

# **“Gender, Economic and Ecological Justice in a fierce new world: perspectives of young women from the economic South”**

## **Land Grabs in Africa**

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### **Context**

One of the striking things about Africa today is the clear contradictions which have emerged with there being economic growth, even recording the highest growth rates in the world. Prior to the emergence of global economic crises there was even talk of the emergence of African cheetahs. In the mean time, there has been unabated worsening conditions chronic poverty, increased inequality, high unemployment, precarious working conditions, especially those surviving in the informal sector and also for small scale agriculture producers.

This has occurred in a period in which African governments have focused on the export of raw materials. Thus, is important to recognise that structural transformation has not occurred in Africa which has been a major failure of neoliberalism in Africa. This has meant that there has been deindustrialisation with the shrinking size of manufacturing industries and even agricultural stagnation.

In recent years in response to increased demand for renewable energy sources and increases in food prices, MNCs have also had keen interest in large scale land acquisitions at the cost of the dispossession of agriculture based communities and also initiatives that work towards drawing small scale farmers deeper into the orbit of the global market.

The central point is that despite the widespread acknowledgement (by UNCTAD, ECA and trade unions in Africa) of the need for an alternative path for capitalist development, this has not occurred. In this context, land grabs illustrate the grave cost of more of the same neoliberal policies.

### **Agriculture in Africa**

In some estimates, 75% of employment in Africa is accounted for in the agriculture (that is from 2005-2008). Small holder farmers provide the basis for the agriculture sector in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike other regions of the world where the spread of capitalist forms of production led to the widespread dispossession of peasant producers from land, and thereby ownership of the means of production to free labour, there were deliberate policies that sought to preserve the subsistence sector in Africa. This was mainly because the colonial authorities, and even post independence African governments, were unable or unwilling to bear the social and political cost from displacing populations from the subsistence sector. This is the main reason why in contemporary times, small scale farmers still provide the backbone of the agriculture sector in the production of food and even cash crops. This was most especially the case in non-settler colonial Africa.

Women, who are the majority of small scale farmers, were relegated to food crop production (which formed part of domestic work) by deliberate colonial policies (example

being the poll tax) forced male workers (to seek employment in mines, road construction, commercial farms) without necessarily disrupting food production. This role of women, which prevails until today, not only supported families and communities in rural areas, but also subsidised the wage bill (to the benefit of employers) of the nascent working classes emerging in new towns and cities.

After independence most African states placed greater emphasis on the state's role in actively building a domestic market (on the basis of an expanding workforce) with manufacturing as an important sector. This was an attempt to reorient the economy away from the export of raw materials to jump start industrialisation as a path to greater capitalist accumulation. Despite the goal of economic diversification, African economies were still largely dependent on a few cash crops to support the new industries. Fluctuations in commodity prices, alongside failing state enterprises were placing a drain on public funds. This marked the onset of economic decline in the late 1960s in Africa. By the 1980s, within conditions of extreme global economic and political crises, neoliberal economic reforms were introduced.

These reforms were geared to focusing on the production of cash crops and minerals for exports, while the industries in manufacturing sector, especially, experienced contraction mainly as a result of trade liberalisation programs. As part of the neoliberal reforms, most countries in Africa also removed subsidies for farm inputs and cutback on the provision of extension services. These have contributed to stagnation in agriculture production.

As part of the growth strategy of African countries, the emphasis is on the prioritisation of the attraction of investment at whatever cost. In these circumstances, land reforms in Africa have been geared to enabling investors to more easily lease or even own land. There is also increased emphasis on small holder farmer's access to the global market in anticipation of a Green Revolution in Africa. Despite this there was very little investment in direct production, which was considered risky, and was worsened with financial liberalisation.

However, from 2006-2008, African economies had become dependent on food imports. With droughts combined with existing conditions of chronic poverty, the food crisis affected African economies which responded by increasing their volumes of imports. In this period, average food prices increased by about 140%. In Africa it increased by 320%. Latin America and Asian annual increases in food prices hovered from about 32-37% respectively. In Africa it was about 44%.

