



AGRICULTURAL AND LAND COMMERCIALISATION: DO THEY FOSTER GENDER EQUALITY AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD?

The commercialisation of land and agriculture has long been considered a key approach to stimulating rural development and eliminating hunger and food insecurity. Since the 1970s, in most countries of the South, governments and international organisations have set up regulatory frameworks and financial incentives to promote large-scale, resource-intensive agricultural businesses. Neoliberal economic orthodoxy has entrenched this model by seeking to liberalise capital, land and labour markets, prioritising economies of scale and reducing support for smallholder farmers. The theory is that market efficiency will select successful farmers and insert them into global value chains while pushing those unable to compete into other livelihoods. Robust land markets based on clear ownership rights are understood to be central to achieving such efficiency.

But agricultural and land commercialisation sometimes have given rise to human rights violations and undermined progress towards the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is a wealth of evidence to show that the liberalisation of agriculture has exacerbated existing inequalities, including gender inequality. Moreover, globalised agricultural markets drive excessive price fluctuations, as was the case between 2006 and 2014, when land, food and non-food commodity speculation resulted in soaring food prices and increased food insecurity for large numbers of people in the South. Global concerns about food security were one driver of the ensuing global land rush, causing the dispossession and forced displacement of smallholder farmers in numerous countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Environmental policies promoting biofuels and speculative land-based investments further encouraged these processes.

The DEMETER project on Land Commercialisation, Gendered Agrarian Transformation and the Right to Food explores the

Key messages

Policies on food and agriculture disproportionately focus on commercialisation as a mechanism for increasing food production and do not sufficiently consider the rights to food and gender equality.

For those living in the countryside in Cambodia and Ghana, commercialisation has increased the diversity of available foods but has limited peoples' ability to sustainably grow and access food.

Commercialisation sharpens the gender division of labour and generates inequalities in income and in access to land, labour and employment. Food insecurity is also unequally distributed according to gender, class, and ethnicity.

Food cultures are deeply gendered, with men often eating greater quantities of food and having more diverse diets than women. The interaction between commercialisation and food cultures can deepen gender inequalities in access to food and nutrition.

linkages between land and agricultural commercialisation and the right to food from a gender perspective, with Cambodia and Ghana as case studies (see Box 1). This brief summarises a number of findings from the project, focusing on the social, cultural, and economic outcomes of commercialisation and on the ways in which these affect the rights to food, land, decent work and social security.

Box 1: DEMETER

DEMETER (Droits et Égalité pour une Meilleure Économie de la Terre) is a six-year research project that seeks to:

- map gendered changes in livelihoods in the wake of land and agricultural commercialisation;
- examine the role of politics and policies in achieving gender equality and the right to food; and
- analyse the role of human rights-based accountability mechanisms in realising a gender-equal right to food.

Started in 2015, the project is a research partnership of scholars from Cambodia, Ghana, and Switzerland and is funded by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d programme).

See the project website at <https://r4d-demeter.info/>

Commercialisation and the Right to Food

Agricultural commercialisation is commonly associated with the consolidation of rural land holdings, increased capital investment and indebtedness, the widespread use of agro-industrial technologies, and the employment of wage labour. For small and medium scale farmers it often means their transformation into outgrowers in subcontracting arrangements for agro-companies, or they may become independent commercial farmers, producing mainly for the market and selling crops through brokers. In order to produce commercially, smallholder farmers frequently find themselves under pressure to invest in agricultural inputs and machinery, with the growing need for capital and associated indebtedness driving forced sales of commodities and land. While different types of commercialisation co-exist in the DEMETER case countries, they do so to varying degrees. But for both Cambodia and Ghana, trade liberalisation and neoliberal economic policies promoting free market principles, entrepreneurship and private land ownership helped accelerate commercialisation.

