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## THE FATE OF SETTLER FARMERS IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

BY RITA SEWORNU

### SUMMARY

- Land shortages, declining soil fertility, and environmental degradation are exacerbating the ability of settler farmers in Ghana to create sustainable livelihoods.
- Institutional weaknesses in the land tenure and governance systems have contributed to the exploitation of settler farmers by traditional chiefs, at times resulting in violent confrontations.
- To enhance agricultural productivity in subsistence and export sectors and achieve food security in Ghana, the government must formulate policies conducive to farmers, including securing land tenancy for settler farmers.

Settler farming has a long history in Ghana. The practice involves the migration of farmers from resource-deprived areas of the country to areas where conditions are more favorable for agriculture. Settler farmers are located in most of the southern regions of the country, although the majority are concentrated in Western, Ashanti, Eastern, and Brong Ahafo regions.

In the context of Ghana's increasing competition over access to land, most settler farmers face fragile, uncertain and shifting tenure regimes as well as a high level of insecurity. While the plight of these farmers is not entirely new, the situation has recently worsened.

For almost a decade, the country has witnessed frequent and diverse forms of confrontation between settler farmers and landlords — who are typically chiefs and members of the host communities. For instance, in 2002, some 70 settler farmers in Dadieso in Western region were allegedly chased off of their farms by local youth wielding guns, cutlasses, clubs, and catapults on the orders of the community elders (Ghana News Agency, 2002). More recently about

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a thousand settler rice farmers and their dependents at Afife in the Volta region were forced to vacate their farms after being threatened by the host community and asked to leave within the year.

Land scarcity and resultant conflicts are a growing reality in Africa (Peters, 2004: 269 and Lund et al, 2006:1). In Ghana, the main reason for confrontations is the increasing shortage of land that can be traced back to ever-growing pressures of a high population, declining soil fertility from climate changes and environmental degradations.

Other important factors also threaten the viability of settlement farming, especially institutional weakness of land tenure and governance systems, including the exploitation of flexible customary laws and an associated authoritarian interpretation by the chiefs. This backgrounder shows how the weakness of governance and tenure systems is contributing to the present day confrontation between settler farmers and their hosts and notes the implications of this on development

## **THE ADVENT OF THE SETTLER FARMERS MOVEMENT: THE PUSH AND THE PULL FACTORS**

The term "settler/tenant/migrant farmers" was part of social taxonomy that emerged in the 1940s as a consequence of the increased commodification of land rights (Boni, 2008:92). Historically, the development of settler farming can be traced to the advent of colonialism and the subsequent introduction of tree crop and commercial farming.

Ghana is an agrarian economy richly endowed with natural resources. The availability of resources varies by region; there is a sharp difference between the south and the north. The north is predominantly an area of subsistence agriculture with production confined almost entirely to a few main staples. Soils are generally poor and there is a single rainy season. The south has better soils and more rain. Cocoa and other tree crops are grown in the south, and food crops are cultivated all year around. The south also contains virtually all the mining and industrial activity (Beals and Menezes, 1970).

A sparse population and less labour in the south led colonial powers to create a labour reserve by recruiting involuntary labour through slave trade. This practice was mostly adopted in the northern part of the country for the

commercial agricultural and mining enclaves of the colonial economy. Local landowners embraced the practice in the south and also started using slave labour to farm their commercial crops (Amanor, 2010:3).

By the 1920s, growth in the agricultural sector, coupled with structural changes in the economy, culture and social organization, resulted in the emergence of voluntary inter-regional migration of labourer farmers — especially to the cocoa growing areas.

Changes in climatic conditions and other environmental issues further pushed people to areas where conditions were more conducive to farming activities. Some settler farmers in Brong Ahafo mentioned environment related factors such as land degradation and unreliable rainfall, as reasons for leaving their homes in the northern regions (Van der Geerst, 2009).

These labourers were initially paid in cash. This was followed by the *nkotokoano* (a sack filled with cocoa beans) labour contract system. Later, other forms of tenancy arrangements emerged. Prominent examples are the *abunu* and the *abusa* sharecropping systems whereby the migrant labour was given half and one third of the harvested cocoa or proceeds from the sale respectively (Hill, 1956 quoted in Amanor, 2006). With time, these systems were upgraded and migrants were allocated land for cocoa plantation as a share from landholding chiefs and families. The cocoa plantations they created were shared between the tenants and the chiefs, with the tenants taking a third or half share of the plantation as their own and the chiefs retaining a two-thirds or half share.

As migrant farmers settled in their host communities, they reinvested their profits by purchasing new lands or entering into more share contracts to expand their farms. It is possible that the number of settler or migrant farmers increased greatly as a result of the security of tenure enjoyed during periods when land seemed to be an almost inexhaustible resource. It is estimated that 98 percent of the land in the New Suhum district was worked by migrant farmers who had either purchased the land or were working it on share tenancies (Hunter (1963) and Boni, (2005 quoted in Amanor, 2006). A similar phenomenon was reproduced in the Western Region where migrant cocoa farmers are dominant in rural settlements.

