

## Peacebuilding starts at home – Gender-just access to land for escaping hunger and for peaceful and inclusive societies



Rice producers in Burkina Faso

### Issues:

- **Women's access to and control over land**
- **Economic empowerment of women**
- **Gender-just land policies**
- **Land certificates**

There is widespread agreement that women are reliable guarantors for development. What they produce and earn is mainly used for their families' benefit. However, while the importance of women's contribution to a household's income, food security and resilience is undisputed, there are many obstacles that render their efforts and ambitions to enhance development difficult. One of their main constraints in the rural areas is the problematic access to and control over land.

Land tenure is gender-sensitive in most African countries and women's access to land is still highly restricted. Access to land has become an issue of conflict in

many African countries. In times of accelerated population growth, pressure on land has strongly increased due to land acquisitions and even land grabbing by non-residents in the rural areas. Whereas land grabbing takes the greater share of the debate, there are also conflicts at the local level.

Therefore, conflict prevention has to start at the household and community level to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies/SDG 16 and increase gender quality in the land and food sector. Based on extensive field research, we demonstrate the importance of this by discussing land-related problems and challenges and presenting attempts to solve these issues.

In Burkina Faso, for instance, we have recently witnessed an increasing crisis of confidence in the population due to an increasing demand for land and insecure land rights. Burkina Faso's traditional land rights are

very community-oriented. New non-residents were usually lent (“prêt”) a piece of land to produce food for their families. However, given the increased demand for land and a growing urban expansion, landowners do not want to lend their land to outsiders anymore. They are afraid that the land user could sell the land to someone else, even though this is illegal. There are many interested people such as bureaucrats from the urban centres, who offer sufficient money in order to build their houses on the land. This development particularly impacts men, since women are traditionally not able to sell land. However, this development is alarming, since it risks producing conflicts in the long run.

In this general context of land scarcity and tenure insecurity, the relation of women and land is also a matter of dispute. In most African countries, women spend as much time as men working in the fields, if not even more. In Benin and Burkina Faso, for instance, women usually have their own “women’s fields” on which they grow peanuts and legumes for the sauce of the daily meal as well as staple crops such as rice and maize. The harvest serves for home consumption and for sale. Contrary to what men say, women need to generate income in order to pay for the school and health expenses for their children (especially in polygamous marriages), for the ingredients of the sauces of their daily meals and for other consumption items.

Men tend to minimise the importance of women’s expenses by calling them “ses petits besoins” (her little needs) and rank their fields as being less important than the so-called family fields, for which men are responsible. Generally, the empowerment of and respect for women is still at a very low level. Many conflicts within families though, stem from the lack of money



for their needs, such as food, education of the children, housing, clothes, ceremonies and the like. If these conflicts are dealt with, there is a good chance that peace is re-established within the families and conflicts are prevented from spilling over into the community.

### **Strategies from conflict to peace**

We encountered different strategies to solve land problems at the household and community levels. These approaches directly and indirectly provided women with access to land via quotas or legal frameworks while also taking social aspects into account. While some strategies have proven successful under certain conditions, others are still in the process or show how conflict sensitivity and conflict management must be integral parts of activities aiming at women’s improved access to and their empowerment.



#### **Key message**

*Women’s secure access to land empowers them economically. If well managed this can create win-win situations without challenging the role of men.*



#### **Strategy 1: Quotas for women in land management**

One approach is to directly or indirectly allow women access to land, for instance by setting quotas for female participation in land management practices. We found this approach in Northern Benin, where we did research on a soil and water conservation project that promotes a number of techniques to restore or increase soil

fertility and thus increase agricultural production. The gender-sensitive, experienced project manager insisted on setting a quota for including female farmers and their fields. In a highly male-dominated society, setting a quota for female participation may be the only means to meaningfully assist women.

In the project region, a woman usually receives around one hectare of land for cultivation from her husband at the time of marriage. Whereas the women of the ethnic group Fulbe (locally called Peulh) receive their plot for a lifetime, the Bariba women in the same region have to leave the land they cultivate in the event of divorce or death of the husband. Hence setting a quota for the inclusion of women's fields does not always seem to provide a sustainable solution – at least not for the Bariba women.

## **2** *Strategy 2: Lifetime guarantee for women to use their land*

Some women told us that they had invested a lot of work in making their fields fertile by building water-conserving stone bunds, mulching or sowing leguminous plants like mucuna, only to see that at the end of the season their husbands took those fields for themselves. When the men saw that their wives produced very good yields from the now fertile fields, they wanted to have them back for themselves. By arguing that the family fields are more important than the women's fields, they claimed their land back and gave their wives another infertile plot to be cultivated in the next agricultural season.

This type of conflict was openly discussed between men and women in our presence and community facilitators co-operating with the project encouraged women to speak their mind. In addition, they tried to convince the men of the importance of women's fields and thus their contribution to the family's livelihood. In the end, a lifetime guarantee for a woman to cultivate her land would lead to a win-win situation.

