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### Militarization and alternative biofuel drives Ethiopian land-grab

By Karen Hardison

Ethiopia buys military weapons and claims advance on Millennium Goal objectives while India and others gain large scale alternative biofuel crops and claim advance on reduction of fossil fuel dependency.



Omo River and surrounding fertile seasonal floodlands as seen from Karo village of Doose, Ethiopia. Photo: Bernard Gagnon

Ethiopia promises to meet its **Millennium Goal** objectives of creating a middle class and providing education and health care for its indigenous tribes. India promises to reduce its **green house gas emissions** from and dependency upon fossil fuels through production of alternative biofuels. Both Ethiopia and India find that leasing or buying large tracts of **"fertile basket" land**, land traditionally used for herding and small scale shifting cultivation (shifting between small plots that are cultivated then left to revert to nature), facilitates the accomplishment of their promises.

These oft-times secret land deals, with hidden terms and conditions, that transfer vast sections of land to foreign governments, private investors and land hedge funds, are called land grabs. The inherent problems in this approach to fulfilling millennial and ecological promises produce effects upon local indigenous people, land ecosystems, hydro-ecosystems and upon the long-term outlook for productive modernization, agro-industrialization, food and fuel security.

#### Who's Involved and Why

##### Sellers, Lessors

Ethiopia is a good example of current land grabbing — offering for lease or sale large, expansive tracts of land — because of the upcoming June operational target date for the **Gibe III dam built by the World Bank and China** on the Omo River. Terms and conditions of land-grab transactions, most often kept secret, are known in a few instances. It is known that land has been sold at between \$0.50 to \$1.00 per hectare or has been leased at around \$1.25 per hectare in 50 to 100 year leases (a hectare is about two-and-a-half acres). It is known that the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had completed more than 800 transactions and that he was proposing twice that number for implementation.

Countries in Africa making land available in land-grabs are Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Congo, Zambia, Uganda, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Mali, Sierra Leone, Ghana, South Africa, Namibia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Senegal and Tanzania. Other countries, such as Australia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Vietnam, Madagascar and others in South America, are also inviting governments and corporations to participate in land-grab deals. In an ironic twist, the governments are collaborators with the agro-colonists who are taking land while simultaneously representing the peoples victimized in foreign land grabs, such as the Mursi and **Anuak** of Omo Valley and **Gambella**.

##### Motives: Why

Ethiopia's stated motive is **modernization** (new infrastructure, schools, health care, rising wealthy middle class) and agro-industrialization that will create jobs, ensure food security and provide roads and communications. Ethiopia intends technology transfer and modernization of farming techniques to boost production: "Agriculture is not modernised, farmers are dependent on rainfall. So if rain doesn't fall, farmers are in trouble," explained **Teshome Laile** of Save the Children.

Ethiopia's hidden motive is that national and local land brokers are reported to receive large payments from sales revenue that they use for **military weaponization** in order to quell protesting indigenous people not wanting to yield to the imperative of abandoning their land to make way for ecosystem-blighting large scale foreign argo-business.

Some **significant names** in land grabbing are: Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Sai Ramakrishna Karuturi, Karuturi Global Ltd., Indian Praj Corporation for renewable fuel, Pakistan, the **G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition**, the G8 Africa Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, China, Al Arabi Mohammed Hamdi, Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development, South Korea, Daewoo Logistics, King Abdullah Initiative for Saudi Agricultural Investment Abroad, Sheik Mansour Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Sheik Mohammed Al Amoudi, Saad Al Swatt, Tabuk Agricultural Development Company.

##### Buyers, Lessees

India offers a good example of nations eager to participate in land grabs where the Indian government is joined by powerful private investors, like Sai Ramakrishna Karuturi of Karuturi Global Ltd., and American hedge funds, such as those **Harvard and Vanderbilt Universities** have been participating in. Saudi Arabia, China and Pakistan are also investing in Ethiopian agro-business.

##### Motives: Why

Stop "Conference on Land and Poverty!" Civil society denounces World Bank hypocrisy on land rights.

Join the Thunderclap campaign: <http://thndr.it/1DDuLOV>

The **Dakar declaration against water and land grabbing**, drafted and endorsed by the African Social Forum in October 2014, is now open to sign-ons. Please read it, add your organisation's name and get involved!

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India's stated motives are to contribute to food production by investing in agro-industry in one of the world's most malnourished countries and to meet its promise to reduce fossil fuel emissions by producing alternative biofuel. Yet linked with these stated motives are the motives of providing for India's own food security and fuel security.

With an exploding population and a rapid reduction of arable land not already under cultivation, India opts to outsource its food supply (as does Saudi Arabia and China and South Korea) in order to grab at food security. This means that the majority of what is grown on Indian plantations in Ethiopia is intended for export and as such won't go to offset Ethiopia's food shortages.

With its own rising middle class, India foresees the need to ensure **fuel security** as more and more Indian people demand private cars. Because of the international agreements India has signed to, like the Warsaw agreement in 2013, India needs an alternative biofuel, grown from biofuel crops, that reduce its dependency upon fossil fuel imports. While creating jobs for laborers, mostly migrants and not Ethiopia's indigenous people, India can claim it is helping to provide food while growing large scale biofuel crops exclusively for export to India.

