



Improving Canada's contribution to women's access to land in Africa

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I'm pleased to be here today. As many of you know, Inter Pares is a feminist social justice organization that works with some 100 local organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Canada. We build common cause relationships with these local groups on issues such as human rights and women's rights, agriculture and food sovereignty, health, migration, and economic justice; and we support *their* agency and *their* agendas.

I was asked to speak specifically about how Canada can improve its contribution to women's empowerment, with respect to land in Africa. So I'll do that in the context in which our partners in Africa address it. They make three key points:

- First: It's not just land: women have less access to all resources. They also face sexual and gender-based violence, and systemic discrimination that is reinforced, sometimes by laws, and by customary practices and deeply rooted cultural norms. That is in addition to the challenges of the exclusively female physical work and vulnerability of pregnancy, giving birth to and feeding children. Any policy or program to address women's access to land must take those issues into account.
- Second: Women are farmers. So – with gendered differences – women are also affected by the policies, regulations and challenges that all small-holder farmers face. Women live in families, and to the extent that there are men in the family and that women have any control over the family land, it will most likely be through joint ownership and decision-making. So dealing with the issues of small-holder farmers, as a whole, and in a gendered way, is also important if we want to promote women's access to land.
- And finally, as we've been talking about: Small-holder farmers in Africa, women and men and their families, are being pushed off their land. This is through two fairly inter-related mechanisms:
 - First, through land grabs by both national elites and by corporate or sovereign funded foreign direct investment, much of it for large-scale agriculture and mining;

- And second, through international treaties, and national and policies, regulations, legislation and infrastructure. Many of these policies assume mining as the first and best use of land. Many of the rest favour large agriculture, and consequently make smallholder farming uneconomic to maintain. Both of these lead women and their families to lose control of their land, forcing them into precarious agricultural employment or to migrate to surrounding towns and cities.

So the issue of unequal access to land by African women must be placed in the context of women's whole lives. It must be placed within the context of women in their societies. And it must be placed within the growing international competition for Africa's land and water. Whatever our policy recommendations, they have to take account of and address those factors.

As Ward mentioned, there are already many good gender-sensitive policies, legislation, and frameworks that have been developed. There are national programs to support women in local land committees: the African Union (AU) has officially recognized the CNC, the civil society coalition established to engage with the AU's Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Program (CAADP). In relation to land grabs, there's the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land – or VGGT. It's true that more is needed. But the mechanisms already in place haven't yet come close to fulfilling their potential. Why is that?

We know that no government will be accountable to the people it governs unless there is an organized, informed civil society. Civil society that has the capacity to participate and represent its own needs and perspectives in the policy arena, and to hold government to account for its actions.

This is also now recognized by the World Bank. Some of you were the launch last week of the World Bank's 2017 World Development Report, called *Governance and the Law*. The Report noted that policy effectiveness is undermined by power inequalities:

- that is, by exclusion of certain groups – the less organized and less powerful
- and policy capture by more powerful actors
- and the report states in no uncertain terms that inequality in the ability of certain groups to influence policy decisions and make the policy-making system more responsive to their needs, leads to a situation where effective policies are not adopted, or if they're adopted, they aren't implemented.

At a time when everyone knows this, and at a time when civil society space the world over is being increasingly restricted – particularly in Africa, and particularly for women – financial support to civil society, which was never large, is shrinking rather than expanding.

Through Inter Pares' work we've seen what happens to smallholder farmers, and especially women's control over land, when they are not able to participate in policy making and implementation; and then, we've seen what happens when they do.

Inter Pares has been working for over a decade with a West African coalition of farmers and NGOs, called COPAGEN. A number of years ago, COPAGEN began to tell us about increasing numbers of land takeovers – land grabs. These land grabs were forcing the communities that they were working with off their land. So Inter Pares and COPAGEN partnered with the University of Montreal and IDRC, to understand the impact of large-scale land grabs in 9 countries in West Africa. This was a participatory research program. So it involved local civil society organizations and people in the affected communities themselves.

