

## Land rights and food security

### The linkages between secure land rights, women, and improved household food security and nutrition

March 2012

The dramatic rise in global food prices in 2007-2008, which hampered the already limited ability of many people to buy food, highlighted the vulnerable state of food security and nutritional status for millions of people around the world. When people lack secure and sustainable access to sufficient and nutritious food, hunger and malnutrition have profoundly negative impacts on their health and productivity. For children, the harm to their cognitive development and educational achievement often mean that they cannot fully contribute to their household or their country's socioeconomic development in the future as adults.

Given these high stakes and the recognition that food security will become an increasingly important issue in light of the growing world population, governments, policymakers, and others in the international development community are paying greater attention to agricultural interventions that can help reduce global hunger and malnutrition.

#### The Link Between Secure Land Rights and Food Security and Nutrition

Secure rights to land are a critical, but often overlooked, factor in achieving household food security and improved nutritional status. Secure land rights refer to rights that are clearly defined, long-term, enforceable, appropriately transferable, and socially and legally legitimate. These rights can lead to increased household agricultural productivity and production by:

- Providing incentives to invest in improvements to the land

- Increasing opportunities to access financial services and government programs
- Creating the space needed—one without constant risk of losing land—for more optimal land use.<sup>1</sup>

Increased agricultural productivity and production can enhance household food security and nutrition through two avenues: directly, through increased food production for consumption, and indirectly, through increased incomes permitting the purchase of more and better quality food. In both ways, secure rights to land can help moderate the impact of food price volatility on poor rural households.<sup>2</sup>

*Secure rights to land are a critical, but often overlooked, factor in achieving household food security and improved nutritional status.*

A growing body of evidence, from a variety of settings around the world, illustrates the positive correlation between land rights and food security and nutrition.

- A preliminary study of a land purchase program in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which provided beneficiaries with plots of land of up to one acre, found that beneficiary households experienced significantly higher levels of food security: 76% of beneficiary households reported having two meals a day, compared to only 50-57% of non-beneficiary households.<sup>3</sup>

- A household survey conducted in five Asian countries found that among four levels of food security, the food secure group had the largest percentage of owner-cultivators at 70%.<sup>4</sup>
- In China, the number of undernourished people fell from 387 million in 1969-1971 to 150 million in the mid-2000s—a reduction that had its roots in key agricultural reforms related to improved land rights.<sup>5</sup>

Even secure rights to “microplots” of land—plots as small as one-tenth of an acre—protect against household food insecurity and improve nutrition. They provide space for home gardens and for keeping poultry, livestock, or other animals. A variety of studies show that these microplots produce a high percentage of the fruits and vegetables consumed by families.<sup>6</sup>

- A study of wage-earning families in the Indian state of Kerala revealed that the value of microplot production was the most “consistent positive predictor of child nutrition.”<sup>7</sup>
- Small plots held by urban residents in the former Soviet Union played a major role in ensuring household food security in both the Soviet and post-Soviet era: In 1990, these small plots comprised about two percent of agricultural land cultivation, but accounted for approximately 27 percent of the gross value of all agricultural output.<sup>8</sup>
- In Puerto Rico, house-and-garden plots allocated to landless agricultural workers helped ensure food security for recipient families.<sup>9</sup>

### The Role of Women’s Land Rights in Improved Household Food Security and Nutrition

The link between secure rights to land and household food security and nutrition is more pronounced when women in the household have secure land rights. An increasing body of research points to that connection. When women have secure property rights—including rights in the land they cultivate—they gain improved status which leads to greater influence

over household decisions. Such influence is significant because women are more likely than men to make decisions that improve the household’s welfare, including decisions regarding food and nutrition needs.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, when women have direct control over assets like land and the income from those assets, they are more likely than men to spend the income on the next generation. Indeed, a World Bank report points out that “the income and resources that women control wield disproportionately strong effects on health and nutrition outcomes generally.”<sup>11</sup>

Women with land rights generally have enhanced status and greater bargaining and decision-making power at home and in their communities.

- A study in Central America found that in some countries, women with land rights are more likely to have control over household income and access to credit.<sup>12</sup> In Nicaragua, for instance, women with either individual or joint title control over half of the crop income while women who have no land rights control only 14% of that income.<sup>13</sup>
- In Nepal, researchers found that women who own land are significantly “more likely to have the final say” in household decisions.<sup>14</sup>

*When women have secure property rights—including rights in the land they cultivate—they gain improved status which leads to greater influence over household decisions.*

This enhanced status translates into improved nutrition for women and for their children, as women can better negotiate food and nutrition security in their households.<sup>15</sup> In particular:

- Data from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean “leave no doubt that women’s status plays a positive role in determining child nutritional status.”<sup>16</sup> Women with higher status have



better nutrition and enjoy better prenatal and birthing care than those with low status, especially in South Asia.<sup>17</sup> Their children, in turn, are more likely to be born at higher birthweights and receive better care critical to their nutritional well-being.<sup>18</sup>

