

Land Grabbing; The case of new landlords

Development by feeding the people of Ethiopia with Aid is impossible! Neither by depriving the people from their empowerment and wealth!

The 1975 land reform is a landmark in the contemporary history of Ethiopia which transformed private land tenure system to public ownership. The 1995 constitution also specified land being a common property of nation, nationality, and people of Ethiopia; and not a private property of individuals or group of individuals. The rewritten 1995 constitution also affirmed the right of peasants to obtain free land, protection from eviction, gave rights to pastoralists, and enabled compensation in case of expropriation. Moreover, it also affirmed state ownership of all land until the vital Proclamation of 29/2001; which enables the federal government to carry out all aspects of foreign land investment for all lands over 5,000 ha came in to place in 2009.

This major shift in Ethiopia led the current aggressive land auction which can be said the 21st colonial style land grabbing. As a consequence of it, peasants, herders and rural households are being dispossessed of the means to feed themselves and their communities, local populations are being evicted, forests are being destroyed, conflicts have occurred, human rights are being violated, and the environment, as well as traditional community structures, is being destroyed.

Land acquisition can have a possible “Win Win” situation; the benefits can include increased productivity and employment, development of agricultural technology, and construction of schools and health facilities and other types of infrastructure. But, to trickle down and rule the benefit to the poor farmers, the processes of land deals and access should be transparent, well monitored, and ensure accountability. In the contrary, the lack of transparency in land deal negotiations, coupled with weak governance in Ethiopia has created increased exposure to corruption to fill individual’s pocket and to serve the ruling party’s goals and interest.

This travesty in the name of development is taking place as the Ethiopian government continues to receive massive financial and political assistance from donor countries. In fact, Ethiopia is one of the largest recipients of US aid in Africa. The paradox of food security lies when we see the government is selling millions of hectares of its most fertile land to rich countries and the world's most wealthy individuals who wave a few bucks and export food by evicting the locals. The development of industrial scale agriculture projects to supply global commodity markets is depriving local communities to access to natural resources and exacerbate rural poverty.

According to the Human Right Watch January 2012 report, at least 3.6 million hectares (8.8 million acres); an area larger than the Netherlands has been leased to foreign and state-owned firms since 2008, with state security using force to drive people from their land. In Gambella, the national park is endangered by ; the Indian Agro giant Karuturi Global on one side with an acres of 741,000 for 99-year lease and with additional occupancy of 24,710 acres by Mohammed Al Amoudi's Saudi Star. Due to this, "Right now, the Ethiopian government is forcing 200,000 indigenous Anuak people off their ancestral farmlands, grazing lands, and forests in the Gambella region," says Paula Palmer, director of the Ethiopia Campaign at Cultural Survival, a non-profit that defends the rights of indigenous people worldwide.

The Indian Agro giant Karuturi Global was offered the land together with generous tax breaks. Karuturi Project Manager in Ethiopia, Karmjeet Sekhon expressed how his company became the beneficiary of one of the largest free land give away in post-colonial African history at a rate of \$1.17 annual lease per hectare. "We never saw the land. They gave it to us and we took it. Seriously, we did. We did not even see the land. They offered it. That's all. It's very good land. It's quite cheap. In fact it is very cheap. We have no land like this in India". If there was any intention of doing this land acquisition for a good cause, at least they would have asked for a reasonable price rather than giving it away for a price that is almost next to nothing.

It has not also been long since we heard the news about the attacks related to the Saudi-owned rice plantation in South-Western Gambella which has left five people dead on April 28, 2012, including one Pakistani worker and four Ethiopians, with at least another eight people injured. The 245,000 ha sugar plantation in South Omo zone along the east bank of Omo River is also another case. The River is critical for the food security and way of life of the pastoralists who live in the valley. Access to the Omo River is being blocked as the government continues to clear land and build roads to the sugar cane plantations. Threatening local indigenous people and many arrests in these villages with seemingly little cause have been reported. The case of land grab and subsequent conflicts is not limited to Southern Ethiopia. The recent gross attack on Waldba Monastery in Gondar; to demolish the surrounding forests and pastures and to force the indigenous people to relocate to substandard environs far from their heritage homeland is one of the cases. Another serious confrontation is also taking place along the Awash Valley in Rumayto about 3 km west of Aysaita. The regime is arbitrarily assigning this area for Sugarcane plantation projects. Local population is removed by force and forests are cleared.

Sustainable development comes from the people; access to land is crucial for combating poverty and promoting local development. Supporting the development of small-scale and agro-ecological projects rather allow local people to grow food for their communities and improve local food security. Local communities can be productive with enabling agricultural policy and proper learning and communication networks.

The significance of Land Grab and the consequences of displacement go beyond economic impacts. Instead, it has both social and psychological importance in terms of freedom, pride and self esteem of the communities. In addition to land being the primary source of livelihood, communities often have a strong cultural and even spiritual affinity to land and, dissolving this link can have a devastating impact on people's lives.

This large-scale land acquisitions and investment approach usually are profit-oriented and the significant portion of farm land is used for fuel and cash crops. This shift in land usage has a potential to create shortage in local food availability for basic provision because local production and consumption does not grow commensurately that leads to food price inflation. The means of production has also immense negative environmental impact; massive loss of topsoil pollutes and overuse of water destroys biodiversity and releases large amounts of greenhouse gases. Investor's priority rights to scarce resources such as water also have potential to put communities in competition with investors for vital resources.

Depriving the right of the community and displacing the people without any prior social and environmental impact analysis is a blind decision. The government needs to review land deals and consider imposing regulatory restrictions such as limits on foreign ownership and additional taxes. Uncultivated land does not mean empty, unused or unwanted; a considerable attention should be delivered to the people living in the area without ignoring future means of subsistence.

End.

The author is Tizita Alemayehu, a PhD student in Environmental Economics and she can be reached at: tize_alemayehu@yahoo.com

