

Brandenburg Online Dialogue “Learning with Africa”

Competition for Land: Strategies for Conflict- Sensitive Climate Action

Michèle Roth

In many parts of the world, land is a scarce resource and therefore in great demand. This applies to Brandenburg and to many regions in Mozambique. With the surge in demand for renewable energies to reach global climate targets, a further competitor for land has increasingly entered the frame in recent years. What can be done to find lasting and peaceful solutions to land conflicts while reconciling climate action and sustainable development in all its dimensions? Marisa Balas, a Maputo-based consultant and researcher on gender inequality in land access, Willi Lehnert, Head of the Alliance of Young Farmers (Bündnis Junge Landwirtschaft e.V.) in Berlin, and Dr Fritz Reusswig, Senior Scientist at the Potsdam In-

stitute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), discussed this topic at the second Brandenburg Online Dialogue “Learning with Africa” on 24 March 2022. The discussion was chaired by subject specialist Dr Tanja Busse from Hamburg.

Land is the basis of human existence. It is a vital source of food for people and animals. It supports biodiversity. It is required for the construction of homes and infrastructure, for the extraction of a multitude of raw materials and, to an ever-increasing extent, for the production of renewable energies – from biofuels to wind power and large-scale solar. But land cannot be reproduced. On the contrary, due to the impacts of climate change, particularly drought and soil erosion, many regions of the world are losing swathes of farmland. In addition, there is the involvement of major international investors who have no connection to the land and who see it primarily as a commodity for investment or speculation.

The current relevance and complexity of the topic were highlighted by Reiner Kneifel-Haverkamp, Head of the Department for European Affairs in the Ministry of Finance and for Europe of the State of Brandenburg, in his welcome. When it comes to land use, he said, it is ultimately about achieving a fair balance between divergent interests. At present, that balance is still some way off, as the Brandenburg Online Dialogue made clear. However, it identified pathways showing how future-fit land management aligned with sustainable development principles is possible.



Brandenburg Online Dialogue “Learning with Africa” (clockwise):
Tanja Busse (Chair), Willi Lehnert, Marisa Balas and Dr Fritz Reusswig

Government regulation is important, but not enough

With reference to the example of Mozambique, Marisa Balas illustrated how important it is to have an appropriate legal framework and formal registration of land tenure. Since 1997, Mozambique has had progressive land legislation in place which stipulates that all land in Mozambique is state-owned. However, registration of land tenure, which is governed to a large extent by customary law, is making very slow progress. Until recently, 80 per cent of the plots being managed legally under customary law were not registered. Some progress has been made in recent years following a large-scale campaign and the introduction of a new “fit for purpose” methodology for land registration. It is essential, Marisa Balas said, to raise public awareness of the importance of formalising land tenure rights. The general public’s knowledge of the law is still very poor, but formal land titles are crucial in order to ward off investor encroachment, for example. The registration of land use rights can thus help to minimise land conflicts in Mozambique.

However, even if the land is formally registered, many practical challenges remain, as Marisa Balas explained. Although the law requires communities to be consulted on land investment decisions, they are often unaware of the legal and practical implications. They do not realise, for example, the extent of land investments. Cases have happened where communities lost a significant portion of land – land which has not only economic but also cultural significance in many cases. For the lucrative development of bio-energy, for example, projects need nutrient-rich soils and an adequate water supply. Local smallholder farmers are allocated substitute plots of poorer quality, which means that they can barely scrape a living.

between some government officials, who profit from the investment projects, and community welfare. She also appealed to the developed countries to honour



Reiner Kneifel-Haverkamp, Head of the Department for European Affairs, Ministry of Finance and for Europe of the State of Brandenburg

their ethical responsibilities and called on Western corporations to comply with fair business practices.

Access to land: a challenge

Whereas the primary issue in Mozambique is ensuring that communities’ land tenure is secure, the challenge in Brandenburg is providing access to land in the first place. This issue particularly affects young farmers, many of whom are highly skilled with innovative ideas. However, due to the intense competition for land, prices have soared, with the result that land is no longer affordable from the proceeds from farming, as Willi Lehnert explained. Farmers’ legal right of first refusal when land is put on the market is being eroded: farmers can only exercise this right if they are able to agree to the terms that the seller and purchaser have already negotiated. In practice, this means that farmers stand no chance against heavy-weight investors.

