



# From goodwill to good deals: FELDA land resettlement scheme and the ascendancy of the landless poor in Malaysia



Aliyu Salisu Barau<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ismail Said<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria

<sup>b</sup> Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor 81310, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Land resettlement schemes are commonly used in the developing countries to leverage poor people's access to land for shelter, food production, or boosting rural development. Unfortunately, not many resettlement schemes have effectively solved the problems they were designed to tackle. For researchers and policymakers in particular, part of the problem has been the lack of enabling analytical tools for holistic and an in-depth analysis of the trajectories of the few successful models of land resettlement schemes. The current study examines the features of one of the most successful land resettlement initiatives, namely the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) scheme in Malaysia. Established in 1956, the scheme comprises over 400 settler communities that cover about 16% of Malaysia's total land area. The FELDA scheme has tremendously transformed the lives of the landless population through provision of shelter, jobs, income from agribusiness shareholding, and ownership of highly valorised land titles. This study combined the path dependency approach and Earth system governance analytic tools to examine the trajectories and multidimensional features that make the FELDA scheme a good example to reckon with. Thus, broadening researchers and policymakers appreciation of the role of analytical dimensions is a major contribution of this study to the current debates on the pro-poor land governance strategies in the Global South. Finally, the study shines some light at the role of land governance in streamlining land development and goals of sustainable national planning.

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## 1. Introduction

Land tenure security has continued to dominate science, policy, and development discourses. The interest in land tenure permeates topical issues such as deforestation and land degradation (Robinson et al., 2014), social inequality, rural development, inclusiveness and fight against poverty (Chimhowu, 2006; Kushnick et al., 2014; Santos et al., 2014), and decarbonisation agenda (Naughton-Treves and Wendland, 2014). However, many researchers prefer the concept of land governance because it is more holistic and inclusive of the role of non-state actors and institutions (Pritchard, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2014; Simbizi et al., 2014). Unfortunately, most studies on land governance in developing countries direct their spotlights on the seemingly inexorable challenges that characterise land tenure systems and institutions in these countries. In this context, it is imperative for critical scholars to explain such contested

issues through new stakeholder theories (Teklemariam et al., 2015) and analytical signposts that can unmask complexities of land governance (Borras Jr. and Franco, 2010). The success of every land governance reform or scheme hinges on how it directly and on a long-term basis improves the lives of the poor people and contributes to sustainable national development.

By and large, examples of successful land reforms that have effectively improved the poor people's accessibility to land and wellbeing in developing countries are very few. Most of the land governance debates have centred on the poor people's access to land for housing and agriculture. In this context, resettlement schemes represent a good example of how governments and development organisations make ample contributions for improving land tenure regime as a vehicle for poverty alleviation, agricultural development and shelter provision. In reviewing several examples of resettlement schemes from developing countries, Kinsey and Binswanger (1993) observed that there is need for serious adjustments to address issues such as sizes of lands allocated, skills, user benefits, and investment. However, these challenges persist and more challenges are emerging due to increasing pressure on land resources in many developing countries.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [aliyuarau1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:aliyuarau1@yahoo.co.uk), [aliyubarau@gmail.com](mailto:aliyubarau@gmail.com) (A.S. Barau), [b-ismail@utm.my](mailto:b-ismail@utm.my) (I. Said).

According to Scudder (1985), the World Bank offered technical and financial assistance to support several land resettlement schemes in developing countries. The most prominent among them are Malaysia's FELDA scheme, the *Accelerated Mahawele Project* in Sri Lanka, *Transmigration projects* in Indonesia, *Rahad*, *Gezira* and *New Halfa* in Sudan, *Bura* scheme in Kenya, *Caqueta* in Colombia, and *Polonoreste* scheme in Brazil. In Asia-Pacific region, countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Solomon Island and Thailand use diverse of means of land allocation for agricultural development schemes (Cramb and Curry, 2012). The common modes of land allocation for the poor in the region include managed stakeholder (e.g. FELDA), nucleus estate-smallholder (Indonesia, Melanesia), and joint venture (with customary system as in eastern Malaysia). Some of these agricultural and rural development projects show some failings and success. Sutton (1989) pointed out that although land resettlement schemes became popular among developing countries, not many of the schemes met the expectations of the landless poor. Nevertheless, some researchers praised FELDA scheme for what they call its fully integrated approach to land development (MacAndrews, 1978, 1979). In spite of its many achievements, the FELDA scheme has received the least attention from the contemporary land governance researchers and policymakers. An analysis of a successful project such as FELDA is important for academic and policy circles who may be interested in replicating the scheme or adapting its strategies in other countries. However, a good understanding of the FELDA resettlement scheme would require a broad, integrated, and interdisciplinary form of land governance analysis. Currently, such forms of analysis for pro-poor land reform are either lacking or complicated (Borras Jr. and Franco, 2010).

