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## Biofuel project in Kenya ignites land, environmental disputes

*Foreign firms seeking land in Africa for biofuel crops run into opposition from communities and environmental activists despite promising jobs and development.*

**June 22, 2013** | By Robyn Dixon, Los Angeles Times



DIDA ADE, Kenya — With its leaf-thatched mud huts, bad roads, chronic unemployment, crushing poverty and vast tracts of "underutilized" land, the Tana River Delta in eastern Kenya seemed the perfect place for a foreign businessman looking to grow crops that could be turned into biofuel.

Canadian David McClure believed the project, which involved leasing more than 600 square miles at a minuscule cost, would be both profitable and humanitarian.

But McClure underestimated local resistance and deep sensitivity about land in a region where ethnic violence linked to land use has flared repeatedly. Four years after launching the project, his company pulled out, leaving McClure bitter and defeated, accusing the Kenyan government of betraying Kenyans by frustrating his plans.

He was not alone in seeing Africa as an exciting new frontier for biofuel production, with cheap land that, to an outside eye, looks wasted.




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Millions of acres have been snapped up across the continent by foreigners for farming biofuel plants, such as the oil-producing jatropha, which McClure wanted to grow. These projects are usually pitched by companies as being good for the environment and good for poor Africans.

But biofuel crop projects have been attacked by environmental and humanitarian activists as doing more harm than good, often replacing food crops that are badly needed in poor countries or destroying natural habitat like forests.

Demand for biofuel is driven by European Union regulations requiring that 10% of energy consumption in member states come from renewable sources by 2020. A British humanitarian organization, Action Aid, reported last year that more than 193,000 square miles had been planted with biofuel plants globally, much of it in Africa.

Foreign biofuel companies promise benefits such as jobs, but their projects have driven rural communities in some of the world's poorest countries off their land, offering only modest benefits in return, critics say.

Jatropha is a shrubby flowering plant whose seeds can be processed to make diesel. Such biofuel crops need vast tracts of cheap land to be viable, hence Africa's attraction for foreign investors. A 2011 [report](#) by the International Monetary Fund and United Nations agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization, linked sharp rises in food prices in poor countries to the demand for land to plant biofuel crops.

McClure, chief executive of Bedford Biofuels, a Canadian company, thought the Tana River Delta project would be popular with residents and win government support as it converted a vast swath of semiarid land to corporate farmland.

"Four years of our blood, sweat and tears to feed babies went into that project. It was a beautiful humanitarian project. We were going to reforest semiarid land with a crop. We had interest from major investors," McClure said in a phone interview from Canada.

The Tana River flows like a lazy, mud-colored python through a region of dry, forlorn-looking bush. About 250,000 people live in its delta, farming, herding cattle and fishing. To McClure, the land was unused and ripe for development. To locals, it was at the heart of years of conflict over grazing rights and subsistence farming.

Dahir Bile, 42, a tall thin man wearing small white skullcap and a colorful wrap around his waist, has lived in the remote sandy village of Dida Ade all his life, in a circular mud hut thatched with leaves and fenced with forbidding spiky plants. The smell of wood smoke drifts through Dida Ade as evening falls, and herdsman bring their long-horned gray zebu cattle home. He was shocked when two local politicians from a rival tribe arrived, telling him the biofuel project was coming and his village would have to be relocated.

It's unclear how many people would have been displaced. The company said that people would be moved voluntarily and that efforts would be made to work around settlements where possible. It had no estimate of how many people would have been affected.

Bedford Biofuels leased more than 600 square miles of land that was supposed to be held in trust for the community, but is actually controlled by a few powerful people, according to activists from a nongovernmental environmental protection group, Nature Kenya.

The company agreed to pay the equivalent of about \$1.25 per acre per year, planted a pilot crop, but withdrew in recent months, citing last year's ethnic violence between the Orma tribe (herders) and the Pokomo (farmers) over grazing rights. More than 200 people died in the clashes.

The project, says Bile (who is of another tribe, the Wardei, which is close to the Orma), was presented as a *fait accompli* by the two politicians, both of the Pokomo tribe.

"We were just told the project was going ahead and we were going to be moved and no one told us where we would be taken," he said. "It's like I was being told to climb into the heavens without a ladder."



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