



**African
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Land Tenure, Land Reform and
Agroecological Transition



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SUMMARY

Land is a crucial resource for agriculture and food systems in Africa and plays a key role in addressing challenges such as habitat loss, biodiversity decline and greenhouse gas emissions. However, inadequate or inappropriate land tenure systems often limit access to land, leading to conflicts, discouraging agricultural investment and preventing the sector from reaching its full potential. Sub-Saharan Africa is highly diverse and both its unique characteristics and commonalities must be carefully considered when shaping policies on land, tenure systems and the future of agriculture.

Agroecology, which emphasises sustainable farming practices that prioritise biodiversity, social equity and economic resilience, offers a pathway for enhancing food systems and sustainable livelihoods, particularly for rural communities. Secure land tenure is crucial for promoting agroecological transitions, as it encourages farmers to use sustainable practices that enhance biodiversity and climate resilience. However, the application of agroecological principles faces challenges owing to entrenched power dynamics and neoliberal development policies in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The interplay of land tenure regimes and reform significantly impacts agricultural productivity, food security and economic development. Many African countries continue to be confronted by the legacy of patterns of colonial land dispossession and land tenure regimes, necessitating reforms that secure land for sustainable food production. The present policy brief explores the relationship between land tenure systems, land reforms and agroecological transitions, offering strategic recommendations that align land governance with agroecological principles.

The intersection of land tenure and agroecology is also highlighted in the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) 13 principles of agroecology, particularly regarding responsible land governance. These principles emphasise participation and fairness, which are crucial for addressing historical injustices in land distribution, particularly in regions affected by colonial legacies. Women, often marginalised in traditional land systems, are central to successful agroecological transitions.

Many African countries continue to be confronted by the legacy of patterns of colonial land dispossession and land tenure regimes

Philanthropic development partners are the precise focus of this text and can play a critical role in supporting land tenure reform and agroecological practices. They have a role in advocating for, and funding, equitable land governance. This is vital for advancing global goals of poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability. To effectively promote transitions to agroecological farming, donor-funding principles and -mechanisms should focus on the following key areas:

- Long-term commitment;
- Locally led approaches;
- Secure land tenure as well as social equity;
- Capacity-building and knowledge transfer;
- Integrated funding approaches;
- Participatory governance; and
- Market development.

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Land is a critical resource for agriculture and food systems and is essential for addressing challenges such as habitat loss, biodiversity decline and greenhouse gas emissions. In Africa, access to land is often complicated by land tenure issues, which, in many cases, have fuelled conflicts, hampered agricultural investment and constrained food production. The historical evolution of land governance in Sub-Saharan Africa is deeply influenced by colonial policies, as evidenced in East Africa where land policies prioritise external interests over local communities (McAuslan 2013). In much of East and Southern Africa, a dual framework of land tenure established during the colonial era under colonial systems granted secure freehold title to settlers while leaving the local population with insecure, permissive land rights. These policies entrenched systemic inequalities which significantly influenced the trajectory of post-independence land reforms. Across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, land reforms have often retained elements of the colonial structure, which limit the autonomy of local communities and reinforce and institutionalise inequalities. Reflecting on these historical dynamics is critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities of contemporary land tenure reform and agroecological transitions in Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa is diverse but the legacy of colonial land dispossession continues to shape contemporary land ownership and agricultural practices in many countries. For instance, in the former 'labour reserve' societies of East and Southern Africa, particularly current-day South Africa, the land reform agenda has sought to redress the injustices of apartheid-era land dispossession (Hall & Cousins 2018). While agroecology is often defined as a sustainable farming approach that promotes biodiversity, environmental health, social equity and economic resilience (Altieri & Toledo 2011), it also has a broader scope. Beyond its technical aspects, agroecology is recognised as a social movement advocating for food sovereignty and justice, as well as an approach to knowledge that values traditional, local and participatory methods. Despite its potential to address systemic issues, agroecology has not featured prominently in institutional efforts to effect land reform. Yet addressing

land tenure and promoting agroecological transitions is essential for securing food systems and sustainable livelihoods, particularly for marginalised rural populations. Responding to global advocacy, the FAO has included responsible land governance as one of its 13 Principles of agroecology, underscoring its importance in achieving food sovereignty through secure land tenure.

Secure land tenure systems are crucial for advancing agroecological transitions, which involves adopting sustainable farming practices that enhance biodiversity and climate resilience. However, applying these principles can be challenging. In countries like Uganda and Kenya, agroecology is shaped by neoliberal development policies, while, in South Africa, local initiatives encounter barriers due to entrenched power dynamics within the food system. These examples highlight the importance of responsible land governance and community empowerment in driving sustainable agricultural transitions.

Across Africa, access to land significantly impacts agricultural productivity, food security and economic development. Yet, land tenure systems, shaped by both customary and civil law, often lead to mismatches or even conflicts that hinder sustainable agricultural practices. Many African countries continue to grapple with the lasting effects of colonial land dispossession, which influence land ownership patterns and property regimes.

