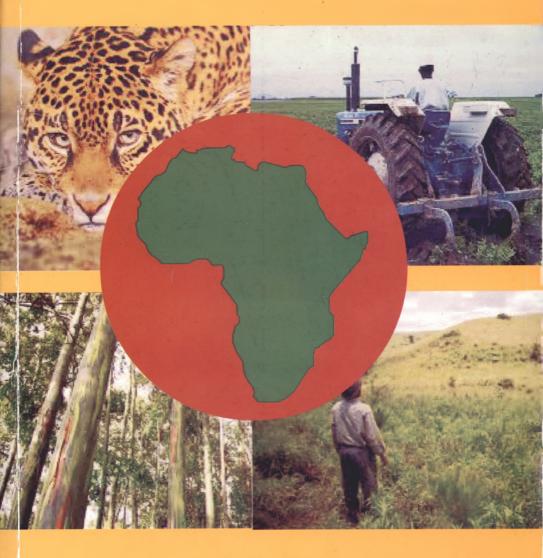# Land: An Empowerment Asset for Africa

The Human Factor Perspective

Edited by
Claude G. Mararike

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Chapter Fourteen

Land and Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Some Salient Issues

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Introduction

Land reform is a collection of activities and changes designed to alter the agrarian structure of society and land-use patterns. It invariably has political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions. Local level institutions such as traditional structures have been severely weakened by colonial government policies. They have either been ignored or, at most, marginally consulted if only to support and be politically compliant. Local communities are custodians of natural resources and are meant to benefit from the land reform process but they have not been meaningfully involved in shaping the process and direction of the programme.

Whilst acknowledging that the role of traditional knowledge and indigenous institutions in the land reform has been ambiguous, the chapter contends that cognisance should be taken of the capacity of these knowledges and institutions to impact on the process, given the socio-economic and political conditions. The chapter makes a case for "blending" traditional knowledge systems with "scientific" knowledge, in the context of land reform. An acknowledgement of which traditional knowledge systems to restore and preserve is equally important.

Indigenous knowledge is often interchangeably referred to as traditional knowledge. This knowledge is inextricably linked to ancestors, tribal lands and information which are peculiar to places and communities. For purposes of this chapter, this knowledge shall be understood as long standing or historical traditions and ways of doing things which apply to defined spatial, indigenous or local communities. This knowledge is usually passed on orally, or through legends and rituals, from one generation to the other and it often becomes the "identity" of that particular community. It is, therefore important that modern-day scientific enquiry should establish dialogue with this time-honoured traditional knowledge, if local communities are to be part of the national development plan.

Indigenous African Land Tenure

Most African farmers cultivate their holdings under indigenous tenure systems, frequently referred to as "customary" or "traditional" (Bruce, 1993: 35). Migot-Adhola and Bruce (1993) note that the parlous state of agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa during the past two decades, has rekindled debate over the suitability of customary land-use practices for more capital intensive agriculture. Bruce (1993) points out that colonial administrators, the African elite and foreign-aid donors have, historically, viewed indigenous landholding systems as obstacles to increasing agricultural output. The argument was that only private, freehold arrangements will provide the investment security necessary to make African agriculture more efficient and productive.

Stereotypes of indigenous tenure systems (which are often a distortion of reality) make them appear as "imperfect" by comparison with idealised western property institutions that are perceived to be efficient and compliant to market economics. Because customary tenure systems are deeply embedded in cultural and political systems and generally offer members of particular social groups overlapping multiple rights of land-use, they tend to exclude non-members of the group from transacting in land. Thus, they are said to distort factor markets and undermine full integration of rural economies into national markets and, instead, contribute to fragmentation.

A major misconception about indigenous land tenure in Africa involves the terms "customary", "traditional" or "communal" often used to describe the social arrangements governing the allocation and use of land. These terms, according to Migot-Adhola and Bruce (1993: 4), conjure up an image of an unchanging and immutable normative system and social egalitarianism. However, this presumed rigidity has come under examination. It is suggested that indigenous tenure arrangements are dynamic and have historically adapted to economic and technological changes. For example, African farmers responded to market incentives in the early years of colonial rule, in the production of new crops such as wheat. In addition, over time, customary tenure systems experience spontaneous simplification and individualisation of rights, whereby households increasingly acquire broader rights of exclusion and transfer as population pressure and levels of commercialisation increase. In fact, once shifting cultivation gives way to settled agriculture, a family usually farms a landholding to which it has had exclusive rights of cultivation for generations (Bruce, 1993:35) The increased privatisation of rights over specific parcels of land provides the necessary incentives for investment, which makes it not entirely inimical to capital intensive agriculture.

Migot-Adhola and Bruce (1993) point out that a review of the large and growing literature of Africa customary tenure arrangements indicates that they have been historically governed by several broad principles, relevant to pre-industrial economies relying on kinship as the primary organizing factor. Rules governing access to and use of land were predicated primarily on one's membership and status in the social group controlling a particular territory. But this was true only in a highly generalised sense. In common practice, access to, and use of land, by individuals was regulated by intricate customary traditions.

