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Drawing Links Between Food Security and Land Rights in an Era of Globalization

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Why Land Policy Matters: Drawing the Linkages Between Food Security and Land Rights in an Era of Globalization and Uncertainty

Most of the poorest and most food-insecure people in the world share three characteristics: they live in rural areas, rely on agricultural labour to survive, and do not own the land that they cultivate.[1] This state of crisis across the rural world of the Global South finds its historical origins in colonial land grabs, where existing forms of land tenure were either ignored or overridden. This resulted in farming communities, who relied on subsistence agriculture for their food, being stripped of their ownership and agency over their land, leading to their continuous displacement in to increasingly marginal, infertile lands such as desert margins, rocky slopes, and rainforests. This legacy, only slightly modified in the post-colonial era, has resulted in the persistent and worsening inequity of land ownership and tenure relations. The resulting millions of landless or near-landless, who comprise the poorest strata of society, also suffer most extremely from chronic food insecurity.[2]

In this context, this essay argues that in an increasingly globalized and populated world, heightened attention on and work toward ensuring secure and appropriate land rights for rural and indigenous communities and individuals is integral for progress to ensure sustained, universal food security. It is especially important that this issue be taken seriously in policy circles concerned with food security, given the recent worrying trend of massive land acquisitions by foreign entities, particularly since 2008 in sub-Saharan Africa. This trend constitutes a serious threat to the food security of a wide array of the population of the region, where the coexistence of insecure land rights and chronic food insecurity is most prevalent. While this essay focuses primarily on the sub-Saharan African context, its findings apply to many other regions[3] under similar threats.

Outlining the Linkages Between Secure Land Rights and Food Security

Secure land rights refer to rights that are clearly defined, long-term, enforceable, appropriately transferrable, and socially and legally legitimate.[4] Secure land rights are a critical but often an overlooked factor in achieving household food security and improved nutritional status for those who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Food security in the context of livelihoods can be defined as the capacity of households, communities, and the state to mobilize sufficient food through production, acquisition, and distribution of food on a sustainable basis.[5]

Access to land and security of tenure[6] are the main means through which food security can be realized in Africa, because the livelihoods of over 70% of the population in Africa are mainly linked to land and natural resources exploitation.[7] Land is critical because rural households rely on this resource for the reproduction of future generations, since the industrial and service sectors do not currently provide alternative opportunities for survival. Although various factors such as climate, markets, and infrastructure affect agricultural activities and other livelihood options, unequal access to land and insecure land tenure have the most profound impact on livelihoods of smallholders in Africa.[8]

Secure land rights can lead to increased household agricultural productivity and production through a number of

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ways. First, secure land tenure provides incentives for the owner to invest in improvements to the land. If a farmer constantly operates under the assumption that the state or a foreign entity may take hold of the land, they will not be compelled to invest in the land to the end of increasing its quality, health, and the sustainability of its productivity. Second, secure land tenure will increase opportunities to access financial services and government programs, particularly for women. Third, by removing the constant risk of losing the land, secure land rights can allow for the creation of space needed for more optimal land use.[9] For example, one study shows that when Ugandan women farmers did not have independent and secure rights to the land, they did not allow the land to lie fallow when necessary because they feared that not using the land would affect their ability to gain future access. This resulted in the land being overused and less productive in the long run.[10]

Increased household agricultural productivity can then enhance household food security through two main avenues. This can happen directly, through increased food production for consumption, and indirectly, through increased income permitting the purchase of more and better quality food. Land can also serve as a source of income in other ways, such as by providing rental income or serving as collateral for loans for non-agricultural income-generating activities. In all these ways, secure land tenure can help moderate the impact of food price volatility on poor rural households.[11]

A variety of cases from different setting around the world illustrate the positive correlation between land rights and food security. A study conducted in 2009 of a land purchase program in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which provided beneficiaries with plots of land of up to one acre, found that beneficiary households experience significantly higher levels of food security, with 75% of beneficiary households reporting having two meals a day, compared to only 50-57% of non-beneficiary households.[12] Another study, where a household survey was conducted in five Asian countries, found that among four levels of food security, the food secure group had the largest percentage of owner-cultivators at 70%.[13]

