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Uganda's loss of land, land productivity, and indigenous seed/food varieties: A synthesis of emerging issues and demands towards the promotion of food sovereignty.

"Making land work for us all"

Introduction

The Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) has conceived a national campaign dubbed ***Keep Your Land, Keep Your Seed*** from 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 the local farmers". The ensuing reflection has *inter alia* revealed that farming communities are losing their power over food production due to the decline of local food and seed varieties, among other factors. With this, LEMU considers, as key pillars for sustainable development, the need for farming communities to retain land and control their food systems. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this campaign is to advocate for the retention of land and indigenous seed/food varieties by the rural farming and pastoral 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 undertook several pre-launch activities, among which was conducting background studies in five regions of Uganda to inform a national level Issues Paper broadly on land and seed loss. The regions that participated in this research were: Busoga, Teso, Kumam and Lango. A partner umbrella organization in this campaign, COPACSO, also undertook a pre-launch study in the pastoral region of Karamoja. Below is a synthesis of the results from all these studies, broadly categorized around three core areas of focus for the campaign: land loss, land/seed productivity loss, and seed loss.

The first core issue is *land loss*, and the following emerged as key dimensions to it:

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

In all the five areas covered by our preliminary studies (Busoga, Teso, Kumam, Lango and Karamoja), it was evident that processes that embody commodification, commercialization, and monetization of land have triggered with them a direct modality through which landed communities are losing their land. In all these areas, ongoing commodification of land has been linked to the speed with which land is being 'sold' off by community members, habitually triggering conflicts within families and communities. In Lango, for instance, participants took note of the rampant 'land sales for big and small cash needs' which speaks to the fact that commodification of land has birthed a dangerous attitude in these landed communities, in which the sale of land is seen as an acceptable recourse for any of their monetary (cash) needs, including those that previously did not necessitate possession of money, such as marriage. In Busoga, a whole new and unprecedented process of land dispossession has been triggered by the massive commodification of land that has accompanied the sugar(cane) industry predominant in this region. Here, a new "investor' class has descended onto these landed communities, renting land (for sugarcane growing) on extremely vague and exploitative terms, and using cunning methods such as prolonged harvesting periods and their financial muscle to ultimately dispossess people of their land. In Teso-Kumam, local and cultural leaders decried how commodification of land has given birth to a dangerous belief that "*another way of getting money*" is through the sale of land - land that is in most cases family land, given the customary land tenure context in these areas.

Commodification of land has had a tremendous impact on many other aspects that also came up during these studies. For instance, even when participants decried the growing population on an unchanging land, such as in Busoga, it was consistently notable that such population increase would not have meant the same thing had there been restrictions on land sales (or land renting). The fact that influential family members (such as husbands in homes) are able to let out family land for money, either through complete sales or termly renting, means little, if any land, remains for these otherwise land-dependent families to reproduce themselves. In these circumstances, any slight increase in the family size is bound to be felt negatively.

(b) Land grabbing

This is a widespread mechanism through which people are directly losing their land in the regions under study. This grabbing takes different and ever-changing *scales* and *forms.* It manifests itself within families, where land in the hands of the weak and vulnerable is grabbed by the more powerful family members, at times justifying this through questionable "customs" - such as those that supposedly bar given groups from owning land. One of our studies focusing on the experiences of widows in the Teso-Kumam region revealed much to this effect. In other cases, at family and community levels, this grabbing takes the form of boundary extension, particularly done forcefully by the more powerful buyers. In Busoga, the "investor" class that has sprung up, thanks to the sugar(cane) industry, uses legal trickery to technically grab land through land rent agreements that make it possible to hold onto land for long periods, which at times leaves its owners without any survival options other than selling (portions of) this land to these sugarcane "investors".

