

## LEMU Issues Paper Series - No.3 of 2024

# Uganda's Loss of land, loss of indigenous seed/food varieties and their productivity: Explorations from Busoga sub-region



## INTRODUCTION

The Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) has conceived a national campaign, named **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 tackle this question, the reflection revealed that farming communities are losing their power over food production due to the decline of local food and seed varieties, 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. It should also be noted that, the aforementioned challenges 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.

As a precursor to the campaign, LEMU undertook several pre-launch activities that would culminate in the actual campaign launch. These included the development of the national campaign strategy, the formation and operationalization of a campaign planning committee, and the conduct of a 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 Karamoja<sup>1</sup>. In each of the papers and the research that led to them, the focus was on inquiring into the loss of land, loss of land productivity, and loss of indigenous seeds and food varieties (for agricultural

<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.

and pastoral communities). This particular Issues Paper focuses on Busoga sub-region, especially in the sugarcane enclave. LEMU undertook this investigation with a focus on the land and seed in order to show what is happening on ground regarding seed, land, and food sovereignty, in the process contributing to the existing body of knowledge about the region and the country at large.

In terms of methods, the research was qualitative, using focus group discussions to engage with three (03) communities; and about five (05) key informant interviews with leaders. The criteria for participation in the FGD was: experience of a land loss; land productivity loss; and being knowledgeable about the issue of local seed/food variety loss [1]. Kaliro, Kamuli and Luuka were considered to provide a good representation of the sugarcane industry in the region. Community level participants in the study included individual land owners, land tenants (also known as ‘investors’), as well as local leaders at local council I, II and III levels. The transcripts of the data collected from the individual interviews and focus group consultations were analyzed to identify the key themes under the three key foci of the study, that is: land problems and land loss, land productivity loss; and seed/food variety loss. The community engagements and data collections was conducted in August 2024, during the Land Awareness Campaign which is an annual event through which government and CSOs engage communities in a specific region to understand and share issues related to land. The section below presents the findings and analysis of this short study in Busoga’s sugar affected communities.

## FINDINGS

### Land Issues

#### (a) Land loss: Land dispossession, landed exploitation, rentier accumulation and ecological mismanagement

Our findings indicate that the key factor leading to land loss/dispossession is excessive exploitation of land owners through land tenancy agreements drafted in favor of the land tenant. This exploitative arrangement has rendered most land owners perpetual borrowers from their land tenants. Eventually, due to a high

accumulation of debt, the land tenants (rentier class) tended to recover their loans through taking over the land they were initially tenants on. As one respondent noted, *“Issues with land ownership and use were noted, where investors who rent land often assume ownership and violate land use agreements over time”* [1]. Another respondent argued that *“improper tenancy agreements are common in the region. Villagers often rent out their land for a low price, like UGX 200,000, for up to six harvests. However, investors control when to harvest, sometimes taking years between harvests, leaving the landowners effectively landless for long periods. These agreements are often made by men without considering the impact on women”*[2].

Under land renting, the majority of land owners tended to rent out all of their land leaving very little to nothing as a reserve for food production. And yet, as much as some of the proceeds support welfare needs including education, medical expenses, and setting up a business for additional income source, some of it is wasted, especially by men, who spend it on personal wants such as marrying another wife, buying a car or motorbike. Noteworthy, the youth prefer to exchange the land (usually owned through inheritance or accessed through their male status) for cash income. They tend to sell or rent out all the land to establish a source of daily income, most often motorbikes (bodaboda) for passenger transportation. *“The youth don’t like to work hard, they want money quickly. The youth sees that ‘that old man rented out and he got money’ so, they will quickly give out their 2 acres (or so) for renting out....”* a Kamuli participant noted.

An important element of land loss that needs to be considered is that at family level, vulnerable members of families are losing land or access to land. Study participants reported that husbands, in-laws of deceased husbands, sons and daughters usually sell or lease out **all land** leaving married women, widows, the elderly, and orphaned children without access to land for food production.

Land and wetlands mismanagement is another key factor considered by participants in the region. This is in part attributed to inadequate knowledge coupled with no options for better land management given the context of high poverty that is prevailing in the area. The smaller land sizes people own both on slopes and in the wetlands- a factor of high land fragmentation-are over cultivated, and in many cases, trees are cut to increase space for crop production while not controlling soil erosion from the exposed soils. These mismanagement practices along with other adopted/modern agriculture practices have highly degraded the land and wetlands to the point that it is no longer as productive as it used to be a decade or so ago. The crisis of rentier accumulation is coupled with the absence of adequate regulation on land transactions under land tenancy, thanks to the free-market economy paradigm. This study clearly exhibits

how capitalism has become a dangerous paradigm in contexts where the powerful and well-resourced ‘haves’ can take full and excessive advantage of the ‘have nots’.

