

## LEMU Issues Paper Series - No.2 of 2024

### Uganda's Loss of land, loss of indigenous seed/food varieties and their productivity:

### Explorations from Lango Sub-region



## INTRODUCTION

Drawing from its 20-year reflection on the land question in Uganda, specifically on why local communities should have the right to customary land, the Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) has conceived a national campaign dubbed **“Keep Your Land, Keep Your Seed”**. This reflection has revealed a close connection between land ownership and the ability of local farming communities to produce their own food. LEMU’s engagements have also revealed that farming communities are losing their power over land and over food production due to the multiples threats to their land and the decline of local food and seed varieties, among others. LEMU therefore considers the need for farming communities to retain land and control their food systems as key pillars for sustainable development. The campaign thus advocates 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 socio-economic crisis. It should be noted that the foregoing is 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.

LEMU undertook several pre-launch activities as a precursor to the actual campaign launch. These included; the developing the national campaign strategy, the formation and operationalization of the campaign planning committee and subcommittees, and conducting data collection and research in four regions of Uganda to inform a national level Issues Paper on land and seed loss as well as loss of seed and land productivity. The regions that participated in this research were Busoga, Teso, Kumam, and Lango. A partner in the campaign also undertook a pre-launch study in the pastoral region of Karamoja<sup>1</sup>. This Issues Paper is derived from the Lango sub-region, constituted by the districts of Alebtong, Amolatar, Apac, Dokolo, Kole, Lira, Oyam, Otuke, and Kwania. The region continues to have customary land tenure as the predominant form to-date. The findings drawn from the data are expected to provide

<sup>1</sup> The 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

a better understanding of the land, indigenous seeds, and (land/seed) productivity issues in the region and point us to the roles different stakeholders can play in ameliorating the existing predicaments.

In terms of methods, the research followed a qualitative approach, collecting data in a workshop format/setting by drawing research participants from the Lango cultural leaders in a hotel around the Dokolo District Headquarters. Through a purposive sampling technique, the clan leaders that had experienced land loss, land productivity loss, as well as indigenous seed loss, and were knowledgeable about the issues we were delving into, were selected for the study. The data gathered was to some extent corroborated with existing literature on land and seed (and their respective productivities) through desk review of previous studies and other information publicly available on the internet. The transcripts of the data collected from the individual and focus group consultations were analyzed to identify the key themes and patterns under the three key foci of the study, that is, land issues and land loss, land productivity loss, and seed/food variety loss. Data was collected within two months, between August and September 2024. The section below presents the findings of the study.

## FINDINGS

### Land issues

#### (a) Land dispossession through land marketization, commodification, monetization, and land use conversion

Our study found that the core land issues are land commercialization (Auma 2023), land scarcity, and land use conversion. Participants in the study indicated that there is rampant ‘land sales for big and small cash needs’ which has contributed to massive land losses. Moreover, the income from land sales is covering big household expenses including children’s education and medical bills yet, these expenses could be settled without selling land a few decades ago. Furthermore, costs such as funeral expenses, starting up an alternative income generating project, marrying especially paying bride price, settling court cases/lawsuit charges, and related costs are now all being met by land sales. However, one wonders how these communities and households would meet

the expenses, some of which are part of their day-to-day living and practices, if all the land gets sold so that they no longer have any more land to live and farm on. This is partly attributable to the fact that all aspects of human existence and survival have been marketized.

Participants in this research reported that in addition to the direct sale of land through which land is lost, there are also land grabbing and encroachments through boundary extensions. They further reported that the rich tend to initially buy land then they extend the boundaries beyond what they actually paid for, especially when their neighbors are among the less privileged in the community. In the long-run, the latter, who are unable to flex financial muscles to influence the justice systems, end up losing their land.

Other participants in the research attributed the shortage of land to the population increase on an expectedly, fixed land area. The participants expressed a belief that due to population increase, they were facing widespread land fragmentation. Such fragmentation in itself does not directly result in land loss. However, when over cultivated, as is the case, the land loses its productivity; and then, out of frustration with the loss of productivity, the farmers regard it justifiable to dispose off the land through selling it. In either case, a form of land loss is registered. Additionally, another impact of population increase was that land grabbing within families; and, within and between communities was increasing in a worrisome manner. Regarding intra-family land grabs, particularly widows are evicted by relatives of the deceased husbands so that the rest of the family members can increase land in their possession. For intra-community land grabs, the study found that powerful individuals move their boundaries into the land of their less powerful and less privileged neighbours.

Some participants also noted that land wrangles were increasingly manifesting when descendants of people who offered land as gifts to institutions such as churches and mosques, hospitals and schools were starting to reclaim the land. The participants linked such land reclamation challenges to the absence of documentation, at the time of the land gifting event.

