
The production of precarity: industrialization and racial inequality in colonial Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, development theorists have pointed to industrialization as key to long-term growth and poverty reduction in rural societies (e.g., Rostow 1962; Lewis 1954). In the context of Africa, dependency theorists in the 1960s and 1970s criticized colonial governments' emphasis on mineral and agricultural extraction at the expense of growth-stimulating manufacturing (Rodney 1972). Meanwhile, contemporary neoclassical economists have highlighted limited industrial development in the southern hemisphere as a cause of enduring poverty (Williamson 2011). In a recent study on urbanization in developing nations from 1960 to 2010, Gollin, Jedwab, and Vollrath (2016) found lower urban welfare gains where urbanization has been stimulated by resource extraction (so-called "consumption cities") in lieu of manufacturing-based development ("production cities").

Today, sub-Saharan African countries are among the least industrialized and least economically developed in the world. However, during the colonial era, some regions experienced considerable industrial development. Did colonial-era industrialization necessarily result in a poverty-reducing economic boost for industrial labourers? The colony of Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) provides excellent scope to explore the implications of industrialization and poverty in a colonial context, particularly when considered with a comparative eye toward urban developments in other sub-Saharan African colonies with different colonial institutions and/or economic characteristics.

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Beginning in the mid-1940s, Southern Rhodesia underwent rapid industrialization, with manufacturing output expanding nearly 25% per annum from 1944–1948 alone (Phimister 1988, pp. 239-257). By 1960, industrial output accounted for 16% of GDP in Southern Rhodesia, second only to South Africa's 20% (Austin, Frankema, and Jerven 2017, pp. 346, 353). But this industrial progress was accompanied by widespread poverty among black industrial workers and immense economic inequality. While industrial development has often been accompanied by inequality between capital and labour, inequality in Southern Rhodesia took on a very different character – between black and white labour.

Southern Rhodesia's rapid-fire industrial boom led to surging demand for industrial labour, the majority of which was supplied by black African men drawn from rural areas within and beyond the colony. Labourers sought higher-earning opportunities in industrializing cities, especially Salisbury and Bulawayo, relative to on overcrowded Reserves or as wage-workers on settler-owned farms. Even then, very few black industrial labourers earned wages sufficient to support an urban family. Consequently, most could not settle permanently in towns and instead migrated periodically between urban centres and their rural homelands. Meanwhile, labourers drawn from the small population of white settlers who had immigrated from Europe had reportedly "become one of the better paid working-classes of the world" by the 1960s, earning wages ten times higher than black workers performing similar tasks (Arrighi 1967, pp. 49-50).

This study of the opportunities, constraints, and inequality faced by black workers in industrializing Southern Rhodesia provides a number of key insights. First, it sheds light on the interplay between industrialization, institutions, and inequality, particularly highlighting the centrality of policies in determining the distribution of gains and, in turn, the impact of industrial development on poverty.¹ Specially, I illustrate: how inequitable institutions crafted to benefit the white settler population determined the opportunities and constraints faced by black inhabitants in both rural and urban Southern Rhodesia, which explains why black workers chose to labour in industry despite rampant urban inequality; how strong bargaining power of white industrial workers curtailed the opportunities of black industrial workers; and how the consequences of these dynamics negatively affected the income and living standards of most black urban inhabitants, consequently quashing the poverty-reducing capabilities of broader economic progress. Second, this study places the case of Southern Rhodesia in comparative perspective to consider if industrial cities necessarily provide higher living standards than cities that

1. For perspectives on industrial development, economic growth, and inequality, see Kniivilä (2007).

serviced extractive industries, or if institutions were more crucial in determining urban welfare developments in the colonial era. Comparison of urban development in Southern Rhodesia relative to sub-Saharan African colonies with differing colonial institutional characteristics (particularly, settler versus non-settler) and economic characteristics (urban growth based on manufacturing versus servicing primary exports) proves instructive. This asymmetrical approach lays the groundwork for more extensive systematic comparison and already suggests that institutions mattered more than the foundations of economic development for determining the welfare gains for black urban workers.

The article is organized as follows. The first section places Southern Rhodesian urban economic development and black urban welfare in comparative perspective. Focus then shifts to Southern Rhodesia, beginning with an overview of the colony's early history, when the foundations of exploitative colonial institutions were laid. Thereafter, I explore the colony's post-war manufacturing boom and surge of black workers entering urban industrial areas, and the causes and consequences of inequality that accompanied industrialization. The paper concludes by highlighting strategies employed by black labourers to survive economic insecurity in industrial towns.

Development and urban welfare in colonial Africa

Southern Rhodesia was not alone in its experience of pronounced racial inequality amid industrial development. Similar dynamics had unfolded in earlier-industrializing South Africa, which provided a model for numerous policies implemented by neighbouring Southern Rhodesia. In South Africa, land alienation, taxes, and other policy instruments had pushed black labourers into low-remuneration work, including in the mining and burgeoning manufacturing sectors. Meanwhile, black workers were excluded from skilled manufacturing occupations reserved for white settlers, whose high wages were subsidized by low rates paid to unskilled black workers (Feinstein 2005, pp. 128-135). Similarly, in South Africa's industrial gold mines, black workers were prohibited from skilled professions, depressing their potential earnings. They were also barred from residing permanently in "white" urban areas, which perpetuated circular migration (Juif 2022, pp. 210-215). As subsequent sections illustrate, strikingly similar tactics were employed in Southern Rhodesia to generate a black industrial labour force while privileging white urban residents as the colony underwent rapid industrialization by mid-century.

This was not the case in all nearby colonies undergoing industrial development. In industrializing Belgian Congo, the colonial government actively encouraged the development of a settled and skilled black labour force in

manufacturing cities, like Leopoldville. Real wages for black manufacturing workers increased from the 1930s, and funds were provided for housing and social provisions to support the settlement of black families in town. Consequently, wives increasingly joined their husbands in town (Frederick and van Nederveen Meerkerk 2022, pp. 263, 271-272). Family settlement was likewise encouraged in the colony's industrial copper mining region. In Katanga, the percentage of females relative to males steadily expanded from only 28% in the period 1920-1925 to nearly 82% in 1951-1965, indicating greater family settlement in the region. Meanwhile, the length of service for the majority of workers increased considerably from the 1920s onward (Juif and Frankema 2018, pp. 331-332). A move toward stabilization was partly a response to labour supply problems that arose when cross-border labour migration from Northern Rhodesia dwindled as the neighbouring colony underwent its own mining boom, and to rising costs of white relative to black labour. But the rise of a large population of settled black urban workers in the Congo's mining and manufacturing sectors was smoothed by the *absence* of a politically powerful population of colonial settlers preoccupied with preserving access to choice jobs and maintaining urban spaces as exclusively "white" areas.²

In contrast, the labour policy in neighbouring Northern Rhodesia's copper belt – with a 1:8 ratio of white to black workers in 1936 versus 1:20 in the Belgian Congo – was more akin to South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Here, the colonial government continued to promote circular migration and restrict urban habitation only to those black workers with valid labour contracts. The aim was to simultaneously maintain the "tribal" character of black labourers and protect the skilled jobs of unionized white mine workers. Meanwhile, black mining labourers in the Congo were offered a much greater range of skill and wage mobility (Juif and Frankema 2018; Juif 2022). Comparison of industrializing colonies in southern and central Africa illustrates how the opportunities for black workers wrought by industrial development in both manufacturing and mining centres hinged upon the colonial institutional context. Where settler populations were larger, opportunities for black industrial labourers were curtailed.

Looking beyond Southern Rhodesia and its neighbours further reveals the tighter link between black urban opportunities and *colonial policy* – particularly relating to settler dynamics – than urban *economic characteristics*. As in Southern Rhodesia, real wages for black urban labourers in Nairobi, the capital city of settler-dominated British Kenya in eastern Africa, were far

2. By 1960, white settlers comprised 6% of the Southern Rhodesian population versus 0.8% in the Belgian Congo. For an in-depth comparison of underlying causes of differing urban "labour stabilization" trends in these two colonies, see Frederick and van Nederveen Meerkerk (2022).

too low to settle permanently and establish a family, while white labourers received considerably higher wages for similar work (Rempel 1981, p. 26). Still, urban wages for black workers exceeded rural opportunities, which consequently drew labour-seekers to towns, especially in a context of increasing population pressure on rural land due to land alienation, analogous to developments in settler Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. Meanwhile, urban job opportunities were limited by the structure of the largely service-oriented urban economy, which focused primarily on administration, transport, and commercial facilities for agricultural exports alongside a few capital-intensive industries. This, according to van Zwanenberg (1972), was an important driver of low wages in Nairobi. In the absence of wider industrial development – which theoretically incentivizes the creation of a settled and higher-paid urban labour force – earning opportunities for black labourers were simply too meagre to lift them out of poverty and enable permanent urban settlement.

However, the case of Southern Rhodesia illustrates that the development of secondary industry does not *necessarily* lead to a considerable expansion of real wages for black urban workers if they are confronted with exclusionary and restrictive legislation designed to serve settler needs. In fact, if we compare welfare ratios³ in various sub-Saharan African urban centres (see Table 1), we find that wages in the settler colonies of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia were remarkably similar by the 1950s (1.8 and 1.7, respectively) despite vast differences in the economic makeup of service-oriented Nairobi and manufacturing-oriented Salisbury. And, in fact, the welfare ratio for black labour in Nairobi had even exceeded industrial Salisbury's in the 1940s. In the manufacturing centre of the Belgian Congo (Leopoldville), in contrast, welfare ratios had already reached 2.0 by 1938 and 2.2 in the 1950s, while the colony's mining region of Katanga reached 2.8 in the 1940s and an astounding 6.7 by the 1950s.

