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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Family Farming in Urban and Peri-Urban Tamale, Northern Ghana

EILEEN BOGWEH NCHANJI¹, IMOGEN BELLWOOD-HOWARD¹, NIKOLAUS SCHAREIKA¹, TAKEMORE CHAGOMOKA²

¹*Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Social and Cultural Anthropology, Germany*

²*AVRDC - The World Vegetable Center, Mali*

Abstract

Farm succession and inheritance interacts with land policy in ways that resonate across continents, cultures and post-colonial policy environments. Land scarcity has not historically constrained African family farming. However, recently, lucrative land markets have changed this, especially in urban and peri-urban agriculture. Rapid urbanisation implies land-use competition for industrial, residential and agricultural purposes. This paper draws on empirical ethnographic data collected from Tamale, northern Ghana to explain the challenges of family farming and its future.

Overlaps and contradictions between customary and state land governance has shaped and is still reshaping farm succession, inheritance and retirement in different Ghanaian land scenarios. We consider three situations - farming on community land, government irrigation sites and interspaces. The latter refers to undeveloped patches within the urban landscape. Farmers have usufruct rights over plots they use on community land, traditionally passing these to their heirs. This pattern is the norm in northern Ghana, where farming, the default livelihood activity, is intertwined with cultural identity, and persists in low-income urban contexts. However, farmers farming on community land cannot indefinitely stay in the family. The traditional customary custodians ultimately decide who should use these lands and for how long. In government irrigation sites, farmers are expected to hand over land to irrigation officers after retirement for reallocation to other interested farmers. In practice, they assume the same system as on traditional lands, passing usufruct rights to junior relatives. In interspace farming, the legal owner of the land is often a private individual who has purchased it in a market or undeveloped government land. Usufruct of these spaces depends on a good relationship with the owner, but construction and urbanisation makes access to them less secure.

Land policy is changing. Planners are attempting to form new solutions that legitimise urban farming, limiting yet respecting the role of traditional chiefs and to some extent restraining the booming land market. These different scenarios show how confluences of land governance regimes and differential implementation of land policy by various actors' influences farm succession, inheritance and retirement in Tamale. We recommend that government provides affordable public land to poor urban dwellers.

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