

With farmlands being grabbed, Africa too awaits march of the millions

Tags: **India**

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by Devinder Sharma

The other day I read an interesting blog post by Damian Carrington of The Guardian. It tried to examine the small print behind the massive farm land grab in Africa. His blog was based on a report "Land Deals in Africa: What is in the contracts?" prepared by Lorenzo Cotula of the International Institute of Environment & Development. From the response that the blog attracted, it is quite obvious that people are infuriated by the way land grab is taking place.



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In another related development, an official press release issued by the Govt of India last week (Feb 1, 2011) said: "Ethiopia has invited Indian farmers for commercial farming in view of high skill and experience of Indian farmers in commercial crops. Calling on Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Prof. KVThomas here today, Ethiopian Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Tafera Derbew said that Indian farmers can avail the opportunity of vast farming land set aside by his country for commercial farming and grow pulses and edible oil crops for export to India."

Don't forget, India is the largest foreign investor in Ethiopia with approved investment of US \$4.4 billion, out of which 40 per cent investment is in the field of commercial agriculture. Already, more than 80 Indian companies have bought land in Ethiopia.

Anyway, one of the letters commenting on Damian's blog post quoting Friends of the Earth, listed some of the recent cases of farm land grab in Africa. Before I go to the salient conclusions of the IIED report, let us have a look at the extent of land grab that has already taken place. What the list below provides is only the land grabbed for energy plantations - jatropha and agro-fuels. Therefore this is only a tip of the iceberg.

Ethiopia 700,000 ha earmarked for sugar cane, 23 million ha suitable for jatropha. UK-based Sun Biofuels operates 5,000 ha, Acasis AG (German) leases 56,000 ha with concessions for another 200,000 ha.

Kenya Japanese, Belgian and Canadian companies plan to up to 500,000 ha.

Tanzania 1,000 rice farmers forced off their land to make way for sugarcane.

Mozambique Investors aim for 4.8 million ha. Over 183,000ha currently allocated to jatropha. Companies: UK, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Canada and Ukraine.

Swaziland UK based D1 Oils suspends expansion of jatropha despite promotion by rockstar Bob Geldof.

Congo Chinese company requests 1 million ha. Italian energy corporation ENI plans palm oil plantation ha.

Angola 500,000 ha of land designated for agrofuels. Angolan, Brazilian, Spanish and South African com

Cameroon Cameroon/French company expanding palm oil plantations including 60-year lease on 58,00

Sierra Leone Swiss based Addax Bioenergy obtains 26,000 ha for sugarcane.

Ghana Italian-based Agroils obtains 105,000 ha, UK company Jatropha

S Africa acquires 120,000 ha, ScanFuel (Norway) cultivates 10,000 hectares and has contracts for ca. 4 ha, Galten (Israel) acquires 100,000 ha.

Benin Proposed 300,000 - 400,000 ha of wetlands to be converted for oil palm.

Nigeria Land acquisitions by the state using foreign capital and expertise. Over 100,000 ha grabbed.

Another letter from someone whose id is cbarr, said: "The land grabs seem to be following a similar pattern in Peru where the world business council for sustainable development lobbied for a change in the rules on land ownership stating it would help local communities develop to have a concrete model for land ownership to indigenous groups having land seized from under them and massive strife in agricultural areas especially highlands as mining companies and agricorp buy up all the land. growing social unrest in the nation."

So the malaise is not only confined to Africa, but is global.

Nevertheless, Damian writes in his blog: "*He (Lorenzo Cotula) examines 12 contracts which have become in which large areas of land have been leased, ranging from a timber deal in Sudan to a rice and corn deal in Madagascar. These are mere snapshots of the hundreds of deals that have been struck, from the financial deal that reportedly concluded a deal for 400,000 hectares with a local warlord in Southern Sudan to an agricultural deal with established track record in tropical agriculture that negotiated a sophisticated contract for both production and processing in Mali.*

The picture from the 12 contracts is not good. The leases are long, up to 100 years, and the rents are low, one dollar per hectare per year in one case. In some cases investors get priority access to water, the very scarce resource.

In theory at least, such land acquisition could be beneficial to the host countries. and create jobs. But many of the contracts fail to specify these benefits clearly or enforceably. There is little on the safeguards for local food security - raising the prospect of food being trucked out of a starving nation under armed guard - or for the environment."

I don't know why the Africa leaders are so blind that they can't see the threat farmland grabs pose for their national sovereignty. Why has political leadership across Africa, and this is true for Asia too, has been so easily seduced by the magic of foreign direct investments (FDI) that they can't read the warning ahead? Such shortsighted thinking is certainly taking the world towards difficult times. History may not forgive these political leaders when the time the turn comes to penalize them they would be gone.

I also draw your attention to Lester Browns latest book World on the Edge. He says (in a review published in the Guardian) that in 2009 Saudi Arabia received its first shipment of rice produced on land it had acquired

Ethiopia while at the same time the World Food Program was feeding 5 million Ethiopians. Similarly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, China has acquired 7 million hectares for palm oil production and yet millions of people in the DRC are dependent on international aid for food.

Brown warns that 'land grabbing is an integral part of the global power struggle for food security'. He argues that geopolitics for several centuries have been dominated by the issue of access to markets, but in the future this will be replaced by the overriding importance of access to supplies. Food importing countries are anxiously securing their food supplies, all too aware that exporting countries can impose export bans to meet their needs. In 2007 both Russia and Argentina, major grain exporters, put in place export bans and it set off waves of panic around the world, which have probably played a big part in fuelling land acquisition deals.

Much of the attention so far has focused on Africa. Most of the biggest deals have been in countries such as Ethiopia, Mali and Sudan. The imminent independence of southern Sudan has seen investors queuing up to acquire one of the areas of greatest potential for as yet under developed agricultural land. In comparison with most other areas of the world, land in Africa is very cheap; in Ethiopia, land can be leased for as little as \$1 an acre. You can read the full article at: <http://bit.ly/iHSDrI>

No wonder, many Indian companies are keen to invest in Ethiopia. Where in the world do you get land at such a low price? At this rate, I am sure the African growth bubble will also burst sooner than later. It is not far off when it too will be engulfed with a raging political fire stoked by farm land grabs.