

Halting land degradation through equitable land access and land ownership by Women

Iyenemi Ibimina KAKULU, Nigeria and Joann LEE, Germany

Key words: Access to land; Land distribution; Land management; Land degradation; land restoration; women and land

SUMMARY

Land degradation is a global phenomenon occurring with poor agricultural practices as with poor land choices for urban physical infrastructure development including housing. At scale, land degradation may interfere with the ecosystem services such as the services and benefits derived from topsoil and other terrestrial media. The subtle nature of land degradation makes it thrive relatively unnoticed until it becomes severe. The enormous expanse of global lands requires several more land stewards to promote sustainable land use practices and management. Inclusive access to land by women and youth can increase the number of individuals with a duty of care over land. Based on the growing demand for land, inequitable land access and land ownership can be a hindrance towards halting or reversing land degradation. Land access or outright ownership can be a driver that motivates people to take better care of what is theirs. Unfortunately land ownership still remains in the hands of a few as land discrimination and exclusion of women from access and ownership is still quite common. Social exclusion, where some are excluded from owning land based on their gender or other socio-cultural and socio-economic can result in global apathy, societal apathy, or general apathy, on the subject of land degradation or restoration. Access to land and ownership can provide women with a valid reason to care for land and to develop strategies that halt land degradation and actively promote land restoration. By promoting equitable and inclusive land ownership and granting women and youth equitable rights to land, can promote land restoration initiatives that propel people to act. Youth, women and other marginalized or excluded groups with limited access to land, need to be empowered through land ownership. The freedom to own and use land should not be restricted by gender or youthfulness. Sustainable land management can seek to promote equitable land ownership, ensure equal representation of the building blocks of any society - men, women and youth on matters of land. The journey towards halting land degradation and promoting wise use of land including land restoration needs to be inclusive. The paper presents how women empowerment through access to land and land ownership combined with the knowledge of the consequences of uncontrolled land degradation, can promote habitat conservation and sustainable land management (SLM).

Halting land degradation through equitable land access and land ownership by Women

Iyenemi Ibimina KAKULU, (Nigeria) and Joann LEE (Germany)

1. INTRODUCTION

Lack of access to land and inequitable ownership of land amongst men and women can promote uncontrolled land degradation specifically from human induced sources. The demand for limited parcels of development land by both men and women forces land prices to rise to levels that can be significantly beyond the reach of many, particularly the urban and rural poor - the women and youth. This promotes the development of slums around cities and urban fringes, uncontrolled development and poor sanitation typical of slum-type development, contribute to degradation of adjoining lands and wetlands. Physical degradation of soils also poses a threat to soil's capacity to provide ecosystem functions and services. Equitable land ownership promotes equipping men and women with access to resources that enable them acquire land. In addition, land registration and documentation of land ownership can also provide a greater degree of control of land use by land administrators and managers. Where land owners can be identified through proper land records, ensuring compliance with land use regulations and curbing land-use practices which drive land degradation, can be an effective way to halt degradation through ownership.

Land degradation is a pervasive, systemic phenomenon occurring in all parts of the world, and combatting it is an urgent priority in order to protect the biodiversity and ecosystem services that are vital to all life on Earth and to ensure human well-being. Avoiding land degradation and restoring degraded lands are also essential for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) 15, which aims to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss (IPBES, 2018). Land degradation is caused by multiple forces, including extreme weather conditions, particularly drought. It is also caused by human activities that pollute or degrade the quality of soils and land utility. Land degradation negatively affects food production, livelihoods, and the production and provision of other ecosystem goods and services (IPBES, 2018). Land degradation is a key environmental threat. There are several forms of land degradation arising from multiple and interrelated sources. There is also the need for urgent action targeted at reducing, halting and reversing land degradation. The G20 Global Initiative (GLI) for reducing land degradation and enhancing conservation of terrestrial habitats aims to support existing efforts to prevent, halt, and reverse land degradation and habitat loss through sharing of knowledge and best practices on protecting, conserving, sustainably managing, restoring, and rehabilitating degraded land, and by showcasing and disseminating publicly available data and information on degraded lands and conservation/restoration efforts www.g20land.org. The Global Initiative contributes to capacity building and encourages greater private sector support and general public engagement in land

