

**Research-training workshop on**

**Rural Property and Inequality**

**Time:** September 1-2, 2008  
**Place:** Norwich, UK  
**Participants:** Open to all PhD students. Maximum number of participants: 15  
**Organisers:** Thomas Sikor, School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia  
Christian Lund, International Development Studies, Roskilde University  
**ETCS:** 4 points

**Invited speakers and resource persons:**

- Derek Hall, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
- Linda Lobao, Ohio State University, USA
- Pauline Peters, Harvard University, USA
- Deema Kaneff, University of Birmingham, UK
- Lutz Laschewski, Rostock University, Germany
- Monique Nuijten, Wageningen University, The Netherlands
- Marianne Penker, University of Applied Life Sciences, Austria
- Bertram Turner, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany
- Nitya Rao, University of East Anglia, UK

**Background**

The announced workshop is the result of joint efforts by the Rural Property Network, the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and the Graduate School in International Development Studies at Roskilde University. The idea is to combine a meeting of the Rural Property Network with a research-training workshop. This will allow for an exchange of theoretical ideas and empirical knowledge on the forefront of contemporary research and for a discussion of upcoming researchers' projects and work.

**The issue**

Proposing an investigation into the relationship between rural property and inequality may raise some eyebrows. Property is about inequality, one may argue, just as much as inequality is about property. Understood as an analytical concept, property is about who gets what and how. While some essentially consider property to constitute 'theft', and others see it at a first step in man's good husbandry of resources, scholars from various disciplines tend to recognize that property is a key institution influencing local livelihoods, a critical force of social exclusion/inclusion, source of gender differences, determinant of the distribution of benefit streams among social actors, etc. In short, property and inequality are tied to each other in an intimate relationship; and we have known this for a long time. So why do we propose a workshop on the relationship between rural property and inequality?

We suggest that contemporary rural transformations necessitate a fresh look at the relationship between rural property and inequality. Considering today's processes and patterns of social and spatial differentiation – and the social practices and relationships producing those – we may need to adjust our conceptual framings of property and its relationship with inequality. There are several developments that challenge the focus on land ownership rights (their presence, distribution, or absence) we have commonly employed in

research on rural inequality. People's dealings with land have introduced new practices of exclusion that do not take the form of ownership. Similarly, land and associated resources have acquired new values for recreational and environmental purposes, which may be distributed among changing sets of actors not via ownership titles but other forms of regulation. At the same time, land may no longer be the single most important productive resource in agriculture. More broadly, land-based production has lost significance as a source of income, wealth, and safety for rural areas, possibly making access to non-farm employment, housing, and social services the primary concerns of people in many rural areas of the world.

These far-reaching changes, we argue, imply the need for a renewed investigation into the relationship between property and inequality. How can we, the overarching question is, usefully employ property as an analytical concept to examine processes and patterns of social and spatial differentiation, as well as the social dynamics producing these?

*Agrarian transformations and property in land: property as we know it*

Property has been a key concept informing analyses of agrarian transformations over the past three decades. Agrarian transformations are about the practices and processes by which agriculture becomes commercialized, and through which commercialization leads to the development of capitalist relations in agricultural production. They are inherently uneven, as the associated shifts in patterns of control over productive resources and surplus differentiate rural people's abilities to take advantage of new opportunities and deal with the associated risks. Property is a key 'mechanism' (White 1989) bringing about such shifts, as changes in property practices and relationships bear on the patterns of control over productive resources. Property in land is of particular importance. Land ownership, as indicated by land titles and land holding distributions, emerges as the single most important factor of social differentiation.

Property in land, therefore, has been a key focus in research on agrarian transformation and differentiation across Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America, and Southeast Asia. On the one hand, much of research on the latter four regions analyzes the distribution of land ownership among multiple social actors – small-holders, large landowners, companies, foreign investors, local communities, men, women, old, young, etc. – and their effects on social and spatial differentiation. On the other, research on Africa has noted the widespread absence of land ownership, emphasizing the negotiability and inclusiveness of African land rights. More recently, research on the post socialist parts of Asia and Europe has investigated land ownership, its distribution and negotiability as emerging after the decline of socialism.

Property in land has also made a strong comeback in international policy for rural areas. Governments throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America have introduced legislation promoting the registration of individual land holdings and titling of customary land. Southern Africa has witnessed a strong drive for the redistribution of land, similar to the agrarian reform in Brazil. In North and South America, indigenous people and other local groups have acquired legal rights to land and forest. Around the world, women have seen their names entered in land titles and received separate land certificates. These policies and programs may be highly varied in their implications for rural inequality as they reflect a broad range of agendas, extending from neoliberal privatization to rights-oriented development interventions. As much as these agendas differ from each other, they also coalesce around the importance of assets and rights as key drivers of social change.

### *Contemporary rural transformations: challenging 'property as we know it'?*

Contemporary rural transformations challenge the focus on land ownership and, more broadly, property, as lenses to examine processes of social and spatial differentiation in several ways. In the most narrow way, changes in actual property practices have formed new processes of exclusion from land that do not take the forms of changes in land ownership sanctioned by the state. In Africa, 'informal formalizations' and other practices severely limit the capacity of some social actors to negotiate access to land. In the Southeast Asian uplands, large and small plantations of perennial crops firm up once permeable property boundaries. In Central and Eastern Europe, private entrepreneurs gain effective control over large tracts of agricultural land by way of what is legally considered short-term rental contracts. Or, cutting across all of the above, women across post colonial settings have learned that formal ownership rights do not in themselves allow them to overcome their economic, political, and social exclusion. These developments suggest that property relations may influence agrarian differentiation not only via ownership rights but also in other forms.

