Disappearing Peasants, Disappearing Land

> "Whoever does not command the means to feed himself can neither feel freedom nor dignity"
>
> *Mohamed Hosni Mubarak, president of the Arab Republic of Egypt*

The global media recently made much ado about a 1.3 million ha deal between the South Korean company Daewoo Logistics and the government of Madagascar. The transaction involved Daewoo's acquisition of over half the arable land of the country to grow maize and oil palm mainly for export to South Korea. The bargain subsequently ran aground in the political crisis in which Andry Rajoelina prevailed as the new president.[1]

Daewoo may have been the biggest and most-publicized of foreign coveters of Madagascar's land, but it was by no means the first.

The local controversy also raised international attention to the various scrambles for land played out at the domestic and transnational level, particularly in the light of the most-recent food crisis of 2008. The issues involved and the values at stake include concerns over food security, national sovereignty and the prospects that poor people will lose access to farmland and water and an accelerated pace.

For centuries, agriculture has played the dominant role in Sub-Saharan Africa's local, national and regional economies and cultures. That reality lay at the foundation of both colonial and post-colonial development throughout the 20th Century. In fact, no other continent has been so closely identified with smallholder peasant farming. However, over the past three decades, Africa's small farmers have been leaving their land in droves with the breakdown of land systems, migrating in search of nonagricultural livelihoods in the urban areas, swelling another policy problem; i.e., the state's failure to regulate, plan or distribute capabilities, means and opportunities for adequate housing in cities. The practices of urban developers have further foreclosed access to agricultural goods and services in cities, forcing urban agriculturalists to struggle harder to preserve their small plots of productive land.

This dynamic makes ever more difficult the isolation of rural and urban sectors in official planning, policy formulation and the search for alternative solutions. While many of the challenges of policy, statecraft and upholding economic/social/cultural rights are inter-related, basic to the current crises is the altered significance of indigenous agriculture in Africa.

Disappearing opportunities

The World Bank has played a prominent and destructive role in setting up failed agricultural policies across Africa. Despite some impressive outcomes, for example, of high yields in African maize and other commodities resulting from state subsidies in the

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[1] "A target of the revolution," *Africa-Asia Confidential*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (March 2009), at: http://www.africa-asia-confidential.com/article-preview/id/210/A-target-of-the-revolution.

1970s, World Bank's prescriptions effectively overturned such gains with economic shock therapy. Under structural adjustment conditionalities of the 1980s, the World Bank promoted high land rents, high tenure concentrations in fewer hands, sever cuts in services and subsidies such that coincided with compliant African countries' mounting foreign debt. This was done at the same time that the United States, Canada, and European countries maintained very large subsidies for their farm sectors, maximizing Western comparative advantage and the resulting harm to African producers. Such policies finally have fulfilled the dire predictions of their critics.[2]

The ongoing world financial crisis should already have exposed "market fundamentalism" as a mistaken belief that unbridled commercial activity serves as a neutral factor or optimizes production. However, structures and functions of development and financial institutions have not yet adjusted under the weight of their own contradictions.

While the World Bank's own *World Development Report 2008* argues that agriculture is key to poverty alleviation, especially for African smallholder farmers, the effects of its policies have spelled de-development for those very economies. Ironically, the same World Bank source asserts that liberalized national markets will remain the primary force for achieving productivity increases and consequent poverty alleviation, as if governments in those globalized national markets were to retain sufficient autonomy to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of the national farmers.

Rather than accelerating development through state investments and subsidized support agricultural productivity improvements, that "green revolution" model has given way to restricted and decentralised government activity that precludes intervention in the national economy. In the 1980s, the World Bank identified African state intervention, particularly in the form of producer subsidies and parastatal marketing, as key problems to fix in order to achieve higher agricultural productivity.[3] After some 30 years of implementing such assumptions, ever more smallholder households now participate in commodity, capital, land and labour markets to rise out of poverty only through nonagricultural production, or out-migration.[4]

Governments, or at least those officials negotiating international trade and finance deals, are generally not in a position knowingly to refuse externally imposed policies detrimental to local agriculture. Rare is the case exemplified by Mauritius in the third round of negotiations on the WTO Agricultural Trade Agreement, when the tiny African nation's delegation refused the terms of the European Communities proposals due to their negative consequences for Mauritius' farmers. Mauritius correctly asserted that since agriculture, in addition to its economic role, should contribute to fulfilling

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[2] Kjell Havnevik, Deborah Bryceson, Lars-Erik Birgegård, Prosper Matondi and& Atakilte Beyene, "African Agriculture and the World Bank: Development or impoverishment?" *Pambazuka*, Issue 353 3 November 2008), at: http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/46564.

