Land Grab and Environmental Pollution: Long Term Consequences for Ghanaians

A Briefing to the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference

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By
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Greetings
Your Excellencies, let me begin by thanking you for the great opportunity and the privilege you have accorded me to come to your august assembly to address an issue that plagues Ghana and most African countries. I wish to thank also the Secretary General Father Lazarus Anondee and CARITAS Executive Director Mr. Samuel Zan Akologo for facilitating my presence at this Plenary Assembly. The issue in question has many layers of serious and devastating consequences on the livelihoods of Africa’s majority workers, especially the small scale farmers and their families. This issue calls for urgent and immediate action. The urgency for a solution also calls for a pastoral ministry agenda so that the poor and most vulnerable in our society do not continue to be easy targets by predators.

Background
Permit me to wonder off a little so as to put this issue in a wider context, in the context of an epidemic that grips Africa, namely, the problem of governance. Governments across this continent, entrusted with the fundamental moral duty of working for the common good, protecting the rights and dignity of their people, guarding the principles of subsidiarity and ensuring equitable distribution of the resources that God has blessed this continent with, have failed to do so.

Africa is literally swimming in wealth yet impoverished by this wealth due to bad management, selfishness, lack of vision, a let-them-tell-us mentality, let them-help us mentality and the them being the West. We see this all around even in academics. Why do we think the West is so interested in Africa? It is precisely because Africa is loaded with riches. If it were not, there would be no sustained interest in promoting Africa’s “need for help”.

Unfortunately, African leaders compromise the common good and the future of the men, women and children entrusted to their care, and collaborate with the exploiters for immediate monetary gains, for quick fixes, and trample on the rights and dignity of their people with impunity.

AFJN Community Empowerment Project
The Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN), recognizing governance as a major challenge to Africa, and responding to SECAM’s position that the Church is called upon to break the wall of powerlessness in solidarity with the bruised and the maimed of God’s children (SECAM Pastoral Letter 2013 §2), has in the past three years, embarked on empowering communities across Africa to be their own advocates, to hold their leaders accountable, to create environments that guarantee that leaders respect the principles of subsidiarity and ensure that leaders work for the common good.

We brought AFJN’s project to the attention of SECAM at the SECAM Forum in Dar es Salaam in November 2012. In November 2015, in Nairobi, Kenya, we held a Continental Conference on Land Grab and Just Governance in Africa, in collaboration with SECAM, the Africa Europe Faith & Justice Network (AEFJN), the International Alliance of Catholic Development Agencies (CIDSE), and a host of faith-based and civil society organizations.

Participants came from forty-five African countries, including Ghana, and from many countries outside the continent. The follow up from that gathering, especially from the
Ghana contingent, has made very encouraging strides. Besides Ghana, AFJN has had follow up gatherings in Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania. AFJN is also currently working towards capacity building and training for African Women Religious to bring a special dimension to these efforts because they are often closer to the most vulnerable of our society.

SECAM Pastoral Letter on Good Governance and the Common Good

Your Excellencies, about three years ago, as conference members of SECAM, you carried out an excellent analysis of the perennial challenges that beset Africa in your 2013 SECAM Joint Pastoral Letter titled Governance, the Common Good and Democratic Transitions in Africa. In that Pastoral Letter, a masterpiece, I may add, you clearly identified bad governance and corruption as a cancer that stands in the way of Africa’s development. You called on Africans and all who care about Africa to team up and “nurture laboratories of good governance and human rights.”

I recall that you, Your Excellencies as members of SECAM affirm that the Church is a transforming and an empowering community, that as such, the Church cannot afford to be indifferent and isolated in the face of our present socio-political and economic challenges. In doing so, you echo the warning of the Prophet Amos against indifference: “Woe to the complacent…” (Amos 6:1-6). You emphasized that Christians have an obligation to proclaim liberty, peace and justice for the good of God’s creation, since in the spirit of peace and justice, the common good, respect of people’s basic rights, and the promotion of good governance are the essential elements of the Biblical message. You also pointed out that the Church is called upon to work for the abolition of injustices and the formation of a liberating social order that engages the future, particularly good governance. We particularly grateful that you have repeated on many other occasions. This is a great task before the Church in Africa. I am grateful that Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference is poised to make a mark on this issue.

