

Land tenure and food security in Uganda: A review

Bonabana, J.^{1*}, Kirinya, J.¹ and Mugonola, B.²

¹Department of Agribusiness and Natural Resource Economics,
College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Makerere University,
P. O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda

²Department of Rural Development and Agribusiness, Faculty of Agriculture and
Environment, Gulu University, P. O. Box 166, Gulu, Uganda

*Corresponding author: jbonabana@caes.mak.ac.ug

Abstract

Although food and nutritional security is at the heart of Uganda's development agenda, it remains a core challenge partly due to the failure of interventions to recognize the direct linkages between land tenure and food security. This paper reviews land tenure as a dynamic concept in enhancing social and economic development with direct impacts on food and nutritional security of Uganda's agriculture-based economy. Such direct impacts could have nation-wide food security policy implications. Where land tenure reforms result in inequitable distribution of land, they render vulnerability to food insecurity to marginalized categories. Appropriate tenure reforms have the potential to enhance land investments, develop markets, improve agricultural productivity, and provide revenue for landless households resulting into decreased malnutrition. Deliberate efforts to align food security policy with land tenure policy are critical weapons in the fight against food and nutritional insecurity in order to keep the hope and future of Ugandans alive.

Key words: Food security, gender, land reform, policy review

Introduction

Land tenure reflects relationships between people and land directly, and between individuals and groups of people in their dealings in land and natural resources, whether legally or customarily defined (Kasimbazi, 2017). It is the social relations and institutions governing access to and use of land and natural resources. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient,

safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit, 1996). This definition implies that both volume and value matter for a system to be food secure. Although food and nutritional security is at the heart of the development agenda, it remains a core challenge in Uganda. This implies that the benefits associated with having a physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food are still elusive among many households.

This is evidenced by the recent FAO food security indicators which show that 12% of Ugandans are chronically food insecure (FAO, 2019) with the prevalence of undernourishment standing at 41% translating into an increase in the number of malnourished people from 6.9 million in 2006 to 17.6 million in 2018. This unpleasant situation comes at a time when many policy interventions (structural adjustment programs, poverty reduction strategies) have already been implemented to improve agricultural production and productivity to enhance food access and availability. Such interventions held the view that poverty eradication would promote economic growth and thus transform people's livelihoods including improving food security. Yet, gains from these interventions have only been marginal and unsustainable with the majority of the people continuing to wallow in undesirable conditions of food and nutritional insecurity, hunger and poverty.

One of the reasons attributed to the persistence of food and nutritional insecurity is the failure for interventions to recognize the direct linkages between land tenure and food security. Development interventions and most past studies viewed land tenure as having indirect linkages with food security and thus held the view that land tenure was an exogenous factor in determining food security. An exception is the study by Maxwell and Wiebe (1999) who consider the direct linkages between land tenure and food security by using a dynamic framework that acknowledges both conventional and recursive links of the two aspects in the short and long run. The current study subscribes to the later view and recognizes the fact that land is a key resource in agricultural production, a principal source of livelihood (Jayne *et al.*, 2014) and that reforms on land can be a powerful tool for enhancing social and economic development including having direct impacts on food and nutritional security status (Nkomoki *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, implementing land tenure reforms can have different impacts on livelihoods. On the one hand, land tenure can improve land equity, enhance productivity and augment the assets of the poor thereby improving food security, reducing poverty and the potential for social unrest at national level (Binswanger *et al.*, 1995). On the other hand, tenure reform may be a major cause of civil wars and revolts due to disputes over land, given its position in the livelihoods of smallholder farmers (Deininger and Feder, 1998). In addition, tenure reforms that create overlapping (dual ownership)

land rights like in Uganda have been found to significantly discourage both short and long-term investments on land (Deininger and Ayalew, 2007). This, therefore, implies that tenure reform has direct impacts on food security given that legitimacy over land has implications for land use, investments and distribution of revenues that accrue from utilization of land (Berry, 2001).

