

Fuelling Evictions – Community Cost of EU Biofuels Boom – Update

In August 2011, Kenya Jatropha Energy Ltd (owned by Italian company Nuove Iniziative Industriali – NII) issued an ultimatum to the Kenyan Government. If they were not given a licence for their biofuels plantation in the Dakatcha Woodlands within 10 days, they would withdraw their investment from the area. The 10 day deadline expired without the licence being approved. According to local sources, the growing of jatropha in Dakatcha has now stopped.

According to Kenyan media sources, jatropha plantations for biofuels have been banned in Kenya's Coastal Region¹. This is partially the result of local lobbying by ActionAid Kenya and other civil society organisations. It shows how local communities are taking action to defend their land against land grabs by foreign companies. These companies are responding to, among others, European policies such as the Renewable Energy Directive (RED). The RED targets will see a trebling of EU biofuels consumption with just over 9% of all EU transport fuel coming from first generation biofuels by 2020.

Two officials from the Kenyan National Environment Ministry have been suspended for illegally issuing international companies with licences to grow jatropha². In addition, a licence granted to a Canadian biofuels company has been revoked in the Tana River Delta. British firm G4 Industries Ltd has also pulled out of the Tana River Delta region near Dakatcha as it acknowledged that environmental concerns about its project were mounting³.

These are positive developments and represent an acknowledgement of the problem within corporate and government circles in Kenya however, they are not a solution to the other part of the problem. The European market for biofuels – artificially created by EU targets and subsidies – is still fuelling land grabs in Africa and other parts of the world. ActionAid believes that the EU needs to re-think its biofuels policies to avoid similar situations in the future.

¹ <http://envirolib.org/news/kenya%E2%80%99s-environment-authority-advises-jatropha-is-%E2%80%98not-viable%E2%80%99-in-coastal-kenya/>

² <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/InsidePage.php?id=2000039849&cid=14&j=&m=&d=>

³ <http://www.treehugger.com/renewable-energy/uk-company-pulls-out-controversial-kenya-biofuel-project.html>

The community

Although the threat of being removed from their land was imminent only one year ago, since the Dakatcha community started working with ActionAid to bring this struggle to the attention of national and international actors, no-one has been displaced.

The community has set up a conservation group to rehabilitate the parts of Dakatcha that had been destroyed by charcoal-burning activities, clearing land for biofuel cultivation, and other activity by the company.

In mid-2011, a local Member of Parliament visited Dakatcha accompanied by the Provincial Commissioner and other local leaders. The purpose of the meeting was allegedly to quell the concerns of the community. However, the community were not satisfied with claims by the politicians that the jatropha project should be supported and they took a stand, chasing them off their land.

One woman said to the MP and leaders *“you wanted to sell us out to these investors and now you want us to listen to you, do you really care about our wellbeing? What kind of leaders are you?”*

However has the Dakatcha problem simply gone elsewhere? Beyond Kenya, NII continues to grow jatropha in Ethiopia and Senegal. This is a situation which we will continue to monitor alongside local communities in these countries.

The risk is that companies such as NII will continue to grab land in places with less civil society and media scrutiny, as well as lower legal protection for poor and marginalised communities. This will mean companies will switch production to countries with lower protection against rights violations.

Further ActionAid engagement to support the Dakatcha community

Since 2011 ActionAid Kenya has broadened its focus to the issue of conserving the environment and ensuring that the livelihoods of local communities are protected.

ActionAid Kenya has also conducted land clinics (community education/awareness-raising groups) to inform the local community of new laws, including land rights provisions in the Kenyan constitution. This is already helping to empower them to challenge future attempts to grab their land.

In Europe, ActionAid has continued to raise awareness and demand justice from the EU on existing policies that have the potential to undermine rights and poverty eradication efforts in the developing world. ActionAid Kenya staff, who have been working with the communities from Dakatcha, have met with the European Commission, Council and MEPs to highlight the effects of EU energy policies on people living in some of the poorest and most food insecure parts of the world.

In 2012 the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and Council on the impacts of the Renewable Energy Directive on, amongst other things, developing countries where biofuels consumed in European markets are grown. ActionAid will ask decision-makers to stop EU policies from violating the rights of communities like those in Dakatcha.

By bringing the voices of the people of Dakatcha to decision-makers in the EU, ActionAid hopes to increase the understanding of the linkages between biofuels, hunger and land rights.