According to Willi Lehnert, this situation has arisen partly as a result of negative incentives such as the EU’s agricultural subsidies, which are calculated by area and make large-scale land purchases an attractive option for well-capitalised investors. These investors do not just purchase individual plots: when farms are passed on to the next generation, they take over entire agricultural enterprises comprising thousands of hectares, large areas of which are then turned over to biofuel production. As a result, the investors benefit from two types of subsidy: EU agricultural funding and the feed-in payment for renewable energies, as Willi Lehnert explained.



Willi Lehnert presents the work of the “Alliance of Young Farmers” and the online project “Area Platform for Sustainable Agriculture Brandenburg”

The government has a responsibility to protect communities in the negotiations, but as Marisa Balas pointed out, there is often a conflict of interests

There is now additional competition from solar energy, he continued. Brandenburg is emerging as a hotspot for solar power. Applications have been submitted for 366 projects covering almost 10,000 hectares; this land risks being permanently withdrawn from food production.

The municipalities are responsible for approving these facilities, but here, a similar structural problem is emerging as in Mozambique. Many municipalities lack the staff capacities and the knowledge to assess the scope and long-term implications of these decisions. It is impossible to rule out conflicts of interest among local officials or unfair practices by investors, who might be tempted to submit expert opinions that are clearly skewed in their favour. Clear criteria are urgently required at state and federal level, for example as regards the size of the facilities and the quality of the land being made available, according to Willi Lehnert.

Integrated policies and innovative solutions chart the direction of travel

The strategies for improving land management are as diverse as the problems affecting access to land. A key term introduced by Dr Fritz Reusswig and frequently referenced in the discussion was policy integration. Dr Reusswig called for sustainable development guidelines that include targets not only for land allocation and use but also for energy production. What is needed is balanced development, based on the integration of the diverse policies and objectives.

This approach was endorsed by Marisa Balas for Mozambique as well. It is not only about access to land, she said; it is also a matter of utilising the land and natural resources in a meaningful way while protecting them at the same time. She gave some insights into the Community Land Initiative in Mozambique, whose aim is not only to designate zones for community use but also to produce plans for the use of land according to its specific characteristics. On this basis, local development plans can then be produced, enabling communities to make better use of available resources. Local community participation in the process is important. When it comes to minimising the environmental impacts of land use, too, local people know best.

Dr Reusswig drew attention to innovative approaches which deserve much more attention. For example, agricultural use should be combined with solar energy production. Many of the participants agreed and shared their own examples of good practice and research. Willi Lehnert also felt that there was considerable scope for multiple use, with farmers acting as energy producers. Should this type of dual use be written into law? Here, Dr Reusswig drew atten-

tion once again to the lack of policy integration. The existing structures, he said, are designed to optimise individual elements; what is lacking is a holistic view. He called for the current crisis to be recognised as an opportunity for a change of direction.

Other building blocks: awareness-raising and social participation

Another key to reducing the imbalance in knowledge, power and financial resources between investors and local communities lies in raising citizens' awareness of the law. Once citizens know their rights, they are able to fight for them, Marisa Balas said.



Marisa Balas, Consultant and researcher on inequality in land access, Maputo

Pointing in a similar direction, Willi Lehnert called for a public debate on how land should be used. It is not acceptable for a few individuals to be able to decide the fate of vast tracts of land. What is needed is a new social awareness and control of the land market, as land is not simply a commodity like any other. As a positive example, he drew attention to France, which has strong regulatory intervention in the land market and only allocates land to farmers once sound management strategies are in place. This approach enjoys a high level of acceptance within society. In Germany, the federal states should now be providing better protection for the land market via legislation on agricultural structures in order to ensure that farmers continue to have access to land.

As an innovative approach which benefits local communities as well, Marisa Balas recommended the promotion of joint ventures between communities and investors; this can support sustainable development in line with local interests.

Dr Reusswig identified local value creation as an important factor. For example, citizen participation

in wind energy has shown that regulations stipulating the required distance from residential areas are not the main issue: what is important is that the local communities have a financial stake in the projects. Here, legislation can help to boost value added at the local level. Rhein-Hunsrück-Kreis in Germany

offers a positive example here; this district administration has adopted an integrated policy approach. In conclusion, he recommended that the state of Brandenburg gear its sustainability strategy more strongly towards creating scope for the necessary policy integration in future.



Musical prelude by the chamber choir of the Protestant School Neuruppin

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