Given the direct impacts of land tenure on food security, it is imperative to explicitly discover key policy issues and the linkages between land tenure and food/nutritional security. These policy issues should adequately consider the unique land relations that exist among different categories such as gender, widowed, small landed and landless farmers and non-agricultural households. Additionally, it is also important to identify the potential benefits and constraints of land tenure to food security of key stakeholders in agricultural production and key policy recommendations to national governments.

Description of land tenure and food security approach

Land tenure

In Uganda, there exist a number of land tenure systems which range from freehold, customary, leasehold and statutory allocations. The evolution of land tenure systems is mainly attributed to the advent of colonialism. This evolution was characterized by a movement away from the customary tenure system to private ownership. Under private ownership, an individual has absolute control, management, use and disposal of land without any sanctions (ECA, 2009). The major criticism that has arisen out of the evolution of the tenure systems has been the unequal distribution of land among people thereby creating a class of landlords and tenants (Deininger and Ayalew, 2007; ECA, 2009).

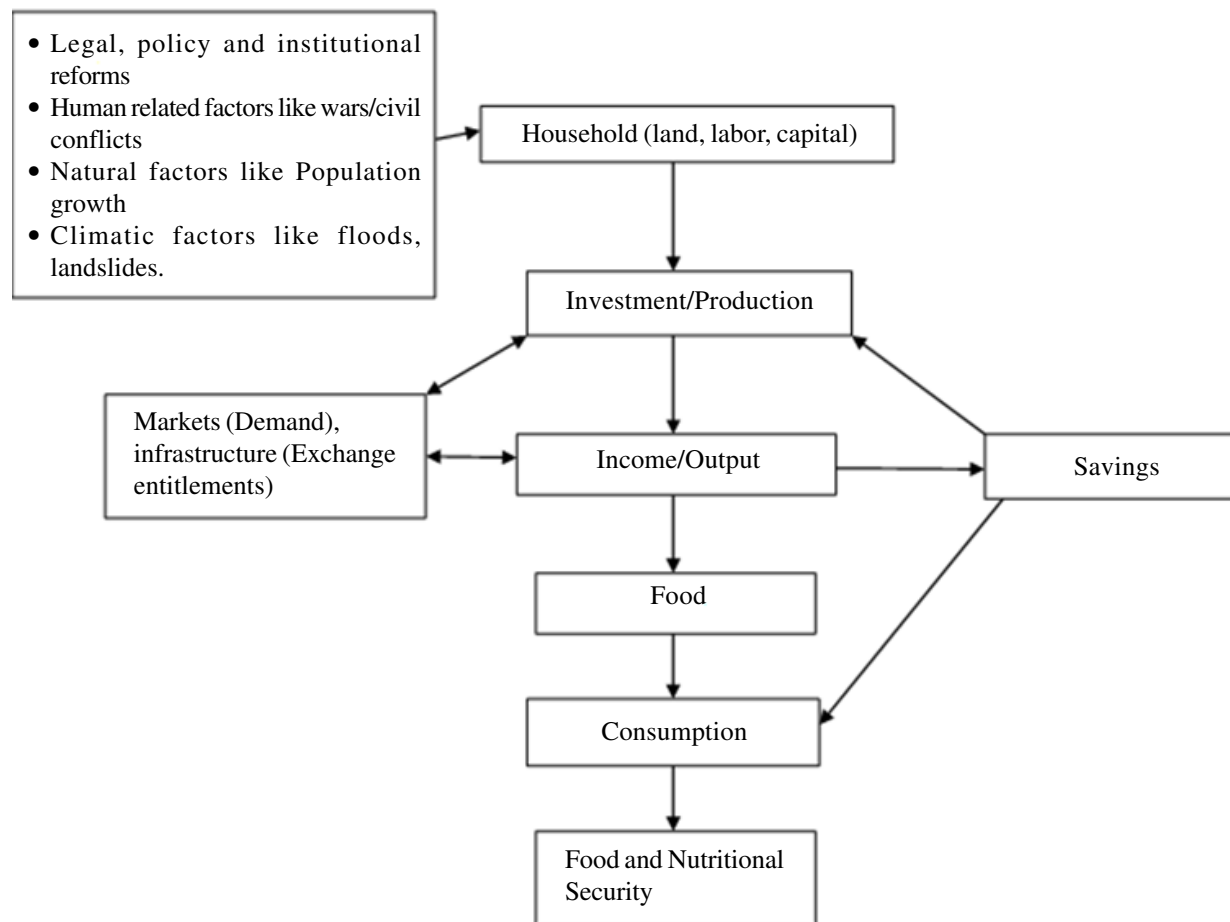
In a bid to address the above land inequalities various models were proposed while implementing tenure reforms. These models aimed at removing land inequalities in order to foster agricultural investments. While other countries (for instance Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe) used market-based redistribution of land from larger landholders to small landholders; , or making land decrees over land by the state such as what was done in Ethiopia and in Uganda formal legislation was used to enable the landless acquire land (Deininger and Ayalew, 2007). Despite, this implementation there has been significant criticism of the said reforms for not truly benefiting those who are in the greatest need (Borras and Saturnino, 2007). This is expected to not only affect agricultural growth and development but also have implications on food and nutritional security.

