

# Water and Land Grabbing

The short story “How much land does a man need?” by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy is a parable about human greed. Farmer Pahom strikes a deal with peasants in Bashkiria, a fertile plateau in eastern Russia, for them to give him all the land he can walk around in one day. Extending the boundary of the land ever more, Pahom rushes back in the evening to his starting point but collapses through exhaustion and dies. In the end, he needs just two square metres of land for his grave.

## Modern Pahoms

Today large amounts of agricultural lands in Africa, Latin America, Asia and central Europe are being bought or leased by modern-day Pahoms. Companies like Daewoo, Sun Biofuels or the Al-Qudra Holding do so mainly for the production of non-food crops such as livestock feed or for biofuel production. At the same time, countries that rely mostly on food imports such as China, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, the Gulf states and India are investing in foreign land to feed their growing populations. Estimates by the World Bank indicate that in 2009 alone there have been large scale farmland deals for about 45 million hectares of land, compared with an average expansion rate of 4 million hectares a year over the previous decade.

Officially, much of the land that is being leased in such deals is “idle public land” held by central or local government. In reality, the land often belongs to communities and is subject to long-standing customary rights. Despite being labelled as “idle”, such land is essential for the livelihoods of the rural poor, providing communities with land for subsistence farming, access to edible wild plant species, grazing land, water and firewood. Land grabbing aggravates hunger in Africa, Asia and Latin America by leading to the eviction of these peasant communities from their main source of livelihood.

## Water and Land Grabbing

Tolstoy's short story does not explain the link between the ownership and control of land and of water. However, in the modern stories of land investment the availability of water is an important factor in the choice of the land being acquired.

Water is becoming increasingly scarce due to overexploitation and pollution. Those who control the land also control the water resources. In many countries, the extraction and use of water by landowners is not sufficiently regulated to protect local communities from the depletion and pollution of the water resources they rely on, or the regulations that do exist are not enforced.



Thus, control of the land often means in practice that groundwater can be extracted or that river water can be diverted to irrigate fields at will.

The use to which the land is put may also result in water becoming polluted or degraded, being contaminated, for example, with agrochemicals or animal waste. Biofuel or agro-fuel production often entails the use of large quantities of water as well as the clearing of trees from vast tracts of land, affecting the water cycle and both the availability and the quality of water.

Such practices can severely undermine the capacity of neighbouring communities to produce food and to access clean water. After Hindustan Coca-Cola built a plant in Plachimada, India, in 1998-1999, communities claimed that groundwater levels in the area decreased substantially and wells in communities close to the factory had dried up. Following protests the factory was closed in 2004. In 2010, a committee set up by the Kerala state government recommended that Coca-Cola should be held liable for \$48 million in “damages to the community and the environment around its bottling plant in Plachimada”.

In Sierra Leone, water from the Rokel River became polluted with herbicides and fertilizers when Addax Bioenergy leased the swamplands and started using the water from the river for irrigation. Further examples underline the link between water and land use. In the municipalities of Ocos and Coatepeque in Guatemala, dams were constructed in 2005 to benefit the nearby banana and palm oil plantations. As a result, the communities suffered severe and regular flooding of their lands and crops. In Coatepeque, access to water was also severely affected by the overuse and re-routing of water resources for the irrigation of a vast oil palm plantation that had been established there. At the same time, communities reported that wells had dried up and that it was becoming increasingly difficult to access clean water during the dry season. Additionally, in both regions, rivers were contaminated with toxic substances and waste from the plantations and sugar refineries.

Cases like these demonstrate the necessity to take into account the implications for water resources as land deals are being negotiated. Access to water by disadvantaged and poor communities in particular needs to be protected in law, policy and practice.

