

LEMU Issues Paper Series - No.1 of 2024

Uganda's Loss of land, loss of indigenous seed/food varieties and their productivity: **Issues from an Engagement with Clan and Local Government Leaders in Teso and Kumam Sub-regions**



INTRODUCTION

The Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) has conceived a national campaign dubbed **Keep Your Land, Keep Your Seed** out of its 20-year reflection on the land question in Uganda, specifically on why local communities should have the right to customary land. This reflection has revealed a close connection between land ownership and the ability of local farming communities to produce their own food. Over these years, LEMU has invested in understanding “who controls the food produced by local farmers”. In a bid to understand this question, the reflection revealed that farming communities are losing their power over controlling land and power over food production due to the decline of local food and seed varieties and threats to land rights, among other factors. LEMU therefore considers the need for farming communities to retain land and control their food systems as key pillars for sustainable development. Along this established record, the purpose of this campaign is therefore to advocate for the retention of land and indigenous seed/food varieties by the rural farming communities so as to bolster their resilience against famine, food shortage, extreme poverty and other climate induced forms of socioeconomic crisis, which are exacerbated by the dominance of commercial approaches to land access (land sales) and the dominance of ‘improved’ seed varieties and commercial crops which are tradable in the market.

In the build-up to the campaign, LEMU and some partner organizations in Uganda’s NGO sector undertook several pre-launch activities that would lead up to the actual campaign launch. These included the development of the national campaign strategy, the formation and operationalization of a campaign planning committee, and background research in four regions of Uganda to inform a national level issues paper on land and seed loss. The regions that participated in this research were: Busoga, Teso, Kumam and Lango. A partner organization in this campaign also undertook a pre-launch study

in the pastoral region of Karamoja¹. This particular Issues Paper focuses on the experiences of clan leaders and local government leaders in the Teso and Kumam sub-regions. Majority of the respondents were men given that they dominate the clan and local government leadership structures in the sub-regions.

In terms of methods, the research was qualitative and it employed a workshop approach to gather data from clan and local government leaders in a hotel setting in Soroti City. The respondents were purposively selected with keen focus on their knowledge and experience of loss of land, loss of land productivity and loss of local seed/food varieties as a close representation of the larger experiences of the community in Teso and Kumam. The collected data was transcribed and analyzed to identify the key themes and patterns. The emerging themes were corroborated with existing literature publicly available on the internet to illuminate the findings. Data was collected within a period of one month, September 2024.

FINDINGS

Land loss: Land commodification (sale), land grabbing, land conflicts, and land injustices

Our field findings indicate that the excessive commodification of land has led to an overarching tendency to sell land. The need for fees for medical treatment, school fees, dowry, payment in execution of a court order and for viable economic business constitute “good reason”, that is permissible reason for land sale, according to the documented customs of this region [1]. Despite some of these reasons being considered “good”, it is worrisome as they are becoming too rampant and excessive. Furthermore, even the formerly “bad reasons”[2], that is grounds

¹The Coalition of Pastoral Civil Society Organizations (COPACSO) (2024) Loss of Pastoral Land and Indigenous Food, Animal and Grass Varieties: Experiences from the Pastoral Complex of Karamoja Region, Uganda

for land sales that the documented customs would not permit a land sale, are also increasing and worrisome. Respondents reported that people are selling land for such reasons as ‘buying liquor’. Other such unacceptable reasons, as per the documented customs included: *‘touring places, purchasing luxurious goods such as radio cassettes, marrying another wife after the first one when not yet divorced and for buying fancy clothes’*[3]. The participants in this research attributed this worrying trend to poverty and one remarked that *“people think that is another way of getting money”* (Teso-Kumam participant). The trend is also attributed to the fact that the former means of income i.e., cotton cash crop growing and cattle rearing, have been lost as a result of abandoning cotton growing; and the loss of cattle during the LRA insurgency and cattle rustling from the neighboring pastoralists in Karamoja region.

The field findings showed that at family level, the people most affected by the rampant land transactions are widows, orphans and vulnerable children, and weaker or poorer family members. One respondent stated that *“women are not allowed responsibility of the land; widows are highly oppressed. Because men say that when the women got married they were not married with the land, women are just for child bearing”* (Teso-Kumam participant). Contrary to the prevalent tendency to blame culture, the documented elements of the culture of the Teso and Kumam recognize and protect widows’ rights to land. Therefore, this violation of their rights must be seen as resulting from contemporary (modern) greed due to land commodification, amongst other factors. Another aspect of land loss intra-family involves the richer/more educated, especially men, within a family taking advantage of the rest and titling a family land in their individual names. For instance, a respondent reported that *“there were 3 brothers. One of them came up and said ‘let us secure our land in totality’. He surveys the land and titles it in his name. Later on, he dies but his children have the title which is in his name. The rest of the brothers will be dispossessed”* (Teso-Kumam participants). At the community level, there is an increasing phenomenon of the richer/more politically connected individuals grabbing land from their vulnerable neighbours. The later demonstrates how financial and political power is increasingly being used to dispossess the poorer and weaker community members of land, which consequently, leaves the latter deprived of livelihood options including access to food.

