

Gender-based impacts of commercial oil palm plantations in Kalangala



Joselyn Bigirwa

Gender and Social Development Analyst
consultant
Kampala, Uganda
joselyn.bigirwa@gmail.com

Summary

“Women have been most affected by the collapse of the local economy and have since organized themselves in small groups to offer advice to one another, working together to resolve family and community conflicts” (FoE 2012). This paper examines gender-based impacts of commercial oil palm in Bugala island, Kalangala district, where large scale oil palm development is ongoing, and informs on a similar forthcoming project in Buvuma. Findings are based on a literature review, viewed through the five dimensions (land rights, productive resource, household labour, employment and decision making) of an analytical

framework for gender impacts of foreign investment in agriculture, and provides information on the impacts of oil palm on social and gender related issues including HIV. The outcomes of agricultural investments for men and women often differ in rural areas where gender inequalities are persistent. Barriers to women’s access to productive resources such as production inputs, credit and training reduce female agricultural producers’ yields by 20-30% from their full potential. Oil palm has taken over the landscape, altering women’s relationship with the forest as opportunities such as handicrafts production have gone.

The reduction in local food supply has meant more food has to be imported, leading to increased food prices and more malnutrition among children. In summary, there was 'gender blindness' and a lack of gender sensitive analysis of the impacts of large land deals on land ownership, accessibility, and disempowerment of women and girls thereby reinforcing the existing gender inequality. Also, that although the oil palm project is promoted as a poverty-reducing endeavour, it has caused displacement, food insecurity and deforestation all these affect the mostly women, children and other disadvantaged groups. Thus, with oil palm expansion in Kalangala, local communities lose out to the interests of corporate capital.

The national gender context

Uganda recognizes the central role of agriculture for food security and income, and that employs some 80% of the country's population, with a majority being women, though society is dominated by patriarchal structures that traditionally gives women access to land only through their relationships with men as daughters, wives, or mothers (Bamuhangi et al., 2011). Uganda is however, a signatory to regional and global obligations on gender equality and women's empowerment, and the 1995 Republic of Uganda Constitution offered a turning point by recognizing the equality of men and women and by making provisions for ensuring women's participation in decision making at all levels through affirmative action provisions. The National Gender Policy developed in 1997, updated in 2007, provides guidance for nationwide gender mainstreaming across key ministries. But despite the conducive legal and policy framework and affirmative action measures, gender inequality in access, control and ownership of productive resources still occurs, with disparities due to high poverty levels, low literacy rates, negative cultural practices and institutional weaknesses.

Addressing gender inequalities in employment would increase GDP growth by 1.2% annually (Government of Uganda, 2010). But women remain concentrated in the lowest paying sectors, linked to low levels of education, with 50% in the three lowest paying sectors compared to 33% of men according to the Uganda National Housing Survey (2016). And women continue to be oppressed due to cultural practices such as gender-based violence, bride price, widow inheritance, socio-cultural discrimination regarding property inheritance, preference of boy to girl child education and unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities. Gender-based violence is of particular concern, leading to reduced economic productivity at all levels, increased risk of acquiring HIV and AIDS, trauma and other health and psychosocial problems.

General gender impacts

A baseline survey in Kalangala in 2006 found extensive poverty among rural households, mostly Kibanja subsistence farmers supplementing their incomes by fishing (dominated by men), timber, charcoal and petty trade (mostly by women). Few women own land. Introduction of commercial agriculture caused a dramatic appreciation in land prices, further marginalizing the poor who cannot afford to acquire land. Although women in Kalangala have formal land rights, they still face constraints in accessing arable land because of limited control over family income, and their relative weakness in addressing male authority and political circles. Therefore, they rely predominantly on intra-household negotiations.

