

**SECURE LAND TENURE:  
FOOD SECURITY DEPENDS ON IT**

**Africa**



➔ Secure land rights, food security, nutrition security are integrally connected in Africa's agricultural development. *Photo: Deborah K. Espinosa*

By Deborah K. Espinosa

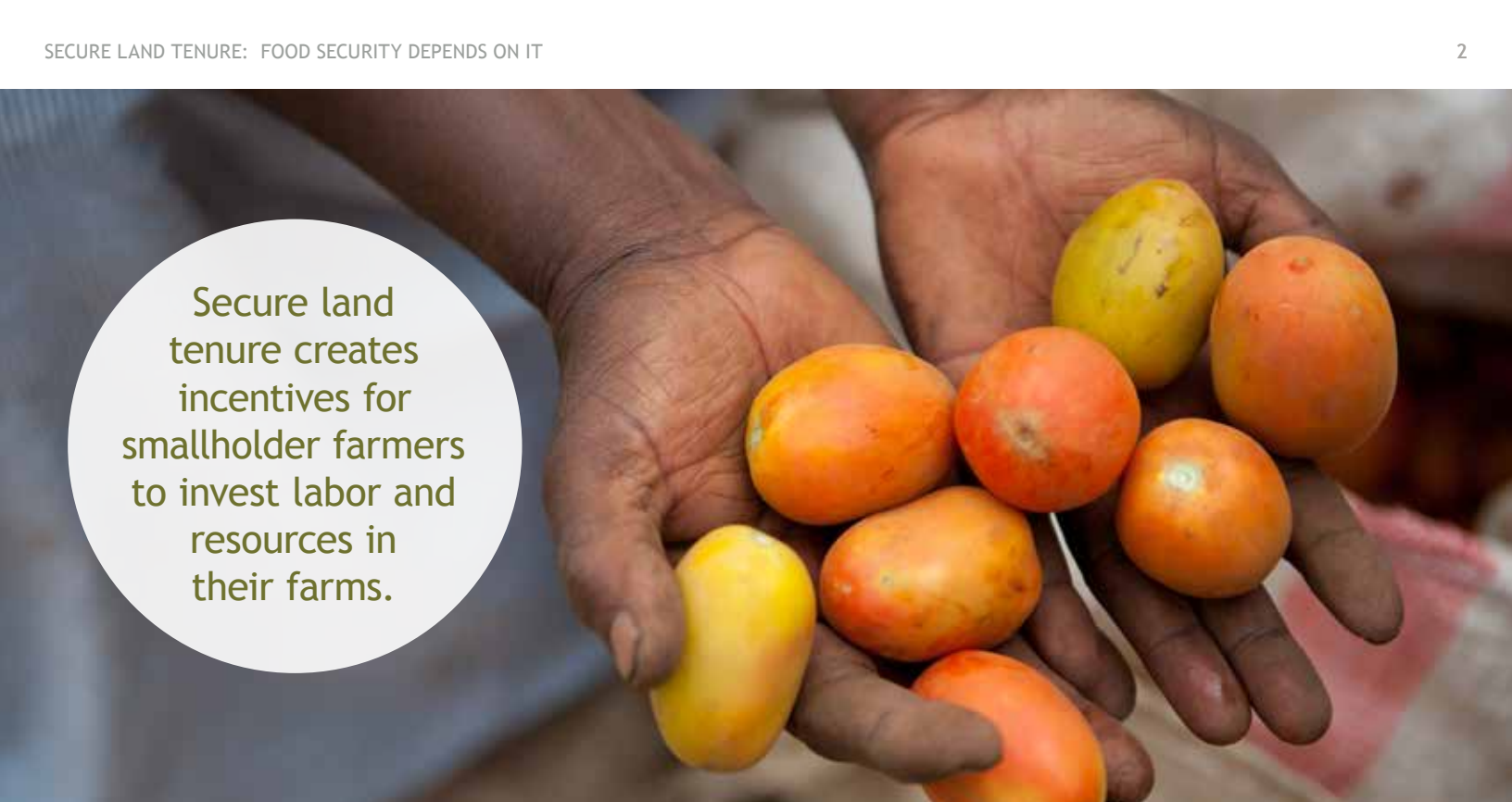
**INTRODUCTION**

Land tenure and food security have traditionally been two separate areas of research, policy, and programs, to the potential detriment of both. Today, as pressures on land and demand for food increase, that gap is slowly narrowing, highlighting new opportunities to accelerate social and economic growth in low-income countries.

This year, as Africa celebrates the “Year of Agriculture and Food Security,” such growth is urgently needed. Some 65 percent of Africa’s labor force relies on agriculture for their livelihood and agriculture accounts for 32 percent of Africa’s gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> And yet, one-in-four people in sub-Saharan Africa are undernourished, despite the region’s abundant resource wealth.



Deborah K. Espinosa is an Attorney and Land Tenure Specialist.



Secure land tenure creates incentives for smallholder farmers to invest labor and resources in their farms.



