

Struggles Over Land Reform in Tanzania: Experiences of Tanzania Gender Networking Programme and Feminist Activist Coalition

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Tanzania Gender Networking Programme

Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) is a feminist organisation with the vision of a transformed Tanzanian society characterised by gender equality, equity, empowered women, and social justice. To achieve this vision, TGNP seeks to build a feminist movement for social transformation and women's empowerment. For over 15 years, the organisation has been at the forefront in the struggle for gender equality in Tanzania. With its vision and mission, TGNP has crafted its identity through transformative feminist theory and ideology which challenges patriarchy and neo-liberalism. It acknowledges the fact that all women are not the same, and women and men within the same class or 'imperialised' location may have much in common when it comes to questions of the right to sustainable livelihoods for example, or quality schooling. This became very clear in the struggles which took place over land reform, as will be discussed below.

TGNP began informally in 1992–1993 in a process of facilitating women's/ gender NGOs to reflect on their achievements, challenges and strategies for the future, in preparation for Beijing 1995. Participants demanded that the facilitators create an organisation to sustain their collective processes through information-sharing, capacity-building, knowledge-generation, networking, advocacy and activism within a clear feminist conceptual framework and a participatory animation methodology. This demand resonated with the dreams of the facilitator team, composed of women – and a few men – who had all been involved in some form of organising and/or research work concerning women's rights as adult educators, university scholar activists, and educators working with women and men peasants in rural development

training colleges. What brought them together at that moment was their shared ideological position, embrace of participatory animation (or what many refer to as popular education) and commitment to practical activist work in order to make change happen. After careful reflection, the facilitators grouped themselves into a formal organisation registered in 1993. Many of these organisations which participated in the 'birth' of TGNP in 1992-1993 became active members of the Feminist Activist Coalition (FemAct) which began to organise itself as a self-conscious coalition in 1995-1996. Now consisting of more than 40 organisations, FemAct provides space for like-minded, community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to jointly analyse, articulate, strategise and act to challenge inequality, inequity and the disempowered position of women and other marginalised groups.

Ongoing land struggles in Tanzania

TGNP and FemAct were focused on land issues from the beginning, in the context of ongoing struggles over land tenure and associated natural resources (water, forests, minerals, wildlife) at family, community and increasingly at national and regional levels. Land was a major issue for many women's/gender organisations and activists, given its significance as the major productive resource for women peasants, and their vulnerability arising from patriarchal principles in both customary and statutory law.

Struggles over land ownership and land alienation date back to the colonial period. The colonial state perpetuated and sometimes imposed patriarchal structures of land use and ownership within 'native' communities and reinforced a gender division of labour which empowered men and disempowered women. At the same time, the colonial economy was structured according to racist principles, whereby African communities were dispossessed of land, forests, waterways and other resources, in favour of white settler farmers, mining companies and large-scale, company-owned sugar cane and sisal plantations. During the 1960s and 1970s, racial segregation was abolished, tribal chiefs were also removed, and major resources were allocated to support small-scale peasants. Women in many areas gained independent access to land and the cash proceeds from their labour on collective farms, although men retained control over major cash crops at family level.

Structural adjustment programmes and other neo-liberal reforms that began in the mid-1980s swept away all the gains of the socialist era, and

privileged the needs and interests of large-scale farmers and plantation owners, many of whom were foreign companies. Poor peasants and women in particular were pushed even further to the margins (Mbilinyi, 2003). Marginalisation was also catalyzed by the continuation of the British Land Act of 1923, which stipulates that the President has ultimate power and authority over land, as did the Governor in the past.

TGNP adopted a critical position and publicly challenged neo-liberal economic reforms from the start, in contrast with many other women's/gender organisations. The negative impact of structural adjustment policies imposed on the Tanzanian government by the World Bank, IMF and all major bilateral donors is widespread and well-known in Africa – a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, and a radical shift from decolonisation of the economy to further integration into the global capitalist economy on terms set by the dominant multinational corporations.

Struggles over land tenure issues and land resources have increased since economic reform, and have been a source of conflict and civil strife in many parts of Africa, including Tanzania. There have been struggles between community and government, community and community, clan and clan as well as peasant farmers and livestock-keepers versus big companies, with differential impacts on small and large capitalists, peasants, and women and men (Kamata, 2003a).

Related sites of struggles over land are patriarchal gender relations within the household and community, with growing resistance from women and children against the powers of the patriarch. According to the current interpretation of customary law, women are denied access to and control over this valuable resource and are pushed to the margins. They do not inherit land in most communities and worse, they often work as unpaid labourers on cash farms owned by male household heads. Their major source of independent income is through the sale of food crops, which remains the domain of women in many areas. Entangled with this is the undeniable fact that the majority of agricultural producers are women.

These struggles over gender, class and national relations often occur simultaneously, as men sell off family land to large-scale farmers for example, or to hunting companies and tourist hotels, without involving their wives and children in decision-making or sharing the proceeds. From TGNP's perspective, one cannot separate the interests of women from those of their communities in the face of the greater enemy in their view: the outside investor and often

the corrupt government go-between (Kitunga, 2003).

