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## Book Review

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**B. Matondo, Kjell havnevik and Ataklte Beyene (Eds.), *Biofuels, Land Grabbing and Food Security in Africa*, Zed Books, London, 2011, pp. 248, \$39.95**

The food crisis of 2007–08 has been one of the major factors in the twenty-first century, which has led nations to explore the option of a quick ‘green revolution’. Also, the developed and developing countries are in need of more fuel to fulfil their energy requirements, forcing the nations across the world to look for alternatives. One such discovery that addresses the second part of the problem has come in the form of investing in biofuels in continents like Africa, Latin America and some parts of Southeast Asia. The vehement critics of the abuse of nature have come out with a strong discourse combining issues of both food crisis and climate change together, which has given a new dimension to the problem. Biofuels using feedstock and the available land for energy requirements have invited special attention and criticism in recent times. This book strikes a fine balance between the vehement criticism of the use of biofuels and supporting poverty alleviation in Africa. Though the book has all the required references to literature against neoliberalism, needless to say, it does not also take an anti-development stand. The editors of the book make this rather clear with the following statement:

Our work is not anti-development, as is assumed by proponents of land grabbing. Rather, we question the ‘win-win’ paradigm that is externally driven, which resembles development for and not with Africans. We are also clear that Africa requires development that not only protects the poor but also attracts technological advances and investments that can benefit all African people. (p. 9–12)

The authors emphasise the whole work problematising biofuels and land grabbing under the garb of four notions by calling them as triggers: ‘Unprecedented economic growth in transition countries, Food security, Global peak oil and alternative fuel energy sources, Climate and environmental concerns’ (p. 9–12). The authors’ concerns, in terms of thinking beyond the top-down approach, which has hampered the underdeveloped and developing countries and moving towards the bottom-up approach, are visible throughout the discourse in this edited volume. Biofuels as such cannot be looked in isolation as just another economic opportunity available for the nations struggling to come out of poverty. As some scholars say, ‘biofuels as a commodity are constructed through social, political and economic relations in ways that must be understood as a whole, and

located within wider, often global, processes' (Borras et al., 2010, p. 579). This book promotes the issue of biopolitics, implying that biophysical resources have now become central to the global policy discourse. Africa has become a new battleground for multinationals. The bigger companies tend to gain more from the investment, while the local population experience little or no tangible output from the deals. The neoliberal agenda is manifesting in its new attire with a new language of global energy crisis and saving the cursed continent in the form of biofuels.

It is interesting to see a lot of literature coming out in the form of scholarly articles, blogs and websites against this new phenomenon and is often construed as against biofuels and investment. But the revelation in the last few years is not about biofuels and investment but about land grabbing. It is in this pretext that even biofuels have come under scrutiny as they appear to trigger land grabbing. There are discourses that suggest that not all biofuel options are problematic but those which are not showing concerns to local sentiments and institutions certainly are. These discourses are also a part of the neoliberal agenda that divide the groups demanding justice and dividends to the deserving in Africa. Only when unpacked and located in particular settings, the real trade-offs will be exposed. These cut across political, social, economic and ecological domains, and too often it is impossible to see how these dimensions interact. Biofuel politics and knowledge politics are thus intimately intertwined. The battle over biofuels is thus a battle over visions of the future, and the different discursive framings suggest a very different set of commitments and politics (Borras et al., 2010, p. 583).

The introduction chapter discusses the concerns plaguing Africa with authors highlighting the much needed raise in food production, dearth of employment opportunities and unabated price rise in consumer goods. There is a need for sustained investment and support for agriculture, which forms the bedrock of the economy but not in the form of large-scale investments as large-scale monoculture farms are the most blatant manifestations of these deals where machines displace the poor and the powerless. There seems to be a fear prevailing among the small land holders regarding this new land grabbing formula of the multinationals. This has often threatened the very existence of a good number of marginal and small farmers. There are a few farmers in each location of the site identified for biofuels who would always be willing to be a part of the grand idea while the other marginal farmers are pressurised to be partaking in the project. The larger vision is that of Africa solving the global crisis by becoming a part of this model, but needless to say, the real experience has not been as encouraging as it has been serving the interests of the domestic elites and policy-makers who have been largely benefitting from this. The authors raise very pertinent questions dealing with biofuel issues in Africa: Whether land grabbing and the associated agro-investments can contribute to the development of Africa in such a way that it benefits people or whether it will lead to their further impoverishment? The authors not only draw a parallel between the present-day land grabbing and the colonisation of Africa by the Western nations who were in the race for creating empires but also emphasise that the strategy has moved from the classic physical

war to corporate boardrooms and stock markets (p. 5). The analysis is stimulating as it adopts the route of post-colonial literature by critiquing the Western nations' neocolonialism through soft approach. The global investors like D1 Oils, Daewoo and SEKAB and the Swiss company Addax Bioenergy identified by the media for land grabbing in Africa are part of a complex social and political web in which capital and the forces behind it shape global policy paradigms exemplified by biofuels and the search for food security.

