

THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND JUSTICE IN AFRICA

An African peoples' contribution to the Ecology Commission of the Vatican Covid-19 Task Force

SEE

For the 60% of Africans who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, land is neither a commodity nor an individual possession; it is a gift from God and our ancestors.¹ Land is the sacred base of our lives, providing timber and stone for building homes, firewood for cooking, clay for cooking pots, grass for livestock, food to nourish families, and sacred plants for rituals and medicines. Land cradles our rivers and streams, and stores the water that replenishes our wells. For Africans, land determines our identity as human beings, our dignity, our sense of belonging, reflected in cultural rituals such as burying the new-born's umbilical cord on the family's ancestral land, a symbolic act of ongoing life and our unbreakable connection with the earth.

If you sell your father's land to buy a trumpet, where will you stand to blow it? (African Proverb)

Demographic trends, mass migration, urbanisation and economic growth have combined with climate change related land and soil degradation to increase pressure on the land. Meanwhile, neo-liberal policies have endeavoured to commodify land and natural resources as tradable assets. Wider macro-economic trends have made land in Africa an attractive proposition to global investors, both as an investment 'asset' and to exploit the growing demand for food, feed and biofuels. This has triggered a huge surge in large-scale land acquisitions that have displaced millions of rural Africans from their homes, farms, forests and grazing lands.² This new wave of 'land grabs' has been associated with massive land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and multiple human rights abuses, with thousands of communities forcibly evicted without legal recourse or compensation. Women are particularly vulnerable due to their weaker status in land governance systems and as land titles tend to pass from father to son. Also vulnerable are environmental, land and indigenous human rights defenders, whose lives are at risk from threats, criminalisation and even death.

High level corruption is endemic in many countries. Case studies from eight African countries reveal the complicity of companies with the State and local authorities in massive land transactions.³ Large scale agribusiness investments are encouraged by the corruption-tainted⁴ African Development Bank President Akinwumi Adesina who claims that Africa sits on 65% of the uncultivated arable land left in the world.⁵ But experience on the ground shows there is shrinking land availability for the growing populations of African farmers and pastoralists, resulting in violent clashes between communities, herders and farmers.

*Less than 5% of the world's population, indigenous people protect 80% of global biodiversity.*⁶

While smallholder farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk and forest communities dominate the demographics of rural Africa, most countries across the continent have been induced – often by Northern initiatives (e.g. G7/G20) based on private investment and public private partnerships – to focus on an external-input based, export-oriented, commodity monocrop model of agricultural development, and to rely heavily on the transfer of land for timber, oil, gas and mineral exploitation to generate foreign exchange, often without or despite environmental impact assessment. Most of the dispossession involves peasant owned 'communal' lands. This is putting African food systems at risk of complete collapse.

*"The animals are the only wealth we have. Where should we go? We need to care for these lands. If not, we will lose them. Let us manage them, so we don't lose them."*⁷ Apangityang Ekidor, Turkana

¹ <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/echoes-16-05.html>

² <https://afsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/trends-emerging-online-single-pages-en.pdf>

³ SECAM 2019), Assessment of the state and situation of land and resource grabbing in Africa and related human rights violations

⁴ <http://saharareporters.com/2020/05/27/sixteen-allegations-unethical-conduct-against-african-development-bank-president-adesina>

⁵ <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/africa-holds-the-key-for-feeding-9-billion-people-by-2050-adesina-says-during-norman-borlaug-lecture-17442/>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/news-article/en/c/1029002/>

⁷ Video - Turkana pastoralists of Northern Uganda facing land pressure and climate change <https://youtu.be/coKv3S8LZN4>

Laudato Si clearly echoes the challenges we see around land in Africa: loss of biodiversity (39), pollution (52), mutual responsibility (67), sustainable agriculture (71), inclusivity (94), food sovereignty (129/134), indigenous rights (146), citizen control (179), and profit motivation (195).

The book of Genesis reminds us that God created man and woman in his image and his likeness (Gen 1,26). He entrusted them the mission of taking care of creation, while drawing their livelihood from it, but never abusing it. Man and women are therefore the stewards of God (Gen 2,15). Any abuse in management of creation, especially the land, leads to disorder in the world (Laudato Si, Ch 2).

The Biblical witness offers many visualizations of the true cost that financial and political exploitation squeezes from our planet (e.g. Dt 29:22-27; Lam 5:1-10); and daring blueprints of the radically different dream that God proposes for our fullness of life (e.g., Dt 26:4-10; Mic 4:1-4). While many hesitate to interpret the Book of Revelation, it is difficult to ignore the parallels between the current global economic meltdown and the fall of Babylon – a toxic, globalizing world-order of resource-extraction and exploitation (Rev 18), of media manipulation and military might (Rev 13) – along with the promise of a glorious new earth (Rev21).

African theologian Teresa Okure brings a feminist perspective: “God empowered the earth to bring forth all vegetation and plant life with their seeds inside them (Gen 1:1-12). The implication of this is that the earth itself is a living creature. Otherwise, how can that which has no life bring forth life? This awareness has great implications for how we treat the earth and helps us to understand why Pope Francis embraces the vision of Saint Francis who calls the earth ‘Our Sister, Mother Earth’. What difference would it make if we truly saw the earth as having life in herself? Would we be on fire to protect the earth from being massacred and exploited by over-farming and all kinds of toxic wastes?”⁸

In response to the land crisis, the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) adopted in 2012 the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure – the ‘gold standard’ for land governance. In 2018 the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas called out the injustices and urged governments to protect and strengthen peasants’ land rights. However, these progressive voluntary policy frameworks devised at global and continental levels have largely failed to ‘stick’ on the ground at national and local levels.⁹ They are largely ignored by ever more concentrated corporations in the pursuit of quarterly earnings targets, while the livelihoods of the poorest are sacrificed by governments desperate to attract foreign investment.