The land question became even more central because land deprivation goes hand-in-hand with food insecurity. According to participatory action research conducted by Kihacha in Shinyanga Rural, Ngorongoro and Njombe districts during 1998–2002, land is a gender as well as a national and class question. More than half the village households researched lacked food security throughout the year (Kihacha, 2002). In all three districts, women and men farmers and livestock-keepers agreed that food security depended on access to and control over land and achieving participatory democracy at home and at community and national levels. They collectively designed and organised a campaign, ‘The Right to Food, Land and Democracy’ and won support from activist NGOs, including TGNP and many FemAct members.

TGNP led a major campaign, ‘Return Resources to the People’ during the 2000s which linked HIV/AIDS, gender and resources. Women’s economic empowerment was understood as essential to reducing their vulnerability to HIV infection, which arises partly from lower immunity due to poor nutrition, and diseases like STDs, malaria, anemia, and water-borne parasite infections – all of which are enhanced by insufficient income for food security and health services. Moreover, many women in both rural and urban areas are forced to engage in risky sexual practices because of their economic dependence on male partners or involvement in commercial sex work. Independent access to productive property such as land, as well as housing and cash incomes, are essential aspects of economic empowerment. Hence, the ‘Return Resources to the People’ campaign embraced women’s efforts to access and control land and other natural resources such as water, minerals, forests, and wildlife. TGNP, FemAct and many grassroots activist organisations joined together to challenge privatisation and commoditisation of land, water and forests.

Struggles over land reform

After the government had taken cognizance of the need for land reform and to address land disputes, a survey was carried out by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry led by Issa Shivji in 1992. The study documented the extent to which rural villagers felt, and were insecure in terms of access to and control over land. It examined the underlying causes of this phenomenon and the views of the community on how to ensure their land rights. Among many other findings, the study noted that women were excluded from land tenure decision-making and land ownership.

The findings and recommendations of the 'Shivji Report' were basically ignored by the government which, under pressure from donors, commissioned another land reform survey that called for further liberalisation and commoditisation of land. A new land act was drafted to meet the needs of large-scale investors, with a clear bias towards foreign investors. In response, the National Land Forum (NALAF) was organised, under the leadership of HakiArdhi (Land Rights Research and Resource Centre), to challenge neo-liberal land reform and defend the land rights of Tanzanian women and men, especially in rural areas. TGNP and many other FemAct members played an active part in this land coalition, as well as grassroots activist partners. A popular petition was produced and signed by thousands of citizens, and presented to Parliament in an effort to slow down, if not halt, the pro-capital land reform process. One of the major bones of contention was over ultimate authority over land. The coalition called for a shift of authority from the President to Parliament, which is representative of the people.

At the same time, women/feminist activists within the land coalition became increasingly disturbed over its failure to adequately address the specific concerns of women. Another coalition, in which TGNP was also active, was therefore formed within the Land Forum, the Gender Land Task Force (GLTF), under the leadership of the Tanzanian Women Lawyers Association, TAWLA. This was especially active from 1996 to 1999¹. Through lobbying and advocacy, the GLTF demanded the rights of both men and women to own land in commonality as members of the community. More sensitively, they also demanded the rights of women to own and inherit land, as daughters, wives, widows and as independent producers, and that women participate equally with men in the local administration of land tenure reform. These are similar to the kind of demands made by women's rights groups in the past, in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa and 'the South'.

In the course of the land reform struggle, some memorable engagements have occurred. A public hearing was called to input into the draft of the basic Land Act bill in March 1995. In 1996, HakiArdhi organised a consultation session involving many FemAct members to discuss the national land policy and examine its implications for small-scale producers, especially in rural areas. Grassroots activists took the lead in the ensuing media campaign challenging the government's version of the land bill, and took the campaign straight to Parliament. The public debate aroused in part by NALAF's advocacy work slowed down the land reform process, forcing the government to adopt alternative

strategies, including passing separate bills on mining and public land.

Another consultative workshop was organised in 1997 on the draft bill for the Basic Land Act – later the Village Land Act – in order to develop a more gender-progressive Land Act (Kamata, 2003a), which was the main aim of the GLTF at this time. TAWLA successfully engaged with the drafters of the bill, ensuring provisions that land cannot be sold without the permission of a spouse, that women have the same rights to own and purchase land as men, and that village land committees overseeing land transactions must include women as well as men².

Regarding land reform however, many of the broad demands of the National Land Forum were not met, including that of shifting ultimate authority to Parliament. Communal rights to land remained marginalised to the priorities of the ‘public interest’, increasingly defined in neo-liberal terms as ‘national growth’. At the same time, the new Village Land Act embraced many of the gender-balanced demands of the GLTF. Hence, the National Land Forum felt that the GLTF had sold out the interests of the people for the sake of ‘gender-balance’. To put it simply, women now have equal rights to be alienated from their land by large scale investors. TGNP was caught in the middle, having sought from the start to support the broad demands of the National Land Forum as well as the specific demands of the GLTF.