The present brief examines land tenure regimes and land reforms across several African countries, highlighting historical and contemporary challenges. It aims to provide insights for philanthropies seeking to understand these complex dynamics and effectively support initiatives that address land rights, equitable access and sustainable land management. It offers strategic recommendations for aligning land governance with agroecological principles, emphasising equitable access to land, food sovereignty and the protection of biodiversity in order to support sustainable agricultural practices and the livelihoods of local communities.

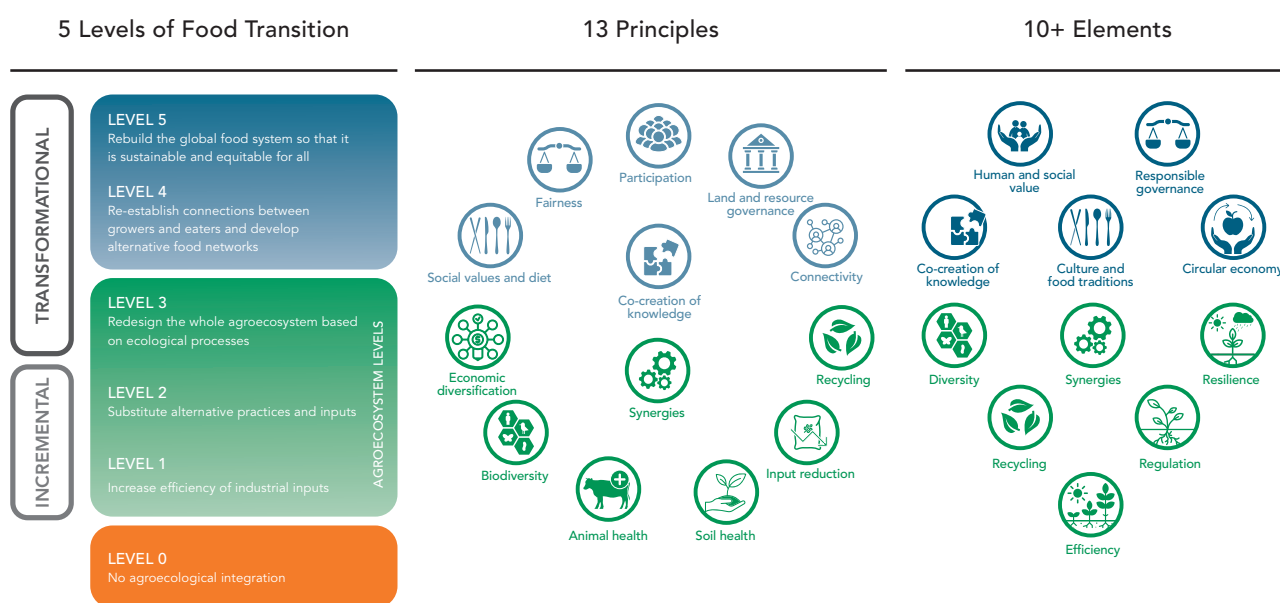
Relationship of the theme with the 13 principles of agroecology

Agroecology and land sovereignty are critical to building sustainable and equitable agricultural systems (Wittman 2022). Agroecology integrates ecological principles into farming, prioritising biodiversity, sustainable land use and healthy ecosystems (Hatt et al. 2016). It challenges the conventional food system by advocating for the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in its design and operation (Bhandari et al. 2024). Land sovereignty, meanwhile, emphasises the democratic control of land by local communities, opposing its commodification and restoring it as a shared resource (Wittman 2022). Together, these concepts offer a pathway to fairer and more sustainable agricultural practices that support both environmental health and social justice (Altieri 1995).

Land tenure regimes, land reforms and agroecological transitions are closely tied at the level of food systems to the FAO's 13 principles of agroecology, particularly the principle of land and resource governance. Secure land tenure provides farmers with the confidence to invest in sustainable practices that potentially enhance biodiversity, improve soil health and build climate resilience. Without tenure security, farmers may be hesitant to adopt agroecological methods due to the risk of losing access to their land.

The principles of participation and fairness are crucial for addressing historical injustices and ensuring more equitable land distribution, especially in areas impacted by colonial dispossession. In countries like South Africa, where land reform seeks to address apartheid-era inequalities, successful reforms enable marginalised communities to embrace agroecology and advance food sovereignty.

FIGURE 1: PRINCIPLES AND ELEMENTS OF AGROECOLOGY



Source: <https://www.agroecology-pool.org/13aeprinciples/>

Key stakeholders and their contribution

FIGURE 2: GROUPS OF STAKEHOLDERS



Note: Categories are based on the assessment of the countries used for developing the present brief.

MOTIVATION

Why does the present issue matter?