(c) *State infrastructure and other 'development' projects*

It emerged from all these studies that many communities' loss of land directly results from state development projects, including infrastructure development (roads, bridges, urban expansion, etc.), and mining. These projects come with huge demands for land from communities, and with or without compensation, they significantly reduce the amount of land available to family and community members. Karamoja in particular, has been the epicenter of these land-demanding infrastructural and mining projects, given its mineral wealth. Yet, this dynamic is a mainstay in all other areas studied and indeed, the entire country. A complex case was reported by a participant from Kwera Sub-County in Dokolo District, of their lands being flooded with water from Lake Kwania, itself a result of the backfilling in the process of Karuma power dam construction. In other cases, participants reported losing land through government claims of ownership of lands on which they are settled, such as in Dokolo district (Atutur) where government demarcation of its (public) land has sparked off a conflict with communities that lay historical claims to the same land.

Participants also reported losing land through state conservation efforts, including wetland conservation. These efforts have come with forceful eviction of people from lands designated as wetlands or protected areas, even in cases where people have valid historical and legally verifiable claims on such lands. As participants in Kaliro (in Busoga) emphasized, state policies on wetland and nature conservation are blind to cases where historically family and community lands constituted wetlands and swamps, which served community needs without these wetlands ever facing total destruction. In all these areas, not only does the GoU's blindness to these claims leave families and communities landless without viable options from the government, but also it means nothing serious can be learned from community nature conservation practices.

(d) *The paradox of land documentation and access to justice.*

Across the areas considered in these studies, which are predominantly based on customary land ownership, a vigorous campaign is ongoing, being promoted by different organizations in the land sector and government, for registration and documentation of (customary) land. At the heart of this initiative are the Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs), meant to be a formality through which land ownership is "secured". Yet in many cases, while this certificate represents valid legal claims to the land in question, this mostly comes at the expense of family members whose names never made it to this certificate, meaning they lose claims to this land at the very moment of its issuance. In other cases, the vulnerable and weak members in society (women in some cases, children, the elderly, and widows) continue to face dispossession by the powerful, especially in families, even when such weak and vulnerable groups have valid CCOs, as many widow participants from the Teso-Kuman region revealed. In such cases, documentation and registration either invalidate claims of family members whose names are not printed on these documents, or are a useless process for the weak and vulnerable within society.

The second core issue identified is the loss of productivity of land and seed due to:

a) *Improper land management and insufficient knowledge among the population.*

There was a general consensus among the participants in all five regions of the study that land productivity loss is attributable to improper land management, constituted by excessive tree cutting; continuous land cultivation without land fallowing; and monocropping. Participants linked the lack of knowledge of land management among the population to poor extension service delivery. The study participants also showed that they regarded the adoption of the new seed varieties and the use of the attendant agricultural inputs, including fertilizers and pesticides as having negative implications for the land's productivity. In Busoga region, for example, extensive tree cutting, and over cultivation of the highly fragmented land and wetlands; and use of modern agrochemicals were reported as the leading causes of land productivity loss. 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. This dynamic did not spare the widows in Kalaki, Kaberamaido, and Soroti districts who decried that land was no longer as productive as it once was. These widows, just like many other categories of respondents, attributed such to "not rotating crops" and the use of chemicals, which they suspected may be having negative impacts on the land's productivity. With such frustration, the widows expressed a preference for the former farming methods that involved the use of natural forms of fertilizer and disease/pest control remedies and society-based modes of knowledge about land productivity preservation. Similarly, from engaging with local government leaders and clan leaders in Soroti, Kalaki, and Kaberamaido districts, 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. The participants also reported that some of the new varieties adopted do not yield thereby making land productivity low. All these challenges with the new varieties are occurring within the context of a climate that has changed unfavorably.

b) *Land fragmentation due to rising population on inelastic land, which in turn exacerbates land grabs.*

The eventuality of land scarcity, partly a consequence of high population increase on an inelastic land, 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 investors and business people (both local and global) to possess huge chunks of land individually at the expense of everyone else. This, along with the greater adoption of modern agriculture practices, including use of chemicals and "improved" seed varieties, have laid the foundation for land productivity loss. In an engagement with clan and local government leaders in Soroti, Kaberamaido, and Kalaki, it was reported that the other factors contributing to loss in land productivity mostly result from the higher population in the region on a finite and inelastic available land. These challenges are compounded by the lack of land fallowing; unregulated dumping of plastics (especially white pills and bottles) on agricultural land; mining murram and sand, which makes the soil 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, if they do not have a male figure to enable their access to the land.

