

In Conversation:

Dzodzi Tsikata and Dede-Esi Amanor-Wilks speak with *Kujejatou Manneh-Jallow*¹

Dzodzi Tsikata and Dede-Esi Amanor-Wilks: Thank you for agreeing to talk to *Feminist Africa* about the ActionAid International Campaign on women's land rights in The Gambia. Can you tell us how you became interested in gender and land issues in Africa? What is it about these issues that motivate you?

Kujejatou Manneh-Jallow: I developed this interest during more than 30 years of working with women farmers, starting as a district extension worker and working through the ranks within the Ministry of Agriculture from 1974 to 1999. During this period, I coordinated the agricultural component of a multi-donor funded Women in Development Project for six years. I also worked as the Executive Director of the National Women Farmers' Association (NAWFA) for more than seven years. In addition, I wrote my PhD thesis on the *Management of Small-scale Women Farmers' Agricultural Projects in The Gambia*. The above experiences exposed me to the wide range of constraints affecting women farmers' production and productivity, among which women's ownership and control over farmland is core.

In The Gambia, women generally have access to farmland but very few have ownership and/or control, particularly in the uplands. This has become increasingly important with women's greater participation in the production of upland cash crops like groundnuts, sesame and upland rice. The uplands form the bulk of the farmland area in The Gambia. Almost all of these lands are controlled by men and women are only allowed user rights. Men would always allocate land to the women after they have selected all the land they can manage. The land allocated to the women is often of poor quality, very far away from their homes and allocation is often done late in the season. The latter is important because the rains last for only three months of the year. Thus it is important to start early in order to benefit optimally from the short rainy season in terms of increased production and productivity.

The lack of ownership has also made it difficult for women to invest

in improving the quality of land as there are no guarantees that the same land would be available to them in subsequent years. There was a series of incidents in which men would loan their land to women's village groups (*kafos*) supported with development projects, only to evict them when the site was fully developed. Recently in the peri-urban areas, men have been selling women's farmland for residential purposes, often without any notice or consultation. The women would just find themselves evicted from land they have worked on all their lives for their livelihoods. Often this land is the only or major source of income for them and their families.

Several studies have echoed the above concerns on women's land tenure in The Gambia. They revealed gender inequalities in the land tenure systems in The Gambia. These problems affected the implementation of a number of development projects. A good example was the 20 year land development programme for rice production by IFAD (1997–2005). According to this report, women who are the traditional rice growers in The Gambia do not own land and depend on land borrowed from the men. The report indicated that most of the lowland areas suitable for rice growing were owned and controlled by a small number of influential farmers, the original founder-settlers, who gave out the land on loan and took it back once the season was over – including land that had been improved during the season. This reduced the incentive for women and other landless farmers to invest in the land.

DT and DEAW: What is the AA Women's Right to Land campaign and how did it start?

KMJ: The ActionAid International (AAI) land campaign is part of its single international campaign which started in 2007. However, campaigning on land for women started in 2005, supported by both the Women's Rights and Food Rights themes. AAI joins social movements worldwide in calling for a new agrarian reform agenda, in which the state plays a central role, ensuring that land is established as a common public good and that its benefits are enjoyed equitably by women and men, regardless of race, class or ethnicity. It calls for activists and development workers to take up the question of women's land rights, and give women's land rights the place that they deserve in mainstream agendas for social justice and poverty eradication. AAI believes that land for rural people is the starting point for sustaining livelihoods and to live a life of dignity; and that lack of ownership and control over land is both a symptom and a cause of injustice. At a broader level, discrimination in land rights contributes to increased poverty, food insecurity, conflict and environmental degradation.

The campaign for women and land is necessitated by the fact that more than 25 years after the UN Declaration on the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obliges governments to guarantee women equal access to land and other resources, poor rural women in many countries have less access to land than ever.

