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Women and development: Biotechnology, hunger and land grabs

Rich Heffern | Jul. 2, 2009 NCR Today

Most of the world's agricultural work is done by women. The following is a statement about the increasing threats to women's land rights and ownership in Africa by Br. David Andrews, former director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, who currently works with Food and Water Watch in Washington.

The issue of women?s land rights and land ownership in Africa is a serious one. The FAO says that women contribute 60 to 80 percent of the labor used to produce food for household consumption and for sale in developing countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa. In a recent meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development at the United Nations the concluding official 50 page text calls for a recognition of the rights of women over 50 times.

The text was negotiated and agreed to by the 53 countries that made up the commission at the end of May, 2009. Of the participating nations, 13 countries were from Africa. Most of the world?s work is agricultural work. Most of the world?s agricultural work is done by women. Most African farmers are women. They have very limited rights to land tenure. Both statutory law and customary law have relevance in Africa. Both have significant limitations relative to the role of women in land ownership or land use.

While the United Nations has solid support for recognizing the role and significance of women in agriculture and the FAO has done important studies on women?s role, nonetheless women will be the victims of land grabs in developing countries where sovereign wealth funds, private investors and wealthy countries are taking control through leases and purchases of agricultural lands in the south to provide their own peoples food security and access to bio-fuels. Increasingly the food security and bio-fuel production is the focus of biotechnology for increased production, climate change adaptation and quick returns on investments.

The victims of these land grabs will be the women farmers who will be driven off the lands they?ve used, small farmers, and communities will be added to the still growing numbers of hungry people in Africa. This issue is a major concern hidden in the intense support by some for biotechnology in development. The robust advocacy of Nina Federoff. the chief advisor for Secretary of State Hilary Clinton on agricultural biotechnology, is in direct conflict with the long held conviction and support of Clinton for women?s rights. Women farmers will be driven off the land in droves by the biotechnology barnstorming expected of Nina Federoff?s advocacy efforts.

The negative impacts of industrial agriculture, of which biofuel production and biotechnology are but the latest examples, has been told by sociologist Linda Labao of Ohio State University. For over sixty years there has been a growth in the dominance of industrial agriculture in the United States. That growth has meant concentration and consolidation of land and power into the hands of a few industrial agriculture giants. It has meant the demise of thousands of small farmers and the loss of a widespread distribution of land ownership.

It has meant that now the U.S. food system is precariously poised, some say, to be replaced by offshore food production. This story of the decline of small holder agriculture in the United States may well be repeated in the developing world if the land grabs continue and the biotechnology advocacy of US policy makers gets more

support than the support for women in agriculture. Such support has been part of the agenda for development both at the United Nations and in the United States.

Increasingly bio-fuel production and land grabs will displace women farmers. The problems of securing for women the right to land tenure require more effort and nuanced attentiveness than is likely to happen in the face of a juggernaut of efforts to outsource food production by countries like Saudi Arabia and for bio-fuel production for countries like South Korea. It will be a lot easier to purchase or lease land holdings and deny land use and land ownership rights to women farmers whose main concern is for their families and communities.

Furthermore, the traditional role of women in plant genetic resource management (seed selection and saving) will be displaced by biotechnology advocacy by U.S. development policy. The livelihood of seed saving and agricultural production by women will be dismantled in the name of a misguided development agenda more focused on agribusiness incomes in the developed world than by enhancing the capacity for real ownership and control by women.

Unfortunately the women in agricultural production are not even consulted in this top-down, traditional approach where the North claims to know better than the South. The history of concentration and consolidation in land ownership and control which has occurred in the United States is likely to occur in the developing world despite the language of the final text of the 17th Commission on Sustainable Development and contrary to the language of strong support for women in agriculture by the official voices of the United States Department of State, Congress and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

The voice of women from South Africa is more relevant than ever: ?Nothing about us without us.? Unfortunately this will not be the case. This despite the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation having a gender policy for agricultural projects where they are claiming to ensure women access by tracking impacts on their welfare through the projects they fund. The World Bank too has published guidelines for best practices for gender sensitive approaches to agricultural development. These processes of gender equity realization will be effectively displaced by the land grabbing, biofuel, food security, funding policy to benefit the haves to the detriment of the feminine have-nots, their families and communities.

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