

Daring to hope

Africa must set ambitious goals for land-tenure reform

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Kyeretwie Opoku: More than any other issue, the resource question divides and undermines democratic development in Africa *Photo: A. Sarre*

Fifty years ago, Africa's founding fathers dared to hope for resource justice as the basis of continental peace and prosperity. Somehow, in the ensuing period, Africa's political and economic elite appears to have lost the courage to believe in this future. We have cynically allowed and even promoted the perpetuation of oppressive and essentially colonial resource relations.

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Of course, Africa has faced many constraints over its first 40 years, including a struggle against the truly spectacular injustices of the settler states. But the racial oppression in Southern Africa should not have blinded us to the more grinding everyday oppression that continues today to distort and retard development in every single African nation.

Now that we have achieved political independence across the continent we have no excuse to ignore the resource rights agenda. Indeed, we have no choice. Today, we know that, more than any other issue, the resource question divides and undermines democratic development in Africa. We know that the instability, insecurity and violence that plagues our continent is fundamentally an expression of a people's quest for justice distorted and turned against them by global and national power structures that, for the time being, appear resolute. As Africans we have urgent unfinished business

and it is this unfinished business that, in its own small way, this meeting is about.

It is in this context that I turn to the more immediate roots of this meeting. These lie in another meeting that took place in mid July 2007, hosted by the Government of Brazil in Rio Branco, Acre. ITTO, RRI, GAFC and IUCN organized a hugely successful international conference on community forest management and enterprises. Twenty-six African forest stakeholders—forestry officials, community forest entrepreneurs and civil-society activists—from twelve African nations participated in the conference. We took the opportunity to meet to discuss the state of forestry and development in Africa and the potential of and challenges facing community forest management and CFES. I am glad that many of those people are also here today.

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We agreed that the weight of the evidence presented at the conference, including several case studies from Africa, demonstrated that, with sufficient support, our communities, too, could manage forest resources to effectively address environmental, economic and social development needs. We agreed that our communities, too, could develop globally competitive enterprises that provide creative and dignified employment in agroforestry, ecological services, and the extraction, processing and manufacturing of timber and non-timber forest products. To this list we must also add the synergistic potential of carbon sequestration under a post-Kyoto climate-change mitigation regime. Crucially, we agreed that, compared to industrial concessions, our communities

would retain and reinvest their wealth locally in productive and social infrastructure or even consumption, thereby initiating a virtuous cycle of economic and social development. We also recognized that, in Tanzania, Cameroon, Mozambique, Gambia and several other countries, real progress was occurring and that Africa as a whole could build on this.

The African environment for community forest management and CFES remains particularly challenging, however. Just as corporate investors require conducive tenure, legal and regulatory regimes and the development of appropriate organizational, technical, marketing and financial support services, so too do CFES. Yet, throughout Africa, national policies and laws continue to ignore these entities. Neither public nor private sectors have the capacity or the focus to support them. CFE pioneers face unfounded prejudice from officials, who pride themselves on their responsiveness to the needs and even the whims of corporate foreign investors. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many of our communities lack the collective self-confidence to take on the challenge of CFES; as a result, our forest sectors are performing sub-optimally and in some cases are disappearing altogether.

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The African participants at Rio Branco urged ITTO and its partners to support Africa in accelerating the recognition and realization of community rights in forestry. We specifically asked them to support a meeting in Africa where we could discuss community rights, community tenure, community management and community enterprise. In the closing minutes of that conference, the organizers responded positively.

We are here today because the Government of the Republic of Cameroon, an established leader in this area, had the vision and commitment to champion this conference and to co-organize and host it. We remain grateful to Cameroon for its continued leadership and impressive hospitality. ITTO, RRI, GACF and IUCN, too, have kept faith with Africa. In the two years since the Acre meeting they have supported additional country, thematic and case studies across Central and West Africa. They have analyzed global, southern and African trends in forest-tenure management and exploitation. They have supported specific historical and legal analyses that identify strategies for making concrete progress. They have facilitated several meetings in Africa, where many of us have been able to reflect on these issues. They have networked tirelessly to bring all the stakeholders and especially our communities into a constructive dialogue. Finally, today, they offer us this exciting platform for learning, thinking and, above all, stimulating action. We salute them and assure them that we will make good use of this opportunity.

As a result of all the analytical work we now have a fuller measure of the dangers and opportunities that confront us. We know now, for example, that if we adopt a business-as-

usual approach we will take 260 years to catch up with the rest of the world. We know that even if we adopt a progressive Latin American model of rights recognition we will need another 16 years to catch up to where they are now. This means that we in Africa have to radically increase and surpass the reform tempo achieved in other southern continents just to stay afloat. This is a challenging thought. In Brazil, however, the Africans who first called for this meeting had, like modern Africa's founders, big dreams. We dared to hope that this meeting would set concrete targets for expanding tenure, management and enterprise reforms tied to the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (that is, in six years, not 16!).

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The facilitator of this conference, James Gasana, is concerned to ensure that we remain realistic in our hopes. I must say, however, that many of us, at least in civil society, have not surrendered our Brazilian dreams. Africa does not have 260 or even 16 years. Indeed, with the wealthy countries preoccupied with the financial crisis, many African countries and communities are in danger of missing the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For many, community tenure, management and enterprise reform is probably the most realistic route to the MDGs. And, while the challenges have grown, so too has the African response.

This conference rightly focuses on opportunity. Certainly, African civil society is considerably more organized, networked and coherent than it was even two years ago. In several African countries, policy and legislative reform processes addressing the community rights agenda are under way or in the pipeline. There is progress, and there is hope.

I wish us all a fruitful conference and I hope that today, Africa Liberation Day 2009, will be remembered as the platform from which we launched our final assault on the land question.

This is an edited version of the speech delivered by Kyeretwie Opoku at the start of the conference.