The evolution of land tenure regimes in Africa is shaped by the interaction of traditional practices, colonial legacies and modern challenges. Traditional land systems, often patriarchal, have historically marginalised women, limiting their access to land and resources (Tsikata 2016). Colonialism interacted with these systems, resulting in widespread land dispossession and the consolidation of power among colonial elites (Peters 2013). The steady rise of land and agricultural commodification into the present have intensified conflicts between customary and statutory land tenure systems, contributing to land grabs and rural inequalities across much of Africa (Namubiru-Mwaura 2014).

The reform and modernisation of African customary land tenure systems have often fallen short of expectations, underscoring the need for practical solutions to enhance land security (Munyuki-Hungwe & Rukuni 2020). Addressing land tenure and agroecological transitions are critical to transforming food systems, reducing poverty and building resilience to climate change (Magdoff & Williams 2017).

Urbanisation, expanding export markets and the rising demand for biofuels have intensified pressure on land resources, leading to large-scale land acquisitions for monoculture farming. The demand for extensive tracts of land for mechanised, monocultural agriculture contributes to economies of scale, which often marginalise small-scale producers, making them less economically competitive. This trend further disrupts customary land systems and exacerbates social inequalities (Bottazzi, Goguen & Rist 2016). Appropriate forms of land governance that support rural livelihoods and promote equitable reforms are therefore essential for sustainable development and food security in Africa.

Why should philanthropies be interested?

Land policy and tenure reform shape access, ownership and use, directly influencing agroecology. Secure land tenure encourages sustainable practices, while unclear policies hinder investment in regenerative agriculture. Aligning reforms with agroecological principles fosters resilience, biodiversity and food security, ensuring equitable resource distribution and long-term environmental and economic sustainability.

The development agenda in Africa has long been influenced by international and multilateral agencies, a terrain on which philanthropic organisations have increasingly entered. All can potentially play a vital role in fostering land tenure reform for sound agroecological transitions by supporting innovative, scalable models that align with global goals for poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability and food security. Through funding and advocacy, philanthropy-based entities can advance equitable land governance, thereby promoting food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. By partnering with advocacy groups and local institutions, they help influence policy dialogues and raise public awareness about the importance of responsible land management.

Targeted investments in marginalised groups, particularly women and vulnerable communities, are crucial for promoting inclusion and social justice in land governance. Philanthropist interests ought to fund training programmes, community-led projects and campaigns that emphasise sustainable land-use practices and agroecological methods, thus strengthening local food systems and building resilience.

By fostering strong partnerships among governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic institutions and local communities, philanthropic support plays a crucial role in enhancing knowledge-sharing and collaboration on land-governance issues. These partnerships are essential for creating robust networks that drive collective action, amplify local voices and promote sustainable development across Africa.

CONTEXT

The state of knowledge on the issue in the study countries

Land tenure systems in Africa and their impact on agroecology

Land tenure systems in Africa are deeply influenced by colonial history, which shapes contemporary agricultural challenges and opportunities (Kenfack Kenjio 2020). These systems vary across regions, reflecting different colonial histories – the labour reserve polities of East and Southern Africa, the cash crop economies of West Africa and the legacy of concessionary territories in Central Africa (Adams, Basset & Crummey 1993). While some advocate for privatisation and individual land titles to boost productivity, others emphasise understanding indigenous tenure systems within their social, political and economic contexts (Bruce et al., 1994). The link between tenure security and agricultural productivity remains complex, with case studies across Sub-Saharan Africa showing diverse outcomes (Bruce et al. 1994). Recent research underscores the need for appropriate land governance in agroecological transitions, thus addressing power dynamics and indigenous land perspectives (Wittman & James 2022). Decolonising tenure systems and implementing tailored reforms are crucial for sustainable agriculture and equitable land access (Kenfack Kenjio 2020).

Samir Amin's (1977) categorisation of African economies – labour reserves, colonial cash crop economies and concessionary company territories – provides a useful framework for understanding land tenure disparities and their implications for agroecology.

1. **Labour reserves:** Land dispossession and tenure dualism

Southern and East African countries, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Malawi and Namibia, were structured as labour reserves under settler colonialism. Land was expropriated and redistributed to white settlers or state-controlled farms, leaving indigenous populations in overcrowded 'reserves' with insecure land rights.

This dual tenure system persists, with large-scale commercial farms dominating fertile land while smallholder farmers struggle with customary or state-controlled tenure.

Land reform efforts, such as Zimbabwe's fast-track programme and Kenya's redistribution initiatives, have yielded mixed results. Without secure tenure and institutional support, smallholders face barriers to adopting sustainable farming practices. Future policies must focus on land security, state-backed agroecological initiatives and restricting agribusiness monopolies.

2. **Colonial economies in West Africa:** Customary tenure and land commodification

West African nations, including Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, adopted a different model, emphasising cash crop production while allowing smallholder farming under customary tenure. While land inheritance and village management systems provided stability, recent trends toward land commodification threaten smallholder access. Urbanisation and large-scale agribusiness investments are accelerating land-grabbing, thereby reducing communal land security.