Food security

Food security is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is defined in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability of food at all levels including intra-household, household, local, national, regional and global levels. Food availability implies that the right amount of adequate quality food is available on a sustainable and consistent basis from all sources of food, that is, food production sources, market sources (where it is purchased), or received from relatives, friends and other sources (food aid inclusive). Food access is the ability of countries, communities and individuals to use economic, legal, political, or social entitlement to resources to obtain the food necessary for a nutritious diet while food utilization requires knowledge of nutrition aspects and accessibility to complementary resources, like clean water, sanitation, and health care, to ensure that food consumed meets dietary needs for a healthy life (Roth, 2013). Stability of food exists when food availability, access and utilization are consistent rather than temporary or subject to fluctuations (FCRN, 2018). On the other hand, food insecurity is when people do not physically, socially or economically access food in adequate quantities to meet their dietary needs at all times. In Uganda, food insecurity is mainly transitory and chronic in nature. Transitory food insecurity is mainly due to failure of households to adjust in presence of a production or income shock. In Uganda this also includes periods when there is prolonged and steady influx of refugees (FAO and OPM, 2018). Chronic food insecurity on the other hand is when there is persistent failure of a household to produce or acquire adequate foods (Gladwin *et al.*, 2001).

Land tenure and food security approach

As per Figure 1, we have an agricultural household that has its own resources - land, labor and capital. We assume that a change in tenure reform that is favorable to the household in terms of tenure security is made by government. Specifically, it is important to note that security of tenure, not ownership, is the decisive factor (Kasimbazi, 2017). As a result of the tenure stability, the household undertakes agricultural production by growing a number of crops. In presence of functioning markets, the household is able to access improved inputs like improved seed, fertilizers, pesticides and advisory services/information, among others. The farmer then realizes output. This output can either be used as food for the household or can be sold to the market through trade to obtain income (this is aided by the presence of a market which stimulates demand for the products). If a decision is made to sell the produce in the market, the household can decide to use part of the income to obtain food from the market and satisfy their consumption needs. Through consumption, the household obtains the nutrients that are needed for a healthy life. It is important to note that in this flow, production meets the component of making the food available; the market makes the food accessible/affordable while consumption caters for utilization of the food to obtain the necessary nutrients for an active and healthy life. The continuity/



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Figure 1. Theoretical functional Land tenure and Food Security system. Source: Authors' own conceptualization.

consistency of the production and market cycles to make food available in sufficient quantities at all times leads to stability of food supply. As such, through the functioning of markets, consumption and production cycles, the four components of food security (availability, accessibility, utilization and consistency) can be attained.

Consumption also leads to an improvement in labor productivity because household members consume the necessary nutrients which improve their health and wellbeing. Improved health leads to reduced health care costs and improved productivity on the job. It is also important to note, that it is unlikely for the household to utilize all the output and income. Part of it is saved either for future consumption or for investment in agricultural and/or non-agricultural activities. The household may also dis-save in case of a production failure due to drought/floods/ pests or due to an income shock in order to meet its consumption and dietary needs. This ultimately leads to improved food security at the household level.