The Scudder's model is one of the major frameworks that social scientists use in analysing trajectories of land resettlement schemes. According to Chimhowu (2006), the Scudder's four-stage linear model was developed in 1984 to help researchers and development practitioners to scrutinise land resettlement projects. Initially, this model was applied in examining dozens of land resettlement schemes being assisted by international development organisations. The model assumes that all land resettlement schemes follow a four-stage process. The first stage is *planning infrastructure development and recruitment*. This stage is concerned with kick-starting land resettlement by recruiting people from diverse livelihoods and clustering of spatial patterns including land banking for next generation. The second stage is the *transition stage*, and this is the most difficult stage because it is characterised by uncertainties and scepticism from project beneficiaries and this uncertainty may prevail for up to four years. The third stage – *economic and social development* – is a confidence-building period when beneficiaries have some level of trust and may be willing to take risks in accepting some innovative ideas being introduced to them. The last stage is known as *handing over and incorporation* and which is the most critical stage, and that is when the project reaches its maturity stage and will be left on its own.

In the case of FELDA, Sutton (1989) argued that the project in Peninsular Malaysia was awaiting entry into the fourth stage of Scudder's analytical framework. Interestingly, a few years after this assertion, Sutton and Buang (1995) concluded that FELDA reached its maturity level after three decades of its existence. This implies that the scheme has reached the fourth stage of the Scudder's model. However, the transformation of the FELDA into an agribusiness entity was purely based on provisions of the Malaysian National Plans (Sutton, 2001; Vermeulen and Goad, 2006). In other words, this scheme has been integrated into the broader Malaysian national development agenda. Thus, Scudder's model alone may not adequately explain the trajectories of the FELDA and neither does it allow for a more systematic analysis of this successful resettlement schemes. Hence, there is a gap in the way policymakers

and researchers from other parts of the world can understand and analyse the FELDA's success trajectories. As such, it is important to explain the FELDA success story through additional theoretical and analytical tools. The current study aims to analyse the accomplishments of FELDA resettlement scheme and specifically its roles in improving the lives of the poor landless Malaysians. In analysing the FELDA scheme, the study deploys path dependency approach to historicise the emergence of the scheme. The study also deploys the Earth system governance analytical framework, which comprises 5As – architecture, agency, accountability, access and allocation, and adaptiveness – in order to make an in-depth analysis of the scheme's trajectories.

## 2. Methods

Sustainable land governance depends largely on innovative and performance-based planning strategy which is invariably a difficult task to accomplish (McNeill et al., 2014). Thus, in explaining the innovative features of the FELDA resettlement scheme, this study adapted the five analytical research tools of the Earth system governance project—a new knowledge paradigm which is also the world's largest social science research network on environmental governance (Biermann, 2007; Biermann et al. 2012; Salleh, 2013). According to Biermann et al. (2009), Earth system governance is an integrated system of formal and informal rules, rulemaking systems, and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global). It also involves Earth system transformation within the normative context of sustainable development. Land is an important component of the Earth system and hence why its accessibility to the poor and its direct link to a wide range of social, economic, and ecological sustainability cannot be ignored. As such, the current study applied the ESG analytical tools or 5As (architecture, agency, accountability, access and allocation, and adaptiveness) in order to facilitate a systematic analysis of the FELDA resettlement scheme. The 5As are supported by four crosscutting issues namely *power*, *knowledge*, *norms*, and *scale*. In addition to the four crosscutting issues, the analytical framework also incorporates four case study domains: *water system*, *food system*, *climate system*, and *global economic system*. Using the ESG analytical framework for this study is justified on the grounds of its unique ability to offer a holistic analysis of a wide range of issues relating to multidimensional aspects of land governance (Pritchard, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2014; Simbizi et al., 2014).

According to Djalante (2013), the ESG framework is an analytical tool that can be used for examining various cases of problems relating to governance and understanding of a wide range of connections between social and ecological issues. Thus, land governance is another suitable area where the concept of ESG can be applied in order to achieve a more critical analysis of issues that cannot be ordinarily understood. Following Biermann et al. (2009, 2010), the study used the *architecture* analytical tool to explain multiplicity of existing and emerging institutions and how they shape the interplay of the private, public, local and global stakeholders with direct links to the success of the FELDA resettlement project. *Agency* as an analytical tool facilitated explanation of actors such as civil society groups, business and other stakeholders whose voices influence decisions of running the FELDA scheme. Similarly, *adaptiveness* was used to explain the dynamics and responses of FELDA scheme to emerging challenges and opportunities surrounding the FELDA scheme. On the other hand, *accountability* helped this study to look at operational legitimacy and transparency issues in respect of the way FELDA as a public agency discharges its responsibilities and initiatives for improving the livelihoods of its settler community. Lastly, fairness and equity are the main issues under *access*

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