

## Summary of discussions Land Governance round 2

(Week April 26 – May 8, 2010)

This round of discussions was started with two short questions and a quotation.

1. **Most agricultural land in the world is owned by men, although it is often cultivated by women. Is gender an issue of particular relevance for land governance and land tenure in the country/ies in which you work – and are you aware of any particular initiatives taken in this regard?**
2. **The conventional picture of rented agricultural land is of wealthy (often absentee) landlords placing excessive demands on poor, exploited tenants. However, such assumptions are now being questioned. Are there experiences of changes in land and land tenancy markets that favour the poor? Would you agree with the following quotation:**

*‘Land tenancy markets can also reduce the vulnerability of poor households by offering a more stable livelihood source than frequently volatile and imperfect labour markets. As opportunities in the non-farm economy increase, tenancy markets can facilitate a broader choice of livelihood opportunities such as migration, specialization, and investment. Households better suited to pursue non-farm livelihoods will be benefited if they are able to rent out their land for others to cultivate.... research teaches that rental markets have more potential for providing access to the poor in settings where agriculture is not capital-intensive.’*

Source: <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/007/j2602e/j2602e00.pdf>

In response we received inputs from colleagues in Nepal, Bhutan, India, Bolivia, Madagascar and Niger.

**Bishnu Upreti** said that in Nepal, as in many other countries, land is not only the basis on which the poor derive their livelihoods. Traditionally, land ownership has also been the base on which citizenship certificates are granted, and services from government agencies are accessed (loans, irrigation services, drinking water, electricity). Land is a source of security during period of stress, a symbol of identity, prestige and recognition. Lack of security of land ownership and gender blind ownership patterns remain the two major factors contributing to inequality and discrimination.

Since 2006, several initiatives have been taken up in Nepal to reduce these inequities. The fee for land registration is reduced if registration is done in the name of woman; citizenship certificates are no longer dependent on land ownership; and service provision is available to women farmers. While some of these changes may have been misused in some cases, these initiatives nonetheless remain very important.

**Walter Roder** shared an interesting perspective and a paper analyzing matrilineal inheritance in Bhutan. The fact that much of the land in the country is owned by women is often cited as a case of women’s empowerment. However, this system evolved under conditions of limited surplus and taxation in kind that lasted up to the 1950s.

Matrilineal inheritance is culturally specific and may have acted to keep women in an inferior position, reflecting both the weak institution of marriage and the locus of power within the monastic establishments. Since the 1950s, when land legislation has increasingly commoditised land, the ownership of land by women may have worked to their economic advantage, at least in areas with good market access. However, since most land remains poorly accessible, land ownership has done little to enhance the women's position, given their limited involvement in public arenas and the need to maintain the subsistence dimension of their livelihood.

[Alhousseïni Iktam](#) from Niger shared his insights of the process of land inheritance under Islamic law in his country. Land inheritance as per the Quran results in boy children inheriting approximately 60% of land, and girl children, 30% of the land overall. Thus men own more land than women – but it is women who are the main agricultural labourers, especially in the second cropping season. That said, women usually have no difficulty in gaining access to land to cultivate on loan, especially outside the main cropping season.

These three examples show that quick conclusions about the effect of land ownership and social norms on the empowerment of women can be fallacious. Furthermore, even where policies and laws exist to promote gender equity, they may not be followed in practice. Each situation needs to be examined within its specific cultural and socio-economic setting.

Continuing the thread of discussion from the first round, [K R Viswanathan](#) shared the experience of the drought prone and traditionally neglected region of Bundhelkhand in India. The region is marked by small holdings (1-2 hectares), low levels of irrigation (less than 20%) and a high reliance (65%) of the population on farming. Recently, the area has experienced rapid growth in transport and communication infrastructure. At the same time, farmers from more prosperous regions of India are purchasing large tracks of land in the area, ostensibly for cultivation but potentially also for financial speculation and conversion to non-agricultural uses. While some people are happy to sell their land at a good price, analysts are divided over the development implications. Some see this as a process of impoverishment of a community that has few skills other than in agriculture. Another group views the trend as a natural evolution and progression, supported by the fact that in a recent national survey, 45% of young farmers in India preferred to opt out of agriculture if given a chance. The new land owners coming into Bundhelkhand bring with them a higher capacity to invest, as well as the ability to take risks that are inherent in agriculture in the region. This could be a solution to the continued neglect of natural resources in the region and could lead to higher levels of mechanisation and economies of scale.

In summary the discussion on land tenure and women brought up the following points:

1. Land provides many kinds of security to the owner and in largely agrarian society is an important source of identity, security and credit worthiness. However, tenure rights alone do not translate into greater empowerment of women.
2. Many kinds of land transactions are occurring at various scales. Laws and governance systems are evolving rapidly, most tending towards a greater

- commodification of land. New interest groups are challenging long held notions of the role of land in society and the economy.
3. The buying up of land by wealthy outside interests (“land grabbing”) is occurring at various levels and scales. In certain circumstances it may bring much needed investment and increased productivity to poorer regions but, as we concluded in the first round, it can also endanger livelihoods and social structures.

As regards the second question on land tenancy markets, the view from [Bishnu Upreti](#) in Nepal was that it is difficult to envisage this as a tool for poverty reduction, given that the tenancy market is volatile and imperfect (like the labour market). Furthermore, the needs of the poor are immediate, and can be met through agriculture, whereas alternative livelihood sources take time to develop.

[Alhousseini Iktam](#) noted that in Niger, farmers who lease land from state controlled bodies often lack the resources to invest in improvements. As in much of West Africa, it has been shown that supporting small farmers in small scale irrigation and similar improvements is far more effective than large land improvement schemes.

To summarise: While it may be argued theoretically that a better land (leasing) market may encourage diversification and the adoption of non-farm occupations, in practice this rarely happens as many other supporting factors need to be in place.