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## Africa Faith and Justice Network and the Damages of Land Grabbing: The Case of the Brewaniase Community, Ghana

Sr. Eucharia Madueke  
*Africa Faith and Justice Network*

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**Africa Faith and Justice Network and the Damages of Land Grabbing:  
The Case of the Brewaniase Community, Ghana**

Sr. Eucharía Madueke <sup>1</sup>  
Africa Faith and Justice Network

*This essay discusses the procurement of farmland around the town of Brewaniase in the Volta Region of Ghana by the New York based agribusiness Herakles Farm (HF). The essay highlights some of the repercussions of land grabbing by foreign corporations that seek only profit and do not fulfill promises made to locals who lease their land for a better life. It provides information on the efforts of Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN), a faith-based Washington DC non-governmental organization, to enable the local communities to avert land grabs and its damages. The essay aims to help African communities and individuals critically evaluate the gains and losses associated with land grabbing so as to prevent them falling into the same quagmire as the Brewaniase community. It offers a broad perspective on issues of land grabbing and encourages wise investment in land.*

**Introduction**

Land grab, “indiscriminate land acquisition,” particularly by big agro-corporations, is a dangerous venture that damages the social and economic life of the people and harms the environment (Goswami and Bureau, 2012). Any acquisition of land that (1) violates human rights, (2) is not based on free, prior and informed consent of the people, (3) does not thoroughly review social, economic, and environmental impact, (4) is not based on transparent contracts or on (5) effective democratic plans, will be damaging to the individual, the environment, and the community at large (International Land Coalition, 2012). The most damaging effects are on communities where land is the major source of life and the means of livelihood and survival, because the members of these communities are deprived of their rights and denied the foundation of their life and sustenance.

Because land is the major source of survival in most African communities, land is rarely sold or leased for a long time. When ownership changes through lease or acquisition, it changes most often to support life or to make life better. Nonetheless, African farmlands are being indiscriminately acquired by multinational corporations, usually led by their indigenous surrogates. Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger (2016), report that Africa is the most targeted continent for land grabbing. Poor circumstances of life in Africa and the need to provide basic necessities drive individuals and communities to sell or lease their land to multi-national companies. But unfortunately, most of these companies, intentionally or unintentionally, short-change the individuals and communities, making their lives worse than before the land deal.

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<sup>1</sup> Sr. Eucharía Madueke is the Coordinator of the Women’s Empowerment Project, Africa Faith and Justice Network, Washington, DC.

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The essay is largely informed by published and unpublished research reports, face-to-face communications, and personal reflections. The data on HF's land acquisition makes it clear that development is generally at the heart of the land deal. It also becomes clear that the unhappiness and frustration of the community affected was due to unfulfilled expectations as well as perceived socio-economic damage resulting from lack of prior information.

We begin this essay by examining the African understanding of land. We then give a brief review of land grabbing in Africa in general, and in Ghana in particular. We provide an overview of the participants, Herakles Farm and the Brewaniase. Then we evaluate the process of HF land acquisition and discuss the damages of this land grabbing on the Brewaniase community. Finally, we highlight the activities of Africa Faith & Justice Network in the region towards helping the communities avert the future damages of land grabs.

### **Brief Discussion of the Concept of Land in Africa**

Land is life and future for Africans. It is the greatest capital and resource. Having land or not having it has great social and economic implications. Land is alive and having land means having life and hoping in the life that the land produces and gives to its owner.

Land, especially family land, where the cord of life (umbilical cord) of a family member is buried and the dead are laid to rest, connects Africans spiritually; the removal of this land impacts the totality of the person, destroying life and separating the living from the dead.

Land is a great resource to Africans, since ownership of land gives individuals and communities life and the power to dream, imagine, and hope in the good that comes from the land. The destiny of an African is tied to land and no individual or community will sell or lease land except for a special reason, which is often related to improving individual or community life. When land is sold or leased, the individuals and communities know that they are incurring spiritual, social, and economic cost. It is no wonder that any perceived or actual unfairness in a land deal causes damage.

