

Women's land rights

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1 Summary

Even though rural women produce between 60 and 80 per cent of food in developing countries, they own less than two per cent of the land (FAO n.d.). The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, obliges governments to guarantee women equal access to land and other resources. But 25 years later, poor rural women in many countries have less access to land than ever, as privatisation of tenure – along with social crises such as HIV/AIDS and civil conflicts – puts land out of their reach.

Eliminating this blatant inequity is key to rolling back the impoverishment of millions of women worldwide and a fundamental starting point for equitable, sustainable development. Land is the basis of many social and political struggles. For rural people it is the starting point for livelihoods and dignity. Lack of access to land is both a symptom and a cause of injustice, perpetuating the power of the rich over the poor and men over women. At a broader level, discrimination in land rights contributes to increased poverty, food insecurity, conflict and environmental degradation.

After decades of neglect and disinvestment in agriculture and rural development, land reform has returned to national policy agendas as a result of increasing landlessness on the one hand, and on the other pressure from the World Bank and donor agencies to develop land markets. Peasants' social movements, claims and struggles have also helped to put agrarian reform back on the political map. However, current initiatives look set to repeat the mistakes of failed land reforms in past decades, by ignoring or marginalising the interests of women as producers and owners. In order for land reform to succeed in reducing poverty and boosting development, it must be anchored in robust policies to establish and entrench women's rights over land.

ActionAid International joins social movements worldwide in calling for a new agrarian reform agenda, in which the state plays a central role, ensuring that land is established as a common public good, and that its benefits are enjoyed equitably by women and men, regardless of race, class or ethnicity. Practical policies that will achieve these objectives can best be designed through an open and inclusive process, with priority given to the voices of women, particularly those from excluded communities such as indigenous peoples, lower castes, and other historically marginalised groups. As a contribution towards opening a renewed and reinvigorated dialogue on agrarian reform, we offer the following priorities for immediate action:

1. Governments must dismantle all discriminatory policies and legislation in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Where women have been unjustly deprived of land and other resources, measures must be put in place for compensation and restitution. Governments and civil society groups should work together to develop programmes to sensitize and train government administrators and traditional leaders to deal fairly with women's claims to land.
2. Policies for agrarian reform need to give priority to the needs and interests of women as farmers and economic actors in their own right, and particularly the needs and interests of the large number of female-headed households.

As a starting point, policy-makers, civil society groups and donors involved in developing such policies must build a differentiated analysis of women and men's land interests, and household resource allocation.

3. National development strategies and macro-economic policies need to be reconsidered in light of the crucial importance of supporting small farming, and women's role in small farming, in order to eradicate poverty, achieve food security and generate sustained pro-poor growth. The outdated modernisation paradigm, which assumed that large-scale commercial farming was always and everywhere superior to peasant agriculture, has proven a poor guide to policy-making and should be rejected. Fresh ideas and bold strategies for strengthening small and especially female producers and revitalising rural communities are urgently needed if international goals for eradicating poverty are to be achieved.
4. Customary law should not be used to deprive women of land rights. Practices that do so, including the widespread dispossession of widows in AIDS-afflicted countries, must be abolished. However, policy-makers and civil society groups must seek ways to reform customary and communal forms of tenure in order to secure the rights of women without losing the many benefits of vesting land rights in a collective or community rather than in individuals.
5. Rural women must be supported to gain knowledge, voice and power in community and national decision making. Priority should be given to increasing women's representation in local bodies overseeing land matters (village councils, committees etc.) and providing the necessary training to women office holders. At national level, governments must support forums where rural women engage one other in dialogue and put forward proposals to policy makers.
6. As part of the reviews of World Bank and International Monetary Fund conditionality currently taking place, these institutions must thoroughly assess the gender-specific impact of their policies (and most especially their initiatives to promote private tenure, willing-buyer willing-seller markets in land, and export-led commercial farming) on poor rural women. Programmes and policy conditions that undermine the right and livelihoods of women must be rescinded.

2 State-led agrarian reform and women's rights

After decades of neglect and disinvestment in agriculture and rural development, land reform has returned to national policy agendas as a result of increasing landlessness on the one hand, and on the other pressure on governments from the World Bank to strengthen individual property rights and develop markets in land. Proponents of market-led solutions are locked in strident debate with champions of state-led redistribution. However, in decades past both the state-led and market-led models have proven equally disastrous for women.