At a systemic level, the very UN agencies that have facilitated the emergence of such progressive policy protection, and enabled civil society voices to be heard, are being undermined and dismantled by governments increasingly beholden to corporate interests. The role of the Rome based agencies at the heart of global food governance is being dismantled and power shifted to New York where capital can exercise even greater control. Meanwhile, African countries are encouraged to out-perform one another on the World Bank’s Doing Business ranking, which rewards lowering social and environmental safeguards to facilitate foreign investments and the exploitation of natural resources.

The COVID-19 crisis underlines the need to change the way that we see land – not as a commodity or even a resource, but as a living system that we respect, value, hold sacred, and upon whose generosity our future depends.

In COVID-19, we see the outcome of a world that clearly failed to heed the warning of Laudato Si that “a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power.”¹⁰

Yet the COVID-19 crisis response has taught us that swift and decisive people-centred action, informed by scientific analysis, delivered with clarity, trust and kindness (as demonstrated in New Zealand) is a recipe for successful and rapid recovery.

⁸ <https://afjn.org/documents/2015/12/a-keynote-address-biblical-perspective-on-land-with-laudato-si-as-the-background.pdf/>

⁹ Schoneveld et al, 2017: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718516301671>

¹⁰ Risks and Benefits of Gain-of-Function Experiments with Pathogens of Pandemic Potential, Such as Influenza Virus: a Call for a Science- Based Discussion <https://mbio.asm.org/content/5/4/e01730-14>

It is incumbent upon humanity to wake up to the sacredness of the land that provides so much, and acknowledge its central role in the cultural and spiritual lives of the communities that rely upon it.

African land is not a commodity to be bought and sold by multinational corporations. The narrative that land in Africa is wasting is a myth. The acquisition and privatisation of indigenous and peasant land must stop and be reversed. Future generations need access and control of enough productive land and living soil to nourish and provide livelihoods for their families and descendants, and to maintain cultural integrity.

- It is essential that increased political pressure is brought to bear at all levels to accelerate the uptake of progressive policies to strengthen community land rights. Well-meaning but ultimately voluntary guidelines are not enough. We need binding international treaties that commit governments to enshrine in legislation, and guarantee in practice, the land rights of the indigenous peoples, peasants, herders, fishers who are the custodians of richly bio-diverse lands, fisheries and forests.
- All large scale land acquisitions must be preceded by transparent environmental, social and cultural impact assessment, and the prior informed consent of indigenous and peasant communities affected. Communities must be afforded the right to say no! Neoliberal globalization is out of control and needs firm regulation. We call for the urgent adoption of a legally binding UN treaty to ensure that transnational corporations are fully accountable for their human rights violations and environmental crimes.¹¹
- There is a need to facilitate communities to co-manage their lands in subsidiary collaboration with local state actors. Community land use management systems can successfully improve livelihoods in equitable, just and sustainable ways whilst protecting and restoring ecosystems. Several land case studies from across Africa demonstrate how this can work in diverse contexts.¹² We call on political, economic, social, cultural and religious decision-makers to work together so that the land remains in the hands of its legitimate users, and its management respects nature and reflects the needs and aspirations of communities, particularly those who live off the land.
- We must learn from the good land practices of our great grandparents who bequeathed the land to us. Ancestral land use and management systems took account of all land users including farmers, pastoralists, hunters, fishers, wild fruit collectors, and wildlife. We must build on the rich indigenous knowledge of previous generations with cutting edge scientific understanding of soil microbiology to give food producers access to soil enhancing technology made in Africa.
- We must protect and promote women's rights to land. While women are recognized as the main contributors of labour in small scale farming systems, women represent a tiny fraction of agricultural land holders across Africa. Women must be guaranteed a strong voice, both within their communities and externally, on land rights, land governance and large-scale land acquisitions.
- We call on governments and policy-makers to rethink their approach to African food systems, to abandon the failed industrial model, and acknowledge small-scale food producers as the custodians of land and the drivers of agricultural development. We need a policy shift to support territorial food systems, based on agroecology, facilitating community-led regeneration, conservation and restoration of land and soils, and resilience to the climate crisis and future pandemics.¹³

Overall, we observe that the question of land goes far beyond land management, it is also about access, governance, culture, education, citizenship, identity, and power relations¹⁴. The defence of land against predation by corporations and economic and political elites, and against processes of agro-industrialisation and environmental degradation should be among the top priorities if we want to tackle injustice and poverty in the world!

¹¹ <https://www.cidse.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CIDSE-Submission-Feb-28.pdf> Also see RECOWA, 2020, Message des Eveques Membres du 8 eme Conseil Permanent

¹² <https://afsafrica.org/case-studies-land/>

¹³ CIDSE, 2018 : <https://www.cidse.org/the-climate-urgency-setting-sail-for-a-new-paradigm/>

¹⁴ CIDSE, January 2020. People's Land Under Pressure, CIDSE Background Paper