Despite these pressures, the persistence of smallholder traditions provides a foundation for agroecology. Policies should prioritise land tenure protection, prevent speculative land sales and support sustainable farming practices.

3. **Concessionary territories:** Corporate dominance and weak land rights

In Central African nations such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Gabon, colonial powers granted vast land concessions to foreign corporations for resource extraction. This legacy continues, with multinational companies controlling large tracts of land,

leading to deforestation, land disputes and weak governance. Agroecological transitions in these regions require strengthening indigenous land rights, curbing land-grabbing and investing in land restoration.

In Africa, land tenure regimes and land reform play a crucial role in shaping agricultural practices, rural livelihoods and the potential for agroecological transitions. These issues intersect with several converging dynamics, including climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion and rapid urbanisation, among others. We draw from experiences in Kenya, South Africa, Lesotho, Eswatini, Benin, Uganda and Malawi, which represent the broad classifications by scholars such as Samir Amin (1977).

Land tenure system in Kenya

Kenya's land tenure system, shaped by colonial-era dispossession, continues to face challenges despite post-independence reforms. The 2010 Constitution recognised three land categories, namely community, private and public land, with the aim being to enhance tenure security and address historical injustices. However, slow implementation, land registration issues and unequal access to land persist, which, in particular, affect pastoralists, forest-dependent communities, women and marginalised groups. Land fragmentation, especially in Central and Western Kenya, poses significant challenges. As land is subdivided into smaller plots, sustainable agricultural practices such as agroforestry become difficult to implement, reducing productivity and hindering agroecological transitions.

Land tenure system in South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini

The land tenure systems across South Africa highlight significant challenges and rare successes in advancing sustainable, community-centred land management. In South Africa, community property associations (CPAs) were intended to support collective land ownership and food security. However, they have struggled to achieve these goals. According to the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform's 2022/2023 report, only 81 of the 1 410 CPAs were fully compliant with governance regulations, while 1 141 were non-compliant and 188 only partly compliant. This widespread lack of compliance undermines the CPAs' ability to effectively manage land,

limiting their capacity to support sustainable practices and transitions toward agroecology. Compliance with governance regulations is crucial, as it ensures transparent decision-making, accountability and the equitable use of resources, all of which are vital for achieving sustainable land stewardship and long-term food sovereignty.

Agroecological practices, while conceptually promising, remain rare across South Africa and much of Southern Africa. In Botswana, for instance, agroecological farmer networks do exist but remain limited in scope and are challenged by broader policy tensions, including the displacement and land dispossession of indigenous Khoisan pastoralists and foragers. This highlights a key tension: while an agroecological perspective advocates for sustainable, community-led land management, marginalised groups often experience exclusion or displacement in practice owing to competing land-use interests. This disconnect suggests that significant policy adjustments are needed to support these communities and foster more inclusive and resilient land practices.

The land tenure systems across South Africa highlight significant challenges and rare successes in advancing sustainable, community-centred land management

Lesotho and Eswatini also face challenges with agroecology. Informal networks that do engage in knowledge-sharing around sustainable practices are not yet widespread enough to drive significant agroecological transitions. Such initiatives demonstrate the potential of localised, community-centred approaches but lack sufficient support or scaling to impact regional food systems meaningfully. Consequently, agroecology, as it stands, remains more aspirational than prevalent in Southern Africa, being confined mainly to small-scale projects rather than mainstream agricultural practice. This limited adoption is closely linked to existing land-governance regimes, which often favour large-scale, industrial farming models. These regimes typically prioritise land consolidation and monoculture practices, making it difficult for agroecological approaches, which require diverse, community-managed plots and participatory land stewardship in order to gain a foothold.

In shaping land tenure policy for Southern Africa, it is essential to balance aspirations with current realities. CPAs, and the difficulties of implementing mechanisms for community-based land tenure in South Africa, underline the need for accountable governance and institutional support, while Botswana's experiences highlight the importance of including indigenous communities in land policy decisions. Additionally, while agroecological networks in Lesotho and Eswatini show potential, substantial investment and political commitment are needed to make agroecology a viable path forward. Future policies could aim to strengthen governance frameworks, protect indigenous land rights and support the gradual adoption of agroecological practices. Achieving these outcomes would require a dedicated commitment to reshaping Southern Africa's agricultural systems to better support environmental resilience, community agency and food sovereignty. Philanthropic organisations can play a pivotal role in this process by providing the necessary funding, fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships and facilitating capacity-building initiatives. Their support can help bridge the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground implementation, ensuring that local communities are empowered to lead in the transition to agroecological practices.