In the meantime, with increases in food prices, there has been increased interest in access to land by MNCs such as Lonrho seeking control over direct production in Angola, Mali and Malawi (Lonrho Plc, 2009 cited in Oxfam).

Thus, the Director General of the Arab Organisation for Agricultural Development makes the point, that he is 'convinced that if there is a real interest and seriousness by investors in the farming sector, then *the whole Arab World* needs of cereal, sugar, fodder and other essential foodstuffs could be met by Sudan *alone*' (Kawach, 2009). A US investment company is reported to have acquired, a lease over 400,000 ha in South Sudan by buying into a 70% stake of a local company LEAC for Agriculture and Investment Co Ltd. controlled

by the son of a high official in the Sudan People's Liberation Army which had acquired a significant proportion of the land from the government.

This is literally land grabbing in which legal deals are hashed up alongside illegal ones with grave consequences. Before 2008, 4 million hectares of land have been bought or leased globally. In 2009, it was 45 million. About 70% of the deals in 2009 were in Africa. World Bank, 9 million hectares have been acquired in four African countries alone (i.e. Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique and Sudan).<sup>1</sup>

How can states and corporations be challenged?

Political significance: African governments are today displacing communities on a scale that previous regimes dating back to colonial times (in non-settler Africa at least) have been unable or unwilling to do. It is directly a product of the current emphasis of growth on the basis of raw material exports, pressed for under neoliberalism.

Despite the constant recognition for an alternative economic growth strategy for Africa, especially with the onset of economic crises (with the falls in ODA, remittances and demand for some raw materials), there has not been a significant shift. Politicians continue to insist that there is no alternative. External and internal interests have entrenched the status quo.

How can there be progress?

An alternative politics: Small farmers in the rural areas, the bulk of who are women, face exploitation and oppression that is linked to conditions of poverty that the urban poor live under. In this rest the seeds for a revolution to dismantle neoliberalism and even capitalism itself. The main point here is for women in urban and rural areas to recognise these connections and work with rural based women in struggle to not only fight for their right to own their lands and protect the food security of their families and communities but also hold governments directly accountable for the high unemployment rates, access to quality healthcare, education, housing, social security, sanitation and potable water etc.

Such steps in themselves in the current period of systemic global crises would amount to the building of an anti-capitalist movement in Africa. It is really the only means through which the majority of women fighting to make ends meet can have hope for a better quality of life and even liberation from exploitation and oppression.

This is not a utopian idea. At the DAWN Africa Regional Training institute a participant from Africa, Ruth Mumbi, an activist in an informal settlement in Nairobi, made the point that at the height of the food crisis in Kenya, the strongest allies of the women poor urban women who were protesting against their conditions of hardship were women in rural communities. And they won their demands for reduced food prices.

This makes the most important point that solidarity building between membership-based organisations, including trade unions, to challenge the power of African governments and enterprises can lead the way to resist local and foreign enterprises. Nigeria offers an example in this regard. But also so do the iconic protesting young and old, Muslim and Christian, gay and lesbian Egyptians in Tahrir and other urban areas such as Alexandria in their struggle for freedom, which has witnessed the rise of groups, especially workers who

have not only challenged the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, but also the demand for a reversal of neoliberalism and reassertion of public control of the economy and for redistribution of resources.

This struggle needs collaboration between regions too. Not only at the local, national and regional level. Women's organisations in Europe, North America, BRICs and other developing countries must show solidarity with women in Africa in their struggle for greater freedom, real democracy and social justice by taking corporations and their governments on for their role in land grabs as part of the struggle against neoliberalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Cotula, L., (2011), "Land deals in Africa: What is in the contracts?", International Institute for Environment and Development p 13 available at <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/12568IIED.pdf>