restoration efforts. The GLI promotes integrated, sustainable and resilient land and landscape management through the empowerment of Indigenous peoples and local communities (including women, youth and smallholders) in land management; secure land tenure, property and land-use rights in accordance with national legislation. This paper outlines the drivers of land degradation and discusses a few specific scenarios in detail. It discusses urbanization-driven land degradation and discusses how an increase in the number of documented land owners (including women) can increase the number of persons with a duty-of-care over land. It suggests that narrowing existing gaps in women's access to land can halt and reverse the trends in global land degradation as the ratio of registered land users to non-registered land users is increased.

2. LAND DEGRADATION DRIVERS

Several factors can serve as drivers which promote land degradation either independently or in combination with each other through synergistic relationships. In order to meet legitimate human needs for food and shelter, it is unsustainable to think that mankind can exist without degrading lands in one form or the other. There is a growing need to take steps to halt land degradation and reverse the trend of this global crisis in order to achieve sustainable development goal number 15 on land. There is a wide array of triggers of soil degradation which actively contribute to the processes that ultimately culminate in land and terrestrial habitat degradation. This results in loss of biological diversity, loss of ecosystems and their services on which humanity depends. A cursory look at drivers of land degradation provides an opportunity for land administrators and managers to identify the land administration gaps which if closed, can achieve lasting results including reversing the current trend and protecting terrestrial habitats. Soil pollution, soil erosion, overgrazing, extraction of minerals, infrastructure development, uncontrolled city expansion into virgin forests, flooding, drought and desertification are all key drivers of land degradation amongst others. This discourse identifies and discusses a few drivers of land degradation.

2.1 Land Use Planning and Land Inequitable Access to Land

In the absence of policies and regulations to effectively control how urban or rural lands are used, the resulting abuse, misuse and over-use of land and terrestrial habitats is inevitable. Land-use plans can provide a holistic approach to land management which can prevent or serve to control land degradation triggers. Planning and zoning, work together to deliver sustainable land use where land user types with the potential for deleterious consequences such as land degradation, are carefully thought-out, and mitigative measures put in place to reduce the impact. Poor land-use planning is a key driver of land degradation and land administrators and land managers can play a role to address this situation. Lack of access to land particularly amongst the urban poor including women and youth coupled with the lack of access to adequate finance, excludes the urban poor from access to land and decent accommodation particularly in well-planned layouts and neighbourhoods. The poor respond to this challenging situation by resorting to cheaper alternatives leading to slum development on lands, forests, wetland, including inland and coastal wetlands. Slums are a classic driver of land degradation particularly as slums have little or no planning and usually very poor sanitation is maintained.

The urban poor consisting mainly of women and youth, do not also have equal access to land due to the huge financial resources required to purchase land. The inequities in education, limited employment opportunities, socio-cultural exclusion from undertaking paid employment limits their access to finance required to purchase land or to develop it for their use. This exclusion of women and the continued marginalization from access to land fueled by socio-cultural practices contributes to land degradation. Slums also serve as havens for uncontrolled and unregulated cottage industries by the urban poor. The effluents from these industries can contribute to soil and water pollution and drive land degradation with consequences on biodiversity and ecosystem function and services.

