary Zimbabweans Navigated Capitalist Transitions and Socio-Economic Challenges Post-Independence

In the post-independence era, Zimbabweans confronted successive waves of capitalist transition, from state-led developmentalism to structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms by relying on resilience, improvisation, and adaptation. Excluded from formal economic structures, citizens crafted parallel economies that operated outside state and institutional frameworks, reshaping everyday economic life. These strategies clustered around household survival, labour improvisation, community solidarity, and digital innovation, each reflecting how ordinary people sustained livelihoods in contexts of crisis and exclusion. Against this backdrop, following is a presentation of the findings thematically, showing how Zimbabweans navigated capitalist transitions and socio-economic challenges through diverse and adaptive practices.

Household Survival and Informal Economies

The findings reveal that households became the frontline of survival, transforming homes and streets into informal markets. One participant, a historian, explained this: *"People adjusted. In the 1990s, when structural adjustment came, men lost factory jobs, and women began trading tomatoes, clothes, anything. The home became the new factory, and the street became the marketplace."* In the same vein, a trade unionist emphasized: *"Former industrial workers now work in kombis, sell second-hand clothes, or run tuck-shops. It's a hustle economy. Capitalism collapsed, but people didn't. They adjusted."* Furthermore, a community elder reflected this: *"Families turned to vending and recycling; survival meant turning every corner into a market."* Sharing the same experience, a retrenched worker added: *"We had no choice but to use our homes as shops*



and our children as helpers in the trade." Additionally, a women's cooperative leader made this emphasis: "*Women carried the burden, selling vegetables and clothes to keep households alive when wages disappeared.*"

This illustrate how households became the frontline of survival during Zimbabwe's economic transitions, transforming domestic and public spaces into informal markets. Mahiya (2021) argues that urban households reconstructed livelihoods through vending, recycling, and kinship ties, making informal markets shock absorbers against state neglect. Muzondidya (2020) reinforces that informalisation was structural, not transitional, embedding survivalist practices into everyday life. Kamete (2010) further highlights that informal economies reshaped urban landscapes, creating parallel systems of resilience outside formal regulation. In this light, household survival strategies were central to navigating capitalist collapse, demonstrating both resilience and exclusion in Zimbabwe's socio-economic trajectory.

Community Solidarity and Self-Reliance

The findings show that communities relied on solidarity and self-reliance, building parallel systems of survival when the state failed. One participant, a civil society activist, noted: "*We saw people building roads, running informal clinics, setting up community schools not because they wanted to, but because the state had failed them. Capitalism left them behind, so they made their own way.*" In conformity, a respondent who is a journalist recalled: "*People created parallel economies, fuel coupons, USD, bartering. Supermarkets were empty, but markets were full. Ordinary people built systems while the formal ones collapsed.*" Furthermore, a community elder explained this: "*Villagers pooled resources to repair bridges and dig wells because government services never reached us.*" Sharing the same view, a participant, who is women's cooperative leader added: "*We organized savings clubs and rotating credit schemes to survive when banks excluded us.*" Additionally, a youth activist made this reflection: "*Community solidarity became our safety net, without it, many families would not have survived the crisis.*"

The findings highlight how ordinary Zimbabweans relied on community solidarity and self-reliance to navigate economic collapse, building parallel systems of survival when the state failed to deliver. Masunungure and Shumba (2012) argue that citizenship in Zimbabwe is increasingly expressed through informal circuits and grassroots resilience rather than formal political participation. Muzondidya (2020) reinforces that informalisation entrenched survivalist practices, embedding them structurally in everyday life. Raftopoulos (2019) adds that community-driven initiatives filled gaps left by state neglect, underscoring the agency of citizens in reconfiguring economic life. Synthesised, these perspectives confirm that solidarity and self-reliance were central to sustaining livelihoods, transforming communities into engines of resilience amid systemic breakdown.

