

Exploring the Africa Learning Route

The representative of the ILC Asia focal point for women, Ms. Rowshan Jahan Moni was granted the opportunity to participate in the Africa Learning Route organised in Uganda and Kenya in March 2010. In this article, she shares her experiences and reflections on the issues women face in Africa and civil society's responses. Asian CSOs working on land rights can learn from the experiences of their African counterparts.

Background

The purpose of the 'Action-Oriented Research and Policy Influence for Women's Access to Land in Africa' Learning Route was to analyse the main obstacles to and opportunities for women's access to land in Africa. ILC organised the event jointly with PROCASUR and Uganda Land Alliance on 8 – 16 March 2010, incorporating a plan to visit ILC supported projects in various districts in Uganda and Kenya. Participants consisted mostly of African ILC members. In addition, representatives from Bolivia (Latin America) and Bangladesh (Asia) were present, and are expected to take the lead roles in promoting women's access to land in their respective regions. The Association for Land Reform and Rural Development (ALRD) is the focal point for Asia.

Learning Route is a methodology involving peer-to-peer approaches through workshops, interviews, conversations and other infield activities in which the local actors become the trainers. It is a capacity building tool that includes spaces for exchange, analysis and reflections in a continuous process of training.

The Learning Route participants visited different projects implemented both in Uganda and Kenya targeting the protection of women's land rights. The projects deal with a range of women's rights issues seen as crucial in the African context. The most noteworthy ones include: ensuring that women secure land title deeds; the successful enforcement of the Spousal Consent Clause of the 1998 Land Act in Uganda's Kayunga district; the valiant Women Watch Dog Groups on human rights violations against women in the Gatundu district of Kenya; the high-impact Young Widows Advancement Program spearheading women's empowerment in and around Nairobi. These are but a few examples; community-specific success stories abound. The thriving initiatives of the Uganda and Kenya Land Alliances in bringing different actors together in pursuing women's land rights issues through a coordinated approach are also laudable.

Based on the presentation and paper of Ms. Rowshan Jahan Moni, Deputy Director of ALRD. As Asia focal point Ms. Jahan participated in the Africa Learning Route.

Problems that Need Redress

African women face serious challenges, because of male dominance, disintegration among different tribal communities, the lack of social capital, and a strong sense of tribal identity over national identity, to name a few. Statutory laws granting women access to land are either weak or non-functional, whereas customary practice on women's land ownership hardly favours women. Take the common practice of polygamy, irrespective of class and community, which has resulted in widespread HIV/AIDs. Infected husbands leave behind infected widows, who must fight against poverty and hunger, while taking care of their many children, often numbering between 5 and 10. As wives generally do not inherit their husband's property – with the exception of the first wife and her son, in most cases they are chased away from their husbands' homes and lands. Sometimes the first wife is not spared either from such evictions. This is one illustration of how denial of women and girl's land rights (as customarily, female children have no rights to inherit parental lands) is deeply rooted in African society. The existing social system and its practices make addressing women's rights all the more difficult.

Fierce unending tribal conflicts, civil conflicts and war, have also escalated the suffering and internal displacement of different communities in Africa. The impact on women among internally displaced people (IDPs) is alarmingly

negative. Women living in camps have become the worst victims of rape, forced and early marriage and other forms of sexual violence. During the last presidential and parliamentary election in 2007, massive violence erupted in Kenya, a complicated issue that remains to be resolved. A National Accord was signed and a program by the Kenyan Government was launched, embarking on a process called "Operation Rudi Nyumbani" meaning 'Operation Return Home.' However, this process has allegedly become a forced repatriation of displaced communities. No effectual measures have been taken for their protection, security and reintegration into their respective communities. The greater emphasis on tribal identity over national identity has slowed down the social capital building process.

Moreover, corruption in government agencies dealing with land and related issues remains rampant, which only exacerbates the already disheartening situation women face in terms of access to land.

There is also the issue of underutilised land. Women could productively use parcels of fertile lands in Uganda and Kenya for agriculture. Unfortunately, communities have not been entirely supportive of women farmers' initiatives. Thus, women's opportunities contract, while their rights are not fully realised. This has made hunger and poverty worse.

Hope for a Better Future

The Ugandan and Kenyan Governments as well as CSOs supported by ILC

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and coordinated by Procasur are undertaking special initiatives and processes towards bringing more equity and justice in the arena of women's land rights, as follows:

- Kenya is undergoing the process of drafting its new Constitution and Land Reform Policy. The Kenya Land Alliance is effectively engaged in this process so that women's rights in general and land rights in particular are well articulated.
- Women are becoming more aware of their rights. To ensure their voices are heard at the policy level, they are organising themselves under several umbrella groups, and planning and implementing activities, many of which are supported by ILC.
- Information flow is being ensured, resulting in strengthened linkages and networks, which in turn bear the fruits of women's confidence, enhanced bargaining capacity and the tackling of various land rights issues.
- The proactive involvement of male counterparts in the processes of ensuring justice to women positively indicates increasing social capital in some communities, which can eventually help mobilise the whole community towards a better and sustained future.

Team members of the Learning Route recommended that ILC include of climate change and commercial pressures on land besides providing further support to activities relating to women's empowerment in Africa.

A Wake Up Call

The Learning Route was overall a successful experience that brought a diverse group of people together to discuss a common advocacy, and ended up being an eye opener for many participants. Continuing the learning route process will definitely bring positive changes in the lives of women in Africa, as well as in other parts of the globe. For my part, I was amazed to see those courageous women, mostly widows living with HIV/AIDS, asserting their rights and control over lands to fight poverty and hunger, and feeding their children. Their experiences of working with long-term forward-looking strategies to overcome challenges in their embattled lives will inspire women in other parts of the globe to take a step towards achieving their land rights. I salute them. ■