On the side of a non-agricultural household, if the tenure reform improves the household's tenure security then there may be investment by the household in different activities. For example, the household may decide to invest its labor in non-farm activities. This helps it to generate income which is used to access the food from the market for household consumption/utilization from which household members can then be able to acquire the necessary nutrients which improve labor productivity. As such, in making consumption decisions, consumers take into account their future productivity, and not just immediate satisfaction. Consumption in this case is an investment in the household labor (Maxwell and Wiebe, 1999), as opposed to labor being the determinant of consumption (Seng, 2015). Just like for the agricultural household, a non-agricultural household is also likely to save the surplus income for re-investment to accumulate more wealth and will also dis-save when it experiences an income shock.

It is imperative to note that the assumption on which the above discussions are premised is that a given tenure reform brings equitable distribution of benefits to all households regardless of gender, size of landholding and land ownership. However, if the reform fails to ensure equitable distribution of benefits, then food security for the adversely affected groups will be undermined and therefore incidences of under nutrition, malnutrition and famine will prevail among the losers. We also note that land tenure has direct linkages with the production of food which is the process that makes food available for the household (USAID, 2016); thus, tenure arrangements have various impacts on agricultural productivity and food security. Moreover, since land tenure has various consequences on the expectations and perceptions of land holders, this may have a direct effect on how farms are managed (Place and Migot-Adholla, 1998), thereby resulting not only into efficiency but also food security sustainability

consequences. Therefore, the incentives that farmers receive from the land tenure reforms may motivate them to undertake long term investments in agriculture which will then influence the pace and potential for food security as well as agriculture development in SSA. This is especially true as the global imperative to improve food security and promote economic development is driving some countries to actively support investment in large-scale commercial agricultural production (USAID, 2016).

Land tenure policy issues related to food security

- a) Land tenure may bring about equity issues in the distribution of land among the different categories of farmers. This may have serious food security implications on the farmers who are marginalized by the tenure reform. This was the case in Zimbabwe where politically motivated tenure reforms allocated 7.3 million hectares of land to black farmers (Rukuni, 2006). These inequitable considerations in land allocation resulted into recurrent food deficits at the national level and by the time of the 2008 food crisis, Zimbabwe was one of the countries with the highest levels of food insecurity and famine which even sparked off riots (Berazneva and Lee, 2011).
- b) Land tenure brings about policy issues in gender. If the tenure reform gives more land rights to one gender against another then this is likely to have implications for household food security. In Uganda, females are mainly in charge of ensuring food availability in the household and also taking care of child feeding. If a tenure reform marginalizes females, this will have serious ramifications not only in terms of food security but also on the nutritional status of the household members especially children. Thus, tenure reform ought not to be gender-blind.
- c) Tenure reform that discourages land investments will also lead to under development of markets (land, labor, capital and commodity markets). This would lead to reduced revenue of landless households (who mainly sell their labor) resulting into malnutrition of their children and ultimately famine. Lack of markets results in exchange failure which may affect the food and nutritional status of households that have money/assets and would like to exchange them for food items in the markets.
- d) Tenure reform that caters for population changes over time and ensures redistribution of land to new households that are landless will help ensure that food production is matched with population growth. This shall ensure food availability and access at the national level thereby promoting nation-wide food security. This is especially true in instances where borders are porous and the influx of refugees is high,

brought about by civil strife in neighboring countries, resulting in high population pressure on available land resources.

- e) Tenure reform can also have impacts on poverty reduction. If the reform enhances tenure security, households will invest in production, which will result in increased output, increases in income, savings and investment, thus avoiding the vicious circle of poverty. Increased income enhances the households' purchasing power to access food.
- f) When tenure reform enhances investment on the land, it leads to development of markets which also leads to creation of employment opportunities. People generate income which they can use to purchase food which improves peoples' wellbeing and also ultimately improves productivity on their jobs. This not only reduces health care costs but also increases government revenue through wider tax bases.
- g) Tenure reform also has policy implications for natural resource management/ degradation and public resources/collectively owned resources such as grazing lands, wetlands and forests. For instance, recognition of pastoral and agro-pastoral cultural institutions in management of common grazing land and protection of mobility routes enhances pastoral systems and conserves the natural resources in such arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) (Waiswa *et al.*, 2019).

