

# **Fodder for War:** Getting to the Crux of the Natural Resources Crisis\*



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DRC,

**populations in agrarian economies are still little better than squatters on their own land, in the eyes of their country laws.**

Not surprisingly, this makes their collective properties most vulnerable; the areas which they sensibly retain as community owned rather than individual or family land: forests and rangelands, often full of minerals and water.

This is not a small problem. It affects over one billion of the world's rural poor in Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

**4 Nor is it coincidental that these are the areas – and especially in Africa – where most civil wars and lesser conflicts are rife.**

In January 2008 when I was preparing the chapter in *Uncharted Territory: Land, Conflict and Humanitarian Action*

intentions, but in the growing angry response by the rural poor [see Robin Palmer's excellent collation of clippings and papers].

**5 Mining, logging, ranching, farming, and other commercial enterprise are hardly illegitimate.**

Poor countries and ordinary farmers need investment and technical expertise. This is not disputed. What must be disputed is the strategy: the failure to root these developments on a platform of local tenure recognition. To do so would structure enterprise with, rather than against, rural populations. It is this failure which has the most potential to generate new conflict in these countries.

Consider the facts: who, for example, are the traditional and continuing customary owners of the ten million ha of valuable rural real estate which the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo is reported to have offered to a South African Farmers Union for development? Who is the natural owner of the 10,000 ha which the Cameroon Government has leased to China for rice production and where, perhaps to the surprise of the Chinese company, they have begun to find is not vacant, unoccupied or unowned land after all?

**6 Conflict in and around this grievance can increase – and the signs are it will increase.**

The current 'global land grab' is merely grist to the mill. Popular response to the plan to lease 1.3 million ha of customary property in Madagascar to the Daewoo Corporation saw the fall of the government in March 2009. Tanzanians have queried the lease of their common properties to Chinese and other investors and new developments have been paused.

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Yet it would be wrong to say that just solutions will be easily reached. Rumour has it that the response of the Tanzanian Government for example, has been to consider amending recently reformed land law which recognised community ownership of not just farms and houses, but communal properties of each community to rid itself of this now apparent obstruction. In Ethiopia, the position of ultimate State ownership over all land has allegedly hardened to facilitate the many new foreign business land occupations.

**7 There are elements in the process which are provocative to not just human rights but common sense.**

The leasing of land by foreign governments and their agencies to feed their own populations most afflicts Africa. This is a continent where few countries produce enough to feed themselves and where a third of the population is hungry. Among the 40 million ha known to have been leased since late 2007 or under negotiation, half is in Africa. This is in countries where poor rural majorities live and depend upon not just farming but forest/woodland and rangeland use: Ethiopia, DRC, CAR, Sudan, Cameroon, Kenya, Angola, Madagascar, Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi.

Local livelihood is almost always organized on a community or village basis, each community having both its family farming areas and shared non-farmed resources. These are the target for investors, and easily accessible because host governments either claim these lands are unowned, or hold them in trust for local communities, a trust which it has proven all too easy to abuse.

GRAIN reports that more foreign state or agency land for food applications and offers are in the pipeline. It remarks the trend of private investors getting in on the act: hedge funds, private equity groups, and investment banks. This sector is not

seeking food security but to make money out of food insecurity, rising food shortages and prices, that is, from both the harvests and the land itself. They seek land in mainly Africa because it is cheap to lease, bountiful and host Governments seem only too eager to rent out 'their' lands. So far this has been through less-than-transparent agreements and within which local benefit is vague at best.

GRAIN, among others (e.g. the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food), also throws cold water on the time-old response of the industrial-backed international community (notably FAO and The World Bank, Japan and the G-8) to this threatening conflict of interest. The response comes in the form of establishing a 'win-win' code of conduct for foreign land and food security investments. The international press has broadly welcomed this. A sigh of relief around international agencies and companies can be heard. The argument is 'agricultural investment is needed and this will be good for African economies, so let's make it work'. GRAIN raises the point that even the food security is unsound, that the answer lies not in the north taking and farming the lands of the south, but building upon existing family farm and local market development in poor agrarian states. The real question, GRAIN says, is not 'How do we make these investments work? But 'What farming and food systems will feed people without making them sick, keep farmers on the farm instead of the city slums, and allow communities to prosper and thrive?'

To this might be added the now-doubted returns of large-scale estate farming in labour-rich economies over the last sixty or so years. So too must a future be challenged on moral and common sense grounds where African nations become the farmyard of the industrialised world and the Middle East, not quite the client future which Africans envisioned for themselves.

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humanitarian community, long used to focusing upon the plight of refugees and displaced persons, a new version of displacement will present itself, involving growing numbers of farmers displaced

other agents, who become the direct shareholding partners in the commercial development of their lands. This has to directly include not just their houses and farms, but the target of most land grabbing past and present whether it has been local or international - the yet uncultivated rangelands, woodlands and forests which belong today and customarily to these rural communities.

To achieve such changes requires a mindset change, and in a time when vested interest, corruption, and greed militate against change, and where the meaning of 'good government' has lost its way. This suggests a needed reconstruction of the State. Perhaps as of old, this may take civil unrest if not war to be forced upon benighted agrarian populations. Whichever way we look at it, the sorry truth is that conflict over natural resources and how they are and should be owned, is probably on the agenda. And sadly, the continent which can least afford it, Africa, is the most vulnerable.

#### **10 Finally, why should the humanitarian community be concerned over these issues?**

The answer to this is simple. It is they, not those who make the policies and deals, who have to clean up in civil conflicts, find the shelter and food for the displaced and dispossessed. Whether it is burdensome or not, humanitarian actors need to become informed and participate in every possible way to prevent, not just treat, the emerging land war.

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Wily, Liz Alden. (Contributing Author). *Fodder for War: Getting to the Crux of the National Resources Crisis*. Washington: Rights and Resources Initiative, 2010.

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This publication was made possible with the support of the Ford Foundation, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and UK Department for International Development. The views presented here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the agencies that have generously supported this work, nor all the Partners of the coalition.