Lessons learned

There are many lessons to be learnt from TGNP’s engagement with land reform, for future work. The challenge of conceptual clarity is one. TGNP tried to promote a transformative feminist consciousness and position from the start, in which it articulated its position clearly in support of both ‘communal’ and ‘gender’ demands. This position ran counter to that of liberal feminist ‘partners’ in the GLTF who tended to isolate the ‘gender question’ from the broad question of communal rights and the relationship between the state and the people. Gender equality can best be achieved by finding a way to link these issues together, from the perspective of grassroots women and men themselves, without compromising either the struggle against patriarchy or neo-liberalism.

Another lesson noted was the challenge TGNP faced in working on movement building with male-dominated organisations whose priorities were not always the same³. Even when they fought together for one broad issue, interests differed. Organisational egos were a challenge, making it difficult

sometimes to work together on one collective agenda. This was found in both the National Land Forum and the GLTF⁴.

TGNP and other like-minded members of the GLTF also realised that struggling for women's rights is a long-term issue requiring a long-term perspective and built-in sustainability mechanisms including spaces for celebration of achievements. Also essential is persistence with our ideological position as transformative feminists, so as not to separate issues of gender from those of class and nation/imperialism. Greater clarity within the feminist movement is needed, as is addressing the challenge of linking different feminist and progressive organisations in one broad movement without losing the feminist position.

FemAct set out a number of priorities regarding land tenure, including the need to appreciate the different implications of land tenure issues for all marginalised groups. Women are not separate from the societies in which they live and have taken the lead in defending communal land/resource rights. Documenting experiences that have brought gains in women's rights and the process of gender mainstreaming is also a priority, towards which this article is a contribution. Promoting feminist leadership through training and identifying like-minded partners is also required⁵.

Future work

TGNP and FemAct continue to campaign so as to galvanise popular pressure on the government to involve all the people in the formulation of key policies and budgets, especially those pertaining to basic productive resources. They also play a lead role in challenging neo-liberal, macro-economic policies and demanding alternatives which ensure land security as well as sustainable livelihoods and employment for all⁶.

Both media and legal reform strategies remain fundamental. To feed into these strategies, TGNP makes use of invaluable contributions/views obtained from grassroots activists through the weekly Gender and Development Seminar Series. In 2008, it also carried out participatory research of transformative feminist movement building in three districts in Dar-es-Salaam and one district in Mbeya region, in order to clarify the priorities of grassroots women/feminist activists and their strategies for organising. The results of this research have already been incorporated into restructuring the organisation so as to better support a transformative feminist movement which is grounded locally at the grassroots level.

One of the major findings was the priority given by grassroots women to economic empowerment, and their struggles over the alienation of productive property arising not only from patriarchy at family level, but also from oppressive actions of the state, such as the destruction of their stalls and stoves. The interests of company investors, supported by neo-liberal economic reform, conflict directly with those of poor women active in the informal sector in both urban and rural areas.

Major challenges remain to address resistance to implementing progressive elements of the Village Land Act, including joint titling and the involvement of women in land tenure administration institutions. Joint work is also needed to stop the escalation of the land grabbing process, and to ensure that people are not deprived of their land. Despite the government being aware that 75 to 80 per cent of Tanzanians still depend on land as a major source of employment and livelihoods, rampant sales of huge blocks of land persist, with dire effects on rural women and their communities. In addition, the rights of pastoralists have been increasingly trampled upon, as farming and livestock-keeping communities compete with each other over valuable water and land resources⁷.

TGNP and many of its activist grassroots and FemAct partners continue to prioritise struggles over land as a source of livelihood and employment. Land as well as other productive resources feature in its new campaign of 'Making Resources Work for Women', which challenges how the dominant neo-liberal, macro-economic framework denies the rights of all but a small elite minority of women to the resources needed for quality life and livelihoods.

What will be the future of struggles over tenure rights for women in Tanzania? These will heighten in response to growing land grabbing, and challenge the concept of both 'communal solidarity' and 'solidarity among women', given the diverse gender, class and national interests of different actors involved. There is enormous pressure coming from the banking, mining and agro-industry sectors for *more* neo-liberal land tenure reform as a condition for further investment. The main stumbling blocks, in their perception, have been communal land rights and the government's policy of not allowing full land ownership to foreign investors. Donors will continue to support 'liberal' efforts to mainstream gender equality into land tenure reform, in the context of their efforts to further promote commoditisation and privatisation of land, water, forests and other natural resources. Feminist activists on land issues will need to decide whose side they are on in this struggle; and communal

land rights activists similarly, will be called upon to join forces with grassroots women activists in the struggle for democratisation of land rights in the home as well as the community, the nation and the African continent.

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Endnotes

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2. Marjorie Mbilinyi, personal communication, 16 April 2009.
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5. Mary Rusimbi, personal communication, Dar-es-Salaam, 24 April 2009; Marjorie Mbilinyi, 16 April 2009.
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