A Decade of the UNIDROIT/FAO/IFAD Legal Guide on Contract Farming: Prospects for Equitable Agriculture and Sustainable Livelihoods for Smallholder Farmers in Uganda's Coffee Sector.

Can the decade-old international Legal guide on contract farming level the playing field for Ugandan smallholder coffee farmers or will the interplay between local politics and the broader economic landscape continue to impede their pursuit for a fair agricultural landscape and their ultimate long-term wellbeing?

The coffee industry in Uganda has witnessed a resurgence in the past decade with export values soaring from US$410 million in 2014 (UCDA, 2015) to an all-time high of US$1.11 billion in 2024 (MAAIF, 2024), establishing it as the nation's second largest foreign exchange earner. Beyond this economic contribution, the coffee industry directly supports the livelihoods of 1.6 million smallholder farmers (ILO, 2024), which is about 85% of all coffee farmers in Uganda (Lindiro, 2021). However, despite this recent growth, the sector still operates within a complex political and economic environment where these farmers have to grapple with not only limited resources and discriminatory legislation but also asymmetric power dynamics within the inherent supply chains, which undermines their capacity for upward mobility and integration into the broader agricultural economy and therefore achieving sustainable livelihoods in the long run.

It is within this context that the Legal guide developed by the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) emerges as a vital international tool that can be leveraged to address these deficiencies. When it was promulgated in 2015, the Legal guide was meant to provide a conducive legal framework with the potential to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable environment for contract farming, thereby supporting the adoption of resilient agricultural practices as well as advocating for fair agricultural contractual relationships.

This essay will explore the extent to which the Legal guide can do this for Ugandan smallholder coffee farmers by analysing its power as a vital learning tool as well as its provisions in relation to power imbalances stemming from political factors, disparate land tenure system, inadequate access to crucial inputs that extend beyond finance and limited participation in lucrative and inclusive agricultural/coffee value chains.

Systematic imbalances, flaws in land legislation and the Legal guide's mitigating role.

The fragilities within Uganda's legal framework particularly surrounding land tenure security coupled with the lax enforcement of customary land rights renders smallholder farmers vulnerable to land conflicts and dispossession. This is often exacerbated by the government's strong emphasis on attracting large-scale foreign direct investments which sometimes prioritizes commercial land acquisition over the protection of pre-existing land rights. A stark illustration is the Kaweri Coffee Plantation case in Mubende District, where in the early 2000s, hundreds of smallholder families relying on customary land claims were forcibly displaced to make way for a large-commercial coffee plantation (FIAN International, 2018). Such a precarious land tenure system creates a climate of uncertainty that makes smallholder farmers hesitate from engaging in long-term agricultural commitments for fear of losing their land, either directly