Studies show that even secure rights to "microplots" of land (plots as small as one-tenth of an acre), providing enough space for home gardens and for keeping poultry, livestock, and other animals, can protect against household food insecurity by enabling the household production of a majority of fruits and vegetables consumed by the families.[14] For example, a study of wage-earning families in the Indian state of Kerala revealed that the value of the microplot production was the most consistent positive predictor of child nutrition.[15] Further, small plots held by urban residents in the former Soviet Union played a major role in ensuring household food security in both the Soviet and post-Soviet era, with small plots comprising about two percent of agricultural land cultivation accounting for approximately 27 percent of the value of all agricultural production.[16] Finally, in Puerto Rico, house-and-garden plots allocated to landless agricultural workers helped ensure food security for recipient families.[17]

The link between secure land rights and household food security is even more pronounced when women in the household have secure land rights. When women own the rights to the land that they till, they gain improved status which leads to greater influence over household decisions, which often translates in to improved welfare of the household, including food and nutrition needs.[18] Furthermore, when women have direct control over assets such as land and resultant income, they are more likely than men to spend the income on the next generation. Studies show that women with secure rights to land also have greater influence over decisions regarding what types of crops to grow on that land and that in some settings. This is also significant as men tend to plant crops with a high market value, while women tend to plant crops that can supplement a family's diet.[19]

Historical Drivers of Insecure and Inequitable Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa

Although secure land rights for smallholder farmers have clear implications for household food security, and smallholder farmers constitute a majority of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank estimated that only between 2 and 10 percent of total land in sub-Saharan Africa was formally tenured to smallholder farmers in 2003.[20] Agriculture in Africa can be characterized as bimodal—that is, divided sharply in to smallholder and large-scale/estate agriculture. Economic policies have historically exclusively promoted large-scale farming, leading to the underdevelopment of smallholder agriculture in most African countries. Examples of such policies have been through setting prices and controlling marketing systems that regulate the flow of information and credit-making mechanisms

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oriented to large farmers, constraining the link of smallholders to national and international markets.[21] This attitude has been reinforced by the maintenance of insecure land rights for smallholder farmers, manifested in dualistic land tenure systems and inequitable land distribution patterns. For example, in Zimbabwe, over 1.2 million smallholders in communal lands have access to only 50% of agricultural land while 13,335 large and medium commercial farms controlled 37.3% of the best agricultural land. The situation in Southern Africa is even more acute. For instance, in South Africa, smallholders hold 13% of the land area while about 67,000 commercial farmers own 86% if the country's agricultural land.[22]

This inequity and associated land tenure challenges in sub-Saharan Africa are trenched in the legacies of the colonial period and the subsequent neo-liberal development policies imposed by institutions associated with the Washington Consensus. Africa was colonized through a combination of military conquests and unjust treaties and agreements, while the process of colonization was driven by the economic imperatives of establishing markets for European goods, exploitation of mineral resources, and the establishment of European agriculture.[23] Following conquest, the colonizers largely declared that the indigenous population was ignorant of any ownership concepts, using this as justification to grant land ownership to white settlers and thereby giving them virtual absolute ownership. The displaced population was then settled on the worst lands and governed by administrative discretion, while land rights were held on trust by the state.[24] At the time of independence, then, this dual, unequal, and hierarchical system of land tenure was inherited, with freehold and leasehold land rights being treated as superior to indigenous customary land rights.[25]

Exacerbating the existent injustice was the imposition of neoliberal economic development policies imposed by institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and WTO following independence. These policies have included trade liberalization and the subsequent flooding of local markets with cheap food imports, against which local famers can hardly compete; cutting price supports and subsidies for food producers; and excessive export promotion. This culminated in credit being inadequate or too expensive, and prices too low for smaller and poorer farmers to cover rising production costs. The result has been that the access of the poor to land has continued to deteriorate significantly, as they are forced to sell the land they own, cannot afford land rentals, or lose by defaulting on credit.[26] The export-led, free trade-based, industrial agriculture model of large farms and land concentration has attempted to address the problem of food insecurity and hunger by boosting exports from the giant plantations owned by the wealthy as the way to generate income to import cheap food. However, not only does this increase food insecurity as the local population is then subjected to the volatility of the international market, but they also often cannot afford to buy what is grown as export-oriented crops in their own countries.[27]