In AAI's analysis, securing women's land rights requires that: action is taken on many fronts and not just on tenure reform; deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes which dictate that women cannot own property in their own right are challenged; cultural and legal norms that define wives and daughters as chattel are changed; legislation governing women's status within the household and society at large is urgently reformed and new laws to eliminate the discrimination that women currently face in matters of inheritance, widowhood, or divorce (with disastrous consequences for their dignity and well-being as well as that of their children) are put in place; and that the World Bank and other international lenders and donors stop pushing policies and schemes that have had disastrous consequences for poor rural women, including initiatives to privatise land and liberalise agriculture.

At the national level, ActionAid The Gambia's (AATG's) land campaign is aimed at ensuring that the 48,000 women farmers in NAWFA each has guaranteed access to and control of a minimum of 0.25 ha of good quality farmland with the ability to develop and manage it for increased production and productivity, using appropriate labour (drudgery) and time-saving technologies, with the possibility of year-round production using surface and underground irrigation.

DT and DEAW: What are the campaign's key messages and how were they generated?

KMJ: AATG's campaign messages, (which also resonate with campaign messages from other countries and at international levels) were generated from the many voices of desperate women farmers. In The Gambia and in 20 other countries where AAI works, women developed what we called Charters of Demands, and these essentially were the demands of women who depend on the mercy of their male folk for access to farmland. The charter from 20 ActionAid countries (including The Gambia) reads:

- Governments must dismantle all discriminatory policies and legislation in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- Where women have been unjustly deprived of land and other resources,

measures must be put in place for compensation and restitution;

- Governments and civil society groups should work together to develop programmes to sensitise and train government administrators and traditional leaders to deal fairly with women's claims to land;
- Policies for agrarian reform need to give priority to the needs and interests of women as farmers and economic actors in their own right, and particularly the needs and interests of the large number of female-headed households;
- National development strategies and macro-economic policies need to be reconsidered in light of the crucial importance of supporting small farming, and women's role in small farming, in order to eradicate poverty, achieve food security and generate sustained pro-poor growth;
- Small-scale farming properly supported with improved technologies has proven to be efficient contrary to the claims made by the modernisation theory;
- Fresh ideas and bold strategies for strengthening small and especially female producers and revitalising rural communities are urgently needed if international goals for eradicating poverty are to be achieved;
- Customary law should not be used to deprive women of land rights; practices that do so, including the widespread dispossession of widows in AIDS-afflicted countries, must be abolished. However, policy-makers and civil society groups must seek ways to reform customary and communal forms of tenure in order to secure the rights of women without losing the many benefits of vesting land rights in a collective or community rather than in individuals;
- Rural women must be supported to gain knowledge, voice and power in community and national decision-making. Priority should be given to increasing women's representation in local bodies overseeing land matters (village councils, committees etc.) and providing the necessary training to women office holders. At national level, governments must support forums where rural women engage one another in dialogue and put forward proposals to policy makers;
- As part of the reviews of World Bank and International Monetary Fund conditionality currently taking place, these institutions must thoroughly assess the gender-specific impact of their policies (especially their initiatives to promote private tenure, willing-buyer willing-seller markets in land, and export-led commercial farming) on poor rural women. Programmes and

policy conditions that undermine the rights and livelihoods of women must be rescinded.

DT and DEAW: Who are you targeting the campaign at and who are you involving as campaigners? Who are your allies and who else have you engaged with in your campaign?

KMJ: The AAI campaign at the international level targets governments, and regional and international bodies such as the United Nations, the Africa Union and the World Bank. At the local level, AATG targets women farmers (to increase awareness on rights and change attitudes to enable them lead in the campaign), land owners, local authorities (village, district and regional leaders) and policy makers (parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries).

Key allies for AATG include members of the National Alliance for Food Security (NAFS), which is composed of local NGOs working in agriculture and related areas. Other allies include village development committee (VDC) executives, youth groups such as ACTIVISTA (Global Youth Network for AAI) and AYCAH (Africa Youth Coalition Against Hunger) and FAO.