The study found widespread non-compliance with the Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure. The local communities, and most of the officials, had never heard of it.

I want to tell you a bit about one of the case studies done in Guinea-Bissau. The lowlands in the eastern part of the country are excellent for rice production. They'd been cultivated by women for generations. And suddenly in 2009, 2,000 hectares of this rich land was transferred to a Spanish agro-industrial corporation, without the community's knowledge. In these fertile lowlands, women had worked together in groups, taking care of each other's children and each other, and producing most of the food for the community. Men farmed too, but in the tableland forests – less fertile, more remote and much more physically demanding. When women were forced off the lowlands, they received no compensation – because they weren't on the transfer documents. They lost their role as primary food providers for the family, and became dependent on the men. Many women had to go up and join the men to cut down the brambles and work the tableland. There, instead of 40 bags of rice, they were lucky to get 6 or 7. It was more difficult to take care of the children, they were more separated and isolated, and became vulnerable to sexual predation.

But the fact that this research was participatory meant that the community itself was involved, along with local civil society organizations. The process made them aware of their rights, and it strengthened the capacity of local CSOs and community groups to hold government and the private sector accountable. Using their new knowledge and their strengthened network, the local CSOs and communities established "Alerte Foncier," a new platform for 'land alertness.' It's a civil society hub for reporting and responding to land rights infringements. And, local land watch committees have now been established in Côte d'Ivoire.

These are important experiences that have lessons for communities, and for those who want to support them. Inter Pares is now exploring how to document other case studies where communities we've been working with have been able to influence policies and their implementation: for instance, in Guinea-Bissau, Chinese lumber companies have been plundering community forests with few restrictions. However, a community that was accompanied by a local CSO was able to organize, and demonstrated to the government both its excellent land stewardship and its social cohesion – that is, its power. It was able to negotiate a land title from the government for its forests, and those forests remained untouched.

Another example is from the Bijagos Islands Community Protected Marine Reserve. Through years of organizing and advocacy for the protection of their fisheries and coastal

areas, they gained national and international support. Still, men have tended to dominate the local governance structure. Tiniguena, a local CSO with which we work, helped community members establish a youth council and a women's council. These councils are nurturing emerging women leaders, helping to establish their authority among elders and other leaders, bit by bit making a place for women in the management of the reserve.

Our experience is that the best and most sustainable results arise from supporting women to identify for themselves what their problems are, and to support women to identify, develop and implement solutions appropriate within their own contexts. Focusing on women's capacity to address root causes requires a long-term approach, but it also

means that women are able to have a place at the table, and they themselves can hold government and other actors to account. This makes the changes more sustainable, and owned by the people whose lives are affected.

If Canada wants to promote African women's access to land, here are three ideas I'd like to discuss:

1. All program decision-making with respect to land should begin with a couple fundamental questions: How does this initiative address power differences and barriers to gender equality with respect to land? How does it address women's participation in the policy arena? The evidence is overwhelming that any program that is "gender-neutral" will work to further entrench inequality in women's access to land. Canada as a donor nation needs to develop mechanisms to ensure the application of a women's rights approach as a necessary criterion for all land-oriented programming.
2. The principal focus of a significant proportion of investment in land tenure for African women should be to advance women's rights, women's empowerment and gender equality – in a holistic way. There should be an explicit fund for long-term predictable support for women's rights organizations and movements to engage in promoting, formulating, and implementing policies and processes that advance women's rights, including land rights. For example, this could include resources for women and other civil society organizations to be adequately represented and involved in the CAADP process. It could include support for local CSOs with a women's rights perspective to work with communities around women's rights, including the implementation of responsible land tenure principles.
3. Responsive programming: Local women's groups need to be seen not as implementing bodies but as autonomous experts. Funding needs to be responsive to the needs and perspectives of local women's rights organizations. Programs need to be directed by the local partners working in the communities. Canada was once known as a place that understood the value of responsiveness to local partners; it can be again. Our work together is to make it so.