Grassroots movements led by family farmers, peasants, rural workers, and indigenous people have taken root against insecure and unjust land tenure systems in many parts of the world. Perhaps the most prominent and concentrated of these is the global alliance, La Via Campesina, founded in 1993 by farmers' organizations from Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. More recently, however, international institutions, led by the World Bank, have started to take note of the significance of land in broad-based sustainable development objectives and food security.[28] The report titled, "Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?," published by the Bank in 2011, was perhaps the first major initiative indicative of this growing concern.

Despite the shift in attitude toward land by the international development community, however, the fact remains that most land in African nations continues to be owned by the state, rendering resident communities powerless against the whims of governments, especially in contexts of failed, weak, and/or corrupt states.[29] This is especially concerning given the recent, accelerating interest in massive land acquisitions in sub-Saharan Africa by foreign entities, triggered by the Financial and Global Food Crisis of 2007-2008.

An Emerging Threat: Land Grabbing in Sub-Saharan Africa Post-2008

An emerging trend in large-scale land acquisitions by foreign governments and corporations has recently taken hold in sub-Saharan Africa, and has been accelerating since the World Food Price Crisis of 2008. Given the preexisting problematic nature of land tenure in the region, this constitutes an alarming threat to overall food security for the population of sub-Saharan Africa, and thus should be taken seriously by policy circles concerned with global food

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security.

The "world food crisis" of 2007-2008 served as a catalyst for renewed attention on issues surrounding global food production systems and food security by policy-makers, scholars, and civil society around the world. The crisis occurred as a result of the rise of average global food prices by 83% over the three years leading up to the first quarter of 2008. The most drastic increase was experienced during the second half of 2007 and the first half of 2008, where in the 9-month period alone, world food prices increased by 45%. As of March 2008, average wheat prices had risen by 130%, soy prices were up by 87%, and rice by 74% from levels in the previous year.[30] This had a devastating impact on the poorest households and the hungry across many low-income countries, and according to the World Bank, 100 million people were driven in to hunger.[31] It also led to food riots that quickly escalated in to violent mass demonstrations from Mexico to Pakistan, leading to deaths and turmoil in many affected countries.[32]

The crisis served as a stark reminder of the fragility of the global food system and the centrality of food to social and political stability, while triggering worldwide concern about threats to global food security. Consequently, it caused general erosion in confidence in international markets as a reliable source of food.[33] This erosion in confidence has manifested in different ways depending on countries' levels of dependence on food imports. Some of the richer netfood importers, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have since invested in growing food abroad for their domestic markets.[34] Paired with other growing incentives for investment in agriculture of rich, industrialized nations, such as biofuel production and reduced attractiveness of other assets due to the financial crisis, there has since been a 'rediscovery' of the agricultural sector by different types of investors and a wave of massive land acquisitions in low-income countries of the Global South.[35] Compared to an average annual expansion of global agricultural land of less than 4 million hectares before 2008, approximately 56 million hectares worth of large-scale farmland deals were announced even before the end of 2009, while more than 50 percent of the demand has been in Africa.[36] More specifically, Sub-Saharan Africa is now the site of the most speculative land deals in the world.[37]

One of the first and most controversial of these was an attempted deal between the South Korean firm Daewoo Logistics Corporation and the government of Madagascar. In 2008, Daewoo attempted to lease half of all of Madagascar's arable land for 99 years to grow maize and palm oil, at no clear benefit to the general Madagascan population. The deal ultimately did not go through due to massive protests by the local population. The severity and size of the protests ultimately led to the dismantling of the government.[38] Although the deal failed in Madagascar, many others have since taken hold. For example, in 2009, the government of Qatar leased 40,000 hectares of agricultural land along Kenya's coast to grow fruit and vegetables, in return for building a 2.4 billion port close to the Indian Ocean tourist island of Lamu.[39] In 2009, the government of Abu Dhabi also acquired 61,750 acres of agricultural land watered by the Nile in Sudan to grow its own maize and alfalfa.[40] Similarly, in 2012, the Liberian government granted the Malaysian-based multinational company Sime Darby a 63-year lease to 220,000 hectares of land to grow trees for palm oil.[41]