### **A Brief Review of Land Grabbing in Africa and in Ghana**

The large scale acquisition of farmland by multinational corporations referred to in this paper as "land grabbing" is not a new phenomenon in Africa, but its astronomical increase in recent years calls for concern. For instance, Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger (2016) observed that from the time of their 2012 report for Land Matrix until the 2016 report, 1,004 land deals in the global South were concluded by multinational companies. Of these, Africa accounts for 422, 42%. The total of 10 million hectares of African agricultural land acquired, largely around major rivers, represents 37% of global acquisitions.

These researchers also noted that Africa has the highest number of intended land deals (147 deals; 13.2 million hectares). They further reported that one-third of the acquired territory involved land used by small farm holders, the basic engine of the African economy, and that land grabbers primarily target relatively highly populated areas dominated by croplands.

Scholars have conjectured why local communities would mortgage their land to multi-national corporations for “a bowl of soup.” Hall et al. (2015) and Holmen (2015) suggest that, beyond the popular propaganda of job creation, enduring food security, and the like, it is the long history of government neglect and the lack of alternative livelihoods that makes it easy for a community to be coaxed into leasing large farmlands to foreign investors. When a government fails to support its people by providing employment and other capacities for socio-economic survival, people are more easily deceived or coerced into believing that the only way to survive is to give up their land.

Land grabbing has serious consequences for the entire continent. Besides the displacement of families from their homes and farms (FAO, 2004), large scale land acquisition, according to Thurmond (2007) has also led to insecurity of food, sovereignty, and land tenure and the process can re-create class distinction when it concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a few who dispossesses others for their own benefit (Mbiba, 2017).

Land grabbing brings serious, negative consequences to the environment (Balehegn, 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, most of the large scale land acquired is used for high capital, commercial farming. Farming that is high in energy consumption significantly increases the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, destroys natural habitats, and contributes to deforestation, as opposed to small scale farming, which supports a diversity of livelihoods and greater biodiversity (Balehegn, 2015; Tilman, 1999).

Ghana is one of the African countries most greatly targeted by land grabbers. For instance, Aarts (2009) and Kachika (2011) estimated that land deals occurred there in 2009 involving 452,000 hectares of land. Caritas Ghana (2016) cites 2010 Friends of the Earth Europe estimate that 37% of Ghana cropland had been acquired by both foreign and local businesses to plant *Jatropha* for biofuel. Mwesigire (2014) reported that one million hectares of farmland had been acquired with government support by multinational companies for the establishment of a single mega farm, planning to plant *Jatropha* rather than food for the population.

What has been driving the rush for African farmland? The Friends of the Earth Europe (2010) attributed the movement to the low price of African land, the availability of cheap labor, and easier access than on the international market. Caritas Ghana (2016) and Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger (2016) have tied the land rush to Africa’s rich soil, the continent’s traditional system of communal landownership, and its poor economy.

Other investors, mostly foreign, link the rush to food shortages and the need to ensure food security and food sovereignty on the continent and beyond. This group sees sub-Saharan Africa as home to abundant uncultivated and underutilized land, and as the key to achieving global food security, alleviating hunger and addressing poverty on the continent (Bitchoka, 2013; Henriques,

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2008). Further, foreign investors perceive Africa as the best destination for land investment because it is where land can be obtained at low cost (Aabø and Kring, 2012). In contrast, Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger (2016) discovered that much of the acquired African land has not always been used for growing food, as most investors specified. Rather, these lands are used for unspecified intentions, often unknown to the land sellers or leasers.

Concerns about the intensity of land grabbing in Africa continue to grow. Okure (2016) foresaw land grabs in Africa as a potential recipe for social conflict: a population with no land to live on will turn against one another. He observed that Africa's population continues to increase, with no corresponding increase in the extent of arable land. He noted that in the 1960s the 6.7 million people in Ghana shared the land size of 238,533 square kilometers; in 2015, the same land mass is shared by 27.41 million Ghanaians. Thus does selling or leasing land ferment future conflict.

The Catholic bishops of Ghana have also expressed their concern publicly, saying: "We condemn land acquisition that robs Ghanaians of their heritage and impacts negatively on the ecosystems and food cultures of our people" (Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference, 2016). Following this concern, Caritas Ghana warns that land grabbing, when left unchecked, could lead to social destabilization (2016: p. 47).

