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the global rush for farmland and peoples' struggles against it

Africa: up for grabs

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Reported cases of land grabbing and agrofuel development across Africa

Friends of the Earth Africa and Friends of the Earth Europe | 30 August 2010

Africa: up for grabs

The scale and impact of land grabbing for agrofuels

Executive summary

Access to land provides food and livelihoods for billions of people around the world, but as the availability of fertile land and water is threatened by climate change, mismanagement and consumption patterns, demand for land has been increasing.

“Land grabs” – where land traditionally used by local communities is leased or sold to outside investors (from corporations and from governments) are becoming increasingly common across Africa. Whilst many of these deals are for food cultivation, there is a growing interest in growing crops for fuel – agrofuels – particularly to supply the growing EU market.

These land grabs have been taking place against a backdrop of rising food prices which led to the food crisis in 2008. There were food riots in some developing countries and in Haiti and Madagascar the governments were overthrown as a result of the crisis. Crops being used for agrofuels was a major factor in the rising price of food.

This report looks at the extent of these deals for agrofuels and questions the impacts on local communities and the environment. It finds that although information is limited, there is growing evidence that significant levels of farmland are being acquired for fuel crops, in some cases without the consent of local communities and often without a full assessment of the impact on the local environment.

Extent of the problem

Studies suggest that a third of the land sold or acquired in Africa is intended for fuel crops - some 5 million hectares. Friends of the Earth has looked at cases of land grabbing in 11 countries across Africa, from Ethiopia to Mozambique (see appendix).

While some of this land is sold outright – to private companies, state companies or investment funds – most is leased and some is obtained through contracting with the farmer to grow specific crops (known as “out growing”).

A number of, often small, EU companies are involved, sometimes with support or involvement from their national government. Many are keen to vaunt the social and environmental benefits of their business, offering employment and the promise of development to rural areas.

Green OPEC

Many of the host countries have encouraged this investment, keen to develop a potentially lucrative export crop. Fifteen African nations joined forces to set up what has been described as a “Green OPEC” and a number of national governments have also introduced domestic targets and strategies for agrofuel use at home.

But there is also a growing awareness of the downsides of this agrofuel boom. As scientists and international institutions challenge the climate benefits of this alternative fuel source, local communities and in some cases national governments are waking up to the impact of land grabs on the environment and on local livelihoods.

Local protest

In Tanzania, Madagascar and Ghana there have been protests following land grabs by foreign companies. Companies have been accused of providing misleading information to local farmers, of obtaining land from fraudulent community land owners and of bypassing environmental protection laws.

Agrofuels are competing with food crops for farmland, and agrofuel development companies are competing with farmers for access to that land. And this appears to be as much the case for jatropha, as for other crops, despite

the claim that it grows on non-agricultural land. When losing their access to traditional land, local communities face growing food insecurity and hunger – their human right to food is threatened.

Environmental damage

Pressure on farmland has led to forest being cleared to make way for agrofuel plantations, destroying valuable natural resources and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. In Ethiopia, land inside an elephant sanctuary was cleared to make way for agrofuels.

Farmers have found that the much vaunted wonder crop jatropha, rather than bringing a guaranteed income, in fact takes valuable water resources and needs expensive pesticides. In some cases, food crops have been cleared to plant jatropha, leaving farmers with no income and no source of food.

Threat from genetically modified crops What is more, there are concerns that biotech companies, keen to find new outlets for their products, will see agrofuels as a way into the African market. Research is on-going into genetically modified (GM) varieties which might be suitable for agrofuels, and biotech companies are eager to claim that their products can help tackle climate change.

Resource exploitation

Growing European and international demand for agrofuels as a transport fuel is creating market demand for agrofuels. While African politicians may promise that agrofuels will bring locally sourced energy supplies to their countries, the reality is that most of the foreign companies are developing agrofuels to sell on the international market. The EU's mandatory target for increasing agrofuels is a clear driver to the land grabbing in Africa.

Is the tide turning?

Concerns about the social and environmental impacts have caused a backlash in a number of countries such as in Tanzania and Swaziland. Some companies have also withdrawn their investments. But elsewhere the enthusiasm for agrofuels continues unchecked.

Just as African countries have seen fossil fuels and other natural resources exploited for the benefit of richer countries, there is a risk that agrofuels, and with them, Africa's agricultural land and natural resources, will be exported abroad with minimal benefit for local communities and national economies.

Recommendations for action

1. Put a brake on land grabbing

- Stopping the drivers – political targets that increase demand for agrofuels should be scrapped, in particular the EU's mandatory target.
- African states should immediately suspend further land acquisitions and investments in agrofuels.