Why We Should Be Worried: Assessing the Food Security Implications of Large-Scale Land Acquisitions in Sub-Saharan Africa

There is much disagreement surrounding this recently accelerating trend in land acquisition. Some see it as an opportunity to address long-standing underinvestment in agriculture that could drive broader access to better technology and more jobs for poor farmers.[42] However, broad-based development implications of these investments have been overwhelmingly negative, deeming it perhaps more appropriate to characterize these investments as (what the media has termed) "land grabs," referring to large-scale purchases or leases of agricultural or forest-land on terms that do not serve those already living on the land.[43] They are rather associated with weak institutional capacity (and sometimes corruption) in the recipient country's governments, while the communities whose land is leased or bought are not adequately protected.[44] Such land deals are too often characterized by "a lack of documented rights claimed by local people and weak consultation processes that have led to uncompensated loss of land rights, especially by vulnerable groups," while countries attracting investor interest largely include those that are land abundant with weak land governance, such as Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, and Sudan.[45]

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In a report titled "Rising Global Interest in Farmland," the World Bank investigated whether the most recent "land rush" differs from past trends, and it concluded that the recent wave of investment and acquisitions were, in fact, different from traditional trends in investment. This is because the recent investment involves new types of investors and is focused mainly in African countries that do not appear to have been attractive targets earlier and have very weak land governance.[46] The report goes on to assert that as a consequence, the new wave of investment created risks beyond those present in more traditional investments. This is because investors may lack the necessary experience, countries' institutional infrastructure may be ill-equipped to handle an upsurge in investor interest, and weak protection of land rights may lead to uncompensated land loss by existing land users or land being given away well below its true value.[47]

Indeed, mounting evidence has shown that such leases or concessions have been granted on communal land that is already claimed, occupied, and used by local people. These deals then potentially intensely threaten the food security of farming households and the prospects for the continent's smallholder farms, which sustain many of its poorest citizens.[48] Case studies by the World Bank on large land acquisitions by foreign entities in Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Sudan confirmed these risks. The studies concluded that such acquisitions were significantly associated with the following findings: weak land governance and a failure to recognize, protect, or properly compensate local communities' land rights; lack of country capacity to process and manage large-scale investments, including inclusive and participatory consultations that result in clear and enforceable agreements; and investor proposals that were insufficiently elaborated, nonviable technically, or inconsistent with local visions and national plans for development, in some cases leading investors to encroach on local lands to make ends meet.[49]

The recent developments in large-scale 'land grabs' thus threaten to exacerbate the preexisting trend present in many recipient countries of the displacement of rural and indigenous communities to marginal, less-fertile lands. As such, it poses a serious threat to the livelihood and thus, food security, of the masses of rural populations that often represent the poorest strata of society, and whom, without recognition of their customary land rights, are driven in to deeper poverty and heightened long-term chronic food insecurity. The cases of land acquisitions since 2007 in South Sudan and Uganda are illustrative of the severity of the threat.

Case Studies: South Sudan and Uganda

South Sudan: Nile Trading and Development Inc. vs. Residents of Lainya County

In the newly formed state of South Sudan, smallholder farming is the primary source of livelihood for 80% of households. As of January 2011, 36% of people were found to be food insecure whereas 9.7% of people were extremely insecure.[50] Between 2007 and 2010, foreign companies, government, and individuals sought or acquired at least 2.64 million hectares for agriculture, biofuel, and forestry projects. The area represents nearly 10% of South Sudan's total land mass.[51]