The magnitude of land grabbing in Ghana was observed by Offei (2014) at the DevNet Biennial Conference at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, where he noted that in 2010 a total of 5 million hectares of Ghana land was acquired by foreign corporations, thus rendering large expanses of land unavailable to local farmers. When land becomes unavailable for over 50 percent of the population that grow food for family and local consumption, the impact on family and community nutrition, health-care, and social cohesion will certainly be negative, threatening the development of the people (Alhassan, Shaibu, and Kuworun (2018).

These developments make it clear that land grabbing is a grave concern. Its perpetrators continue to expand beyond foreign multinational corporations to include domestic actors: national governments and those connected to them (Holmen, 2015; Balehegn 2015). Domestic actors play a nefarious role in any land deal if it is the insider who informs the outsider of the treasure in the home. Unfortunately, in a society marred by lack of transparency, irregularity and corruption, efforts must be made to protect local communities from being dispossessed and exploited by land grabbers, whether foreign or domestic. Political action "from below" is needed, according to Hall et al. (2015); otherwise, the lack of resistance to land grabbing will only increase its magnitude.

For better assessment and understanding of land grabs, familiarity with typical perpetrators and victims is essential. We now briefly review the participants in the land grab that occurred in the Volta Region of Ghana in 2009.

### **Herakles Farms (HF): A Brief Company Overview**

Herakles Farm, formerly known as SG Sustainable Oils, is an American agribusiness company that deals in palm oil plantations and the timber business (Greenpeace USA, 2013). Its founder, Bruce Wrobel, was described in Delevingne (2014) and Bloomberg (2016) as a lifelong environmentalist and activist for the poor who saw the company improving the lives of the local

people in the area of operation. The company's operational base is in Cameroon and Ghana, while its headquarters is in New York City, USA.

HF came to the Southwest region of Cameroon and Brewaniase, Volta Region, in Ghana in 2009 to acquire a total of 73,000 hectares of rainforest for palm oil plantation (Ndi, 2015).

HF's activities in Africa have been controversial. The company's CEO saw HF addressing the food security needs of the African people through investment in sustainable agricultural development; Word (2013) challenges the company's public image as false. Achobang (2013) reports that HF is corrupt because, to get what it wants, the company uses intimidation, especially, against leaders and key decision makers in the local communities in which it operates.

At the establishment of the company, the founder promised that the organization would bring much-needed economic development. He assured that his management would pursue environmentally and socially sustainable projects that could result in economic development in some of the least-developed African areas (Delevingne, 2014). Nevertheless, the company has been found to lack respect for the rights of individuals and the environment; rather, it makes money through environmental destruction and social discord in Africa (Schwartz, 2014; Word, 2013). The company is also said to be unreliable, making promises soon broken, bribing governments and local officials, and intimidating landowners, local activists, and community organizers who oppose its land grabbing efforts (Ndi, 2015; Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014). Bahati and Homan-Smith (2014) supposed that it was because of both local and international campaigns against HF's lack of transparency in its activities in Africa that the company went downhill and saw Brewaniase as a poor investment. Ultimately, HF's resold the acquired land in the Brewaniase community to a British company that does business in Ghana.

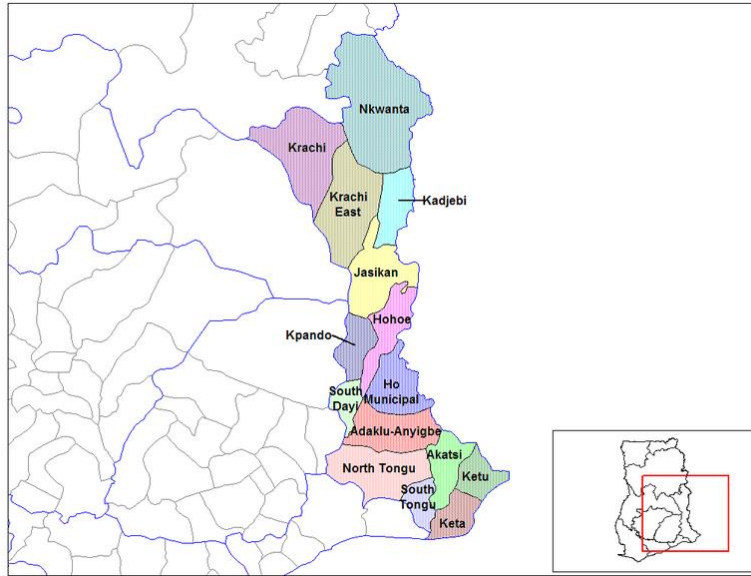
### **Brewaniase Community: A Brief Background**