CSO consultations report that local people were not informed nor meaningfully engaged in the design and execution of development schemes, marginalizing large sections of the rural population especially women and children. Then in its first project progress review report, IFAD (2010) noted that initial project objectives were geared more towards large-scale estate production, but failed to include poorer sections of society which was to be corrected. It reported positive outcomes from foreign investment including new employment opportunities, higher prices for farmers, improved access to local processing facilities, and programs for community and infrastructural development. However, although oil palm is promoted as a poverty-reducing endeavour, critics note that these investments have also been associated with large-scale human displacement, loss of autonomy over livelihoods, land conflicts, community food insecurity, deforestation and environmental destruction. All disproportionately affecting women, children and other disadvantaged groups.

Oil palm is like any other cash crop grown for export; where as many rural communities have traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture, growing cassava, corn, potatoes and millet, as well as plants for medicinal uses. This has caused huge concerns of food insecurity and has mainly affected women who are the major providers of food in the households (Piacenza, 2012). People living on Bugala Island used to grow beans, yams, peas, maize, and bananas and some of these crops were used to supply food to neighboring islands. But the island now has to import almost all its supplies of bananas, rice, beans and maize flour from the main land. This has led to an increase in living costs for the people on the island, making it difficult for some members of the community to be able to feed themselves (FoE, 2012).

Large-scale investment projects that invest in community well-being, e.g. by building schools, medical facilities, wells or other access to clean drinking water, help women

to better care for their families. But in Bugala, KOGPT encountered obstacles to delivering on their corporate social responsibility; notably weak law enforcement and non-participatory approaches to project design, land and water allocation (IFAD, 2010).

Oil palm and land ownership

Since oil palm was introduced to Kalangala, the investment has been geared more towards large-scale estate production but failed to include poorer sections of society including women, youth and children among others. A 2006 baseline survey in Bugala Island found extensive poverty among rural households; most were Kibanja tenants with less than one hectare of land, engaged in subsistence farming supplemented by fishing, dominated by men, timber felling, charcoal burning and petty trade, mostly by women. Few women owned land (IFAD and IDS, 2015). Patterns of land control shifted considerably after the introduction of oil palm, with privatization of former public land to a private firm and so removing a resource that used to be at the disposal of the community. Furthermore, the project led to accumulation of one third of the island's territory land by BIDCO and an increasing amount by wealthier outgrowers, with women and single parent households losing access to land (Piacenza, 2012). To be engaged in oil palm production as a smallholder, the project required individuals to prove legitimate control over land.

The introduction of commercial agriculture caused a dramatic appreciation in land prices, further marginalizing more people who are now less able to acquire land. From a gender perspective, this caused an individualization of family land, a process that had positive and negative effects on women's empowerment depending on their negotiating power within the household. Even though women in Kalangala have formal land rights, they still face several constraints in accessing arable land because of limited control over family income, and their relative weakness in addressing male authority and political circles. Therefore, they rely predominantly on intra-household negotiations.

To encourage women to participate, KOPGT relaxed initial requirements for registration as an oil palm grower. In the absence of a land title or a certificate of occupancy, a letter from the local council and five witnesses are sufficient to attest tenancy by occupancy, if the landowner did not reclaim the land. In addition, the project has encouraged men to give user rights to their wives and daughters so they can participate in their own right as independent farmers. The project has also instituted a maximum size of landholding for which an individual farmer is supported by the project.

The project also worked with the district government to provide public land for the benefit of women who do not have access to land (Piacenza, 2012), to offset the marginalization of landless and women who do not share the benefits generated by oil palm because of their weak position in the community, the excessive burden of household work and the weak bargaining position vis-à-vis their husbands. For women, strong bargaining power within the household can determine a share of family land on their name but in the context of oil palm, no direct action was taken to build women's confidence and negotiation ability at household and community levels (Piacenza, 2012).