Land Grabbing and Bad Governance in Africa

Bad governance and corruption are at the heart of large-scale land acquisition and are a source of the sufferings, including deaths, of many Africans:

- Families are dislocated from their homes. So we have thousands of internally displaced persons in Africa today, not due to war, but due to land grabbing
- Drinking water sources are polluted due to land grab and mining that has no safety measures in place
- Family lands are confiscated for unlawful human activities by foreigners
- Their ancestral burial grounds are trampled upon
- Farm owners are turned into employees by corporations at their beck and call
- Most put in far too many hours but receive fare less money than they made as farm owners
- Some marriages, the foundation of family life are undermined as mothers work long hours in the commercial farms to the neglect of the chores at home
- When displaced, people’s way of life are disrupted and children’s education put on hold
The Unveiling of Land Grab in Ghana

Following up on the Continental Conference in Nairobi, CARITAS Ghana has conducted an excellent research with a follow up conference on land acquisition in Ghana. We are most grateful to the Executive Secretary, Department of Human Development and Director of CARITAS Ghana, Mr. Samuel Zan Akologo. The energy he has brought to this issue since the Nairobi Conference is palpable and highly commendable. He makes us proud. Permit me to use this opportunity to thank him and his team for their contribution to sounding the alarm about this threat to the life and wellbeing of Ghanaians.

Common Thread of Land Deals in Africa

Africa is the continent targeted most for large-scale land acquisitions. The so-called investors come to the community preaching the gospel of “development, increased food production, employment, a better life and food security.” Over 10 million hectares have been acquired, mostly in East and West African countries, for investment. According to Land Matrix (an independent land monitoring initiative that promotes transparency and accountability in investment), the top ten countries where these investors come from are the United States of America, Malaysia, Singapore, United Kingdom, the Arab Emirates, China, Brazil, India, Canada and the Netherlands. While some investors are growing crops for food, others are focused on clean energy production. It is a fact however that these investors are not coming to Africa to help address current and future food shortages on the African continent or for Africans. We find also that domestic investors are partnering with foreign investors to gain advantage in land acquisition and private companies focused on the production of sugar, rice, rubber, palm oil trees and jatropha, as well as livestock activities. Some investors acquire land with no intention other than keeping it to resale to other investors when the price goes up. This is commonly referred to as land banking.

Patterns and Consequences of Large Land Acquisition

Large-scale land acquisition by corporations shows a common pattern with negative impact on the livelihoods of communities:

- Investors grab rich fertile lands regardless of whether the area is already settled by communities.
- These lands are those along major rivers and natural water sources
- The grabs mostly involve land previously owned by a community for crop production by small-scale farmers
- In effect, there is a direct conflict over land, water sources and grazing rights between communities and investors
- A change of land ownership directly impacts the sources of income, food and other resources for the affected communities
- Some of the land targeted is fertile and densely populated with good access to markets and cities. Part of the reason for targeting settled areas is that the surrounding population provides cheap labor for investors
- Investors are interested in high value land, not marginal land which is hard to develop
- Part of the land acquired by investors are “banked” for future sale when the land’s value appreciates
- The crops planted are mostly palm oil, jatropha and sugar cane followed by rubber and a number of cereals
• In general, most of the crops planted in grabbed land are not for consumption by the local communities but cash crop

**A Call for Foresight**

African leaders need to carefully review large-scale land acquisition by corporations and individuals. The reasons given for this large-scale land acquisition for commercial farming are that it brings development, employment and is a solution to food security. However, when examined closely, one sees inherent misinformation that has carefully excluded the unfulfilled promises made by these corporations, the negative impact on small-scale farmers, and the confiscation of water sources from local communities, the harmful impact on the community, and the inherent risks of industrial mono-cropping and the loss of biodiversity. Large-scale land acquisition has already sown communal conflicts in some communities in Africa.