Crucially, the *real* earnings of most black urban workers in Salisbury were considerably lower than the welfare ratios in Table 1 suggest given that these data have been calculated based on a generalized “bare-bones” subsistence basket of goods to ensure comparability across the continent. If welfare ratios are instead calculated on the basis of local consumption norms recorded in Poverty Datum Line (hereafter PDL) studies carried out in Salisbury by Batson (1945) and Bettison (1960), the real value of wages declines sharply.

3. Welfare ratios are calculated by dividing a single male wage by the cost of a specified “bare-bones” basket of goods (including food, fuel, lighting, clothing, soap, and rent) necessary to support a family of five. Welfare ratios in Table 1 are based on a standardized sub-Saharan Africa basket developed by Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012). A welfare ratio of 1.0 means that the wage can purchase a single basket, equalling bare subsistence. A ratio lower than 1.0 indicates a wage insufficient to support a family.

Salisbury's localized welfare ratio drops to a scant 0.2 in the mid-1940s (probably related to wartime scarcity) and 0.6 in the late-1950s, indicative of real wages far from sufficient to support a family in urban areas on the basis of *local consumption standards*.⁴

TABLE 1 • *Welfare ratios in sub-Saharan African cities, 1940s–1950s*

	1940s	1950s
Settler colonies		
South: S. Rhodesia (Salisbury)	0.6	1.7
East: Kenya (Nairobi)	1.5	1.8
Non-settler colonies		
Central: Congo (Leopoldville)	2.0*	2.2
Central: Congo (Katanga)	2.8*	6.7
West: Gambia (Bathurst)	2.0	2.6
West: Gold Coast (Accra)	3.3	4.1
West: Sierra Leone (Freetown)	2.2	2.7

*Belgian Congo 1940s data=1938.

Sources: S. Rhodesia: author's calculation based on the African subsistence basket developed by Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012), using Salisbury prices from Batson (1945) and Bettison (1960) and average urban manufacturing wages from Mosley (1983, p. 160).

Note: For 1940s, prices=1944 and wages=1946. Belgian Congo: Frederick and van Nederveen Meerkerk (2022, p. 263); all other colonies: Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012, p. 910).

Bare-bones urban welfare ratios were particularly high across western Africa, where comparatively few Europeans settled. As in eastern Africa, western African urban economies were based primarily on trade and services during the colonial era rather than heavy industries. Here, however, welfare ratios far exceeded those in settler colonies in both eastern and southern Africa – regardless of their economic characteristics – with Accra (Gambia), for example, reaching 4.1 by the 1950s. Less impeded by the range of restrictive colonial policies that privileged European settlers in places like Salisbury and Nairobi, colonial-era western African cities saw far greater long-term residence of black urbanites and more balanced sex ratios in towns, particularly in areas with strong pre-colonial urban foundations. Wages for men were

4. The “localized” welfare ratio for Salisbury is calculated from minimum dietary standards, norms, and prices provided by Batson (1945) and Bettison (1960). Salisbury's comparatively high consumption of meat (50 grams versus 2 grams in the Africa-wide bare-bones basket) and higher reported daily caloric intake (3,000-3,100 in the local PDL studies versus 1,939 in the Africa-wide basket) accounts for most of the considerable difference from the welfare ratio computed using the Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012) African basket.

higher, while women were drawn to urban environments by trading opportunities that were more widely available to them than in eastern and (even less so) southern Africa.⁵

Were differences in welfare ratios across sub-Saharan Africa linked to the timing of industrial development in different locales? Analyses of industrial development in Europe suggest that living standards can initially decline during early phases of industrial development before eventually improving as real wages increase (e.g., Gallardo-Albarrán and de Jong 2021). Could this account for Southern Rhodesia's relatively low welfare ratios? Comparison suggests that even if welfare ratios were initially negatively affected by industrialization in sub-Saharan Africa, colonial policy still played a central role in influencing the degree of improvement enjoyed by workers as industrialization matured. Southern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo had reached similar levels of industrial development by 1960, with manufacturing comprising 14% of GDP in the Congo and 16% in Southern Rhodesia (Austin, Frankema, and Jerven 2017, pp. 346, 353). But as of the late 1950s, several decades after the onset of industrialization in both colonies, the welfare ratio for black laborers in Congo's Leopoldville exceeded levels in Southern Rhodesia's settler-dominated Salisbury (2.2 versus 1.7).

It seems that even more than the structure of the urban economy, the institutional environment was central in influencing urban incomes and tenure opportunities for black city dwellers in settler versus non-settler colonies. This is not to suggest that opportunities and welfare ratios were relatively low *only* in settler colonies. For example, welfare ratios in the non-settler colonies of Tanganyika and Uganda were similar to those in settler Kenya; meanwhile, non-settler Nyasaland had among the lowest welfare ratios in sub-Saharan Africa (Frankema and van Waijenburg 2012, p. 910). But when comparing urban centres with broadly similar economic characteristics, welfare ratios tend to be lower in settler versus non-settler contexts. Moreover, in settler colonies with dissimilar urban economies but similar institutional models, like Salisbury and Nairobi, colonial-era economic opportunities for black urban inhabitants were strongly analogous. The remainder of this article delves into the development of racial inequality and urban industry in Southern Rhodesia – complemented by pertinent comparative reference, particularly to Kenya – to unpack how settler-oriented colonial policies perpetuated urban insecurity for black workers.

5. For a comprehensive comparison of urbanization in eastern and western Africa, see Meier zu Selhausen (2022).

Foundations of colonial institutions in Southern Rhodesia

Southern Rhodesia was founded in 1889 by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) as a prospective mining colony. Matabeleland in the southwest first came under British influence in 1888 with the Rudd Concession, negotiated “with consummate duplicity”, which granted the BSAC discovery and mining rights. The Company subsequently forced northward into Mashonaland using the Maxim gun. Following a series of uprisings by the Ndebele and Shona, the colonial territory was largely pacified by 1900, and white European settlers increasingly established gold mines and maize farms (Phimister 1988, pp. 4-64).

Initially, the arrival of settlers brought profitable trading opportunities (Phimister 1988, p. 25). White settler farmers faced stiff competition from black cultivators, who traded an estimated £350,000 of produce and livestock in 1903 and supplied 90% of the colony’s marketed output in 1904 (Arrighi 1970, p. 201; Phimister and Pilosof 2017, p. 216; Phimister 1988, p. 68). Moreover, settlers struggled to attract black labourers, who were unwilling to work in mines or on European farms in lieu of profitable peasant production. A number of measures, including land alienation, taxation, and price controls, were consequently taken to minimize indigenous agricultural marketing opportunities and direct black labour to European employers. A take-off of white settler agriculture, Arrighi (1970) argues, depended upon non-market mechanisms that undermined black peasants. Similar tactics were concurrently employed in settler Kenya and South Africa to fortify settler agriculture and generate a black wage labour force (Rempel 1981, pp. 21-26; Feinstein 2005, pp. 32-46).

By 1902, Native Reserves were created for black settlement, beginning a process of segregating “Africans” from “Europeans”, which would increasingly diminish the geographic and economic mobility of the colony’s black inhabitants. The Reserves would, in theory, provide “land sufficient for their occupation [...] and suitable for their agricultural and pastoral requirements” (Section 81 of the Southern Rhodesia Order in Council 1898 cited in Plewman et al. 1958, p. 20). In practice, the Reserves were often unproductive and dry, especially in Matabeleland, and typically isolated from cities and transport hubs, stymying peasant marketing. Reserve populations swelled as black peasants were increasingly pushed off their land to make way for new European immigrants, while others were indirectly forced into the Reserves by the introduction of rent and grazing fees on non-Reserve land. By 1922, 63.5% of the black population lived in the Reserves. Meanwhile, the introduction of an array of taxes from 1893 onward shifted the fiscal burden from white settlers onto the black population, while most government income was reinvested into settler initiatives (Phimister 1988, pp. 65-67, 83; Arrighi 1970, p. 210).

Moreover, peasant incomes declined with the rise of settler commercial agriculture, propped up by cheap contracted labour. Organized labour recruit-

TABLE 2 • *Racial composition of the Southern Rhodesian population, 1901–1961*

	White European		Black African		Total
		% Total		% Total	
1901	11,032	2%	530,000	98%	541,032
1911	23,606	3%	700,000	97%	723,606
1921	33,620	4%	847,000	96%	880,620
1931	49,910	5%	937,000	95%	986,910
1940			1,390,000		
1945	82,386	5%	1,640,000	95%	1,722,386
1951	136,017	6%	1,970,000	94%	2,106,017
1961	225,000	7%	2,885,000	93%	3,110,000

Sources: Floyd (1962, p. 577); McEwan (1963, p. 429).