Land reform refers to the reform of the tenure system, or redistribution of ownership rights. Agrarian reform embraces changes in land tenure and ownership, but also includes changes in the scale of farming operations; in the types of crop planted and growing methods used; or in supplementary measures such as credit, marketing or extension services.

Newly independent governments in Asia and Africa introduced agrarian reform programmes during the 50s, 60s and 70s to address the colonial legacy of skewed land ownership patterns and feudal systems. The success of these programmes varies from country to country, but common to most of these programmes was the 'land to the tiller principle' facilitated by direct state intervention, and compulsory land acquisition.

However, the promise of land to peasants went largely unfulfilled and such programmes generally failed to meet their targets in terms of redistribution. Where land was redistributed, often this did not come with security of tenure. In addition, state-led agrarian reforms contributed to the marginalisation of women as producers and further undermined what weak rights to land they previously had,

These problems can be traced to several policy failures:

Box 1: What is access to land?

Rights to land are diverse and, in practice, multiple rights to an object can be held by several persons or groups. This has given rise to the concept of the "bundle of rights". Different rights to the same parcel of land, such as rights to sell the land, rights to use the land through a lease, or rights to travel across the land, may be pictured as "sticks in the bundle", each of which may be held by a different party. Although a large and varied number of rights may exist, it is sometimes useful to illustrate that rights of access to land can take the form of:

- use rights (rights to use the land for grazing, growing subsistence crops, gathering minor forestry products, etc.)
- control rights (rights to make decisions how the land should be used including deciding what crops should be planted, and to benefit financially from the sale of the crops, etc.)
- transfer rights (rights to sell or mortgage the land, to convey the land to others through intra-community reallocations or to heirs, and to reallocate the use and control rights)

In practice the scope of potential rights of access may be broad and measurements could be required for rights such as the following.

- rights to shelter
- rights to access water, firewood, fish, or fruit
- rights to shares in inheritance on the death of a family member
- rights to shares in land and improvements on the death or departure of a partner in informal and formal marriages
- rights to use the interest to secure access to financing and financial inputs
- rights to the profits from the use or sale of the resource
- social status in the community based on access to land

Failure to recognise women's land interests: In many countries women have access to land only through male relatives: husbands, fathers, sons or brothers. If such a relationship ceases to exist, for example through separation, divorce or widowhood, so too will the land rights that came with it. In the words of a woman from the Volta region in Ghana, 'A woman's interest in the land can at best be described as a short term lease.' Therefore, it is critical to establish tenure security for women as legal persons in their own right.

Unfortunately, however, policy makers have tended to look at households according to a unitary model where "the household" is a single decision maker 'within which resources transferred to men are seen as benefiting the whole family (Agarwal 2002). Reforms designed around this assumption not only left women defenceless if they were widowed or divorced, but in many cases they 'exacerbated married women's (unpaid) workloads, economic insecurity, and [lack of] bargaining power within households' (UNRISD 2004).

Neglecting women's rights in state redistribution programmes: Women have often been unable to apply for land through state-managed programmes because it is registered solely in the name of the husband. Even where women have applied to receive land, they have been pushed to the back of the queue because the rules governing implementation, or simply the assumptions and values of the officials in charge, give preference to men.

In Zimbabwe, for example, any deserving "person" was legally entitled to resettlement land in the 1980s. However, resettlement officers tended to discriminate against women, preferring to allocate land to so called families – led by a male head.

In fact, failure to incorporate women's interests in agrarian reform has tended to result in an erosion of previously existing rights which women might have had under common law and local practice, if not in legislation (Manuh 1998). For example, even in traditionally matrilineal communities of northeast India, state redistribution and resettlement programmes have allotted land almost exclusively to men (Agarwal 2002).

Losing rights through changing patterns of land use: Women may also lose plots they had previously cultivated as a result of agricultural "modernisation", particularly the introduction of new, more economically rewarding crops (e.g. switching to cash crops from subsistence farming) or more capital-intensive technology (e.g. irrigation). With tradition according men the role of decision making in land use, they are able to 'use a language of custom to take control of these new forms of agriculture' (Tsikata and Whitehead 2003 2003).

In the mid-1980s, for example, Nairobi-based export companies introduced horticulture to Meru, a largely coffee growing district. Men had largely grown the tea and coffee. But when prices fell, the men either started to grow French beans on their plots, or took control of their wives' income from the French beans (Ayieko 2001).

