

Green revolution or Green plunder?

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When a local consultant firm, Serengeti Advisers, heard about a much marketed, 'Green revolution' or Kilimo Kwanza as it's known here, the firm quickly grabbed the golden opportunity and invited a US based giant investor, Agrisol Energy to bring millions of dollars in Tanzania.

But, what the local firm and its partners from US, didn't figure out was what would be the reactions of locals whose livelihood have been built on the socialism mode of production.

Today, what was once considered to be the biggest deal in East Africa in commercial farming has been termed a massive land grabbing and the are all clear indications that the project involving a total of 300,117 ha has already attracted thousands of critics at both local and international level.

Today, hundreds of villagers have cause to be irked by the paradox of their land being so highly valued but simultaneously so abysmally cheap, given the spirited struggle to wrest it from British colonialists in the 1950s, and yet, nearly 50 years after independence, leasing it to foreign investors for a mere Sh200 per hectare per annum.

The paradox is being played out in Rukwa Region's Mpanda District, whose council has signed a controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with an American-based firm, AgriSol Energy LLC, under which the latter will be charged that miserly sum for huge tracts of land on which it will operate a large-scale agricultural project, effective next month.

While Serengeti Advisers and their partners as well as the Tanzanian government though theirs was move to attract Foreign Direct Investment in commercial farming, to critics, the deal is another land grabbing done by the pimps of globalization.

Serengeti Advisers are strongly defending the deal calling it a pro-growth not only to the investors, but, also to the country and their neighbouring villagers.

But, in a country where people are so suspicious about foreign investors, their defense seems to nosedive as activists joins their hands with both local and foreign media to nail the massive land deal.

Activists say that what on the surface appears to be an exploitative deal is - like similar previous ones - is actually a self-inflicted fate, "thanks" to monetary aspects of the Land Law that have remained static for several years and whose revision foreigners focused on reaping huge profits can't be expected to be instrumental in pushing.

AgriSol activities will be undertaken at Katumba and Mishamo, for nearly 30 years settlements for Burundian refugees (currently totally numbering over 160,000), who will be re-located elsewhere, after they were granted Tanzanian citizenship in 2009.

The available details show that one of the conditions for the Tanzanian government to grant the Burundian refugees citizenship was that the latter be integrated with locals in various parts of the country for security reasons.

However to critics of this project, the move was just another calculation aimed at evicting the Burundian refugees in order to pave the way for the massive commercial farming to take place in the area.

Besides the peanuts aspects in lease fees, the project is riddled with a host of problems, including resistance by the many of the refugees to leave, citing the Sh300,000 per head compensation as meager, demanding, instead, between Sh between 13-19 million.

Contentious, too, is AgriSol's condition that the government creates a regulatory framework for use of genetically modified (GM) crops, which Tanzania has not yet approved. Modified crops kill local seeds and cause soil infertility.

According to the already signed AgriSol Energy LLC-Mpanda District Council MoU, a copy of which The Guardian on Sunday has obtained,

the investor will, on top of the Sh200-per-hectare-per annum land rent, part with Sh500 as fee to the council per hectare per year.

Those within and in the proximity of the locations in question, accuse local leaders of being insensitive to the value of land, and, by extension, of lacking patriotic spirit; unaware, or scantily aware, of the long-static, grossly unfair land laws being the source of the problem.

Article 4.4 of the MoU says that the initial term of the certificate of occupancy shall be 99 years lease, and already AgriSol is conducting a feasibility study, including examining soil samples for agriculture, prompting fears in some quarters, of the ugly, peace-threatening Zimbabwe-like eventualities.

Under the contract, for any disputes that may arise, arbitration shall be held in London, England, pursuant to the rules of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) - reminiscent of the controversial Dowans contract.

An investigation conducted by The Guardian on Sunday revealed that the residents and leaders living near or adjacent to the settlements are not well informed of the presumed benefits from the investment, let alone participation in the whole investment process.