Land tenure system in Benin

Benin, a former French colony that gained independence in 1960, has undergone several land tenure reforms to reduce land conflicts and promote sustainable investments. From 2007 to 2017, three land reforms were introduced, with the 2017 reform aiming to centralise land administration through a national digital cadaster. Benin's land system involves multiple actors, including traditional leaders and the government, applying both customary and modern laws. Despite these reforms, agroecology has been under-represented in land policies, even though it is key to sustainable land use. The reforms focus more on land security than on promoting practices that protect biodiversity and combat climate change. In the Benin Land Code, Chapter 6 (Art. 315 to Art. 337) focuses on the principles of management of natural resources (forests, afforested areas, fisheries, water), and Art. 365 to Art. 373 emphasises the management of rural land through afforestation, protection of soil, preservation of water quality, creation of botanical gardens, procedures for access to rural land and sanctions for not promoting rural land after five years. *Land reform has restricted land use to promoting agroecology and reducing the impact of climate change.*

Land tenure system in Uganda

Uganda's land tenure system is a mix of traditional practices, colonial regulations and post-colonial legislation. The 1995 Constitution recognises four tenure systems: mailo, freehold, leasehold and customary. Historically, customary tenure linked agriculture with spirituality and ecosystems, thereby fostering agroecology. However, inappropriate land-use decisions have led to land degradation, erosion and biodiversity loss. The National Land Use Policy (2006) and the National Organic Agriculture Policy Implementation Plan (2019) highlight Uganda's commitment to agroecology, with organisations like the National Organic Agriculture Movement and Uganda Organic Certification promoting organic farming so as to protect biodiversity and enhance sustainable food systems.

Land and agroecology in Malawi

Malawi, like many African countries, continues to struggle with historic colonial injustices in respect of land, which affect tenure security and effective governance of land. Since 2016, the country has been undergoing land reform processes in a quest to strike a sound balance regarding land rights that are knitted into cultural norms, some of which continue to be resistant to change. In consequence of these reforms, Malawi now has land laws which include the 2022 Customary Land Act that aims at enhancing tenure security and legal land ownership in order to provide a sound framework for agroecology-sensitive, land-based investments. The tenure systems are threefold in nature, comprising public land, private land and customary land. Present-day politico-economic issues relating to land are extensive and include policy, the economic drive towards large, agro-based investments (mega farms) and a population growth which is placing increasing pressure on land. Malawi's population has nearly doubled since 2000, with the population density in the Southern Region being 276 per square kilometre. This region, therefore, faces increasing land ownership and governance challenges and has been a target of land-redistribution interventions. Growing food insecurity brought about by low productivity and negative climate impacts require rerouting of land management practices. In recognising this, Malawi has adopted sustainable land management practices involving short-, medium- and long-term strategies, which include graduating from the intensive use of inorganic fertilisers to the adoption of nature-based solutions to land restoration. Agroecology, as a terminology and a guiding framework,

has not been integrated in the policy framework. However, a national agroecology coalition has been established which has generated momentum in conscientising stakeholders on the need for policy and practice reforms.

Agroecological transitions and converging dynamics

Agroecological practices in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as agroforestry, natural-input farming and soil conservation, provide sustainable solutions to enhance soil health, biodiversity and climate resilience. However, smallholder farmers face challenges such as insecure land tenure and limited financial resources, which impede the adoption of these methods. Although national policies are increasingly recognising agroecology, conventional farming remains prevalent due to government support for synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and hybrid seeds, and, crucially, the hold such farming continues to have over research and knowledge production.

Addressing land tenure and agroecological transitions demands a comprehensive approach that aligns agricultural, environmental and planning policies

Climate change exacerbates soil degradation and water scarcity, among other problems, making sustainable land management crucial for improving food production and ecosystem resilience. Agroforestry, for instance, can help restore biodiversity but requires land tenure reforms and supportive policies. Rapid urbanisation and population growth further intensify pressure on agricultural land, leading to conflicts over land use. Thus, land tenure reform is essential for equitable access and sustainable farming practices.

Addressing land tenure and agroecological transitions demands a comprehensive approach that aligns agricultural, environmental and planning policies. Challenges arise from institutional weaknesses and entrenched land ownership interests, underscoring the need to strengthen local institutions and empower communities. Despite these hurdles, opportunities for innovation exist through public–private partnerships, community-based resource management and indigenous knowledge systems.

The theme in relation to broader food system transitions in Africa at different spatial scales

The interaction of land tenure regimes, land reform and agroecological transitions plays out differently at various scales, with each scale presenting distinct opportunities and challenges. These interactions affect agricultural practices, sustainable land management and policy implementation.

Farm or enterprise scale

At the farm level, secure land tenure is vital for enabling farmers to invest in agroecological practices like organic farming, agroforestry and soil conservation. Farmers without secure tenure are less likely to adopt these methods due to the risk of losing their land before benefiting from sustainable farming efforts. Land reforms that clarify ownership can empower farmers to invest in practices that improve soil health and biodiversity. Agroecological practices at this scale require knowledge and labour investment, focusing on long-term land stewardship.