For food to be consistently available in markets and for people to have the income to purchase food, there must be an enabling environment for sustained agricultural growth. *Photo: Deborah K. Espinosa*

Reasons often cited for Africa's food and nutritional insecurity include chronic poverty, underdeveloped agricultural sectors, and effects of climate change, among others.<sup>ii</sup> The relationship between food security and land tenure, i.e., rights to one of Africa's most precious and coveted assets, has received insufficient attention.

Food security occurs "when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."<sup>iii</sup> Thus, food security has four main dimensions: (1) stability; (2) availability; (3) accessibility; and (4) actual consumption (Id.). Food insecurity exists "when food is not available, when individuals or households lack the means to access it, when it is not available all of the time, and when individuals and households are unable to consume it."<sup>iv</sup>

Land tenure security exists when landowners and users—including some 50 million smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa—enjoy clearly defined and enforceable rights to land, whether such rights are based on formal law or customary practices.

Availability, access, and utilization of food depend on land tenure security.

For food to be consistently available in markets and for people to have the financial means to access safe and nutritious food, there must be an enabling environment for sustained agricultural growth for smallholders and large-scale investors alike. As seen in today's high-income countries, such an environment includes land tenure security. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has noted that: "Without squarely addressing tenure security and property rights issues, investments in food security programming may be compromised and, indeed, be undermined."<sup>v</sup>

### RESEARCH FINDINGS ON FOOD SECURITY AND LAND RIGHTS IN AFRICA

Recent research highlights the critical relationship between food security and security over land.


Studies in Malawi of a pilot land redistribution program based on a willing buyer/willing seller model illustrate the substantial increase in food availability, and thus food security, when formerly

### SECURE LAND TENURE PROVIDES SOLID GROUND FOR FOOD SECURITY

Land tenure arrangements create incentives for investing labor and resources over the long term and adopting and using new technologies and sustainable land management practices. When rights to land are secure, there is:

- Greater incentive to manage and conserve the land;
- Greater incentive to make long-term improvements to the land and other land-related investments;
- Less potential for conflict and arbitrary eviction;
- Opportunity for land rental and sales markets to transfer land to more productive uses and users; and
- If combined with cost-effective systems of land administration, opportunity to reduce the cost of credit by leveraging the land as collateral.<sup>vi</sup>

In addition, land tenure security builds household resilience to climate, environmental, financial, and health shocks by providing families a safety net.



A study in Zambia found that children whose families lost land received 11% fewer daily calories.

➔ In Malawi, land-poor households that were able to acquire more land had a 236 percent increase in maize yields per hectare. *Photo: IITA*

landless or near landless households acquire land or substantially more land. An early study of the pilot found that beneficiary households:

- Invested a greater proportion of their land in hybrid crops (24 percentage points more); and
- Had a higher yields for maize, the staple crop (yield was twice as much).<sup>vii</sup>

These figures are in comparison to nearby households that did not receive land from the pilot. At the conclusion of the pilot, an independent impact evaluation found that, among 15,000 beneficiary households, there were significant increases in the production of all food crops, particularly a 236 percent increase in maize yields (per hectare), increasing household food availability.<sup>viii</sup> Household food security (measured by meals eaten in the lean season and months of reserve food) and income from agricultural activities continued to increase after the pilot.<sup>ix</sup>

A study in Ethiopia also bridges the two disciplines, measuring how land tenure security and land tenure reforms affect and are affected by household food security.<sup>x</sup> That study assessed the impacts of how a regional land registration and certification program contributed to increased food availability

and, thus to food security in a food-deficit region of northern Ethiopia.

Comparing child nutrition impacts 8 to 12 years after implementation of the land program, the study found that land certification appears to have contributed to increased caloric intake—and more so within female-headed households—either through enhanced participation in land rental markets or increased owner investment in land and productivity.<sup>xi</sup> Results also showed that those households who accessed additional land through rental markets (made possible in part through widespread land certification) had a significantly higher body mass index.<sup>xii</sup>

Meanwhile, a study from Zambia that compared caloric intake among children whose families had access to land and those that did not revealed dramatic

impacts. Researchers found that children under 10 in households who lost access to agricultural land within the previous 5 years received fewer daily calories (a decrease of 243 calories, or 11 percent of the average daily calorie intake) compared to same-aged children whose households did not lose access to agricultural land within the same period.

But a full-scale land program need not be the only type of land tenure intervention that can contribute to improved food security. Advocacy and public education around land rights can also make a difference. For example, SNV supported a national farmers' advocacy program in Mali, empowering and providing tools for farmers to engage in the national land policy process, where there is significant commercial demands for agricultural land.<sup>xiii</sup>

## + FACT

A study in Ethiopia found that children in families who benefited from the land certification program had significantly increased caloric intake.

## WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND FOOD SECURITY

Absent secure rights to land, farmers will not have the confidence (or cash) to make long-term investments needed to sustain agricultural growth.

With this in mind, many land tenure programs have worked to strengthen household rights to land. But secure household rights may not in themselves improve food security.