Brewaniase is a farming community in Nkwanta district in the north of the Volta Region of Ghana, in the eastern part of the country. Volta is a fertile region that encompasses river and lake, beaches, mangrove swamps, rain forest, and arid savannahs. The varied vegetation makes various crops thrive in the region. Ninety percent of the Brewaniase community survives on land-based activities, farming crops such as groundnuts, rice and cocoa, raising livestock, and fishing as well (Caritas Ghana, 2016).

With land as the main economic asset of the community and farming the main economic activity, ownership of that land is critical to the survival of the people. Oral communication with the paramount chief of the community stresses that the land is the asset entrusted to family heads to hold in trust for the family and for the community, and the paramount chief is the moral custodian of the land. The chief and the heads of families play the important role of assigning ownership, assigning access, and distributing land. These entities have the special duty to ensure that each community member has access to land for farming and building a personal house. In normal circumstances, they can sell or lease land to a non-member of the community for subsistence farming under an agreed arrangement. The chiefs and family heads can also allocate land for commercial purposes and can receive royalties on behalf of the members of the clan or family. Nevertheless, no land transaction can occur without the chief's having been notified or consulted (J. Nana, 2017).

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The rich Brewaniase soil was confirmed by an experienced and influential local farmer to be good for palm oil plantation, which attracted HF to the community in 2009 to acquire land for a plantation. We now examine the process by which HF obtained its concession in this community.



Map of Volta Region, Ghana By User:Rarelibra - Own work, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=901883>

### **The Process of HF Land Acquisition in the Brewaniase Community**

A free and fair process drives healthy investment and if the process of a venture is to be healthy, those individuals involved in the process have to be truthful and sufficiently informed and possess the capacity to make informed, voluntary decisions. The promises and contracts arrived at during the process must be honored.

The process of HF's acquisition of farmland in Brewaniase, as described by Bahati & Homan-Smith (2014) and Lowyck (2012), a researcher from Greenpeace USA, is nothing but a hoax: guarded, deceitful, unfair, and in violation of models of ethical business. Having been informed of the richness of the area for plantation, the company engaged the services of a Ghanaian surrogate who facilitated the land deal, to be later employed as one of the company's top employees.

The process began with the company's representative and the Ghanaian agent circumventing and disregarding the community's institution, the paramount chief, who is the moral custodian of the community land and whose counsel must be sought and is required for any land deal in the community. To ensure that the company would secure the amount of land needed for the plantation when the chief himself could not provide it, HF's representatives approached the family heads directly, promising them immediate investment in social services in the community, including infrastructure development and job creation, in return for the land lease. Enticed apparently by the promises, the family heads leased their land without the counsel of the clan chief.

Unfortunately, the promises made to the community were empty, for after four years of concession, the company had not invested in any reasonable social developments in the community, nor had it paid the full compensation promised to the families for their land and for their crops within the concession (Lowyck, 2012; Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014).

In any process, sufficient knowledge and comprehension will foster a fair deal. Unfortunately, that was not the case in the HF concession, where lack of prior knowledge trumped transparency and disclosure. Lowyck (2012) and Bahati & Homan-Smith (2014) discovered that the community was not informed about the consequences of the deal and was not given enough time for counsel before signing the contract for the land lease, even at the request of the paramount chief. These researchers also discovered that the locals were taken to a hotel located at the district headquarters where they were presented with a lease agreement for signing and a total of \$24,000 that was divided among the landowners in compensation for their crops within the concession and another promise of immediate social development in the community. Such is the manipulation of the autonomy of the vulnerable.

Lacking prior knowledge of the consequences of the land lease, lacking understanding of the terms and content of the lease agreement as the contract was written in “legalese,” and being enticed by the company’s promises, the family heads signed an agreement with HF, leasing a total of 3,750 hectares (9,266 acres) of their farm land for 50 years, renewable for 25 years, with yearly lease payment of \$5 per hectare, \$18,750 in total. Disclosure of risks and benefits would have informed the landowners’ decision, and the lack of disclosure deprived the process of moral credence.