Landscape scale

At the landscape level, land tenure regimes influence the management of shared resources, such as forests, watersheds and rangelands. Secure and equitable land access fosters collaboration, enabling community-led conservation efforts and integrated landscape management. Insecure land tenure hinders collective landscape management, while reforms that ensure equitable access can promote coordinated reforestation, biodiversity conservation and watershed management.

City-region scale

In peri-urban areas, land tenure security is crucial for balancing agricultural production with urban expansion. As many cities across the Global South grow, pressure on rural and peri-urban land intensifies, leading to potential conflicts. These urban locales are likely to benefit from support for agroecologically-informed urban farming, community gardens and composting, which help supply food to urban markets while preserving green spaces.

Country scale

National land policies have far-reaching effects on food security and environmental sustainability. Reforms that secure land rights for marginalised groups, such as women and indigenous communities, promote the adoption of agroecological practices. Policies aligning agriculture, the environment and land use can drive sustainable practices and address historical land injustices.

Regional scale

Cross-border dynamics, climate change and food security challenges influence land tenure and agroecological transitions at the regional level. Regional cooperation, such as harmonising land reform efforts and cross-border resource management, is crucial to address shared challenges like desertification and food insecurity. Initiatives like the Great Green Wall project promoted by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) exemplify regional agroecological efforts to restore degraded landscapes and enhance resilience.

How this issue is affected by cross-cutting issues

Land tenure, land reform and agroecological transitions are intertwined with cross-cutting issues that shape land access, management and use, affecting sustainable farming and equitable resource distribution.

Local and indigenous knowledge

Traditional land management practices, rooted in indigenous knowledge, emphasise collective ownership and sustainability. However, formal land reforms often overlook these systems, leading to conflicts and displacement. Integrating indigenous knowledge is the basis of implementing co-creation and sharing knowledge of agroecology principles and of introducing these into reforms that can enhance sustainability and empower communities to maintain and deepen their practices through innovation.

Gender

Women face significant barriers to land ownership, thereby limiting their ability to invest in sustainable farming. Gender-sensitive land reforms that grant women equal rights can promote agroecological practices, as women are often leaders in biodiversity conservation and organic farming. Including women in land reform facilitates access to land, which increases food production and food security, because women constitute the majority in Africa's food systems through production, processing, marketing and consumption.

Age

Young people struggle to access land, with ownership concentrated among older generations. Land tenure reforms that provide secure tenure for youth, alongside training, can encourage their participation in sustainable farming, enabling agroecological innovation.

Power and governance

Land is often controlled by political elites, leaving smallholders with insecure access. Effective land reform requires transparent governance and equitable distribution. Good governance can foster agroecological transitions by supporting resource access and sound resource management, as well as promoting sustainable practices.

Waste management

Insecure tenure discourages sustainable waste management, as landholders may lack incentives to invest in composting and recycling. Secure tenure promotes long-term waste-management strategies that improve soil health.

Food safety

Secure land tenure potentially enables farmers to adopt sustainable, organic practices, reducing reliance on chemicals and enhancing food safety. Agroecological transitions supported by land reforms contribute to safer, healthier food systems through natural farming methods.

How regional differences shape divergent transition needs and opportunities

Regional differences in land tenure, land reform and agroecological transitions in Africa stem from the continent's vast linguistic, cultural, geographic and ecological diversity. These differences create varying needs and opportunities for sustainable agricultural practices.

In East Africa, pastoralism and mixed farming thrive, supported by community governance and indigenous knowledge, especially in agroforestry. However, land-privatisation policies that conflict with one another, hinder progress. West Africa relies on shifting cultivation and agroforestry, with women playing key roles but facing barriers to land ownership, highlighting the importance of gender equity for successful transitions. Southern Africa deals with historical land inequalities and challenges associated with the dominance of large-scale commercial farming, but its diverse food cultures present opportunities for crop diversification.

In East Africa, pastoralism and mixed farming thrive, supported by community governance and indigenous knowledge, especially in agroforestry

Geographically, Africa's rainforests could benefit from agroforestry in order to combat deforestation, which would necessitate sustainable land policies and protections for indigenous rights. In arid regions like Kenya and Botswana, pastoralists depend on communal lands, emphasising the need for sustainable grazing practices and water conservation.

Urban areas focus on integrating urban farming amid rapid growth, where secure land tenure is vital for peri-urban farmers. Meanwhile, rural youth migration to cities creates labour gaps, underscoring the need for education and secure land access to engage the next generation in sustainable practices. Each region requires tailored strategies that respect local contexts while fostering agroecological transitions.

The key levers for food systems transition in relation to the theme

Key levers for transitioning African food systems toward sustainability and resilience include secure land tenure, support for agroecological practices, appropriate policies and community engagement. Ensuring land tenure security empowers farmers to adopt long-term agroecological methods, thereby improving soil health and food security. Comprehensive land reforms that address historical injustices and marginalisation are essential.

