

Policy pointers

Reform policy and practice to keep pace with fast moving change. Both traditional and state-based land access systems should be overhauled to ensure fair land governance in the face of the increasing commercialisation of land transactions.

Support smallholder farming and off-farm employment. Policy and project support should focus on better ways to use fragmented lands, spread the benefits of commercial opportunities, develop off-farm income, and drive up quality and value in the informal economy.

Invest in local institutions for smallholder farming to thrive. Interventions should promote professionalism in local government, and grassroots and producer organisations pushing local value-addition, credit and infrastructure, particularly on fragmented lands.

Monitor changes in land access. Land use institutions and their development agency partners should develop the tracking and oversight systems needed to discern who owns what land, who knows this and how rural livelihoods can prosper as land access changes.

Access to farmland gets quick and dirty in sub-Saharan Africa

Who can access and use the land? The answer to this age-old question is changing fast in many parts of rural Africa. Land that used to be allocated within the community by chiefs is now increasingly changing hands in more diverse ways. The wealthy and well-connected within the community or from further afield are frequently able to override local statutory or customary land rights, dispossessing the previous occupants or forcing them to divide their already small plots of land. When government-backed investors obtain large tracts for agribusiness, local farmers who manage to participate in the schemes do well, but those who cannot may find themselves in dire need of support. While the scale and pace of these changes are growing fast, policy responses are lagging. This briefing sets out some suggestions for how to close the gap.

Understanding the changing dynamics of land access in rural Africa will be crucial if systems of land governance, companies and organisations, and rural development initiatives are to adapt and make a positive impact. IIED, with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), is working to contribute towards a deeper understanding.¹ Collaborating with research teams of national experts, we reviewed published and unpublished literature and analysed case studies based on fieldwork in two sites in each of the following four countries — selected to offer some spread of different contexts in sub-Saharan Africa — Ghana,² Senegal,³ Mozambique⁴ and Uganda.⁵

While the case study sites reflect diverse contexts, they also have important similarities — in particular a recurring trend towards increasingly commercialised land relations, with land values being pushed up and more disadvantaged groups being displaced into marginal areas. As land values increase,

government officials and political leaders seek a greater role in allocating land. This can lead to unregulated, and in some cases corrupt or otherwise illegal, transactions.

Meanwhile, landholdings are subject to increasing fragmentation and concentration in different contexts. Demographic factors are driving fragmentation in densely populated areas, while economic forces such as changes in land use and the rise of medium- and large-scale farming are fostering greater land concentration.⁶ This concentration often favours the actors who are best placed to make the most of opportunities for commercial land use and of land governance systems.

In the case study areas, these actors were primarily large-scale commercial operators, whether owned by national or foreign investors, and urban elites, including real estate developers and people pursuing speculative strategies. Under pressure from these

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processes of fragmentation and concentration, other groups have been forced to adopt coping strategies to survive. In the Limpopo site in Mozambique, for example, these strategies include borrowing land from relatives and

friends, and a local practice called *xitoco* or *rimela* whereby the landless work on someone else's land and receive a fixed payment.

In several of the case study areas, large-scale

commercial operators aim to establish 'inclusive' business models centred on integrating smallscale producers into the value chain. As in other parts of Africa, higher incomes can accrue for the smallholders involved in this kind of 'inclusive' model, but such schemes may also divert labour and land from food crops.⁷ For example, in the Ahanta West site in Ghana, the premium price paid for latex compared to oil palm and food crops, and the existence of nearby large-scale rubber operations, incentivises smallholder rubber cultivation. Some banks are also prepared to grant loans on the basis of the regular income stream rubber generates. However, many smallholders interviewed in this study perceived that a shift away from food crops in response to these kinds of inducements could lead to a significant risk of inadequate food supplies in their households.

