

Extent of agricultural land-grab revealed on new website

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With rich, resource-poor nations increasingly outsourcing their food production to less developed nations, a new website aims to expose the extent of the agricultural land-grab epidemic

South Korea's biggest is 1.3 million hectares in Madagascar. China's is 1.24 million in the Philippines. Qatar's most problematic is 40,000 hectares in Kenya. We're talking breadbaskets, parcels of land bought in poorer countries where food is grown to feed foreign markets.

It's a simple if iniquitous equation: rich countries with limited land resources snap up agricultural land in less developed nations in order to secure food production. From African fields to Korean plates, trading cash for cropland is a throwback to an earlier, less enlightened time. Not for nothing has it been dubbed a neo-colonial enterprise.

South Korea and China are by far the world's most prolific players, with a total of 4.4 million hectares between them in countries such as Sudan, Indonesia, Madagascar, Laos and the Philippines. Saudi Arabia leases 1.6 million hectares, the Arab Emirates some 1.3 million and Japan approximately 325,000 hectares globally.

A recent [report](#) by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) on behalf of the Food and Agriculture Organization and International Fund for Agricultural Development revealed that in five African countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali and Sudan) a total of 2,492,684 hectares of farmland had been allocated to overseas interests since 2004. According to [GRAIN](#), an international NGO that promotes sustainable management and agricultural biodiversity, more than 20 million hectares worldwide have been earmarked for or given over to crops that will feed people a thousand miles away from the fields in which they were grown.

As a result of a focus on growing food destined for overseas markets, domestic markets are suffering and local populations are losing access to land, water and resources, as well as suffering evictions. Qatar thought its agreement with Kenya - a loan of \$2.5 billion for the Kenyan government to build a second deep-water port in the country in exchange for 40,000 hectares of farmland along the Tana River Delta - was a done deal, but the scheme is opposed by conservation groups, community leaders and ordinary Kenyans alike, outraged at the loss of biodiversity and agricultural land.

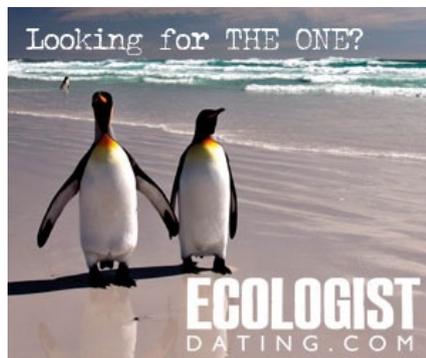
'Land is being leased to foreign investors who are then able to decide what gets practised - whether to clear small farmers and local inhabitants to different areas, employ them as labourers or throw them off the land entirely,' says Devlin Kuyek of GRAIN.

'To get a sense of how some of these deals are received on the ground, in some countries the army becomes a part of negotiations. Gulf countries that have invested in Pakistan, for example, receive assurances of military protection for these projects.'

GRAIN has just launched a new [website](#) that aims to draw attention to the issue. Updated daily, allows anyone to upload content. Originally launched last year it has been updated to



South Korea's attempt to buy a third of all Madagascar's arable land led to the fall of the country's president



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include more than 800 articles, interviews and reports on global land acquisitions. Its creators are asking for help in exposing the alleged shady negotiations and dodgy contracts upon which the land-grab system is built.

'We have two contracts at the moment – one between an Indian company and the Madagascar government, and one between Syria and Sudan, both for farmland,' says Kuyek. 'This is an open site, so anyone can participate in terms of posting an article, commenting or indeed adding more of these secretive contracts so that everyone can see the terms and conditions that have been agreed.'

Earlier this year, South Korean car firm Daewoo pulled out of a plan to lease 1.3 million hectares of prime Madagascar farmland for a corn plantation and palm oil production. With a population of some 50 million, South Korea is the world third-largest importer of corn. Its plan to buy up a third of Madagascar's arable land was so unpopular it led to the fall of the island's president, Marc Ravalomanana. The new incumbent, Andry Rajoelina, shelved the scheme in March, declaring, 'In the constitution it is stipulated that Madagascar's land is neither for sale nor for rent. We are not against the idea of working with investors, but if we want to sell or rent out land, we have to change the constitution, you have to consult the people.' Also cancelled was Mumbai-based company Varun International's lease of half a million hectares to grow rice for consumption in India.

Concerned at the negative sentiment such 'breadbasket' deals are producing – as well as their potential to jeopardise imports – Japan will propose a voluntary 'code of conduct' for foreign investors in the agriculture of developing countries at next month's G8 meeting in Italy.

'We expect that such a code of conduct will help prevent companies from behaving in an abusive manner, while keeping a free flow of investments,' said Tamaki Tsukada, director of economic security division at Japan's Ministry of Foreign affairs.

He said the set of principles would create a 'win-win' situation for investors and developing countries alike, but NGOs are sceptical.

'I would be extremely surprised to see anything of real benefit come out of this to any people on the ground,' says Kuyek. 'Japan is one of the countries involved in land acquisitions, so what can we expect?'

Japan currently leases 200,000 hectares of land in the US and 100,000 hectares in Brazil, though it does not invest in Africa.

The European Commission (EC) has also expressed scepticism about the ability of foreign investors and governments to protect local populations in this latter-day scramble for Africa and elsewhere.

'The poorest countries are selling commodities, they are exporting migrants and now they are selling their land, from which they will not take any kind of benefit in terms of food or whatever,' the EC's director-general for aid and development, Stefano Manservigi, said earlier this month. 'We are very concerned because this is another way to exploit developing countries. Doing it 30 years ago, this would have been a perfect example of neo-colonialism.'

He stopped short of condemning all such land deals, but expressed concern about their transparency and their effect on local populations – opinions echoed by the ILED report, Land grab or development opportunity?

Its authors, Sonja Vermuelen and Lorenzo Cotula, claim that 'the scale of land acquisitions have been exaggerated', but that many countries lack the mechanisms to protect the rights and welfare of those directly affected by land acquisitions.

'In many countries the agreements that allow foreign ownership of land can be very problematic,' said Vermuelen. 'In many countries, provisions for including local people in decision-making are usually absent or poorly implemented and this increases the risk of them losing access to land and other resources.'

'The central issue is that there's a global food crisis, with more than a billion people going hungry, and the vast majority of these people are food producers,' says Devlin Kuyek of GRAIN. 'The global food system is badly broken and needs an overhaul. We need to be asking what needs to be done to create food systems that provide everyone with access to good food, and farmers and other food producers with decent livelihoods. With this global land-grab, once again, agriculture is just being organised for the interests of the rich – no matter what label or code of conduct you apply to it.'

The major players

South Korea: 2.3 million hectares in... Madagascar (1,300,000), Sudan (690,000), Mongolia (270,000), Indonesia (25,000), Argentina (21,000).

China: 2.1 million hectares in... Philippines (1,240,000), Laos (700,000), Russia (80,400), Australia (43,000), Cameroon (10,000), Kazakhstan (7,000), Cuba (5,000), Uganda (4,046), Mexico (1,050), Tanzania (300).

UAE: 1.3 million hectares in... Pakistan (900,000), Sudan (378,000), Philippines (3,000), Algeria (1,500)

Saudi Arabia: 1.6 million hectares in... Indonesia (1,600,000), Sudan (10,117).

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