[3] Elliot Berg, *Accelerated development in Sub-Saharan Africa: an agenda for action* (Washington: World Bank, 1981).

[4] See Deborah Bryceson, "Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour Redundancy in the Neo-liberal Era and Beyond," in D. F. Bryceson, C. Kay and J. Mooij, eds., *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 2000), 299–326.

obligations to uphold the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, of which it already is a state party.[5]

In global agricultural commodity markets, African smallholder producers naturally have been losing market share continually over the last three decades. Africa's traditional export crops steadily have declined. The African smallholders' comparative advantage in these crops (coffee, cola, tobacco, cashews, etc.) has been undermined by far more-efficient producers elsewhere. As in other regions, African small-scale peasant farmers, who are considered primary producers for local consumption, are losing ground in every sense.

Domestic dispossession and the food-and-sustainability gap

In Egypt, agrarian reform and privatization of land began in 1987, leading the trend in other sectors. That process and its consequences remain factors in the violation of a bundle of human rights and a source of considerable state and nonstate violence. In 2004, a series of significant tariff reductions was implemented, leading the World Bank to declare that Egypt had made more progress in trade liberalization than almost any other country. Even so, the degree of protection is higher in Egypt than in 40% of the countries of the world.[6] However, removing trade protections for Egyptian producers' sustainability was only half of the pincer policy.

The Land Law No. 96 (1992) already had cancelled rent-controlled land contracts, previous fixed at a low rate of seven times the tax under the Gamal Abdu ul-Nasser-era land law. Law 96 also allowed wide-spread and uncompensated eviction of farmers unable to pay the new free-market rents. Estimates now place the number of landless farmers at well over 900,000, or nearly one-third of Egypt's total number. They and their families—together totaling about 5.3 million people—are now without livelihood, despite the Law No. 96 provision (Article 33) to avail the dispossessed farmers of alternative (desert) land. Other consequences include the deaths of 406 farmers, 2,874 injured, 4,028 arrested in the course of the first eight years of the law's implementation.[7]

Clearly, the core of Egypt's food problem lies in the shortage of domestic production of major food commodities. The gap between domestic production and consumption has been estimated at an average of 44% for wheat, 35% for maize, 78% for vegetable oils, 96% for lentils, 45% for broad beans, 20% for sugar, 17% for red meat and 19% for milk. This deficit has consistently widened in recent years and, consequently, Egypt's dependence on food imports has increased annually. The value of food imports has

[5] "Statement by Mauritius," World Trade Organization, Third Special Session of the Committee on Agriculture, 28–29 September 2000, G/AG/NG/W/52, 10 October 2000.

[6] N. Minot, M. Chemingui and M. Thomas, *Impact of trade liberalization on agriculture in the Near East and North Africa: Liberalisation will not cut poverty in Near East and North Africa* (Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2007), p. 149.

[7] Karem Saber, "Agrarian policy, legislation and violations of Human Rights in Egypt," *diálogos, propuestas, historias*, at: http://base.d-p-h.info/pt/fiches/dph/fiche-dph-6922.html.

risen to about $3.5 billion annually over 2003–06. However, in 2007, a significant surge in the value (and volume) of food imports rose by 78% over 2006.[8]

Globalized dispossession and the food-and-sovereignty gap

Land and times are changing. It used to be that the ongoing large-scale land acquisition in Africa was predominantly by internal privatization and land grabs by postcolonial political and military elites. Before that, land grabs by foreigners was among the classic forms of colonialism. Now the trend synthesizes those legacies in a new form with foreign investors claiming hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile African lands as their hedge against food insecurity at home.

Some see this "farmland grab" to be motivated as a measure to improve precarious food security. Others charge that private, neoliberal interests lie at the base of these large land acquisitions that range in nature from a large-scale irrigation project to monocultures, including biofuel production, and sheer land speculation. In any case, these foreign land grabbers in African states seek to bypass unreliable international food markets toward an autonomous food-security solution, albeit on other peoples' traditionally and formally held lands.