Agroecological practices like organic farming and reduced conventional tillage can boost productivity, while policy frameworks must offer incentives and subsidies that support sustainable agriculture. Financial and technical support, such as grants, microfinance and training, can help smallholder farmers adopt climate-resilient technologies. Research and innovation also play a critical role in advancing sustainable agricultural practices, thus ensuring a link to land reforms.

Engaging communities, especially women and marginalised groups, in decision-making on land tenure and integrating local knowledge strengthen food systems. Enhancing market access for agroecological products through value chains, certifications, consumer education and land tenure rights helps sustain these transitions. Climate-adaptation measures, including drought-resistant crops and water-conservation techniques, increase resilience.

Advocacy for agroecological policies and civil society engagement are vital in driving systemic change. Regional cooperation and global support further enable the scaling of successful transitions across Africa, addressing shared challenges and promoting food security at the regional level.

Agroecology movements are increasingly being established in different communities at local, national and regional level. In Southern Africa, the Rural Women Assembly has expanded its national footprint in 10 countries (Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho, Madagascar, Eswatini, Namibia, Mozambique and Tanzania), offering agroecology schools and leading advocacy campaigns on land reform and on seed and food sovereignty. The movement-building drive is employing four-dimensional approaches aimed at changes in policies, processes, procedures and practices.

HURDLES TO TRANSITION

Sustainable land tenure and agroecological farming in Africa face numerous challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate technical capacity and poor infrastructure. Smallholder farmers, who represent the majority of agricultural producers, often struggle to access affordable financing for essential tools like irrigation and soil-conservation systems. Specialised knowledge focusing on land tenure is required for effective agroecological practices, but underfunded extension services limit this support. The problem is not only one of funding, for much agricultural extension remains dominated by the methods, tools and technologies derived from mainstream, input-intensive commercial agriculture and is therefore at odds with agroecologically-informed production in which issues of land rights are not addressed. Insecure land tenure discourages long-term investments, particularly among marginalised communities, while weak policies favour conventional agriculture over agroecological methods, thus hindering transitions.

Transition funding for land reform and agroecological initiatives is currently insufficient. Although international donors show growing interest in agroecology, funding primarily supports conventional agriculture. Philanthropic backing for agroecological projects remains weak, and impact investing often overlooks smallholder farmers' needs. While emerging financing models like green bonds hold potential, they require supportive policies and, in many African country contexts, better access to financial systems.

Philanthropic support for research and capacity-building, climate resilience and market access is gaining traction, yet the focus often remains on high-tech solutions, sidelining low-input, ecological farming. Additionally, short-term funding cycles and a lack of attention to land tenure reforms can undermine the success of sustainable farming practices. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering resilient and equitable food systems in Africa.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE TRANSITIONS

To effectively promote transitions to agroecological farming, donor-funding principles and mechanisms should focus on several key recommendations:

1. **Long-term commitment:** Given that agroecological transitions are gradual, donors should fund multi-year programmes (5 to 10 years) that provide sustained financial and technical support for farmers and communities.
2. **Locally led approaches:** Solutions must be tailored to specific social, ecological and cultural contexts. Donors should support grassroots organisations and community-based projects that integrate local and indigenous knowledge into agroecological practices.
3. **Secure land tenure and social equity:** Prioritising land tenure security, especially for marginalised groups like women and indigenous peoples, is vital. Donors should fund legal assistance for appropriate land tenure systems, community-land mapping and equitable land reform advocacy.
4. **Capacity-building and knowledge transfer:** Investing in extension services and farmer training programmes is critical. Donors should support platforms for sharing agroecological knowledge and establish farmer field schools to accelerate learning.
5. **Integrated funding approaches:** Agroecological transitions require cross-sector funding that aligns agriculture with climate resilience and biodiversity initiatives. Promoting public-private partnerships can help achieve these goals.
6. **Participatory governance:** Funding decisions should involve local stakeholders, particularly marginalised groups. Establishing participatory governance structures for donor projects ensures that community priorities are reflected in interventions.
7. **Market development:** To ensure fair compensation for sustainably produced food, donors should fund initiatives that enhance market access for agroecological products and support local value chains.
8. **Lessons from successful land reforms:** Lessons from successful land reforms in sub-Saharan Africa can guide the implementation of more equitable land tenure systems. For instance, Rwanda's post-genocide land reforms, which introduced land registration and gender equity provisions, serve as a model for integrating justice into policy design. Similarly, Mozambique's recognition of community rights under its 1997 Land Law demonstrates the potential of legal frameworks to secure tenure while preserving customary practices. Drawing on these examples, future reforms should prioritise participatory approaches that ensure marginalised groups, particularly women and smallholder farmers, have a voice in decision-making processes.
9. **Addressing problematic funding trends:** This is also crucial. Donors should shift away from input-intensive agricultural models that harm long-term soil health and instead adopt a systems-based approach that integrates agriculture, environmental conservation and social justice. Equity-focused funding strategies must prioritise marginalised groups and support policy advocacy for enabling environments that promote agroecological transitions.

