

Famine: Less land, more hunger

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The tragedy of hunger again becomes current news from the food emergency in the Horn of Africa, but famines are a silent daily reality. Worldwide, more than a billion people, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), have difficulties accessing food. A famine with political causes and responsibility.

Africa is a ravaged land. Its natural resources have been plundered from its communities over centuries of domination and colonization. Although it is not only the plundering of gold, oil, coltan, rubber, diamonds and so on, but also, water, land, seeds that provide food to its inhabitants. If 80% of the population in the Horn of Africa, as indicated by the FAO, depends on agriculture as their main source of food and income, what they do when there is no land to cultivate?

In recent years, the growing wave of privatization of land in Africa (purchase by food multinationals, foreign governments or investment funds) has made its precarious agricultural and food system even more vulnerable. With peasants and farmers expelled from their lands, where can they grow food to eat? Many countries, as a result, have seen their already limited capacity for self-provision drastically reduced, after decades of trade liberalization policies which have reduced their productive capacity.

The food and financial crisis that erupted in 2008 gave rise, as has been well documented by the international organization GRAIN, to a new cycle of appropriation of land on a global scale. Governments of countries dependent on food imports, in order to ensure the production of food for their people beyond their borders, and agro-industry and investors, eager for new and profitable investment, have subsequently been acquiring fertile lands in the South. A dynamic that threatens peasant agriculture and food security in these countries.

It is estimated that since 2008, they have acquired in this way around 56 million hectares of land on a global scale, according to data from the World Bank, the major part of this, more than 30 million hectares, in Africa, where land is cheap and communal ownership makes it more vulnerable. Other sources, such as the Global Land Project, speak of from 51 to 63 million hectares in Africa, an area similar in size to France. This covers leases, concessions or purchases of land. The forms of transaction can be multiple and often opaque, a dynamic that some authors have described as a "new colonialism" or "agricultural colonialism", through an indirect recolonization of African resources.

The World Bank has been one of the main proponents in developing, together with other international institutions such as the FAO, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the International Fund for Agricultural development (IFAD), what have come to be known as the "Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment", which legitimize the appropriation of land by foreign investors. Through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the institution affiliated with the World Bank dealing with the private sector, programmes have been promoted to eliminate administrative barriers, change laws and tax systems in the countries of the South and encourage investment.

Ethiopia, one of the countries affected by the current famine, has offered three million hectares of

arable land to foreign investors in India, China, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Business could not be better: 2,500 km² of virgin productive land at 700 Euros per month, with a contract for fifty years. This is, for example, the agreement reached between the Ethiopian government and the Indian company Karuturi Global, one of the 25 largest global agribusiness which uses these lands for the cultivation of oil palm, rice, sugar cane, corn and cotton for export. The consequences: thousands of peasants and indigenous people expelled from their lands, precisely those who suffer most from hunger and lack of food, as well as vast tracts of forests cut down and burned.

Other African countries such as Mozambique, Ghana, Sudan, Mali, Tanzania, and Kenya have leased out millions of hectares of their territory. In Tanzania, the government of Saudi Arabia has acquired 500,000 hectares of land to produce rice and wheat for export. In Congo, 48 per cent of agricultural land is in the hands of foreign investors. In Mozambique, more than ten million areas of land have been leased.

The academic conference “Global Land Grabbing”, which took place in Britain in April 2011, noted the negative impact of these acquisitions. Over 100 documented case studies show how these investments had no positive impact on local communities, on the contrary generating displacement and increased poverty.

For years, the international movement Vía Campesina has denounced the dramatic impact of this massive wave of land grabbing on the peoples of the populations of the countries of the South. If we want to put an end to hunger in the world it is essential to ensure universal access to land, as well as water and seeds, and prohibit speculation and business deals concerning that which feeds us and provides us with food.

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P.S.

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