

ECOWAS charged to enforce gender-friendly and inclusive agricultural laws

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ECOWAS countries have been tasked to enforce gender-friendly and inclusive agriculture laws to increase production and value chain in order to meet up with Africa's Zero Hunger target by the year 2025.



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The reiteration came at the ECOWAS Parliament joint programme with Oxfam and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) aimed at promoting gender equality in agricultural land investments in Africa.

There is no choice but to invest in women

The two-day conference deliberated on issues of the inability of women to own land. Participants revealed that women account for about 60 to 80% of smallholder farmers, and make up the largest percentage of the workforce in the agricultural sector. The event further addressed the inadequately enforced policies that displace not only women but small-scale farmers by multi-agricultural investors.

Speaking at the programme, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) official, Tacko Ndiaye, said data indicate less than 10% of women in some West African are landowners.

Ndiaye, who is the senior officer for gender, equality and rural development at FAO, said ECOWAS must invest in women to increase their productive potentials. She continued: "A 2013 survey by the Gambian Ministry of Agriculture revealed that 90% of rice producers and rice field managers are women. There is no choice but to invest in women."

Beyond gender-friendly policies, Ndiaye recommended the region's investment in agriculture be capacity driven.

Small-scale farmers should be promoted and protected

Oxfam West African Regional Director, Adama Coulibaly, emphasised the importance of gender equality and the protection of smallholder farmers in the region. He notes that with Africa's vast arable land attracting investors, rural farmers lose out to agricultural investors who buy up land in the rural areas. "80% of people in agriculture here in Africa are smallholders. Our governments need to have well-balanced policies so that when investors invest in large-scale agriculture the rights of small-scale farmers should be promoted and protected. If not, we will end up creating more vulnerabilities," Coulibaly warned.

Agriculture and investment advisor at IISD, Carin Smaller, highlighted the need to ensure gender-friendly agricultural programmes are carried out at the time and place that maximises the potentials for women's participation.

To tackle legal obstacles to land rights in West Africa, Smaller said IISD in collaboration with governments, national parliaments and the ECOWAS Parliament work to change laws and policies towards the achievement of the SDGs. "We are very active with parliamentarians to see what roles they can play either at the legislative level by bringing new laws into force or at an oversight level, by making sure that laws being put into place by the government are respected and enforced. Further, that their constituencies know about what is happening, and can apply these new laws and regulations," concluded Smaller.

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