New Land Reform in Nigeria

IN AN INTERVIEW FOR ALLAFRICA.COM THAT WAS CONNECTED TO HIS VISIT LAST MONTH TO GHANA, U.S. President Obama noted that progress was being made in the rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and the protection of property rights in Africa. Success in these endeavors requires that Africa faces squarely several fundamental impediments to progress. In doing so, it must access the best available science and technologies not only from the natural sciences and engineering, but also from the social sciences. A critical example that combines all of these elements relates to property rights and land tenure reform, which is an issue at the heart of reducing poverty, promoting wide-ranging development, and ensuring the basic rights of African citizens.

The World Bank estimates that about 70% of the population of my country, Nigeria, lives on less than U.S.$1 to $2 a day. In discussions of poverty here and throughout Africa, far too little emphasis is placed on the economic incapacitation of the population due to their having no recognizable property rights. Nigerian citizens thereby miss out on many economically empowering possibilities that such rights confer, including access to the collateral that is required to acquire credit from financial institutions. This ability could bring them into the mainstream of the growing market economy.

For several decades, many African countries have engaged in programs aimed at realigning their largely kinship-based, communal land tenure to the demands of an increasingly free-market economy. Initially, in the 1970s and 1980s, such land reform attempts devolved into legislating custodial rights of communal land to governments in a manner reminiscent of land nationalization. The growing inequities of this earlier reform effort, and the recognition that it prevents rural farmers from participating effectively in the evolving market economy, has propelled many of these countries to a new round of land reforms. Nigeria is one such country.

Today, land reform in most African countries is about how to induce or encourage largely peasant land-owning communities to confer individual property rights, rather than communal tenure, to the present tillers of the land. New, ongoing land reforms in countries including Ghana, Rwanda, Namibia, Tanzania, Liberia, Mali, Namibia, Uganda, and South Africa are dedicated to providing individuals, and in particular rural producers, with titles to their land. Many of these programs are supported by bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the British Department for International Development and the World Bank. As also noted by President Obama, modern science and technologies are being drafted for this purpose. These include the use of aerial photographs, satellite images, global positioning systems, geographic information systems, and various types of computer software. Para-surveyors are trained to read and interpret these remotely sensed images. And farmers are trained to appreciate not only the plans of their holdings, but also the many implications of a land title for their economic advancement.

On 2 April 2009, the President of Nigeria inaugurated a Presidential Technical Committee on Land Reform under my chairmanship. The Committee is “to determine individuals’ ‘possessory rights’ using best practices and most appropriate technology to determine the process of identification of locations and registration of title holdings,” as a forerunner to a National Land Commission. In order to identify, demarcate, and title the land holdings of individuals, one of the committee’s major challenges will be to create mechanisms that are coordinately implemented by state and local governments.

The new Land Reform in Nigeria is not expected to be completed in the short or even the medium term. But as its effects begin to show, the process should accelerate to serve its goal of confirming the property rights of the majority of the population, whose citizens each hold a vital stake in a nation’s most important natural resource.

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