Gendered and Generational Adaptation

The findings highlight how women and youth became central to adapting Zimbabwe's economy through informal and digital innovations. One participant, a government economist, admitted: "*The truth is, we were slow to support the informal economy. People were innovating, doing mobile money, peer lending, trading with Mozambique, long before we tried to regulate or empower them.*" In the same vein, an academic observed this: "*The youth are digital entrepreneurs now. They use WhatsApp to sell groceries, Facebook to run informal taxis, and TikTok to advertise businesses. This is informal capitalism adapted to technology.*" Furthermore, another respondent, a women's cooperative leader reflected this: "*Women carried the informal economy, running savings clubs, vending, and cross-border trade, yet they remained invisible in policy.*" Sharing the same experience, a youth activist explained this: "*Digital hustling is our survival, WhatsApp groups are our shops, and mobile money is our bank.*" Additionally, a civil society organizer made this emphasis: "*Generational adaptation shows resilience, young people innovate digitally while women sustain households through informal trade.*"

The above postulations highlight how women and youth have been central to adapting Zimbabwe's economy through informal and digital innovations. UNDP (2021) confirms that women and youth dominate informal economies, underscoring the feminization and generational reshaping of survival strategies. Muzondidya



(2020) argues that informalization is structural, not transitional, embedding these practices into everyday life. Mahiya (2021) further emphasizes that households and communities reconstruct livelihoods through vending, peer lending, and kinship ties, transforming informality into a permanent economic system. In this regard, gendered and generational adaptation has redefined Zimbabwe's post-independence capitalism, blending resilience with exclusion in ways that sustain survival but entrench precarity.

Documentary evidence strongly corroborates the lived experiences of ordinary Zimbabweans, illustrating how resilience and improvisation have become structural features of economic life. The Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC, 2020) shows that households in drought-affected regions increasingly rely on seasonal migration, remittances, and informal markets, with over sixty percent depending on labour mobility to sustain livelihoods. This finding underscores the extent to which survival has been externalized beyond the formal economy, with mobility and informal trade acting as shock absorbers against systemic collapse. Similarly, the UNDP Human Development Report (2021) highlights the critical role of informal safety nets such as *mukando* (rotating savings groups), which have become pillars of household survival in the absence of state welfare. These grassroots financial systems demonstrate how communities have reconfigured economic life through solidarity and improvisation, embedding informalisation as a permanent rather than transitional feature of Zimbabwe's capitalism.

ZELA (2021) adds another layer by documenting artisanal miners who, despite operating in legally ambiguous spaces, organize themselves into income-sharing collectives and mutual aid groups. Strikingly, these arrangements often achieve more equitable outcomes than formal employers, revealing how informal economies can generate alternative models of redistribution and justice. Scoones et al. (2019) similarly emphasize hybrid livelihoods among resettled farmers, who combine subsistence agriculture with trading and artisanal mining, thereby diversifying survival strategies in fragile rural economies. Bond (2014) interprets these developments as part of a "silent reconfiguration" of economic life, where ordinary Zimbabweans craft viable economies in the ruins of formal institutions, effectively reshaping capitalism from below.

More recent reports reinforce this trajectory. The World Bank's Zimbabwe Economic Update (2024) stresses that resilience to climate shocks, particularly the El Niño-induced drought, has been mediated through informal markets, migration, and remittance flows, underscoring the structural role of informality in cushioning households. The World Food Programme (2024) similarly observes that food insecurity has driven communities to rely on barter, parallel currencies, and informal distribution networks, further entrenching grassroots systems of survival. Complementing these findings, TARSC, ZCTU, and ZCIEA (2022) highlight how informal economy workers are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change impacts, yet simultaneously act as agents of innovation through adaptive practices such as informal insurance schemes and community-based climate responses.

The findings from documents therefore confirm that adaptation in Zimbabwe is not passive but active, reflecting resilience, innovation, and structural transformation of livelihoods. Informalization has become a defining feature of post-independence capitalism, with households, communities, and youth crafting parallel economies that operate outside formal institutions. These responses reveal both the exclusionary nature of capitalist transitions and the agency of citizens in reconfiguring economic life. In this sense, Zimbabwe's experience speaks to broader debates on post-crisis capitalism, where resilience and improvisation are not marginal but central to survival, and where ordinary people, through everyday practices, redefine the contours of economic systems in contexts of systemic collapse. In this regard, Zimbabwe's post-independence economic transitions reveal a profound reliance on informalisation, resilience, and improvisation. However, this trajectory is not unique; across Africa, ordinary citizens have similarly reconfigured capitalism from below, crafting survival economies in contexts of systemic collapse, state withdrawal, or neoliberal restructuring.