Moreover, land has lost some of its significance in agriculture in relations to other productive resources. The rise of contract farming across the globe demonstrates new strategies allowing private capital to penetrate agriculture even where rural small-holders continue to own the land they work. Similarly, food processors and supermarkets exercise power over agricultural producers by way of controlling product markets and specifying product standards at global and national scales. Biotech companies hold property rights to seed and technology that exert a stronger influence on agricultural production than land rights, not unlike the all-important production quotas issued to farmers in the European Union and the monopolies over machinery services observed in post socialist Europe. As a result, control over other productive resources, quotas, and markets may have become more important determinants of social and spatial differentiation than property in land.

At the same time as land has lost in significance as a productive resource for agriculture, land and associated resources have acquired new values in relation to recreational and environmental demands on rural areas. Not only Europeans and (North) Americans but also people living on the other continents increasingly use rural areas for (secondary) housing and relaxation. They value the aesthetic beauty of open space and cultural landscapes. In addition, the turn to environmental sustainability has implied that rural areas are more and more understood as harbouring important environmental values, such as biodiversity habitats, watershed services, CO<sub>2</sub> storage, and various other kinds of ecosystem services. The recreational and environmental values have, in turn, introduced a whole range of new actors to rural areas. They have also motivated extensive interventions of state and non-state actors into the use of rural land and associated resources. Yet neither the state nor most non-state actors have sought to change landownership patterns. They have instead pursued their objectives by other means, such as spatial zoning and use regulations. Consequently, it may not be land ownership but other forms of property that influences the distribution of recreational and environmental values among actors and over space.

More broadly, land-based production has lost significance as a source of income, wealth, and safety for many rural areas. Rural areas across the world have become less and less agrarian, as people have taken up employment and entrepreneurship outside agriculture. Simultaneously, states have increasingly expanded and improved the provision of social services to rural areas. Cash transfers are replacing the traditional concern with access to land and other productive resources as a means to fight hunger and secure subsistence. As a result, many rural people are more concerned with gaining and maintaining access to employment,

housing, and social services than land rights. Correspondingly, property in land may have become a much less significant factor of social and spatial differentiation as access to other resources has gained importance for people's livelihoods.

### *Leading questions*

The workshop examines these issues by way of the following set of questions:

- How do legal property rights to various kinds of resources affect contemporary processes and patterns of social and spatial differentiation at various scales (intra-household, household, social group, locality, region, etc.)?
- What are the effects of contemporary changes in rural inequality on property relations regarding various kinds of resources?
- How do various actions of the state directed at property rights, such as privatization and rights-oriented development interventions, affect processes and patterns of differentiation at various scales?
- How do states modify their property laws and regulations in reaction to changes in rural inequality and associated changes in rural discourses?
- How do our understandings of the relationship between rural property and inequality differ among post industrial, post colonial and post socialist settings?
- How does the lens of property influence our understanding of social and spatial differentiation processes at various scales? How can property improve current research on inequality? What can property researchers learn from insights on rural inequality originating from research that employs other analytical lenses?

### **Objectives of the workshop**

The PhD researcher course aims at training the participants in analyzing questions of property and their wider socio-economic and political implications, through discussions of concepts, theories and methodological aspects. Conceptual questions of *how* property can serve as an analytical lens to investigate processes and patterns of rural inequality are a core element of this workshop.

### **Workshop principles**

The aim of the course is to discuss ways to actually study and analyze relationships between rural property and inequality. The basis for this is each participant's research, being they invited speakers or PhD researchers. This makes the paper to be presented by each participant an important part of the preparation for the workshop. A number of key texts will be selected by the invited speakers in coordination with the organizers of the course, as a common background for the discussions during the workshop. Each PhD researcher has to prepare and present a paper related to the overall theme of the course.

The role of the lecturers will be twofold: Partly present their own work with and reflections on rural property and inequality, and the implications for their research and methodology; and partly serve as discussants and advisors to the PhD researchers on how to move along in their analysis.

## **Structure of the workshop**

The training course is structured around two elements, 1) the presentations of the invited speakers, and 2) the presentation of PhD papers. The latter will take place in smaller groups. There will be made plenty of time in the programme for discussion, in plenary as well as in the smaller groups.

## **Requirements**

The workshop is open for all PhD students, but with a maximum of 15 participants. Send applications for the course to Thomas Sikor ([T.Sikor@uea.ac.uk](mailto:T.Sikor@uea.ac.uk)) by March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, including an abstract for the PhD paper of a maximum of 500 words. Participants will be selected on the basis of their abstract, as themes are expected to relate to the overall theme of this PhD course. Notice of acceptance will be sent by April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Deadline for the PhD paper, of a maximum of 6000 words, is July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, to be sent to the same address.

## **Fees and costs**

Fee for the participation in the workshop is £160, covering day rates and conference meals. The fee is to be paid by July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008 and is not refundable. Accommodation can be arranged on campus at a rate of £20/night. The University of East Anglia Norwich is within easy reach from the airports of Norwich and Stansted (the latter being served from across Europe by low-budget airlines).

## **Credits**

Participation in the research-training workshop earns students 4 ECTS points