One of the signatories to the MOU, Idd Simba, who signed as the Chairman of AgriSol Tanzania Limited, says in one of the documents that AgriSol will stabilize local food supplies, create jobs develop new markets for agriculture improvement and spur investment in local infrastructure improvement.

Simba's stand is supported by Patrick Mwakyusa, Mpanda District Council legal officer, whose signature appears on the MoU. In an interview with The Guardian On Sunday, he says the contract is good and stands to improve agriculture and benefit Tanzanians.

"This contract is probably the best, we shall make sure that our laws are followed, the investor pays revenues, and locals benefits from skills and markets" he said.

However, investigation conducted by this newspaper revealed that creating jobs for locals is not a priority for AgriSol. In a presentation based on the Iowa state University in USA, the AgriSol says it will bring in outside farmers including South African farm managers to provide expertise.

One of the documents in The Guardian on Sunday's possession reads in part: "The Tanzanian Prime Minister understands the country and the capabilities and what we need to bring in. They quite frankly think we will need to bring in outside farmers and they are fine with bringing in South African Farm managers....the white South African farm managers , to be able to provide general expertise".

This indicates that AgriSol's stand contradicts that of AgriSol Tanzania Limited which claims that the AgriSol LLC will create jobs for locals and spur the economy.

A visit by our reporter who was part of a fact-finding mission at Katumba and Mishamo commissioned by the Land Rights Research and Resources Institute, HAKIARDHI, revealed that residents living proximity to the two tracts are completely ignorant of the investor's details.

Interviewed by this paper, Faustine Msonga, the Chairman of Ndui station village, Litapunga ward, Katumba with a total of 1650 villagers, said the rumours about AgriSol and the resettlement of refugees to other regions started in 2009.

He said that since then, there is no formal meeting between the villagers and the investor to clarify on some contentious issues the villagers want to know, but worse still, not a single top official from district level has visited their village or ward.

Instead they got the information about Agrisol to invest in the area last year through ward councilor, Godfrey Lusambo, and, a few weeks later, through an aide to Prime Minister Mizengo Peter Pinda.

He explained: "When he told us that Agrisol was coming to invest in Katumba, many people living adjacent to the camp were angry and others asked under what terms and conditions the company was coming to invest" shortly afterwards, came Assistant to the PM to clarify on the issue, but we are still worried,"

The councilor said that people were worried of the 99 year lease term, saying that such investments would plunge the country into other conflicts with locals in case the investors don't adhere to the laws of the land.

Another concern is the little land left for them after taking Katumba settlement, saying the increasing population will end up fighting over the little spare land.

Contacted for comment, Litapunga ward councilor, Godfrey Lusambo, who has vowed to mobilize people to protest against the investor, saying that during a meeting between the Prime Minister, district officials and Agrisol company, he was not invited, an omission that prompted him to question the legality of the investor and seriousness of the government.

He questioned 99 years lease and arbitration to be held in London, alleging that the contact had whiffs of corruption and run counter to national interests.

Lusambo said that all councilors living close to the settlements were not part of the 10-person delegation that went to Iowa, US, to acquaint themselves with the AgriSol company; instead councilors were selected from the relatively distant areas of Mpimbwe, Ulwila and from the district council's committee chairmen.

The 10-team of delegation led by Rukwa Regional Administrative Secretary comprised Mpanda DC Rajabu Rutenge, (Mpanda District Council Chairman), Philip Kalyalya, (Vice Chairman-Mpanda District Council Chairman), Eng. Emmanuel Kalobelo (DED), Rose Mayaya (Member of finance committee) and Teddy Nyambo (Member of Ethics Committee)

Also in the list were Patrick Mwakyusa (Solicitor), Fabian Kashindy (Agriculture and Livestock officer), Haruna Mwakitanile (designation not established) and Salum Chima (RAS).

"We don't know the investor, even their representatives, so if the investor will not give satisfying answers to our questions, we are planning to boycott his investment" Lusambo warned.

