

Enhancing Women's Access to Land through Land Restoration Policies and Programs

Iyenemi Ibimina KAKULU, Nigeria, and Kate FAIRLIE, Australia

Key words: Land redistribution, Land restoration, women's land access,

SUMMARY

Land degradation arising from man-made and natural courses, is on the rise globally. It further aggravated and accelerated by climate change and extreme weather events. While there are implications about the growing crises of land degradation on property investment and the property development sector, there are also land ownership and tenure issues associated with the phenomenon. Issues such as capital value diminution from incessant flooding and inundation of residential and commercial neighbourhoods, or complete erosion of investment capital through climate induced land disasters. Either way, land tenure is impacted and people, particularly women's access to land and tenure security can be compromised through the loss of land and land rights as a result of land degradation. Land restoration is currently being deployed across the globe to address and reverse land degradation. The [Land Degradation Neutrality Fund](#) (LDN) offers finance for the rehabilitation of degraded land and sustainable business models used on land affected or at risk of degradation. This funding presents an indirect opportunity for women's increased access to land because of the potential for economic empowerment that they can leverage upon by actively participating in financed land restoration projects. It also presents a direct opportunity for women to be at the forefront of environmental restoration projects if their capacity is enhanced to enable them do so. Another possible outcome of land restoration is the fact that restored land can be redistributed so that more people gain access to the same land after its restoration. Such redistributive benefits of land restoration can be factored into land degradation neutrality funding and can further narrow the current gaps that exist in terms of ownership. Generally, in many parts of the world and Africa in particular, there is on-going and strong advocacy for gender equality within the context of land access and land ownership. Through a policy driven redistribution options tied to land restoration financing, more women can gain access to land. The mechanism by which land redistribution can be explored further is the thrust of this paper.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to end poverty, conserve biodiversity, combat climate change and improve livelihoods for everyone, everywhere. These objectives, encapsulated in 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are unlikely to be met unless ecosystem degradation is stopped and ecosystem restoration is undertaken at the immense scale of hundreds of millions of hectares globally (UN Environment, n.d.). On 1 March 2019, under Resolution 73/284 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/73/284>, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2021–2030 to be the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (hereafter referred to as the UN Decade), with the primary aim being to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide. As different interest and pressure groups around the world take action to address ecosystem degradation, with special emphasis on terrestrial ecosystems and land in particular, there is the need to address the available opportunities for gender inclusivity and empowerment in land restoration, ensuring that no one is left behind. When selecting assessment criteria for land restoration, it's important to consider the land tenure regimes present in the area which should include the ownership structures and who has access to land either seasonally for farming, statutory titles such as leasehold or freehold ownership. It is also crucial to ascertain if local landowners are interested in the subject of restoration, and whether there are any conflicts over the land that are the subject of restoration.

Land degradation is used in the context of this paper as an umbrella term for degradation of terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems. It has different systems, types and degradation occurs in different parts of the world with diverse socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-ecological contexts. Land degradation impacts women's access to land as it does men, but the extent to which women are impacted is more pronounced owing to decades of exclusion in societies where the priority for land ownership is in favour of the men. Land degradation reduces the overall quantity of land available for future generations. The marginalized or minority in decision-making on issues to do with land may suffer exclusion or be impacted disproportionately.

2 LAND DEGRADATION

Land degradation and restoration has terminology and definitions that may sometimes be confusing. In 1994, the UNCCD adopted, as the definition of land degradation as the reduction

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or loss, in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, of the biological or economic productivity and complexity of rainfed cropland, irrigated cropland, etc. ([IPBES, 2018:5](#)). ¹Land degradation is characterized by a general decline or loss of biodiversity and/or ecosystem functions and includes the many processes that drive the decline or loss in biodiversity, ecosystem function or services. Degradation of freshwater and coastal ecosystems that are closely connected to terrestrial ecosystems. With special reference to terrestrial environments such as forests, meadows, or partially forested areas, what is common about them is the fact that they all provide ecosystem services for human settlements to exist. Land degradation can also exist in different forms and to various degrees of intensity ([IPBES, 2018](#))

