

**Land in Africa: Market Asset or Secure Livelihood  
Conference  
London, November 8-9, 2004**

---

**Land in Africa: rethinking its role in growth, investment and poverty reduction**

**Prof Ben Cousins, PLAAS, UWC, South Africa**

1. Agriculture and natural resources are centrally important to NEPAD and other initiatives to kick-start pro-poor economic growth in Africa. This is appropriate, given their large contributions to income at present and the high proportion of people still living in rural areas in most African countries. Agriculture and natural resources are clearly not the sole answer, given processes of urbanization and de-agrarianisation, the impacts of globalisation on agro-food regimes, and the continuing need for development in secondary and tertiary sectors of African economies, but they remain central to poverty reduction policies.
2. Given the key role of agriculture and natural resources, land rights and land reform are critical. Secure land rights are important to rural people investing resources in a range of economic activities and enterprises. They are also important to underpin the household livelihood security of both the rural and urban poor. Equitable access to land and natural resources is important to ensure that growth is broad-based and poverty reducing, and thus redistributive land reform is a key enabling condition for pro-poor agricultural development. This is especially the case in those countries where colonial rule saw large-scale alienation of land to settlers, as in much of Southern Africa, but is also key in contexts where post-colonial development has led to inequitable patterns of land and resource appropriation.
3. Conventional models of development see increased tenure security, access to markets and complementary measures such as extension services leading to a virtuous circle of investment, enhanced production, multiplier effects, linkages and off-farm enterprise development, and ultimately to a movement of rural populations into the non-farm economy. Over the past decade and a half the property rights and market access elements of this model were heavily emphasized in structural adjustment programmes, that also saw reductions of state regulation, support and intervention in agriculture and natural resource use. The results have not been encouraging. These models are clearly inadequate, and new policy approaches and frameworks are needed.
4. New thinking on pro-poor agricultural growth (as in Dorward et al 2004) suggests that a return to a higher degree of state intervention is required to create the conditions for much growth, including a degree of protection via tariffs or similar measures, involvement in marketing, land reform, provision of extension services etc. Access to markets will require pervasive 'market imperfections' to be addressed, including at the global level (e.g. subsidies to developed country farmers). Misleading stereotypes of full-time and male 'smallholder farmers' need to be replaced with more realistic models of part-time, multiple-livelihood, and female as well as male producers. The impacts

of HIV/AIDS are still not sufficiently understood, nor are the policy implications clear. Multiplier effects and linkages may need interventions to bring them into being, rather than relying on market processes. Differences between high and lower potential regions need to be addressed by appropriate policies. Perhaps the most important message is that policies will need to be context-specific and socially differentiated to ensure a strong pro-poor thrust; 'one-size-fits-all' style policy prescriptions and blueprint approaches are even less appropriate now than they were in the colonial and early post-colonial periods.

5. Blueprint-style solutions are particularly inappropriate in respect of land and resource rights. The growing influence of Hernando de Soto, whose simplistic prescription is that capitalist growth can be generated by giving legal recognition to the extra-legal capital and property rights of by the poor, is deeply worrying. As van Benda-Beckmann points out, in de Soto's analysis people remain undifferentiated, and the millions of poor people without any kind of extra-legal assets receive no recognition. Property rights are also undifferentiated, their role in underpinning the livelihood security of the poor is not acknowledged, and common property is invisible. Issues of the distribution of wealth are ignored, and as a consequence the redistribution of property rights is not addressed. The role of the state as property owner, a key policy issue across Africa, is underplayed, as is the actual experience of land registration and titling programmes, within which it is often wealthy elites who have benefited more than the poor. In general, the political aspects of property rights are downplayed by de Soto.
6. In contrast, most recent studies recognize that securing the tenure rights of the poor is a deeply political issue, which means that democratic governance is a vital dimension of land policies and programmes. More nuanced approaches to tenure reform do not neglect the complexity of land rights, that in Africa are often overlapping and socially embedded, and in stressing the role of local institutions and processes, these emphasise the need for accountability of land administrators to the majority of citizens.
7. As in relation to land rights, democratic governance is key to the development of appropriate and effective policy frameworks for pro-poor agriculture and natural resource use across Africa. Political will must be mobilized to place the interests of the poor at the centre of policy processes and outcomes, even where the poor are not politically powerful enough to ensure this all on their own. This is the challenge to NGOs, activists, academics and donors.

16/11/04