Notes: For Africans: 1901=1902, 1961=1960; for Europeans: 1945=1946. Total population excludes a small population of "Asian" and "coloured" inhabitants.

ment ramped up after 1903 when the Rhodesian Native Labour Board began securing low-paid *chibaro* "boys" from Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, and Mozambique. Although contract labourers initially worked primarily in mines, by 1913, over half were sent to European-owned farms. Between 1904 and 1914 grain prices fell by half. Later, in the 1930s, grain prices for most black cultivators were actively depressed by the Maize Control Acts, which reduced maize prices paid to black farmers, essentially subsidizing white farmers. While white farmers received on average 8s. per bag of maize between 1934 and 1939, black farmers only received between 2s.6d. and 6s.6d. Many struggled to pay their rents and taxes on cultivation profits alone and were increasingly drawn onto the wage labour market (Phimister 1988, pp. 50, 85, 185-189).

Settler demand for land and labour continued to grow as immigration more than quadrupled between 1901-1931 (see Table 2). The establishment of

TABLE 3 • *Land apportionment in Southern Rhodesia, 1930*

Category	Acres	% of colony
European Areas	49,149,440	51.1%
Native Reserves	21,127,040	22.0%
Native Purchase Areas	7,464,320	7.8%
Unassigned areas	17,793,280	18.5%
Undetermined areas	68,480	0.1%
Forest areas	590,720	0.6%
Total	96,193,280	

Source: Floyd (1962, p. 577).

a semi-autonomous “Responsible Government” in 1923 provided settlers with legislative machinery to craft policies, with limited interference from Britain, that catered to settler demands. Segregation was soon institutionalized: “Until the Native has advanced very much further on the paths of civilization”, concluded the Carter Commission, “it is better that the points of contact in this respect between the two races should be reduced” (quoted in Plewman et al. 1958, p. 23). In line with segregationist ideology and demands of newly arriving settlers, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 expanded land alienation. Black Africans, who made up 95% of the population, were allotted less than one-third of the colony’s land (see Tables 2 and 3). Southern Rhodesia was divided into the existing Native Reserves, a Native Purchase Area (in which blacks could theoretically purchase land, though few could afford it), various unassigned zones, and European Areas, which included all urban zones. African geographic mobility was sharply curtailed across half of the colony’s territory and strictly controlled in urban areas, where they were required to carry an official pass to legally seek work, to visit for a short duration, or as proof of urban employment by a white employer.

Meanwhile, the Native Reserves became increasingly overcrowded. Per-capita allotments of land decreased by over 50% between the 1930s and 1950s (Zinyama and Whitlow 1986, pp. 368-369). By the beginning of the 1930s, Arrighi (1970, p. 221) argues, pro-settler colonial policies had generated a “qualitative change” in the black peasantry as white settler agriculture expanded at the expense of increasingly pressed black cultivators. For many, wage labour became the only means to ensure subsistence. The proportion of the colony’s black inhabitants in wage employment expanded from only 20% by 1920 to 61% in the early 1950s (see Table 4). Within this context of mounting economic pressures on the black population, the colony began rapidly industrializing from the mid-1940s. This drew thousands of black male labourers into the colony’s growing urban centres.

TABLE 4 • *Black African males in wage employment in Southern Rhodesia, 1911–1961*

Year	% in wage employment
1911-1920	20%
1923	23%
1926	35%
1946	48%
1951	61%
1956	58%
1961	56%

Sources: 1911–1926: Phimister (1988, p. 141); 1946–1961: Arrighi (1970, p. 222).

Note: It is unclear if 1911–1926 data relates to males only or the entire population.

Industrialization in Southern Rhodesia

Slow beginnings and post-war boom

Industrialization in Southern Rhodesia proceeded slowly in the early decades of the century as the government focused first on gold mining and, later, settler agricultural development. During the First World War, wartime import protection had offered a brief boost to the small industrial sector, although domestic demand was largely met with products from neighbouring South Africa's more established industrial sector.⁶ In the interwar period, wage earnings among black Africans in Southern Rhodesia and neighbouring Northern Rhodesia provided a growing market for local manufactures, including shoes, simple clothing, wagons, and tinned meats. Manufacturing grew further in the years following the Depression, when gold mining profits helped boost internal demand. Manufacturing output grew at an average annual rate of 7.5% from 1929–1938, outpacing mining's 7.2%.

Still, industry remained stymied in part by trade agreements that favoured unfettered export of Southern Rhodesian mining and agricultural products (particularly tobacco) over protection of domestic manufactures. However, an agreement in 1932 to allow free movement of goods between Northern and Southern Rhodesia offered a significant market for Southern Rhodesian manufactures, while a modest increase in protections from South African manufactured imports with the Customs and Excise Tariff Act of 1937 helped encourage South African industrialists to open branches within their northern neighbour. Additionally, in catering to mining and farming interests, the Southern Rhodesian government established processing plants for certain agricultural and mineral commodities during the 1930s (Clarence-Smith 1989, pp. 173-175).

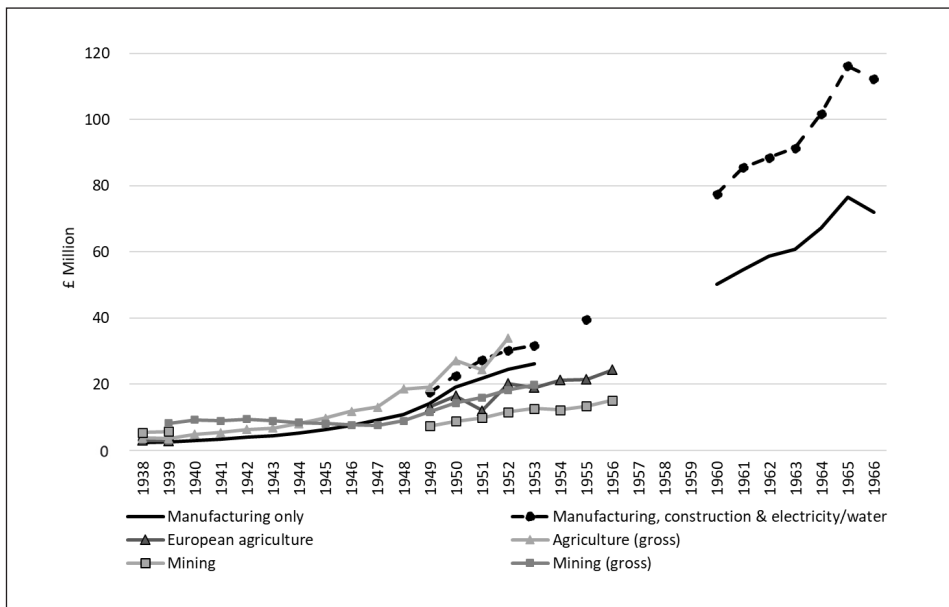
However, the real breakthrough came only with the Second World War, when supply chain disruptions threw the expansion of domestic industry to the top of the government's agenda. An Industrial Development Advisory Committee was quickly established, public funds were provided for essential industries – including a state-sponsored ordnance factory, spinning mill, and nationalized iron and steel works – and import duties were reduced for necessary raw materials. Government encouragement of industrialization continued into the post-war period, although state-sponsorship was largely replaced with private investment. The number of factories grew rapidly from 299 in 1938 to 681 by 1951, turning out heavy iron, steel and cement products, along with an array of consumer goods, including processed sugars, pressed

6. Except where otherwise noted, descriptions of industrial development in this sub-section are based on Phimister (1988, pp. 239-257) and Phimister and Gwande (2017).

oil, drinks, cigarettes, leather goods and footwear, clothing, wooden manufactures, paper products, and electrical goods. The government specifically encouraged the expansion of consumer products, for fear that an emphasis on domestic production of capital goods might lead to increased costs for the vital mining and agricultural sectors, which in turn provided the necessary foreign exchange to purchase capital goods from abroad. Moreover, the government was keen to take advantage of the large domestic consumer base of black African wage earners. “The great advantage we have”, argued the Minister of Finance in the Legislative Assembly in 1943, “[...] is our large native population. This is an enormous potential market for certain commodities. The native’s wants are few, but they are consistent and they are in respect of things that can be manufactured in this Colony” (Southern Rhodesia 1943, p. 1748).

Southern Rhodesia also gained favourable access to the large South African market with a Customs Union agreement in 1948. Over the ensuing five years, exports of consumer goods – especially textiles and electrical products – grew from £1.2 million to £7 million. British and South African investors flocked to develop the colony’s light consumer goods sector, and as foreign capital poured in, industry was increasingly dominated by large firms clus-

FIGURE 1 ▪ *Output of industry and European agriculture, Southern Rhodesia, 1938–1953*



Sources: Manufacturing (including construction and utilities), mining, and agriculture, 1938–1956: Southern Rhodesia (1955, p. 18); Plewman et al. (1958, p. 9); Federation of Rhodesian Industries (1954, pp. 45–46). Gross agriculture and mining, 1939–1948: Phimister (1988, p. 253). 1960–1966: Southern Rhodesia (no date, p. 17–18). Note: Net output unless specifically indicated as gross.

tered in a few cities – especially Salisbury and Bulawayo. By 1949, 45% of the colony’s total annual industrial output by value was produced by only 21 manufacturing firms. Industrial development in the colony experienced a further boost in 1953 when Southern Rhodesia joined the Federation of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, which granted access to member markets and enabled Southern Rhodesia to supplant South Africa as the main supplier of the region’s manufactures. As of the early 1950s, the value of industrial output exceeded both gross and net output from European agriculture and mining and would continue to climb into the 1960s, stimulating related construction and utilities sectors (see Figure 1).