The introduction chapter elaborately highlights the pressures emanating from both the domestic and the global economies that have created a cruel dilemma for the African governments. The concern is about the future as this would lead to domestic unrest leading to heavy damage to the political legitimacy. The denial of land for such multinationals would lead to taking the wrath of the people looking for development and opportunity on the one hand and allowing them to invest without adequate guidelines and preparation on the other, which can result in unforeseen damage and subsequently push the countries into civil war. It is interesting to note that the arguments made by the authors are very much valid as there are some astonishing data available on land grabbing in Africa in the disguise of biofuel extraction. The starting point for understanding land grabbing is 'Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with the surplus wealth?' (Borras et al., 2010, p. 575). The section also speaks about the foreign direct investment (FDI) in agriculture as an important component leading to development but cautions the readers that it is not the case with Africa and the political class has been misled in this regard.

Chapter 1 is precisely written and highlights the land grabbing issues, livelihood of the small farmers, environmental degradation, negative ecological and human consequences. It also discusses the FDI, compromising the rights of the farmers and by showing eagerness to declare land to be unused or unoccupied in order to attract foreign investments, although there may be multiple claims to the same land (p. 25). Chapter 2 by Marie Widengard is a good inclusion in the edited volume as it brings an interesting paradigm through the theoretical understanding of the concept of governmentality. The author uses green governmentality as an important concept for biofuels. First, it refers to a governmentality that acknowledges environmental problems to be global, with climate change being the most urgent issue. Secondly, it refers to governmentality where biofuels become a logical solution to climate change (p. 49). Chapter 3 contains a lot of data, which is useful for people working with quantitative data. The term 'peak oil' is introduced in this chapter. It predominantly discusses the issues of climate crisis and brings forth the lacuna in the present way of handling the issue. The author also finds fault with pitting biofuel as an answer to climate crisis by calling it an illusion, which is nurtured by corporations hunting for profits, and could lead to serious damage and suffering for millions of people in developing countries (p. 67).

The second half of the book consists of case studies on Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Ghana. The value addition of the book is in the form of the case studies on Tanzania and Zimbabwe. The case study on Ethiopia demands consideration of the rights to natural resources of people across various social categories

as part of physical inventory of land resources during assessment. The case study on Tanzania by Kjell Havnevik and Hanne Haaland starts with a narration of the Swedish and Nordic relationship with Tanzania dating back to the 1960s. The Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) process of the Bagamoyo project has been one of the widely spoken examples of this nexus. The role of SEKAB T in presenting the ESIA in a faulty way has been explained with supporting examples and maps. The chapter also exposes the Tanzanian bureaucratic processes and SEKAB's ethical standards for its Tanzanian operations. The chapter ends on a positive note that the process is now well in place after due consideration and suggests that it is on the right path. Chapter 7 by Prosper B Matondi largely deals with the livelihood of the poor to be guarded during the implementation of large-scale development projects and chapter 8 by Festus Boamah on Northern Ghana calls for the implementation of agencies to take note of the local variations in land use patterns, land availability, farming seasons, household composition, the resilience of livelihoods and biological characteristics of the biofuel feedstock.

The conclusion to a large extent sums up different chapters of the book. They argue, despite not being able to invite large scale development projects, the rural Africa has demonstrated the capacity to produce their own food, to supply food and labour to urban areas, to sustain indigenous and formal education systems, to endure deprivation and to reconstruct economic and social systems. They may not be doing this at the pace and in forms that policy-makers at the national or global level may wish (p. 187). It concludes on a cautious note on multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) who have come forward to frame guidelines for win-win solutions in agro-investments, which need to be closely watched as their efforts are aimed at diverting the wrongdoings done so far and crush the culture of resistance towards biofuels and land grabbing in Africa tactfully.

Like any other edited volume, this one too suffers from the lack of coherence. It falls short in terms of methodology. None of the case studies discuss methodology as part of their studies. The book would have been of great use to students researching on Africa if the authors would have shared their methodology consisting of samples and analytical tools. Interestingly, there is no justification on why there is no inclusion of case study from Central Africa. The other major drawback of the book is that it fails to present the voices of the people. Some examples in boxes within the chapters could have elevated the relevance of the book to a different level. For sure it is a valued addition to the knowledge on Africa and especially on lingering issues such as land grabbing. The book has its strength in the readability factor with simple English, which would make many working on Africa to buy it for their libraries.

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