



Mobilising grassroots women and local chiefs to advance women's land rights in Africa

By Selma Zijlstra



On 23rd April 2018, about 65 participants gathered together at the top floor of the Concord Hotel in Westlands, Nairobi, for the Women's Land Rights Learning Event: agents of grassroots transformation. The well-designed hotel, with its spectacular views on the city's high-rise buildings and a vibrant mini-slum below, proved to be a fruitful place for discussing women's land rights in Africa. The centrality of

the 'grassroots women' was literally visible by placing the women at the front row of the tables, neatly arranged in circles. It was especially unique that alongside the grassroots women, all sorts of local authorities were present, ranging from village chiefs to mayors and paramount chiefs.

About the event

The 2-day learning event was organized by LANDac (the Netherlands Land Academy), GROOTS Kenya and ActionAid International in Kenya, Enda Pronat in Senegal, ADECRU and Forum Mulher in Mozambique, and Oxfam in Malawi. It builds on the LANDac initiative 'Securing women's Land Rights in Africa', a one-year program funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that aims to identify, build upon and scale successful practices and experiences of grassroots organizations and movements that work to strengthen women's access and control over land and natural resources in Africa.

Beyond access to land

The day opened with Maasai prayers followed by Malawian women recapitulating the key messages of the former day and singing "No women, no food". Esther Mwaura, founder and former director of GROOTS Kenya, gave the keynote speech. Mwaura lauded the program as one of the most exciting programs she had participated in, because it builds on existing experiences and successes, because grassroots women are at the forefront of the initiative gathering their own data, and last, but not least, because the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrated that it is not shying away from funding local NGOs directly. 'That is important, because often, donors do not see our role,' Mwaura stated.

According to Mwaura, women's land rights go beyond access to land. They are also about livelihoods, inheritance and identity: and they are a prerequisite for human development and other empowerment processes. In addition, public land is central, because without public land, there is no access to

['A Fact, not a fight']

Esther Mwaura

public hospitals and schools. Women's access to land should be a 'fact, not a fight': women are tired of fighting. 'The absence of women in land governance is a tragedy,' she continued, 'as decisions are left to men, even though men have less experience as producers on the land.'

Mwaura emphasized the importance of community-led data collection as a crucial tool for land activism and to hold governments accountable. Data collection is a political activity: the validity of data collected and owned by the community is heavily contested in the political realm. In addition, because data collection requires a lot of resources, it would be wise if donors, NGOs and governments invest in technical capacity, such as providing women with mobile phones.

Mwaura furthermore underlined the importance of investing in the 'social legitimacy' of women's movements to advance their rights, because women's land rights are in constant competition with traditional practices. Advocacy is likewise needed to recognize the knowledge of grassroots communities. Just like community health workers who are now officially recognized and listened to, the land sector should have community paralegal surveyors. Mwaura further made a distinction between 'mobilizing' and 'organising', as mobilizing is the first step, but it takes careful organisation to really make a meaningful difference: 'Our work must be vibrant. We have enough lessons that we have learnt, so now we have to identify the catalysts and mobilize the champions to build a movement for social revolution,' she concluded.

Mobilising local chiefs

Grassroots women from Malawi, Senegal, Mozambique and Kenya emphasized the importance of raising awareness in communities and mobilising local chiefs to support the cause



of women's rights. 'Local leaders are not aware, they need CSOs [civil society organizations] to train them and help communities to make sure that all women register land,' said Emmanuel Mlaka from Landnet Malawi. Violet Shivutse from Kakamega county in Kenya, stated that even though the law is there, the will of the people still needs to be built. Violet also shared success stories, referring to women's groups which have formed cooperatives to lease land for 6 months up to three years.

['We need to be ready to sacrifice cultural practices that are overtaken by time']

Chief Kombo, Kakamega County, Kenya

In Senegal, religious leaders need to be targeted. Saliou Fall from Enda Pronat reminded the audience that 'educating a man is educating a single person, but educating a woman is educating humanity'. In addition, grassroots women participants from Malawi emphasized that it is important to make people understand that women's access and control over land does not only empower women: it also ensures food security for future generations because women take care of the household. Monica Elias Mhoja from Landesa Tanzania added that women themselves sometimes need to be convinced to become 'champions' because it is about power and 'it is not easy to have power'. The women from Enda Pronat furthermore were some of the few activists that explicitly called attention to the land-grabbing practices of multinationals that threaten land rights.

