

In Ethiopia, foreign investment is a fancy word for stealing land

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Colonialism never left. (Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

It's been called by some to be a [new form of colonialism](#). Others say it is [outright theft](#).

Since 2000, over 37 million hectares of land, mainly in the world's poorest nations, have been acquired by foreign investors “without the free, prior, and informed consent of communities” in what, [according to Oxfam](#) and other organizations, constitutes a “land grab.” It's a portion of land twice the size of Germany, [according to researchers](#).

More than 60% of crops grown on land bought by foreign investors in developing countries are intended for export, instead of for feeding local communities. Worse still, two-thirds of these agricultural land deals are in countries with serious hunger problems. A report by the University of Virginia in collaboration with the Polytechnic University of Milan says that [a third to a fourth](#) (pdf, p. 1) of the global malnourished population, or 300 to 550 million people, could be fed from the global share of land grabs.

Instead, the land is used to grow profitable crops—like sugarcane, palm oil, and soy. The benefits of this food production “go to the investors and to the countries that are receiving the exports, and not to the benefit of local communities,” says Paolo D'Odorico, professor of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia. He attributes the

phenomenon to a global “commodification of land” and says the problem will only get worse in the coming years as food prices continue to rise globally.

Land grabs in the developing world create a system so unequal that resource-rich countries become resource dependent.

In Ethiopia, one of the [world’s largest](#) recipients of foreign aid, the problem is particularly acute. In a country where [over 30% of the population](#) (pdf) is below the food poverty line, crops are exported abroad—primarily to India, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Multinationals [buy up the land](#) from the Ethiopian government for lease and bring in workers to farm it.

Favorable climate conditions and government relief have led Ethiopia to be chosen as a new production site by many flower growers present in Kenya. Bangalore-based Karuturi Global, the world’s largest rose exporter, has rose plantations in the country, and is planning the development of a 300,000-hectare lease in the Gambella area.

[Alfredo Bini](#), an Italian photojournalist, examined Ethiopian land grabs in his [recently released photo series](#), “Land Grabbing.” For the investors, Bini explains, the deals were not “land grabs” but opportunities to get huge returns on investments.

As Birinder Singh, the executive director of Karuturi in Ethiopia, plainly states in his interview with Bini: “When someone calls it ‘land grab,’ we call it ‘land development.’”

“These companies—mostly Saudi and Indian—are signing deals with the Ethiopian government to lease this land... for 25, 30, sometimes 50 years, depriving local populations of the ability to harvest their crops and feed themselves,” Bini told Quartz. “The government says the lands are empty and not being harvested but from what I saw and documented in my reporting this is entirely not the case.”

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Farming women walk along a bank to reach their plot in the Agula region of Tigray. The average size of plots cultivated by the local farmers is no more than 0.6 hectares, hardly sufficient to guarantee sustenance for typical, large Ethiopian families.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

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Burning forest around the Karuturi facility, in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, to allow access to bulldozers preparing the ground for oil palm and sugar cane plantations. The area is near a national park where the second largest animal migration in Africa occurs. Karuturi claims they have preserved the free movement of animals through corridors of intact forest.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

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A school in Arabhara, a village near the Kebena River, between the town of Amibara and the Aledeghi natural reserve. This area is included in the government-owned Metahara Sugar Factory's 20,000 hectare expansion plan. The native Afar herders have declared they are ready for an armed revolt rather than accepting their villages being moved.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

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The planting of sugar cane cuttings in Awash near Amibara and the Aledeghi natural reserve. This area is included in the government-owned Metahara Sugar Factory's expansion plan, aimed at boosting sugar and biofuel production.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

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A rose growing in one of the greenhouses springing up around Holeta. Favorable climate conditions and government relief have led to Holeta being chosen as a new production site by many flower growers present in Kenya, including Karuturi.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)

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Once cut, the roses are taken to the stocking and shipping area where they are packed and readied for the daily shipments to Holland.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)



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Executive director Birinder Singh in the Ethiopian offices in Addis Ababa for Bangalore-based Karuturi.(Alfredo Bini/Cosmos)