After coming back, the villagers received another directive showing the number of kilometers to be given to the investor without a survey of the villages to establish whether the land for the investor is enough or not, he said.

He further said that the villagers had no knowledge on the investor and type of crops the investor is going to grow, leave alone out-growers schemes.

On his part, Agustino Wanga, Executive Officer for Mishamo ward, a refugee settlement that is in the plan for agricultural investment, said that neither residents no leaders participated in the Agrisol investment process.

In an interview with The Guardian on Sunday, Mishamo ward executive officer Augustine Wanga, whose ward has 58,800 refugees and 1300 Tanzanians living in Isenga and Bulamata villages, said that he has never seen the AgriSol representatives.

"We don't know them; how can the investment be imposed on us while people at the village level do not know? We just hear that they decided to sit as a full district council and passed the decision without our consent," he lamented.

Executive Officer for Bulamata village, Hamisi Mayunga says he, too, is ignorant of the investor and doesn't know how his people will benefit from the investment.

Buchumi Nikodem, a doctor at Mishamo health centre, says the investment is top-down rather than vice-versa, something which gave them a hard time on whom to ask in case something goes wrong in the process of investment.

"A 99 lease term is a very long time, it is simply grabbing the land and these types of contracts may plunge the nation into another Zimbabwe," he noted.

According to Athuman Igwe, settlement commandant who is also refugee coordinator for Katumba, Uyahulu and Mishamo, the evacuation exercise which is being coordinated by Prime Minister's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government has been received with mixed reactions.

While refugees demand to be paid Sh19million per head instead of 300,000 shillings, locals think that the 99 years lease is an unduly long period, because should the investor misbehave, finding a solution would be very difficult.

Andrea Helmashi, a refugee who has lived for some 30 years at Mnyaki, Katumba, is also against the evacuation, saying the Sh300,000 per head compensation is not enough to buy a new plot and other requirements wherever someone would be relocated.

Reached for comment, the District Commissioner, Dr. Rajab Rutenge, emphatically defended the investment, saying AgriSol is a serious investor who wants to develop and improve agriculture.

On the use of genetically Modified crops (GM), the DC simply said there is no doubt with that because already Tanzanians used to eat such foods in the past, such as the yellow-coloured floor nick-named "Yanga".

“I am an expert in food security, Tanzania is faced with food insecurity, if we want to solve this problem we must involve investors like AgriSol,” he said.

On his part, the Mpanda District Administrative Secretary Laurent Kanoni, said that the investors will increase production, markets, create jobs and processing industries will be opened.

However, on a surprising note, the District Administrative Secretary said that his district is no longer accepting livestock keepers from outside the district because of little land and land degradation, but when the reporter asked him why his district was accepting AgriSol which is also coming to invest in livestock, he quickly said that Agrisol's investment in livestock is advanced and better.

While the District Administrative Secretary defends AgriSol's investment in livestock, Masanja Musa Katambi, an activist who is also the secretary for Rukwa region livestock keepers' community, says Mpanda District is one of the districts which is faced with land scarcity that has triggered conflicts and killings between farmers, investors and livestock keepers.

“People are asking why the land should not be given to livestock keepers to solve the increasing conflicts between livestock keepers and farmers.

There is no land for livestock keepers, sometimes the livestock keepers are forced to lure game wardens at Katavi National Park to allow them feed their cattle in the National park to due to scarcity in pastures,” he said.

AgriSol Energy LLC is partnering with Iowa-based Summit Group and Global Agriculture Fund of the Pharos Financial Group and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Iowa State University.

The Tanzanian arm of AgriSol Energy, AgriSol Energy Tanzania Limited, a Tanzanian Investment and consulting firm will provide domestic Front for the operation.

* Correspondent Gerald Kitabu filed this report at the culmination of a fact-finding trip to Mpanda District, Rukwa Region, sponsored by HAKIARDHI.

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