In March 2008, Nile Trading and Development Inc. (NTD), a for-profit corporation established under Delaware law, secured a 49-year lease for 600,000 hectares of extremely fertile community land in Lainya Country, Central Equatorial State (CES).[52] The deal was concluded between NTD and 'Mukayama Payam Cooperative'. According to the Mukayama Payam community, who live in Lainya County, this 'cooperative' is not a legally registered entity, does not represent them, and is made up of influential elites of the region. In response, unlike some other large-scale land acquisitions, the Mukayama community has since mounted an organized and initially successful campaign against the lease with NTD. Although the CES Governor has verbally supported the community, an annulment of the deal has not yet been documented officially.[53]

According to a census conducted in 2008, Lainya County's population is largely dependent on subsistence farming, while their staple crops are dura and maize. Under the lease agreement with NTD, communities beyond the Mukaya Payam are required to land give up the right to oppose the following activity by NTD:

"exploiting timber/forestry resources on the leased land, the harvesting of current tree growth, the planting and harvesting of megafoli-paulownia, palm oil trees and other hardwood trees and the development of wood-based

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industries; and agriculture."[54]

If the lease is activated and the deal confirmed, the implications for the Mukaya Payam community will thus clearly be that of displacement, associated loss of livelihood, and predictable extreme food insecurity.

Uganda: New Forests Company vs. Residents of Kigoba and Mubende Counties

The case of the large-scale acquisition of land in Kigoba and nearby Mubende district in Uganda by the UK-based New Forests Company (NFC) provides a starker illustration of the food-security implications of the deal and other similar deals. The Ugandan National Forestry Authority (NFA) granted licenses over large-scale plantation areas to NFC, and authorized the removal of the former residents between 2006-2010. Over twenty thousand people claim to have been evicted from their homes as a result. According to an Oxfam report published in 2011, the NFC maintains that the locals left voluntarily and that they would bear no responsibility for evictions from land licensed to it. The NFA has described the displaced groups as illegal encroachers on forest land and that their eviction was justified. [55]

According to the report, however, most of the residents claim to have spent their entire lives on the land—some of whose families had settled in previous generations, such as in the 1970s during the Idi Amin regime or on return from World War 2—and believe that they have clear legal rights to the land they occupied. Furthermore, the reports outline testimonials by local communities stating that the evictions were anything but voluntary, and that army and police were deployed in the area to assist with the evictions, with many beaten and violently harassed in the process.[56]

A detailed interview with one of the evictees featured in the report highlights food security and overall welfare-related implications of the case. Christine, the interviewee, explained that her and her husband used to grow enough food to feed their eight children on the six hectares of land that they had farmed in the Kigoba district for over 20 years. By selling the surplus at the market, they could afford to send their children to school. At the time of the interview, instead of living in their old six-room home, they were struggling to pay rent for a cramped two-room house, where there was not enough land to farm and grow food. Consequently, Christine's children often had fallen to having only one meal a day at the time of the interview, and were no longer receiving an education. Her and her husband were now dependent on the goodwill of friends and whatever casual labour could be found.[57]

Looking Forward: Policy Recommendations for the International Community

The current implications of large-scale foreign land acquisitions, especially in countries with poor land governance and weak state structures are clear. However, left unaddressed, given the projected rate of world population growth, changing weather patterns, and uncertainty of energy costs, the scramble by foreign entities for resources for their own national food security and/or energy needs will only intensify. Thus, it is paramount that relevant governments and international policy circles concerned with food security rapidly take action to address the issue.

Land reform to the end of securing fair and appropriate land rights for relevant communities is an issue that is largely idiosyncratic to each countries' historical, political, and societal contexts, and appropriate policies may thus vary widely. Nevertheless, there exist commonalities. This commonality in grievances is evident in already-existent transnational peasant movements and networks, such as in the case when the Brazilian Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra helped to train, educate, and inspire the South African Landless People's Movement. It also provides a basis upon which international policy institutions can initiate supranational policy platforms in order to elevate and seriously engage such transnational peasant movements, provide much-needed information sharing on best practices, and support policy coordination for relevant governments.