### Secret Land-Grabs Deals: What Terms Do They Require?

The terms of land-grabs that have come to light specify that Ethiopia must guarantee that the land is cleared out of any and all obstacles to production. This includes the indigenous tribes who are living there. For this reason, Ethiopia has erected purpose built villages, in the **villagization program**, that are many miles away from the tribes' original villages; that are in terrain that is unlike the land they left; that are overgrown and not cleared for farming as they were promised it would be; that have no schools and healthcare centers as they were promised there would be.

Terms also specified that support roads and irrigation sources must be provided. For this reason, Ethiopia has added miles and miles of new road that support the activities of the agro-plantations being planted. As on the **Koka River** important to the Suri people in south-west Ethiopia, the waters of which were diverted to a Malaysian palm oil plantation, and as on the Omo River, where China's **Gibe III dam** is due to go into operation in the summer of 2015, irrigation water must be taken from its natural routes and diverted to land-grab agricultural targets.

### Why Is This Bad?

Agro-industry will be beneficial and needs irrigation, right? Yes and no. Agro-industry will increase Ethiopia's gross national product but the increase won't go to tribes removed from their villages by force; it will go to migrant workers brought in from India and other countries. Indigenous Ethiopians who do manage to find work on the plantations are paid very small wages. The standard of living of the relocated tribes will not increase neither will their schooling or health care be improved because these facilities are not provided in their new purpose built villages. In a land where **hunger is rampant**, mass production of plantation food crops, the portion that is kept in Ethiopia, will drive up food prices when food already consumes **50 to 80 percent** of Ethiopians' income. Food prices will be driven up because the food that is not exported back to the foreign country will be sold at profitable markets in urban areas rather than at local markets for the rural populace. Higher prices can be asked to meet the new demand the food products will generate. At the same time, local farming will fall off because plantation food and biofuel crops take up the same fertile land (and more than the same land) that would otherwise be planted for food by local tribal agro-pastoralists. Closing off rivers to operate irrigation dams results in depletion of lake water and the loss of fish and other aquaculture used for food. Damming rivers results in flooding of vast extends of arable and grazing land as the new dam lake is created from the river water captured by the dam, water that will be rerouted along pipes or canals to irrigation targets to be used there under private water rights. It results in the death or migration of many species of plant and animal life that provide the dynamic engine that creates new soil to keep fertile baskets fertile. The end result of agro-industry dependent upon irrigation is wholesale destruction of Ethiopia's economy, traditional indigenous cultures and life-styles, of ecosystem balance and of the fertile basket that brought the agro-industrialists to the area.

### What Is the Role of the World Bank

The **World Bank** plays a controversial role. On one hand, it issues reports about the condition of Ethiopia's population's food security and the arability of the land. These reports advise that agro-industry will relieve hunger, create a middle class through jobs and higher wages and improve agricultural methods through sharing technology.

On the other hand, the **World Bank** funds Ethiopia's villagization program in which indigenous people are removed from their lands, oftentimes brutally, and relocated to purpose built villages that promise schools and healthcare and farmable fields yet deliver much much less than that. The World Bank also funds construction of infrastructure roads and communications that serve the foreign landowners but not the local people who are relocated to villages quite remote from the plantations. The World Bank also funded China's Gibe III dam that will stop the waters of the **Omo River** in Omo Valley, deplete **Lake Turkana**, divert Omo Valley water to irrigation for plantations and destroy Omo Valley ecosystems.

There are clear contradictions between the World Bank's rhetoric and actions. One might think of accusing the World Bank of doublespeak. The World Bank addresses the notion of opportunity in its reports then goes on to fund opportunities that it encourages. Yet there are two kinds of opportunity. There is exploitative opportunity that is newly being labeled agro-colonialism and that is apparent in Ethiopia's Omo Valley where so many and so much is being displaced, depleted and destroyed. Then there is development opportunity. Proponents of development opportunity, like Oxfam, the Oakland Institute and the International Rice Research Institute, prefer funded research to increase yields as **Dr. Robert Zeigler** did in the 1960s with the "miracle rice." They also prefer shared technology that is adapted to small agro-industry projects that work with the land and ecosystems instead of working against them.

### What's Being Grown on Land-Grab Plantations?

While Karuturi Global claims a ready profitable market in East Africa, others are clear about their intentions to export what is grown in order to provide food security and biofuel security. India and Saudi Arabia are both clear about their intentions to export for these two reasons. Some things being grown are used for biofuel: jatropha, cereals or grains, corn and palm oil. Jan Prins, managing plantations for Saudi Arabia's Al Amoudi, is farming tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, melons primarily for export to Saudi Arabia. Wheat and barley are grown for camel feed for Saudi Arabia. Other things grown are rice, sugar, tea, coffee, rubber. Sugar, rice, palm oil and grains are grown by Karuturi Global and processed on location for export as ethanol biofuel.

Source: **Digital Journal**

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