



# LAND AND EQUITY MOVEMENT IN UGANDA

*'Making Land Work For Us All'*

## Our Land Our Future! What does this statement mean to people who depend on land?



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As the world marks 52 years of commemorating the World Environment Day since its inception in the Stockholm Conference in Sweden in 1972, it is important to interrogate the theme of this year's celebration – "our land our future".

cultural identities have emerged in Uganda. Some of these factors arise from global economic pressures, some from the national level and others are internal to communities. Global economic model of a capitalist market expansion in Uganda since the 1980s has meant the expansion of market oriented modes of production in the form of private/foreign investments even into spaces that are otherwise meant to be conserved.

The adoption of this model of a market-based economy in Uganda has also led to commodification of spaces that should be conserved, and at the community level things that were never commodities in the market – such as trees for firewood and charcoal- are now valuable commodities well sought after in rural markets. The situation has been exacerbated by factors such as climate change, loss of biodiversity (including indigenous food/seed varieties) and insecure food supplies (adulterated food supplies).

For a long time, customary land acted as a shield against market forms of dispossession but this too has come under attack as it is now being turned into a commodity, with many individuals and families selling off their customary land as a result of poverty. Research has shown that in northern Uganda for example, some poor people sell their land to pay school fees, pay medical bills in private hospitals in case of pro-longed illnesses, bury their dead, marry wives for their sons, and some even sell land to buy food. Precisely, people are selling land for the sake of survival!

Interestingly, the rich are the buyers of land from the poor population. So who are the rich buying off land? They are businessmen, civil servants, politicians, and the list goes on and

on. This process has occasioned an ongoing transfer of land from the poor to the rich. If poor people sell their land for today's survival, where then is their future? Where is the future of their children? It is worth noting, that land being sold, at least for the case of northern and eastern Uganda is not because there is plenty of land, as may be wrongly assumed. In fact, poor families are not only facing a land shortage, they are also facing a food shortage. A quick sample made during a recent study I carried out under a research program funded by Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) revealed that many households in locations such as Lango and Teso sub-regions hold an average size of 2-3 acres in a family of about 12-16 members, most if not all use the same land. Parents cite that after allocating land to especially the sons, they are only left with narrow spaces (around their compounds) to grow a handful of vegetables, denying them the chance to plant their nutritious traditional food varieties.

The mainstream agricultural model and food system instigated by government agencies and mainstream development approaches seems not to have yielded much among agricultural communities, as soils appear to be less fertile, there's a notable increase in pests and diseases, making, rural agriculture less productive,

farmers have continuously grumbled about being cheated by the middle-men who compel them to significantly reduce the cost of their crops after harvest. This has also contributed to increased poverty among the rural population.

While market forces are compelling many people into self-dispossession in the form of selling off their customary land, a section of the society still continues to hold fort. The customary/traditional/clan leaders in sections of the society in northern Uganda for instance, has embraced and embarked on regulating their members to ensure that customary land is not sold. This measure has been put in place to guard against market dispossessions to prevent landlessness among the uneducated members of their society who are at risk of being exploited as labourers in the hands of others.

To provide an alternative against people being dispossessed by the rising land markets, Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) works with communities, clans and traditional institutions to document and disseminate norms, rules and practices that enable people to keep their land within their families and communities for their own (food) production. Instead of engaging in land sales, LEMU advocates for communities and land owners to instead rent out/lease their land to avert potential landlessness among the future generation. In a current context where the market threatens people's land rights, where small-scale farmers are being made to depend on seeds produced by seed companies, where seed and indigenous food varieties are disappearing at an alarming rate, it is important to think about alternatives that will save the future of African societies, their land, and their food systems.

**A campaign for people to keep their land and keep their seed is therefore necessary if their land is indeed their future. A landless people have no future! It is time to reconnect our food, our land, our culture, nature, the environment and our community. It is time to reduce food dependence of rural communities, it is time for people to grow their own food, on their land in order to guarantee their future, it is time for food sovereignty!**

**Keep your land, keep your seed, for a secure future!**

Since the inception of the World Environment Day at the international level in 1972, several factors that threaten the environment and specifically the future of people who depend on land for their livelihoods and cherish it for their political, historical, religious and