Growth of the urban African labour force

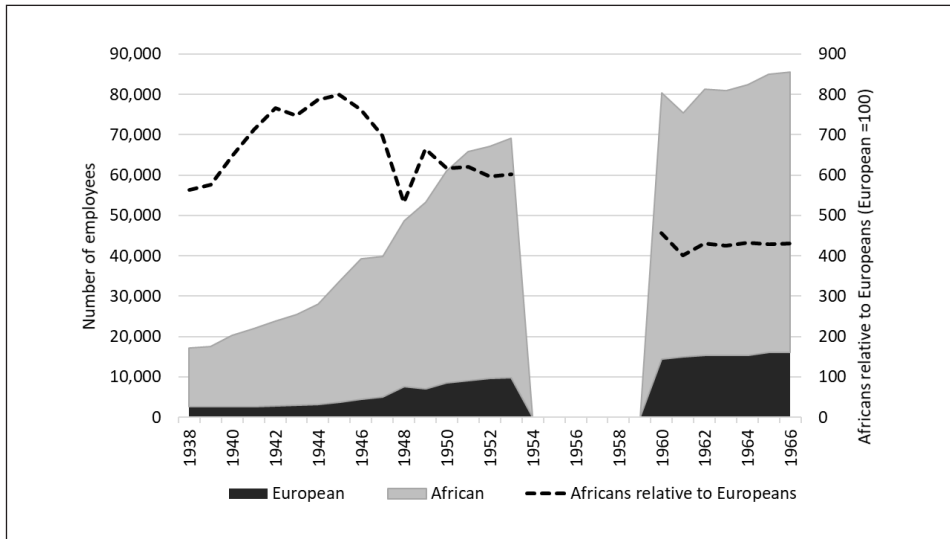
From the 1940s, demand for industrial labour surged in the colony’s urban centres. The colonial government heavily encouraged immigration of Europeans, assumed to be higher-productivity workers, and the total white settler population rose from roughly 82,400 in 1945 to 136,000 by 1951 (see Table 2). But, as Prime Minister Huggins was well aware, black Africans would form the backbone of the colony’s industrial labour force: “[The colony] must face the fact that a fixed urban African population would arise”, despite the entrenched ideology of racial segregation.⁷ Although the number of white manufacturing employees grew over time from roughly 2,500 in 1938 to 9,800 by 1966, their numbers remained dwarfed by black employees, who already numbered 14,500 in 1938 and reached over 59,000 by 1966 (see Figure 2). However, as we will see, they earned wages far below those offered to white settlers and, consequently, faced immense economic precarity, slum conditions, and perpetually insecure tenure in urban zones. Moreover, they faced prejudice by white urbanites, like former Salisbury Mayor Charles Oley, who demanded strict segregation and feared that the “towns built up by European efforts and civilization will be flooded by a black population [...] and will bring in its train a number of dangerous problems”.⁸ Similar racially motivated anxieties by white settlers in Kenya’s Nairobi led to the development of “Native location” slums segregating black workers from white urban dwellers as the black urban labour force expanded (van Zwanenberg 1972).

Southern Rhodesia’s black urban population grew rapidly with the post-war industrial boom as men in rural areas were drawn to comparatively high urban wages. By the early 1950s, manufacturing wages were on the rise and

7. TNA, DO 35/1169, Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins’ speech to Salisbury Chamber of Commerce on 28 June 1943, quoted in *The Rhodesia Herald* 29 June 1943.

8. TNA, DO 35/1167, Speech at Municipal Conference at Victoria Falls by Charles Oley, 29 May 1946.

FIGURE 2 • Composition of manufacturing labour force, Southern Rhodesia, 1938–1966

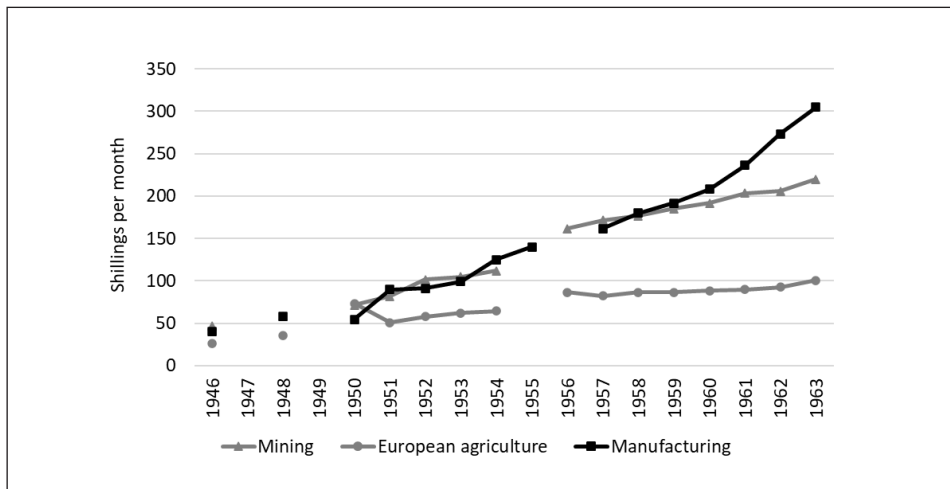


Sources: Southern Rhodesia (1955, pp. 26, 34; no date, p. 53).

Notes: The “European” category includes a small number of “Asian” and “Coloured” labourers for 1960–1966. Data gap is due to missing report.

progressively exceeded agricultural wages, which remained depressed well into the 1960s. Whereas nominal agricultural and manufacturing wages were similar up to 1950, by 1954 a black labourer could earn 150 shillings per month in manufacturing versus 64 on a settler farm. By 1963, this disparity had increased to 305 versus 100 shillings per month, respectively (see Figure 3). Although industrial mining mirrored manufacturing wage growth, at least until 1959 when manufacturing pulled away, this sector relied heavily on contracted “foreign” labour migrants, especially from Northern Rhodesia, and by 1960, roughly 70% of miners came from regions beyond Southern Rhodesia (Scott 1954, pp. 45-46; Phimister and Pilosof 2017, p. 217).

The alternative, agricultural labour on European commercial farms, was unattractive for most Southern Rhodesian labourers, with agricultural wages kept particularly low through the ongoing inflow of labour migrants from surrounding colonies, especially Nyasaland and Mozambique, encouraged by a government-subsidized migrant transport system (“*Ulere*”, Nyanja for “free”) (Scott 1954, p. 36; Clarke 1974, p. 25). In the second half of the 1940s, the Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission (RNLSC) expanded the contract labour system through recruitment agreements with neighbouring governments. In the early 1950s, “alien labour” comprised around 70% of African labour on maize and tobacco farms (Scott 1954, p. 45 n30).

FIGURE 3 • Average nominal wages for black labourers, Southern Rhodesia, 1946–1963

Source: Mosley (1983, p. 160).

In the case of Mozambique, migrants came primarily from the southern portion of the Portuguese colony, which was burdened by particularly high direct taxes and the threat of forced labour. The Portuguese colonial government supported labour migration from the region, especially to the mines of South Africa, as a means of increasing the colony's taxable income from wages earned abroad. Most Mozambican migrants working on the settler farms of Southern Rhodesia were transient, labouring for relatively brief periods on Rhodesian farms to raise funds to continue their southward journey to the South African mines, where wages were considerably higher (Alexopoulou and Juif 2017, pp. 227-233).

In the case of Nyasaland, a number of push factors encouraged out-migration, including population pressure on land, job scarcity, and taxation policies that together sharply limited economic opportunities for Africans (Clarke 1974, p. 39). Vail (1975) points to imperial mismanagement triggered by metropolitan interventions as the underlying cause of out-migration from Nyasaland from the 1930s onward. By the start of the 1920s, the colony had been saddled with immense debt to fund a series of ill-conceived infrastructure projects, including an expensive external rail line in Mozambique constructed to ensure British economic presence in Portuguese East Africa. These investments provided no tangible economic benefits to Nyasaland, only resulting in high taxes on the African population and virtually no investment in services for African welfare or development. Meanwhile, the expansion of exportable products like coal and maize had been stifled to prevent potential competition with settlers in British Kenya and Southern Rhodesia. Nyasa-

land had become an “imperial slum” with few opportunities at home, reflected in the particularly low welfare ratios even in the colony’s main city of Zomba, which reached only 1.3 (1950s) and 1.4 (1960s), the lowest in Frankema and van Waijenburg’s (2012, p. 910) sample of nine British African cities.

Clarke (1974, pp. 74-76) argues that the systematic inflow of migrants from places like Nyasaland and Mozambique kept agricultural wage rates artificially low and thus prevented farm wages from rising to levels sufficient to attract internal labour. Moreover, farm workers fell under an oppressive Masters and Servants Act, which deterred unionization and forbade striking, while the Rhodesia National Farmers Union effectively lobbied against wage regulations. In manufacturing, conversely, broad strike action by black rail workers in October 1945 resulted in the Native Labour Board Act of 1947, which allowed the establishment of black industrial unions and labour resolution machinery. This facilitated progress in black industrial wages over the ensuing decades albeit modest compared to white earnings (Clarke 1974, pp. 43-44; Vickery 1999).