The research findings also revealed an increase

in cases of land conflicts, ranging from family to community to inter district levels, in the subregions. The conflicts at family and community level result from the land grabs as described above. Additionally, at family level, the role of population increase driven by the continued practice of polygamy that yield many children who all have to access/own land must be noted. The community level land conflicts also come from instances of the community being denied access to the more fertile wetlands by those who have political power and/or the financial prowess. District/administrative units-based land conflicts include the conflict between Katakwi and the neighboring Karamoja districts that is reportedly being driven by the increased sale of land. As one participant highlighted, *“there is a boundary conflict between the Itesots and Karamojongs. There are too many land transactions going on in the district of Katakwi, especially Palam Sub-county which is bordering Karamojongs”* (Teso-Kumam participant). A different type of land conflict, similar to what is happening in Northern Uganda, is that between the cattle keepers from Western Uganda - *the Balaalo* - and the natives of Teso/Kumam sub regions. This land conflict has an important political element to it.

Our research revealed that the apparent lack of regulation of the excessive land sales by the customary structures is due to *“the usurpation of the power of clan”* and other customary leaders in land governance. In their own words, the research respondents shared this frustration: *“courts and human rights organizations are a problem because they have usurped the power of cultural leaders. Formerly, when a young person misbehaved on matters of land, the cultural leaders would cane him 3-4 strokes. But today, if you try to discipline this way, you will be arrested for abusing human rights”* (Teso-Kumam participant). The Land Act, 1998 recognizes the customary tenure system, and rightly leaves the management of this type of tenure to the relevant socio-political groups with customary tenure [3]. However, this was not backed up by giving them the full authority to pass judgments and met out punitive remedies for defaulters of the customs that govern management under these structures. This rendered them powerless to do anything. Their inability to take action has been exacerbated by the embracement of a pro-market willing-buyer-willing-seller approach anchored in the pre-eminence of land markets and property rights, giving rights to individuals, families, communities to sell land as they wished as long as there is a willing land buyer [4] with disregard of customary rules. Consequently, this undermined the

power of the traditional leaders to have oversight over the sale of land.

Land productivity loss

This study established that there was an increasing loss of land productivity since chemicals used alongside cultivation of the new varieties are destroying the soil's productivity. A participant in Soroti district noted that *"some of the chemicals used for spraying our crops: Pesticides cause loss of fertility"*. The participants also reported that some of the new varieties adopted do not yield thereby making the land productivity low: *"The plant varieties today are not the ones yielding. For example, we had a cassava variety called 'Onganda' before the Nigerian variety. But these have been replaced by GMOs. Improved ground nut called BOSS, if you plant and get a harvest this year, next year you don't get the same yields"* (Teso-Kumam participant). All these challenges with the new varieties are occurring within the context of a climate that has changed unfavorably.

Other factors contributing to loss in land productivity mentioned by the stakeholders mostly result from the higher population in the region on a finite and inelastic available land. These are lack of land fallowing; unregulated dumping of plastics (especially white plastic bags and bottles) on agricultural land; mining murram and sand, which makes the soil to remain bare and unproductive; rampant deforestation; and the rising migration of, majorly the men, from the rural areas to the urban centers. The latter results in women being left to tend the land alone, yet they have a limitation on the extent of land they can put under cultivation.

Local seed variety loss

We found that communities are losing local seed/food varieties. The loss of local varieties is first of all attributed to the increased adoption of the new varieties which have been promoted with the promise of greater yield and readily available market than the local varieties. Additionally, participants reported that some local seed varieties cannot stay for long in prolonged dry conditions. A respondent stated that *"some seeds have got a short period of expiry. If the dry season is prolonged, in between as you try to store the seeds they rot or others cannot germinate...."* (Teso-Kumam participant). Respondents explained that the reason for the lower survival of the local seed in harsh weather is because of change in post-harvest

(or maturity) handling. For them, *"... we abandoned the traditional way of storage whereby we left maize to dry on the stalk in the garden; now, we put them in bags with the end result of weevils destroying the maize. So, you have to buy another seed..."* (Teso-Kumam participant).

