

## Farming for peace

By Gregory Rose



It is often unclear who owns what. (Photo credit: Creative Commons)

**11 March 2011.** On the African continent, one out of every three people suffers from malnourishment. Many African governments believe selling land to agribusinesses is one way to help those living in poverty and feed people who are unable to get food.

Agribusinesses combine investment banks, hedge funds, and sovereign wealth funds to buy farmable land, produce seeds and fertilizer, build farming machines, and distribute food. Today, 50 million hectares (more than twice the size of England) around the world have been bought or negotiated for, and these numbers continue to rise.

Leaders in Africa have said these investments are crucial to improve the low agricultural productivity of individual nations. To make these deals possible, governments offer agribusinesses, which may be afraid of corruption and weary of a country's lacking infrastructure, lucrative deals which, in turn, minimize the risk of losing their investment.

According to the World Bank, three quarters of Ethiopia's arable land is not being used to farm. Experts argue that if foreign investors are able to finance projects, this land can produce vast amounts of needed food.

However, most land that is considered to be owned by people has no legal binding; there are no formal boundaries showing who owns what. When Ethiopia's Constitution was ratified in 1995, it did not recognize any land ownership. But because land has been passed down from generations for the purposes of farming, Ethiopia's citizens feel they are being kicked off what is rightfully theirs.

Since 2007, 3 million hectares of land has been sold, which amounts to 4 percent of the country.

Critics argue there are other policies governments can enact without selling land. 2004 Nobel Peace laureate Wangari Maathai told **MediaGlobal** that "governments always give excuses that they need revenue to improve the quality of life of the very people that complain land is being degraded."

Agribusinesses often use chemicals that can seriously damage the land they buy, which can take hundreds of years to revitalize. While the government argues the land is not being used by its people, researchers say some of the land is used for livestock or purposely left unused to prevent nutrient depletion and erosion.

Farmers employed by these corporations get paid 75 cents a day, not enough to buy food or support a family. The Green Belt Movement, started by Maathai, works with local farmers, governments, and universities to cultivate contested lands. A method being used to involve individuals is by drawing maps that determine land barriers between the farms. Once those borders are agreed to, governments are able to implement policies that allow more food to be grown. By empowering local farmers, governments do not have to sell land because farmers are able to accomplish what agribusinesses promise to do.

Maathai's programs have inspired others around the world, such as Rwanda's Intensification Program. As a landlocked state, local farming is very important to Rwanda's people and economy. Much of the farming is done by individuals who own half a hectare of land or less; barely enough to feed their families, let alone make a profit.

Rwanda's Intensification Program gives small farmers access to advanced seeds that are genetically produced to grow in Rwanda's environment, making it easier to grow food. The government helps organize and gives financial support to groups of farmers. This ensures certain foods are being grown and allows the farmers to make a profit by combining sales of their crops.

When the program started in 2007, just 3.5 percent of Rwanda's budget was allocated toward agriculture. Today it has more than doubled. In the past three years, the use of maize, wheat, and beans in Rwanda has increased almost tenfold, from 28,788 hectares to 254,000. This growth has made Rwanda food secure and allowed the country to export food surpluses.

Small investment in local farming, like in Rwanda, act as catalysts to greater economic prosperity. As Wangari put it: "An economic system that allows some regions to be so rich and others to be so poor, especially when the poor are in resource rich regions, is extremely unfair. It is unsustainable and eventually it could undermine peace."