2.2 Soil Pollution and Urbanization-driven Land Degradation

Soil pollution is another driver of land degradation which occurs from several sources such as poor agricultural practices, poor environmental sanitation practices, extractive industry activities and many others. Soil pollution inhibits the soil's capacity to provide ecosystem provisioning and other services. It interferes with food security and livelihoods and urban and rural communities alike. There are instances of soil pollution being as a result of non-compliance with environmental laws and regulations where they exist or, soil pollution occurring as a result of non-existent land-use policies that can prevent soil pollution altogether. In order to address land degradation, a holistic approach to tackling each known driver is required. As urban populations grow in numbers, the demand for housing and complimentary physical infrastructure results in urban expansion and sprawl into peri-urban and rural settlements. Human activities which are causing urbanization-driven land degradation include deforestation for urban infrastructure expansion and housing construction, overgrazing by livestock, mismanagement of agricultural land, resource exploitation and industrial activities. The deforestation of several forest types including mangroves and inland wetlands, becomes the ultimate price to pay for urbanization and the associated development needs. Without careful thought and sustainable planning for future city growth, uncontrolled expansion and encroachment on pristine lands will continue to serve as a major driver of global land degradation.

2.3 Climate Change, Resource Extraction and Desertification

Climate change is also one of the known drivers of land degradation. Rising temperatures from green-house gas emissions, melting icecaps, extreme weather events are all contributing to flooding, large scale erosion and land and mud slides which lead to land degradation. In recent years, the impact of climate change has become so intense in frequency and severity that land administrators and managers are currently being left with no option but to embrace this new normal and respond through transformative policies. Siltation of mangrove forests with soils washed by erosion occurring on higher lands, destroys these coastal habitats, leads to ecosystem depletion and ultimately impacts on the livelihoods of local communities. The degradation of natural resources, especially where agriculture is practiced, is a tangible threat in several countries and continues to constitute a significant limitation in the ability to produce sufficient food and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of zero hunger. In most countries, water and wind erosion, salinization, loss of vegetation cover, physical degradation

of soils are key threats to the soil's capacity to provide ecosystem services. Moreover, the expansion of agriculture into marginal lands has put further pressure on already degraded soils. (FAO n.d.) Natural resources extraction such as precious metals, fossil fuels, gem stones and gold take place within terrestrial habitats leaving in their wake, a destruction trail. Operational accidents such as oil spills or open cast mining and collapsed mines, leave heavy environmental footprints in the form of degraded lands. Desertification is also a major form of land degradation by which fertile land becomes desert. It is also caused by human activities that pollute or degrade the quality of soils and land utility. It negatively affects food production, livelihoods, and the production and provision of other ecosystem goods and services. These social and environmental processes are stressing the world's arable lands and pastures essential for the provision of food and water and quality air. Land degradation and desertification can affect human health through complex pathways. As land is degraded and deserts expand in some places, food production is reduced, water sources dry up and populations are pressured to move to more hospitable areas (WHO, n.d.) The SDG's 15.3 in particular, states that: "By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world".

3. STRATEGIES FOR HALTING LAND DEGRADATION

Countries without huge financial resources or investments required for land restoration, can opt to promote preventive measures which would discourage land abuse and promote wise land use. By increasing the number of people with access to land and promoting land ownership reduces the volume of unregistered and undocumented lands that can easily be polluted thereby contributing to the burden of land degradation. By narrowing the gap in land ownership and bringing more women into the fold, the number of people with a duty of care for land increases as does the number of land stewards. Land ownership can improve the level of care for land as more people who own land can play crucial decision-making roles. With several causes and sources of land degradation, the more opportunity for gender perspectives to be considered when land use decisions are being made, the higher the chances that land degradation can be prevented. Women use and cultivate the land and they will typically not keep silent if they are given an opportunity to contribute to decision-making on future land uses. Land professionals can play a key role by ensuring stricter land use controls for registered land owners and also seek to register all lands. The more land owners with documented title, the greater the control over how land is planned and used. This can reduce land abuse and halt or reverse land degradation.