Household power dynamics often dictate decisions that can support or undermine food security. Studies demonstrate that when women enjoy secure rights to the land they cultivate, they gain improved status within the household, which leads to greater influence over allocation of household resources. Such influence is significant because across cultures, women are more likely than men to spend income on improving household welfare, including nutrition.<sup>xv</sup>

As USAID explains in its Food Security and Gender Factsheet:

“Women are responsible for nutrition in most homes, including the purchase and preparation of food.... When given

the opportunity to manage household finances, studies show that women are more likely than men to spend on their family's nutritional needs, healthcare, and school fees for children. Therefore, empowering women to increase access to and control over resources is critical to attaining food security in the developing world.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Further, the FAO and Asian Development Bank recently concluded, “Gender equality . . . is the single most important determinant of food security.”<sup>xvii</sup> As evidence, gender inequalities are most severe in countries ranking highest on the global hunger index. That conclusion is based on a number of studies including a multi-country study over a 25-year period that found that 55 percent of the gains made against hunger during that period were attributable to improvements in women's situation within society.<sup>xviii</sup>

NGOs are beginning to recognize the crucial link between women's access and rights to land and food security.<sup>xix</sup> For example, CARE's Pathways to Empowerment program is based “on the conviction that women farmers possess enormous potential to contribute to long-term food security for their families

and substantially impact nutritional outcomes in sustainable ways.”<sup>xx</sup> In Africa, CARE is implementing the program in Malawi, Tanzania, Mali, and Ghana using five strategic approaches. One of those approaches is to foster women's collective access to and control over resources, particularly land, and build the capacity of women's producer groups.<sup>xxi</sup>

Secure property rights for women also bolster their economic opportunities more broadly. In Tanzania, women who reported holding strong property and inheritance rights were nearly three times more likely to be employed outside of the home and 3.8 times more likely to have higher gross earnings<sup>xxii</sup> in comparison to women who reported weaker property and inheritance rights. In addition, women in communities with stronger property and inheritance rights were 1.35 times more likely to have individual savings.

When combined with women's greater propensity to invest their incomes in food, nutrition and education, this bodes well for the health and opportunities of their children.



The global program Scaling up Nutrition, of which at least 29 African countries participate, recognizes the key relationship between land, women, and food security. *Photo: Deborah K. Espinosa*



## EVOLVING FRAMEWORKS ON LAND RIGHTS AND FOOD SECURITY

Unfortunately, a large proportion of rural Africans lack secure rights to the land on which they rely for their survival. Formal and/or customary law may not grant them rights, or they may be unaware of their existing rights. Formal or informal institutions may be inaccessible or, if accessible, the institutions may not recognize or enforce their rights.

Given the many competing demands for land, including large-scale agricultural investment, biofuel production, and extractive industries, insecure land rights make rural communities increasingly vulnerable to food insecurity.

In recognition of the vital relationship between food security and land tenure security, in 2012, the UN Committee on World Food Security unanimously endorsed the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of National Food Security (“Voluntary Guidelines”). The overarching goals of the Voluntary Guidelines are to “achieve food security for all and support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Voluntary Guidelines also are intended “to contribute to achieving sustainable livelihoods, social stability, housing security, rural development, environmental protection, and sustainable social and economic development. The Guidelines are meant to benefit all people in all countries, although there is an emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized people.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

On the African continent, the Land Policy Initiative (LPI) addresses the relationship between Africa’s development, land rights, and food security. LPI is a joint program of the African Union Commission, African Development Bank, and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Its purpose is to “enable the use of land to lend impetus to the process of African development,” including the achievement of food security. In recognition of the opportunities and



When women enjoy secure rights to the land they cultivate, they gain greater household status and influence of household resources, and tend to spend more on nutrition, education and health. *Photo: Deborah K. Espinosa*

risks that large-scale land investments create for Africa’s future, particularly for smallholder farmers and food security, it created and is implementing the Nairobi Action Plan on Large-Scale Land-Based Investments in Africa.<sup>xxv</sup>

Further, the global program Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), of which at least 29 African countries participate, recognizes the key relationship between land, women, and food security. SUN is a “unique Movement founded on the principle that all people have a right to food and good nutrition.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Within the SUN movement, national leaders prioritize efforts to address malnutrition,

including improving policies, collaborating with partners to implement programs, and mobilizing resources. SUN has a core focus on empowering women and supporting small farms as a source of income for women and their families. That support must include land tenure security, as recognized in SUN progress reports as well as countries’ strategies and implementing plans.

The emerging trend for development research, policies, and programs to address land rights is not only promising, but essential. Africa’s food security depends on it.

### FACT

In a 25-year period, 55% of gains made against hunger were attributed to improvements in women’s situations within society.

## SOURCES

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- <sup>xvi</sup> USAID. N.D. Food Security and Gender Fact Sheet (emphasis added).
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> Id.
- <sup>xxv</sup> African Union, African Development Bank, and UNECA. 2011. Nairobi Action Plan on Large Scale Land-Based Investments.
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The views presented in this brief do not necessarily represent those of any FOLA partners, but rather reflect the views of individual authors.