



A woman who lost land to a large corporation shows Oxfam's researchers some of the vegetables she grows on what land she has left to meet the needs of her family (2013). Photo: Oxfam / Marc Wegerif

PROMISES, POWER, AND POVERTY

Corporate land deals and rural women in Africa

The rush to invest in farmland in Africa is having an immediate impact on women's land-use options, on their livelihoods, on food availability and the cost of living, and, ultimately, on women's access to land for food production. These are only the economic impacts. Women's knowledge, socio-cultural relationship with the land, and stewardship of nature are also under threat. Too often ignored, rural women's voices and perspectives need to be heeded urgently if a robust rural economy and food for all are to be guaranteed.

SUMMARY

The new wave of corporate investments in land seems intent on expanding and intensifying a short-sighted farming model that, to date, has marginalized women's voices and interests. As with sisal, tobacco, and tea in the past, today's private investors in soya, jatropha¹ and eucalyptus crops continue to dismiss small-scale food production by women as unimportant and irrelevant. They could not be more wrong.

Small-scale food production and the women involved in it are the backbone of rural livelihoods. Women farmers, like those who were found to have lost land in the research carried out for this paper, produce more than half of all the food grown in the world. Roughly 1.6 billion women depend on agriculture for their livelihoods,² but many are now at risk from a huge surge in large-scale corporate agricultural investments that threaten the food supply of people living in poverty.

Few governments appear to be contemplating the sort of investments that can meet the real needs of women small-scale food producers and their communities—the kind of investments that could build a vibrant rural economy and secure the ecological sustainability of farming practices for future generations. If governments really want to transform the rural economies of their countries, the investments they encourage and approve should enable rural people to pursue their own solutions for rural development.

Women are squeezed out of resources

When competition for land escalates, rural women are often subjected to exclusionary pressure from male relatives or community members. As soon as a natural resource gains commercial value on the international commodity market, control and decisions over that resource pass swiftly from rural women into the hands of men.³

When and if compensatory measures are enforced, rural women are less likely to be direct recipients; in any case, monetary compensation is short-lived and cannot replace the many ways that women value and benefit from land.

Women are not heard

The exclusion of rural women from access to land does not just result in their loss of control over food production. Knowledge, practices, and techniques that for centuries have safeguarded the integrity of the land, seeds, and soil, as well as the nutritional value of food, are also lost. When an outside investor does consult with a local community, rural women are more likely to be *told* what will happen, instead of being *asked* what should happen. Even within some indigenous movements and farmer associations, women rarely have any real influence. Emerging systems of climate change financing and pricing on forest-based carbon legitimize and value production at scale – to the detriment of women and their value systems.

I am now landless and have to work piece jobs like doing laundry for people such as teachers, or working on [another] farm so that I can get some food. Today I worked at the company's farm and I was given mealie meal which can only make two pots of [maize porridge].

65-year-old woman respondent who used to farm land now owned by a large corporation

Women scramble to survive

When women lose access to the land where they produced food, they are compelled to find money to buy food, just as food prices are rising.⁴ Women facing these multiple challenges often eat less themselves, compromising their health, and sacrificing other necessities in order to feed their families. The same is true of water, when intensive monocropping depletes the water table or the enclosure of land cuts people off from water sources. Women then have to purchase a natural resource that previously cost them nothing. Women, young and old, are driven into more compromising, humiliating, and risky situations, including illegal activities and younger marriages.⁵

Just as more basic necessities need to be purchased instead of being produced, the activities and opportunities to generate cash are few. Contract labour or seasonal employment is difficult for women to secure, and when they do, it is usually for the lowest-paid and most menial of tasks. Additionally, weak or non-existent rural banking infrastructure means that women cannot generate savings or credit from earnings, and are at the mercy of moneylenders when times are tight.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, investors, and development and human-rights organizations need to intervene to protect local food production and the interests of rural women and their communities in the context of corporate land investments.

- **Governments** need to make robust interventions to:
 - improve women's rights to land and natural resources;
 - invest in support to women food producers and their ecologically sound production approaches;
 - firmly regulate investments to protect women's food systems and the environment.
- **Investors** need to:
 - support women's small-scale ecologically sound food production;
 - work in a way that enhances rather than depletes the natural resource base;
 - ensure that women are involved in decision-making and their interests are addressed.
- **Development and human-rights organizations** need to work with rural women to strengthen their production and build their collective voice and influence.

Above all, the voice and power of rural women must be strengthened to shift the balance of power in their favour. This is the power to define possibilities, make choices and to act on them. It starts from having the power within that enables people to have the courage to do things they never thought themselves capable of. When faced with powerful actors, such as large corporations and national governments, it involves the power that women get from working alongside others to claim what is rightfully theirs.⁷

We are desperate of food. Nowadays food comes from the city to be sold in the village, and not vice versa as before. We could not afford to buy food because the wages we are paid are very little. We do not produce our own food as before, because our land has been taken over by foreign companies under the privatisation policy to produce biofuel farms.

Woman, from Mavuji village, Kilwa district, Tanzania⁶

NOTES

¹ Jatropha is a shrub that can grow into a small tree. Its leaves and fruit pods are poisonous. Inside the pods are several black seeds, each one about twice the size of a coffee bean which when crushed produces oil. It has become one of the most popular plants for biofuel production, although its viability and environmental impacts have been questioned. The plant grows all over the tropics, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, India and Latin America. See: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/08/22/159391553/how-a-biofuel-dream-called-jatropha-came-crashing-down> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jatropha>

² Theobald (2010)

³ Oxfam, in its work in many parts of the world, has witnessed this process of crops moving from women to men's control as these crops gain commercial value. As Sabine Guendel said, when writing for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 'Men usually move into traditionally "women's crop activities" when those activities are perceived as having become more productive or profitable.' (Guendel 2009)

⁴ Food prices surged globally in 2008 and have continued to remain high. See: Oxfam (2011a), p 38. The FAO tracks food prices, and their information can be found here: <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/en/>

⁵ This is evidenced by the increasing numbers of women convicted of crimes and imprisoned in Africa. Women in African prisons are overwhelmingly poor and uneducated. They are frequently incarcerated for crimes such as murder and attempted murder, infanticide, abortion, and theft. See Sarkin (2009). Child marriage is closely linked to poverty (ICRW undated; UNICEF 2010, pg 46-47).

⁶ Land Rights and Rights Research and Resources Institute (2010) 'Accumulation by Land Dispossession and Labour Devaluation in Tanzania. A case of biofuels and forestry investments in Kilwa and Kilolo'. <http://hakiardhi.org>

⁷ Eyben, Kabeer, and Cornwall (2008)

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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