The discussion in the community will continue and probably lead to a change of mind on the part of the men. A project can only stimulate the process and put forward arguments. The change has to come from the people themselves.

## **3** *Strategy 3: Improving women's agriculture*

Besides quotas, women's access to land can also be indirectly strengthened. For example, in Burkina Faso, we visited a project that aimed at strengthening the rural people's resilience to climate extremes and disasters. In this project, women received improved seeds to be used in their fields. While women are often provided with a piece of land by their husband, this is not the case in all households. Through the women receiving enhanced seeds, however, men were practically "forced" to give their wives a piece of land. Coupled with trainings that addressed both men and women, men soon realised the importance of granting their wives access to land. Women particularly highlighted this social impact of their land access that had strongly improved their standing in the family and the relation to their husbands.

## **4** *Strategy 4: Land certificates in the names of both women and men*

In addition to these interventions at the micro-level, innovative changes of the legal framework can likewise contribute to the promotion of women's access to land. In Ethiopia, for instance, we found two good practice examples to address conflicting issues concerning gender-just land policies and women's access to land. Here, married women do not usually have their own fields, but they work side-by-side with their husbands and children on the family's plots. Two conflicting issues arise in this case.

One issue concerns women's rights in case of divorce or death of the husband. In the past, divorced women or widows lost all claims on the land that they used to farm together with their husbands and that had earned their living. Even though modern law gives them the right to inherit land in those cases, women in remote rural areas are often not aware of their rights. In addition, people tend to push women to refrain from their right of land. Husbands' and wives' families tend to dispute over inheritance and compensation for many years. In the



## **Success factors contributing to conflict prevention**

- **Economic empowerment of women**
- **Long-term tenure security for women**
- **Social status and bargaining power of women**

meantime, women are left without a means to make their living.

A couple of years ago, the Ethiopian government embarked on a countrywide initiative for land registration. The land certificates are issued in the names of both husband and wife, including photographs and fingerprints of both. The certificate does not only provide the family with tenure security and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* their neighbours or the government, which is the sole owner of all land in Ethiopia and can claim any land at any time for infrastructure or investment projects. It also ensures that women are not left without any means after the death of their husband or after divorce. It legally entitles them to half of the family land.

Although the government is implementing in a top-down way a legal measure contrary to the local traditions, it bears the opportunity to restore peace over an issue that many families dispute over for years. In addition, it gives women more standing, bargaining power and security in land issues which results in a better treatment of women within the families.

### **5 Strategy 5: Income-generating activities for female-headed households**

Another issue concerns female-headed households. If they do not have grown-up sons living with them, they usually do not have enough labour force to cultivate their land. Very poor women also do not have the means to host neighbourhood groups who work on people's land in exchange for food and drinks. This fact forces them into unfavourable sharecropping arrangements, where they provide the land and the inputs for planting

and the other partner provides his own labour and a pair of oxen for ploughing. The harvest is most often shared equally, leaving the woman and her small children with not enough to survive on. This means that women de facto have the right to their land; however, the circumstances do not allow them to fully profit from it.

During our research in Ethiopia, we encountered several projects that put a focus on including women in small-scale irrigation schemes in order to provide them an income-generating activity. In addition, some projects enhance sheep and goat breeding, poultry keeping for egg production and other income-generating activities that provide women a living. The money women gain from these activities allows them to hire labour for ploughing their fields, make a decent living and be independent from sharecropping arrangements or from renting out their land completely.

### **Cross-sectoral approach: Land, gender, peace and justice**

Access to land and land tenure security are important determinants of conflict prevention, particularly in the light of the current challenges. A growing world population faces an increasing scarcity of (fertile) land, which threatens its food security and potentially its existence. Our examples have demonstrated the importance of preventing conflicts already at the household and community levels by actively including women in land management. In the cases presented, the approaches to tackle land tenure conflicts lead or can lead to win-win situations, in which the women are able to earn their living due to their access to land.

## ***Favourable conditions for conflict prevention***

Besides project interventions which favour women's economic empowerment, gender-just land policies and processes favouring women's access to land are vital elements to contribute to the promotion of women's access to land and to reduce the potential of conflicts at family and village level. However, it is not only top-down measures such as inclusion via quotas or laws which are important. Continuous awareness-raising is also necessary in order to make men understand and realise the importance of women's access to land for the wellbeing of their families and thus of the whole community, transforming laws into gender-just land situations on the ground.

## ***References and further reading***

- The research project "Ways out of poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity" analyses good practice projects that identify measures to reach the very poor, the vulnerable and food-insecure people and to assist them in a sustainable and efficient way to overcome poverty and food insecurity. A strong focus of the research lies on access to land and tenure security. One of the main outcomes of the research is that in the rural areas of Africa, land matters a lot with respect to making a living and being rich or poor. The research was carried out in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya and Cambodia between 2016 and 2019.
- [[www.inef-reachthepoorest.de](http://www.inef-reachthepoorest.de)]

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