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Let's learn bitter lessons on land alienation from India's debacle

Updated 7 hr(s) 48 min(s) ago

By Keya Acharya

Listening to [Kenya's](#) land issues was a peephole into a complicated and historically iniquitous heritage that the country is landed with today. As the National Land Policy itself acknowledges, Kenya's ambiguous land-related laws have resulted in disinheritance, conflict, tenure insecurity, political, social, economic and environmental problems. The point though is that there are some avenues of hope that stretch out as examples from across the Indian Ocean, from India.

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Lands in Kenya are categorised as either Government lands, trust lands or private lands, a seemingly average classification that has now added another dimension to its already tortured history: the alienation of large tracts of land to various foreign agencies in the name of Kenya's economic development.

The impact has been one of displacement of indigenous people and their change of livelihood systems that are now leading to poverty, besides losing the wealth of resources the land offers.

Take the fertile and rich Tana Delta as example: the UK-based multinational G4 Industries has targeted 28,000 hectares of land, some of it a collapsed ranch used for grazing by local communities. There has been no change of user or cost benefit analysis for converting this land from livestock to crop farming. Mat International is claiming 30,000 hectares for sugarcane growing, besides another 90,000 hectares elsewhere for the same purpose. Canadian company Bedford Biofuels is reportedly claiming some 50,000 hectares of livestock land near the Tana delta for jatropha plantations; the Qatar government has claimed more than 40,000 hectares to grow food for Qataris in exchange for a port in the town of Lamu.

None of the projects mentioned have documented negative impacts such as loss of biodiversity, livelihoods and traditional lifestyles and wildlife habitats. And there is yet no Tana Delta development master plan agreed to by all stakeholders.

Now fast-track across the ocean to India, where government deals with industry for handing over rural, arable, lands, is at crisis proportions currently. Mining, steel, petroleum, chemical industries and a tax-free-industry classification known as 'special economic zones' have been literally usurping tribal and arable lands, especially in central and eastern areas.

In spite of laws that disallow alienation of tribal lands and conversion of agricultural ones for non-agricultural purposes, laws for industrial area development give priority for 'public good' uses.

The result has been explosive. Public protest from local communities being displaced and losing their livelihoods has become politicised in states like West Bengal in the northeast, where the industry in question, an Indian giant conglomerate Tatas, moved out of the state, and the ruling party lost seats in the election. It is a painful process, but a process nevertheless.

Wide dissemination of information and civil agitation against unjust takeover of lands that buttonholes political parties is one avenue for amending this situation. Land-right groups in Kenya could well strategise what to do on this score.

The writer is a senior Indian development journalist and recipient of several journalism awards.

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