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, an initiative spearheaded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and resulting in an extensive report of the same name published in 2012, represents a concrete step taken by the UN. However, there is much more work that can and should be done in order to further real progress on the issue and address the associated glaring food security governance gap.

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One recommendation could be to build on the Voluntary Guidelines to develop binding national and international investment law that would complement the Guidelines. As voluntary guidelines, they allow countries to shape their land investment laws according to their local needs and customs, and given the complexity of land issues, it is arguably a good thing that the report, albeit non-binding and relatively vague, was published quickly, without the political weight of biding negotiations. However, the challenge now is to turn the guidelines in to law, and to review contracts already signed that do not conform to the principles set out.[58]

Another recommendation could be to create a system of internationally coordinated public reserves, particularly for certain staple grains. Beyond the direct benefits for national and regional food security, such a system would help to restore confidence in the availability of food and lessen the drive to lock in supplies through land purchases.[59]

Finally, the international community could support systematic effort to develop appropriate capacities and skill sets for the effective governance of land resources and for inclusive land administration and management across the world.[60] This could include creating platform(s) for information sharing, hosting annual meetings to leverage the expertise of international NGOs, international organizations, peasant movements, and governments, and publishing widely disseminated advocacy documents to bring the issue to a broader international audience.

Concluding Remarks

This study has attempted to draw a clear link between sustainable food security in the sub-Saharan African context of livelihoods, and secure and equitable land tenure. By doing so, it aimed to stress the significance of large land acquisitions in the region as a serious and growing threat to regional food security. Such massive land acquisitions, although primarily conducted in sub-Saharan Africa thus far, are not unique to the region. Cambodia, Indonesia, Honduras, and Guatemala have also been targeted for similar massive land deals during the same time period, with similar grievances reported amongst affected populations. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, globally 842 million people, about 12% of the world population, were chronically hungry and food-insecure in 2013, with a vast majority living in low-income countries.[61] If universal food security is to be achieved, the needs of the close to 1 billion currently chronically food-insecure, largely constituted by the landless and agricultural poor, must be addressed in an effective and genuine manner. The international community has a real role to play in this regard, whether by constraint-based initiatives to investment, or encouragement to context-sensitive redistributive and fair land policies in recipient governments. No matter in which form, however, it is clear that in order to be effective and sustainable, policies adopted moving forward must maintain the centrality of secure and equitable land tenure for affected communities who continue to be dependent on the land for their survival.

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[25] ibid.

[3] Example of other countries in this respect are Cambodia, Indonesia, Honduras, and Guatemala, amongst others.
[4] Landesa, Issue Brief – Land Rights and Food Security. (Seattle: Landesa, 2012), 1.
[5] Economic Commission for Africa, <i>Land Tenure System and their Impacts on Food Security and Sustainable Development in Africa.</i> (Addis Ababa: Economic Commission for Africa, 2004), 5.
[6] 'Land Tenure' refers to the social construct defining relationships between individuals and groups of individual by which rights and obligations concerning the control and use of land are defined.
[7] Economic Commission for Africa, 4.
[8] ibid, 6.
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[13] L. Miggiano, et al, <i>Links between Land Tenure Security and Food Security</i> , (Rome: International Land Coalition, 2010), 11.
[14] Landesa, 2.
[15] ibid.
[16] ibid.
[17] ibid.
[18] Food and Agriculture Organization, <i>The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in Agriculture – Closing the Gender Gap for Development 2010-2011</i> , (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2012), 43.
[19] Landesa, 3.
[20] Lorenzo Cotula, et al, <i>Land Grab or Development Opportunity? Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa</i> , (London: IIED/FAO/IFAD, 2009), 20.
[21] Economic Commission for Africa, 49.
[22] ibid.
[23] ibid, 18.
[24] ibid, 19.

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[26] Rosset, "Moving Forward," 302-303.

[27] ibid 308.

[28] ibid 309.

[29] Rachel S. Knight, Statutory Recognition of Customary Land Rights in Africa: An Investigation into Best Practices for Lawmaking and Implementation, (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010), v.

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[34] ibid.

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