

A Note on Food Security and Land Tenure Security in Lesotho

Stephen Turner and Martin Adams, 5 December 2004

Some definitions

Food security refers to ‘access by all people at all times to sufficient food for an active and healthy life’.¹

Land tenure security refers to secure access by, and land rights for, people who wish to use and occupy land for diverse purposes.

Note that, while everyone needs food security, not everyone wishes to use and occupy land for food production. However, the great majority of people need secure access to land for accommodation (housing, business, etc.), even if it is held only in terms of a short term lease.

Reasons for holding land

In a market economy, land has many values other than its value for agriculture. For example, it often:

- has value as collateral, such that holding it may benefit non-agricultural enterprises owned by the same person or organisation;
- contributes to social prestige or political power;
- has value as a speculative asset, particularly in peri-urban areas, where future use for property development (low-income rentals – *malaene* in Sesotho) raises its value well above that derived from its agricultural usage;
- provides a better hedge against inflation than financial assets;
- is bound up with identity, membership of a particular community and ancestral and/or spiritual roots;
- fulfils a security, welfare or insurance role, for example where other livelihood options are foreclosed.

The last of these values is likely to be most important for low-income housing and/or small-scale farming, given the relatively few alternative sources of welfare or insurance that people on low incomes have, and it may indeed lead them to place a very high value on land. However, most of the other values (listed above) are most applicable to higher income owners and can provide them with strong reasons for holding on to land, to the exclusion of the poor.²

¹ Borrowed from ‘Food Security Program Proposal by the New Coalition for Food Security in Ethiopia’, Addis Ababa, 2003

² Based on observations by C. Poulton and J. Kydd of Wye College in a paper for DFID 2000.

Land tenure security and food security

It can be seen from the above definitions that food security depends on land tenure security in direct and indirect ways:

- those contributing to food security through their own food production need arable land tenure security;
- those contributing to food security through other economic activity usually need secure tenure of the land on which that activity takes place – either for themselves or for those controlling the activity on which their livelihoods and food security depend.

Both the direct and the indirect dependence on tenure security include the requirement for efficient, transparent and equitable land administration. Directly and indirectly, the ability to sustain a living on the land hinges on the strength of land rights, e.g.

- the right to occupy a homestead, a site for business or community purposes, to use land for crops, to make improvements, to graze animals and so on;
- the right to transact that land: to give, to mortgage, to bequeath, to rent areas of exclusive use;
- the right to exclude others;
- the right to enforcement of legal and administrative provisions in order to protect the rights of the holder.

Land and livelihoods in Lesotho

- Equitable distribution of land has been a key traditional strength of land tenure and livelihoods in Lesotho. But there is not enough arable land to be distributed on an equitable basis.
- About 40% of all households, and 30% of rural households, have no fields. Those who do have fields generally hold very little: usually one or two fields totalling one or two hectares.
- Typical holdings – where people have fields at all – are inadequate for anything approaching household food self sufficiency with the agricultural methods prevailing in the country³.
- There is no large land-owning class with extensive farms whose redistribution or better use would enhance overall food security.
- The contribution of farming to food security, though still important, is gradually declining. Decades of agricultural development projects have failed to reverse this trend. Most households, if they have land at all, can contribute to their food security by farming – but not achieve it. Increasingly, other economic activity – indirectly dependent on land access and tenure security – must be the basis for food security.

³ Turner, S.D., 2003. *The southern African food crisis. Lesotho literature review*. Maseru: CARE Lesotho.

Land tenure security and food security in Lesotho

Tenure insecurity is not the primary constraint on the contribution that farming can make to food security in Lesotho. *However:*

- women's access rights and widows' tenure security are inadequate;
- a minority of better-resourced, more productive farmers could contribute more to aggregate food security if they had better regulated, more secure access to additional land, either through market transactions (with the inevitable equity implications), enhanced sharecropping or other temporary transfers of use rights;
- arable tenure security and the efficiency of arable land use are currently impaired by the confused interim arrangements for land administration, pending implementation of local government and land reform laws (the former already enacted; the latter awaiting approval and dependent on implementation of the former);
- rural livelihoods and food security depend on community-based natural resource management structures that it would be socially and economically unwise to discard. Instead, their current decline needs to be reinforced by clearer communal tenure security, framed by clearer administrative arrangements. The sustainable land management provisions of the Land Husbandry Act (1969) are now widely disregarded.

Tenure insecurity is a primary constraint on the general economic growth in other, non-farm sectors on which food security in Lesotho increasingly depends:

- with increasing urbanisation (28% of the population in 2000; a projected 49% in 2030) and increasing livelihood dependence on secure urban land rights, the current insecurity of urban and peri-urban land access and rights is a major threat to food security;
- in urban and peri-urban settings, it is even more important to redress women's current land tenure insecurity;
- an increasingly urbanised economy cannot prosper, and the food security of a growing proportion of the population cannot be assured, unless the poor and the better off are able to invest securely in land improvements and productive land uses;
- with greater competition for land resources, increased mobility and specialisation, and the incorporation of rural areas into market economies, policies that secure the land rights of the poor in rural and urban areas will increase in importance;
- bank loans for much of the investment on which food security will increasingly depend require collateral underwritten by land tenure security that current arrangements fail to provide;
- all kinds of economic activity are hindered by the current failure to resolve land disputes efficiently, which aggravates tenure insecurity on all kinds of land;
- tenure security, and consequently food security, are inadequately protected by laws for appropriate compensation when people are arbitrarily deprived of residential, farming or other land use rights by the state;

- aggregate tenure security and food security are harmed by the current failure to control land hoarding and speculation;
- urban and peri-urban livelihoods and food security, and the economic growth they require, depend on orderly land allocation and infrastructure provision, both of which have been hindered by current tenure insecurity and poor administration of land in these sectors.

There is thus an urgent need to enact and implement legislation that will enhance land tenure security in Lesotho. These measures will make an essential contribution to the nation's food security.