

A NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA? by Robin Palmer

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An early chapter in my 1977 book *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* is called 'the Age of the Fortune Hunters'. It describes how, in late Victorian times, the British Government granted a Royal Charter to the millionaire imperialist Cecil Rhodes, which gave him *carte blanche* to exploit for 35 years the territories we now know as Zimbabwe and Zambia. That Charter was based on highly dubious land and mineral concessions signed with local chiefs spuriously claiming to rule all of those lands. After Zimbabweans rose up against the misrule of Rhodes' British South Africa Company in 1896, a new administrator ruefully observed that his predecessor had 'given nearly the whole country away' to speculators who 'promise any amount of things but the execution thereof is delayed til the Greek Calends' (i.e. forever).

I've just returned from workshops near Cape Town, where we discussed land grabbing in Southern Africa, and near Johannesburg, where some denied its existence. Amid much talk in the literature about the need for 'codes of conduct' to help regulate this new phenomenon, I found myself wondering whether Cecil Rhodes would have signed such a code. He probably would, and have then gone on to completely disregard it.

Over the past 9 months or so, I've been collecting, and slowly reading, material on biofuels, land rights in Africa, and global land grabbing.¹ What I've read worries me greatly, carrying, as it does, very strong echoes of Cecil Rhodes and his merry men. It worries me because of the nature, scale and secrecy of land grabbing and the seemingly limited capacity of anyone to do much to either halt or modify it. The long term impact on rural communities could well be extremely serious. Two years ago, nobody in an audience of 50 Southern African land specialists had even heard of biofuels. Now they have, but I fear that we are all playing catch-up.

A key driver of this new form of imperialism has clearly been the recent global food crisis, driven by rising fuel prices and by the switch from maize for food to maize for fuel in the American Midwest. This in turn persuaded many Gulf States to look externally for places where food could be grown to feed their rapidly growing populations, while China, India and South Korea are also looking to outsource agriculture to feed their expanding populations. Each year increasing numbers of Chinese and Indians are consuming more meat and milk. There is a recognition globally that population growth (expected to rise from 6bn to 9bn by 2050) will outstrip the world's ability to feed itself unless there are radical changes in agricultural production. There is also a recognition that agriculture in Africa has been chronically underfunded for decades – but not a recognition that this is a consequence of decades of externally imposed structural adjustment driven by an almost religious belief in the magic of the free market.

This combination of factors has led to the phenomenon many now refer to as global land grabbing, while others prefer to talk in more decorous terms, such as 'large scale acquisition of land for agricultural investment'. The private sector is in the lead – led by agribusiness, corporations and food traders, with investment banks and private equity funds also jumping on board. But there is also considerable government involvement, both foreign and domestic.

A year ago in Cambodia I was told of huge economic land concessions which had been given to Chinese, South Korean, Japanese and Kuwaiti companies. The c.60 deals were invariably done in secret. No one knew the extent of them nor their terms and conditions. The Cambodian Government is deeply corrupt, the legal system offers little recourse to justice, and the people affected are not consulted. Similar things are now happening in many countries all over the world, but especially in Africa.

¹ For my select bibliographies on these topics, see http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/downloads/select_bibliog_reports_biofuels_africanlandrights_global_land_grabbing_at_310311.pdf and http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/downloads/select_bibliog_presscutts_biofuels_africanlandrights_global_land_grabbing_at_310311.pdf

Parts of Africa are being targeted because 'African farmland prices are the lowest in the world' and 'it is probably the last frontier'. Many African leaders, and foreign investors, peddle the myth that there is a vast amount of vacant, unused land, owned by no one – and hence available to outsiders. One suggested that pastoralists in Ethiopia 'can just go somewhere else', another that 36 million ha in Mozambique could be used for biofuels without threatening food production!



Photo credit: <http://gadaa.com/oduu/?p=1719>

So, with the willing consent of many African leaders, there has been extensive acquisition of land, usually in the form of leases, in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mozambique. The companies come principally from the Gulf States, India, South Korea and China, but also from Europe. It is customary to promise that many jobs will be created and there will be technological transfer. No one knows how much land is involved or how many people are being affected, though IIED and the International Land Coalition are trying to get hold of some figures.

Concerns that 3,000 Chinese would come to work in the Zambezi Valley led to much unease in Mozambique, while outrage at a 'free land' deal with a South Korean company, Daewoo, led to the overthrow of the government in Madagascar. In response, researchers and policy makers in the World Bank, FAO, IFAD, IFPRI, IIED, UN-Habitat etc argue the need for the afore-mentioned 'code of conduct', and they also talk glibly of finding 'win-win' solutions.

A contributory and controversial factor is that of biofuels. The recognition that the world's oil reserves are finite coupled with price rises led to a frantic search for alternatives. Biofuels were seen as a strong option and Brazil, which has been using them for fuel for decades, was cited as a success story and a model for others to follow. American Midwest farmers were given financial incentives to turn their maize into biofuels (ethanol) which contributed to the food price crisis. In addition, EU countries signed up to an undertaking to use a greater proportion of fuel from biofuels (10% by 2020), thereby contributing to the global land grab by encouraging countries to find land for biofuels. This provoked a withering attack from an ActionAid report entitled *Meals per gallon: The impact of industrial biofuels on people and global hunger* (February 2010).²

² http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc/lib/meals_per_gallon_final.pdf

For desperately poor countries, such as Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique, biofuels are seen by some as a magic route out of poverty. One report speaks of Africa 'becoming a biofuel battleground' while Southern Africa is said, somewhat alarmingly, to have the potential to be 'the Middle East of biofuels.' Mercifully, some of the early optimism on the potential of biofuels is now dimming; what was once described as a 'miracle cure' has now become a 'problem'.

The proposed switch from food to fuel crops is of course highly contentious, not least in countries with major problems of food security. At a meeting in London in January, I asked the Tanzanian High Commissioner, 'what if, at a time of great food insecurity, a foreign company working in your country exported food back home?' She replied 'we would not allow it; in fact we are in the process of drawing up a code of conduct which would prevent such a thing happening, and if any company refuses to sign it, then they won't be allowed to operate.'

Well, we must fervently hope that she is right; in fact Tanzania represents the best case in Southern Africa of local and international NGOs coming together to conduct strategic research on biofuels which caused the government to announce a temporary ban. It also led to such newspaper headings as: 'Public fury halts biofuel onslaught on farmers', 'Biofuels and neo-colonialism', 'Growing "land question" alarm over foreign biofuel investors in Tanzania', 'We must stay vigil against the rush for our land by multinational corporations'.

The Cape Town workshop I attended recently was in part a scoping exercise looking at the extent of land grabbing in Southern Africa, and seeking to find intelligent responses in terms of research and advocacy. All 7 country case studies depicted serious situations of secretive deals; the Angolan plastered his country's map with numerous concession flags – rather as though we were back in the 19th century!

Much of what is happening is illegal, for instance the fencing off of large stretches of Mozambique's coastline by the elite, thereby depriving fishing communities of their livelihoods. I suggested that it might be an excellent use of Oxfam's resources to issue local activists with wire cutters to restore open access to the coast. Sadly, this is unlikely to happen, but certainly a great deal of imaginative thinking and action are needed to address this highly dangerous new Scramble for Africa.