CASE STUDIES

Case study 1: The Green Belt Movement (Kenya)

The Green Belt Movement (GBM) in Kenya, founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977, has played a pivotal role in advocating for environmental conservation, women's empowerment and sustainable land management practices. Its approach to land tenure, land reform and agroecological transitions has been instrumental in addressing the complex challenges faced by rural communities in Kenya.

Land tenure

One of the fundamental issues that the GBM addresses is land tenure insecurity, which often affects smallholder farmers and local communities. In Kenya, land ownership is frequently concentrated among a few individuals or entities, leaving many communities without secure access to land. This insecurity discourages investment in sustainable practices, as farmers are less likely to improve land that they do not legally own. The GBM advocates for equitable land tenure systems that empower local communities and ensure their rights to land use and management. By promoting community-based approaches to land ownership, the movement supports initiatives that prioritise sustainable land use and biodiversity conservation.

Land reform

The GBM has been at the forefront of land reform efforts in Kenya, advocating for policies that address historical injustices in land distribution and promote equitable access to land resources. Through tree-planting and community engagement, the GBM emphasises the importance of land as a communal resource rather than a commodity. The movement's focus on reforestation and afforestation contributes to land reform by restoring degraded lands and enhancing their productivity. Furthermore, the GBM has lobbied for legislative changes to facilitate land reform, highlighting the need for comprehensive policies that address both land rights and environmental conservation.

Agroecological transitions

In promoting agroecological transitions, the GBM emphasises the importance of integrating environmental sustainability with agricultural practices. Agroecology offers a holistic approach that enhances food security while preserving ecological integrity. The movement encourages practices such as agroforestry, organic farming and sustainable land management, which are aligned with agroecological principles. These practices not only improve soil health and increase biodiversity, but also enhance resilience to climate change.

Moreover, the GBM emphasises education and capacity-building among local communities in order to adopt sustainable agricultural techniques. By training farmers in agroecological practices, the movement empowers them to enhance productivity while minimising environmental impact. This education is critical in fostering a cultural shift towards sustainable farming methods and reinforcing the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems for future generations.

Conclusion

The GBM's work in relation to land tenure, land reform and agroecological transitions illustrates a comprehensive approach to environmental and social challenges in Kenya. By advocating for secure land tenure, promoting equitable land reform and fostering agroecological practices, the GBM addresses the root causes of environmental degradation and social injustice. Its initiatives have not only improved livelihoods but have also contributed to the restoration of Kenya's natural ecosystems, showcasing the interconnectedness of land rights, environmental sustainability and community empowerment. Through its holistic approach, the GBM serves as a model for similar movements globally, demonstrating the potential of grassroots activism in driving sustainable change.

Case study 2: South Africa's post-apartheid land reform and agroecology

South Africa's post-apartheid land reform programmes aimed to address deep-seated historical inequalities stemming from the dispossession of land under colonial and apartheid rule. Since 1994, the government has implemented a variety of policies underpinned by the 1996 Constitution and the 1997 White Paper on Land Reform. These initiatives, including land redistribution, restitution and tenure reform, sought to promote equitable land ownership and rural development. However, progress has been slow, with less than 10% of agricultural land redistributed by the mid-2000s. Challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate funding models and policy ambiguity have hampered the effectiveness of these programmes. Studies highlight the under-utilisation of redistributed land and a lack of alignment between land reform and sustainable farming practices. Despite these challenges, some successes have been noted, particularly in agroecological transitions supported by initiatives like the Agroecology Academy, which helps new landowners adopt sustainable farming methods to improve productivity and environmental stewardship.

A critical area of concern is the limited technical and institutional support provided to land reform beneficiaries to transition to commercial and sustainable farming systems. Research, such as that conducted by Mphahlele (2023), underscores the importance of structured partnerships, comprehensive stakeholder engagement and capacity-building in fostering the success of land-reform farms. However, inadequate entrepreneurial skills and poorly defined funding mechanisms continue to undermine farm sustainability. Furthermore, policy clarity remains a pressing issue, as highlighted by Gumede (2014), who argues that South Africa's reform efforts lack a coherent vision of the type of farming systems and land tenure arrangements best suited to the country's socio-economic and environmental context. Lessons from neighbouring Zimbabwe amplify the need for a balanced approach that avoids the pitfalls of rapid expropriation while promoting food security and rural livelihoods. A more streamlined and inclusive land reform process, integrating agroecological principles, is crucial for achieving the dual objectives of redressing historical injustices and building a resilient agricultural sector in South Africa.



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