

Rich Countries Feeding on Poor Countries Farmland

By Haider Rizvi NEW YORK, New York, November 2, 2009 (ENS) – Investors from capital-rich nations that cannot produce enough food for their own consumption are squeezing small farmers in poor countries off their lands, new research has found.

Over the past three years, foreign interests have either sought or secured nearly 50 million acres of farmland in poor countries such as Sudan, Pakistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Madagascar and the Democratic Republic of Congo, according to a study by Anuradha Mittal, executive director of the Oakland Institute, an independent think tank.

"The purchase of vast tracts of land from poor, developing countries by wealthier, food-insecure nations and private investors has become a widespread phenomenon," Mittal told ENS today.

In her study titled, "The Great Land Grab," Mittal points out that investors who are buying farm lands in these poor countries come from wealthy nations that are facing shortfalls of food production at home in the near future.

Most of those investing in the agricultural sector of poor nations hail from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, China, and South Korea, Mittal has found.

"All of this is happening in the name of promoting food security through foreign investment in agriculture," said Mittal.

Her colleague and co-author Shepard Daniel concludes that land grabs are not the solution to food insecurity. **Rice harvest, Cambodia, August 2009.** (Photo by [Matteo Allegro](#))



"There is simply no place for the small farmer in the vast majority of these land grab situations," said Daniel. They "will only increase monoculture-based, export-oriented agriculture, further jeopardizing international food security," he said.

"Much press coverage and research has focused on the food security motivations of food import-dependent countries," Daniel said. "We forget, however, that the main thrust of investment is coming from the private sector, whose interests do not lie in establishing food security, but rather in making a profit in international food markets."

Proponents of private investment in developing countries by agricultural investors and biotech firms argue that growth in crop production through technological means is the right answer to the problem of hunger.

According to UN estimates, more than one billion people are suffering from chronic hunger. Numerous studies show that about 70 percent of these starving people live and work on small farms and in rural areas.



Produce from Pakistan's Swat Valley (Photo by [Scott Christian](#))

These issues will be central to the World Summit on Food Security to be held from November 16 through 18 at the headquarters of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome.

The Summit was called by the FAO to reverse the downward trend of investments in agriculture and return to the 1980 level of 17 percent of Official Development Assistance with a view to eradicating hunger. The FAO says another goal is to double food production for a world population set to grow from 6.3 billion today to nine billion in 2050.

Heads of state and government, and members of FAO and the United Nations are expected to attend the summit. The government of Saudi Arabia is underwriting the cost of the

summit, estimated at \$2.5 million, the FAO has announced.

Observers say most policy makers and agriculture experts who will be in attendance at the Rome summit are likely to argue in favor of increased investment in agriculture, a trend that Mittal and Daniel describe as "dangerous."

They warn that when wealthy investors amass agricultural land in developing countries, the **access of millions of poor people to food is undermined, which they view as violations of** international humanitarian and human rights laws.

A top UN expert expressed similar concerns last month in a report to the UN General Assembly.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Professor Olivier De Schutter, challenged the domination of major biotech firms over the global seed market and urged governments to impose new regulatory measures to protect the rights of small farmers.

In his report, "Seed policies and the right to food," De Schutter said, "Excessive protection of intellectual property rights in agriculture is an obstacle rather than an incentive for innovation."

De Schutter, points out that the world's proprietary seed is heavily dominated by a few large companies based in wealthy countries of the North. The top 10 seed companies account for 67 percent of the global propriety seed market. Of them, the world's largest seed company alone, Monsanto, accounts for 23 percent. Monsanto, Syngenta and DuPont combined control about 47 percent of this market.

While claiming to increase food production, these companies are not only depriving poor farmers of seed production resources, which are essential for their livelihood, but are also causing further increases in food prices, De Schutter and other independent experts say.

There are currently two ways for farmers to access seeds. Either they store seeds from one year to the next and exchange locally or they depend on commercial systems marketing improved seeds which are certified by the authorities.

The traditional seed system, according to De Schutter's report, is rapidly deteriorating due to neglect in agricultural policies. The commercial system, on the other hand, is advancing as a result of globalization and the strengthening of intellectual property rights regime.



A farmer in Madagascar (Photo by Jonathan Talbot, [World Resources Institute](#))

"This trend must be reversed," said De Schutter. "We need both systems for a successful approach to food security and climate change. Indeed, each of these systems has specific function to fulfill, and each corresponds to different needs."

De Schutter said small farmers need greater legal protections by governments. Otherwise, he said, the current situation would lead to "a serious threat" to food security.

"The intellectual property regime is not working for poor farmers in the developing world," he said, suggesting that developing countries of the South set up local seed banks.

De Schutter's findings have been welcomed by independent researchers who seek to bring the intellectual property rights regime of the World Trade Organization into line with the UN Convention on Biodiversity, a 1993 treaty ratified by 193 nations. The treaty requires "fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources."

Last month, Food First, a policy think tank, released a study titled, "Challenging Industrial Agriculture and the Green Revolution." It concludes that hunger is linked more to food distribution than to farmers' capacity to produce.

"There is a lot involved in it," Food First Executive Director Eric Holt-Gimenez told ENS. "Monsanto Corporation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are promoting biotechnology. It increases production for a while. But it doesn't solve the problem."

Climate change is adding to growing concerns about food security. This week a number of humanitarian organizations, including some UN agencies, warned that hunger is likely to increase as the planet warms.

Today at the opening of UN preparatory meeting on climate change in Barcelona, representatives of nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies warned that by 2050 the risk of hunger in the world could rise as much as 20 percent.

NGO leaders told delegates that they must agree to enable the poor and most vulnerable to build sustainable and climate resilient livelihoods and move out of chronic poverty and food insecurity.