

Low Income Women: First Casualties of Green Economy Land Grab

By Nidhi Tandon

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In a future green economy, where the impetus for renewable energy is high, biofuels may only be one small, but growing element¹ in a world-wide future energy mix. Nevertheless, the economic case for the intensive and mass-scale production of oil-seed plants and feed stocks such as sugarcane, sweet sorghum, cassava and maize (for ethanol) and *Jatropha curcas*, coconut, sunflower, soy and groundnuts (for biodiesel) is legitimised under the green economy regime. The concept of a green economy and especially the focus on alternate 'clean energy' is a focal point for Rio+20, which marks the 20th anniversary of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In our understanding of the green economy, one thing is clear: rural women have already faced eviction or exclusion from land 'grabbed' for powerful green agendas that are not their own. This is because the current political/economic paradigm ensures that the interests of corporate actors and powerful vested interests in the global and export economies in the productive capacity of land² and water are protected while small farming communities producing for domestic markets are not.

Another aspect of the green economy agenda is to put a commercial value on nature. Preparing the green economy for 'the market of nature' is essentially about placing a commercial exchange value on nature. Nature in all its complexity, however, is invaluable (interpreted as priceless) to poor women and men on an everyday basis – particularly when this applies to the public commons.

In as far as the commercial value of land is concerned, it is still relatively low in many parts of the developing world, and today's buyers purchase 'cheap' land in anticipation of large returns in the future. Land becomes a strategic asset to be speculated on as population increases and land supply decreases.³ The present global market dollar valuation⁴ of resources is poised to both reinforce this trend and expectations that future value, profit and power lie in the rights to land and fresh water. Evidence from the field shows that those women whose access to land and water is dependent on their community status and traditional usage do not even figure in this kind of land market – they have no say in the sale or purchase of land, much less any revenue from the same.⁵

The 'equity challenge' for the evolving green economy is to make sure that policies put in place do not as a consequence make rural people 'squatters' on their ancestral lands and 'stealers' from their common heritage.

The hard-won gains that the majority of the world's poor women have made in the last few decades in securing their societal, legal and economic rights are under siege by the intensification and deepening of a market-centred framework and mentality. The property and environmental wealth of the weak is exposed and vulnerable to the agenda and incursions of the powerful. In the face of global competition and the power of global finance capital, it is reasonable to argue that poor women simply cannot hold on to their green economy assets: land, water, seed and knowledge. In losing these assets they lose their dignity, their self-reliance and the core of their empowerment. Consequently, their communities suffer and the futures of their children are put in jeopardy.

Land rights are essentially political issues; but where women's land rights are concerned, the proposed solutions are primarily of a legal dimension. Such a technical solution to a political problem has serious shortcomings, because 'lack of political will' often means that a legal statute is rendered useless – or worse, overridden entirely. Lack of political will translates into a bureaucratic tactic that delays, slows things down, obfuscates, and hopes that resistance will fizzle out. Women's formal rights to farmland in most African countries are tentative to non-existent, with legal or procedural mechanisms that are distant, expensive and slow. They are not participants in the decisions around income or revenue aspects of land and water use. Their opinions on the intrinsic or cultural value of land, on the value of indigenous bio-diversity, or the monetary value of carbon are not being solicited or accounted for in any economic value proposition. In some countries, the eroding bases of customary or communal ownership make women's overall social security – through their access to natural capital - even more precarious. In some countries, with increased commercialization of land and problems of land scarcity, local leaders face mounting pressures to protect the patriarchal clan system, and in so doing have placed even greater constraints on women's access. In particular, men and groups of men, organized through their lineage, have sought to renegotiate and redefine the formal and informal relationships that in the past supported women in their various roles in society.

Recent history shows that land reform schemes have rarely worked to women's benefit except when women have taken control of the process. In fact, land reform schemes could undermine a complex system of land use and tenure where women retain certain rights in common law and local practice, if not in legislation. Land reform almost always assigns formal land titles to male heads of households, regardless of women's economic contribution to the household, their customary rights, or the increasing number of female headed households.⁶ Statutory regulation of title has also served to weaken the land rights of women and tenants and to downplay the status and role of women as land users. Unmarried women, divorcees and widows are particularly vulnerable.

Instead, protection of land through communal processes, communal funds, and communal negotiation might stand a better chance in the face of powerful external interests.

Within these processes, the rights of women need to be articulated, strengthened and realized. In Rio, the green economy discourse must position women's individual and community rights squarely within the broader human rights and equity framework. A vibrant green economy rests on the involvement and engagement of poor people... "and because women often show more concern for the environment, support pro-environmental policies, and vote for pro-environmental leaders, their greater involvement in politics and in non-governmental organizations could result in environmental gains with multiplier effects across the MDGs."⁷ One way to measure the success of Rio+20 will be to assess the level of commitment and momentum built around the causes, rights and interests of the poor.

References

- 1 The International Energy Agency estimates that biofuels will represent 4–7 per cent of the world's road fuel use by 2030 compared to 1 per cent in 2005.
- 2 The pace of acquiring lands by global investors quickened in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis; this global market in land has very little connection to domestic agricultural plans. In 2008, agricultural funds made 9.5 per cent return on investment, according to BarclayHedge, while almost every other investment lost money. Financial speculation in commodity futures, following the collapse of the financial derivatives markets, fostered a 'commodities super-cycle'. In 2008 and 2009, speculators seeking quick returns transferred billions of dollars out of equities and mortgage bonds to invest in food and raw materials. This 'heated-up' speculation in commodities has a worldwide impact on food prices because of the globalized system of food production and the domino effects between different food sectors. Tandon. 2011. "From Under Their Feet" Land Grab impacts on women small holder farmers in Africa. <http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/actionaidfromundertheirfeet.pdf>
- 3 Head, P.R. 2009. "Vision for the Future of Cities 'in the Ecological Age.'" London: The Alliance for Global Sustainability. www.cces.ethz.ch/agsam2009/panels/AGSAM2009_keynote_Head.pdf
- 4 More dollar value statistics are available from Roxburgh, C. et al. 2010. Lions on the Move: The progress and potential of African economies. Washington, DC: McKinsey Global Institute. http://www.mckinsey.com/Insights/MGI/Research/Productivity_Competitiveness_and_Growth/Lions_on_the_move
- 5 Tandon, N. 2010. "New Agri-business Investments Mean Wholesale Sell out for Women Farmers." Gender and Development 18 (3). <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/new-agribusiness-investments-mean-wholesale-sell-out-for-women-farmers-131748>
- 6 Bullock, Susan. 1993. Women and Work, Women and World Development Series, London: Zed Publications
- 7 UNDP. 2011. Human Development Report, op. cit. p. 10

Nidhi Tandon, Director of Networked Intelligence for Development, works on local grassroots issues in the context of globalisation and increasing disparities between peoples and nations. She has published critical articles on land grab implications for women farmers, climate change and its impact on water, and on the negative implications of biofuel monoculture on women's land use options.