Abstract: Customary land reform to facilitate private investment in Zambia: achievements, potentials and limitations

By Austine Ng’ombe

In the name of development, governments in southern Africa are reformulating land policies to facilitate privatization of customary land rights. It is argued that this can stimulate land markets, (foreign) private investment, access to formal credit, and enhance security of tenure (by way of holding title), thereby leading to economic growth and poverty alleviation. However, these land reform proposals have often produced unintended results as reports of exclusion, elite capture, displacement and enclosure of the commons are widespread in many parts of southern Africa. Zambia is not an exception in the regional land reform rhetoric. In 1995 the government enacted a pro-investment Lands Act in order to attract the investment from ‘abroad’. In line with the provisions of the Act, and the objective of government, a large amount of customary land has been converted to private tenure as more foreign investments have flooded the country. One notable example of such investments is in the mining sector as, for example, Lumwana Mine (the largest copper mine in Africa) and Kansanshi Mine were opened up in Solwezi, North Western Province. These mines have attracted more people and fringe investments to the area in search of economic opportunities. This has further led to increased pressure on land, particularly in peri-urban locations, as more people and organisations seek to acquire customary land from traditional rulers and convert it to private leaseholds. This paper uses personal experience and research to present the achievements, potentials and limitations of private investments on local communities/economy in Solwezi. The paper argues that despite the huge potential of private investment, attainment of land reform-related poverty alleviation strategies in Zambia still remains overshadowed by conflicting agendas — how does government serve the interests of its poor citizens while at the same time it is expected to pursue the collective global market agenda in order to aspire for the country’s international recognition and acceptance? This question is particularly crucial given that these agendas are often at odds.

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