Impacts on the division of labour

Women in Uganda are largely responsible for subsistence farming, food purchasing and preparation, and ensuring adequate household nutrition. Between these domestic, farming and community activities, women endure a 'triple work burden' that is unremunerated and under-appreciated. According to KOPGT, 35% of registered farmers were women (Both Ends, 2010), and as such met the IFAD target of involving at least 30% of women, considering the male/female sex ratio of Kalangala District is 136:100. But the strong male prevalence in Kalangala is mostly due to positive net migration, meaning that most men living there do not live within permanent/settled households. But overall, oil palm has reinforced gender divisions as it failed to introduce a less gender biased off-farm employment for women. Furthermore, women can typically only access the lowest paid jobs due to gender divisions inhibiting them from engaging in the most lucrative tasks such as harvesting and pruning. These tasks are considered too hard for women, who usually collect just the loose fruits that fall on the ground during harvest (Piacenza, 2012). These developments notably affect younger women, who with no opportunities left, migrate to cities, undermining the social fabric of communities.

Impacts on employment

Most workers on the company's plantations are from outside the island community (Piacenza, 2012), as the company states that there are too few islanders to meet the demand for labourers. But for local communities, plantation work does not represent a viable alternative due to the working conditions and low pay rates. These jobs are only considered viable for those with no alternative, due to having no access to arable land or education (CAO, 2012). OPUL's workforce is also very much male-dominated because the recruitment process favours men, social prejudices regarding women's ability

to work in plantations, and few gender-sensitive company policies. Moreover, such jobs appear to offer little security.

The original design of the project contained several pro-poor measures but these were apparently dropped during implementation so BIDCO could meet its economic requirements (IFAD, 2010). Securing salaried employment could have represented an important outcome for the poorest women in Kalangala, especially those with limited access to arable land. However, strong gender division in the labour force and the lack of specific gender provisions in recruiting and organizing workers have left women with few jobs and wages that are not even above the poverty line. For the local inhabitants, relatively few people have found alternative livelihood opportunities; either as small-scale palm oil growers or as laborers on the palm oil estates (since the companies hire predominantly migrant workers).

On a positive note, investments by BIDCO, and interventions by VODP have created employment for more than 3,200 workers directly employed by BIDCO and by smallholder households (World Bank, 2010). However, there is no disaggregated data that shows the number of women or those from marginalized groups.

Impact on access to resources

Although rural communities' customary land rights are protected under the Ugandan constitution, in practice, these rights are being violated. Communities are being displaced and are losing vital access to natural resources, including land for farming, firewood and other forest products. As oil palm has taken over the landscape, women's relationship with the forest has altered, with reduced opportunities in the production of handicrafts, felt particularly by older women (Piacenza, 2012). Also, an IFAD-financed fund provide loans to farmers for the first 4 years as oil palm becomes establishment, but these support only farmers that already have access rights over land, and planting a perennial crop reinforces their rights and is a way of maintaining access which less numbers of women have. However, with forethought, this provision could have facilitated a greater participation of women and other socially marginalized groups (Piacenza, 2012).

Prior to the arrival of oil palm, the forest allowed for nutritional and livelihood diversification, particularly for women who are the food gatherers. The reduction in local food supply has meant more food has to be imported to the island, leading to increased food prices and high chances of malnutrition among children especially for the very poor families that can't afford to buy sufficient quantities needed and varieties, and as the only work is casual and low paid, local people struggle to make

ends meet (FoE, 2012). Forest also provided 'waves of opportunities' for communities who could frequently switch from one income source to another, depending on resource availability, market prices, seasonality, etc., as a resilience strategy for coping with external shocks.

Impact on decision making

Effective participation of local communities and safeguarding their entitlements are a vital precondition for natural resource management and sustainable economic development. This is especially true in the design and implementation large scale land based investments, when only men and women farmers that controlled land prior to investments have success stories to tell (FoE, 2012). But CSO consultations reveal that local people and civil society were often not informed, consulted or meaningfully engaged (FoE, 2012; Piacenza, 2012). Uganda is a signatory to international environmental and human rights conventions, but indicators show that further efforts are needed to implement them, by improving living conditions, including those large segments of society that still face serious under-nutrition and lack the most basic needs such as safe water, healthcare, and absence of violence. Harsh, socio-economic and ecological realities on the ground are underlined by key indicators for sustainable development, including levels of under-nourishment, prevalence of corruption, rate of deforestation and governance (FoE, 2012).