2. The real political priorities

- Farming revolution – Investments and priorities given to develop food sovereignty– the right of people to

adequate, healthy, locally produced and controlled food.
- Energy revolution – the reduction of energy use in transport through the rapid development of more efficient vehicles and investment in sustainable societies through the use of public transport, walking and cycling.

3. Dealing with land grabbers

- *Full environmental and social impact assessments* of land use changes before any land sale or lease takes place must be carried out with the participation of local communities. These need to take into account the impacts on biodiversity, natural resources, genetic erosion, food sovereignty, gender, access to productive resources of the local communities (including pastoralists or itinerant farmers) and impacts of new technologies and investments in infrastructure.
- *Full legal liability of companies and investors:* Any land deals should include clear, legally-binding and enforceable obligations on the investor. Investors should pay into an obligatory liability fund to cover for cases of non-compliance. Independent and participatory ex post impact assessments should be made at pre-defined intervals.
- *Full agreement of communities and the protection of indigenous people:* Any land sales or leases can only take place with the free, prior and informed consent of the local communities concerned. The customary rights of communities and the protection of indigenous people are fundamental.
- *Farmer and environment friendly farming:* Priority also needs to be given to investing and developing farming in Africa that supports small farmers and small-scale ecological agriculture. The farming system developed shall respect ecological limits, not lead to climate changing emissions, depletion of the soil and prevent the exhaustion of water supplies. Such systems naturally forbid the use of genetically modified crops or trees.
- *Farming for the local community:* Due to the historic negative impacts created by instable international markets, and to reduce reliance on food aid, any new uses of land should be focused on supplying the local market. One suggestion put forward recently is to ensure that all land deals include a legal obligation that a certain minimum percentage of crops produced should be sold on the local market.

  Food is a natural right and agricultural products should not be treated as commodities whose ultimate purpose is the generation of business profits rather than meeting needs of the people. Family and small-scale farmers should be encouraged and strengthened in a deliberate push to sustain the populations in urban and rural areas.

- *Protection of farm workers:* Agricultural waged workers should be provided with adequate protection and their fundamental human and labour rights should be stipulated in legislation and enforced in practice, consistent with the applicable ILO instruments. Increasing protection would contribute to enhancing their ability and that of their families to procure access to sufficient and adequate food.

Download the full report (PDF): http://www.foeeurope.org/agrofuels/FoEE_Africa_up_for_grabs_2010.pdf

Source: FOE

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2 Comments

1. Samaila Mohammed
   04 Sep 2010

   Land grab is land grab: whether it if for biofuels or for expotable food commodities. Land is a finite and scarce resource. Therefore, its use must be controlled and safeguarded not only for the present but also for the upcoming generations. Most agricultural lands in Africa are being farmed in the form of subsistence farming, growing local and traditional foods, utilising local farming technologies and practices best adapted to the environment. These land grabs would introduce exotic, unsustainable and environmentally bad agricultural practices and technologies. In addition, the claimed 'development' in terms of income, jobs, etc. have so far failed to materialise in the farming communities in which actual land grabs have taken place. Instead, farmers have been turned into rented workers on their ancestors lands. This poses serious political and social justice concerns to our leaders. The time to challenge this is now. Friends of the Earth must continue their advocacy to make us understand and repel this evil idea of land grab. It is no different from the scramble for Africa which partitioned the continent and laid a fertile ground for an exploitative colonialism.

2. Emerson Olenewa
   03 Sep 2010

   So it seems Friends of the Earth would rather see Africa stay exactly where it is. Why are land purchases for biofuels purposes necessarily "land grabs"? There is no lack of land in Africa - what there is a lack of is the ability to use it efficiently. Africa can't grow food efficiently because that would step on the toes of heavily subsidized and highly inefficient farmers in Europe and the US, whose status quo Friends of the Earth apparently would like to protect. Biofuels are a fantastic option for Africa - they would bring development in remote areas, jobs, electricity, income, and with that income Africans will gain access to food and other basic needs. Africa's ability to grow food is only compromised by the distorted agricultural practices of the West. With this type of "report", that is what so-called "Friends of the Earth" wants to protect. What a disgusting twisted "report" - only someone with porridge for brains will buy this!

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- **Kerry**

  Very interesting work/list. So what is the pathway forward? What are the policy options? Social movement?
  25 May 2018

- **John**

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- **boucard**

  Comment se procurer ce film pour des débats publics. Peuples solidaires, association à laquelle j'appartiens, a organisé la semaine dernière une r…
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- **Elijah**

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- **sebastian**

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  09 Dec 2016

- **Anonymous**

  La critique est facile mais l'art difficile; j'ai rarement vu des ONG créer des emplois et contribuer au développement socio-économique autant que d…
  29 Nov 2016

- **Christopher Ajua**

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