In Nigeria, research by Meagher (2010) have shown how informal trade networks, particularly in urban centres like Lagos and Kano, became the backbone of survival amid structural adjustment and state neglect. These networks are highly organized, with associations regulating markets, enforcing contracts, and providing social protection where the state fails. Much like Zimbabwe's *mukando* savings clubs, Nigerian informal traders have created parallel institutions that sustain livelihoods, demonstrating that informality is not chaotic but institutionally embedded. In Kenya, mobile money ecosystems such as M-Pesa have transformed informal



capitalism into a digitally mediated system. Jack and Suri (2016) argue that mobile money has not only facilitated everyday transactions but also enabled savings, credit, and remittance flows, thereby integrating informal actors into broader financial circuits. Zimbabwe's EcoCash mirrors this trajectory, as observed in UNDP (2021), where mobile platforms became lifelines in the absence of stable currency. Both cases highlight how digital innovation reconfigures informal economies, blending resilience with technological adaptation.

In South Africa, informalization has taken a different shape, with urban township economies and cross-border trade networks sustaining marginalized communities. Hart (2010) and Rogan (2016) emphasize that informal work is deeply gendered, with women disproportionately engaged in survivalist activities such as street vending and domestic work. This resonates with Zimbabwe's feminization of informal capitalism, where women carry the burden of economic collapse, as documented by UNDP (2021) and Mahiya (2021).

To this effect, comparatively, Zimbabwe's informalization shares commonalities with other African cases, especially the centrality of household survival, the feminization of informal work, and the rise of digital innovation. Yet Zimbabwe's experience is distinctive in its intensity and structural permanence. Bond (2014) and Muzondidya (2020) argue that informalization in Zimbabwe is not transitional but deeply embedded, reflecting the collapse of formal institutions and the creation of parallel economies that are now integral to national survival. Unlike Kenya, where mobile money has been partially formalized, or Nigeria, where trade associations provide quasi-formal governance, Zimbabwe's informal capitalism remains precarious, tolerated but unsupported by the state, as Raftopoulos (2019) notes.

The above findings demonstrate that ordinary Zimbabweans have navigated capitalist transitions through a mosaic of adaptive strategies, household improvisation, community solidarity, gendered resilience, and digital innovation. These practices reveal the contradictions of peripheral capitalism: while formal structures collapse, withdraw, or exclude, citizens actively construct parallel systems that sustain livelihoods and reconfigure economic life. Far from being passive recipients of structural shocks, Zimbabweans have shown remarkable agency in transforming everyday spaces into sites of production, exchange, and solidarity. In conformity with Moyo (2020), the evidence underscores that grassroots agency is central to Zimbabwe's economic survival, challenging Dependency Theory's portrayal of peripheral actors as victims trapped in global capitalist hierarchies. Instead, the findings extend Peripheral Capitalism Theory by illustrating how domestic elites, state ambivalence, and citizen innovation coexist in tension, producing a fractured but dynamic economic landscape. This hybridity is marked by elite capture and state neglect on one hand, and by community-driven resilience and technological improvisation on the other.

Moreover, the findings resonate with Muzondidya (2020), who argues that informalisation in Zimbabwe is structural rather than transitional, embedding survivalist practices into the very fabric of the economy. Raftopoulos (2019) adds that state ambivalence toward informality, exploiting it for political leverage while withholding structural support, reinforces precarity but also opens spaces for citizen-led innovation. UNDP (2021) further confirms that women and youth dominate these informal circuits, highlighting the gendered and generational dimensions of adaptation. Thus, Zimbabwe's post-independence trajectory exemplifies a form of hybrid capitalism where exclusion and agency coexist. Formal institutions may falter, but ordinary citizens continuously reinvent economic life through improvisation and solidarity. This dynamic underscores that peripheral capitalism is not static or monolithic; it is contested, negotiated, and reshaped from below, revealing both the vulnerabilities and the creative capacities of marginalized populations.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research demonstrates that the capitalist system was fundamentally rooted in racial dispossession and coercive labour regimes. Archival evidence from BSAC reports and colonial legislative debates revealed that land expropriation and hut taxes were deliberately designed to force Africans into wage labour. This confirms Phimister's (1988) argument that colonial capitalism was not about free markets but about monopolies and racial privilege. The researcher concludes that settler capitalism entrenched structural inequality, laying the foundation for dependency and dual economies that persisted beyond independence. In the post-independence era (1980–1990), state-led capitalist experimentation was characterized by redistributive ambition but undermined by inefficiency and elite capture. Policy documents such as the First Five-Year National



Development Plan and the World Bank Memorandum (1989) highlighted both the promise of parastatals and their eventual underperformance. While investments in education and healthcare expanded access, the failure to dismantle settler capital and the reliance on parastatals created a bureaucratic capitalism that privileged elites. This aligns with Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009), who argue that Zimbabwe's post-independence economy became a hybrid of redistribution and capitalist accumulation, compromising ideological coherence.

