

The ‘African farmer’... is a woman

by Ruth Hall on 20 Aug 2013

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<http://www.plaas.org.za/blog/%E2%80%98african-farmer%E2%80%99-woman>

The raw realities facing women whose land is the only means of survival seems far removed from dry NGO and donor jargon, filled with ‘and women’, and ‘gender mainstreaming’. This was vividly evident at the Pan African Land Hearings, held on 15 August 2013 at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, representatives of rural communities affected by ‘land grabs’ in 9 African countries presented testimony to a panel of experts, including the Pan African Parliament.

The hearings were co-hosted by Oxfam, ActionAid, the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), and the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), with the purpose of providing a high-profile public platform for those directly affected by large-scale land acquisitions to present their own experiences in a forum of academics, politicians, lawyers and activists. The event builds on the academic conferences hosted by the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI): Global Land Grabbing, which took place in April 2011 at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, and Global Land Grabbing II, which took place in October 2012 at Cornell University in the USA. Both events were partnered by FAC and PLAAS. It also builds on a Seminar of the Pan African Parliament on ‘Making investment Work for Africa: a Parliamentarian response to land grabbing’, also co-hosted by PLAAS and FAC, together with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, two years ago in July 2011.

In contrast to these prior events which targeted academics and politicians, the first Pan African Land Hearings foregrounded the voices of people directly affected by corporate land deals in Africa. The day got off to a roaring start (literally) as 21 year old poet, South African born and Tanzanian-raised Maya Wegerif performed her poem ‘Until the lion speaks....’ in English and Kiswahili. By a time 9.30am in the morning, the convened audience was roaring and ululating with approval.

Chairing the mock tribunal was Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, renowned academic and former President of the Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa (Codesria), who observed that:

Asia had the ‘Tigers’ and now they say Africa has the ‘lions’. Maybe today we are going to hear the lions and the lionesses...

This comment, and its last words, seemed to open the way for powerful women’s voices, who consistently showed how the theme of gender permeated every case: women were excluded from ‘community consultations’ on land transfers, women lost fields, women were less likely than men to get jobs, and women’s labour burdens increased with declining access to forest and water resources. Mariam Sow-Enda of Senegal lambasted that, after the annexation of community land for commercial ethanol production, ‘The men depart and are badly paid [but] it is the women who suffer. Most devastatingly, she pointed to the multiple levels of struggle that women face to secure rights to land:



As women we have been fighting to get our rights, we have been fighting against our men to get the right on the land, but now if we get the right to the land, then the foreign investors come and get this land, what will happen to us? Now we are fighting the multinationals. It is our time. We as women must govern our land. When our president comes back from the G8 summit and says that our land is going to be sold, that is unacceptable. We must ensure that we will govern our land.*

In Zimbabwe, when the government partnered with a Brazilian biofuels firm and annexed land at Chisumbanje which had been occupied by peasant farmers during that country's fast-track land reform of 2000-2002, the community resisted displacement and it was women who led the resistance.

Raulina Valoi, president of a small-scale farmers' association in Mozambique, described how her community's land at Massingir district was targeted first by the biofuels company Pro Cana and later (after the Mozambican government cancelled its lease) by the same Mozambican businessmen, this time in partnership with the South African sugar company TSB (formerly Transvaal Suiker Beperk):

As women, we don't have access to the forest for firewood-collecting – we as women have to work harder, and walk further, to fetch water and firewood, because the company has taken all the land around us. In Malawi, as the traditional leader Petros Yohane observed, the expansion of the South African sugar giant Illovo into communal grazing and cropping areas, and the growth of sugar outgrowing to respond to its demand, pitted women's interests against men's: The most affected are girls, especially as there are dropouts, they are becoming nannies to the bosses in Illovo. We are seeing

more divorces, after husbands sell their pieces of land, leaving their wives and children alone.

These testimonies showed women as the primary producers of food in Africa. Marc Wegerif of Oxfam, in introducing the hearings, argued that women produce between 60% and 80% of Africa's food yet own 1% of the land. Land grabs are precisely the outcome of the failure of governments and investors to recognise that women's unregistered rights to fields to grow food for their families and for markets, to forests, to water and other natural resources are legitimate property rights and must be recognised as such. Only then can women be at the centre of deciding about the future.

Rebecca Oniango from Kenya is a widow from Siaya in western Kenya, where the US company Dominion Farms has acquired land is Yala Swamp. She spoke out against the odds stacked up against women:

In Siaya, a woman does not have a voice when it comes to land. When my husband passed on, two months after that, somebody came to tell me that my land was being sold, and I said if they are selling my land, and I am staying there with the children, where do I go to? I decided to become the Incredible Hulk, anyone who comes across me, either I will die or they will die! But how many women can do that? We have our Constitution, we have our Land Commission, but nobody cares, as long as you are a woman, you are nothing.

After this testimony, the panel chair, Prof Adebayo Olokushi (formerly President of CODESRIA and currently Director of IDEP), confirmed that the land grab phenomenon has to be understood as gendered:

Now we see the depth of the gender dimensions of the issues that we are dealing with, because not only do we have a layer of international land grabbing with the connivance of local authorities and elites, but we also have a foundational structure of patriarchal power, in which women are effectively excluded from any rights of ownership, control, even increasingly of use and access, and I think here we see injustice reinforcing injustice that is already in the system. This alerts us to the fact that the issues of land grabbing are multi-layered, which we need to attack in multiple ways if we are to propose responses to resolve difficulties and challenges that have arisen.

The day of hearing of women not only as victims but as leaders of resistance, as those speaking out for themselves and their communities brought to mind, in what is South Africa's 'women's month' of August, the slogan that galvanised the women's protests of 1956 against the extension of the hated pass laws to women: "Wathint' Abafazi, Wathin' Imbokotho!" [You strike the woman, you strike the rock!]

As Rebecca of Kenya said: 'If you were a lioness and you were rained on, let nobody think you are a cat, you are still a lioness!' What we witnessed today were lionesses. Rained on, yes, but still lionesses. And we heard them roar.

The [verdict](#) from the hearings is available for download.

*Note: quotations are based on the best possible approximate notes, in some cases through translation from French and Kiswahili. Note: quotations are based on the best possible approximate notes, in some cases through translation from French and Kiswahili.

- See more at: <http://www.plaas.org.za/blog/%E2%80%98african-farmer%E2%80%99-woman#sthash.kEYLPkrw.dpuf>