Trees and vegetation regulate local climate, enhance the ability of rainfall to recharge groundwater, and enhance air quality by getting rid of pollutants. Healthy soils support vegetation growth, waste recycling and also sequester carbon which is necessary to mitigate climate change. Habitat connectivity is also crucial for species movement in different stages of life and growth which implies that corridors for species movement must be preserved as they are often destroyed by large scale deforestation for housing, infrastructure development and large-scale agriculture. If terrestrial ecosystems continue to be degraded without maintaining some form of equilibrium, the quality of life in human settlements whether in urban or rural settings will be compromised. Ecosystem services have to be preserved and land restoration action is a viable option.

3 LAND RESTORATION

At the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) Conference of the parties (COP) held in December 2016, the parties agreed on short-term action plans in Ecosystem restoration. They adopted a flexible framework, adaptable to national circumstances for achieving internationally agreed goals, targets and commitments under various Conventions. The key activities of the short-term action plan include the assessment of opportunities for restoration by determining the extents, type, degree and location of degraded lands. Several of these roles can be filled by surveying and land management professionals. Land restoration is also defined as any intentional activity that initiates or accelerates the recovery of an ecosystem from a degraded state ([IPBES, 2018:5-6](#)).

The term restore by implication makes an innate assumption about the return of something to what it once was or to a previous state at some point in its history. In the context of land, it can be quite difficult to describe the historical state or to fix a reference date because within the natural phenomena of weather or weathering, the previous state of land is constantly changing. Global warming also accelerates this change. Restoration is hinged on baselines, more especially, natural baselines. These could be pre-modern natural baselines or counterfactual natural baselines and historical baselines. What is key within the context of land restoration is

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the baseline or reference point that are established. This affects target setting by restoration efforts for what is to be achieved by the restoration efforts in the future. There are however challenges of inclusivity in land restoration emanating from women's limited access to land historically.

4 WOMEN'S ACCESS TO LAND AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Historically, where land ownership of currently degraded lands was originally dominated by men, this might perpetuate women's exclusion from the economic empowerment opportunities that land restoration projects might have to offer. Historically, when compared with men, women have had limited access to land in various societies. In a restoration context, the chance that women would get a seat along with land owners to discuss upcoming restoration projects, design and implement them, is quite slim because due to stereotypes or other cultural norms, they might not own land. There needs to be policies in place to ensure their participation in other ways, irrespective of the fact that they do not own land. The reasoning behind this is that most restoration projects are not funded by the private resources of the original land owners. They are usually funded through publicly generated funds, to which women might have contributed indirectly through taxes and other levies over time. The deployment of public funds to restoration projects or other globally sourced funds presents an opportunity for gender equality in the opportunities that these projects have to offer. The future of restored land or land that is set on the path of recovery opens up opportunities for more equitable distribution or redistribution of land, improving women's access to it.

5 WOMEN AS STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS IN LAND RESTORATION

Land tenure and land restoration are closely linked, with actions in one area often affecting the other. This interrelationship is known as the tenure-restoration nexus. In order to proceed from the current condition of degraded land to a desired future is a complex process which includes policies, programs and projects. Some of these programs and projects by design or during implementation may or may not be inclusive or offer equal opportunity. A key component of land restoration is the engagement of stakeholders in decision-making about the project. Top on the list of critical stakeholders are the original land owners. Their involvement throughout the process from initiation to completion and achievement of the set goals and future desired state is crucial.

The engagement with land owners presents an invaluable opportunity to ascertain historical land ownership and the percentage of such lands that were actually owned by women and what opportunities there are for them to make any meaningful contribution towards the execution of these projects. As decision-making for restoration shapes the process, the chances of inclusivity

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and equal opportunity may yet exclude those who do not have a seat in decision-making, or who represent an insignificant minority.

6 SCENARIO-SETTING FOR LAND REDISTRIBUTION

Land restoration presents indirect and direct opportunities for land redistribution. In this section, 5 possible hypothetical scenarios are presented detailing how women can gain access to land through active engagement in the land restoration industry. There is the need to explore different scenarios for increasing women's access to land through land restoration initiatives. Scenario-setting will uncover if it is possible to redistribute restored land as a part of the costs of land restoration or if women can be empowered through restoration.