By the late-1940s, black labourers were consequently flocking to urban industrial centres, which promised higher wages, even amid increasing competition for urban jobs. As agricultural wages continued to remain far below urban rates, preference for urban over agricultural work persisted for decades. The Secretary of Internal Affairs reported in 1962, “While there was general unemployment on a large scale in urban areas throughout the year, the demand exceeded supply in many of the rural districts, particularly in the field of agricultural work [...] the young indigenous men do not appear to favour work on farms” (Secretary for Internal Affairs and Chief Native Commissioner 1963, p. 32). Similarly, in Kenya, where settler-oriented colonial policies had limited African opportunities in rural areas through land alienation and controls over agricultural marketing, urban Nairobi experienced a constant inflow of job seekers; employment opportunities were relatively scarce, but wages were much higher than in rural areas. As in Southern Rhodesia, this in turn produced perpetual urban labour oversupply and “constant urban crisis” (Rempel 1981, pp. 22-25; van Zwanenberg 1972, p. 50). In contrast, the incentive to migrate to urban centres was much lower in colonies with more balanced rural and urban economic opportunities, for example in the non-settler colonies of Uganda, Ghana, and the Belgian Congo, where small-holder farming and/or rural real wages offered remuneration comparable to urban opportunities (Meier zu Selhausen 2022; De Haas 2017; Frankema and van Waijenburg 2012; Frederick and van Nederveen Meerkerk 2022).

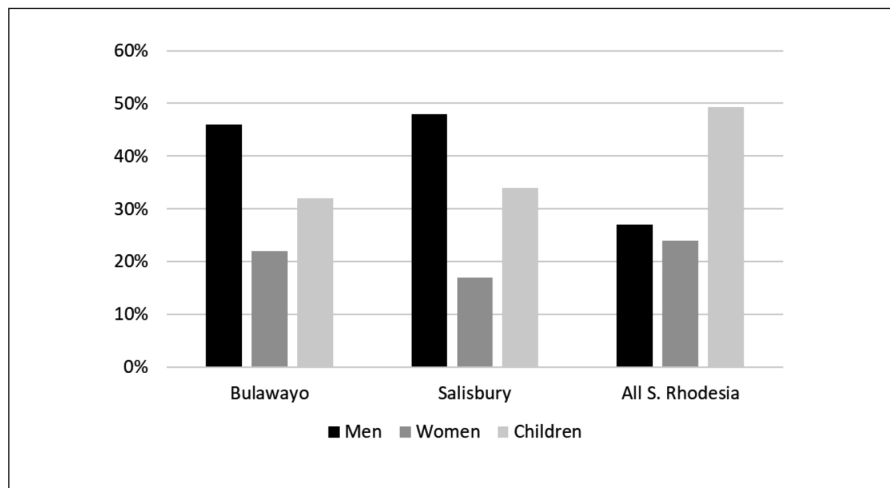
Opportunity and precarity in industrial employment

Urban tenure

For the tens of thousands of men joining Southern Rhodesia's industrial workforce from the 1940s onward, manufacturing entailed entrée into urban environments. However, most black urban labourers operated along migratory lines well into the 1970s, moving periodically between rural and urban zones, with relatively few settling permanently in town.

Most urban-bound black migrants were working-age males. While some were unmarried, others left wives and children on the Reserves. By 1956, no more than 16.5% of the black industrial labour force in Salisbury, the largest urban centre, was settled with a family in the city, suggesting that 83.5% remained migratory (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 18). Consequently, well into the 1960s, Southern Rhodesian urban areas retained a heavily male-skewed gender distribution far exceeding the colony-wide average. In both major industrial cities of Salisbury and Bulawayo, men comprised almost half of the black urban population, nearly double their share in the colony-wide population (see Figure 4). In 1962, sex ratios (the number of adult males relative to females) of the black population in Salisbury and Bulawayo were 276 and 211, respectively (Southern Rhodesia 1964, p. 45). Sex ratios were also male-skewed in the settler city of Nairobi (Kenya), at 190 in the first half of the 1960s; meanwhile, in the non-settler western African cities of Accra (Ghana) and

FIGURE 4 • *Gender composition of black population in 1962*



Source: Southern Rhodesia (1964, p. 45).

Freetown (Sierra Leone), they hovered around 110, indicating much more balanced gender compositions (Felix Meier zu Selhausen 2022, pp. 291-293).

Within the early-colonial segregationist paradigm in Southern Rhodesia – and similarly in Kenya (Rempel 1981) – the “European frame of mind [...] insisted that the African worker was merely a temporary participant in urban life, that his wife and children should be left in the Reserves” (Gray 1960, p. 256). By the late 1940s, however, industrial employers and colonial officials in Southern Rhodesia increasingly favoured permanent settlement of black industrial labourers with families to simultaneously reduce labour turnover – thus increasing productivity – and cope with ever-worsening overcrowding on the Reserves.⁹ A plan was crafted to divide the colony’s black inhabitants into either rural peasants with tenured land or industrial labourers settled with families in towns. The Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 sub-divided Reserve land into individual tenured plots and restricted cultivation and grazing rights. The government attempted to “freeze the numbers of people inside and outside the [R]eserves”, denying Reserve land to existing urban industrial workers (Duggan 1980, p. 229).

The implementation of the Act was met with immense hostility and proceeded slowly, partly due to the sheer the scope of the intended reorganization. It was ultimately applied to roughly 42% of the Reserves before the project was disbanded in the early 1960s (Phimister 1993). Even at half-implementation, the Act created an estimated 102,000 landless families by the end of the 1950s (Zinyama and Whitlow 1986, p. 377). Meanwhile, a recession at the end of the 1950s temporarily reduced industrial labour demand, which must have diminished alternative income opportunities for many now-landless peasants, while also generating crisis for landless urban labour migrants as urban jobs were cut. Some historians suggest that the recession of 1957-58 was, in fact, key to the demise of the Land Husbandry Act as depressed demand for industrial labour disincentivized the creation of a permanent urban labour force (Palmer 1977, pp. 243-244).

By 1960, the government again intervened in the urban labour market, seeking to “create better employment opportunities in the towns for Africans indigenous to the Federation and to divert foreign workers to employment in the rural areas” by banning “foreign Africans”¹⁰ from working in and around urban zones (Secretary for Labour 1961, 12). However, even as the share of urban labourers hailing from Southern Rhodesia rose – from 52% in 1958 to

9. Already by 1943, 62 of 98 Reserves were overpopulated, with 19 overpopulated by at least 100% (Phimister 1988, pp. 237-238).

10. Like Southern Rhodesian men, uncontracted migrants from Nyasaland and Mozambique were attracted to superior urban wages and conditions relative to agriculture, drawn in particular to Salisbury, which was conveniently located in the northeast of the colony (Scott 1954, p. 45).

82% by 1969¹¹ – black industrial labourers continued to struggle to establish roots in towns. Other factors were at play in perpetuating this system of temporary urban tenure, which lasted into the 1970s.

At the onset of the Native Land Husbandry scheme, the Minister of Native Affairs had (condescendingly) expressed, “The natives must realise that, if they want to become a great people and to make a contribution to the development of Africa, they must face the fact that, as the years go by, a smaller percentage of their people will be able to engage in agriculture. Greater and greater numbers must seek a future in industrial development [...]” (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 21). Yet while government officials and industrial employers paid lip service to the development of a permanent black urban labour force and had attempted unsuccessful policy interventions to this end, the *necessary institutional and economic conditions* to enable black labourers and their families to settle permanently in towns remained absent. In particular, black workers faced discriminatory wage rates, underpinned by institutional inequalities; insufficient housing, especially for families; and segregationist legislation that perpetuated urban insecurity.

Discriminatory wages rates and legislated inequality

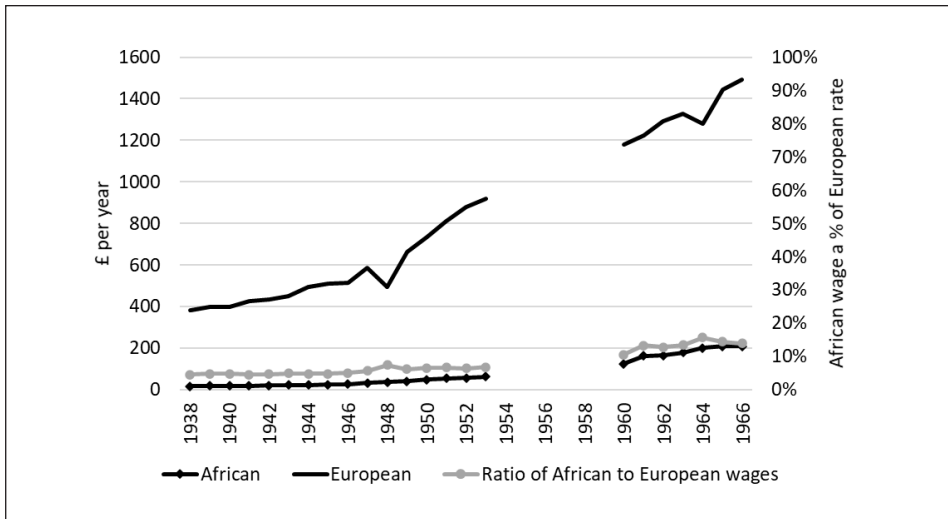
While urban wages were substantially higher than wages paid on European farms, incomes for black urban labourers remained far below their white counterparts (see Figure 5) and helped subsidize the higher living standards of the white workforce. Wages paid to black industrial workers were set at a “subsistence” rate that did not fluctuate with the market but was instead capped at a level sufficient to provide basic sustenance.¹² The data for 1960–1966 does not account for differing skill levels. However, the data for 1938–1956 exclude the relatively small class of white “administrative, technical and clerical” staff and thus more accurately reflect the immense gap between black and white labourers performing roughly similar work. This gap persisted into the post-independence 1970s, when white industrial wages exceeded those paid to black workers more than ten-fold (Harris 1974, p. 11).