The study found that land use conversion is happening mostly through the implementation of the government infrastructure development programmes. For instance, in areas that have been converted into urban areas, roads are being constructed through formerly rural homes for the development of municipalities and cities. This amounts to land loss for the rural land owners affected by these infrastructure development programmes. Additionally, there is an indirect type of land loss to government programs. A case in point is the flooding of rural people's lands which has been attributed to displacement of water from Lake Kwanja as a result of backfilling under the Karuma Hydro Electricity Power dam construction works. As a participant in in Kwera Sub-County in Dokolo District reported that, *"there is flooding from Lake Kwanja.*

*It is affecting Agwata, Okwongdul, Kwera, Kangai, Ayabi (Kwanja), Adek nino; and other areas outside Dokolo district. The water is a result of backfilling of Karuma Dam construction. Government of Uganda compensated the people in Oyam (where the dam is located) but it has not done so for people of Dokolo (those indirectly affected). Since the water does not go back, people lose land/homes".* This points to an inadequate feasibility and social/environmental impact assessment for this project.

Also related to land loss is the land lost by those that formerly settled on undemarcated government land. It was stated that the government of Uganda has huge chunks of undemarcated and unused land, which local communities had settled on. The participants in this research reported that when government officials come to use such land, they meet with resistance from these communities who lay claims to these lands. One participant from Dokolo District intimated that *"government has not put demarcation on its lands. So, when government leaders go to tell people to get off the land, the people claim it as their own land. It is bringing a lot of land wrangles, for instance, there is such land in Atur occupied by the army; in the neighborhood are several clans who are claiming ownership of this same land. It has caused a lot of problems in my clan".* In most cases, as seen from other parts of Uganda, government response has mostly consisted of resorting to forceful evictions. This is not useful because, by responding with forceful evictions in cases where the land occupiers matters can be upheld by law, government actions may tantamount to breaking its own laws.

The study also found that in the face of both land commercialization and government infrastructure development programs, land is being lost through speculative buying by the rich. Research participants reported that once the rich members of their region, specifically MPs, get to know of a forthcoming infrastructure project (and they always do, given their proximity to state power), they accumulate large land chunks by purchasing from the community cheaply while speculating hefty compensations from the government. By doing so, they dispossess many smallholder families thereby or leaving them with very small land acreages for food production.

### **(b) Loss of land productivity**

There was a consensus among the participants in this study that land productivity loss is attributable to improper land management by the population. They thus linked such lack of knowledge among the population to poor extension service delivery. These findings are consistent with the results of the UBOS (2020), who reported that by 2020, there was 'low access to extension services in the sub-regions of Teso and Lango'<sup>[1]</sup>. The key practices mentioned as constitutive of improper land management were excessive tree cutting, continuous land cultivation without fallowing, and monocropping. For instance, participants in an FGD in Dokolo district noted that *"there is a level of ignorance on how to use land: no*



*knowledge-based [agriculture]. So, people use land anyhow whether big or small... There is not enough agriculture extension service. Each sub county has only one (1) Agriculture Officer, but they go to the community only once in a while; and they go to only one (1) spot. They don't do comprehensive work. These days the Parish chiefs are not working".*

Participants further indicated that they regarded the adoption of the new/improved seed varieties and the use of the attendant agricultural inputs, including fertilizer and pesticides as having negative implications for the land's productivity. In their own words, participants in an FGD in Dokolo district reported that *"all the improved seeds including Maize, Soybean, Sorghum, and Sunflower are not good for our soils. Even Chia is destroying our soils....e.g. when you are growing maize now you have to use DK at the point of flowering otherwise you get nothing"*. A participant from Okwongodul sub-county stated that due to the constant spraying of crops, their land no longer produces beans which used to give bountiful yields about 20 years ago. They now depend on buying beans brought from other parts of Uganda and Tanzania which are sold in the local markets.

## Seed issues

### Seed/variety loss and extent of the Loss

Participants in the study indicated that the communities were increasingly losing local seed varieties. The study participants gave insights into the specific varieties lost per crop and extent of the loss. For instance, they noted that the crop with the highest variety loss was Cassava and the least one was a local vegetable called 'Ngor". The number of varieties lost per crop discussed was as follows: Cassava (9 varieties lost); Millet (8 varieties); sweet potatoes (8 varieties); Beans (5 varieties); Simsim (4 varieties); pumpkin (3 varieties) and a vegetable called 'ngor' (1 variety). They also mentioned crops that have been wholly lost, specifically Killian and Bambara nuts, while Malakwang, also a local vegetable, is dying out.