Potential benefits and constraints of land tenure to food security

Tenure reform can provide secure property rights to households which can be used to carry out agricultural production and thereby directly impacting on food security and poverty reduction. This is true in most communities of Uganda where agriculture is the main economic activity and a major employer of the majority of the population. Therefore, tenure reform that improves access to land enables poor households to secure an agricultural output which can be used both as food supplies and generating household income (Quan, 2006). Additionally, land can both be used to solve household liquidity constraints through using it as collateral for credit and a buffer against shocks like production failures and exchange failures. Maxwell and Wiebe (1999) and Holden and Ghebru (2018) note that households that have secure tenure are less vulnerable to production and income shocks. However, it is important to note that the degree of vulnerability against the shock will differ among households depending on the value of wealth that a particular household possesses. Asset-poor households are likely to be more vulnerable to shocks, hence affecting their livelihood in general compared to asset-rich households (Baumann, 2002; Shoba *et al.*, 2013). Thus, if the tenure reform enhances access to land by the poor, then such vulnerability is likely to be reduced (IFAD, 2015). Moreover, the marginal reduction in vulnerability

is expected to be higher for asset-poor households compared to the asset-rich counterparts.

When there is security of tenure, land provides a basis for food production and employment opportunity for agricultural households. This is especially so if the household has sufficient family labor to till the land. With the presence of markets, a household can then sell the marketable surplus to obtain income which can then be used to acquire other household necessities. In this context, land access enhances household's food/nutritional security and general wellbeing (Binswanger and Deininger, 1999; Cotula et al., 2006). In communities where agriculture is the only economic activity, land provides the basis for accessing food and income through agricultural production (Quan, 2006). Household income can then be enhanced through selling household labor on other larger farms.

Through equitable redistribution of land across farmer and gender categories, land tenure reforms can lead to improved living standards and food security levels of poor and subsistence households. For example, through equitable land re-distribution there is even concentration of land among the different classes of people which enhances investment on the land (FAO, 2002). Additionally, such even distribution of land eliminates social tensions and civil unrest among the population and enhances greater cooperation among members of the community. This is because conflict is one of the major contributors to food insecurity arising from displacement of people and disruption of agricultural production activities on the land (FAO, 2002). In such instances, redistribution reform alone may improve food security across the community (Jacobs, 1998) especially if those reforms promote rural development by raising agricultural productivity and creating a class of productive smallholder farmers (Cotula *et al.*, 2006).

Land tenure reform can decrease both economic and food security inequality among different members of the community. For example, this can be achieved if the reform strengthens the local institutions which are used to provide security to all community members. This has already been found to work efficiently across many societies under communal land tenure systems (Platteau, 1996).

Land tenure systems may potentially impact on agricultural investment and productivity through their effect on land access, utilization and farm sizes. This is especially so when the land occupants are skeptical of a future land reform. For example, the size of land holdings was found to be inversely related to agricultural productivity in subsistence agricultural production systems (Patel *et al.*, 1995). This implies that farmers would be less likely to take on technologies that require land improvements. As such, the impact of land reform would make farmers realize low yields thus making

them vulnerable to shocks, food insecurity and under nutrition. This would then have serious ramifications for labor productivity leading to increased health costs.

Where land tenure results in inequitable distribution of land among the different classes of people, gender inequality and landlessness may increase across many communities. For example, if the redistribution reform places the ownership of land in hands of the males, females' incomes are likely to reduce because of limited access to land due to loss of control, limited access to raw materials that are linked to land and loss of economic opportunities. This is also true when the proceeds from land sales or from land compensation is handled by males (Oxfam, 2019). The result is likely to undermine the food security of females and the households in general given that women constitute 70% of agricultural production labor force and are charged with the primary responsibility of sourcing for food and caring for the children in many African households (Jacobs, 2002). Therefore, institutional changes that reduce females' access to land are more likely to undermine household food security (El-Ghonemy, 2001). Land tenure reform has also been noted to increase both economic and food security inequality among different members of the society (Oxfam, 2019). For example, land registration is more likely to weaken local institutions which used to provide economic and food security to all members of the community and prevent such differentiation from rising (Hilhorst, 2000). Moreover, when the reform is not well planned, negative effects may result. For instance, Valente (2009) showed a negative effect of land redistribution through land grants on the food security situation of subsistence households in South Africa.