Colonial officials reported that low wages were linked to productivity deficiencies among black labourers (e.g., Plewman et al. 1958, p. 73). However, Harris found in the early 1970s that black and white semi-skilled workers performed similar tasks, but white workers enjoyed institutionalized protections that kept their jobs secure and their wages elevated. Additionally, a number

11. Based on Secretary for Labour (1959, p. 16, Table VII); Southern Rhodesia (1964, p. 27); Secretary for Labour and Social Welfare (1964, p. 27); Harris (1974, p. 13).

12. The Southern Rhodesian “subsistence wage” was identified by Bettison (1958;1960) and expanded on by Arrighi (1970).

FIGURE 5 • Average European and African nominal annual wages per worker, Southern Rhodesian manufacturing sector, 1938–1966



Sources: Southern Rhodesia (1955, pp. 26, 34; no date, p. 53); see also Frederick and van Nederveen Meerkerk (2022, p. 274).

Notes: Wages calculated from employment numbers and respective wage bill for “African” and “European” employees. The “European” category includes a small number of “Asian” and “Coloured” labourers for the years 1960–1966. 1954–1959: data gap due to missing report.

of unskilled jobs at “European” rates were set aside by state enterprises to ensure that white workers could maintain their “white” standard of living (Harris 1974, pp. 15-16). Moreover, the premium paid to white-collar workers in the industrial sector was negligible, suggesting that unskilled and semi-skilled white industrial labourers in Southern Rhodesia were likely earning wages in excess of their real market value, propped up by exceedingly low black rates.¹³ Indeed, already in the 1940s, wages for white Southern Rhodesian workers had reportedly even exceeded those paid to whites in the wealthy neighbouring settler colony of South Africa.¹⁴

The strong position of white industrial labourers in Southern Rhodesia was initially secured with the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934. The Act

13. Between 1938 and 1953, the average annual income of European white-collar workers was £584, while the rest of the white industrial work force earned £567. The average wage for male white-collar workers may have been somewhat higher given that earnings for white-collar workers also includes female staff who may have earned less (Southern Rhodesia 1955, pp. 26, 34).

14. TNA, DO 35/1169, Letter from Evelyn Baring (Southern Rhodesian Governor) to Sir Eric Machtig (British Under-secretary of State), 21 June 1943.

officially recognized the right of white workers to strike, form trade unions, and pursue collective action. Black labour, however, was excluded from the rights secured by the Act, which applied only to those workers who were termed “employees”, a designation that was explicitly not extended to black Africans. Black workers instead fell under the draconian rules of the Masters and Servants Act of 1901, which made various worker actions, including striking, an imprisonable offense. Moreover, the Act instituted a “colour bar” prohibiting black Africans from apprenticing to become skilled artisans, including building professionals, which would eventually have broad consequences amid growing housing shortages for black urban labourers from the 1940s onward (see discussion below) (Gray 1960, pp. 102-103).

Only after the black rail workers’ strike of 1945 would black labourers gradually gain collective bargaining rights. The rail strike inspired broader action, including a colony-wide general strike in 1948 as black labourers in other industries sought to replicate the relative success of the rail workers and expand black worker rights (Vickery 1999, pp. 66-68). The second half of the 1940s saw the development of the Federation of Bulawayo African Workers Union, the African Workers Voice Association, and the Reformed Industrial Commercial Workers’ Union in Salisbury, which campaigned for black workers’ interests, including paid leave, overtime wages, access to skilled jobs, sufficient housing, and acceptance of black trade unions. At the same time, a newly established Voters League campaigned for black voting and labour rights (Mlambo 2009, pp. 97-98). These initiatives helped turn the government’s attention toward conditions and consequences of racial inequality, albeit largely in terms of implications for European welfare, leading to a series of commissions, which broadly concluded:

Measures under which Native workers are prevented from (1) acquiring skill, (2) exercising skill, (3) obtaining the full reward for the exercise of skill [...] are in the highest degree detrimental to the expansion of the income-creating potentialities of the colony. [...] Europeans will fail to exploit the resources of the territory because of their unwillingness to improve and utilize the potential income-creating powers of all sections of the community.¹⁵

One colonial official optimistically related to London, “I am convinced that enlightened opinion is on the increase, although it is proceeding rather cautiously for fear of losing votes [...] The process has begun, and will go on,

15. TNA, DO 35/1169, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Mining Industry of Southern Rhodesia*, paragraph 229, quoted in a letter from W.A.W. Clark (Chief Secretary of the Central African Council) to Sir Eric Machtig (British Under-secretary of State), 19 March 1946.

whatever happens in the election”.¹⁶ But despite strides toward industrial bargaining for black workers and a shift in the 1940s toward more progressive views by Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins’ United Party government, powerful white unions deflected efforts to overturn segregationist legislation (Arighi 1967, pp. 49-50). White industrial wages continued to climb, while black wages made far more modest progress from the 1940s on. Even as elements of the colour bar were gradually lifted, black labourers would long face “informal” discrimination, including missed promotions due to employer prejudice and concerns over backlash among whites supervised by black employees. By 1972, less than 3% of the black industrial workforce was classified as skilled and less than 9% as semi-skilled. Moreover, government immigration policies helped funnel new white arrivals into higher-paid technical and administrative positions (Harris 1974, p. 11; 1975, p. 146).

In settler Kenya, in contrast, the British government’s response to widespread unrest during the Mau Mau Rebellion of the 1950s resulted in more far-reaching concessions to the black population, including in urban Nairobi. Minimum wages were legislated and housing allowances increased, as did unionization and provisions for education. Welfare ratios in Nairobi rose to 2.7 by the 1960s (versus Southern Rhodesia’s 1.7 as of 1957), a process that would accelerate after independence in 1963, although urban jobs still remained in relatively short supply (Frankema and van Waijenburg 2012, p. 910; Rempel 1981, pp. 27-29). Rising real wages enabled greater permanent settlement of families in Nairobi, and urban sex ratios steadily declined from roughly 190 in the 1960s to just under 140 in the 1980s (Meier zu Selhausen 2022, p. 291).

In Southern Rhodesia, where the settler population was both considerably larger and more politically powerful vis-à-vis the metropolitan government than in Kenya, real wage increases for black workers were far more limited, and racial inequality would persist after independence, which saw white minority power entrenched. Eventually, even the moderately progressive attitude of the government toward black advancement was abandoned with the 1962 electoral victory and eventual 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence of Ian Smith’s right-wing Rhodesian Front, which was devoted to upholding the interests of white settlers. The 1968 Apprenticeship Training and Skilled Manpower Development Act, for example, mandated that only those with a formal apprenticeship or trade test could work in skilled occupation, which effectively – if not formally – barred most black workers (Mtisi, Nyakudya, and Barnes 2009, pp. 117-121, 136).

16. TNA, DO 35/1169, W.A.W. Clark to Sir Eric Machtig, 19 March 1946.

Consequences of wage inequality

The deep income inequality between white and black workers in urban Southern Rhodesia profoundly hindered social reproduction for black men living in cities, as wage rates remained far too low for most to support a family in town. Collective household earnings were further hampered by the minimal urban employment opportunities for most black women, with the exception of a small minority from more affluent families (Weinrich 1979, pp. 34-36). This compared starkly with white families, for whom wives had more employment avenues (Harris 1974, p. 11). In 1951, on average only 3.3% of all black Africans employed in Salisbury and Bulawayo were female, whereas 12% of the white labour force in the manufacturing sector alone was female (Secretary for Labour 1959, p. 15; Southern Rhodesia 1955, p. 26). Consequently, most married workers left their families behind on the Reserves from the 1940s into the 1970s (Ibottson 1946; Bettison 1960; Gargett 1977; Harris 1974).

Rural and urban zones and sectors were consequently deeply entangled. Based on social-anthropological fieldwork in rural and urban Southern Rhodesia, Weinrich (1979) concluded that rural women underpinned the high profits of urban industrialists by taking on the subsistence-agricultural tasks of their absent labour-migrant husbands, thus supplementing low urban earnings through their own labour *and* eventually supplying social security for retired workers. Well into the early 1970s, the Reserves were virtually depleted of men over the age of 20, with women and children supplying nearly 80% of subsistence-agricultural labour, which often yielded meagre returns on low-quality Reserve land. Women and children thus remained dependent on remittances from their migrant husbands to purchase clothing, fuel, and supplementary foods like sugar and salt, and to pay school fees, since black children were excluded from the free education offered to whites. Marital power relations on the Reserves had consequently shifted: women depended on their husbands for cash incomes but also exercised a higher degree of control over household management in the absence of labour-migrant husbands (Weinrich 1979, pp. 17-37, 67).

