Land in Africa Conference
November 8-9, 2004
Church House, London

Report back from Group 4

The group heard analyses from three West African countries and Mozambique. A critique of locally owned land in Ghana in a neo liberal world suggested that the aim of international capital is to open up African economies to international capital, cut out the middleman, force individual farmers to absorb transaction costs, and hold them to contractual relationships backed up with moral coercion. Customary land holding is not pre colonial but defined by colonial rule. It makes the chief the labour boss answerable to the government, not to the people. These factors make land rights in Ghana "fragile and insecure". Up to 50% of small holders in parts of Ghana could be sharecroppers.

Huge immigration into the cotton growing areas of Burkina Faso – increasing by up to 10% in some years in the 1970s and 80s, created a land shortage by the 90s. There is no formal market in land that is effective and transparent. Land is transferred by a chief giving it to immigrants, by sales or, rarely, by leasing. Urban dwellers buy land for speculation and they want title deeds. Young locals have no land through inheritance and are feeling left out. The system of land transfer is complex and very unclear. In general contrary to the pattern elsewhere women entrepreneurs may be doing quite well out of land speculation.

In Cote d'Ivoire a lot of land has changed ownership, much through sales to outsiders. The South East, traditionally quite empty, was invaded by pioneers who cleared forest. Among the new owners there was no problems with buying and selling but in time issues of inheritance have entered and decisions are no longer individual decisions but family decisions. All the non-commercial complexities experienced in other areas of Africa have entered the market.

In Mozambique, unlike West Africa, there is no shortage of land but land is only made valuable by developing it. Smallholders are the most important and productive owners. There is little renting and some purchase by South Africans and tourist businesses. Most people buying land locally prefer not to have registration as it means they had to pay tax on it.

General themes emerging from the analyses:

1. A land market exists in Africa but it is unclear and very imperfect.
2. It is impossible to talk about land in isolation. It is part of the political economy.
3. Land exchanges are not merely an agreement between people and a piece of land. They are about the relationship between people. As with bride price in African marriage the handing over of money for land may be the beginning of a relationship between families not the end. The relationship between users and owners, buyers and sellers is not just economic, it also involves social relations, class and even caste.

4. Customary and formal legal systems of ownership are both dynamic and developing. There was consensus that the state should only create a framework for systems of ownership and exchange and encourage transparency and openness at local level and protect the poor. Passing laws is not enough. Information needs to be disseminated at local level.
5. But there were fears that strengthening the customary “traditional” systems of land ownership or building new ones simply left power in the hands of an elite. Titling and privatisation would concentrate ownership in a tiny elite.
6. Woman and pastoralists are losing out in the struggle of land.
7. The group touched on but did not discuss the impact of globalisation; the impact of the flower growing industry and western supermarkets or the effect of European and American agricultural subsidies on Africa or what would happen if they were removed.

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