For Cambodia, the shift towards economic liberalisation coincided with the end of the civil war in the 1980s. The 1993 elections under UN supervision installed a government intent on moving the country to a free-market economy while strengthening its

control over land and natural resources to leverage its political power. In the 1990s and early 2000s, development institutions such as the World Bank supported large scale land mapping and registration policies that set the scene for agricultural and land commercialisation. A new system of economic land concessions was established, and this attracted domestic and foreign investments and resulted in massive commercial logging along with the internal migration of people in search of farming land. The rapid development of economic land concessions also led to the dispossession of smallholder and indigenous farmers and to diminished access to forests, communal grazing lands and fisheries. In practice, the process of agricultural and land commercialisation in Cambodia has been conflictual and marked by the violent grabbing of land from smallholders, dependence on volatile boom crops such as cassava and rubber, widespread indebtedness, environmental degradation, and increased inequalities within many communities and households.

In Ghana, the return to democracy in 1993, after years of populism and military rule, did not entail a major shift in economic policies. Rather, the transformed Rawlings government remained true to the neoliberal economic logic that had informed its structural adjustment policies during the 1980s. With a strong export-oriented sector since colonial times focused on the production of cocoa, Ghana's agricultural sector has long been deeply integrated into global markets. Since the 1990s, national development policies in the food and agricultural sector have prioritised strengthening investment in agro-industrial companies as key engines of growth, and these policies have garnered extensive support from

Figure 1

Cassava fields with a prayer symbol, Ratanakiri, Cambodia, 2015.

Excerpt from a picture by Saba Joshi



international development actors. A multi-year, internationally funded land administration project (LAP) was put in place starting in 2011, geared towards establishing a land governance framework through the promotion of titling and registration in an effort to provide security of tenure and, in turn, to facilitate land-based investments. The LAP has been a key enabler, helping to accelerate processes of land and agricultural commercialisation in a context where small-scale farming still predominates. While land grabs in Ghana are less extensive than in Cambodia, there are reports of displacements where chiefs – all of whom are male – use their prerogative as custodians of customary land to sell plots, including that of the commons, for their own private gain. Within an agricultural system based on small to medium-sized farms of less than five hectares, the loss of even small amounts of farming land may have disastrous consequences for the livelihoods of rural people.

In parallel with their pursuit of liberalisation and commercialisation policies, both Cambodia and Ghana are bound by international human rights obligations related to the promotion and protection of gender equality and the right to food. The countries are parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and both voted in favour of the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas in 2018. In addition, while the Ghanaian 1992 Constitution makes no explicit reference to the right to food, it is presumed that the constitution recognises this right indirectly through its provisions on the right to life and the directive principles concerned with ensuring that the welfare and livelihoods of citizens, among other things, are secured. The right to food is explicitly acknowledged in Cambodian legislative and policy documents. But when land is sold or allocated as a concession without public consultation and without regard for the rights of those living on and from the land, this constitutes a violation of the right to food as well as inter-related human rights such as those to natural resources, social security and decent work. Moreover, the realisation of the right to food implies that its core elements of availability, accessibility, and adequacy, including its cultural dimensions (see Box 2) are respected, protected and fulfilled. The right to food must be accessible to all and this means that particular attention must be paid to preventing and redressing any gender-based inequalities within food systems. The DEMETER project uses a gender perspective to gauge the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of food in the aftermath of commercialisation. In the following we highlight gendered impacts in these domains, keeping in mind that these impacts intersect with other dimensions of inequality, in particular class and ethnicity.

Food Availability and Accessibility

Agricultural development policies in both of our study countries emphasise interventions to increase the availability of food through commercial food production. Our research found, however, that many rural populations in Cambodia and Ghana continue

Box 2: The right to food

“The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. The core content of the right to adequate food implies (...) the availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture (and) the accessibility of such food in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights.”

(UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment no. 12, 1999, para. 6)

to experience seasonal variations in access to food as a result of storage problems. The non-existence of, or fluctuations in rural job markets; boom and bust commodity cycles; declining availability of food gathered from forests and other community lands; and reduced levels of homestead and subsistence farming paired with a weakening of women’s land use rights.

In Cambodia, our interviewees reported seasonal food shortages that correlated with variations in the availability of agricultural wage labour opportunities and spikes in food prices. Between 54 and 58 per cent of households in our study provinces (Rattanakiri, Kampong Thom and Kratie) reported that they had experienced considerable difficulties as a result of price increases for a major food item. Many respondents stated that they borrowed money to buy food and to refinance loans; and forced land sales as a result of indebtedness were mentioned as a constant source of stress. Households with small landholdings and low incomes were particularly food insecure, and food shortages were acute in Rattanakiri, where indigenous communities have lost land as a result of economic land concessions. The loss of communal areas for livestock grazing and of forest food sources also impacted food security in our Cambodian study areas.