Four hypothetical scenarios are presented below as possible options as well as justification for engaging women in land restoration:

6.1 Scenario 1 – Creating Land Redistribution Banks

- Identify degraded lands, currently with little or no utility value and possibly useless to society in terms of biodiversity, but, possess the potential for a more productive use – post-restoration.
- The original land owners may not have the financial or technical resources now, or in the near future, to fund the required restoration that will unlock the degraded land's productive potential for a desired realistic future use.
- That the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) funds and other similar funding mechanisms are available, and can be accessed by land owners through their governments, at a cost which can be offset by giving up a small fraction of the restored in return for the funds accessed.
- That the fraction of land redeemed and part of the proceeds from the funding may be domiciled in a land redistribution bank and made available for purchase or some form of coordinated allocation to the marginalized, including women in the local community. This can close the gap in land access and particularly to increase women's access to land.
- That the restored land may also be used for public housing schemes or development projects or site and services projects and women prioritized in its allocation or sale.

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6.2 Scenario 2 – Policy formulation for Women’s Participation in Restoration Projects

- In this scenario, policies which ensure women’s participation in decision-making for restoration projects, irrespective of whether they are land owners or not, is a first step. This is important for publicly funded restoration projects.
- This scenario creates an opportunity for gender inclusion in the overall design of restoration projects thereby creating employment opportunities that women can take advantage and become active players.
- Ultimately, women’s employment on restoration projects can lead to women’s economic empowerment and financial independence. Women will have the resources to enable them purchase land.
- This will increase women’s access to land as a direct benefit of active participation in land restoration.

6.3 Scenario 3 – Capacity Development for Restoration

- Restoration projects can offer employment opportunities to men and women owing to the variety and broad range of roles and complexity of skills required to perform restoration.
- Owing to skill shortages on land restoration, women and other groups may be unable to participate in restoration projects without capacity development in place.
- By proactively designing and delivering capacity building and skills enhancement training programs on land restoration skills set, this will empower women and make them able to take advantage of opportunities presented by the land restoration industry.
- Equipped with the necessary skills and where an enabling environment of inclusivity is created through policy and in place, women can gain financial independence with which to purchase land and property

6.4 Scenario 4 – Program Development to Halt land Degradation

- By taking steps to halt and reverse land degradation, restoration is achieved in terms of the net available land.

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- By initiating programs to address the triggers of global warming and climate change that fuel land degradation, economic empowerment opportunities can be created for women.
- Increased financial independence can increase land purchasing power by women.

7 CONCLUSION

There are a number of options to improve women's empowerment and increase their access to land. One of the avenues through which women can increase access to land for use and ownership is by active involvement and participation in the land restoration industry employing any of the scenarios suggested above. There are several agencies working to build capacity globally for land restoration. The UNCCD [G20 Global Land Initiative Coordination Office](#) has floated a series of [capacity development programmes](#) that are designed to develop capacity for people to understand the opportunities that they can leverage upon to become actively involved in the restoration industry. There are large expanses of derelict and degraded lands that can be rehabilitated and restored by women through Cooperatives and collaborative action. This will increase land availability and enable more women gain access to such lands. Land redistribution can be one of the positive outcomes of land restoration in addition to ecosystem benefits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges the support of the UNCCD G20 Global Land Initiative.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu is a Professor of Land Management and Valuation of the Rivers State University in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She is a Senior Expert on Gender and Land with the G20 Global Land Initiative Coordination Office. Prof Kakulu has an academic background in Real Estate appraisal and planning with over thirty-eight years in academia. She is a specialist in value-centric sustainable land use and is widely published. She has been instrumental to the development of postgraduate programmes that address sustainable land management, pro-poor approaches to land use and gender equality issues. Prof Kakulu has held leadership positions within the Nigerian University system, served on different academic and professional governing boards and councils. She is a Senior Expert with the G20 GLI Coordination Office.

CONTACTS

Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu

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Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo
Port Harcourt
NIGERIA
kakulu.iyenemi@ust.edu.ng
ikakulu@unccd.int

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