Large-scale land acquisition is part of the Western development and capitalist economic regime that continues to make Africa a continent for cheap raw material extraction and market for high priced finished products. It is the reason that these corporations are appropriately designated as investors. Indeed they are investors. No one goes to invest unless one has already calculated and sees maximal profits from that investment. We have to conclude, and from available evidence, that large-scale land dealers are primarily out for profit, operating at the expense of small-scale farmers who produce about 70% of the food we consume. They also contribute to internally displaced persons (IDPs) by dislodging local communities from their homes.

Large-scale farming claims to be the solution to the problem of food shortage for Africa. This is also misinformation, indeed propaganda. First, what is perceived as “food shortage” is not the lack of food production; rather, it is the failure to empower local farmers to produce food they already know how, and the lack of infrastructure for food distribution already produced. Secondly, most of the crops planted by investors are not for local consumption but export crops for cash. So the question arises: whose food sovereignty are we talking about? There is also the long-term damage of appropriating the rights of food production for Ghanaian citizens to trans-national corporations. A country that depends on outside sources to feed its citizens sets itself up for disaster and the control of its population by the corporate world.

The potential short-term gain from large-scale farming is not worth the long-term impact on security, cultural, ethical and ecological system. Besides, it diminishes the positive contributions of small-scale farmers in feeding the country, promoting cultural practices, community well-being, and traditional crop varieties. Small scale farmers actually reduce rural unemployment; raise the quality of life of indigenous peoples and re-affirm food security and food sovereignty.

**Informed Consent**

AFJN has discovered that when properly consulted, local communities, especially those that have undergone awareness programs on the implications of large-scale land deals, often reject the takeover of their land by investors (as was the case with Mama Alovii II, Queen Mother of Dorfor in Agorveme Traditional Area in North Dondu District of Volta...
Region and an Indian company). The agents of investors know this and avoid community consultations during the negotiations preceding the contract agreement. Those that consult the community do not give them the full picture, amounting to deceitful negotiations. They promise the community benefits, mainly in the form of education and health facilities, but also in roads (which most often lead to project site for easy transportation of goods out of the country) and other types of development. But these are mostly empty promises. There is little compensation for the communities whose land and water resources are taken. According to Land Matrix, promises have partly materialized in only a third of the cases for which compensation was reported.

**Sowing the Seeds of Conflict**

Populations continue to increase, but land size does not increase correspondingly. Rather, habitable land size can be reduced by human activities. In Ghana for example, in 1960 the land size was 238,533 square kilometers. Today, the land size is still 238,533 square kilometers. On the contrary, in 1960, Ghana’s entire population was 6.7 million, while in 2015, the population of Ghana stood at 27.41 million - so we can assume at least 28 million in 2016. If you do the math, there are 21.3 million more people in Ghana today than in 1960, occupying the same land size that 6.7 million occupied in 1960.

The question is, if Ghanaians keep giving out large chunks of land to corporations, where will future generations of Ghanaians live, farm, establish business and build homes, churches and schools for their children? We are setting up conflict for future generations and sealing it with signed contracts.

Already it is happening in some communities. At a recent roundtable meeting at AFJN in Washington with Fr. Peter Konteh, Executive Director of Caritas and Vice Chairman of CCRITAS Africa Humanitarian Team, we learned that Sierra Leone is already seeing conflict arise between communities as a result of land grabbing. In one community for example, their common land was given out to investors. The communities no longer have a space to bury their dead, and an attempt to get a piece of land in the neighboring town for a burial plot resulted in serious conflict. In effect, land grabbing is further dividing and subdividing Africa, keeping her people in perpetual state of conflict and underdevelopment while their raw materials are taken away.

**A Point to Note**

Business corporations do not come to help you without having already calculated the profit they are going to make from you. They are not Catholic missionaries. They exist to make profit; a reason they are called For-Profit Business Corporations. Let me repeat that. No business corporation comes to Ghana to help Ghanaians without having calculated a good profit they are going to make from the deal.