The ESAP period (1991–2000) marked a sharp neoliberal turn, with findings indicating widespread social dislocation. IMF and World Bank reports revealed the dismantling of social safety nets and exposure of domestic industries to global competition. Communities responded by turning to informal vending and household-based enterprises as survival strategies. Bond (2014) argues that ESAP entrenched inequality and deindustrialization, and the findings here confirm that neoliberal reforms deepened vulnerability while failing to deliver sustainable growth. Contemporary informal capitalism (2000 to present) emerged as both resilience and exclusion. NDS 1 (2021–2025) and ZELA (2021) acknowledged the dominance of informality, particularly in vending and artisanal mining. Informal capitalism has become feminized and youth-driven, with women and young people bearing the brunt of economic collapse while simultaneously innovating through cross-border trade and digital entrepreneurship. The lived reality situation in urban markets and mining areas confirmed unsafe working conditions and harassment of vendors, underscoring the precariousness of informal livelihoods. This resonates with Muzondidya (2020), who argues that informalisation is now structural, not transitional, reflecting both state withdrawal and citizen innovation.

A key pattern across the findings is the continuity of exclusionary structures despite shifts in policy regimes. Whether under settler capitalism, state-led socialism, neoliberal reforms, or informal capitalism, ordinary Zimbabweans remained marginalized from ownership and decision-making. This continuity challenges narratives of rupture and instead highlights structural persistence. Mkodzongi (2019) emphasizes that elite capture has been a constant feature, regardless of ideological shifts, and the findings here affirm that capitalist transitions in Zimbabwe have consistently privileged elites over workers and communities. Another important theme is the gendered and generational dimension of capitalist transitions. Women and youth emerged as central actors in informal capitalism, sustaining households through vending, cross-border trade, and digital hustling. Yet, despite their centrality, they remain excluded from formal recognition and protection. The UNDP Human Development Report (2021) highlights this feminization of informality, while Mahiya (2021) shows how urban households reconstruct livelihoods through kinship ties and spatial creativity. The researcher concludes that informal capitalism has created spaces of agency but also entrenched vulnerabilities, particularly for marginalized groups.

The findings also reveal contradictions between state rhetoric and practice. While policy documents such as Vision 2030 symbolically recognize the informal sector, the state provides little structural support, relying instead on ad hoc toleration. Grassroots innovation through mobile money and peer lending has flourished, but regulatory inconsistencies hinder its potential. This reflects Ferguson's (2015) notion of "peripheral neoliberalism," where the state withdraws but retains authoritarian controls, allowing market logics to spread without protections. The evidence suggests that the state instrumentalizes informality politically while neglecting its developmental potential.

The findings strongly affirm the assumptions of Dependency Theory in explaining the colonial period. As Frank (1967) and Amin (1974) argued, colonial capitalism integrated Zimbabwe into global capitalism on unequal terms, subordinating local development to metropolitan needs. Evidence of land dispossession, forced labour, and resource extraction confirms Rodney's (1972) thesis that colonialism deliberately underdeveloped Africa. Thus, Dependency Theory remains highly relevant in explaining the structural roots of Zimbabwe's capitalist formation, particularly the creation of a dual economy that privileged settler capital while marginalizing African livelihoods. This historical trajectory illustrates how external domination entrenched long-term dependency, validating the central claim of Dependency Theory that underdevelopment is structurally produced rather than accidental.