The company did at least allow the family heads two weeks to consider leasing their land. Nonetheless, the offer of undue inducement was a distraction that distorted rational judgment. This constraint was articulated by the chief, who felt pressured in signing the lease contract but who had to do so when family heads accused him of attempting “to take food away out of the people’s mouth” (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014, p. 3).

HF created a legally binding document and urged that the community enter into legal agreement with the company. Evidently this is a good business model. However, refusing to give the people adequate time to study and understand the terms of the agreement when the chief requested this, refusing to making extra effort to help the people understand the words of the contract and its legal implications for them is a moral failure on the part of the company. The lack of disclosure was especially damaging because the rural farming community, uneducated in the ways of modern law, would be unlikely to understand a signed legal document that required settling any future conflict with HF in a court in Paris (Land Registry Volta Region Ghana, 2010).

From all indications, HF’s process of land acquisition in Brewaniase is unfair and deceitful as well as contrived to include undue inducement. The process, between two unequal associates, is clearly skewed to benefit the company rather than the community. One entity has economic power over the other and is willing to use that power to press forward until it achieves its end; this partner’s interest trumps the common good and shows no regard for the customs of the people. Unfortunately, when the weak engage in an unfair process that leads to a serious,



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uncustomary decision, that individual or community suffers damage as a result. What have been the damages of land grabs on the Brewaniase community?

**The Damages Caused to the Brewaniase Community by HF's Land Grabbing**

Any investment incurs a cost, whether overt or covert, harmless or damaging, economic or non-economic; it can occur in both human and natural systems.

The HF land grab involved the acquisition of a large land area in Brewaniase, but the company's practices brought social, economic, and environmental damages to the people rather than the improvement in the quality of life that the people hoped for and expected in the venture.

**Social Damage:** The reports from Lowyck (2012) and Bahati & Homan-Smith (2014) clearly evidence social damage on the Brewaniase community as a result of HF's land venture. These include population displacement, loss of autonomy, breakdown in social cohesion, and environmental degradation. These reports also highlight the pains and emotional stress of individuals and community members resulting from the land grab.

**Displacement:** In a community where land is life itself and the major source of livelihood, any act blocking members' access to that land or forcing them to leave their familiar environment and activities is a form of violence, damaging to the emotional and social welfare of the individual and community.

By acquiring the large farmland from the Brewaniase community and introducing a new system of agriculture, HF forced some members of the community off their land and away from their familiar occupations. This violence may appear less reprehensible than that which harms the body, but it is violence nevertheless. Bahati, of AFJN, who visited Brewaniase in February 2017, reported how a member of that community lamented having to leave his familiar home and his familiar occupation of subsistence farming for a nearby community and a new occupation (J. Bahati, 2017). The member recounted his departure in search of survival after his land, situated in the very middle of a huge HF concession, was gradually taken over by HF without compensation. Unable to access his small farm or compete with HF's large scale production, he could no longer sustain his family (J. Bahati, 2017).

**Loss of Social Power:** With ownership comes security, which gives power. Loss of power means loss of security, freedom, and rights. Ownership also brings the power to decide who is to be admitted to one's property and what crop is to be introduced there.

On becoming the new owner of land that the community had previously owned, HF damaged the social power of the community. As the new owner, HF became the power that decides who comes in or goes out, what is to be planted or not, who will have access or not, etc. The community was deprived of free access to its land and to the common access road (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014; Lowyck, 2012). Any unauthorized entering amounts to trespassing and is forbidden. Individual family heads and the entire community lost control of the land that had been entrusted to them to hold for future generations. By depriving people of the freedom, rights, and responsibility to hold what entrusted to them, HF stole the power of the people, wreaking damage on the community, both present and future generations.

This erosion of ownership of land will force the community to become onlookers of its own land, as was evident in the powerlessness of the community when HF re-sold the community land to another company, on its own terms without consultation or involvement of the community (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014; Lowyck, 2012). The community's loss to a powerful foreign company of power, land rights, and freedom of access to its previously owned land will make the community members feel less protected and subject to the whims and caprices of the new owner of their land.

**Weakening of Social Cohesion:** Certain institutions are customarily invested with the protection of the community's assets and the facilitation of its decision making process. These institutions were created by the community, which is expected to respect them. Disregard of such institutions can lead to conflict and can damage community cohesiveness. Most often, lies and deceit will ruin social institutions, thereby destroying social cohesion, breeding social division, sowing seeds of discord, and making the victim the means of achieving the liar's purpose.