Some black industrial labourers did manage to bring dependents to towns, but urban families were often deeply impoverished, as revealed by Bettison's 1957 PDL survey of 218 black families and 153 single labourers in Salisbury. Most single labourers in Bettison's sample met or exceeded the PDL, while only 5% fell into "extreme" poverty. Conversely, the majority of black families fell below the PDL – with many in extreme poverty – even in the comparatively better-off New Highfield area (see Table 5). In particular, Bettison (1958, p. 193) found that the presence of children in urban households was "a major cause" of poverty. In New Highfield, the incidence of "extreme im-

poverishment” increased with each additional child, as reflected in Table 6. Consequently, many urban families sent children to live with rural relatives to cope with the cost of urban family living (see section 6).

TABLE 5 • *Percentage of black single men and households in income brackets relative to the PDL, Salisbury, 1957*

	Extremely impoverished	Below PDL	Within PDL	Above PDL	Extremely affluent
<i>Single men</i>	5%	22%	37%	17%	13%
<i>Families in New Highfield</i>	47%	18%	20%	2%	13%
<i>Families in “Other areas”</i>	57%	19%	17%	3%	3%

Source: Bettison (1958, pp. 181, 188).

TABLE 6 • *Rates of “extreme impoverishment” in households, New Highfield, Salisbury, 1957*

Household composition	Percent impoverished
<i>Man and wife</i>	0%
<i>Couple + 1 child</i>	38%
<i>Couple + 2 children</i>	38%
<i>Couple + 3 children</i>	47%
<i>Couple + 4 children</i>	60%
<i>Couple + 5 children</i>	67%
<i>Couple + 6 children (plus)</i>	100%

Source: Bettison (1958, p. 188).

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the position of most black urban families remained precarious. Nominal and real wages grew through the 1950s and 1960s – albeit starting from low levels – but not enough to allow most industrial workers to support an urban family. Wage increases were partly effected through the growing bargaining power of black industrial workers from the 1950s onward. However, Harris (1975) pointed to an additional factor that was simultaneously enabling wage growth while still preventing permanent urban settlement: over time, rural areas with ever-more limited resources had become increasingly less capable of “subsidizing” the industrial wages of the expanding black urban labour force by supporting rural-dwelling dependents and/or providing support during retirement. Growing constraints on rural supports, in turn, necessitated a rise in urban wages sufficient to increase urban-to-rural cash flows to a level that could maintain the status

quo but not high enough to allow permanent urban settlement. Indeed, despite considerable wage progress in the preceding decades, a 1974 PDL study found that nearly 90% of industrial labourers still fell below the monthly wage necessary to support an average six-member family in town (Cubitt and Ridell 1974 cited in Harris 1975).

Perpetual housing shortages

Black industrial labourers in urban Southern Rhodesia also faced unsanitary living conditions in crowded accommodations. Both single and married workers alike struggled to find sufficient housing. The roots of the problem lay with the initial segregation-based legislation of the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which identified urban zones as distinctly “European”. Meanwhile, “African” access to urban areas was permitted only in designated areas and under strict conditions of employment. While the Act included a provision for establishing space for black urban labourers, local urban authorities took little action, and by the mid-1940s, commissioned investigators found that black industrial workers were crowded into “hovels and places not fit for human habitation” (Ibottson 1946, p. 79). Later, the Urban African Affairs Commission of 1958 would reflect that it was “somewhat paradoxical” that the Land Apportionment Act should have brought “this state of affairs about, at the very time when Southern Rhodesia was entering [...] a phase of economic development that has made the towns in the European Area an economic magnet to many thousands of Africans” (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 25). Similarly, in settler Nairobi, housing for black urban workers was woefully insufficient and sanitation conditions were abominable. As in Southern Rhodesia, Africans were expected to remain in town for relatively brief labour stints before returning to Kenya’s rural areas, and no more than 1-2% of city revenue went to services for black inhabitants, with the vast majority spent on “white” areas (van Zwanenberg 1972, pp. 18, 29-30).

In Southern Rhodesia, the government ultimately issued an amendment in 1945, making the allotment of “adequate land for African occupation” in urban industrial areas compulsory (Ibottson 1946, pp. 74-75). However, severe housing shortages remained endemic as the black industrial labour force continuously swelled (Gray 1960, p. 257). Moreover, the Howman Committee, established to investigate black urban conditions in the mid-1940s, found that housing shortages were exacerbated in Salisbury by the colour bar for skilled labour, which prevented black artisans from constructing new accommodations, even in areas designated for black residence, thus driving up building costs using expensive “European” labour (Howman Committee 1945, p. 18). The construction of houses that could be “let at an economic rent that Africans could afford to pay”, Governor Campbell Tait noted, “can only be

done if most of the actual building is done by Africans”.¹⁷ Similar problems arose in the colony’s railway compounds, slowing provision of accommodation for black railway workers, as white unions exercised what the Governor termed “too privileged a place in the country’s economy and practis[ed] a dog-in-the-manger policy”.¹⁸

Housing was particularly limited for married labourers with resident families, who in the case of Salisbury, still only accounted for roughly one-sixth of the black urban workforce by mid-century. The Urban Affairs Commission reported, “Many more families would in fact come into Salisbury if accommodation was available for them and thus the existing structure of the population is conditioned by the type of accommodation available [and] contributes to the employer’s having to depend to such an extent on migrant labour” (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 18). Indeed, just as much as insufficient wages, insufficient housing was a chief barrier to establishing permanent urban roots. The government had provided some married housing in Native Village Settlements in the 1930s and 1940s, but facilities remained limited, and by 1958, when industrial expansion was in full swing, no further settlements had been established despite surging black urban populations (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 27). A portion of the urban labour force of both Bulawayo and Salisbury resided outside of towns in “private locations” rented out by landholders. Married black workers were particularly drawn by the prospect of engaging in small amounts of subsistence farming, paying lower rents, and escaping urban squalor (Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni 1999, pp. 5-6). However, already by 1945, restrictions were placed on the leasing of privately held European land to black tenants (Plewman et al. 1958, p. 26).

In the mid-1940s, surveyors investigating urban living conditions suggested that employers be obliged to provide housing for black workers and their families (Ibottson 1946, p. 75). The ensuing Natives (Urban Areas) Accommodation and Registration Act (1946, 1951) mandated that employers offer accommodation to labourers and their wives in approved urban areas. However, the Act ultimately placed black urban dwellers in a more precarious position by binding housing access to contracted employment. It simultaneously limited the already paltry housing options for black inhabitants by further restricting accommodation to “approved” locations. In Nairobi, too, restrictive urban ordinances had been issued already from 1918 onward and strengthened in the 1930s, modeled on the South African

17. TNA, DO 35/1169, Letter from Sir Campbell Tait (Governor of Southern Rhodesia) to Sir Eric Machtig, 4 May 1946.

18. TNA, DO 35/1169, Letter from Sir Campbell Tait (Governor of Southern Rhodesia) to Sir Eric Machtig, 23 March 1946.

Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which also informed Southern Rhodesian policies (van Zwanenberg 1972, p. 43).

Black families in urban Southern Rhodesia were particularly disadvantaged given that women and children were only permitted to reside in accommodation specifically designated for family habitation, which was in extremely short supply. The Act provided authorities with extensive surveillance powers to track and evict women living “illegally” with urban labourers – i.e., either without government-issued marriage papers or living with a husband in accommodations for single men (Phimister and Raftopoulos 2000, pp. 311-312). This direct affront to “respectable” women “with babies on their backs” angered labourers in Salisbury. Barnes (1995) suggests that the growing popularity of the Reformed Industrial Commercial Workers’ Union during the 1950s was linked to the group’s vociferous campaign against raids on black women, which included refusing to pay rent and boycotting the visitor-permit system, which required women to register to travel into town to meet their husbands. She argues that behind much of the worker action in mid-century urban Southern Rhodesia lay deep concerns about the “colonial order [...] ripping apart the reproductive fabric of their societies” (p. 98).

By the early 1960s, a series of vagrancy laws further bolstered the power of city officials to detain and “rehabilitate” those without proof of official employment and residence (Alexander 2012). Meanwhile, the housing stock for both single and married black labourers remained insufficient in Southern Rhodesia’s urban centres well into the 1970s. While in 1948, “hundreds” of applicants were awaiting housing in Salisbury’s married accommodations in New Highfield, by 1972, 16,000 applicants were registered with the Salisbury Municipal authorities awaiting the allocation of housing appropriate for families. In allotting housing, priority was given to those labourers who had been in constant urban employment for at least thirteen years, consequently diminishing opportunities for newcomers. Squatter settlements in and around urban centres were reportedly erected by urban labourers unable to find accommodation and regularly demolished by urban authorities (Gray 1960, p. 31; Harris 1974, p. 22-23).

A rural-urban social security net

In the face of economic precarity in both urban and rural zones, black Africans in colonial Southern Rhodesia maximized rural-urban social bonds to make ends meet. This was partly conditioned by familial bonds and obligations, particularly in the case of unaccompanied male labourers with dependents remaining in rural areas. In a 1957 urban African budget survey, it was estimated that the rural dependents of all men living alone in Salisbury

totalled 47,000, including 17,000 wives and 30,000 children.¹⁹ Single men reportedly “sent both money and goods to the rural areas and received very little from the rural areas” (Southern Rhodesia 1959, pp. 22-23). For many single urban labourers, it would seem, the prospect of urban employment was a means to support a family within the context of an altered framework with limited rural prospects on overcrowded Reserves.