Indeed, in some contexts in West Africa, the goals of 'inclusion' have proved elusive, with smallholders declining to fully participate in these value chains. Instead, smallholders have tended to become more oriented towards more

informal, trader-based modes of exchange, which may generate greater short-term cash flow. Some have thus become active in increasingly dynamic systems of food provisioning in emerging small urban centres.⁸

Where food demand is increasing and competition for land sharpens, some smallholders take the opportunity to intensify production and to innovate. Farmers may extend cultivation periods or adopt continuous cultivation. But, depending on the inputs that can be made to soil fertility, these may compromise long-term yields and exacerbate land degradation.⁹

The effects of these changes in land access and use are increasingly unevenly distributed. As land becomes concentrated in the hands of those who have the financial means and the political connections not only to acquire land but to develop it for agricultural or other purposes, a constellation of other local players also benefit. In Ghana, for example, customary chiefs and groups connected to them appear to be at the centre of these processes; while in Senegal there is a close relationship between municipal administrations and people acting as brokers and intermediaries.¹⁰

Among those losing out, farmers relying on customary tenure arrangements with 'secondary' land rights are the most vulnerable. The recurring theme here is that their lack of access to: finance, connections to officialdom and information serves as a barrier to seizing opportunities linked to land markets and the cash economy. This barrier is particularly daunting for women who depend on their husbands or male relatives for access to land, pastoralists who rely on negotiated arrangements with local farmers, and youths who traditionally have a limited voice in land management.

In the Ugandan sites, for example, youths are among the most affected by the increase in land prices since they cannot afford to buy land. And in the Ghana case study areas, difficulties in accessing land are causing youths to shift to off-farm occupations, notably small-scale mining, or to migrate to urban or other rural areas. In the Senegal sites, rural youths are seeking a greater voice, and greater autonomy from elders and family heads. Many still see a future linked to the land, but attempt to be more entrepreneurial than their elders and spend their money differently.

For women, the rise of market-based land transactions and the erosion of customary systems can provide some with new

Box 1. Case studies of changing rural land access

Mozambique. One case study from Boane municipality, not far from Maputo, looked at changing local land access in the context of the conversion of agricultural land into residential land. The second study was in the Lower Limpopo valley where a large-scale investment in rice production is contributing to changing patterns of land access.

Uganda. In Kalangala district, land relations are changing as the commercial production of palm oil expands, while in the northern district of Amuru, featured in the second case study, multiple sources of pressure are fostering land conflict amongst local groups.

Ghana. Ahanta West district, in the south of the country, was the focus of the first case study that explores how the discovery of oil, urban expansion and small-scale mining operations have increased pressure on rural and peri-urban land. Further north, near Tamale, the second case study saw rural communities facing large-scale land acquisitions for commercial projects.

Senegal. In the case studies in the Senegal River delta and Niayes areas, dynamics include local land transactions and large-scale land acquisitions for commercial agriculture and mining. In Niayes, there is also increasing pressure from urbanisation.

opportunities to overcome their disadvantaged tenure position. Particularly for those with greater access to finance, there may be greater scope for obtaining more secure, formal forms of tenure than would have traditionally been possible. But the emergence of large-scale commercial land ventures can be harsh on women too. In the northern Ghana site, for example, changing patterns of land use have constrained women's access to shea nut and dawadawa trees that were traditionally common property. And in all sites, women's responsibility to provide food for their families has remained largely unchanged even when plots have shrunk or become more fragmented.

These fast changing patterns of land access suggest the following implications for development policy and practice:

1. Policy, law and practice need to be reformed for fair land governance

Adapt and adopt guidelines. Land governance systems need to rise to these fast-growing challenges. Law and policy have been revised in many African countries in recent years but few governance systems are yet able to keep up with the pace and scale of change. The international consensus on responsible land governance, reflected in the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure, provides an important basis for practical reforms.

Reconcile conflicting systems and develop practical accountability mechanisms. Some chaotic land markets need better regulation and some conflicting systems — customary and state-based, for example — need to be reconciled more effectively, bridging gaps between statute books and local practice. While laws in an increasing number of countries now purport to recognise customary land rights, it is also clear that customary systems themselves have been changing, in some cases quite rapidly. Land governance systems thus need in-built flexibility — robust institutions will be more effective than one-off regulation in dealing with evolving challenges. Accountability mechanisms will also be crucial to prevent elites acquiring land unjustly. Furthermore, dispute resolution mechanisms will need to be recognised as essential tools in land governance.