- Business corporations, land developers, those in extractive industries, and those promising abundant food and a better life do not come to “help” for help’s sake. They come because they have already seen ahead. What they see is good for them.
- Some already built into the contract an undue advantage for themselves and a great disadvantage for the local community. A case in point: An agribusiness company, Herakles Farms, came to Ghana preaching development, increased production, and
employment, and improved living standards for Ghanaians. Herakles Farms, a US based agribusiness under its subsidiary name SG Sustainable Oils Ghana Limited coerced landowners from Brewaniase in Ghana’s Volta Region to give away their land. AFJN obtained a copy of the contract registered on June 10, 2010, under N0 VR2548, and serial number 357/2010. Section 12.3 titled “Arbitration” under Article XII titled “Resolution of Disputes” stipulates that:

(a) “Any dispute controversy or claim arising out of or relating to this Agreement or the breach, termination or validity thereof that is not resolved pursuant to Section 12.2 shall be finally settled by the arbitration under the Rules of Conciliation and Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce (the ICC Rules)

(b) The arbitration shall be conducted in Paris, France and, unless otherwise agreed by the parties, the number of arbitrators shall be three.”

The same argument is emphasized further in Article XVI/ Miscellaneous, section 14.3 titled “Choice of law.” It says:

“This Agreement shall be governed by and constructed in accordance with the laws of Ghana; provided, that, the agreement to arbitrate contained in Section 12.3 shall be governed by the laws of France.” This “provided” clause effectively subsumes Ghana’s law under French laws.

- This land was later sold by Herakles Farms to a British company called Volta Red. Think for a moment, your Excellencies. Local farmers in the Volta Region who probably do not have a passport, who may not speak French, who have already lost their farm lands and their source of livelihood, will have to pay their way to the French embassy in Accra for a French visa with all the hassle that comes with it. They will have to hire a team of lawyers, pay for plane tickets for themselves and their lawyers, book a hotel in Paris for however long the litigation lasts, contribute to supporting the French economy to seek justice for their heritage confiscated by a stranger! How do we explain that?

**Role of Local Insiders**

Unfortunately, there are always local insiders who are the chief collaborators with these corporations, people who serve as the doorway to the exploitation of the community, who preach that what these corporations do is best for the community. They readily mortgage the heritage of their people for a bowl of soup – for fleeting gains.

When these corporations dangle a few dollars or Euros in their faces, something strange happens: their rational, logical reasoning and ability to see beyond the immediate gratification seems completely annulled.

It would be of great benefit if Ghanaians and Africans develop what Frederick Nietzsche described as "the art of mistrust," at least as an intellectual disposition in business dealings. What is clear when it comes to business dealings is that you should not take what is offered to you at face value. Ghanaians should painstakingly read between the lines. When it sounds too good to be true, think again, because it most likely is not true.
Land Acquisition for Toxic Waste Dumping

Some prized African lands are acquired for dumping of nuclear toxic waste. Trafigura – a company from Holland got land in Ivory Coast and dumped nuclear toxic waste in the suburb of Abidjan with deadly consequences. Dozens have died, many in the community have developed strange skin diseases and women are having unprecedented miscarriages from the radiation. Toxic dumping is happening across Africa with known cases in Benin, Congo Brazzaville, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Togo and Somalia. Nigeria had her share. A businessman collaborated with an Italian company to dump 8,000 tons of toxic waste in a farmland in Koko, Delta State for $100 a month, resulting in skin burns and death for the community. Scientists indicate that it takes about one thousand (1,000) years for the milder forms of radioactive waste to biodegrade.

So we must do all we can to ensure we do not consign generations of Africans to toxins, illness and slow death.

