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Unlocking Africa's land potential and addressing its problems through sustainable land management

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ABSTRACT

Context and background

Unsustainable land management practices result in land degradation that threatens the environment and stifles livelihoods. Africa remains exposed to threats such as natural resource degradation and poverty due to various reasons that include: changing demographics, urbanization, mining, fragile natural resources and ecosystems, increased soil erosion and land degradation, low yields and high post-harvest yield losses. Land degradation is severe and ongoing because of economic pressures and slower evolution of environmental awareness.

Goal and Objectives:

This article, while examining the Africa's land potential of the African countries, advocates for the people themselves and youth particularly, not just the governments, to be involved. It also explores the wealth of livelihood opportunities that can be found in tackling land degradation and environmental policies.

Methodology:

The methodology involves multiple case studies focused on the review of the continent's strategic resource richness. It includes scientific studies, and reports of support organizations.

Results:

This paper has laid out concerns about both the state of Africa's environment and youth career prospects. But more importantly, provided insights on steps that can be taken to conserve the environment and create jobs.

Keywords:

Land access, African youth, policies, sustainable land management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Land is the true wealth of Africa (FAO 2011) and is characterized by a very rich diversity of natural resources and ecosystems including soils, vegetation, water and genetic diversity. Together, they constitute the main natural capital of Africa and it is from these assets that food, water, wood, fiber and industrial products and essential ecosystem services and functions are derived (FAO 2011). 60% of the African population earn their livelihoods directly from agriculture, freshwater, fisheries, forestry and other natural resources (FAO 2004). Africa is home to 30% of world's natural resources (UNEP 2016). Africa has 12% of global oil reserves (Taylor et al. 2009), 30% of global mineral reserves (ANRC 2016) and 60% of unconverted arable land resources (UNEP 2016). Approximately 66% of Africa is classified as desert or drylands; 45% of the population lives in drylands (FAO 2011, UNCCD 2011).

Current activities and trends show that land and water resources in some regions of Africa are seriously threatened by over-exploitation, although per capita availability is among the highest in the world (UNEP 2013). This is a direct result of the growing needs of a growing population, often combined with inappropriate land management practices.

2. SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT

The African population grows by more than 2% every year (FAO 2008) requiring doubling of food production by 2030 to meet this demand; on the other hand, the productivity of natural resources is generally declining. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 83% of its people live in extreme poverty and their demand for food, water and other resources is increasing (FAO 2011).

Land degradation, resulting from unsustainable land management practices, is a threat to the environment and to livelihoods, where the majority of people directly depend on it. Africa is particularly vulnerable to threats such as natural resource degradation and poverty due to various factors including changing demographics, urbanization, mining, fragile natural resources and ecosystems, high rates of erosion and land degradation, low yields and high post-harvest yield losses (UNEP 2016).

Despite the enormous endowments of natural resources, Africans, especially youths are still to grasp the benefits. Challenges facing youths in the agricultural sector are insufficient access to knowledge, information and education including limited access to land, inadequate access to financial services, difficulties accessing green jobs, limited access to markets and less involvement in policy dialogue (FAO 2014, UNEP 2016). Addressing these principal challenges will increase youth's involvement in this sector, and eventually address the significant untapped potential of this sizeable and growing resource as shown in figures 1 and 2. Unless green jobs are created and multiplied across Africa, the largely unemployed youth will continue to engage in low-cost investment ventures such as farming and artisanal mining (Fig. 3), including unsustainable practices that are hazardous to the environment and human health.

Giving an important voice and the inclusion of young people in the decision-making process in land policies is paramount for institutions to pick up the signals of what is specifically happening at the rural periphery and to be able to design appropriate solutions since they form the majority of the rural population. Very few governments take the initiative to collect information on the activities of

rural populations. As a result, they are failing to balance the interests in establishing their development programs.

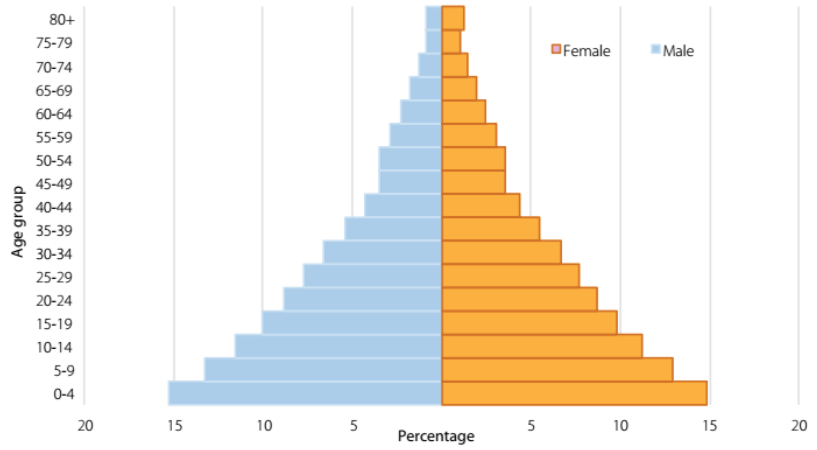

Fig. 1. Population pyramid of Africa (2015) (Source: ECA, 2016)

