

‘Gender and Commercial Pressures on Land’

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I’ve been asked to make a presentation on gender and commercial pressures on land in Africa. ‘Commercial pressures on land’ – or CPL – is the term that is used by the International Land Coalition (the ILC) in lieu of ‘land grabbing’. I have recently written a detailed research and policy paper on the impacts of CPL on women for the ILC, as part of a broader global study of CPL which is due to be published later this autumn. As a result, although my presentation is largely based on this research, it is constrained by the requirement not to pre-empt official publication. I therefore present some brief observations about the impacts of CPL on women today, but without the details that you will be able to read in full later on.¹

Gender in the existing literature

To start off, it is important to emphasise that there is presently a notable lack of specific information about – or indeed attention to – gender issues within the existing wider literature on land grabbing. My fellow panelist, Robin Palmer, has described the current situation as one of “overwhelming gender blindness”, while other experts have bemoaned the difficulties in acquiring reliable gender-disaggregated data.² Studies and reports which comment directly, however briefly, on the gendered impacts of CPL are still very limited, while those which focus exclusively on gender are virtually non-existent. The majority of the literature instead barely even mentions gender issues, and where women are mentioned, this is usually in the context of discussions about the poor or marginalized groups.

For example, a recent UN policy paper on ‘*Foreign Land Purchases for Agriculture*’ makes not a single mention of either women or gender in its entirety.³ The World Bank’s recent ‘*Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*’ says almost nothing about the gendered impacts of CPL and devotes only one of the thirteen points under the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ on its

¹ Daley, E., 2010, *Commercial Pressures on Land – Gender Study*, Rome: ILC.

² Pers, comm. Robin Palmer; Pers. comm. Lorenzo Cotula.

³ UN 2010.

website to the gendered impacts of CPL in relation to biofuels.⁴ In this we are told that women may suffer from the potential loss of biodiversity and edible wild plant species as large-scale mono-culture cropping spreads. We are also told that the conversion of marginal and common property lands to biofuel crops might result in the displacement of women's agricultural activities towards lands that are even more marginal, thus decreasing household food security.⁵ While these are valid points, there are no details – no examples or case studies – on which to build a nuanced understanding of the nature and extent of the gendered impacts of increased biofuels production and start to work out appropriate policies and mechanisms for ensuring that women are as able to benefit from any opportunities offered as men.

Another source on biofuels written by Rossi and Lambrou for the FAO, and one of the few items which claims to have a focus solely on gender issues, is similarly short on details, case studies and examples, although the authors draw attention to the likelihood of gender differentiation arising out of men's and women's different roles and responsibilities in agriculture and the existing gender inequalities between them.⁶ Rossi and Lambrou raise similar concerns to the World Bank, before noting, on employment, that although women workers are often preferred in plantation agriculture for being more “docile and dependent”, there are health risks from the chemicals they are often recruited to spray without proper training or safety equipment.⁷ A recent FIAN study highlights this issue for an investment in the Yala Swamp in Kenya, where women work all day in the fields even when the crops are being sprayed with pesticides.⁸ The FIAN study also notes reduced access to water in the Yala river and the negative livelihood impact of this on poor women who can no longer “harvest papyrus and sisal from the nearby swamp”.⁹

In general, NGO and CSO evidence on the gendered impacts of CPL is more substantive, and is based on more detailed ground-level research such as that carried out by the likes of Action Aid and Oxfam.¹⁰ Voices from civil society are frequently concerned that women are not involved in the negotiations carried out when land is leased to investors, and that their existing resource rights might not be adequately protected by community leaders negotiating

⁴ World Bank 2009; 2010.

⁵ World Bank 2010, Q.8.

⁶ Rossi and Lambrou 2008, 4.

⁷ Ibid, 6, 9-14.

⁸ FIAN 2010, 23.

⁹ Ibid, 34.

¹⁰ Action-Aid 2010a; 2010b; Oxfam 2008. C.f. Nhandumbo and Salomão 2010; Sulle and Nelson 2010.

on their behalf.¹¹ There are worries about population displacement from large-scale land deals, and about who will benefit from any out-grower and contract farming schemes set up under them. Oxfam, for example, has expressed concern that women and children might do the majority of work while benefiting disproportionately from the cash income derived.¹²

To be fair, the current wave of land grabbing has only recently sprung to widespread international attention with the sudden food price rises of late 2007 and early 2008.¹³ Actual land use changes on the ground have been slow to follow through, as investments take time to take effect in terms of production, and this makes it difficult at the present time to see many gendered impacts of specific recent land deals that could have been documented in the existing literature.¹⁴ This means that any analysis of the impacts of CPL on women has usually been abstract or speculative, based on anticipated impacts rather than known impacts, including by extrapolation from similar situations in the past. In fact, the lessons from history are very instructive, with many of the same potential issues arising for women now as we have seen from past land reforms and large-scale agricultural and rural development schemes. For example, there has been substantial documentation of problems faced by women during classic land titling programmes across Africa, where ‘household’ land has typically been titled to the male ‘household head’.¹⁵ Colonial agricultural development schemes involving technical change and new farming systems have also often impacted on women in negative ways.¹⁶ More recently, the dominant finding among studies of contract farming in Africa remains that “women are generally not involved in contracting with agro-industrial firms and are disadvantaged in contract schemes”.¹⁷

Entrenched gender discrimination

I argue in my paper for the ILC that there are solid *a priori* grounds for thinking that women are likely to be affected differently to men by CPL, as well as that they are disproportionately more likely to be negatively affected by them than men. The reasoning behind this position is partly because of the lessons from history that I have just mentioned. However, and more

¹¹ Wandia 2009; Tandon 2010; Nhantumbo and Salomão 2010.

