

Land, Leadership and Rural Transformation

Lessons from China for Uganda

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Rural transformation is no longer a peripheral policy concern. Across Africa - where the majority of citizens still live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods - it lies at the heart of national development.

During my recent visit to China at the invitation of China Agricultural University (CAU), I had the opportunity to examine firsthand how one of the world's largest agrarian societies is navigating rural revitalisation. Through conferences and field visits, particularly in Yunnan province, I observed a model of rural transformation anchored in land governance, state coordination and institutional leadership. My visit was guided by leading rural development scholars, including Professor Li Xiaoyun and Professor Tang Lixia of CAU. Professor Li is widely recognised for advancing a “human-land-industry” framework that integrates land reform, poverty reduction and sustainable agricultural modernisation. Professor Tang's research focuses on livelihood diversification, agricultural transition and inclusive rural development. Both scholars emphasise field-based research and policy innovation grounded in lived rural realities. Their work provided an analytical lens through which to understand China's rural transformation - and to reflect on possible lessons for Uganda.

Rural transformation matters for Africa

Across Africa, agriculture remains central to GDP, employment, food security

and export earnings. Continental frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), and the Maputo and Malabo Declarations all identify agriculture as a driver of inclusive growth and poverty reduction. Globally, the Sustainable Development Goals - particularly SDGs 1, 2, 8 and 10 - place rural development at the centre of sustainable transformation. Yet rural poverty, land inequality, youth migration, weak infrastructure and low productivity persist across much of the Global South. As African countries pursue industrialisation and urbanisation, a pressing question emerges: *Can rural areas become engines of growth rather than reservoirs of poverty?*

It was within this broader context that I examined China's approach.

Land governance and policy architecture in China's rural revitalisation

China's rural transformation is underpinned by a comprehensive national policy framework, most notably the Rural Revitalisation Strategy launched in 2017. The strategy advances five core objectives: industrial vitality, ecological sustainability, effective governance, cultural renewal and improved living standards. Following the 2020 declaration that extreme rural poverty had been eradicated, policy emphasis shifted toward agricultural modernisation and long-term rural prosperity, while retaining the principle of collective land

ownership. Under China's Constitution and the Land Administration Law, rural land belongs to village collectives, with households granted long-term, legally protected use rights through the Household Responsibility System. Recent reforms - including the extension of land contracts and the "Three Rights Separation" reform (distinguishing ownership, contract rights and management rights) - have enhanced tenure security while permitting land transfer and consolidation to support scaled and commercialised production.

This legal and institutional architecture enables coordinated land management, strict land-use classification to safeguard national food security, and structured rural planning aligned with broader development goals. Village committees possess the authority to reorganise fragmented holdings, facilitate agribusiness expansion, and attract external investment without privatising land. Field observations in Yunnan province illustrate how this framework operates in practice. Rural land remains collectively owned, households retain transferable user rights within regulated categories - agricultural, residential, construction or forest - and land may be reallocated if families permanently relinquish village membership. Such arrangements allow local leaders to consolidate plots, redesign settlements and implement reconstruction initiatives with relative efficiency. The result is a multi-level governance system in which village authorities, local governments, universities, enterprises, NGOs and residents collaborate within a clearly defined policy structure to advance rural revitalisation.

The central role of the State in China's rural development

Perhaps the most striking feature of rural China is the visible and sustained commitment of the state. Modern infrastructure - roads, electricity, sanitation, health-care, schools and digital connectivity - extends deep into rural areas. Environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation

are integrated into planning. Local governance structures actively monitor implementation, often using incentive systems to encourage compliance and community participation. Government facilitation is also critical in attracting investment. In the absence of private land ownership, large-scale speculation is limited. Instead, village leadership mobilises partnerships, drawing entrepreneurs and managerial talent into rural communities. However, the system is not without challenges. The absence of private property rights may dampen incentives for long-term capital investment by individual farmers. In some areas, wage employment appears more attractive than entrepreneurial risk-taking, leaving economic dynamism reliant on state support and external actors.

