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Rural Women’s Access to Land and Household Food Security: Implications of Agricultural Intensification in Ghana

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Abstract

From growing food to processing food, women’s paid and unpaid labour in the food system is a critical part of food security. However, women’s access to land is often mediated by men as is common in patrilineal societies such as the Dagbon in northern Ghana. With increasing pressure on land from new agricultural investment projects, men can shift priorities for land use. One such new investment is a European-Ghanaian joint-venture company, which cultivates and processes organic fruit for both domestic and export markets using both a plantation nucleus and out-grower scheme.

Using this European-Ghanaian company as a land acquisition case study, this research empirically investigates the implications on women’s access to land and food security. Fieldwork was conducted in six rural communities in the Savelugu Municipality and Tolon District of the Northern region. Drawing from the USDA’s six-point scale measurement of food security, 185 questionnaires and 6 focus groups were conducted in 2018–2019.

The results revealed that because women rely mainly on male relatives for access to land and other common resources, they are vulnerable to food insecurities when there is a breakdown of relations or when the priorities of male landowners change. The land acquired by this company for its plantation led to a direct reduction in women’s access to trees such as *Vitellaria paradoxa* (shea nut), *Parkia biglobosa* (locust bean known as ‘dawa dawa’ in the region) and various fruit trees. Because products harvested from these trees are important both for household consumption and for women’s cash income, household food security diminished. Women who lost access to such trees faced longer travel distances as well as the need to negotiate access to new sources, further compounding scarcity and competition in the region.

Although the out-grower scheme of this company has been praised for keeping land and labour in the control of smallholders, the growing disadvantage of women has been overlooked. The removal and constriction of women’s access to land and other resources led to diminished access to harvests needed for home consumption, processing and sale, which diminished food security.

Keywords: Agri-food processing, food security, Ghana, land access, locust bean, shea, women