Disempowerment from absence of rural support services and credit for women: Men have been the majority beneficiaries of rural support services and credit. This disadvantages women producers, who often lack the necessary support--in the form of

working capital, inputs, extension access or credit--to increase the area of land that they cultivate (Tsikata and Whitehead 2003).

In summary, state-led agrarian reforms have too often failed to recognise women's needs and interests as farmers and economic actors in their own right. As a result, they have strengthened and expanded male monopolies over land. Policy-makers and social movements involved in agrarian reform need to build a differentiated analysis of women and men's land interests, and household resource allocation. Agrarian reform programmes must also explicitly address the situation and needs of the large number of female-headed and maintained households.

3 Women's rights and market based land reform

If past experiments in state-led redistribution have achieved disappointing results in transferring land to the poor and women, it is clear that market forces will not achieve these objectives either. The introduction of private land ownership and individual title might be thought to offer more security to women, but in practice the creation of a market in land once again marginalises women.

First, introducing individual rights is hardly likely to benefit women in contexts in which they are not recognized as individual persons in their own right.

Second, market based land reforms allow for sales of land, but in the process women are losing access to land on which they depended because men dominate decisions to put some or all of a family's land on the market. Distress sales of land on which women depend have increased. In Uganda for example, Specioza Mbabazi husband sold all the land they had except the piece where their house is. The person who bought the land does not allow her to carry out any cultivation. She now has to walk four miles to her parents' home to cultivate food for her family (ActionAid International Uganda & Uganda Land Alliance 2006).

When families sell off land, women are not in a position to find well paid safe alternative work. Access to common resources (trees, water, pasture, grass) is being closed off by new landowners who now claim ownership of these resources.

Third, there is convincing evidence that the creation of a private market in land benefits the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Willing-buyer willing-seller reforms promoted by the World Bank and others provide landless peasants with long term credit from the state to buy land directly from the owners. Large farmers and landowners have taken advantage of such programmes to dispose of poor quality land at high prices, while the intended beneficiaries end up with big debts and unviable plots. Title registration schemes, similarly, have led to a rush to register land, but it is mainly the wealthy and or those with links to the state who have taken advantage of the new provisions.

Increased competition for resources under a market system, and the new waves of landlessness and poverty this creates, can make it impossible for women to realise gains made in legislation and policy. The development of a market in land can even undermine the fragile gains that women have negotiated under so-called "traditional" systems. For example, some communities are increasingly allocating land to female heirs, either because parents see the growing instability of marriage or because women are shown to be more likely to look after their parents in old age whereas men are seen

to be influenced by 'get rich quick' attitudes (Senkumba and Bikaako). But this trend may be reversed if land comes to be seen as a disposable commodity rather than a long-term social and economic asset.

Finally, market-led land reform centred on private title is seen by many critics as part and parcel of a wider set of initiatives intended to integrate developing countries into the global market economy.¹ These policies (widely seen to include trade liberalisation, deflationary monetary policies and the take-over of agriculture by multinational corporations) are charged with leaving poor people increasingly vulnerable to sudden loss of livelihoods. Some scholars allege that neo-liberal reforms have been especially damaging to smallholder agriculture and poor rural women, as evidenced by drops in production and increasing food insecurity (Fortin 2005).

Donors and international agencies championing market based approaches have encouraged rural communities to offer land concessions to foreign and domestic investors, for example the tourism and mining industries, in order to finance growth. The experience of many communities who have leased out land to investors is that they lose the land as well as the common resources on it, with few overall benefits for the community. Women are not party to these negotiations and are not in a position to prevent land leases. In the case of Zambia for example, traditional leaders negotiate leases on behalf of their communities, but may give away resources that are critical for the poor:

'The growth of tourism and the number of lodges in the Victoria Falls area for instance, has led to the enclosure of more and more riverfront property in this particularly arid part of Zambia. As a result, some villagers now have a difficult time accessing the river to collect drinking water, to graze and water their animals, to fish or to gather thatching grass. [...] Planning restrictions exist that prevent title holders from owning the riverbank itself. These easements however, are seldom enforced and lodge owners generally claim not only the riverbank but also much of the river. [...] Some lodge owners also prevent locals from fishing too close to the lodges for fear they will 'spoil the guests' views.' (Brown 2003)

As this example shows, deregulating land tenure systems and introducing private individual tenure (whether freehold or leasehold), as recommended by the World Bank and other donors, can leave the poor and landless without any protection from the acquisitive appetites of local and international business. At a minimum, there is a pressing need for strict procedures and guidelines, sensitive to gender-differentiated uses of land and other natural resources, to ensure that land transfers do not deprive communities, most especially women, of common resources.