The HF land grab, particularly the deceitful process of acquiring the land, damaged the community by weakening the institution of the paramount chief, whose duty was to give guidance to the community and to facilitate land deals. As established earlier, it is customary and binding in Brewaniase that the paramount chief, the moral custodian of land, the uniting figure in the community, and the one entrusted with facilitating community affairs, should be consulted in any land deal, notwithstanding the right of family heads to decide what is done with family land. To be sure of securing the needed size of land for its business, the company sidetracked the unifying power of the chief and negotiated the lease by going directly to the family heads, who in turn did not seek the counsel of the chief before agreeing to lease their family land.

This violation of the people's way of life damaged the community's cohesiveness at its heart. The disregard of the role of the chief weakened the institution. When an institution of the people is weakened, the community becomes less united in working together for the common good. Rather than working with the chief, especially by demanding more time to study the lease contract before signing, landowners turned against the chief, accusing him "of wanting to remove food from their mouth" (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014, p. 4). When the institution central to the community's cohesion is ignored and trust among members is destroyed, that community inflicts all forms of violence on itself, and members no longer stand together to fight marginalization. Visiting the community in February 2017, the AFJN team reported that some landowners expressed regret for their failure to listen to the chief before signing the lease document (J. Bahati, 2017). Once done, such damage is hard to reverse.

**Damage to Systems of Survival:** Changing any system of survival or replacing it with an unfamiliar one without proper preparation of the community or individuals can be harmful to that entity. The Brewaniase people survive on subsistence farming, where families work together to grow food for consumption with little surplus to sell. But HF introduced the plantation system of farming, where workers labor long hours and earn less for their work. With the plantation, the company introduced division of labor and remuneration patterns by which more women are employed for less pay, in contrast to a family working together to grow its own food. In the plantation system, women do more work but receive only 2-3 Ghana Cedis a day, compared to

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men, who can earn up to 10 Cedis for the same day (Bahati and Homan-Smith, 2014; Lowyck, 2012).

The introduction of plantations and salaried jobs may not be damaging per se, but HF's system gave one gender the upper hand in the job market along with less financial clout, creating a social and economic division that may take ages to reverse. This plantation system seems also to have created a mentality of dependence rather than of self-sufficiency. With land taken and plantations introduced, some members of the community embraced plantation farming and salaried jobs. Accepting this system inflicted damage, however, on those who were frustrated and angry not to be making enough money for their long hours of work. Often when a system is damaging to an individual or a community, or when a system keeps workers from having enough, the tendency for the individual or community to turn against self and others increases. No wonder, then, the community's aversion to HF's employing of people from outside of the community (Lowyck, 2012).

**Environmental Damage:** The logging required to prepare for plantation farming and the use of chemicals to enhance produce bring damaging environmental consequences. Lowyck (2012) noted that HF acquired a thick forest in its natural beauty, with only a small portion already being farmed. But the company cut down trees and used the proceeds to compensate some members of the community. He also noted how the company applied fertilizer and pesticide (Glyphosate). Deforestation and chemicals inevitably contaminate the soil, reduce biodiversity, and jeopardize the environment. When the environment suffers, its inhabitants suffer with it.

Although no member of the community spoke about soil and water, it is certain that these were damaged. Rainfall washes away chemicals from the contaminated soil to pollute the waterways as well. One member of the community reported a change in wind and weather patterns, including the pattern of rainfall, since the start of HF's activities in the area (Lowyck, 2012).

**Economic Damage:** The individual or a community invests in something because they want a result, but the result can be either positive or negative. The landowners in Brewaniase supposedly ceded their land to reap economic benefits, achieve better employment for the community, and obtain a fair price for the land. Unfortunately, the community was damaged economically by trading off its major economic capital and source of livelihood and survival "for peanuts," for empty promises, for \$5 per hectare a year, which is well below the land's real worth. The damage was aggravated when the community members who had been denied compensation commensurate to the value of their land were hired as temporary workers only, and not under a formal contract (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014; Lowyck, 2012).

