



MISR

Keeping land reform on the agenda

The *Makerere Institute for Social Research* (MISR) is working to keep land issues high on Uganda's policymaking agenda.

SETTING THE SCENE —Uganda has a long history of conflict over land, rooted in a heritage of colonial rule, boundary disputes, ethnic conflicts, gender imbalances, and land management issues. These issues have been exacerbated by conflicting land policies, market-based and “customary”, and competing rights and interests over the same piece of land. More recently, new tensions have arisen from the increasing practice of “land grabbing,” whereby state agencies and big corporations acquire large tracts of agricultural land for mass production, as well as the discovery of oil and petroleum deposits. The social repercussions of these unresolved land issues have included widespread evictions of small farmers and displacement of whole communities, disrupted access to natural resources, loss of sources of food and livelihoods, and violence. The Government of Uganda has acknowledged it as “a situation where land dispute resolution mechanisms have broken down and land justice has become a nightmare to many land holders.”¹

Although there have been many attempts to settle the land question over the years, Uganda lacks a coherent

and well-defined national policy; instead, land is governed by a number of scattered policies. In many cases, while protections exist in the law, in practice they are either inadequate or poorly enforced.

WHAT MISR DID —The Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR), established in 1948, is a well-respected research organization with a long history of engagement in Ugandan land policy. For decades now, the organization has worked to address land-related issues such as questions of access, conflict, and governance. Through its research and advocacy work, MISR's land team is contributing to the discussion around important questions such as whether land should be governed by custom, by contractual leasehold agreements, or by freehold tenure.

For example, in 1989, in collaboration with the Land Tenure Centre of the University of Wisconsin, MISR undertook a study of landholding systems commissioned by the World Bank. The findings provided a basis for the *Tenure and Control of Land Bill* of 1990, although the Bill was sidelined for a new national constitution. A

¹ *Uganda National Land Policy, Final Draft, March 2011, Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, Government of Uganda.*



few years later, as a prominent member of the Uganda Land Alliance (ULA), MISR provided research that culminated in the passage of the *Land Act* (1998), which addressed important issues of equity in land tenure. After 1998, as MISR shifted from being a research institute to a consultancy-driven organization, the focus on land-based research declined.

In 2010, MISR revised its land program. Its land team works closely with land-based organizations such as ULA and the Land and Equity Movement in Uganda. The think tank's researchers who work regionally have developed connections with local, community-based organizations such as Human Rights Focus (Gulu), Heifer International, Hunger Project, Send-A-Cow (Uganda) and Territorial Approach to Climate Change.

THE OUTCOME —With support from the Think Tank Initiative, MISR has taken important steps to reinvigorate the debate around land, in particular around questions of land tenure, nationally and within the East Africa region. Its renewed efforts include a two-day regional workshop on land issues in East Africa held in August

2012. This conference, attended by prominent academics from the UK, US, India, and China, focused on comparative discussions on regions of China, India and Africa where access to land is governed by customary law rather than market-based arrangements. MISR has also developed a major research agenda focused around land issues as well as a new series of working papers on the issue. MISR has also recently launched a new interdisciplinary PhD program which is expected to contribute significantly to the ongoing debate and search for solutions to Uganda's land problems.

The workshops and working papers, based on original research, make it possible to rethink the public agenda on land issues. As MISR engages with local and community-based organizations, it works to re-shape the available land-related options through a comprehensive effort to link research with advocacy. At the same time, its advocacy not only responds to the existing legislative agenda but also seeks to change it through an engagement with both groups that articulate ground-level disaffection and policymakers that are open to giving this a legislative voice.

For more information on MISR, <http://misr.mak.ac.ug>

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