Mining and Impact on Communities and the Environment

Small scale mining which in Ghana is called “GALAMSEY,” meaning, “Gather them and sell” is fast destroying the land, aside the land grabbing. This has left environmental degradation in Ghana and a toll on the heath of Ghanaians. Recent miners, mostly Chinese provide the locals with heavy duty equipment such as excavators and haulage trucks, and employ Ghanaians – men, women and youth in dangerous mining activities. This galamsey is labor intensive with low technology and has significant impact on the livelihoods of Ghanaians:

- Some communities are fast deteriorating due to mercury, cyanide and arsenic contamination exposing the miners themselves to serious health consequences such as heart and lung diseases, cough, asthma, catarrh, reddening of eyes, hearing problems due to the blasting, vibration and noise associated with the mining activities
- Mining leaves behind waterlogged pits and soil erosion, pollution of rivers and other drinking water sources, since there are no laws regulating the process.
- Although official records show that major cyanide spillage occurred in 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1999 and 2001, there are lot more that go unreported especially those occurring from illegal mining activities.
- Besides exposing the soil to erosion, it has negative impact on agriculture as small-scale farmers of food crops abandon their farms and join the wagon of mining in search for quick money.
- In some rural areas parents withdraw their children from primary and even senior secondary school to help them in the mining sites, eventually resulting in school drop-outs
- Parents leaving their homes for mining sites and can no longer monitor their children

Large-scale mining, especially of gold has taken a toll on Ghana; some not so visible to the eye. However, satellite photos have shown serious environmental problems including land degradation. The removal of vegetative top cover and destruction of flora and fauna has produced pockets of desert-like places and in others serious erosion problems. High
concentrations of mercury have been found in fish in the vicinity of mining activities using amalgamation as their main technique.

**A Troubling Pattern**

On a deeper level, we need to take a reflective and prayerful look at a recurring pattern in Africa. The Ghanaian soil bears a lasting testimony to some of the most heinous cases of dehumanizing Africans and treated as disposable property. The eerie monument called “Castle” in Cape Coast and Elmina reflects this. Africans readily sell their own and their birthright and heritage for a bowl of soup (Gen 25:34).

When one looks at the history of slavery, the history of colonization, the dynamics that reduces Africa to a land of permanent raw material extraction, and now a new form of colonization that is worse than the first, something striking stands out that calls for a thorough self-examination and a communal search for solutions. Why do Africans readily sell off their own and their heritage for cheap gains? One recalls here that some of the exchange-incentive tradeoffs with local dealers during the slave trade were mirrors, gun powder, bottles of gin/whiskey (when the local brew was even more potent), umbrellas, and fancy toys. Are these what African life is worth?

Today, the pattern continues with our generation. Despite the fact that we know better, we are still settling for the same cheap tradeoffs. Trips abroad, titles, colored pieces of paper engraved with images of dead people in the form of dollars or Euros in exchange for something that lasts a lifetime and worth hundreds of millions times more.

The saying that until the lion has the opportunity to tell his own story, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. What is intriguing is that African leaders have a thousand and one opportunities to tell their own story; instead, they prefer to regurgitate their story from the perspective of the hunter; repeating and passing on to the next generation the degrading stories from the perspective the colonialist. How sad.

So your Excellencies, we need to wake up Africans so they can see what is at stake and take action for the good of the future. Let it not be that future generations will look at this generation and curse us for mortgaging their heritage for a bowl of soup, for cheap fleeting gains. The children of Africans whose ancestors were sold into slavery are still suffering today for what happened centuries ago. History might forgive those who did not know better, but history will not be kind to this generation because we should know better.

God has truly blessed the church with a network of people across Ghana, across Africa. History bears testimony to the fact that a handful of people have brought great changes. And there is more than a handful here. If one doubts it, we are reminded of the wisdom captured in an African proverb: “If you think one is too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with one mosquito in it.”

**AFJN Empowerment and Advocacy Efforts**

The Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN) has done some advocacy on this issue in Washington, in Cameroon, in Uganda and here in Ghana. We worked with local civil
society organizations to tackle Herakles Farms, the same company that acquired large chunks of land in the Volta Region and later sold it for profit to a British company called Volta Red. We have tackled another US-based company, Monsanto, in its efforts to take-over seeds (cotton, yams, sweet potato, cassava and maize) in Nigeria, and we have carried out training sessions in Tanzania. We continue to sound the alarm across the continent as a local town crier who cares about the welfare of the community, warning about impeding danger with serious negative consequences for generations to come.