In Ghana, we found that staple foods become scarce during the lean season, in particular in areas where most productive land is dedicated to non-food cash crops; and women are faced with the emotional and practical burden of figuring out how to feed their families. Here we diagnosed the phenomenon of over-commercialisation; that is, although households earn income from cash crops, without efficient food markets, specialisation in cash and non-food crops leads to food insecurity (see Box 3). Indeed, average food security levels appeared lower in highly commercialised study areas than in the low commercialisation districts. As in Cambodia, the diversity and amount of food intake in Ghana varied by household wealth.

Food availability in smallholder households is mediated by gender and ethnicity as commercialisation has reduced women’s

Box 3: Over-commercialisation? Cocoa Farmers and Seasonal Food Shortages in Ghana

“Many households do not have enough food during the lean season because almost all our lands are under cocoa, and food is very expensive because of transportation costs from other places. We are in the lean season now and three fingers of plantain go for GH 2, but in normal times you can buy a bunch for the same price” (Man, focus group discussion, Asunafo North, 2016)

“All our lands are occupied with cocoa. We buy all the food we eat from the market; it has been like this for the past three years.” (46-year old female farmer, Asunafo)

Our qualitative study and survey data show that successful farming means cocoa farming in the Asunafo North District of the Ahafo Region of southern Ghana. While farmers praise cocoa for providing them the cash to invest in education and housing, they also concede that there are tradeoffs between these benefits and seasonal food insecurity.

From: Dzanku F., Tsikata D. & Ankrah D. 2020.

and indigenous populations' access to land and sometimes the production of food for their families, which women tend to be involved in more extensively. In both Ghana and Cambodia, increasing land scarcity and the associated costs of buying or renting land is eroding traditional land rights regimes. Among the Charay and the Tampoun in the northeast of Cambodia, people noted that young couples could no longer clear tracts of forest to start their own farms. Traditional inheritance practices are in flux as some families move away from a matrilineal system that provided women with a greater degree of status to a bilateral pattern where small amounts of land are equally shared amongst all children in the family. Some young men and women, in particular those from land poor families without the resources to buy land, are delaying marriage (arguably a boon for gender equality in indigenous contexts where teen marriages are common) and accepting that they may spend their lives working for other people as farm labourers. In Ghana, commercialisation similarly has affected access to land. Here it reduced the importance of inheritance: In our most highly commercialised study region, Asunafo North in southern Ghana, only 58 per cent of farmers interviewed had inherited their land, as compared to 94 per cent in Garu-Tempane in the less commercialised north. As sharecropping and purchases become the predominant means of accessing land in southern Ghana, women's traditional land rights, particularly those over communal lands, are threatened. And while in theory, women are free to buy or rent land, they rarely have the necessary financial resources or economic networks to engage with agri-business actors in order to do so.

The Impacts of Gendered Labour Relations

Commercialisation generates major changes in rural labour relations with significantly gendered impacts. It affects gender divisions of labour on farms and opportunities for wage labour. Some of the outcomes are deeply problematic from a right to food perspective.

First, commercialisation increases the demand for farm labour. In southern Ghana women and men often farm plots independently. Men tend to grow commercial crops while women grow food crops for both consumption and sale. There is an expectation that women will work on male family members' plots, and as a result commercialisation has increased demand for women's unpaid labour. At the same time, customary expectations that women contribute fish, vegetables and other ingredients to the family diet have not changed, leading to a double or triple burden for women as the major providers of household nutrition (see Box 4). Conversely, women farmers are unable to access the labour or the land they need to participate independently in contract farming schemes. In contrast to southern Ghana, women and men in northern Ghana and Cambodia typically farm jointly. In

Box 4: Gender division of labour in food procurement in the East Gonja district of Ghana

Agricultural commercialisation in East Gonja primarily involved the cultivation of staple crops such as maize, but mostly yam. While there are periods of food shortages, the different varieties of yam produced in the district ensures that food was available for most part of the year. While women played essential roles in yam production, men were generally viewed as the producers and owners of the yam crop. Thus, as part of a gender division of labour in food procurement, women were required to provide fish, vegetables and other ingredients used in food preparation. However, as these were food items not produced in the household, they had to be procured from the market or through barter arrangements with fisherfolk. This placed an additional responsibility on women as they had to find money or spend a large amount of time trying with no guarantee of success, to exchange yam for fish, vegetables and spices. On any particular day, successful barter would depend on the fishermen's catch, their need for yam or other food items. As the use of yam in this way was not always approved by men, it was often done without their knowledge. This was reported as a source of emotional stress and domestic violence against women.