Government efforts on wetlands management have, on the one hand, not been well guided; and on the other hand, have been unequitable. The fact that Government issued blanket directives for all people to vacate wetlands without first establishing who will be affected and putting in place remedial strategies for ensuring protection of the vulnerable segments of the population points to an ill-devised strategy in wetlands management. Some sections of the population have been effectively dispossessed of land as a result of the wetlands management directives. *“Some of us were born without land in the non-wetland areas... And some people had large chunks of wetlands. The government policy has resulted into people becoming landless”*, a male youth in Kaliro district noted. The unequitable aspect of these efforts arises out of the negative impact of making the former wetlands’ users unemployed. As one male youth from Kaliro district emphasized, *“Government policy is that people should vacate wetlands. This policy has led to an increased number of people that are not working because in these wetlands, people worked by growing rice, sugarcane, trees of eucalyptus and horticultural crops”*. If a youth is denied this direct source of income from the land, why will he/she not rent out or sell all of the land they get access to in order to set up a daily income?

### (b) Loss of land productivity

Extensive tree cutting, and over cultivation of the highly fragmented land and wetlands; and use of modern agrochemicals are the key leading causes to loss in the land’s productivity in this region. The other factor is agronomic-based practices such as clearing and burning bushes and crop residues, ploughing along the slopes as opposed to along the contours and late cropping.

The participants reported that land scarcity - in part a consequence of high population increase on an inelastic land resource - has resulted in a high level of fragmentation as well as increased land grabbing. The increase in population has coincided with the increase in desires by the capitalists (both local and global) who want to own/possess huge chunks of land individually at the expense of all else. This, along with the greater adoption of modern agriculture practices including use of chemicals and of “improved” seed varieties, have laid the foundation for loss in land productivity. The observed land scarcity now raises questions on how customarily held lands can be maintained with a burgeoning population and a land-hungry capitalist class.

The agronomy-based causes of loss in land productivity can be rectified through a functional and effective extension services system as well as more intentional indigenous knowledge transfer from older to younger generations. Both of these, though existent, are largely inadequate. However, regarding knowledge transfer, the participants raised a concern that contemporary youth are not as inclined towards agriculture. As an elderly male participant from Kamuli district retorted, *“many young people today prefer to go for bodaboda”*, an attitude which makes the preservation of indigenous knowledge a real challenge.

## Seed Issues

### (a) Seed/ food variety loss and extent of the loss

The study found that there continues to be a significant loss of local seed varieties in the community. As regards the extent of loss, analysis showed that the crop with the highest variety loss was Bananas-Matooke (12 varieties estimated to have been lost), followed by ground nuts (5 varieties lost), then Beans (5 varieties lost), cassava (3 varieties lost), sweet potatoes (2), Rice (1 variety) and maize (1 variety). The crop with the greatest number of new varieties adopted was Maize (5 new varieties) and sweet potatoes (5 varieties), followed by beans (4 varieties), Rice (4 varieties), Cassava (2 varieties), ground nuts (2 varieties), and the least was bananas (1 variety). It is important to note that, at smallholder level, all these crops are cultivated primarily for subsistence and the surplus is for sale to earn household income. The loss of some indigenous seed varieties is conditioned by a market-driven narrative, according to which modern crops are said to result in high yields and indigenous crops yielding less. Yet this market rhetoric promotes production for the market at the expense of household food security and health benefits.

### (b) The politics of indigenous food/seed variety loss

Our consultations showed that local farmers firmly held that the adoption of the new “improved” varieties is the primary reason for the loss of indigenous varieties, and that GoU is part of the problem since they have been at the forefront of promoting such seed varieties. As a Kaliro participant insisted, *“it is solely the government of Uganda program that led to the loss of the above seeds/food varieties in our communities. Extension agents have promoted the new varieties and seeds, e.g. Coffee and bananas; they say, ‘the old is bad’”*. Our national agricultural policy is guided by the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and modernization of agriculture, by which it means the adoption and prioritization of capitalist agriculture. As such, despite the National Seed Policy (NSP) of (2018) <sup>[1]</sup> recognizing

the importance of the informal system, it did not put in place adequate strategies; and by default, invest commensurately into developing the ‘informal seed sector’ alongside the ‘formal (modern/improved seed sector)’. Through the NSP, the government of Uganda committed to strengthening the formal seed sector, did so, and succeeded in shifting farmers from the “informal” to the “formal”. As the LCV Chairperson of Iganga noted, *“Most farmers now prefer using the modern improved seed varieties instead of local indigenous ones. The new seed varieties perform better, mature faster, and are more resistant to pests and diseases...”*.