Individual families enjoyed fairly clearly defined spatial and temporary rights of use over different parcels of cultivated land. Such family rights were transmitted to succeeding generations, in accordance with prevailing rules of succession, which ordinarily allowed divisible inheritance. Initial rights were established by first occupation and investment in labour for land-clearing and cultivation. While land was relatively abundant and population density remained low, fallow periods were long and boundaries were poorly defined and hardly contested. Families enjoyed more or less continuous use rights over specific parcels of land, provided the period of fallow was not so long as to suggest that the plots had been abandoned.

It is further noted that as population increased and the land frontier diminished, fallow periods became shorter and cultivation of plots relatively 'continuous and boundaries were more distinctly marked. So long as the land had crops, other members of the land-controlling social groups were excluded from exercising their right of concurrent use. But all members of the community retained the right to graze livestock in the stubble, as on fallow and previously unclaimed land, and to use other common property resources: pasture, forests and water. Where population pressure led to internal conflict over use of common resources, particularly pasture, members of land-controlling groups often moved to establish new territory elsewhere, through either military conquest or by peaceful incorporation. Once continuous cultivation was established, transactions in land, limited to borrowing and seasonal or permanent exchanges, were restricted to members of the social group. Generally, however, land purchases did not emerge in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa until the late 19th century. Even then, such transactions remained confined to a small number of buyers within the same land-controlling social group.

The emerging picture is that individual and family rights to land under indigenous tenure have historically become more exclusive, although they fall short of private property. As a strategy of control, colonial administrators often forged political alliances with the local rural elite

and sometimes designated local notables as "chiefs" even in societies where there was no tradition of chiefdoms. The notion of a clearly bounded socio-political unit, identified with a definite territorial area governed by some customary ruler, was often a contract conveniently created and sustained by those whose interest it served. Yet an important consequence was that it froze the regional migratory processes through which communities had previously adapted to land shortage, by extending resource use and settlement into unpopulated land frontiers or by incorporation into communities controlling "excess" or "surplus" land. Therefore, the lack of systematic legislative reform to change the conditions of access to and use of land was an administrative convenience. The colonial state perpetuated a form of citizenship in which right depended on tribal membership, which was consistent with the dual economies of the colonial state. The formal sector would recruit labour from the tribal sector at less than subsistence wages and labour disbanded from the formal sector could always be incorporated back into the tribal economy and guaranteed rights of access to land and socio-economic welfare.

Overall, the earliest tenure transformation programmes in sub-Saharan Africa were not motivated by the desire to promote productivity among indigenous farmers, but, rather, to provide land for European settlers. This was achieved largely through enactment of legislation which nullified customary claims over land deemed unoccupied and the subsequent issue of leasehold or freehold titles to the new occupants. Administration of land among indigenous Africans was relegated to the realm of customary law under tribal authorities.

Against this background, land reforms and re-organisation of tenure relations in post-colonial Zimbabwe were intended to meet two objectives: to achieve social justice by removing undesirable inequalities in access to land and to promote greater productivity with a view to reducing poverty.

Indigenous Knowledge and Land Reform

Zimbabwe has been distributing land since independence in 1980. Within a period of 25 years, land redistribution transferred 12.3 million hectares of land to 203 000 small scale farmers and led to the establishment of 30 000 indigenous black commercial farmers. However, by the 1990s, land redistribution had stalled due to a combination of many factors, including donor fatigue and economic structural adjustment. However, in 200 government responded to the imperatives of the national land question

by launching the fast track land redistribution programme. One of the laudable objectives of this programme was to enable local indigenous people to take control of the formerly white-owned large-scale commercial farming sector.

Against the foregoing, it is important to highlight that the indigenous people who received land under the land reform programme represent different language and ethnic groups who undoubtedly are, at the same time, a reservoir of untapped indigenous agricultural and natural resource knowledge and experience. If government recognises that indigenous farmers can contribute to achieving national food self-sufficiency and national development, Warren (1993) suggests that policy-makers and development planners need to consider the following, among others:

- Local communities' knowledge of animal breeding and production, classification of animal diseases and ethnoveterinary medicine;
- Farmers' perspectives of positive and negative characteristics of varieties of major crops such as rice;
- Indigenous soil classification and management systems;
- Indigenous agricultural and natural resource management systems for aquatic resources, water and soil, domesticated and wild plants, crop varieties and crop pest management;
- Indigenous disease classification systems and the use of herbal remedies in the treatment of diseases;
- Knowledge of relationship between food and nutrition status;
- Indigenous knowledge relating to crop production, crop storage, food processing and crop/food marketing; and
- Indigenous approaches to innovation and experimentation as responses to locally identified problems.