¹² Oxfam 2008, 1-2.

¹³ Action-Aid 2010a, 12-19; 2010b, 17-24; Economist 2009; GRAIN 2008; Merlet et al 2009, 3-4; Tandon 2010; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009.

¹⁴ Pers. comm. Lorenzo Cotula.

¹⁵ Berry 1993; Coldham 1978; Davison 1987; Mackenzie 1990; Peters 2010, 181-186.

¹⁶ Bernal 1988; 1999; Carney 1988; Dey 1981; Hanger and Moris 1973; Watts 1993.

¹⁷ Schneider and Gugerty 2010, 1-2.

importantly, it is also because, even though women as a group are not homogenous, they are generally vulnerable as a group and subject to systemic gender discrimination worldwide. Gender is uniquely the most central axis of differentiation and discrimination across all societies, and although women also face other forms of discrimination (on grounds of race, class, age, etc.), these are everywhere added on top of the underlying gender discrimination.

Clearly women's experiences of CPL will differ according to their position in their families, clans, communities and societies, their relative wealth and age, their marital status and their education level. Some of the issues women face are also faced by other vulnerable social groups – indigenous and tribal peoples, chronically poor and food-insecure people, disabled people, orphans, etc., and women in these vulnerable social groups often face double (or even multiple forms of) discrimination. But it is nevertheless the underlying gender discrimination that is most central, and which gives us reason to be concerned about the relative impacts of CPL on women as a whole *vis-à-vis* men.

In my paper for the ILC, I set out a four-fold analysis of women's vulnerability to the impacts of CPL *vis-à-vis* men. I argue that it arises, **first**, through the constraints and systemic discrimination women generally face in relation to their access to, ownership of and control of land, including the level of legal protection of their land rights.

Second, women's vulnerability arises through the systemic discrimination they generally face in socio-cultural and political relations, most particularly in relation to their role in decision-making, and their ability to exercise freely both 'voice' and 'choice' in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. Women's lack of political participation at all levels of government and society has important implications for the regulatory frameworks and guidelines currently being developed around land grabbing. For example, where such guidelines refer to 'free, prior and informed consent', such as those of de Schutter and IFPRI, the question to be asked, if women's voices are not heard and they do not participate politically, is 'whose consent'?¹⁸

Third, women's vulnerability also arises through the more general state of relative (cash) income poverty of women *vis-à-vis* men. This affects women's ability to participate in the

¹⁸ UN 2009; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009.

land market and is also related to the generally lower cash wages women receive relative to men worldwide for any paid work they do. This latter point is especially important with regard to the gender distribution of any benefits from large-scale land deals that might arise from increased wage employment opportunities.

Fourth, and not least, is women's general physical vulnerability *vis-à-vis* men, as manifested in gender-based and sexual violence against women, and which is directly linked to women's experience of land loss through "property grabbing".¹⁹

The global study case studies

Given the limitations that I have described within the existing wider literature on CPL, the ILC's global study provided a timely opportunity to address some of these gaps. The global study includes 17 detailed country case studies, covering issues around CPL from a range of drivers including food and biofuels production, timber extraction, tourism, land speculation, commercial and industrial development and special economic zones. Without pre-empting their forthcoming publication, I would like now to briefly highlight a few key points concerning the gendered impacts of CPL from some of the African case studies.

Ethiopia

First, in Ethiopia, specific gendered impacts are already visible on the ground from Karuturi Ltd's 'Bechera Agricultural Development Project' in the Bako Plains area of Oromiya Regional State. There have been some positive employment effects for local women there, who comprise around 70% of the 500 seasonal workers employed by the project. However, the project has reduced local people's access to former common property wetlands which were of vital importance to livestock grazing, a local livelihood activity in which women and children typically play a much greater part than men and derive their own cash incomes from. Roads previously used to gain access to rivers and other local watering points have also been blocked by the project and people have to walk further than before to fetch water, which mainly affects women as "fetching water...is mainly a business of female members of the family".²⁰

¹⁹ Izumi 2007.

²⁰ Fisseha 2010; Pers. comm. Messele Fisseha.