¹ Pereira (2005) breaks World Bank policies on land into eight dimensions: lands renting, purchase and sale of lands, private titling, agrarian legislation change and creation of new management apparatus, agrarian conflicts control, rural property taxation, land de-collectivisation and privatisation, and market-assisted land reform.

4 Reinstating the state

As Olukushi (2004) points out, whatever model of land reform is adopted, the state has an indispensable role to play in securing and enforcing property rights, as well as in promoting the investment and growth needed to sustain a thriving agricultural sector. 'Historically, no process of reform of property relations, enforcement of the rights ensuing and sustained growth has occurred without a strong, capable state which is both willing and able to take on a proactive role,' he argues. Moreover, the verdict of the past decades' experience suggests that more rather than less state involvement is likely to deliver better results for poor and excluded groups, including women.

First, gender blind as it was, state-led land reform afforded women more land and better security because its explicit aim was to provide land to poor households. And second, women and other marginalised groups can find greater space for contesting issues of equity and social justice if land rights are settled in the political arena rather than in the marketplace.

The urgent question is how to "reinstating the state" in a new approach to land reform based on equal citizen engagement, inclusive participation, and affirmative action, putting women's rights and interests at the forefront. Peasant movements have intensified their efforts to find a new approach to land reform that overcomes the weakness of previous state-led efforts, while preserving a central role for the state and protecting land resources from the vagaries of market forces. They see redistributive agrarian reform as an important opportunity to roll back the social and economic exclusion reinforced by neo-liberal policies and put poor people's rights to access to and control over land first.

The development of such an approach requires a broader debate over the best rural development strategy for each country, and its place in the overall national strategy for poverty eradication and development. Many critics and social movements are calling for governments to question and rethink the assumption that "commercial" farming is more desirable than "subsistence" farming and is best promoted through large-scale landowners. Under this paradigm "subsistence farming" is at best tolerated as an unimportant and unproductive activity sustaining a "residual" peasantry (Moyo 2004).

Peasants' movements have increasingly challenged these assumptions and are calling on governments to make small farming and investment in rural communities central to their national development strategies. The women of Via Campesina, for example,

have made clear that their struggle is not only economic and class based, but also for the revalorisation of their culture and their traditional wisdom in the production of food, the selection and management of seeds, the breeding of animals, and in caring for the earth and nature (Suarez 2005).

Any successful land reform must be home-grown, addressing the specific history, context and local realities of a given country. However, some of the most important policy challenges are common to a large number of countries. These include reforming customary tenure, securing the rights of indigenous peoples, stamping out human rights violations that undermine women's ability to access land, reforming inheritance laws in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and responding to the feminisation of agriculture.

4.1 Engendering customary tenure

In theory, customary tenure systems discriminate against those whom culture and tradition defines as dependent or subordinate – women, lower caste groups, youth, etc. In theory, private property regimes allow these groups to exercise the same legal rights to ownership and control of land as men. In practice, however, women may actually achieve greater access to land under customary or communal systems, which are premised on land as a social relationship. Because they privilege community-building over short-term individual gain, they are more flexible and adaptive than private property systems. This flexibility can afford women greater room for manoeuvre in negotiating access to land than market-based systems (Tsikata and Whitehead 2003 citing Toulmin and Quan).

Experience suggests that tenure systems work best when rural communities are allowed to adapt and evolve them to their own needs; legal frameworks should be flexible enough to allow for the differences in land relations from one community to the next. Unfortunately, however, in the context of growing competition for land, many observers note an increasing tendency to use customary tenure as a means of defending patriarchy, male privilege and autocracy. The challenge facing policymakers and women's rights activists is to preserve the flexibility of customary law and its orientation towards collective rather than individual interests, while securing improved rights for all groups and establishing robust provisions to ensure that women have legally enforceable claims to land in their own right.

