



**Brussels Rural Development Briefings**  
**A series of meetings on ACP-EU development issues**

**Briefing session n° 9: Land access and rural development:  
new challenges, new opportunities**

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**Changing rural development dynamics and challenges for land tenure and land policy in  
ACP countries**

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***Executive Summary***

This presentation briefly reviews theoretical and empirical understanding of links between secure land access, land distribution, investment and economic growth, and considers the challenges in operationalising and adapting the land tenure and land redistribution reforms pursued in developing countries in the latter part of the 20th Century in the context of current changes affecting rural areas.

Redistributive land reforms have had some success in providing new livelihood opportunities for the landless poor, but have been confronted by political opposition, failures to deliver development support to land reform communities, and the steady drift of rural landless poor into urban areas. Relatively modest but comprehensive policy and institutional reforms involving gradual increases in tenure security have led to significant improvements in economic growth and social welfare in cases such as China and recent policies and projects have experimented with a variety of tenure innovations in different contexts. A key lesson is that successful tenure reforms need to find pragmatic ways of building on and improving existing land rights and land management arrangements, but a main obstacle has been the absence of institutional capacity to delivering secure land rights at scale.

The presentation summarises the lessons learnt and the related challenges to devise pragmatic and scalable low cost approaches to tenure security, build on pre-existing land tenure and management arrangements; reform inefficient and corrupt land administration organisations; strengthen women's rights; and improve harmonisation and sustainability of donor engagement.

Two contrasting examples of ongoing land tenure reform programmes from sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana and Mozambique) will be discussed and the implications will be considered. Broadly, land reforms need to be accompanied by broader measures to support the development of a vibrant small farm economy, but in practice most have adopted highly technical and sector focused approaches poorly coordinated with other dimensions of rural development.

The challenges become more acute in the context of rapid and globalised changes affecting the nature of rural areas and the demands society makes on them, which need to be properly understood before embarking on a new generation of land reform policies and projects. Changes in OECD countries and Latin America, driven by demographic growth, out migration, urbanisation and industrial growth involving additional demands on rural areas by external actors and likely to affect ACP countries increasingly are briefly summarised. Growing integration of value chains, quality and efficiency standards of urban and global markets, and demands for biofuels development, environmental services, and tourism all create comparative advantages for agribusiness and corporate control of rural land as opposed to smallholder farming.

The presentation goes on to consider the consequences for the economic and social fortunes of rural areas, which have been highly variable, and the outcomes for the poor which depend largely on pre-existing distribution of property rights and power relations, and the quality and effectiveness of the governance arrangements for rural development. Specific challenges faced are outlined together with the ingredients which can contribute to progressive combination of rural economic growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability outcomes for rural development.

Returning to land issues, the sectoral focus on land institutions, land tenure security and land reform which has predominated is unlikely to succeed in this changing context. The key message is that it is necessary to advance on a number of fronts simultaneously, combining land and broader reforms in rural policy with improved local governance and territorial planning to manage land and resource use conflicts between different groups, and decentralised delivery of land and tenure reforms.