DT and DEAW: What strategies have you used to achieve your aims and objectives?

KMJ: The main strategies we use at the national level include sensitisation and mobilisation of women affected by landlessness to participate and lead in the land campaign and to speak loudest and longest in the land debate using evidence-based advocacy to tell their own stories and sufferings.

The specific strategies include:

- Research to identify problems of women's ownership and control of farmland including review of the land tenure system in the country;
- Sensitisation of local authorities (regional, district and village heads) and land owners;
- Lobbying parliamentarians and other policy makers;
- Forming partnerships with different groups including youth groups such as AYCAH and ACTIVISA;
- Engaging policy makers in dialogue on women and land;
- Conducting national-level campaigns using caravans to collect the voices of women to present to policy makers;
- Building a differentiated analysis of women's and men's land interests and household resource allocation;

- Developing proposals to raise funds for the development and management of women's farmland for increased production and productivity;
- Developing a model farm to demonstrate the use of a women's communal farm to promote commercialisation and profitability of small-scale agriculture.

DT and DEAW: Before AAI were you involved in campaigns/activism around gender and land? Can you describe these and explain how different or similar they are to the AA campaign?

KMJ: Actually AATG land campaign was built on the NAWFA land campaign which I spearheaded as the Executive Director of the Association. NAWFA has a membership of 48,000 women farmers in 1,074 villages and started the land campaign in 2005. This was as a result of the numerous problems we encountered in accessing farmland for women during our campaign for increased sesame production which the women embarked on as a cooperative.

The problems of timely access to good quality farmland hindered women's increased production and productivity. This was my major motivation as it directly impacts on the mission of the Association, which is to increase the production, productivity and income of the women. As a result, we developed a land acquisition, development and management programme proposal for which we solicited funding from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and AATG. Both CRS and AATG funded the first phase of the programme. AATG eventually signed a partnership contract with NAWFA in 2006 to implement the land campaign nationally. This was before AAI declared the single international campaign in 2007.

The campaign realized some key achievements which include: increased awareness both among women and the land owners for the need to support women to own and develop land for increased production and productivity; the sensitisation of local authorities (Chiefs, Alkalolu, and commissioners) on women's land ownership issues; and commitments for support made at different levels. A total of 3,000 ha of land has already been allocated with documentation (ownership titles).

DT and DEAW: Has this present campaign generated any debates in your country or in Africa as a whole? Can you share some of these with us?

KMJ: The land campaign is very controversial in many quarters in The Gambia. The most difficult part of the campaign is penetrating the patriarchal structure embedded in the community land tenure system. The main argument put

forward in favour of community ownership of land is that it makes it possible for women who move to their husband's community to access farmland. The other side of this debate raises issues of women who have been married for many years, who get divorced or are widowed only to find themselves left landless; the overall insecurity of land tenure for women making it difficult for them to invest in land; or worse still that it is now a common occurrence for husbands to sell land without informing their wives.

DT and DEAW: Can you recall any exciting significant moments in the campaign?

KMJ: My most significant exciting moments were with the regional and district authorities at the beginning of the campaign. We were met with unexpectedly high levels of support from the commissioners who called on all the district chiefs to respond to our call. This was highly welcomed by the chiefs who demanded that we hold district-level workshops for the village heads (Alkalolu) and land owners. These were the most exciting moments of the campaign which gave us great hopes and energy to move on. At the international level, the campaign became prominent when the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development Declaration (ICAARD) was organised, clearly indicating the need for women to be supported and given ownership rights to land (see ICAARD declaration, www.FAO.org).

DT and DEAW: Have you experienced any disappointments and challenges with this campaign?

KMJ: At the international level, we are disappointed with the fact that after the ICAARD declaration there is still no clear cut mechanism to monitor compliance. Nationals are not fulfilling their commitments in that declaration. At the national level, after a very successful country-wide caravan campaign collecting the voices of women on land issues, the demands made by women are still largely not addressed.

