

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IMW-20
Land Consolidation

The White Rhino
Nyeri, Kenya
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The pressure on land around here is pretty high. The Kikuyu and its sub-tribes, the Meru and Embu, number more than two million and occupy a great belt of territory circling Mount Kenya and stretching southwards to Nairobi. This is the Central Province. As its population grows, and it is doing just that very fast, it becomes impossible to find land for each and every Kikuyu, Meru and Embu. With Kenya's development more people will find employment in industry, but this is of little comfort to the growing class of landless peasants. Few can be accommodated in schemes like Mwea.

At the same time increased production on existing land is greatly hindered by the tribal system of apportioning land to all, and thereby breaking it up into many small holdings, many of which are uneconomic. A survey made in 1950 showed the average number of fragments to be six to eight. Many cases were worse. One man from Nyeri had forty, the smallest only .01 of an acre, adding up to a total of twelve acres. The smallest fragment on record was one banana plant which may have been as many as twenty miles from the owner's home. Yet his wife was expected to walk this distance (nowadays she can often take a bus) to tend to this single plant.

Considering that all the records were in minds rather than ledgers, it's not surprising that in spite of the retentive Kikuyu minds land ownership and inheritance were the most fruitful sources of disputes imaginable. Court cases multiplied, and by 1952 it was estimated the Kikuyu were spending almost \$300,000 a year on land cases.

The thing had gotten out of hand, and the Kikuyu were the first to recognize it. Something had to be done; consolidation was it. Essentially consolidation recognizes the existing land rights of individuals and consolidates into one economic plot each person's holdings. If a man's holdings are too small to be economically sound, he is either offered land on a settlement scheme or given a small plot in one of the villages where he can either work in a trade or work for one of his land-owning friends.

Consolidation has two main objectives: to leave everyone who has land with one consolidated holding which he can farm more easily, and to give each farmer security of title so that he can borrow to develop his farm. Consolidation is a purely voluntary process today, and the operation isn't started until the overwhelming majority of the local people want it.

A brief outline of the stages of consolidation follows:

- 1) Each district is broken up into "adjudication sections" which usually correspond to an area with 500-1,000 landowners.
- 2) All those owning land within the section are asked to declare their holdings.
- 3) A committee of elders decides upon the ownership of every piece of land within the section and settles disputes.
- 4) A Record of Existing Rights is compiled and after sixty days is declared to be final.
- 5) A planning committee of the younger, educated members of the section decide how much of the land will be needed in the foreseeable future for local public purposes, and it allocates that land (usually between 3% and 5% of the area).
- 6) The residue is divided into single pieces among the original holders in proportion to what they owned, and a percentage cut is levied on all for the communal land.
- 7) Survey teams mark the new boundaries and volunteers plant boundary hedges.
- 8) After waiting sixty days for objections, the books are closed and each land claim is registered for a certain fee per acre.

Considering the complexity of the process and the numerous opportunities for disputes, it has been extraordinarily smooth and there have been very few problems. The consolidation officers we have talked to unanimously contribute this to the real desire to consolidate and have a registered title.

Clearly this would be a waste of time if once the land is registered, its owners would be free to sub-divide it at will. Therefore a system of control, exercised through local land boards, was devised to prevent sub-division below the size of an economic holding.

Clearly also the aim is to increase farm production by encouraging good agricultural practices. With this in mind farm layouts and plans have been introduced. Neither is compulsory, but for a fee a farmer may have an advisor to suggest where to place his homestead and paddocks in order to conform best to the contours and potential of the farm. The layout is quite simple in that only general direction is given about where to plant what on an average cycle of seven or eight years with half its life under grass. The farm plan is much more complex in that it plans everything for the next ten years. In spite of their complexity, however, they are increasingly popular.

In the Central Province the process has been virtually completed within the Kikuyu and Embu areas and about a million acres have been registered. Production has increased and together commercial banks and government have loaned over a million dollars to small producers

over the past few years. In Nyeri consolidation was wound up in 1959, but many of the farmers didn't believe the new boundaries would remain constant. It's an old Kikuyu custom, partly to ensure tenancy, to plant bananas on any new piece of land which a person hopes to settle for a long time. As a result bananas have become a valuable cash crop to the district as confidence has been restored.

In Meru, however, the situation is different. The process has only just begun. We asked the District Officer in charge of land consolidation, Mr. Mathews, why.



Consolidated land at Muhoya's

"Our main reason for starting recently is simple: we have only had so many staff and up until now they have been busy in the priority areas where people are more in need and more interested. Meru is one of the largest districts in Kenya and potentially one of the richest, but it is only in the higher areas where there is a real problem. Although the WaMeru universally support the principle of land consolidation and indeed are constantly requesting that the scope of operations be enlarged, we encountered massive apathy when we sought their practical co-operation. In general, though, we've made steady if not spectacular progress over the last year."

He continued that heavy rains in October and November had brought consolidation virtually to a standstill. "We couldn't even get to the villages to demarcate holdings. We also had an outbreak of Mau Mau oathing in the middle of the year. Troops had to be called in and consolidation was stopped in some areas while security operations were being carried out.

"We're getting places though. Many of the people really want it and we're moving ahead solidly in five sections. Only one area has turned us down, but when they see the advantages, they'll change their minds. There are indications they're doing so already. Altogether we've demarcated about 13,000 acres into 3,500 farms. We have our problems, but then one expects a certain amount of foot-dragging in the beginning. We should have most completed by 1964."

He went on to tell us of voluntary consolidation that had taken place among some progressive farmers before Government was assisting

the district. "This isn't unique either. When you're in Nyeri, go see Chief Muhoya. He was leading voluntary consolidation in his location back in 1948."

We couldn't see Chief Muhoya, but we did hear his story. It was in his location of North Tetu, near Nyeri, that the consolidation movement began, on the initiative of the people and not the government. Many of North Tetu's Kikuyu, ardent cattlemen, worked on nearby European stock farms where they saw for themselves the advantages of what are here called exotic cattle (Jerseys, Holsteins, etc.). When they subsequently bought these breeds for themselves, they spontaneously began to paddock their grazing land in order to maintain health standards.

Enclosing the land brought with it its own problems, since the boundaries of grazing land had never been properly defined. Clan elders settled most of the boundary disputes, but it soon became evident that a more permanent arrangement had to be made. Thus the need for consolidation, and under the strong leadership of Chief Muhoya land exchanges between heads of families began to take place.

This wasn't easy at that time, however. The need was clear but the atmosphere wasn't. Many Kikuyu leaders opposed land consolidation bitterly because it was encouraged by Europeans and because they felt it attacked the integrity of Kikuyu culture.

Then came Mau Mau in 1952 and all progress stopped. It was not until two years later that consolidation was resumed. Then Government stepped in and made it an official concern. Today in Muhoya's location nearly half of the landowners work to farm plans, the highest proportion anywhere in Kenya.

Land consolidation certainly is a step in the right direction, and especially so among the progressive tribes of the Central Province, willing and eager to benefit from the increased opportunities provided by agricultural extension services. Elsewhere in Kenya there has been very real progress in consolidation, although title has been registered over only comparatively small areas. Nevertheless improved farming practices and increased production are becoming more widespread.

Such development is heartening, since the impetus originally came from the people. In this case a relatively small amount of money has had an immediate impact on those on the bottom of the pyramid, the peasant farmers. In relation to Kenya's total needs, however, consolidation is only a drop in the bucket. But every drop counts.

Very sincerely yours,



Ian Michael Wright