

Backgrounder

Food and agriculture

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Access to land and the future of farming in Africa

Exploring the links among changing land tenure, access to land and agrarian transformation

As competition over productive land in Africa rises, land transactions, such as leases, sharecropping arrangements and (less frequently) sales of property rights, increase. These deals do not always follow formal rules, but increasingly involve the use of money in exchange for individual (rather than communal or household) rights. These emerging land markets may accelerate ongoing processes of social differentiation, bringing opportunities for some (such as households who rely on wage incomes or on migrants' remittances) but also the risk of increasingly unequal access to land and land-based resources.

The increasing use of money in land transactions may cause productive land to become more concentrated among wealthy individuals; large-scale investments, whether by locals or foreigners, further accentuate land concentration. Meanwhile, access to land is becoming more difficult for people who cannot participate in the emerging land

markets, those living in high population density areas and those whose land has been taken without adequate compensation. These people are forced into marginal, often degraded areas where land is becoming increasingly fragmented.

For disadvantaged groups, the security of tenure may be further compromised by unbalanced power relations, gaps between legality and legitimacy due to legal pluralism, and technical and budget constraints that mean land policies are not correctly implemented. For instance, transactions that rely on land titling (even if not issued by any legally recognised actor) may override customary rights or exclude people who own 'secondary' rights (often women).

The future of smallholder farming in Africa may take many different forms, depending on how these dynamics of change in land tenure, access and uses will develop. Some potential interconnections are discussed below.

KEY TERMS

Legal pluralism: sometimes statutory laws and customary land tenure run in parallel without effective coordination or a clear hierarchy. When pressure on land brings more conflicting claims, overlapping regulations and institutions make land governance difficult.

Agricultural intensification: farmers intensify production when they get higher yields from more efficient use of inputs and technologies. Intensification is usually in response to rising demand; but can also happen because resources like land or labour are in short supply.

Land fragmentation: farmers increasingly have to manage smaller, non-contiguous plots; this 'fragmentation' raises transaction costs and makes labour less efficient, but can also help reduce risks from pests and unpredictable rainfalls if plots are scattered in different locations.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Equitable access to land critically determines rural households' capability to participate in land markets and in agricultural growth. Tenure security and fair distribution of assets also encourage sustainable farming, whereas vicious cycles of insecure tenure and inappropriate intensification practices lead to declining productivity and land degradation.

However, land tenure systems in Africa are altering fast, possibly reducing smallholders' access to land. Population growth, rural-urban migrations, economic diversification and environmental and climate stresses are major drivers of change. Land uses and access to land also evolve in response to these driving

Agricultural intensification and productivity: an uncertain link

One common consequence of increased competition for land is that smallholder farmers intensify their production, with varying success. Some aim for competitiveness and raise their productivity, although long-term sustainability will depend on the technology and the inputs they use. Others intensify because they need to extend cultivation periods on smaller plots, or because they must cultivate continuously to avoid losing land rights in densely populated areas. For these farmers, intensification usually compromises yields and income, and can also exacerbate land degradation.

So wealth quickly becomes a key factor determining whether households can keep pace with intensification, secure land tenure and increase productivity. Farmers that can invest in productivity, in turn, have privileged access to emerging land markets, as 'improved' land is more valuable and can be used as financial collateral or sold and leased more easily. Conversely, farmers who are pushed into marginal plots have no incentives to invest in their land and often enter a downward spiral of land degradation, decreasing yields and poverty.

Fewer family farms

More and more land in Africa is growing commercial crops to feed urban areas and to supply regional and international markets. The increasing commercialisation of agriculture is at the same time a determinant and an outcome of more dynamic land markets. A related consequence is that fewer households rely on family farming, more youth decide or are forced to step out of agriculture, and the cultural and moral values embedded in farmland are progressively lost. Farming increasingly becomes an individual pursuit that relies on hired workers rather than family labour and on contractual arrangements instead of inheritance and reciprocal obligations in the transmission of land. While agricultural commercialisation encourages individuals to invest in productivity, the progressive shift away from family farming can also produce intergenerational conflicts and gender imbalances.

More large-scale investments in commercial agriculture

The revitalisation of commercial agriculture along with greater land value makes local and foreign investments rise, with varying

impacts on small-scale farmers. Plantations and commercial hubs can encourage new crops, technologies and business models, potentially boosting employment and yields. But they may also depress local food production by diverting labour from small-scale farming and by acquiring or 'alienating' land previously used by local people.

Commercial farming areas, contract farming, and outgrowing schemes can all foster smallholders' participation in the local economy. But this will depend on whether big players leave enough 'space' for competition and whether farmers have access to infrastructure and supply chains. And still there are no guarantees of fairness for all. An inclusive and equitable agricultural development will depend on many contextual factors such as contractual arrangements, recognition of local land users' rights, women's inclusion and respect of work and health standards.

Understanding the links

More research and policy analysis are needed to understand how changing land access and uses are transforming agriculture and how this is affecting the livelihoods of more than half a billion Africans that depend on small-scale farming.

IIED is starting a project aimed at understanding changing land issues for rural people in Africa; it is also exploring potential partners' and donors' interest in developing further a stream of work focusing more closely on access to land and small-scale farming. The aim is to help policymakers and international organisations support sustainable development of the agricultural sector, while at the same time protecting the livelihoods of those who depend on it.

This backgrounder draws on a literature review on "Understanding Changing Land Issues for Poor Rural People in Sub-Saharan Africa". Email Laura Silici at laura.silici@iied.org for further information and to request a copy.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

forces. While family farming remains central to rural livelihoods, increasingly more land is destined for commercial agriculture, residential development and other economic activities. Investors' interest, population pressure and urbanisation, all make competition for land — and its value — rise.

More research is needed to help policymakers and international organisations understand how these complex links affect small-scale farming in Africa, and to help them implement inclusive policies that protect the livelihoods of those who depend on agriculture.



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FIND OUT MORE

Our work on agriculture and rural livelihoods is part of the Exploring Sustainable Intensification Project, funded by DFID. Further work on land tenure and rural livelihoods will be undertaken under a forthcoming project funded by IFAD. Both projects are run by IIED's Natural Resources Group. Find out more about our work on land and agriculture at www.iied.org/food-agriculture and www.iied.org/land-acquisitions-rights.