While recent reporting on the phenomenon arises from in-depth investigations of "farmland grabbing" in Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali and Sudan, a recent study also touches on similar practices in Angola, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia.[9] Moreover, other countries in Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Indonesia, and potentially Malaysia and Philippines), as well as parts of Eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine) are among the target countries. The report identifies a variety of investing countries that include China, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Sa`udi Arabia, Syria, UAE, United States and others. Other sources cite Egypt's search for off-shore production in Niger, Tanzania, Niger and, soon, in Uganda.[10] Some estimates put total farmland investments in Africa, Latin America and Asia above 15m hectares, about half the size of Italy.[11]

The recent FAO/IFAD/IIED report finds also that "Governments concerned about stability of food supplies are promoting acquisition of farmland in foreign countries as an alternative to purchasing food from international markets" after the shocking spike in food prices over the past two years. The global food crisis has extinguished the assumption of continuously low food prices. Food-importing countries are now more

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[8] Hamdy El-Swalhy, "Using what we have," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, Issue No. 919 (23–29 October 2008), at: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/919/sc5.htm. Fully 71.6% of the increase attributed to an increase in import prices, while 7% was due to a the rise in the volume of imports.

[9] L. Cotula, S. Vermeulen, R. Leonard and J. Keeley, "Land grab or development opportunity? Agricultural investment and international land deals in Africa" (London/Rome: IIED/FAO/IFAD, 2009).

[10] Emojong Osere, "Egypt could grow wheat in Uganda soon," *Daily Monitor* (9 June 2009), at: http://www.monitor.co.ug/artman/publish/business_power/egypt_could_grow_wheat_in_uganda_soon_86137.shtm.

[11] Citing Peter Brabeck, chairman of Nestlé. Javier Blas, "Africa giving away land 'almost for free'," *Irish Times* (25 May 2009), at: http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2009/0525/1224247325047.html.

vulnerable to export trade restrictions and otherwise-interrupted supplies. The current farmland grabbing trend differs from past international agribusiness primarily selling produce in international markets in order to repatriate the profits. In that scenario, produce was purely a means to a profitable end. In the current trend, food moves to the center of the investment objective, while land and other capital are mere means toward that end.

Although the authors do not apply a human rights methodology to their analysis, the acknowledge that "This is rightly a hot issue, because land is so central to identity, livelihoods and food security." Reportedly, the investing countries now primarily seek to repatriate the off-shore-produced crops to feed their own population as a stroke of nominal "self-sufficiency."

Underreported is the new investment patterns` effects on the identity or livelihoods of farmers indigenous to the affected host countries. Food, land and adequate housing rights, investor claims and interests, and affected persons` voices in the host countries are central to the needed debate. This emerging analysis is welcome for opening the door to more need and opportunity to pursue the local human and human-rights values affected in global "farmland grabbing."

Rights, democracy, land and food security

The democratization trend in Africa, as in the world, has marched in divergent and even contradictory directions. More countries have ratified human rights treaties that relate to food security, but with some notable exceptions, such as Brazil, most ratifying states largely have not implemented their corresponding obligations through indispensible laws and policies. A recent and hopeful development has been the international agreement in 2004 of a new set of voluntary guidelines on the human right to food.[12]

Some actual and acclaimed democratic systems have seen recent corruption in food management such as the (privatized) sale of Malawi's strategic grain reserve and Zimbabwe government's allocation of food aid as a political tool to reward political allies and punish opponents. The good news is that some media, academics, politicians and a few NGOs (such as FIAN and Habitat International Coalition affiliates) are examining and raising awareness of how land, food and hunger relate to other human rights.

Food production for local use by small-scale farmers (the vast majority of farmers in developing countries) was not only deemed déclassé under the Washington Consensus, it also became unpopular among government leaders in developing countries who favored the supposedly more-profitable and taxable agricultural or manufacturing exports to the developed world. Now they risk incurring a far-greater cost.

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[12] *Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security*, adopted by the 127th Session of the FAO Council, November 2004 (Rome: FAO, 2005), at: http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/009/y9825e/y9825e00.htm.

It is late and much damage is done. However, it is time to recognize that hunger and the right food are too important to be subordinated to privately interpreted national interests or discredited neoliberal trade ideologies. As a life-giving substance and public good, food is not just another commodity. Addressing food needs deserves corrective policies governing food production and trade, but with a view to preserving local subsistence.