Land registration drives have been used in some contexts to push the replacement of communal tenure with private ownership and promote the commoditisation of land. However, title registration in itself can be a useful tool to entrench and protect the rights of the poor, as long as various forms of communal or collective title are recognised alongside individual title, and as long as legal title does not become the sole valid form of claim to land. Public funds should be used to enable women and rural communities to undertake all the necessary steps to register their land claims. Where title is given to a household, it should always provide for joint ownership by the woman and the man, in order to secure women's rights.

Ensuring that tenure systems uphold women's rights to land should be a priority objective of land administration systems. Scope exists for governments and NGOs to work together in training civil servants, traditional leaders and community structures to deal with women's claims fairly; and in establishing monitoring systems to track and resolve any violations of women's rights.

4.2 Rights of indigenous people and marginalised groups

Indigenous peoples' rights to territorial integrity are established under international conventions. However, these communities have long suffered persecution, discrimination, and neglect. With increasing foreign investment, more and more indigenous land is being lost to mining, forestry or tourism. State clampdowns on resistance of indigenous and peasant peoples in defence of their legitimate grievances have been extremely violent.

Indigenous women's land rights are constantly being undermined as a result of displacements and evictions, intrusion of other actors on their lands, and assimilationist policies. Dispossession of indigenous lands is frequently an extremely violent process which has included crimes of rape, murder and torture of women as a means to subjugate indigenous populations.

Indigenous women also have to struggle to maintain their status and enhance their rights within their own communities.

'The majority power is with the men, who are the leadership within the communities. When women take on these spaces they are not respected. This is a major problem. [...] Women are not respected as organisers, as leadership by right alongside men. The men begin to argue that this is not indigenous culture and that indigenous women begin to wake up when they organise as women. ...This is impoverishment and a cause of poverty too' (Wakana 2005).

4.3 Human rights violations

Women's land rights can best be secured in tandem with the realisation of their other human rights. Illiteracy levels are highest amongst rural women. Their rights to water, primary health care and reproductive services are undermined by privatisation. They have limited access to legal services. Women are prevented from participating in decision making within their communities and in the national sphere. When they work for wages (for example as farm labourers), they are often worse paid and frequently face harassment and abuse. Forced marriages of young girls and the treatment of women as the property of males persist, and activist groups believe that child trafficking is on the rise. ActionAid fieldworkers around the world report that human rights violations associated with increased competition for land are becoming more widespread and acute.

Asserting women's land rights can help to curb such violations by reducing their dependence on men; conversely, strengthening other rights puts women in a better position to claim their land rights. A successful strategy for rural development and agrarian reform must tackle women's basic rights as a package, seeking to strengthen women's voice in decision-making, and making plans and budgets available to improve rural women's access to education, water, health care, justice and other essential services. Well-designed public information campaigns, and legal literacy programmes can be useful ways to increase women's knowledge of, and ability to claim, their rights and entitlements.

4.4 HIV/AIDS

Women's tenure insecurity has been dramatically exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Increasing numbers of women find themselves widowed at an early age, but are prevented by custom from inheriting land as well as other resources ranging from livestock and implements to urban houses and pension benefits. Despite multi-country research on the topic, little has been done at a public policy level to address the cruel treatment that widows and children face following the death of a spouse.

Ana Ajok of Apac in Uganda recalls watching helplessly as a 60 year old relative claimed her late father's land. The man sent brokers to uproot Ana's mother's crops. Because Ana was ill with HIV related complications, she could not help her mother.

A UNIFEM/FAO study undertaken in Zimbabwe in 2005 found that several factors lead widows to give up their claims on family property. In addition to harassment and abuse, the fear of witchcraft, pressure from their own relatives, and the fear of prejudicing the husband's family against the children all play a role (Marongwe et al 2005). Finally, many women are married under customary law which gives them few inheritance rights. The study reports that women will often have to return to their natal homes to work as unpaid labourers on the family land without any entitlements.

4.5 The 'feminisation of agriculture'

Women's participation in peasant agriculture can no longer be considered secondary to men's. In many cases women are emerging as farm managers and the main source of family labour. This is a result of lack of viability of peasant agricultural production in the present period. The number of female-headed households in rural areas, particularly as a result of male out-migration to seek waged employment, is increasing. According to the FAO, in sub-Saharan Africa, 31 percent of rural households are headed by women, while in Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia, women head 17 percent and 14 percent of households, respectively (FAO n.d.) As a consequence, women's work is undervalued, and not enough is done to direct public resources for women farmers.