Land administrators and managers can work together in a number of ways to actively halt land degradation and promote habitat conservation through equitable ownership as follows:

3.1 Closing the Gender Gap in Land ownership

Decision-making on strategies that can halt land degradation can benefit from greater representation of women in land-use planning. Improved equality in the decision-making power which leads to balanced decisions and decisions that that incorporate different gender values

and perspectives on the subject of land degradation. Land ownership gives a voice to land owners where land use decisions are being considered or debated upon. The different social, political, intellectual, cultural, or economic attainments or attitudes and absence of ownership that lower women's participation, in community-based decision-making prevents their thoughts and perspectives from being captured and which may prefer alternative land-use strategies with reduced environmental footprints.

3.2 Gender Equality in Land Access

Gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making, and when different behaviors, aspirations, and needs of women and men are equally valued (Eden & Wagstaff, 2021). Women and men should be given equal conditions for access to land and land ownership. The requirements which should be holistic, should be based on their ability to take care of the land, undertake approved improvements and developments on the land within permissive use, and adhere to planning regulations and control. Land ownership should not be based on marital status or family composition that are exclusive to women or men. Opportunities to realize the full potential of land ownership, to develop and use the land, and to make economic gains from the land, can promote wise land use. Wise use of land resources can halt and reverse land degradation.

3.3 Gender Empowerment and Parity in Land Ownership

Land values respond to competing demands for land backed by the purchasing power of prospective land owners. Addressing employment gaps, gender pay differences and creating equal opportunity for men and women to be gainfully employed can improve their chances of becoming land owners. While empowerment is a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives, it increases their capacity to act on problems which are essential, parity gives both men and women increased power (Ehrhardt et al., 2012). By promoting projects that can serve to eradicate extreme poverty especially with women, their chances of becoming land owners and key decision makers can be enhanced. The huge financial resources required to access and purchase land, makes it such that without steady income or access to credit and other financial resources, women may remain excluded from land ownership when compared with men. This results in under-representation of a large fraction of global populations on land-use decision-making that can halt land degradation.

3.4 Gender Perspectives

Women participation in decision-making on land use, during the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of land-based projects, can contribute to a reduction in the execution of projects with huge environmental footprints. Gender-based differences in status and power and gender discrimination shapes the immediate needs, as well as the long-term interests, of women and men in land ownership. Leadership encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviours which should be respected in land distribution. Gender based decision-making for land use, aligns with the different contexts within which men and women hold and use land.

3.5 Enhancing Women's Land Rights

The literature suggests that formalization of land rights may enshrine gender-based discrimination through formalizing the customary land rights of male right holders. Simultaneously, however, legal reforms several countries, at least ostensibly, have attempted to improve land rights for women (Eagly & Sczesny, 2019). A gender approach to land rights can enable shifts in gender power relations, and assure that all people, regardless of sex, benefit from, and are empowered by, development policies and practices to improve people's rights to land (The Gender tool Box, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

Land restoration addresses land degradation arising from natural and man-made sources. There are numerous degradation triggers and restoration types and projects typically include indigenous and other land owners who collectively make decisions on what is to be restored, by who it is to be restored and how it would be financed. Land ownership which is not inclusive of women suggests that women might be unable to make as much contribution to the processes as they would have with equal representation. The costs associated with land restoration are quite high and the cost of advocacy for the prevention and halting of land degradation could be prioritized. In addition to ensuring balanced access to land ownership by men and women, land administrator and managers can contribute to reducing land degradation in a number of ways:

1. By producing and sharing of relevant data including soil maps, and information is a key priority to halt land degradation.
2. Making projections as to what can go terribly wrong to the environment, to lives and property if land degradation continues unchecked is crucial.
3. There is the need to promote investments into land and sustainable soil management in urban areas. and to promote sustainable and integrated land management in urban and rural lands.
4. By improving land access and ownership particularly of women which can help promote indigenous knowledge on land preservation which can also be used to halt land degradation.
5. Although women generally have used land for centuries around the world, in some areas, they have access to use the land and not to own it and as such are excluded from decision-making on land uses that could have deleterious consequences on the land.
6. Encouraging women land ownership gives them a voice. They can participate in decision-making, promote indigenous knowledge and serve as land stewards on an equal platform as the men.
7. Encouraging women to work through their networks to teach their youth about the benefits of land preservation and help halt land degradation for generations yet unborn.