Uganda's land question: Opportunity and constraint

Uganda presents a markedly different context from China. Land is predominantly privately owned under a complex tenure system that includes customary, freehold, leasehold and mailo arrangements. Even when families migrate permanently to urban areas, land typically remains within the family. While private ownership can encourage long-term investment and security, it has also contributed to fragmentation, idle land and deepening inequality in some regions.

One of the most persistent challenges is the phenomenon of absentee landlords - registered land titleholders, often under the Mailo system, who neither occupy nor actively manage their land. In many cases, occupants (bibanja holders) cannot easily access or even locate these landlords. The result is chronic tenure insecurity, land conflicts and underutilization. Historical research shows that absentee Baganda landlords significantly disrupted land use patterns in districts such as Kibaale during both the colonial and post-independence periods. Although they held formal land titles, their physical absence created in-

security among Banyoro tenants, undermining long-term agricultural investment and rural stability. The land question in Kibaale remains emblematic of broader tensions within Uganda's land governance system. Government interventions - including the Land Fund aimed at compensating landlords and securing tenant rights - represent steps toward resolving these tensions. New regulatory efforts to streamline payment of busuulu (ground rent) through local councils also seek to formalise relationships between landlords and occupants. However, deeper structural reforms may be required to fully address historical grievances, tenure insecurity and inefficient land use. Unlike China's collective system, Uganda cannot easily implement centralised village restructuring due to constitutional protection of private property. But this does not mean reform is impossible. The challenge is to design legally grounded, consultative solutions that promote both productivity and justice.

Uganda's rural development challenge

Uganda's agricultural potential is significant. With a favourable tropical climate and bimodal rainfall, the country supports multiple cropping seasons and produces a wide range of commodities, including coffee, maize, bananas, beans and tea. Agriculture contributes roughly 23-25 per cent of GDP, employs nearly 70 per cent of the workforce and accounts for over 40 per cent of export earnings. Yet the sector remains largely subsistence-based, with about 80 per cent of farmers operating on smallholder plots of less than two hectares.

More than 75 per cent of Ugandans live in rural areas, where poverty levels remain higher than in urban centres. Despite policy commitments under Vision 2040 and the National Development Plan (NDP III and NDP IV), structural constraints continue to limit transformation.

Agricultural funding remains below the 10 per cent Maputo/Malabo target, irriga-

tion covers only about 3-4 per cent of farmland, and productivity remains low compared to potential yields. Rural infrastructure gaps - including limited paved roads, low electricity and internet access and high post-harvest losses - further weaken competitiveness. At the same time, land tenure insecurity under customary and Mailo systems discourages long-term investment. Together, these challenges slow rural transformation and constrain agriculture's ability to drive inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Lessons for Uganda

China's experience offers important lessons - not as a template, but as inspiration. First, sustained political commitment is essential. Rural transformation must be financed and treated as a national priority. Second, local governance matters. Empowered district and parish institutions can coordinate land-use planning, dispute resolution and development initiatives. Third, land governance reform is unavoidable. Addressing absentee landlordism, idle land and tenure insecurity - through structured leasing frameworks, land banks or incentives for productive use - could unlock significant agricultural potential. With high youth unemployment, government-backed programs that match unemployed youth with underutilised land, under transparent legal arrangements, could transform rural economies while reducing conflict. Fourth, modernisation and infrastructure are foundational. Irrigation, mechanisation, improved seeds, research-driven agriculture, and reliable transport, internet, and energy networks are critical. Fifth, research and universities must engage rural communities directly. Knowledge-driven transformation - as seen in China - strengthens sustainability and inclusiveness.

Way forward

The villages of Yunnan demonstrate that coordinated land management, strong governance and sustained public investment can convert rural communities into en-

gines of national growth. For Uganda, the way forward lies not in replicating China's model wholesale, but in confronting its own land question decisively. Absentee landlordism, tenure insecurity and fragmented landholding are not merely legal issues — they are development constraints. If addressed through balanced reform, strength-

ened institutions and inclusive rural investment, Uganda's rural sector can become a foundation for employment, food security and shared prosperity. Rural transformation is not simply about farming. It is about land, leadership and the political will to ensure that rural citizens are not left behind in the march toward national development.

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