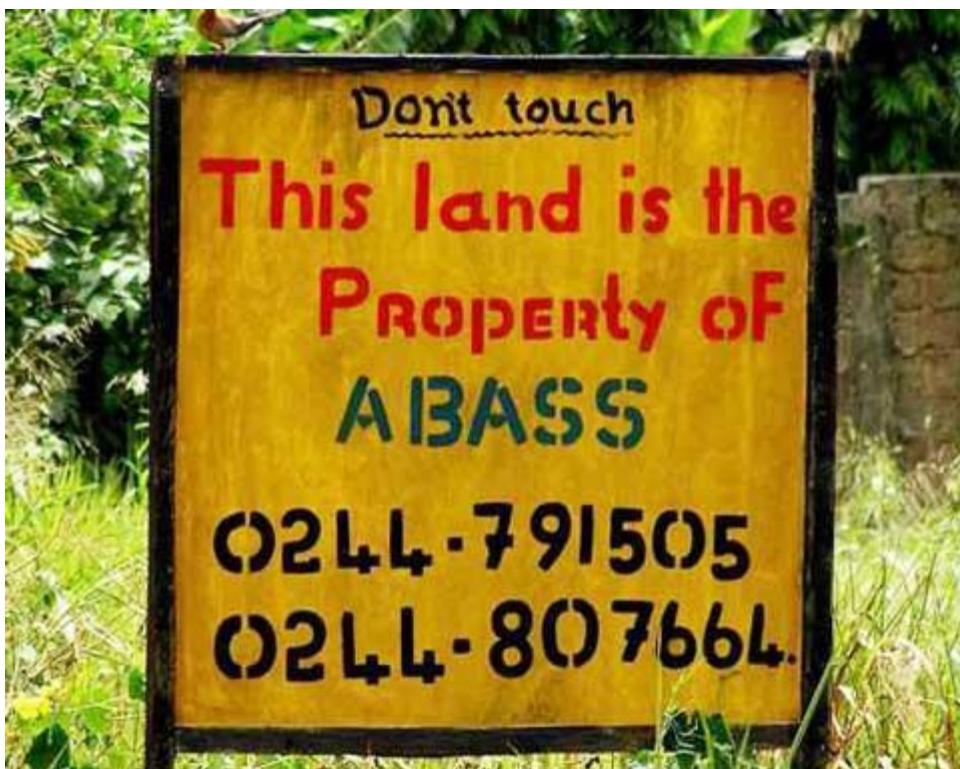


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'Property Ladder' Helps the Poor Gain Land Rights



Lorenzo Cotula

A sign marking private property in Angola

(You can download an MP3 of this story at voaspecialenglish.com)

This is the VOA Special English Agriculture Report.

Less than a third of people in developing countries own or have any official right to the land they live on. Groups like UN-Habitat and its partners are working on a simple way to secure land rights for millions of people. Development experts say gaining land rights is important for reducing poverty and increasing economic growth and food production.

Poor people can then use the land as security to get bank loans. Land records can also show foreign investors that the land and the rights of those on it are legally secure. Foreign demand has increased in recent years for agricultural land in Africa, Asia and South America. UN-Habitat official Clarissa Augustinus in Nairobi, Kenya, explains why land records are so important.

CLARISSA AUGUSTINUS: "When an investor goes to the government and says 'I want a piece of land,' the government looks on their maps which show that that particular piece of land is empty, and they give it to an investor. But when the investor goes there and looks at the land, he sees that it is fully occupied by a tribe or a family or whatever."

Forcing the people off the land can harm the image of the investor.

CLARISSA AUGUSTINUS: "It can cause what the European investors are calling reputation risk."

Ownership documents like deeds and titles are rare, she says, because establishing property lines and recording land is expensive.

CLARISSA AUGUSTINUS: "You could be talking a couple of hundred dollars to create a deed or a title. And most countries cannot afford to give the majority of citizens, at this point in time, ownership rights because of the cost of creating it, and most individuals cannot afford to subsidize it."

UN-Habitat says the answer in some countries is to create a series of steps in gaining land rights -- a so-called property ladder. First, people could receive a simple document or starter title to the land they are on. They would be safe from the threat of being forced off the land by the state or wealthy buyers. Higher steps would provide greater rights. Finally, a majority of a community could decide to allow individual ownership of the land.

Namibia, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia are among the countries adopting property ladders. Ms. Augustinus says Ethiopia has already provided twenty million land certificates on the lower end of the property ladder for about one dollar each.

In Southeast Asia, the United States Agency for International Development is working on a project to help Timor-Leste develop property rights. The first step is an official certificate recognizing a landholder's unopposed claim. East Timor separated from Indonesia in nineteen ninety-nine. The Indonesian army had destroyed land records and forced communities from their land to break up resistance.

And that's the VOA Special English Agriculture Report. I'm Bob Doughty.

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