DT and DEAW: What do you hope to achieve at the end of the campaign and what are the signs that you can achieve these goals?

KMJ: I would like to see the following: traditional land laws revised to ensure that each village women's group will own enough land to ensure guaranteed access to and control of a minimum of a quarter (0.25) of a hectare for its members; current land laws reviewed to identify elements that negatively affect women's ownership and control; simplification of the interpretation of laws to increase public understanding; government and civil society projects providing women adequate access to grants or soft loans to purchase land

in their own capacity, that is, via a revolving fund set aside for financing women's land purchase; and women farmers owning and controlling productive resources, including labour (drudgery) and time-saving technologies which are efficient in increasing their production and productivity.

DT and DEAW: Does the campaign speak in any way to the linkages among land, capital and labour in livelihoods from a gender perspective?

KMJ: The campaign at the national level is aimed at acquisition, development and management of land. This requires capital investment to allow for year-round production, including use of surface and underground irrigation and efficient labour and time-saving technologies. This is why the block ownership by women village groups is necessary to allow for the use of improved technologies on an economic basis. Villages are encouraged to allocate blocks of not less than ten hectares to justify capital investment. The campaign links women's access to productive resources to their efficiency in providing food for themselves and their families, which is particularly important given the current food crisis.

DT and DEAW: Some people have observed that the same solutions have been proposed by women's groups irrespective of region and the peculiarities of the land tenure issues. Joint titling and the involvement of women in land tenure administration institutions have been quite common recommendations. In your view, is this a fair assessment? What accounts for the similarities and what in your view would be the best approaches to gender inequalities in land tenure systems?

KMJ: I think it is fair to say that most of the solutions put forward are in favour of titling which allows women to have guaranteed control over land and thus allows for investment in land. It should however be noted that there are varying arrangements suggested for titling, which range from communal or cooperative arrangements; household-level titling, involving intra-family negotiations; to individual women purchasing land, which is on the increase; as well as land acquisition through inheritance in Muslim communities.

The similarities in the solutions are a result of the similarities in the problems. For example, the major problem in the issues of land and women is the lack of security of tenure. Women generally have user rights but do not control or have ownership over land. The user rights only allow women to cultivate and to dispose of produce and crop incomes but they cannot allocate or sell the land or even invest in it to allow for increased productivity. This is why titling is a favoured solution across the board. There are, however,

arguments against titling where men use it to dispose of land, denying women their traditional limited access.

DT and DEAW: Some persons have argued that AA as an international NGO should not be leading campaigns of this nature, but should instead support local initiatives. What would you say to this? In your campaign, have you experienced any tensions in this regard?

KMJ: Although tensions have been reported in some countries and by some civil society platforms like GCAAP, which complained that AAI is taking the space of local NGOs, we in The Gambia fortunately have not experienced such problems. This is because AATG's role in the campaign is mainly focussed on providing financial and technical support to the lead institution (NAWFA) and her allies.

The involvement of the single international campaign in 2007 gave the campaign more prominence and increased awareness at both national and international levels. AAI brings to the debate the effects of national and international policies on the lives and livelihoods of women and their families. For example, the AAI campaign questions the World Bank policy on “willing buyer and willing seller” and the whole agrarian reform and privatisation policies as they affect poor rural families.

DT and DEAW: Do you have lessons to share with people planning campaigns of this nature?

KMJ: The most important lessons learnt were the significant achievements that can be made through negotiations with local authorities and the important role of the women themselves in leading such campaigns. Another important lesson is the effectiveness of evidence-based campaigns. The use of model development farms has served as a great incentive for local authorities to increase allocations to village women's groups. This serves as an encouragement for community land allocation, as it has demonstrated tangible benefits to the women and to the communities at large.

Endnotes

1. Kujejatou Manneh-Jallow is Country Director of ActionAid, The Gambia. She has long years of experience working with women farmers in The Gambia.