Another constraint of tenure reform on food security is attributed to the argument that tenure reform in Africa has led to increased concentration of land among a few individuals and landlessness for the majority of the smallholders (Migot-Adholla, 1994; IFAD, 2015). This is especially so because of lack of connections to the political hierarchy (Kasimbazi, 2017). This has been observed in areas where land displacements have been carried out for large scale non-agricultural investments especially in Western Uganda (Oxfam, 2019) and in north Eastern Uganda. Elsewhere in many African countries like Zimbabwe the benefits of the 2002 land redistribution reform went to veterans and military personnel as opposed to the many smallholder farmers in the country sides. The possible explanation for this comes from the collective action model by Olson (1965) that enables a few individuals to lobby government to have the reform in their favor. Few individuals take advantage of easy mobilization, communication and with absence of no free riding; this would enable them to get the policy in their favor. This undermines the productivity, livelihoods and food security of many smallholder farmers, and is one of the reasons why Zimbabwe suffered greatly during the 2008 food crisis.

Land tenure systems that create future uncertainty on tenure security of land most especially through alienation of land may result in loss of livelihood and food insecurity of such communities (Maxwell and Wiebe, 1999). When faced with shocks, such households easily sell off their assets thereby increasing their vulnerability to future shocks. Moreover, such sales are mainly distress-sales which may not be reversed when land markets are non-existent. While the wealthier households benefit from such sales the poorer households lose out completely and their vulnerability to food insecurity crises is further enhanced (Mamdani, 1987, IFAD, 2015). As noted by Maxwell and Wiebe (1999) and Baumann (2002), land tenure is a long term determinant of a household's vulnerability to food insecurity with or without a food crisis.

Recommendations

Land reform processes are strategic imperatives for stimulating food security among many households in Uganda. Since many households are dependent on agriculture for livelihoods and given the direct linkages between land, agriculture and food security, revival and/or stimulation of the agricultural sector will have direct linkages to the resolution of all land reform outstanding issues. Effecting equitable land reform tenure systems and strengthening property rights will continue to be a critical factor in the fight against food insecurity, famine and poverty. However, this will only be achieved if appropriate interventions that cater for the interest of all stakeholders in the tenure reforms in addition to coming up with viable strategies for addressing past land conflicts, injustices and compensation mechanisms. Catering for the more vulnerable and marginalized classes in the tenure reforms will be a big step towards making them contribute to and benefit from the growing economic opportunities.

Given the potential of the agricultural sector in increasing economic growth and incomes and in reducing poverty, malnutrition and hunger, there is an urgent need for the government of Uganda to devise mechanisms on how tenure security can improve agricultural productivity. Without deliberate efforts to address issues of land tenure security and property rights, any investments in food security policy may be undermined and /or comprised.

Given the position of women in agriculture and in the Ugandan households, there is need to address all issues of gender inequality and discrimination on all matters of land tenure and property rights issues. This will entail taking a great deal more careful efforts to look at all issues that disenfranchise women's rights to land ownership, inheritance and rights of access to use of land and other natural resources. Addressing the above issues will not only enhance the women's access to economic resources

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but also enhance household agricultural productivity, food security and avert any malnutrition related incidences (Quisumbing and Maluccio 2002; Allendorf, 2006).

The increasing importance of land tenure and property rights in averting food insecurity, malnutrition and hunger at all levels demonstrates the urgent need for national governments to directly align food security policy with land tenure reform policies. Such policy interventions shall not only help improve the livelihoods of rural smallholders but will also help to keep the hope and future of Ugandans alive.

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