

Lecture outline-

Land lost – land regained in transforming rural landscapes? Smallholder farmers navigating Rwanda's agrarian and land reforms

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In the many years of debate about land dynamics, there are three main discourses that actors have developed and instrumentalised in order to legitimise the necessity of land reforms: the 'efficiency' discourse, the 'rights' discourse, and the 'conflictuality' discourse. The 'efficiency' discourse, first of all, is based upon the rationale that land reforms should facilitate investment in the agrarian sector in order to maximise productivity. The World Bank's plea for a 'New Green Revolution' for sub-Saharan Africa aligns to this perspective. The rights discourse, secondly, focuses upon the importance of land reforms to determine the rights of land users. According to proponents of a neoliberal market-oriented large-scale farming system, land titling allows for more correct compensation of those losing their land rights in the logical move towards more professional farming models. For defenders of smallholders' land rights, land titling is to be defended as a way of officially protecting people's land rights. The conflictuality discourse, finally, is linked to the idea that there is a strong interconnection between land disputes and broader conflict dynamics. According to some, the reality of legal pluralism lays at the foundation of conflictuality. A land reform should then shed clarity on the multitude of normative rules by providing a clear dominant formal framework. Others however, place land relations within a broader social, cultural and political space in which legal pluralism is considered as a given reality that shapes the power relations of the different interest groups. They see land governance processes as per definition complex, and plead for mechanisms that search for pragmatic solutions.

In her lecture, An Ansoms will reflect on how these discourses have played a role in the reorganisation of Rwanda's rural economy. Since 2007-2008, Rwandan authorities embarked upon an ambitious project to reorganise the entire agrarian sector. Instead of counting on subsistence-based family farming, the Rwandan government elaborated a Green Revolution strategy. This strategy aimed at promoting productive farming through a modernisation and professionalization of the entire agrarian sector. A national land law established a centrally-organised land registration system, attributing individual land titles. The Crop Intensification Policy imposed market-oriented cultivation in combination with regional specialisation. A top-down organised administrative chain rigidly translated nationally imposed performance targets to local levels through a system of performance contracts. Professor Ansoms will reflect on how the various land governance discourses were mobilised by authorities at all levels, and how they culminated in a concrete reconfiguration of the rural landscape. She will also point to how other actors involved (civil society, farmer organisations, private sector), and in particular smallholder farmers have navigated and continue to navigate within Rwanda's agrarian and land reforms. Interestingly, the space for criticism towards the 'modernising' orientation of the reforms is opening up. Forms of contestation by smallholder farmers are being picked up by Rwandan policy makers, and ten years after the introduction of the New Green Revolution, this is resulting in renewed opportunities for smallholder farming. At the same time, the challenges are huge in a land scarce overpopulated country confronted with climate change and profound land degradation.