For men who did manage to bring their family to town, close connections to rural areas could serve as a social and economic safety valve. The preservation of ties with rural environs enabled urban families to send children to stay with relatives to cope with overcrowding and reduce urban living costs (Gray 1960, pp. 263-264; Weinrich 1979, p. 34). Rural community membership was maintained by sending remittances (Harris 1974, p. 29). Consequently, Bettison found in his 1957 Salisbury household budget study that the poorest families tended to be among the highest savers. This, he suggests, was indicative of lower-income families “saving money to send home to relatives” and was enabled by foregoing food consumption and clothing purchases, with living standards “considerably further depressed as a consequence of saving” (Bettison 1958, p. 193). Still, low-income families living in Salisbury often gleaned additional benefits from their ties to rural homelands. The lowest-income urban families reportedly received commodities from their rural relatives, including groundnuts and cattle, which they sold in urban markets, while others received maize, meal, and other foodstuffs for household consumption. The Central African Statistical Office consequently concluded in the 1950s that among poorer urban households, “some money was sent to the rural areas [... but] on balance more was received from the rural areas than was sent there” when goods received are taken into account for (Southern Rhodesia 1959, p. 22). Better-off black urban households, in contrast, likewise sent money to rural areas but received significantly less in the form of goods from rural kin, resulting in a net flow to rural areas.

Twenty years later, rural-urban ties were still maintained through transfers of money and goods. While the transfer of agricultural goods from rural areas had declined, in its place a reverse flow developed, with seed, fertilizer, and maize sent by urban labourers to their rural homelands. Beyond providing a means for maximizing incomes across rural-urban productive zones, the maintenance of rural-urban relations through continued economic exchange was crucial for insecure urban dwellers. Rural areas provided social security for urban industrial labourers, which could provide support in instances of unemployment and, eventually, upon retirement. Indeed, within the Salisbury

19. The majority of these were situated in Southern Rhodesia, given that only 10% and 4%, respectively, of survey participants from Nyasaland and Mozambique reported dependents in rural areas.

township, black residents were legally barred from renting property once they ceased work. After their industrial service to the colony had ended, they were obliged to leave town and return to the Reserves (Harris 1974, pp. 23, 29). By the 1970s, a small urban elite of relatively affluent black urban professionals was increasingly cutting ties with rural areas; most black labourers, however, were obliged to maintain social and economic ties to guarantee their security (Weinrich 1979, pp. 71-73).

Conclusion

The rapid industrialization of Southern Rhodesia had depended wholly on the colony's black population, as both labourer and consumer. However, the capacity of black Southern Rhodesians to equitably share in the fruits of rapid economic growth was sharply curtailed by a deep-seated, multi-layered, and formally codified system of institutional racism. Decades of active government policies that limited the physical and economic mobility of black Africans in rural zones prompted the initial surge in black urban labour migration, as young men were drawn to the comparatively higher-earning opportunities in burgeoning industrial cities. Here, however, black workers faced economic insecurity underpinned by policies that perpetually privileged white settlers. At various times, the government sought to craft solutions, with the ostensible intention of improving circumstances for black urban dwellers, but the segregationist ideology woven deep into the fabric of the colony would continue to fetter genuine progress. The institutional foundations of inequality laid long before the industrial boom years would continue to produce and reproduce conditions of economic insecurity for black Southern Rhodesians. Caught in the vice of Southern Rhodesia's economic and political machinery and unable to share equally in the profits of economic development, black urban and rural dwellers relied on the direct inputs and support of each other to survive.

The poverty faced by black industrial workers – and their rural kin – amid rapid industrial growth in Southern Rhodesia lays bare the central role played by institutions in guiding the opportunities and outcomes of economic development, as a vehicle for broad poverty reduction or, in this case, a catalyst for increasing inequality. This was not the case in all colonial contexts. In the Belgian Congo, for example, colonial policies were not geared toward the interests of a minority of white settlers, and urban industrial development resulted in higher gains for black industrial workers both in manufacturing centres and in mines. In settler colonies, like Kenya and South Africa, in contrast, the constraints and conditions faced by black urban labourers mirrored those in Southern Rhodesia. While in Kenya, barriers were lifted and welfare ratios

improved for black urban labourers in the lead-up to independence, Southern Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 only further entrenched white settler controls and prolonged the economic precarity long faced by the country's black industrial labour force.

As the cases of Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, and South Africa illustrate, settler political domination tended to result in highly iniquitous economic outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. This is not to suggest, however, that Africans in non-settler colonies were necessarily spared from dire economic ramifications of colonial rule. In the case of Nyasaland, where the settler population was considerably smaller and less powerful, colonial mismanagement influenced by metropolitan interests condemned the colony to immense debt and its inhabitants to poverty and out-migration, including to low-paid Rhodesian farms. Institutions mattered for developmental processes and the implications of colonial rule for local populations, but ill-crafted policies could arise out of multiple contexts. In general terms, black Africans tended to face particularly high barriers to economic mobility in settler contexts. But imperial interventions that ignored broad-based local development in the service of broader metropolitan interests could likewise result in economic precarity for Africans under colonial rule. A comparison of Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland – both colonies with exceptionally low welfare ratios – could shed light on how institutional and economic characteristics in two very different contexts – one an industrializing settler colony, the other a non-industrial non-settler colony – could similarly stymie economic opportunities for black inhabitants.

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The production of precarity: industrialization and racial inequality in colonial Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

During the mid-twentieth century, the colony of Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) underwent a rapid process of industrial development, leading tens of thousands of black African men to leave overcrowded rural Reserves in search of better economic prospects in burgeoning industrial cities. Cities in Southern Rhodesia promised higher wages relative to rural areas, but many urban black labourers found themselves in precarious economic positions. Few black industrial workers earned wages sufficient to support an urban family; meanwhile, white industrial workers secured wage rates ten times higher, afforded by colonial institutions geared primarily toward serving the needs of white European settlers. This study zooms in on the foundations and consequences of racial inequality in industrializing Southern Rhodesia and also considers the settler colony in comparative perspective relative to other sub-Saharan African colonies – both settler and non-settler – to draw attention to the interplay between economic development, institutions, and inequality in a colonial context.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, racial inequality

JEL CODES: N37, N67, N97, F54



La producción de la precariedad: industrialización y desigualdad racial en el Zimbabue colonial

RESUMEN

A mediados del siglo XX, la colonia de Rodesia del Sur (hoy Zimbabue) experimentó un rápido proceso de desarrollo industrial que llevó a decenas de miles de hombres negros africanos a abandonar las superpobladas reservas rurales en busca de mejores perspectivas económicas en las florecientes ciudades industriales. Las zonas urbanas de Rodesia del Sur prometían salarios más altos en comparación con las áreas rurales, pero muchos trabajadores negros urbanos se encontraron en una situación económica precaria. Pocos trabajadores industriales negros ganaban un salario suficiente para mantener a una familia urbana; mientras tanto, los trabajadores industriales blancos disponían de un salario diez veces superior. Este era el salario que ofrecían las instituciones coloniales, orientadas, principalmente, a atender las necesidades de los colonos blancos europeos. Este estudio se centra en los fundamentos y las consecuencias de la desigualdad racial en la industrialización de Rodesia del Sur y también considera esta colonia de asentamiento en comparación con otras colonias del África subsahariana —tanto de asentamiento como de no asentamiento— para destacar la interacción entre el desarrollo económico, las instituciones y la desigualdad en el contexto colonial.

PALABRAS CLAVE: colonialismo, industrialización, urbanización, desigualdad racial

CÓDIGOS JEL: N37, N67, N97, F54



La producció de la precarietat: industrialització i desigualtat racial en el Zimbàbue colonial

RESUM

A mitjan segle xx, la colònia de Rhodèsia del Sud (avui Zimbàbue) va experimentar un ràpid procés de desenvolupament industrial, que va portar desenes de milers d'homes negres africans a abandonar les superpoblades reserves rurals a la recerca de millors perspectives econòmiques a les ciutats industrials en creixement. Les zones urbanes de Rhodèsia del Sud prometien salaris més alts en comparació a les àrees rurals, però molts treballadors negres urbans es van trobar en una situació econòmica precària. Hi havia pocs treballadors industrials negres que guanyessin un salari suficient per mantenir una família urbana; mentrestant, els treballadors industrials blancs tenien un salari deu vegades superior. Aquest era el salari que oferien les institucions colonials, orientades, principalment, a atendre les necessitats dels colons blancs europeus. Aquest estudi aborda els fonaments i les conseqüències de la desigualtat racial en la industrialització de Rhodèsia del Sud i també considera aquesta colònia d'assentament en comparació amb altres colònies de l'Àfrica subsahariana –tant d'assentament com de no assentament– amb l'objectiu de destacar la interacció entre el desenvolupament econòmic, les institucions i la desigualtat en el context colonial.

PARAULES CLAU: colonialisme, industrialització, urbanització, desigualtat racial

CODIS JEL: N37, N67, N97, F54