Ninety percent of the community depended on small scale, subsistence farming. The availability and accessibility of land is a necessity for sustainable economic development. A farming community whose access to extensive farmland is limited or controlled by an external body suffers economic damages: loss of livelihood and the ability to make a living and secure basic necessities; loss of both short and long term economic benefits from the land, loss of opportunity for future development of the land, loss of opportunity for agricultural improvement, etc.

Evidently, when land is removed from a community that depends on it for survival, the major capital for development and the security that comes with land ownership are lost. The loss is practically irreversible because it deprives farmers of the capital needed to actualize any dreams of future development. The community will suffer anxiety and frustration.

It becomes clear that land grab implies a bad investment that damages its victim. Individuals and communities need to be able to make an *informed* decision, especially about an investment such as long term lease of land. How does Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN) engage communities on issues of land grab? A brief background of AFJN will help us understand its activities to stem the damage of land grabbing in Volta Region of Ghana and beyond.

### **Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN): A Brief Background**

AFJN is a Washington, DC, non-profit advocacy organization with a C501(c) 3 **tax** status. Its advocacy effort is rooted in the promotion of the dignity of the individual as created in the image of God. AFJN works with missionary congregations and numerous Africa-focused coalitions to advocate for just U.S policies towards Africa.

In the USA, AFJN works primarily with the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government to advance the message of social justice. The organization is also registered as a UN-DPI organization at the United Nations.

In Africa, AFJN works with people at the grassroots, empowering them in several areas. AFJN's main efforts include advancing just governance, fighting land grabbing, protecting food systems, empowering women, and preventing toxic dumping.

### **The Anti-Land Grabbing Activities of AFJN in Volta Region, Ghana**

AFJN's anti-land grabbing activities generally aim to expose, oppose, stop, and prevent the massive, ongoing land grabbing in Africa (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014). The organization strongly affirms preventing land grabbing more than just averting its damages (J. Bahati, 2017). This mission to prevent took AFJN to Volta Region of Ghana in 2014 after the organization was informed about the activities of HF in Brewaniase. With funding from the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, an AFJN team of two traveled to Volta Region Ghana for fact finding. While in the region, the team carried out activities that included town hall meetings, advocacy visits, enlightenment programs, grassroots organizing, capacity building, etc., to strengthen the hand of the community to fight and prevent land grabbing.

**Town Hall Meeting:** In August 2012, on arrival in Brewaniase, where HF had grabbed the community land, the AFJN team organized a town hall meeting to bring together the community, the paramount chief, and HF's Ghanaian surrogate to discuss the issue of land grabbing in the community and the damages encountered. The AFJN team acknowledged that this was the first time the entire community was coming together to talk about HF's land grabbing and problems associated with it (J. Bahati, 2017).

According to the AFJN team, the gathering brought together both the chief and the Ghanaian surrogate to offer the community – including members not yet aware of the land grab as well as victims of the grab – an explanation of the HF farmland grab and the dangers it posed (Bahati &

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Homan-Smith, 2014). During the meeting, the AFJN team witnessed anger and frustration among the people. The team saw the meeting as a great moment of “learning, airing of grievances, healing, and reconciliation in the community,” especially for those who had no knowledge of land grabbing and those who are its victims (p. 4).

The AFJN team considers the meeting a fact-finding one. It allowed the team to listen to the story of the community and it confirmed HF’s acquisition of 9,266 acres of community farmland for 50 years with possible renewal for another 25. The team also learned that the community had filed suit against HF on the grounds of lack of free, prior, and informed consent. Nevertheless, the community proved unwilling to pursue litigation against HF, probably because they had signed a contract accepting that any grievances be addressed in a court in Paris (Land Registry Volta Region Ghana, 2010). Further, the team found that HF had already re-sold the community land to Volta Red (VR), a small British oil company, another reason why the community had no desire to continue the suit against HF.

As a caveat, the stated mission of AFJN in the region is not to fight HF against the community’s wishes, but rather to empower the community by helping them to articulate their stories and feelings so as to fight for themselves when necessary. Since AFJN is there to support the actions of the people, the organization did not push for litigation; rather it supported the community to ensure that the activities of the new landowner are just and are not damaging to the people. The stories, feelings, and desires of the Brewaniase community continue to inform AFJN’s work with them and with other communities around and beyond.