The economic yields of commercial farms, coupled with the high demand for land by an influx of migrant farmers and local population growth, led

to a marked economic appreciation of land as a commercial commodity. Landholders (chiefs) quickly facilitated rapid sales of land to migrant farmers and accumulated cocoa plantations through the sharecropping system. During these periods, settler farmers lived in harmony with the chiefs and members of the host communities.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s (and continuing today), the past phenomenon of readily available and scarce labour that promoted the development of settler farming drastically changed, setting the stage for a worsening situation for settler farmers in Ghana. Under the context of land shortages, tenure insecurity for settler farmers in particular has become widespread and continues to grow.

### **DISAPPEARING SECURITY OF TENURE FOR SETTLER FARMERS**

An influential source of tenure insecurity for the settler farmers comes from the ever-changing rules in customary land tenure. Traditionally, rights to land for agricultural and other purposes depend on membership of the landholding groups. Non-members of the group gain rights to land through contractual tenurial arrangements that are both mostly verbal and comparatively weaker than those held by members of the landowning group.

The process wherein non-indigenous settler farmers are granted rights to land is popularly described as underlying or secondary or derivative. The customary rules that regulate these rights are developed, maintained and administered by landlords (the chiefs and elders), although these rules or customs are fluid and easily manipulated.

As supplies of virgin forested land dwindled, chiefs unscrupulously started redefining claims of settler farmers by sometimes reducing the size of plots originally granted to them and had been cultivated; amidst accusation that the settler farmers have encroached on those lands.

Evidence indicates that landowners — chiefs, sometimes with elders — normally take over farms cultivated by settler farmers when the farm produce reaches the peak production stage (Prah, 2004). When settler farmers protest this kind of social injustice the situation can become chaotic and settler farmers are sometimes asked to leave the host communities. The viability of the settler farms has also been limited as farmers are required

to clear the land within a few years or face the confiscation of the parcel.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that grants to the settler farmers are verbal. In most cases, a source of tension is the divergence in opinion on the entitlements of the settler farmers by both the chiefs and the farmers. Many of the chiefs believe that lands under their authority cannot be sold, and most settler farmers believe they have purchased the land outright and that their entitlement amounts to full ownership. Problems arise when the original grantor (usually a chief) dies and a newly installed chief refuses to recognize the rights of the migrant farmers. Similarly, problems arise when a settler farmer dies and leaves his successors with the “misleading” impression of full ownership over the land without obligations to the grantor. A possible result of this kind of disagreement is the loss of land for the settler farmer.

Under customary tenure, settler farmers pay for the land granted to them. In addition, settler farmers pay yearly taxes to the chiefs. Since these transactions are solely regulated by custom rather than written law, some chiefs arbitrarily increase these taxes. Failure to comply with these new obligations can result in loss of land for the farmers. In recent years, government and religious leaders have asked chiefs to reduce the taxes levied on settler farmers, but little has changed. Chiefs also invoke the issue of the influx of non-indigenous peoples onto ancestral lands in order to extract more money from migrants. In rare cases, migrant farmers have acquired full ownership of the land.

Due to the tenure security most migrant farmers enjoyed in the past, many were motivated to expand their farms. The chiefs, motivated by financial gain, were willing to give lands to the settler farmers. The result has been a rapid dispensation of land to migrants at the expense of peasant indigenous farmers who lack the resources to compete and engage in commercial farming. This has culminated in friction between settler farmers and indigenous peasants. Arising disputes are settled using the customary arbitration system where the chief and the elders pronounce judgment. Contestation between settler farmers and local chiefs and communities is not new; but “the contestations over farming rights were exercised peacefully or with limited, localized violence in most periods in the past” (Boni, 2008: 98), which suggests that the existing mechanism of resolving these differences was likely yielding results acceptable to the parties involved.

The inability to manage these tensions and prevent them from degenerating into violence in recent times implies that the justice system is weakened. Chiefs who are judges in the customary courts are implicated in most of the land cases; many would be in a position as judge in a dispute over land for which they are landholder or grantor.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS**

Agriculture is the backbone of Ghana's economy and a means of livelihood for more than half of the population. In spite of this, the country is still experiencing food shortages. This development has serious implications for the livelihoods of these farmers and indeed for the entire population. Settler farmers have contributed to growth of agricultural outputs in both the subsistence and export sectors. Settler farmers have not been given the support for land tenure security by government and locals needed to enhance their productivity. The agricultural sector is a critical element in reducing poverty, sustaining food security and achieving economic growth. Ghana's settler farmers and their agricultural yields can be supported by providing them with conditions essential to carrying out their daily activities and sustain their practices. A good first start would be to move towards guaranteeing tenure security for settler farmers.

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