### The state and the politics of loss of indigenous seed/food varieties

This study found that the community members believed that the adoption of "improved seeds" or Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) promoted through government agricultural programs and agencies was the primary cause of local seeds/food varieties loss. However, they admitted that they willingly adopted improved seeds because these were promoted with the promise for better incomes. Participants from Dokolo expressed that *"...our mindset is responsible for us rushing into food varieties that mature very fast... we wanted money, yet our own could not be purchased. We needed those that could bring us money quickly"*. Unfortunately, the anticipated better incomes has not materialized due to a myriad of other factors such as lack of market

for agriculture produce, poor seed and food storage facilities (and poor post-harvest handling) as well as land productivity degradation. The lack of market for agricultural produce is attributable to the prevalent free market economy dispensation in which the price of commodities is supposedly determined by the forces of demand and supply. Unsurprisingly, whenever there is abundant supply, the prices dip due to lowering in demand. This is completely beyond the farmers' and control the government has so far not put in place any remedies to this challenge.

In the past few decades, seeds and food in Uganda's households were stored in granaries or other facilities and methods that ensured its preservation. Yet, nowadays, granaries are no longer in use for various reasons. For example, the insecurity around granaries as thieves can take all the harvest at night, also due to economic pressures people do not store for their harvests long because they hurry to sell when the crop is still fresh and weighs more kilograms. Other reasons relate to the craftsmanship and materials for making granaries that have since diminished. Moreover, with the absence of adequate agricultural extension services, even seeds/food post-harvest handling does not support its preservation. All the aforementioned happens against the background of small land sizes (after land fragmentation) whose poor management compromises productivity as already stated in the preceding sections. This has created dependence on the market for seeds and food, rendered inevitable by the continual undermining of the food sovereignty of these small holder/peasant farmers.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding land, the continuous and escalating land sales and other land problems leading to increasing land losses that have occurred for over a decade are likely to lead to a large landless population or possessing land with extremely small acreages, a scenario that is bound to endanger the capacities of communities and households to take care of their food needs. If nothing is done to address these land dilemmas, the government is likely to have an amorphous expenditure on food imports to feed its people. Government infrastructure development programs are a key contributory factor to land loss amongst its population which has to be addressed. And lastly, the continued existence of undemarcated government land which is redundant is also another factor of dispossessing the population of land which must be looked into.

It is worthwhile to note that the land productivity loss can easily be fixed, in particular once the government addresses the extension service delivery in the country and considers and gives place to indigenous knowledge in the preservation of the land's productivity.

Regarding seed, we see that the adoption of new seed

varieties and the associated higher cost of production and low prices of proceeds from the farms puts the smallholder farmers into perpetual dependence and impoverishment. Modern agriculture has not delivered on its promise of better economic status for households, nor has it delivered its promise of food security.

## Recommendations

- The Government of Uganda (GOU) should revisit the free market logic of its land commodification and ensure that existing social regulations to land sales are strengthened while new state regulations are also put in place to ensure that land transactions accounts for the need for rural populations and smallholder farmers to retain land to produce their own food.
- The GOU should link the land and agriculture policies. Specifically, with the prevalent promotion of agriculture modernization, sustainability of land productivity ought not to be ignored. A rethink of intensive agriculture inputs and availability to markets that absorb the resulting 'high yields' of modern agriculture is urgent.
- Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD) working with all MDAs in infrastructure development should find a lasting solution to land losses due to actual infrastructure constructions; improve the quality of social-environment assessments to adequately prepare for compensation of Project Affected Persons (PAPs); and, to curb speculative buyers of land. MLHUD should undertake the demarcation of government lands, or else the government should forfeit these lands to communities that have settled on them.
- The communities and smallholder farmers should make judicious use of modern agriculture practices. The idea is to take contexts seriously, and consider alternatives, especially indigenous knowledge as much as possible to be able to keep your land and your seed. They should also control their appetite for "modern" goods which is one of the drivers for dispossession through land sales.
- The NGO and CSO sector programmes on land rights and seeds/foods production need to consider the long-term effects on the local communities. CSOs/NGOs ought to support GoU to sensitize communities on the relevant issues such as land retention, proper land use

and management, preservation of local seeds and food preservation, and, promote feasible alternatives to land fragmentation.

- The government, NGOs/CSOs and communities need to take seriously the ideals of food sovereignty as an alternative but more sustainable approach to food production and distribution in a context of climate crisis.
- 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] UBOS (2022) Annual Agricultural Survey 2020 Report. Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS); Kampala, Uganda. ([https://www.ubos.org/wpcontent/uploads/publications/07\\_2023AAS2020\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wpcontent/uploads/publications/07_2023AAS2020_Report.pdf)).

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