From: Atupare, P. 2016.

Cambodia, as in Ghana, it similarly emerged that women were more likely to make decisions regarding rice and vegetable crops as well as small livestock, whereas men were primarily responsible for managing cash commodities (such as cassava, cashew and rubber). And women were more likely to engage in reciprocal labour exchanges, while men preferred to use paid agricultural labourers. Unlike in Ghana, where we found a scarcity of agricultural labour, the need for additional labour was thus solved through labour commercialisation.

Box 5: Separating production and reproduction in Ratanakiri, Cambodia

“In my family, we depend on income from wage labour a lot. This is mainly my husband’s work, because I am busy with the children. But we work on the farm together, and then I can bring my children along. (Charai woman, 20s, 16th August 2016)”

Out of the 43 households interviewed in Ratanakiri, only one Charai woman mentioned occasionally working for the neighbouring economic land concession. As a seasonal casual labourer, she earned USD 5 per day for cutting grass at the rubber plantation. However, when she brought her breastfeeding infant with her, the employer reduced her daily wage to USD 2.75.

From: Joshi, S. 2020a. p. 9.

Second, commercialisation is associated with a separation of production and social reproduction and a related sharpening of gender divisions of labour. It tends to weaken family and community labour sharing arrangements by promoting individualised wage contracts, generally leaving women with the burden of performing unpaid care and family farming work in addition to salaried agricultural labour. Thus, women wage labourers in Rattanakiri (Cambodia) regretted that, unlike in traditional exchange labour networks (which continue to operate in parallel to wage labour markets in this region), they cannot bring their children to commercial plantation workplaces (see Box 5). Many other smallholder farmers stated that caring for young children was a factor that made them less competitive in commercial agriculture in that they could not call upon family labour to perform time sensitive activities such as cassava harvesting.

Third, in both of our case countries, commercialisation is associated with unequal wages for agricultural work. In Ghana, men are typically assigned jobs that require physical strength, while women are employed in labour-intensive tasks that rely on gendered stereotypes about their greater attention to detail. These differences are used to justify consistently lower wages for women in all of our Ghanaian case communities. Similar patterns

emerged from our 2019 survey in Cambodia, where women agricultural labourers in different provinces earned from 18 to 38 per cent less than men. Moreover, in highly commercialised areas we found that job creation favoured men: they were much more likely to participate in wage labour than women. Factors such as greater physical strength, mobility and the willingness of male employees to work at night were frequently used to justify the gender differences in agricultural labour markets. In the northeast of Cambodia, most jobs were taken by immigrant Khmers, leaving indigenous and local populations marginalised. In our study sites in Ghana, contract farmers and share-croppers were more likely to be men than women.

Adequacy and Food Cultures

An often overlooked element of the human right to food is the notion of food adequacy, which encompasses dietary diversity, food safety and quality, as well as access to culturally appropriate food. In Cambodia and Ghana women tend to be in charge of sourcing food and cooking; as a result, they play a key role in assuring nutritional adequacy in a context of commercialisation, and they do so within the confines of gendered customs.

In both Ghana and Cambodia, people tend to consider food culturally adequate if they can access staple foods. In northern Ghana staples (in particular tuo-zaafi, prepared from maize or

Figure 2

Cocoa tree in a cocoa plantation, Ghana
Excerpt from a picture by © Neja Hrovat / Shutterstock.com



millet) are considered more nutritious and are valued more highly than proteins, in part because they constitute men's contribution to the household diet. In the south of Ghana, people associate food shortages with shortages of fufu (pounded cassava or plantain), which is the preferred staple in the region. Similarly, in Cambodia, rice is the central part of a meal with fish, vegetables and sauce optional accompaniments added when available or affordable. However, although food security is associated with eating enough carbohydrates, added protein is highly valued in the study sites in both Ghana and Cambodia.