Recognise tenure rights and maintain records. Time and again the evidence suggests that private investors can secure documentation for land they acquire, whereas smallholder farmers often lack any legal proof of their land rights or the means to cover the cost of securing such proof. Sustained investment continues to

be needed in securing the land rights of rural people through legislative and operational interventions that: recognise all socially legitimate tenure rights; establish accessible, low-cost arrangements for recording rights, including collective rights; and provide effective mechanisms for maintaining records.

Ensure quality in investment processes.

Plans and governance frameworks for agricultural development need tightening up to ensure investments are responsible and of high quality. Depending on the context, this will include strengthening community consultation and impact assessment requirements, attention to employment and participation arrangements, and ensuring the payment of timely and adequate compensation.

Monitor changes in land access. There are currently scant systems in place to track and document the profound transformations affecting land access in sub-Saharan Africa — yet good data will be critical to informing effective public action. New roles are needed in land use institutions and in their development agency partners to ensure that an emerging understanding of these changes, and how rural livelihoods can thrive as land access evolves, is effectively shared.

2. Smallholder farming and off-farm employment need concerted support

Make business models truly inclusive. This study has found that investments aiming to integrate farmers into commercial value chains have brought significant benefits to some farmers, but exacerbated difficulties for others. Careful shaping of these agribusiness developments — including the structures and benefits of outgrower schemes, anchor farms, contract farming and the associated models of large-scale business operations — is needed to ensure opportunities for smallholders are truly inclusive.

Engage with informal markets. Evidence suggests that food production has become much more oriented to domestic and regional markets than export markets in recent years, notably in West Africa. Rather than participating in 'inclusive' value chains, many smallholders are selling and buying in small urban centres — which are emerging as service and aggregation hubs, mainly out of sight of policy. Work is needed on the policy and business interventions that can drive up quality and promote robust rural and urban development in these contexts.

Promote off-farm income. Generating energy for rural areas, including for processing

agricultural produce, is one potentially promising sector, and links like this between on-farm and off-farm income are likely to be key. Employment in agricultural product processing, for example, can provide not just income but a stimulant to on-farm production — if farmers are able to secure a decent price for their produce this can have a 'pull' effect on its quality.

3. Local institutions need investment for smallholder farming to thrive

Support professionalism in local government. Local governments, customary authorities and devolved administrations are important actors in land governance and in mediating multiple pressures on land. There needs to be a concerted focus on building effective resourcing and professional codes within local governance administrations.

Orient credit, training and infrastructure to smallholders on fragmented lands. More interventions focused on agricultural credit, training and rural infrastructure for poorer producers are needed. If, for example, small plot size reduces farmers' ability to diversify, they may be more vulnerable to the risks of crop failure — in the context of climate change in

particular. Small-scale farmers are pursuing a variety of strategies to adapt, including different crop choices, acquiring small plots of land in different locations to make up farm sizes and hiring themselves out as labourers. Support systems need to take this diversity into account to promote a more flexible small- and medium-scale farming sector.

Invest in grassroots groups, producer organisations and support institutions.

Grassroots groups working to promote public accountability in local governance are vital — and are often the catalyst for effective rural development interventions. Support is needed in particular for rural producer organisations to strengthen their negotiating power in relation to both companies and government agencies. Moreover, support institutions that have traditionally focused on agriculture alone may need to add capabilities and strengthen their partnerships with those that can support non-land-based livelihoods.

James Mayers, Catriona Knapman, Laura Silici and Lorenzo Cotula

James Mayers is the director of IIED's Natural Resources Group. Catriona Knapman is a consultant to IIED. Laura Silici is a consultant to IIED. Lorenzo Cotula is a principal researcher (law and sustainable development) in IIED's Natural Resources Group.



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Contact

James Mayers
james.mayers@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

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Notes

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