*When members of Sierra Leone's Council of Churches visited Lungi, one of the villages that had sublet land to Addax Bioenergy for the next fifty years, they found a community that felt betrayed. Addax had taken over the swamplands, the best areas for growing food crops. The company paid some compensation, but much less than the value of the crops that could have been generated from the land by the people themselves.*

*Addax did not only use the land but also took over the water, pumping it from the Rokel River and returning it polluted with herbicides and fertilizers. Women reported that the water could no longer be used for drinking.*

## Land Grabbing and the Right to Food

Access to safe and adequate food and water has always formed the foundations of a just and peaceful world. This vision stands in contrast to the reality that in 2010, 925 million people were estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger. The lack of adequate and secure access to land and natural resources for the rural and urban poor is one of the key causes of hunger and poverty in the world.

Yet land investment plans involving foreign companies and governments often do not focus on the need to feed local populations but primarily attempt to stabilize food and oil prices in the home country. The price rise of basic foods like rice and wheat in 2007-2008 demonstrated that food, and therefore land, had moved into the sights of financial speculators, betting on shortages. The global food system is designed to generate profits and not to feed people.

Today, we see food riots in developing countries, including those that have rich fertile soils but are leasing their agricultural land to foreign investors. In 2010, there were riots over high bread prices in Mozambique, yet the government was considering leasing more than 30,000 hectares of land to BioEnergy Africa for ethanol production. Many other countries targeted by foreign investors for food and agro-industrial raw materials cannot feed their own populations.



*In Mali, without the knowledge of the public, the government granted a Libyan company, Malibya, 100,000 hectares of land in the Macina region for 50 years to grow hybrid rice for export to Libya. In addition, the government granted the company priority access to water during the dry season. As a result, local producers suffered reduced access to water from the Niger River, the main source of irrigation water in the region.*

The impact of climate change poses a further threat to food security as prices continue to rise due to bad harvests and the limited availability of water. In Saudi Arabia, like most Gulf states, water scarcity is a major concern. For Saudi Arabia, the main aim of investing in lands abroad is to stabilize local food prices by reducing dependency on food imports as groundwater reserves dry up after decades of irrigated wheat farming. Meanwhile, some companies are investing in land to receive subsidies for carbon sequestration as a means of mitigating the impact of climate change.

The rise in oil prices is also a driving force for massive land investments to produce bio-fuels. Instead of feeding the hungry, food crops such as maize, soya beans and sugar cane are being diverted for fuel production. Large jatropha and palm oil plantations are also being set up for the production of oil, diverting the limited water resources available towards the irrigation of these plantations. Establishing plantations involves clearing trees from huge tracts of land, destroying natural resources and environmental systems.

Can we really claim that there are food shortages when one-third of the global cereals production goes to animal feed and agro-fuel production? The amount of grain needed to fill a 90-litre petrol tank of a four-wheel drive vehicle once with ethanol could feed one person for a whole year. Filling the tank every two weeks uses an amount that would feed 26 people. Cutting down forests to produce fuel does not keep vulnerable small-scale farmers in charge of their food supply but forces them to rely on the market. Landless and displaced communities have to buy food from the market and with the food price crisis, the prices will be beyond the reach of many.

## False promises and protest

While in Tolstoy's short story it was the people of Bashkiria themselves who offered to sell the land to Pahom because there was plenty of land available, today in most cases it is governments or local authorities, holding the land in trust for the community or the nation, that give away the concessions. When the modern Pahoms arrive with their large boots, communities whose very existence and welfare depend on the land are rarely consulted or asked for their consent.



Some of the leases are for 99 years for a dollar per hectare but local people are not eligible for the deals. They are promised jobs, new houses, or financial compensation, but in many cases the expectations of the local communities are dashed. Even where in-kind or financial compensation is provided, it is often insufficient to make up for the long-term loss of livelihoods.