However, Peripheral Capitalism Theory provides a more nuanced lens for analysing the post-independence and contemporary periods. Cardoso and Faletto (1979) emphasized the role of domestic elites and state policies in shaping peripheral outcomes, and the findings here confirm that Zimbabwe's hybrid capitalist structures were



driven by elite alliances, policy contradictions, and state ambivalence. The persistence of exclusion despite redistributive rhetoric illustrates how internal dynamics reinforced dependency. For example, the state's failure to dismantle settler capital and its reliance on parastatals created a bureaucratic capitalism that privileged elites while marginalizing workers, echoing Bond's (2014) critique of elite transition. At the same time, the rise of informal capitalism since 2000 demonstrates how peripheral economies evolve through improvisation and survival strategies, challenging Dependency Theory's tendency to portray peripheral actors as passive victims. Instead, the findings highlight citizen agency, innovation, and adaptation, showing that peripheral capitalism is not only shaped by external domination but also by internal contestations and grassroots resilience.

These insights contribute to theoretical debates on peripheral capitalism by demonstrating the need for a synthesis of Dependency and Peripheral Capitalism Theory. In conformity with Mhone (2001) and Murisa (2013), the findings suggest that external dependency explains structural constraints, while internal political economy dynamics account for contradictions and adaptations within Zimbabwe's capitalist trajectory. The evidence of elite capture, informal innovation, and gendered dimensions of survival economies expands the scope of Peripheral Capitalism Theory, showing that peripheral societies are not homogenous but are marked by diverse forms of agency and exclusion. Thus, the Zimbabwean case illustrates that peripheral capitalism is both imposed and negotiated, simultaneously reproducing dependency while generating new spaces of resistance and adaptation. This duality enriches theoretical debates by affirming the relevance of classical dependency insights while extending Peripheral Capitalism Theory to account for the lived realities of ordinary citizens navigating capitalist transitions in the Global South.

CONCLUSION

Capitalism in Zimbabwe has unfolded through complex, fractured, and contested transitions that reflect distinct historical epochs and highlight the enduring relevance of both Dependency Theory and Peripheral Capitalism Theory. Initially imposed through conquest, racialized land dispossession, and coercive labour regimes, colonial capitalism entrenched structural inequality and created a dual economy privileging settler capital while marginalizing African livelihoods, thereby confirming Rodney's (1972) thesis of deliberate underdevelopment and Frank's (1967) notion of dependency through extraction from periphery to core. In the post-independence period (1980–1990), state-led capitalist experimentation was marked by redistributive ambitions that expanded education and healthcare, yet the persistence of settler capital and the rise of bureaucratic and elite-driven structures limited transformative outcomes, producing a hybrid economy that combined redistributive rhetoric with capitalist accumulation. In the contemporary era (2000 to present), informal capitalism has become structural rather than transitional, with vending, artisanal mining, and digital entrepreneurship often feminized and youth-driven, emerging as survivalist strategies that demonstrate resilience and innovation. This trajectory challenges Dependency Theory's portrayal of peripheral actors as passive victims, instead affirming their agency in negotiating survival through kinship, solidarity, and technological improvisation, as seen in mukando savings groups, cooperative mining, and community-based clinics and schools. Overall, Zimbabwe's capitalist path has been characterized by settler racial capitalism, statist bureaucratic capitalism, neoliberal restructuring, and informal survivalism, each marked by exclusion and elite entrenchment but also by grassroots adaptation and innovation. Capitalism in Zimbabwe must therefore be understood as both imposed and negotiated: a system that reproduces dependency while simultaneously opening spaces for resistance, resilience, and inclusive adaptation, offering important lessons for policy and practice in balancing structural reform with community-driven agency.

The paper therefore recommends that future policy should build on the resilience already demonstrated by households and communities, by creating supportive frameworks that recognize and strengthen informal economies. Rather than viewing informality as a challenge, it can be embraced as an engine of innovation and survival, with policies that provide access to credit, training, and social protection for women, youth, and other groups who have sustained livelihoods through vending, savings clubs, and digital entrepreneurship. In this way, government can complement community initiatives and ensure that survivalist practices are transformed into sustainable development strategies. Furthermore, the paper emphasize the importance of inclusive planning and equitable resource distribution. While significant progress has been made in expanding education, health, and infrastructure, greater attention could be given to ensuring that rural and marginalized



communities benefit fully from these investments. Strengthening partnerships between government, civil society, and local cooperatives can help democratize development processes, ensuring that community voices shape priorities. Through embedding solidarity, inclusivity, and accountability into socio-economic planning, Zimbabwe can consolidate early gains and foster a more resilient and participatory development trajectory.

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