- This cross-regional study also identified several public policies to improve women's status—including reforming legislation to give women equal rights to own and inherit land.<sup>19</sup>

Women with secure rights to land also have greater influence over decisions regarding what types of crops to grow on that land. Studies have shown that in some settings, men tend to plant crops with a high market value, whereas women tend to plant crops that can supplement a family's diet.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, when women own land, their food purchasing decisions are likely to benefit the household's food security and their children's nutritional status.<sup>21</sup>

- A study in Nicaragua and Honduras, found that families spend more on food when the woman of the house owns land.<sup>22</sup>
- A study in Ghana showed that when women own a larger share of the household's farmland, families allocate a larger proportion of their household budget to food.<sup>23</sup>
- In Nepal, research demonstrated that the likelihood that a child is severely underweight is reduced by half if the child's mother owns land.<sup>24</sup> The Nepal study suggested that the route to better child nutrition was through the greater income and resources provided by the women's right to land.<sup>25</sup>
- Data analyzed by the OECD Development Centre show that countries where women lack rights or opportunities to own land have on average 60% more malnourished children than countries where women have some or equal access to land.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the evidence showing that women have a pivotal role in improving household food security and nutrition when they have secure

land rights, many women have only weak or unclear rights over the land they farm.

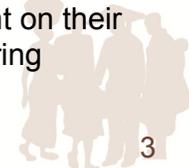
## Constraints to Secure Land Rights for Women

Although they comprise 43 percent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries and nearly half of the agricultural labor force in parts of Africa and Asia,<sup>27</sup> women are significantly less likely to own land than men and the land they do own is usually smaller and of poorer quality than that owned by men.<sup>28</sup> Several reasons lie behind this gender disparity.<sup>29</sup>

Even where formal land and property laws do not discriminate against women, enforcement of those laws can be challenging. The rights may not be clearly defined, other laws (such as family law) may be inconsistent with land laws guaranteeing equal rights, and enforcement institutions may be weak or reflect deeply rooted traditional attitudes that suggest women should not be equal participants in ownership or control of land.<sup>30</sup>

*These constraints, reflected in women's insecure rights to land, limit women's potential as household agricultural producers and as household caregivers.*

Aside from formal laws governing land, in many countries customary laws have significant, and sometimes prevailing, implications for women's rights to land. Although diverse, customary regimes are often determined by cultural and religious institutions that typically favor the rights of men over women or deem the rights of women subservient to those of men. Men generally are considered "owners" of the land and custom often allows them to sell land without permission from their spouses, choose what crops to grow, and control income from the land.<sup>31</sup> Under customary systems, women's rights to land are generally dependent on their relationship to a male relative, rendering



women's rights more tenuous. In addition, land is usually transferred through inheritance, and it is almost always men who inherit the land.<sup>32</sup> Marriage and divorce practices can also create barriers to women's land rights.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, structural factors or social norms about appropriate behavior and roles for women can prevent them from realizing land rights conferred by customary or formal laws. Claiming a right to land may result in household conflict and the loss of support from extended family, social costs that women may be unwilling or unable to bear. Furthermore, women may not be fully aware of their rights to own land or may lack the financial resources needed to exercise those rights.

Finally, women's access to land through the state or through the market is often limited. In countries where the state has allocated land to its citizens, the distribution of land has generally benefited only male heads of household. Land titling and registration programs may also fail to formalize women's rights. And because women have less access to capital than men, they are usually less able than men to purchase land on the open market.<sup>34</sup>

These constraints, reflected in women's insecure rights to land, limit women's potential as household agricultural producers and as household caregivers. This has a dramatic impact on not only women, but on the food security and nutritional status of their household.

## Moving Forward

As governments, the private sector, multilateral institutions, and international development organizations weigh the options for improving food security around the world, they must consider one of the most promising elements for addressing the needs of the world's hungry and malnourished: secure land rights. Addressing land rights issues—in particular, women's land rights—in programs and policies designed to address food security and nutrition through agriculture can deepen the impact of those interventions and lead to improved development outcomes.

## About Landesa

Founded as the Rural Development Institute, Landesa has partnered with governments on reforms that have provided secure land rights to more than 100 million families since 1967. When families have secure rights to land, they can invest in their land to sustainably increase their harvests and reap the benefits—improved nutrition, health, education, and dignity—for generations.

## The Center for Women's Land Rights

An initiative of Landesa, the Center for Women's Land Rights champions the untapped potential of women and girls to transform their communities. With secure rights to land, women and girls can improve food security, education, health, and economic development for themselves and their families.