Deere's (2005) extensive investigation into the feminisation of agriculture in Latin America documents the rise in female agricultural labour, both as own account workers and as participants in the agricultural wage labour force. This tends to go unnoticed because 'agricultural censuses are notorious for underestimating women's work in agriculture' (Deere 2005).

Unfortunately it is also true that 'as some occupations become feminised ... the income they generate is reduced along with the prestige associated with doing such a job' (Arrighiada). Without deliberate intervention to value women's productive and reproductive labour, then it is likely that the feminisation of agriculture will result in less rather than more resources being channelled to rural development.

To counter this tendency, programmes of agrarian reform and land redistribution should include affirmative action programmes specifically targeting women with rural support services (including rural extension, credit, insurance, and housing), increased tenure security and land rights.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

'The worst realities of our age are manufactured realities. It is therefore our task, as creative participants in the universe to redream our world. The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be redreamed. Each reality can have its alternative possibilities. Human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformation.' - Ben Okri

The vision of an alternative world can not be realised while gender inequalities persist. Activists and development workers must therefore take up the question of women's land rights, and give women's land rights the place that they deserve in 'mainstream' agendas for social justice and poverty eradication.

Securing women's rights to land will require action on many fronts and not just tenure reform. Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, which dictate that women cannot own property in their own right, must be challenged. Cultural and legal norms that define wives and daughters as chattel must be changed. While laws now exist in many countries to assert women's civic and political status, legislation governing women's status within the household and society at large is in urgent need of reform. New laws are needed to eliminate the discrimination that women currently face in matters of inheritance, widowhood, or divorce, with disastrous consequences for their dignity and well-being as well as that of their children. Political resistance and indifference is perhaps the biggest challenge of all, as leaders, legislators and officials seldom champion and often block efforts to secure justice for women through agrarian reform processes. The World Bank and other international lenders and donors must stop pushing policies and schemes that have had disastrous consequences for poor rural women, including initiatives to privatise land and liberalise agriculture.

If world leaders are serious about eradicating poverty, they must give their urgent attention to securing women's access to and control over land. ActionAid International joins social movements worldwide in calling for a new agrarian reform agenda, in which the state plays a central role, ensuring that land is established as a common public good, and that its benefits are enjoyed equitably by women and men, regardless of race, class or ethnicity. In designing practical policies to translate this vision into a working reality, it is essential to seek the insights and of those most systematically excluded from land – poor rural women, indigenous and minority groups, and those affected by HIV/AIDS. They must speak loudest and longest in the debate over land. However, as a contribution towards opening a renewed and inclusive dialogue on agrarian reform, we offer the following priorities for immediate action:

1. Governments must dismantle all discriminatory policies and legislation in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including laws that deny wives and daughters the ability to own property in their own right. Where women have been unjustly deprived of land and other resources, measures must put in place for compensation and restitution. Governments and civil society groups should work together to develop programmes to sensitize and train government administrators and traditional leaders to deal fairly with women's claims to land.
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As a starting point, policy-makers, civil society groups and donors involved in developing such policies must build a differentiated analysis of women and men's land interests, and household resource allocation.

3. National development strategies and macro-economic policies need to be reconsidered in light of the crucial importance of supporting small farming, and women's role in small farming, in order to eradicate poverty, achieve food security and generate sustained pro-poor growth. The outdated modernisation paradigm, which assumed that large-scale commercial farming was always and everywhere superior to peasant agriculture, has proven a poor guide to policy-making and should be rejected. Fresh ideas and bold strategies for strengthening small and especially female producers and revitalising rural communities are urgently needed if international goals for eradicating poverty are to be achieved.
4. Customary law should not be used to deprive women of land rights. Practices that do so, including the widespread dispossession of widows in AIDS-afflicted countries, must be abolished. However, policy-makers and civil society groups must seek ways to reform customary and communal forms of tenure in order to secure the rights of women without losing the many benefits of vesting land rights in a collective or community.
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6. As part of the reviews of World Bank and International Monetary Fund conditionality currently taking place, these institutions must thoroughly assess the impact of their policies (and most especially their initiatives to promote private tenure, willing-buyer willing-seller markets in land, and export-led commercial farming) on poor rural women.

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