For Zimbabwe, apart from documenting indigenous knowledge systems, there is need for research also on the adaptability of these systems in circumstances involving rapid population increases like in the resettlement areas. Indeed, the land reform programme significantly altered the agrarian structure by increasing the average land units and gave access to a large number of indigenous people who had been deprived of land rights through historical injustices.

The potential and value of using indigenous knowledge, in combination with modern "scientific" techniques to enhance the sustainable management and productive use of land, is immense. Although indigenous knowledge systems were not properly recognised during the colonial

period, advocacy for community participation in project cycle activities demonstrates that local level initiatives are an important basis for sustainable advancement in the productive use of the land resource. Njie and Muir-Leresche (2000: 10) observe that past attitudes of scepticism and contempt for local farmers' knowledge have been the cause of many government and aid-sponsored failures and have contributed to the mistrust and suspicion of local people towards officialdom. A good entry point for the mobilisation of local communities to develop sustainable systems for greater self-reliance would be proper acknowledgement of the farmer as the real master of the land.

The dominant development paradigm, until recently, was the modernisation and transfer-of-technology model which was blind to local knowledge issues. There has now been a shift from "top-down" imposition of interventions to a "grassroots" participatory perspective. There is now growing consensus that farmers' own indigenous knowledge should be mobilised in the production of plans and interventions for rural development programmes. This knowledge derives from past experiences, is transmitted from one generation to another, evaluated and fine-tuned, as people engage in a continuous process of experimentation and innovation. It, therefore, forms an important basis for decision-making in both familiar and new circumstances, problems and challenges. Indigenous knowledge is, therefore, very important for sustainable development planning because it has been tried and tested through time to meet the demands of local conditions.

The success of development projects under the land reform programme in Zimbabwe depends, to a great extent, on local participation. This means that agricultural extension staff needs to be familiar with indigenous knowledge so that they are able to understand and communicate with local people. Development practitioners and local people should work as partners in planning and implementing projects. Quite often, solutions offered by a development project may fail if it does not fit with local knowledge. In any case, indigenous knowledge may suggest alternatives, and can offer comparatively low-cost approach with potentially high benefits.

In some cases, indigenous knowledge, used effectively by one group, can also be used to solve issues or challenges faced by another society in a similar agro-ecological environment. The point is that local people have knowledge which should not be viewed as a constraint, but, rather, as a positive resource to promote participatory development. It can either be incorporated into existing efforts to enhance and expand effectiveness

or it can also serve as the basis for new initiatives. Indeed, the looking-down-upon local ways of doing things often yields negative self-esteem among the intended beneficiaries and is at odds with goals of self-sufficiency, sustainability and participation. An understanding of local knowledge makes for better development programmes, and more effective cross-cultural communication.

Warren (1993) notes that indigenous knowledge also provides the basis for local level decision-making. Communities have indigenous fora through which group decision-making takes place. Sometimes these forum are invisible to an outsider. By identifying local decision-making fora and understanding their structures and their functions, development planners are able to give indigenous knowledge the chance to contribute to sustainable development. Membership to these fora can be based on a variety of criteria such as age, gender and totem. Often, it is easier to work with, and through, existing structures, rather than develop new ones to carry out project goals and objectives.

It is also important to point out that local communities manage their common property resources through indigenous decision-making. Warren (1993) notes that common property should not be mistaken as a free for all. There are structured ownership arrangements within which management rules are developed, group size is known and enforced, incentives exist for co-owners to follow the accepted institutional arrangements and sanctions exist to ensure compliance. Resource degradation is sometimes due to the neglect or dissolution of local level institutional arrangements whose very purpose was to promote resource use patterns that were sustainable.

Given the foregoing, there is, therefore, a case to put time and effort into understanding, recording and utilising indigenous knowledge, especially in agriculture and rural development. Warren (1993) suggests that it is critical for agricultural research and extension services to work with parallel indigenous systems. Standard guidelines will then need to be developed which establish ethical codes of practice in the use of indigenous knowledge, based on principles such as informed consent and right to know, intellectual property rights, compensation rights, cultural rights and other generally recognised rights.

Policy-makers should also look at how the national education policy in Zimbabwe can incorporate material on the nation's indigenous knowledge into various curricula at universities, colleges and vocational training centres. Further, researchers should also take interest in the use of indigenous communication channels and their application to sustainable

development discourse. This is because the success and sustainability of development initiatives hinge on active and meaningful participation of the local indigenous people who are also the intended beneficiaries.

Conclusion

There is consensus among researchers that indigenous knowledge systems can play an important role in the development of communities. This is because, despite the changes in land-use in different countries in recent years, local communities have a long and often ignored history of the knowledge of how to identify and diagnose land-related problems which affect their livelihoods. This, they have managed to do, through experimentation, innovation and adaptation over many generations. It is important for government and other stakeholders to recognise that agricultural and natural resource policy initiatives and technological advancements should acknowledge the positive influence which indigenous knowledge systems can have on farming practices of farmers who benefited from the land reform programme.

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