

6. Land grabbing - what's it to do with me?

Everyone knows it goes on. Everyone knows someone who has suffered. Everyone shakes their heads despondently, and carries on with life. Every day people are thrown off their land – women children and even men. Widows are thrown off their own land by their in-laws, and left destitute, often with young children who will grow up not just in poverty but with no community to belong to. Small wonder if many of them turn their rejection by society into their own rejection of society through crime and violence. Orphans are dispossessed of their inheritance by uncles. Women thrown out by their husbands are then denied a home by their own brothers. The children of unmarried women, instead of being valued and protected as children, are seen merely as people who will demand land when they grow up, and for no other reason they are rejected by the families of both their parents. Were these ever the values of Ugandans? Was this ever the culture anywhere in Africa? And yet, no-one will stand up to demand that it stops.

Parliament has passed laws saying this shouldn't happen, but no-one bothers to enforce them. Government wants to eradicate poverty, but thousands are forced into conditions worse than poverty – not as a result of any policies, but in spite of the policies and laws that should protect them. And worst of all, while we tell each other how supportive our communities are, we turn away from the rampant crime in our own communities and do nothing. The poor and vulnerable are not being forced off their land by guns that we can say we fear to stand up against. And yet everyone turns away, forgetting the message of Pastor Niemoeller that if I don't stand up when others are at risk, who will be there to stand up for me and my family when it is our turn to be threatened?

The tide must turn. We are trying to mobilise everyone – individuals, communities, NGOs, religious leaders and others – to eradicate these crimes from our society. We have begun with just a few organisations who were willing to go with us into the villages to hear the stories of the victims, and to find out the facts about what has never been researched. What we found shocked us all.

Land grabbing is not just happening in a few isolated cases. In parts of the country, it affects the majority of widows and almost all women who are divorced or forced to leave their husbands. These are not few households. In the villages we visited we usually found ten to fifteen widows and nearly as many women divorced and separated women. The impact on the victims can easily be imagined in an economy

where farming is the only way that people can feed themselves. Women and children are forced to work every day as hired labourers on the land of others making it impossible ever to escape poverty – and if they ever fall sick or cannot find work, then destitution is quick to be upon them.

But when land grabbing reaches this level, it is no longer only about the victims themselves. All the communities of Uganda have norms and values, with institutions from the family, the community or the clan, which regulate behaviour and protect the vulnerable. Where these institutions are passive in the face of behaviour which is both criminal and a violation of the local culture, these institutions have shown themselves to be irrelevant and cannot survive. As they atrophy and wither away, the culture too is dying. Society is weakening, the family is breaking down, and even the real institution of marriage is being eroded. If anyone doubts it, they should go into the communities and listen to their stories.

It is hard to know why the issue of land grabbing is so ignored. We have NGOs who want to eradicate poverty, who fight HIV, who work for the protection of children or the elderly. And yet how can any of this be achieved when the basic necessity of all – land to farm – is being denied to so many of the weakest? Church leaders preach about morality and protecting the weak, but how can values be passed on to our children when the fabric of society is so torn and they see around them that we do so little to protect it? LCs and clan leaders hear cases, but when the land grabber ignores their rulings, they feel powerless and leave the victim to seek justice where they can find it at some out of reach Court. Uganda has hundreds of radio stations and newspapers in everyone's language, but until a case ends in murder or involves political scandal, you will never read or hear about the problem of land grabbing. Almost no family is untouched, and yet land grabbing remains a problem that we do not deal with. It's not that no-one cares. It's just that no-one quite knows what to do.

The time for excuses has come to an end. The law is there for us to use. The customary law also forbids stealing land from widows and children. We can mobilise the police and LCs and the customary leaders, family heads and clan leaders to work together to bring an end to this shame.

We are publicising our research in the hope that thousands of individuals and communities, and scores of organisations will see that this problem touches them, that their work cannot go ahead whilst this cancer problem remains unaddressed. Individual

voices can go unheard, but if a cry goes out in every District, in every parish and every village, then the voice can be heard and the land grabbers can be stopped. The scandal has only continued because people felt powerless as individuals and didn't know how to stop it. Once we understand the tricks of the land grabbers we can stop them. When we see why both the cultural leaders and LCs are failing to stop the land grabbers, we can work with them to uphold the law.

This call to get involved is for all: individuals and communities, Churches, NGOs, cultural leaders, clan leaders and LCs, the media, the police, local Government and Central Government all have their part to play.

What can you do?

The first step for us all is to open our eyes and recognise the problem. The second step is for us to decide to play our part in ending it.

As Church leaders and church members, we must recognise it as a moral issue and as a factor in spiritual breakdown. Our faith calls us to stand up for the dispossessed, and to stand up for justice. It is our duty to take a moral lead where we see injustice and to encourage the LCs, the clan and family heads in the village to take their responsibilities seriously.

As NGOs, we should recognise how land grabbing affects every issue we work with and everyone we want to help. In our community work we can talk about it, bring cases to the attention of the authorities. We can distribute material about people's rights and how to defend them. We can become part of something much bigger than our own work simply by being part of a national campaign, making sure that the fight against land grabbing becomes part of the national consciousness.

As family heads, we should be vigilant in protecting the interests of all of our family members, and proactive about stepping in to protect the vulnerable.

As clan leaders, we need to remember that our positions come with responsibility. We need to understand our own customary laws and how our cultures have always protected the vulnerable. In the village we need to ensure that justice is done, and as higher clan leaders, we must ensure we know what is really going on in the village, so we can support the protection of the vulnerable there.

As journalists and media workers, we can report cases and act as a channel for passing on information about cases and giving information to victims and others. We can hold discussions about what can be done and challenge those in authority to take action.

As the Police, it is our responsibility to understand the law, that forcing a widow and orphans from their land is not a family quarrel but a criminal offence. In the community we can take action when we see crime and we can report it to our superiors so they understand the seriousness of the problem. As District level officers, we can make sure all our officers know the law and how to take action to protect citizen's rights.

As Local Government, it is our responsibility to establish land administration that will prevent land grabbing from occurring, by putting in place the institutions that can help people know their land boundaries and give them simple documents that can help them defend their rights. We can organise villages to plant trees on land boundaries and draw maps showing who has rights to which land. We must work to support the LCs courts so that they know how to give justice and know how they can get justice enforced.

In Central Government, we need to bring together the different Ministries dealing with land, justice, local Government and the Police. We need to understand the problem in detail, what exactly is going on and why it has been able to continue. Then we need to have a strategy for working together to deal with the real practical problems that people face.

As donors, we need to understand the issues and appreciate their importance. Then we can either fund activities which are addressing the problem, encourage implementing partners to include these perspectives in their work and/or engage in advocacy with Government to work out strategies which can bring an end to the problem.

Land grabbing is a cancer which is already starting to eat away at the society from its very core. Unless we act now to cut it out, it will spread its destruction to the very heart of Ugandan society. It may leave us unable to restore the society to health.