Government achieved the agricultural policy transformation but also did not achieve its intended or promised outcome of better socioeconomic outcomes because of the high cost of agricultural inputs including fertilizers and pests and disease control agrochemicals. Moreover, even those who can afford these agricultural inputs have been frustrated because of counterfeits. At the end of the day, both users and non-users of the agricultural inputs are getting less than desired crop and land productivity. Additionally, there is generally no market for these commodities - whether produced with or without these agricultural inputs. A farmer from Kaliro district noted thus: *“Low price of commodities. When farmers harvest they sell 10 sacks of maize because of the problems they have. Mind you 1 kg of maize is 500UGX. They are selling that maize to be able to buy iron sheets to roof their houses. Therefore, the policies of government of Uganda are not clear because they don’t support the eradication of poverty,”*. For these farmers, it matters less whether they successfully adopted the new varieties and realized the high yields or not. The lack of market or the low farm-gate prices for their produce means that it is the middle men and others in the crop value chain that are reaping the benefits of this agricultural transformation, not the farmer. No wonder that they are questioning government policy as regards to ‘poverty eradication’.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The successful monetization of land, the entrenchment of the sugar outgrowing economy which is promoting the rampant land sales and escalating all out-land rentals coupled with dispossession of the vulnerable under GoU’s wetland management policy is steadily contributing to increased landlessness in Busoga region. Meanwhile, the population continues to burgeon. This creates a scenario of a future Busoga region with a very high proportion of landless people who will have to be fed via alternative mechanisms. The government will have to increase its budget on solving food insecurity in the country, a situation which can be averted right now. Land productivity loss is being driven by both agronomic and non-agronomic causes which can be addressed through addressing the agricultural extension system and adoption of other sustainable land use strategies. Despite the successful promotion and

uptake of modern technologies, the promised outcomes have not been realized and worse still, food security is increasingly being undermined as well as exacerbating poverty. Although farmers' seed-dependency and market dependency benefit the agribusiness industry, it is creating more problems for communities beyond their control, and for which remedial interventions from the government are not forthcoming.

## Recommendations:

1. **GOU:** review the application of the free market economy in the land sector so that it has a certain level of regulation on land transactions with a view to protecting the retention of land by rural populations to continue producing their own food.
2. **GOU:** review the promotion of excessive production for the market and put focus first and foremost on the food needs of the population. A key action could be to revive and reform the agricultural extension system to support both relevant modern and Indigenous Knowledge transfer from generation to generation.
3. **GOU:** related to the free market economy, review the situation in commercial agriculture and implement reforms that balance between large-scale production for markets and local populations retaining their own livelihood sources.
4. **Communities:** Small holder farmers must make judicious use of modern agriculture practices. The point is to consider what fits relevant contexts, to which should be added alternatives, especially indigenous knowledge where these can apply. Communities should control their appetite for “modern” goods and luxury which has been attributed to be one of the causes of the uncontrolled land sales and land rentals.
5. **NGOs/CSOs:** programs on land rights and seeds/foods production should consider the long-term effects on Ugandans and encourage the use of indigenous seed varieties and indigenous modes of cultivation

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1. *From Land Awareness Week (LAW) unpublished Report, 2024.* As presented by Alex Sebukalu, LEMU official.
  2. *Ibid.*
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<sup>[1]</sup>The policy asserts that ‘the seed that farmers use for their farming is of questionable quality’, hence, ‘there was need to transform the informal sector into a commercially viable system through an intermediate system producing quality seed of mainly non-hybrid crops at the community level that meets the minimum standards of variety purity and germination’. Under formal sector, GOU commits to ‘creating an opportunity for companies to access affordable credit for seed production and multiplication’. For the informal system GOU strategy is ‘to promote and build capacity of market-oriented farmers to produce, use and market quality seed with the focus on crops and varieties that have a high food security and nutritional value’; and, ‘to strengthen participatory variety selection to enhance adoption of new improved varieties’.

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