The loss of indigenous seed/food varieties is attributable to Uganda's national policy for modernizing agriculture. Within it, the National Seed Policy promotes the adoption of the improved varieties. Farmers all over Uganda have willingly adopted the new varieties based on the benefits of the new/improved seeds: *"The new varieties like these are seeds brought through the program of NAADs...are high yielding, are resistant to drought... are resistant to disease: that make us prefer the new ones. For example, tomatoes, those old ones could not withstand the nematodes: they would dry up"* (Teso-Kumam participant). Although the national policy of improved adoption of the new varieties can be considered highly successful, it is important to take into account the negative aspects of this adoption; and how they are now outweighing the promised benefits. Consequently, communities are desiring to revert to the former/local seed variety. One stakeholder put it this way: *"People think that 'within a shorter time I harvest and so within one year I can use one garden thrice and get a lot'. And yet, for maize, without using DK you can't get a good yield at the third time of planting it. People believe that the new is the best and yet sometimes the old is the best: we lost the better varieties"* (Teso-Kumam participant).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Local seed variety loss is majorly driven by the adoption of the 'improved' seed varieties in line with the national agricultural development policy. However, the farming communities have not fully reaped the promised benefits of this adoption and are now looking to revert to the former (indigenous) seed varieties. The major cause of land productivity loss is the adoption of the improved varieties coupled with its attendant use of chemicals to enhance crop production. The other key driver of loss of land productivity is the high proportion of the population that practices negative agricultural and other land use methods on highly fragmented land. The rampant land sales for both "good" and "bad" reasons are driving an equally rampant land loss with the most affected being widows, orphans, and vulnerable children, and poorer/weaker family/community members. Land conflicts at different

levels are driven by the monetization of land. These three challenges together have laid the foundation for a future of unprecedented landlessness, low/no food sovereignty, and deepened poverty and economic injustices in the regions of Teso and Kumam. The three problems related to loss of land, loss of land productivity and loss of indigenous seed varieties are exacerbated by the climate crisis which has reduced the yields of small-scale farmers due to drought, floods and related factors, culminating into a situation of food shortage and sometimes famine.

Recommendations

- Government of Uganda: review the application of the free market economy in the land sector so that it has a reasonable level of regulation on land transactions with a view to protecting the retention of land by rural populations so that they continue to produce their own food.
- Government of Uganda: should strengthen the cultural institutions through their clan systems to play their part in regulating land sales at the community level; and to deliver justice on community level land conflicts. GoU should couple this with population control strategies, implemented through these cultural institutions;
- Government of Uganda should rethink strategies that place commercial agriculture above peasant agriculture as a mode of overcoming poverty, because such modes which promote take over by capitalist groups such as the Balalo only exacerbate the land and food crisis in rural areas. Government should institute measures of addressing the emerging Balalo land question.
- GOU should rethink intensive market-based agriculture inputs and availability to markets that absorb the resulting 'high yields' of modern agriculture.
- Communities: Smallholder farmers should make judicious use of modern agriculture practices and consider alternatives, especially indigenous knowledge where these can apply. They should also control their appetite for "modern" goods which is one of the drivers for dispossession through land sales.
- Communities should work with their local governments to designate specific lands at

parish, sub-county, district and regional levels for creation of "seed banks" where indigenous seed and food varieties can be preserved and distributed to small-scale farmers for free.

1. These two ethnic groups live together and intermarry in the districts of Kaberamaido, Serere, and Soroti.
2. GoU, 2010: Land Act, 1998 as amended. CHAPTER 227 .The Land Act, 1998. Commencement: 2 July, 1998. <https://mlhud.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Land-Act-1998-as-amended-CAP-227.pdf>
3. Giuliano, Martinielo. **Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue** Conference Paper #41.
4. LEMU, 2008. Customary Land tenure Management and Land Rights' Principals and Practices No.1 of 2008.
6. Ecogu, 2011: **An analysis of the mechanisms for resolution of land conflicts in Teso Sub-region, Uganda.** A master's Thesis submitted to Makerere University by Ecogu Robert. Accessed at: <http://makir.mak.ac.ug/handle/10570/2767>

Acknowledgement

This issues paper has been produced by Pamela Lakidi Achan, an Independent consultant contracted by LEMU. The author appreciates the detailed comments and reviews by Members of the LEMU (Research) Working Group: Dr. Theresa Auma, who is also the Executive Director of LEMU, and Mr. Adventino Banjwa, Mr. Muhamed Lunyago, and Mr. Samuel Nyende, all three of whom are PhD Fellows at Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), Makerere University. Your guidance gave critical direction and helped shaped the synthesis of a myriad of issues into this product. The author also wishes to acknowledge the research conception and coordination efforts of Dr. Theresa Auma, who offered excellent coordination during the entire field work and writing process. Last but not least, I acknowledge community members, widows, clan leaders from the regions of Lango, Teso, Kumam and Busoga for sharing their experiences during the field discussions leading to the writing of four separate publications sharing experiences from these regions.

This series of publications has been made possible through the generous support of

LEMU's partners:

1) Thousand Currents ; 2) International Development Research Center (IDRC)