REFERENCES

- Eagly, A. H., & Sczesny, S. (2019). *Editorial : Gender Roles in the Future ? Theoretical Foundations and Future Research Directions*. 10(September), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01965>
- Eden, L., & Wagstaff, M. F. (2021). Evidence-based policymaking and the wicked problem of SDG 5 Gender Equality. *Journal of International Business Policy*, 4(1), 28–57. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-020-00054-w>
- Ehrhardt, A. A., Sawires, S., MCGovern, T., & Peacock, D. (2012). *NIH Public Access*. 51(Suppl 3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1097/QAI.0b013e3181aafd54.Gender>
- FAO. (u.d.). Food and Agricultural Organization (UN). Hentet 20. September 2023 fra <https://www.fao.org/about/meetings/land-and-water-days/thematic-areas/halting-land-degradation/en/>
- Olsson, L., H. Barbosa, S. Bhadwal, A. Cowie, K. Delusca, D. Flores-Renteria, K. Hermans, E. Jobbagy, W. Kurz, D. Li, D.J. Sonwa, L. Stringer, (2019): Land Degradation. In: *Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems* [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, E. Calvo Buendia, V. Masson-Delmotte, H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, P. Zhai, R. Slade, S. Connors, R. van Diemen, M. Ferrat, E. Haughey, S. Luz, S. Neogi, M. Pathak, J. Petzold, J. Portugal Pereira, P. Vyas, E. Huntley, K. Kissick, M. Belkacemi, J. Malley, (eds.)]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/9781009157988.006
- The Gender tool Box. (2015). *Women and Land Rights*. Sida's Gender Toolbox, March, 1–4.
- World Health Organization. (u.d.). Hentet 20th. September 2023 fra <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/climate-change-land-degradation-and-desertification>

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu is a Professor of Land Management and Valuation at the Rivers State University in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She has an academic background in Real Estate and planning, with over thirty-eight years in academia lecturing both in Nigeria and overseas. Iyenemi is a specialist in value-centric sustainable land use and is widely published. She has pioneered postgraduate programmes that address sustainable land management, pro-poor approaches to land use and gender issues. She has held leadership positions within the Nigerian University system, served on different academic and professional governing boards and councils. She actively collaborates with international agencies where she contributes immensely to their capacity building initiatives that focus on sustainable land use, environmental degradation and livelihoods. She is a Senior Project Advisor to UNEP in its

capacity development support to the Federal Government of Nigeria's Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP). Prof. Kakulu is a Senior Expert on Gender and Land Issues in Land Restoration with the G20 Global Land Initiative Coordination Office.

Joann Lee is a Programme Officer with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Secretariat in Bonn, leading stakeholder engagement for the G20 Global Land Initiative. She has over 11 years of combined experience in programme management and law. Prior to joining the UNCCD Secretariat, she was a Programme Analyst with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in New York, working on economic empowerment, climate change, and technology and innovation issues. Her previous experience also includes coordinating advocacy and outreach efforts with the Center for Women's Global Leadership and investigating environmental compliance matters as an attorney with the California Department of Justice. She earned a Juris Doctorate from Cornell Law School and Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and East Asian Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

CONTACTS

Iyenemi Ibimina KAKULU & Joann LEE
G20 Global Land Initiative
UN Campus, Platz see Vereinten Nationen
Bonn
Germany
Tel.
Email: ikakulu@unccd.int; jlee@unccd.int
Web site: g20land.org

Halting land degradation through equitable land access and land ownership by Women (12319)
Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria) and Joann Lee (Germany)

FIG Commission 7 & 2 Annual Meeting 2023
Digital Transformation for Responsible Land Administration
Deventer, the Netherlands, 2–4 October 2023