

Africa: Invasion of the Land Grabbers

U.S.-based multinational corporations are buying up massive chunks of Africa

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Suppose that, one day, a foreign investor decided to buy a vast tract of fertile land in the United States. Suppose all that is grown or produced on that land, and all profits made, would be shipped directly overseas. Worse, imagine that those Americans who had been living off that land for decades, maybe centuries, would be forced to move and given little to no compensation.

Such an event would undoubtedly spark public outrage, yet this scenario is not far from reality—only the roles are reversed. American companies have recently been investing heavily in foreign land, and many involved in the worldwide struggle against hunger believe that is a cause for concern. What investors call “agricultural development” is described by critics as “land grabbing,” which they say undermines food security in developing countries.

Land grabbing is nothing new, according to Flavio Valente, secretary general of Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) International, a nonprofit that advocates for the right to food. “But recently, the practice of land grabbing has been intensifying and affecting the most vulnerable—peasants, farmers and indigenous people,” Valente says.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates more than 75,000 square miles have been acquired by foreign interests in Africa alone. A 2010 field study conducted by FIAN in Ethiopia found that the equivalent of up to 20 percent of the country’s arable land has been bought by or made available to foreign investors.

American companies are among those making land deals in Africa. New York-based Jarch Capital, bought an area the size of Dubai from a warlord in South Sudan last year, and Dominion Farms Ltd., which bought swampland in Kenya in 2003 to turn it into a rice plantation, has reportedly intentionally flooded local farms to force the relocation of farmers.

Despite promises of creating jobs and increasing food production, foreign investment hardly ever benefits local communities because it aims to secure crops and profits for those back home, the FIAN report states.

Food security advocates say that even initiatives touted for presenting solutions to the land-grabbing problem, such as the World Bank’s Principles for Responsible Agricultural Development, fail to address the lack of concrete mechanisms to hold companies and governments accountable. “These principles, which are meant to be voluntary and self-regulated by the private sector, distract from the fact that what is needed is mandatory and strict state regulation of investors in several policy fields, such as financial markets and agriculture,” says Sofia Monsalve Suárez, land program coordinator at FIAN International.

Resolutions to regulate foreign land acquisition exist, but are ineffective and weak, Valente says. He is hopeful that the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), a United Nations body which last year became more attuned to indigenous and peasant interests, will act.

“The CFS is the only organization with a clear mandate to uphold food security, and each country gets one vote,” Valente says. “Facilitating the participation of those most affected [by land-grabbing] was the first step; now we must see if those voices will actually be heard.”

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