

Food rights experts warn of bio-fuel triggered land grabs in Africa

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Nairobi, November 29 (ENInews)--Food rights experts are cautioning Africa to be wary of what may amount to land grabbing by foreign companies who want to produce bio-fuel crops and food for their home markets.

The warning was sounded in Nairobi, where members of church groups gathered from 22-26 November, to discuss challenges of food security and justice in southern and central Africa.

"Africa has to be careful with these [deals] because it is the people, the ordinary people at the ground who will suffer, and not [only] suffer now, but into the future," Susie Weldon, an official from the Britain-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation told ENInews.

"I think this is wrong. The first priority of the governments should be to feed its own people," said Weldon, whose organization is working with faith groups to develop environmental programmes based on their beliefs, practices and teaching.

The conference in Nairobi was organized by the Geneva-headquartered Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance.

Weldon explained that corporations are using land for intensive farming, leaving it badly degraded for use by local communities when contracts end. Still, Weldon said due to huge debts, some Africa governments may be tempted to sign what look like lucrative deals.

Global food market price volatility affecting countries depending on imports is a key factor driving the rush, said delegates in Nairobi. A surging demand for bio-fuels by oil companies, the expectation of subsidies for carbon seizure through plantations and the avoidance of deforestation are the other factors.

"I think the issue is how to ensure the local communities and the people most directly affected are part of this discussion," said Peter Prove, the EAA director. "We also need to be very aware of the impact of food security in taking land out of productive agricultural use and into other uses, for example bio-fuels production, which do not feed the people."

The conference heard that the large scale deals are destroying livelihoods, increasing evictions, destroying the environment, exacerbating the climate change crisis and diverting food producing resources and labour to cash crop production.

"That's why we need to speak loudest to make sure that there is no land grabbing before Africans have adequate and sufficient land for their needs," said Thabani Maphosa, the global director of food programming for World Vision International.