### Global Headquarters

1424 Fourth Ave.  
Suite 300  
Seattle, WA 98101

### China Office

Beijing Representative Office  
Wanda Plaza, Building  
No. 8, Suite 502  
93 Jianguo Rd,  
Chaoyang District  
Beijing 100022

### India Office

Rural Development Institute  
2nd Floor / #53  
Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110003



<sup>1</sup> For instance, one study shows that when Ugandan women farmers did not have independent and secure rights to the land they farmed, many did not allow the land to lie fallow during the most beneficial periods. Because they feared that not using the land would affect their ability to gain future access, the land was overused and less productive. R. Giovarelli and B. Wamalwa, *Issue Brief – Land Tenure, Property Rights, and Gender: Challenges and Approaches for Strengthening Women’s Land Tenure and Property Rights 2* (USAID 2011) (citing K. Mason and H. Carlsson, *The Development Impact of Gender Equality in Land Rights*, in HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT (P. Alston and M. Robinson, eds., Oxford U. Press 2005)).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, *Updated Comprehensive Framework for Action 10* (2010). Additionally, land can serve as a source of income in other ways. For example, it can provide rental income or serve as collateral for loans for non-agricultural income-generating activities.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hanstad and R. Nielsen, *Land Tenure Reform in India*, in ONE BILLION RISING 255 (R. Prosterman, et al. eds., Leiden U. Press 2009). The program required the creation of a business plan that considered the economic feasibility of the land purchase and the options for land development, improvement, and cultivation. *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> L. Miggiano, et al, *Links between Land Tenure Security and Food Security 11* (2010); see also *id.* at Annex III, 5.

<sup>5</sup> J. Scoet and K. Stamoulis, *The State of Food Security in the World 2006*, 16 (FAO 2006). Reforms starting in the late 1970s permitted families to lease land from the collectives and gave them long-term, 15-year use rights (later extended to 30 years) to manage land at the household level. This led to a significant increase in agricultural output and incomes. *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> R. Mitchell, et al., *Micro-plots for the Rural Poor*, in ONE BILLION RISING 157 (R. Prosterman, et al. eds., Leiden U. Press 2009).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 157-158; see also L. Ping and R. Prosterman, *From Collective to Household Tenure: China and Elsewhere*, in ONE BILLION RISING 313 (R. Prosterman, et al. eds., Leiden U. Press 2009).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 158.

<sup>10</sup> FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in Agriculture – Closing the Gender Gap for Development 2010-2011*, 43 (2012).

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, *From Agriculture to Nutrition: Pathways, Synergies and Outcomes* xiii (2007).

<sup>12</sup> E. Katz and J. Chamorro, *Gender, Land Rights and the Household Economy in Rural Nicaragua and Honduras 11*, paper prepared for the Regional Workshop on Land Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean (USAID 2002)

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> K. Allendorf, *Do Women’s Land Rights Promote Empowerment and Child Health in Nepal?*, WORLD DEVELOPMENT 35 (11): 1980 (2007).

<sup>15</sup> UN High Level Task Force, *supra* note 2, at 4; see also FAO, *supra* note 10, at 43 (families allocate more income to food and children’s nutrition when women have greater influence over economic decisions); see also Miggiano, *supra* note 4, at 7.

<sup>16</sup> L. Smith, et al, *The Importance of Women’s Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries*, International Food Policy Research Institute Research Report 131, 58 (2003).

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 8-9, 60, 79.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 131.

<sup>20</sup> R. Mitchell and T. Hanstad, *Small Homegarden Plots and Sustainable Livelihoods for the Poor 10* (FAO 2004) (citing studies).

<sup>21</sup> See World Bank, *From Agriculture to Nutrition*, *supra* note 11, at 13 (citing studies showing that women’s income and level of control over income have a “significantly greater positive effect on child nutrition and household food security than income controlled by men”).

<sup>22</sup> Katz, *supra* note 12, at 15.

<sup>23</sup> C. Doss, *The Effects of Intrahousehold Property Ownership on Expenditure Patterns in Ghana*, J. AFR. ECON 15(1): 149-180, at 171 (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Allendorf, *supra* note 14, at 1985.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> OECD Development Centre, *At Issue: Do Discriminatory Social Institutions Matter for Food Security?* 4 (2012); see also OECD Development Centre, *Coding of the Social Institutions Variables*, available at [http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/GID\\_variables.pdf](http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/GID_variables.pdf). In addition, countries where women have equal access or some access to land saw cereal yields increase from 1980 to 2009 by 60% and 54% respectively. OECD, *At Issue* at 5. Where women have few or no rights to own, buy, or sell land, cereal yields increased by 6%. *Id.* Certainly, further study is needed as this analysis reflects the relationship between land ownership and malnutrition and cereal yields without controlling for other factors, and an increased yield does not necessarily result in increased household food consumption. Nevertheless, the findings have important implications for understanding the relationship between women’s land rights, agricultural productivity, food security, and nutrition.

<sup>27</sup> FAO, *supra* note 10, at 7, 8, 111, 113.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 23.

<sup>29</sup> For a more in-depth discussion, see R. Giovarelli, *Gender and Land Tenure Reform*, in ONE BILLION RISING 195-234 (R. Prosterman, et al. eds., Leiden U. Press 2009).

<sup>30</sup> World Bank, *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook 127* (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Giovarelli, *supra* note 29, at 212.

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*, *supra* note 30, at 136.

<sup>33</sup> See generally Giovarelli, *supra* note 29, at 212-217.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