(c) Structural limitations conditioned by excessive obsession with legality, policy and individualization

Pastoral and farming communities are faced with unproductivity engendered by some structural limitations, such as insufficient documenting and failure to recognise indigenous animal breeds and breeding programmes in national policies, which endanger indigenous breeds. There is also a prevalent policy level bias towards prioritizing productivity, and by extension, sidelining indigenous breeds and failing to protect their genetic sovereignty in favor of commercial livestock. Worse still, pastoralist communities often lack access to veterinary care, financial support, and markets, all of which hinder their ability to preserve and sustainably manage their indigenous livestock genetics. There are structural constraints that emerge from the dominant notions of land ownership and use, which tend to favor the individual to the detriment of the community and contradict with the lived realities of pastoralist contexts.

The third core issue is loss of indigenous/ local seed varieties as manifested in:

a) The disappearance and devaluation of local/ indigenous seeds and the dominance of market-based GMO seeds.

Farming and pastoral communities in the five study areas unanimously decried the prevalence of the so-called "improved" seeds (also known as GMOs) being promoted by the government and other organizations) as fueling the disappearance and devaluation of indigenous seeds, crops, grasses and animals. Local farmers firmly held that the adoption of these new "improved" varieties is the primary reason for the loss of indigenous varieties. They attributed this to the government campaigns to promote GMO seeds, its initiatives geared towards modernizing agriculture and the food market which is skewed towards the same. The government campaign to promote 'improved' seeds has come with promises of high and quick yields hence higher incomes. Unfortunately, such promises are deemed empty as they have not materialized due to a myriad of factors, including, lack of market for agriculture produce, high cost of agricultural input such as fertilizers, seeds, and pests and disease control agrochemicals, and the inappropriate food storage facilities (poor post-harvest handling) as well as land productivity degradation. Moreover, even those who can afford these agricultural inputs have been frustrated by counterfeits. 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 ever-blind forces of demand and supply. Market pressures emanating from the global focus on high-yield commercial livestock devalue indigenous breeds, and by doing so, diminish the cultural and ecological significance of traditional livestock to pastoralist communities. In the end, both users and non-users of the agricultural inputs are getting less than desired crop and land productivity. The local varieties lost include several food crops (cassava, sweet potatoes etc.), indigenous grasses such as in Karamoja, indigenous animal breeds, ground nuts, and matooke, Killian and Bambara nuts, as well as Malakwang.

b) Seed dependency due to loss of indigenous seeds, grasses and tree varieties

Across the areas studied, farming and pastoral communities expressed the extent to which they are increasingly becoming dependent on the market for seeds. In pastoral communities especially the cattle complex of Karamoja, pastoralists are suffering rapid decline of indigenous grasses and animal varieties. Such loss is driven by various factors, including conversion of rangelands for agriculture, private ranches, and other uses, which in turn, reduces grazing areas, especially those crucial for dry-season survival. Consequently, pastoralist communities are at the risk of relying on external seeds because they cannot sustainably produce the indigenous seeds. It should also be noted that commercializing seed varieties has eroded indigenous seeds, undermined agricultural biodiversity, and weakened the resilience of local pastoralist and framing systems.

c) Repercussions of the improved seed varieties on indigenous seeds/foods/crops/grasses/ animals.

The improved seed varieties and the attendant inputs and technologies are eroding the indigenous seed and animal genetic sovereignty. In the farming communities of Busoga, Lango, Teso, and Kumam, not only has the planting of GMO seeds diluted the local seeds but also often transformed them into modified seeds through cross pollination. This has rendered the indigenous-cum-GMO plants/seeds less resistant to the climate and weather conditions to which they previously were. In the semi-arid *cattle corridor* especially Karamoja, the introduction of high-yield exotic livestock breeds has compromised indigenous livestock genetics, hence loss of traits like disease resistance and environmentally resilient animals. These farming and pastoral communities are losing both their seed varieties and the indigenous knowledge of seed/ food preservation due to modern seeds/foods and modes of preservation.

