An Assessment of the Evolution of Land Tenure System in Cameroon and its Effects on Women’s Land Rights and Food Security

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Abstract
Cameroon land tenure policy has since pre-colonial times diverged with each passing administration. This change in land policies has effects on women’s rights to land and the ability of the country to feed itself and its neighbors. Women constitute the vast majority of small farmers who are mostly involved in the food production sector. They work on small parcels of land that are either leased to them or have been acquired through family bonds or purchase. Today, with increasing and competing demand for land from urbanization, urban services and infrastructural development, the contribution of rural women to food security hangs in the balance. The situation is further complicated by the current change in land ownership that de-emphasised communal land ownership in favor of private ownership. In the present context, food production is threatened, as land and women’s labor respectively, opt for other opportunities that offer higher rents and wages.

This article explores the evolution of land tenure system in the context of women’s rights to land and their role in ensuring food security in Cameroon. It examines the emerging phenomenon of private land titles and farmer/grazer conflicts, which affect women’s farming activities and output in the face of land scarcity. We advocate for land policies and reforms that mainstream gender in an effort to affirm women’s rights and sustain women’s productive activities and food security in Cameroon.

Keywords
changing land tenure policy, women’s land rights, food security, farmer-grazer conflicts

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Introduction

There is an outstanding mutation in the land tenure system in Cameroon and this situation has had serious implications on women's right to land, food security and sustainable development. This is particularly the case in the rural areas where land is the basis of livelihood for over 80% of the rural population. As a result, how it is owned, managed and exploited becomes an important development question in these communities. Rural communities are made up of men and women with different gender needs and different access and rights to resources. It pre-supposes that agrarian reforms should be designed and implemented in such a way that they are able to address the specific needs of each group.

Unfortunately, the agrarian reforms implemented from the 1950s through the 1970s, just like those of the colonial era in Africa, were gender blind. These reforms were based on the assumption that assets allocated to the typical male-headed households will be equitably distributed and beneficial to all household members (Razavi 2005). Even recent reforms on land titling that subscribe to the position that private property rights are essential for a dynamic agricultural sector has not improved the situation of women. Moreover, government and institutional weaknesses (Razavi 2003: 1) have failed to address the gender inequality problem, vis-à-vis ownership and use, as women tend to be unfamiliar with the legal processes of acquiring land titles or encounter difficulties in trying to do so. Despite all these constraining factors, global research points to the key role of women as food producers, food providers, and contributors to household nutrition security in Sub-Saharan Africa (Quisumbing et al. 1995: V).

The issue of women's rights to land is not an end in itself, but hinges on community and national survival. Land is important for agriculture and particularly for food production. It is therefore a vital resource in Cameroon whose economy is predominantly agricultural; accounting for three-fourths of employment and 50% of GDP (CIA Fact Book 2004). Increasing agricultural innovations or subsidizing the agricultural sector is not enough in the absence of a veritable land-distribution policy that takes into concern the real actors involved in food production (Fonjong 2004). Food security is thus also a question of space, as well as, of actors.

Context of the Study

Cameroon is one of the West African countries whose population of over 16 million inhabitants is characterized by great linguistic and ethnic diversity.