

**Message Delivered by +Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji, Bishop of Umuahia and Chairman of RECOWA Justice, Development and Peace Commission, at the Opening Session of the Conference on Land Grabbing in Africa, Holding in Abidjan from 21st to 23rd November, 2017.**

With unrestrained feelings of joy, I wish to add my voice in welcoming our special guests, partners, resource persons and all the participants at this conference. I am deeply grateful to the organisers of this assembly, who have worked assiduously to ensure that the dream of having this study session becomes a reality.

This conference on land grabbing in Africa is coming at time when we are having disturbing reports on large scale foreign acquisition of land across African countries for various questionable purposes. Some wealthy countries acquire massive hectares of land in African countries to meet their own agricultural needs. Many multinational corporations have also scuttled for large expanse of land in Africa for the production of bio-fuel and for the propagation of genetically modified crops, regardless of their proven environmental and health hazards.

There are also worrisome tales of powerful and influential African elite, who have also contributed to the recent surge in massive land acquisition in Africa. Many of them take advantage of their positions to grab extensive tracts of lands for the production of agricultural goods, which ultimately become raw materials for bio-fuel production meant exclusively for export, with no benefit to the hosting communities, whose lands have been appropriated.

Land grabbing has become a matter of grave concern because many rural communities are being dispossessed of lands which they depend on for energy and livelihood. Some land deals involving such rural communities on the one hand, and foreign investors and powerful elite on the other hand, are no doubt fair and just, while many others are adjudged dubious, unfair and unjust. In some circumstances, poor communities are made to part with large expanse of land without any form of consultation, negotiation or compensation. Others are dispossessed of their lands through unfair deals or bogus promises that remain largely unfulfilled.

At times some host African governments, who should aim at revitalising their nation's agriculture for economic growth, rather aid and abet land grabbing by making policies that foster foreign agricultural interests in the hope of attracting foreign investments and capital inflow. In some instances, governments even use state powers to effect land dispossession of rural communities, which not only promotes foreign interests but which sooner or later turns out to have deadly repercussions to the very communities they are meant to protect and develop.

The impact of land grabbing can be enormous. Small scale farmers are deprived of their only inheritance and their major sources of livelihood due to low bargaining power and inadequate knowledge. Lands previously used for the growing of staple food are turned into farms for the production of exotic goods for export, thereby causing food insecurity and malnutrition in the host countries. Forests, involving millions of hectares of land, are cleared and used with little regard for their long term environmental and health damages as well as their detrimental economic implications for the host countries. Rather than create employment as is often promised, multinational corporations, with their high technology, abolish jobs for labourers in countries where they have acquired large tracts of land.

Thus as a result of land grabbing, many communities in Africa have been deeply wounded and degraded by poverty, a poverty that generates many other social problems: hunger, malnutrition, internally displaced persons, refugees, migration and human trafficking that traps many girls in sex slavery. Above all, poverty leads many young people to despondency or makes them seek relief in drugs. Ultimately, land grabbing in Africa leads poor communities further to the margins and condemns many rural dwellers to a life of wanton suffering and undeserved misery.

The prophets were very violent in their condemnation of such exploitation of the poor and specifically demanded justice and fairness for them. Just as Isaiah enjoined the Israelites of his age, he also urges us today "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke" (Is 58:6). In modern times, the Church is very concerned with justice and fairness to the poor and exploited, who suffer from economic exclusion. As Pope Francis points out in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) art 53, such an economy of exclusion and inequality kills and the divine injunction, "thou shall not kill" applies to it.

In conclusion, permit me to state that the death of thousands of children on account of hunger and malnutrition, the growing army of unemployed youths, the increasing pauperisation of communities and the rising wave of crime and armed conflicts resulting from land grabbing and economic exclusion in African countries and the attendant struggles over lean and dwindling resources pose a challenge to the Christian conscience. It is our belief and hope that this conference will come up with resolutions and strategies that will help countries in Africa overcome this challenge.