**USCCB Awaiting Action**

Given that some of these companies are based in the United States, the Africa Faith & Justice Network has made efforts at building a coalition of concerned groups, including the United Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), to join in the effort to hold these US companies accountable for what they do in Africa. However, as you Your Excellencies know, the USCCB respecting protocol cannot do so until an African Bishops Conference has identified this concern and has made a pronouncement on the issue before they can take up the matter with American companies involved in the ripping off off Africa. So Your Excellencies, we at the Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN) and the network of Catholic organizations - Catholic Task Force for Africa (CTFA) in Washington - are eagerly looking up to the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference to take the lead, especially given the investment AFJN has made in Ghana on this issue in the past three years.

**A Call to Action**

Your Excellencies, the situation at hand calls for urgent action. We have found no better documents on this than the documents of the Church, especially documents that you Your Excellencies have produced or inspired. I recall the First and Second African Synod of Bishops, the Joint Pastoral Letter on *Governance, the Common Good and Democratic Transitions in Africa* which I referred to earlier, and the Holy Father’s recent Encyclical *Laudato Si’* that urges us to do all we can to protect our common home. At the Second Africa Synod’s Final Message (Proposition §15), you pledged to help the people to recognize their exploitation by foreign bodies. You, Your Excellencies called on church personnel to work in solidarity in service to the gospel.

*Africae Munus* warns against the virus of materialism that can eat away the “spiritual lungs” of Africa. Those who sell their heritage for a bowl of soup succumb to the worst type of materialism. But we have the means to let our people and leaders understand the folly of settling for immediate gratification. We have the means to make them understand the value of their heritage and act like Naboth who refused to sell his heritage even at the cost of death – “The Lord forbid that I should give the heritage of my ancestors” (I Kings 21:3). If Ghanaians and Africans stand together in defense of their land against predators, they will surely not die! Rather, they would leave a heritage for future generations.

**A Wealth of Resources at Your Disposal**

Your Excellencies, as a conference, spiritual leaders, you are alive and active, deeply concerned about this issue of the destruction and pawning away of our God given resources, and means of livelihood by greedy local collaborators with “investors” in wolves
clothing. Your resources include your spiritual leadership as bishops. It includes your conference itself where you can speak and act with one voice, one mind and heart. As our spiritual leaders you are more united and have better functioning structures than the government with its many parastatals. The structures of the diocese, parish, the many societies and organizations within the parish, the family and the excellent and committed personnel within the Church, serve as natural units for effective sustainable and monitoring action. The Church has religious communities and schools, Women and Men Religious ready to carry and spread the word. We recall here an African proverb to back this up: “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” The Church has an abundance of webs to contain this menace. When examined closely, the resources in terms of structures and personnel that are available to every Local Ordinary, even the ones with the smallest diocese makes any politician jealous.

**Collaborative Leadership**

From my little knowledge of Ghana, I can say that the Catholic Church has very good relationship with other churches and faith traditions in Ghana. So we have an army ready to be mobilized to see that what is at stake is “Ghana’s common home” (to borrow from Pope Francis: *Laudato Si’ - The Earth our Common Home*); that what is at stake is the very survival and freedom of Ghanaians and the future generations. The Church has social media at her disposal, radio stations, *The Standard*, Catholic newspaper, parish and diocesan bulletins, to disseminate information and awaken consciousness. The Church can even go a step further to ask for legislation with sanctions against people who pawn away the heritage and life resources of their people.

**Conclusion**

There is a saying that “All that it takes for evil to thrive is that good people do nothing.” The issue of land acquisition, the dislocating of Africans from their sources of livelihood and the impact of this process on their health and family life is a matter of urgency, of which prevention is far better than cure. With that in mind, I recall the passionate appeal of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI to Africans to **Rise Up**, and I conclude with the urgings of Saint Catherine of Siena: **“Let us cry out and speak the truth with a million voices, for it is silence that kills the world.”**

Thank you, Your Excellencies, for the opportunity and the privilege to address this august assembly. I am most grateful.
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