After the grassroots women presented their priorities, Chief Kombo from Kakamega county in Kenya took the floor. He emphasized the importance of traditional leaders as local role models and the need to build their capacity. 'We need to

be ready to sacrifice cultural practices that are overtaken by time,' he said passionately. Local leaders should also realize that they have to set a good example by giving their own wives and daughters land to register in their own names. Chief Samson Ole Moto, a Maasai elder from Laikipia North (Kenya), who acknowledges himself as 'a champion for women's rights,' also supported Chief Kombo's argument. 'We trust women in marriage, so why don't we trust women with land?' he said. He spoke about the historical oppression of women in the Maasai community, but also how, since the involvement of GROOTS Kenya, a lot has changed. Now, the Maasai try to register land in women's names as much as possible.

Working together with the government

Pauline Atieno, land program officer at ActionAid, summarized some key findings from the dialogue between grassroots women and (traditional) leaders. First, a network of surveyors should be developed and local authorities should be trained in women's land rights. Second, local champions, meaning women and local leaders, should be empowered. Third, exchange visits ought to be organized to form a network of champions throughout Africa. Fourth, data collection by grassroots communities is of utmost importance.

In the expert panel discussion with Frits van der Wal (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Netherlands), Naomi Leleto (Kenya Land Alliance), Edna Riechi (Habitat for Humanity), Everlyne Nairesiae (GLTN), Mariam Sow (president of Enda Pronat) and Emily Kinama (Katibu Institute), the challenges of upscaling were discussed and a number of important issues came up:

- *Data on women's access to land: Naomi Leleta of the Kenya Land Alliance presented some staggering figures from their data report on women's access to land, that indicated that countrywide, only 10.3 per cent of land is registered in women's names, while 86.5 per cent of land titles are registered in men's names.*
- *The importance of relationships (particularly with the government) and networks.*

- *Even though Kenya (as well as other African countries) has excellent laws in place, the question now is how to implement them.*
- *Men need to be on board, as men tend to listen more to men, especially when it comes down to property.*
- *Make sure that women have income-generating activities.*
- *There are opportunities to advance women's land rights through the nexus with food, environment and health as these are the 'softer' issues.*
- *Edna Riechi (Habitat for Humanity) called attention to urban and peri-urban areas. Few NGOs work on women's access to land in urban areas. There are many programs for slum upgrading, but what about implications for women?*
- *To gain global recognition, communities need to be united – not shattered by in-fighting.*
- *Everlyne Nairesiae (GLTN) noted the important fact that the SDGs recognize women's land rights as a separate sub-goal. The challenge now is to ensure that tools are implemented to monitor progress.*



Traditional law

In the afternoon, three different sessions took place: one on data collection, one on collective action and one on tradition and law.

The session on traditional law discussed the implementation of women's land rights in local communities. Village Chief Saliou Fall and Mayor Dethe Diouf from Senegal emphasized that traditional law should still be respected even though national laws take the upper hand. For example, if traditional custom allows men to marry more than one woman, then laws for women's land rights should take this dynamic into account. Chief Kombo from Kakamega county in Kenya mentioned challenges he has faced in upholding women's land rights. Sometimes, even women and girls themselves refuse to register land in their own names. According to Chief Kombo, this is due to a lack of knowledge: women need training in understanding their own rights. From the moment they take ownership of a piece of land, some women are made to feel



humiliated and insecure by their own communities. Moreover, sons and brothers-in-law tend to resist women's access to land by threatening women who own a plot of land.

Big ambitions

At the end of the day, the participants were invited to write down on post-it notes the main lessons they had learnt from the session, and their commitments for working on women's land rights. It led to a colourful diversity of insights and plans. Clearly, a global movement is on the rise.

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Key insights and plans

During the event, participants agreed that women's land rights are not only about land: they are about livelihoods, access to food, water, identity, history, and securing land for future generations. Even though some countries such as Kenya and Mozambique already have good laws in place, implementation is now key in addition to advocacy to scale up best practice. In addition, it is important to recognize traditional laws and practices when working on women's land rights as well as the expertise of local communities and NGOs. In addition, participants identified the need to:

- Build a social movement and mobilise 'champions' to advance women's land rights (grassroots women and local authorities).
- Support grassroots women to become para surveyors and gather their own data.
- Train local authorities such as chiefs, religious leaders and mayors in women's rights.
- Create networks throughout Africa and support community exchange visits.
- Hold duty bearers accountable – but to do that, good relationships need to be built with government officials.

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