*In 2008 the Kenyan government made an agreement with Qatar. The Arab Gulf state offered a huge loan to construct a second deep-water port in Kenya in exchange for 40,000 hectares of land in the Tana River area Wetlands like the Tana River Delta are not only important sources of water for the environment, for fish and plants, but are also an important area for local communities to grow food and cash crops such as rice, fish or to practise horticulture. Here pastoralists find water and pastures for their cattle, especially in times of drought, when other sources of water dry up.*

As land grabbing increases, so do protests and tensions at local and national level. In Madagascar, land grabbing was one of the major causes for anti-government protests in 2008. The government had sealed a deal to sell 1.2 million hectares of land – one third of Madagascar’s farmland – to the Korean company Daewoo. The protests resulted in the overthrow of the government and the cancellation of the deal by the new government. Similarly, protests against high food prices in Mozambique led to the cancellation of a contract with Procana, a company with British interests, in late 2009.

Large-scale foreign investments and competition for water and fertile land are likely to fuel more conflicts in the future. One of the reasons is that, unlike in Bashkiria, there is hardly any land available that is not being used. Even in the most remote corner there are small farmers, trying to make a living from a plot of land, pastoralists with their cattle using seemingly uninhabited savannah as grazing grounds, or wood lots and forests where village women collect firewood, fodder, herbs, medicinal plants and fruits.

The protests in Madagascar made it clear to governments and investors that there are high risks involved in land grabbing, not only for the people affected, but also for investors who lack security for their investments. This is especially true in poor countries with severe shortages of food, land and water.

## **The need for responsible investment**

There can be no doubt that investment in agriculture is needed. But investment should benefit the farmers and local populations and improve their livelihoods, not displace them and cut them off from their land, ecosystems or water, making them dependent on wage labour or forcing them to migrate to the cities.

To reduce the negative impact of investment in land and to increase the chances that it contributes to the well being of the people affected, there is currently a discussion about principles and guidelines for “responsible investment”. Many of the necessary ingredients for such codes of conduct are well known: transparency, participation, the public and the people concerned being given proper information, acknowledgement of existing land and water rights, and, of course, proper compensation schemes if people have to be resettled.

# What can you do?

Since it cannot be expected that the modern-day Pahoms will give up their quest for land of their own accord or become the victims of their own greed, the question is what can be done to prevent this kind of land and water grabbing that poses a threat to livelihoods, food security and the environment. There is an urgent need to act before millions of pastoralists and small-scale farmers lose their land and access to the natural resources on which they depend.

As churches and church-based organizations you can join the EAA Day of Fasting for Life on Ash Wednesday (9 March) to reflect on the inequalities that allow both hunger and over-consumption in this world. For more information visit: [www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food/sustainable-consumption/fast-for-life/](http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food/sustainable-consumption/fast-for-life/) Use the materials produced by the EWN and EAA to educate yourself on water and food security issues.

Ask national governments and international institutions to ensure that investments are aimed at improving people's income, employment and access to food, promoting sustainable and agro-ecological production systems, while respecting people's rights to water, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized communities; ensure the legal protection of customary land tenure and water rights, in particular guaranteeing women's access to land and water; ensure that land policies and deals respect the 11 principles on land investment highlighted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and that they are understood by land users and enforced at all levels.

Accompany local communities affected by land deals by expressing solidarity and by helping them to understand their rights and the possible implications of such deals.

## For more detailed information on water and land grabbing:

Right to Food and Nutrition Watch 2010: [www.rtfn-watch.org](http://www.rtfn-watch.org)

"Large-scale land acquisitions and leases: A set of core principles and measures to address the human rights challenge", Mr. Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, 2009:

[http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/20090611\\_large-scale-land-acquisitions\\_en.pdf](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/20090611_large-scale-land-acquisitions_en.pdf)

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA):  
[www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food](http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food)