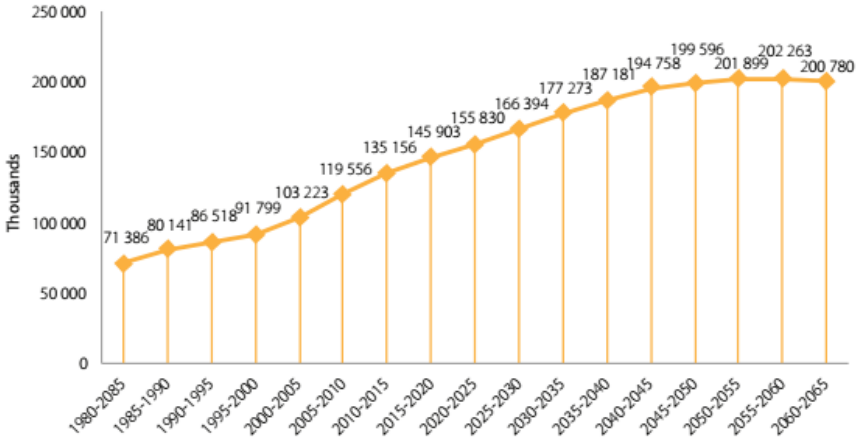

Fig. 2. Population growth in Africa for the period 1980-2065 (Source: ECA, 2016)

Sustainable Land Management (SLM) is a key response to Africa's land resources facing new challenges from myriad uses, including urbanization, mining, deforestation, agricultural expansion and infrastructure development (UNEP 2016). Mining legislation in most African countries dictates that mine closure requires the return of land to a viable post-mining use, such as agriculture (Davies et al. 2012). Continental bodies such as the African Union and programs including the African Mining Vision 2009 continue to advocate for sustainable mining while protecting the environment. This has generally triggered a new spirit in the African mining sector as some countries including South Africa, Ghana, Botswana, Namibia and Madagascar are currently engaging in policies that will check environmental degradation and ensure sustainability.

For instance, in Namibia, they develop mining policies focused on the needs of the Namibian economy and its people. The government has initiated the concept of "home-grown policy". This requires to

consult all relevant stakeholders in the country in developing policies with the need for sustainable development, increasing competition due to globalization and market forces, and the need to protect the environment. This is achieved through a series of well-attended participative workshops. This is certainly why the mining sector remains the largest private sector employer of youth in the country.

Fig. 3. Artisanal gold mining activities in Batouri, Cameroon.

Credit: Dr. Marc Anselme Kamga

Africa today should seize the opportunity to invest in its lands, through strategies and interventions centered on the majority of its population - young people. Land policies must protect rights of communities, women, youth and marginalized communities with emphasis on exploration of land governance solutions that can contribute to socio-economic transformation of Africa. In recent years, thousands of Africans have been swallowed by the sea or abandoned in the desert, in pursuit of a decent life because of socio-economic despair; this testifies the urgency for inclusive action. Most African youths live in rural and urban areas but have limited access to land due to unfavorable land policies and land rights. As Africa becomes progressively urbanized, small holder agriculture will remain fundamental for absorbing much of Africa's burgeoning young labor force into gainful employment (Losch 2012).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusively, one of the viable, innovative and sustainable vision this article is proposing to African governments facing the problem of management and profitability of arid and / or degraded areas

due to the exploitation of mineral resources is to promote and encourage youth to invest in agro-pastoral activities at large scale. This will foster the migration from a traditional (small-scale) dryland economy to a more profitable modernized economy whose products could be exported beyond national borders.

For example, cash crop production can be intensified, by focusing on high-value crops, such as tropical fruits, gums, resins including vegetables, while monitoring price developments in domestic and international markets. Cultivation of shea butter, as well as that of cashews, gum arabic and cocoa agroforestry can also be implemented as solutions to the restoration of degraded lands and sources of economic income. Products from these crops have high demand in several sectors and world market. In fact, the seeds of the shea fruit are large kernels with a high percentage of edible oil, known as shea butter, which is a very important nutritional and economic resource for households and communities across the world.

In addition, the tourism in wildlife sanctuaries can also be a great economic asset especially when we know that in Africa almost all these wildlife reserves are located in arid zones. Promotion and encouragement of youth to invest in agro-pastoral activities at large scale can also be the beginning of a solution to the problem of rural - urban migration of young people in search of new opportunities and a decent life.

A new system of management and governance of land resources is therefore urgent in Africa; one that is able to respond in a systematic and integrated way to this key development challenge (UNEP 2016). The effective integral management of land and its resources will permit transformation of the lives of the African people and significantly reduce conflict.

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5. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS :

Each contributor to the manuscript is invited to present shortly his role (investigator, writer, reviewer, field task, laboratory task, ..etc.) in the paper

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