DEMANDS/CALLS TO ACTION

*On this occasion of the launch of our **Keep Your Land, Keep Your Seed** national campaign, we are making the following demands/calls to action to three core categories of stakeholders: the Government of Uganda; Civil Society Organizations; and Local (landed) farming and pastoralist communities:*

We call upon the Government of Uganda to:

a) Regulate the market in the land sector to protect the ability of landed rural populations to possess land on which to perpetually produce their own food.
b) Make cultural justice integral to land protection systems to ensure its effective functionality and administration of justice on customary land.
c) Respect and value traditional modes of land governance and accord traditional leaders their roles and responsibilities.
d) Strengthen the gender strategy of the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development for gender-responsive land-based development projects.
e) Work with and incorporate the indigenous knowledge of community groups (such as widows) to address land productivity issues and loss of local seeds/food varieties.
f) Establish seed banks for preservation and multiplication of indigenous seeds.
g) Embark on processes to decommodify land, and equip government officials in the land sector with

knowledge pertaining to extra-market uses of land in communities.

h) Embed indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems about seed/food preservation in government agricultural programs.
i) Review the promotion of excessive production for the market and prioritize the food needs of the population.
j) Revive and reform the agricultural extension system to support both relevant modern and indigenous knowledge (IK) transgenerational transfer.
k) Encourage, support, and finance the growth of indigenous seed//food varieties in the local communities and their sale in markets.
l) Regulate the importation and use of chemicals and agro-based fertilizers in farming and pastoralist communities.
m) Link the land policy to the agriculture policy to take seriously the sustainability of land and seed productivity.
n) Rethink commercial agriculture and reform it to balance large-scale production for markets and the ability of local populations to retain their own livelihood sources.
o) Invest in research and extension services to help pastoralists adapt to changing conditions and adopt context-sensitive (relevant) modern management practices.
p) Start programs for preserving indigenous seed varieties by reinforcing community seed banks and engaging farmers to do the same.
q) Recognize and support traditional knowledge and practices, and orient policy interventions to acknowledge and build on them.

We call upon the CSOs to:

a) Popularize the (un)documented and positive cultural land management principles and practices, and work with communities to update these wherever necessary.
b) Revisit the prevalent rhetoric around patriarchy, widows, and women's land rights.
c) Support the positive capacity building of the cultural institutions to equitably deliver justice.
d) Sensitize communities on critical issues such as land retention, proper land use and management, local seeds/food preservation, and feasible alternatives to land fragmentation.
e) Scrutinize all funded land-related projects in communities to curb their negative impact on communities' land ownership, seed/food sovereignty, and productivity.
f) Consider the long-term effects of all programs on land rights and communities' seed/food production.
g) Promote local/indigenous seed production and preservation through training and leveraging indigenous knowledge on seed banks, seed exchanges, etc.
h) Advocate for policies that recognize the value of indigenous breeds in biodiversity and cultural heritage.

We call upon the (landed) farming and pastoral communities to:

a) Retain their land since it is central to sustainable crop farming, pastoralism, and livelihoods as a whole.
b) Be selective in adopting "modern" agricultural practices and deliberately adopt or revive indigenous agricultural (agroecological) practices.
c) Preserve, retain, utilize, and share indigenous knowledge and biological diversity, including knowledge on community-based breeding and multiplication programs.
d) Protect indigenous seed, food, grass, and animal varieties and breeds through community seed banks, breeding programs, and documentation efforts.
e) Establish and promote community-based breeding programs (CBBPs) and annual seed multiplication programs.
f) Engage in and/or intensify communal intergenerational knowledge transfer programs on indigenous seed and animal varieties, as well as best practices for preservation.
g) Reserve a piece of land in (at least) every Parish to preserve, multiply, breed, and distribute indigenous seed, vegetables, grasses, animals, and fruits.

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