Zambia

Second, in Zambia, gendered impacts are already visible in Choma District, where a community was dispossessed from informally cultivated church land when it was leased to a private investor for jatropha cultivation. In this case, some 248 families lost access to valuable farming and grazing lands, and five lost their homes. Women have been affected more than men because of their responsibilities for food provisioning within their families. They reported lower levels of food production and a need to find alternative livelihoods. A local market was lost, with women traders now having to walk further to alternative markets where they make less money, and one old woman was only surviving by renting out a small house as she had no land left at all to farm on.²¹

Rwanda

Third, in Rwanda, specific gendered impacts are visible from the leasing of marshlands for sugarcane production to the Ugandan Madhvani Group. Some 65 to 70% of all the 4,000 to 5,000 casual labourers who work for the Group each day are women, and women and men receive the same wages for the same work. However the differences in their family situations are critical to the actual level of benefits that the women casual labourers obtain, including whether they are single or have a wage-earning partner, and how much (and what type of) land they have access to for their own food production. Madhvani's wages are also lower than those paid by sugarcane outgrowers to the 2,000 to 3,000 casual labourers they take on each day in the same area, although wages are higher during the cutting season when the labour is more exhausting, and young women also participate in this work "in considerable numbers". Some 320 of the 1,100 sugarcane outgrowers are women, mostly running smaller operations, but the outgrowers in general live and work in a situation of strong dependency on Madhvani, as the Group controls the sole processing factory in Rwanda.²² Thus, although the opportunities are there for women as much as men to engage in commercialized agriculture, the reality remains that wages are relatively low and profits uncertain because of the monopoly situation of the investor.

Ways forward

As these examples suggest, the impacts on women of CPL are complex in different cases. In terms of policy, then, what can be done to minimize negative impacts on women and

²¹ Milimo et al 2010.

²² Veldman and Lankhorst 2010, Pers. comm. Marco Lankhorst.

maximize positive ones? To date, the various international initiatives to provide regulatory frameworks and guidelines for land grabbing contain little at all from a gender perspective. De Schutter's 11 principles, for example, only mention the words 'gender' and 'women' once each.²³ Yet work on these initiatives continues, and there is therefore a potential opportunity to address gender issues through the development of gender-sensitive (and indeed women-friendly) tools and procedures. On the other hand, local contexts also need to be considered. Where there is heavily entrenched socio-cultural and political discrimination against women, and where they do not participate fully in decision-making, there is a risk that poorly-designed and over-simplistic 'gender-sensitive' tools and procedures could be seen as harbingers of unwelcome foreign norms and end up being discarded. Tools and procedures must therefore be locally appropriate and not over-generalized if they are to be of any value to women, and they must also address all four aspects of women's vulnerability in relation to the impacts on them of CPL.

Measures to support women's land rights thus make sense. This would directly help to protect their land, as well as enabling them to obtain higher wages through increased bargaining power in any prospective employment or contract-farming arrangements that might be generated by large-scale land deals.²⁴

Measures to support women's increasing levels of participation and decision-making in relation to consultations on individual proposals for large-scale land deals will also be beneficial, although involving women in such consultations will remain difficult in places where there are greater socio-cultural and political obstacles to women's participation.²⁵ In any case, consultation-strengthening measures also need to be supported by broader gender sensitization and capacity building work, and in the best case scenario the threat of land loss may trigger women's empowerment and political engagement within their communities.

Measures to support and protect poor people also make sense from a gender perspective, but these need to recognize and support women's specific concerns. For example, companies can be encouraged to find ways to make it easier for women to take up any employment opportunities presented by large-scale land deals through family-friendly working policies.

²³ UN 2009, 11, 18.

²⁴ Clancy 2008.

²⁵ Pers. comm. Messele Fisseha.

‘Women-friendly’ corporate measures (such as free bus services and strictly enforced anti-harassment policies) would also help address the issue of women’s general physical vulnerability *vis-à-vis* men.²⁶

To guide the development of all such measures, a solid evidence base is required. It is therefore very important to get gender consistently included on the agenda of all future research projects on large-scale land deals. It should also be possible to elaborate a gender research tool – a checklist of issues for women – which could be incorporated within the developing regulatory frameworks and guidelines and which all researchers of large-scale land deals should be encouraged to use in their research by way of best practice.²⁷

Conclusion

The strategic implication of the lack of attention to gendered impacts in the literature and debate on CPL to date is that women have to fight their own corner and cannot rely on basic ‘human rights’ approaches to address their specific concerns about CPL as these do not have the substantive systemic discrimination against women at the fore. For women’s organizations, it is especially important not to subsume gender issues ‘for the greater good’, when those issues could most effectively be addressed by being specifically put on the table at the outset. Activists must also cast their net more widely and ensure coordinated action with the whole range of groups within civil society who are working to achieve improvements in women’s representation and participation in decision-making at all levels of governance.

On this note, I would like to finish with the words of a Maasai woman from northern Tanzania who has been directly affected by land grabbing, cited by Nidhi Tandon:

When asked what it is that the women really need, Kooya does not hesitate, ‘We need our voices to be heard at different levels, by our own government but also by networks of women around the world who will support us. We are being marginalised by our government but also by the men in our communities – and yet we women are the

²⁶ World Bank 2009, 350-352.

²⁷ See World Bank (2005) for a similar sort of best practice tool with respect to land administration projects.

majority in our communities. We need a big movement to hold government accountable.²⁸

Thank you very much.

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²⁸ Tandon 2010.

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