Food cultures have a gender dimension that affects what, where and how much food is eaten. Women in Cambodia reported that they had eaten smaller or fewer meals, and gone hungry at night in the past 12 months at a higher rate than male respondents. Although our surveys show that the percentage of Cambodian women having to cut food intake decreased between 2016 and 2019, this gender difference has persisted. In contrast, in Ghana, while women and men eat differently in terms of quantity and quality of food, the survey data did not show gender differences in terms of hunger.

In both of our case countries, men tended to have richer diets. For example, in Ghana, men typically eat separately from the rest of the family and consume more protein. They also are more likely to have opportunities to eat outside the home, supplementing their food intake through various forms of snacking. Similarly, in Cambodia meat is considered an energy-rich food, and when money is scarce, it is reserved for the working men of the family. As in Ghana, Cambodian men were also more likely to eat meals outside the home than women, and they were far more likely to consume alcohol. There are also a number of food taboos and restrictions that exist for Cambodian women in the post-partum period.

Our research revealed old and new practices of food consumption in rural communities arising from the changes induced by agricultural and land commercialisation. For example, in colonial southern Ghana, migrants from other regions brought with them a new way of processing low-quality cassava so that it could be stored and consumed during the lean season. More recently, maize-based foods, yam, and rice are becoming common as is canned fish. On the other hand, commercialisation in Ghana has reduced dietary diversity and food quality. The loss of the commons has limited the availability of bush foods. In southern Ghana, foods that used to be available in the wild, such as cocoyam, some vegetables, mushrooms and snails, have become scarce as a result of the intensive use of agro-chemicals. Similarly, in upland areas of Cambodia, migrants have brought with them the meat-heavy Khmer cuisine, which has been adopted in indigenous households that traditionally consume more wild vegetables. Large numbers of people in our Cambodian study communities lamented the fact that market-bought vegetables and fish contain chemicals, are less fresh and less tasty; and they felt that food contamination was making them ill (see Box 6). In both Ghana and Cambodia, people also spoke of the introduction of unhealthy new convenience foods. In Ghana this was associated with fatty processed foods consumed mostly in wealthier households. In Cambodia, a

Box 6: Food cultures in Kampong Thom, Cambodia

“Fifteen or ten years ago we never bought food. There was an abundance of fish. When we fished we came back with 20 kg of fish and shared it with relatives and neighbours (we didn't sell them). We hunted wild animals, harvested wild vegetables and fruits. Presently my family is dependent on buying food from the market. The quality of food is worse in terms of freshness, chemical contamination and naturalness of fish. Fish in the market is from aquaculture, which is tasteless. Meat sold by mobile vendors is not fresh.” (Villager in Kampong Thom, 2016)

From: Reysoo, F. and Suon Siny. 2017. p. 39.

number of our respondents mentioned the strain that the purchase of snack foods for their school children was placing on the family budget. Considering food adequacy thus highlights a number of additional concerns about the impacts of commercialisation on the right to food.

Conclusion

Governments and non-governmental actors including businesses and international organisations have legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil gender equality in connection with the right to food. These rights are insufficiently acknowledged in contemporary agricultural policies, which promote commercialisation and increased food production while neglecting the dimensions of food accessibility and adequacy. Our research in Cambodia and Ghana shows the way in which commercialisation limits the right to food:

1. A focus on cash crops may produce shortages in food crops for small farmers. It also severely restricts access to wild foods and forest products through logging, the privatisation of the commons and the use of agro-chemicals.
2. Commercialisation sharpens and creates new inequalities based on gender, class and ethnicity, reinforcing gender divisions of labour and expanding women's unpaid labour while offering them limited income-earning opportunities. This creates new inequalities and dependencies, making access to food less secure for some.
3. Commercialisation's potential to increase the variety of foods people have access to is moderated by its tendency to undermine existing, accessible food supplies.

To avoid these pitfalls of commercialisation, food security, land governance and agricultural development policies and programmes must be firmly grounded in a human rights-based approach.

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