

## **Abstract for World Bank Land and Poverty Conference 2017**

### **Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality For Improved Equity, Sustainability And Resilience**

Melchiade Bukuru, Chief of Office, UNCCD

Access to land resources and the security of tenure has significant implications for sustainable land management particularly when one considers the pressing challenges of poverty, food security, climate change, peace and security, and ultimately achieving sustainable development. Historical, cultural and political factors have influenced and helped form the current systems of land tenure and resource rights which vary in the equity and security that they offer. National laws and land use policies have evolved over time; in many countries, colonial regimes imported systems of common and statutory law which often superseded or suspended existing land governance systems. Today, where tenure and rights are customary or not formally recognized by national or local authorities, they can be easily disregarded in the face of growing pressure and competition for land resources. In some countries, land ownership policies continue to be used as an ideological or economic tool to reinforce the inequitable distribution of property and access to natural resources. The prevalence of large-scale land acquisitions by foreign actors in some African countries is further contributing to small holder disenfranchisement.

Increasingly, entire communities and groups of land users are being dispossessed without appropriate compensation and in some cases, the spatial, temporal and multi-functional uses of the land by different stakeholders are being jeopardized. In West Africa, there are a number of floodplains with multiple overlapping uses where fisher folk have rights to the land during and just after the rainy season, farmers during the dry season, and pastoralists have rights post-harvest and to uncultivated grasslands within the floodplain. In these land use systems, the question of ownership or even that of “primary versus secondary users” is blurred while, at the same time, spatial and temporal rights are well understood by the stakeholders. Throughout much of the developing world, land is considered communal and often managed by different groups and land user types. Consequently, attempts to formally establish more equitable and secure land tenure and resource rights must account for traditional governance systems and mechanisms of negotiation recognizing that statutory legal systems, such as titling and registration, are not always appropriate or flexible enough to cope with the spatial and temporal dimensions of customary use and rights.

#### *Gender equity for better land management*

Many societies have traditions barring women from owning and inheriting land or discriminatory regulatory systems that are reinforced by traditional beliefs, customs and practices. Insecurity of land tenure is underpinned by the fact that women’s access to land is often mediated by their relationship to men. While such arrangements may have been acceptable in the past, today women must not be left behind in acquiring property and using resources as such rights are positively correlated with higher agricultural output, improved land management practices and greater influence in community decision-making. Throughout much of the developing world, women are recognized as playing a pivotal role in managing the land and its associated resources (e.g., soil, water, biodiversity). However, women tend to be under represented in formal land administration or decision-making institutions which affects their

use of land resources and invariably inhibits access to inputs, credit, markets and infrastructure. Globally, there are striking disparities in terms of tenure and rights with women less likely to own land or participate in land use decisions. Women are also less likely to have access to leased land and even when they do, the land is smaller in size and often of poorer quality.

About 80% of economically-active women in the least developed countries are involved in agriculture as a primary source of livelihood. Nevertheless, they are often limited to the most marginal lands with the least secure tenure. This directly impacts not only productivity but also the health and nutrition of the family. Several studies have shown that women's participation in land management decisions results in better land management practices. Secure tenure and rights enable women to make long-term decisions, thus increasing the motivation to invest in more sustainable practices that improve food security and enhance resilience. In addition to the direct economic benefits, land ownership can serve to empower women in their negotiations with other household members, and with the community or society at large. Land rights is synonymous with wealth, status and power in most parts of the world, thus strengthening women's access to and control over land resources is critical in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on poverty, hunger and nutrition, gender equality and the target for achieving land degradation neutrality.

#### *Managing land as a multi-functional asset*

Historically, most rural lands around the world that were owned and governed by local and indigenous communities under customary tenure systems have been acquired by the state. In many countries, the government still controls vast tracts yet the most productive lands were and are being reallocated, leased or sold as private property to individuals and corporations. Land is a uniquely valued and trusted asset, particularly in urban and other high-value economic areas. As a consequence, large areas of land change hands through transactions that are subject different degrees of regulation and formality. In many industrialized countries, there has been a significant consolidation of land holdings in the last decades and legal titling is the norm. However, throughout much of Africa and other parts of the developing world, there are large numbers of small landholders who do not have individual property rights and share land resources among different users within their communities.

Whether land is a private or common asset, it still provides multiple goods and services to people at different scales, such as mitigating climate change at the global scale, regulating water supply at a landscape scale or supporting food production at the local scale. Land management practices often have downstream consequences and increasingly land owners face restrictions or are provided incentives to safeguard the delivery of multiple ecosystem services. A clearer understanding of the land's many functions and services (i.e., benefits to humans) and ascribing valuing to them begs us to consider supporting farmers and other land managers as stewards of the land and its associated resources. We must therefore promote rights, rewards and responsibilities as the pillars of sustainable land management. Our future farmers and land managers must be secure in their tenure/access and adequately compensated for the goods and services that they provide, including those beyond the market, whether conserving biodiversity, safeguarding water supplies or sequestering carbon.

For many developing countries, long-term food security and economic growth is highly dependent on the management of their land resources, including soil, water and biodiversity. To ensure the sustainable use of these essential components into the future, there is no choice but to support a new vision of stewardship based on rights, rewards and responsibilities. This would provide the incentives needed for young people to remain in the rural areas and help foster an enabling environment for more equitable access to markets, investment and infrastructure. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), as part of its mandate to help achieve the SDGs, is advocating and supporting over 100 countries to integrate appropriate land governance systems in their voluntary land degradation neutrality targets. The UNCCD's new flagship publication, the Global Land Outlook, strongly advocates for national and local governments to play a critical role in developing the necessary governance and incentive frameworks that encourage more sustainable land management decisions at all scales. Otherwise, future scenarios are rife with shortages, conflicts and instability.