**Advocacy Meeting:** Because the community land was resold to VR and because the community was reluctant to continue the legal action filed against HF, AFJN decided, as a means to advance justice in the community, to convene an advocacy meeting with the VR in-country manager and staff together with the paramount chief and some selected members of the community. AFJN advocated for just treatment of the community; better pay for workers, respect for the rights of the workers, and proper and prompt payment of compensation to landowners, insisting that “no slave should be made on African soil” (Bahati & Homan-Smith, 2014). The outcomes of the meeting with VR, as published on the AFJN website, include VR’s agreeing to (a) refund the money the community had spent on its lawsuit against HF, (b) renegotiate parts of the land lease to be an addendum to the original lease signed by HF, and (c) make fourteen copies of the land lease available to the members of the community, since the community had only one copy of this document. The manager also promised to improve the plantation workers’ conditions by providing a 150-bed accommodation with a clinic and two meals per day.

The AFJN team also discovered during the advocacy meeting that VR payments to workers start at 10 GHC (\$3.13) per day, exceeding both the national minimum wage (6 GHC) and that of HF (5.5 GHC). The team observed an apparent satisfaction of the community with VR, an encouragement for mutuality and the respect of all.

### **AFJN Engagements with Other Communities in Volta Region**

**Enlightenment Campaign:** The AFJN team believes that knowledge gives the power needed to stop land grabbing and its damage and that people learn better from shared experience, thus, the use of the Brewaniase story to inform other communities about land grabbing (Bahati & Homan-

Smith, 2014, p. 7). Since 2014, the AFJN team has been holding enlightenment forums in schools, churches, and community centers of communities neighboring Brewaniase and beyond. The team even held a forum at a funeral gathering in Tutukpene. During a forum in Pampawie, the community informed the AFJN team that HF had approached them for land lease. With the knowledge gained from the forum, especially after hearing the story of the Brewaniase, the community felt affirmed in the decision not to lease its land to HF (J. Bahati, 2017).

**Mobilization and Capacity Building:** Mobilization and developing local capacity are also the tool of AFJN's engagement with the community to fight land grabbing and its damaging effect. The team mobilized communities to attend town hall meetings to develop their potential to resist land grabs and to invest wisely. In the Agoverme community within the Akata clan, the AFJN team brought the Queen Mothers Association together for an awareness-creation meeting on land grabbing. The team did this out of its belief in the power of African women to create change, observing that the Queen Mothers, under the leadership of Mama Alovi, are fighting to win back the community land leased to an Indian company by the clan's chief (J. Bahati, 2017). A team member spoke of AFJN's continued support and its partnership with this community and surrounding communities to build resistance against land grabs.

### **Conclusion**

Though unhealthy for Africa, land grabbing, the acquisition of large-scale land areas by companies and individuals, both foreign and local, is a growing reality. This insidious, recurring practice, largely unknown to many people, damages African communities and individuals economically and socially, and destroys the environment, "our common home" (Pope Francis, 2015).

Herakles Farm, a New York agribusiness with a history of corruption, bribery, and violations of human rights, grabbed large amounts of farmland from the Brewaniase, a local farming community in Volta Region in Ghana, for palm oil production. By taking away the ownership of land from the people, through an unjust process of acquiring the community land, and by failing to keep the promises made to the community for leasing their land, HF did untold damage to the community.

As part of its campaign to expose, oppose, stop, and prevent land grabbing in Africa and as part of educating local communities to make wise investments with their land, Africa Faith & Justice Network traveled to Brewaniase and other communities around Volta region in 2014 for fact finding and to educate the people about land grabbing. Using the story of Brewaniase, the organization educates the people on issues of land grabbing. In its numerous community meetings and campaign forums, AFJN's team recognizes and affirms the agency of the communities and provides the people necessary support and strength to continue their fight against land grabbing in their communities.

Since its activities in the area, AFJN team has observed no new land lease negotiations; a community recovering its land fully from a land grabber; communities re-negotiating unfair land deals; and communities more proactive in resisting land grabbers. Acknowledging that knowledge is power, the AFJN team affirmed the organization's continued and ongoing partnership with communities around the Volta Region and beyond, "engaging and strengthening

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the hand of the community to fight for themselves and build resistance against land grabbing and its damages to communities (J. Bahati, 2017).

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