Ecumenical Water Network (EWN):  
<http://water.oikoumene.org>

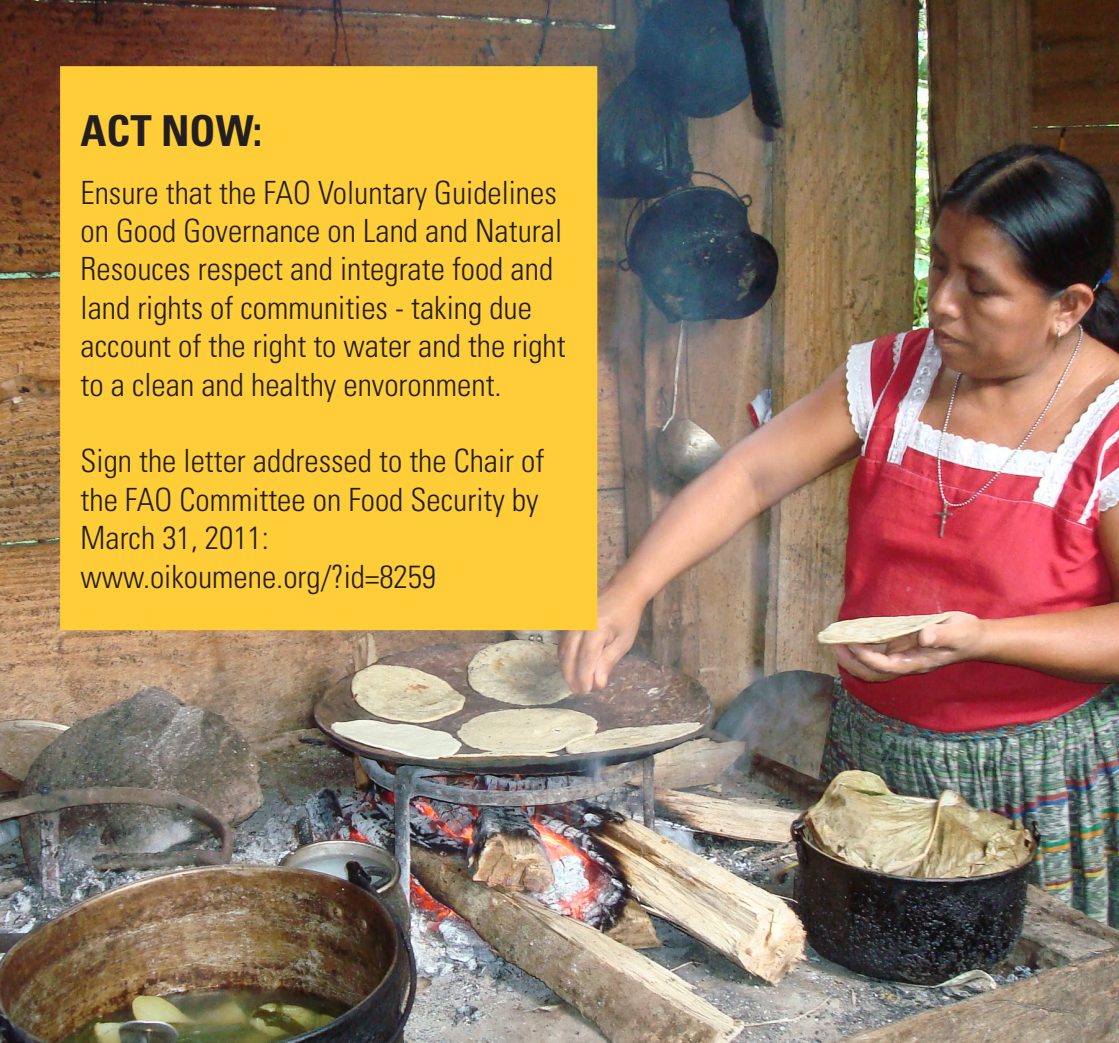


## ACT NOW:

Ensure that the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Good Governance on Land and Natural Resources respect and integrate food and land rights of communities - taking due account of the right to water and the right to a clean and healthy environment.

Sign the letter addressed to the Chair of the FAO Committee on Food Security by March 31, 2011:

[www.oikoumene.org/?id=8259](http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=8259)



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