Impacts of oil palm on HIV

Complainants state that BIDCO employees working on oil palm plantations were almost exclusively from outside Kalangala, leading to an influx of migrant workers. Oil palm workers attract commercial sex workers to plantation areas given their available cash income, leading to an increase in prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases in an area already having a high level of HIV/AIDS infection (IFAD, 2010). This exacerbates violence and the spread of HIV, increasing levels of insecurity for women, including domestic violence, prostitution, early marriages, migration and increased workload. But although an environmental impact assessment in 2004 predicted that the project would increase risks of HIV/AIDS, food insecurity, cultural erosion, loss of sacred places and cultural conflicts (NAPE, 2012), the project went ahead with little evidence that the identified threats had been considered.

Recommendations

The Ugandan National Gender Policy provides an overarching framework and useful guidelines for achieving gender equality in government programmes. As such, the Vegetable Oil Project should have conducted a gender analysis before it started, to provide a clear gender vision and to highlight gender indicators of change. However, this was not done, objectives for the Oil Palm Project in Kalangala are expressed in gender neutral terms (FoE, 2012), and reports do not disaggregate data to see how the project has impacted differently on men, women youth, boys and girls, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, nor how it has contributed to an increase in HIV infection, widowhood and orphans on Bugala island.

It is critical that a gender sensitive approach is adopted from project conceptualization stage, with an understanding of key aspects of: women's and girls' positions regarding vulnerabilities, differences for new economic opportunities, and gender-specific implications of potential increases in national and districts budgets. Interventions can then be tailored, acknowledging the barriers that only women and girls face, including traditions regarding who markets produce, which crops are 'women's crops', who controls proceeds of crop sales, etc., and investing in knowledge and skills and changing social norms that allow young women to share in emerging opportunities. The government of Uganda must also endeavour to remain accountable and compliant to the existing gender related legal frameworks to ensure that the different categories of people derive equal benefits from agricultural related commercial investments.

Subsequent projects must consider the integration of gender mainstreaming approach informed by a comprehensive gender analysis. This should inform revision of the already developed National Oil Palm project. The government must remain accountable to its own commitments to address gender inequality as enshrined in the National Gender Policy, and in this case, the National Gender Machinery should be a central partner in the design and execution of further oil palm project.

A recent project document attempts to address gender and social issues considered as significant risks (IFAD and GoU, 2017), although impacts are limited because consideration is only happening now, in the second phase. To avoid similar issues occurring in the planned oil palm project in Buvuma, IFAD, the government and BIDCO must undertake a comprehensive gender analysis during participatory planning, and ensure compliance with national, regional and international treaties through a thorough assessment of legal and policy frameworks prior to project start.

They must ensure technical and financial resources for enforcement and follow up, in addressing concerns highlighted by the gender analysis, including recruiting dedicated gender experts to keep track of implementation and adherence to gender principles, and project design must address the concerns of women, girls and people with disabilities, involving that institutions establishes groups and platforms for engagement without any form of discrimination. In addition, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. Provide equal employment opportunities for both male and female without any discrimination creating enabling environment for female employees. This will involve ensuring that the recruitment procedures are in place and conform to the gender equality principles enshrined in the National Gender Policy 2017.
2. Create opportunities to lift the position of women in society and design and provide services that improve the conditions of women by reducing the care burden that hinders their participation in investment projects.
3. The government to make deliberate efforts to coordinate and seek support of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, including the Equal Opportunities Commission, in the design and implementation of important and long term projects.
4. Participatory monitoring and evaluation needs to include marginalized groups, women, youth, people with disabilities and people living with HIV, and ensure that their concerns are addressed accordingly.
5. Regular review meetings organized by the company and local government to create a conducive space for marginalized groups and CSOs that represent them to voice their concerns, and the option of participating in monitoring and evaluation initiatives to improve accountability and help address emerging gender issues.

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