Biofuels or grazing lands? Heterogeneous interests in the Tana Delta, Kenya: A cross-community perspective

Setting the scene
Totaling 1300 km², Kenya’s Tana Delta is made up of extensive wetlands that offer high potential for agricultural activities. The delta region, which is on the edge of Kenya’s arid Northeastern Province, has been an important fallback area for nomadic pastoralists for generations as well as being home to communities engaging in small-scale subsistence farming along the Tana River itself. The pastoralists are mostly Orma, but Wardei and Somali livestock keepers also live in the area.

Large-scale land acquisitions (LSLA)
Increasingly frequent droughts and the opening of hydroelectric dams upstream are putting significant pressure on the area’s traditional livelihoods. And the growing interests of investors, mainly in the biofuel sector, are about to impose an additional burden on the delta’s wetlands. Several domestic and international investors have
Several land acquisitions in the Tana Delta have been reported in newspapers and NGO reports and mention has also been made of (inter-)national investors controlling land totaling some 300,000 ha. These include, for example, the Government of Qatar (40,000 ha), MAT international (30,000), G4 Industries (50,000), Bedford Biofuels (160,000) and TARDA/Mumias (16,000). Many plans have, however, never materialized because either the investors were stopped or they pulled out themselves. In mid-2012, only Bedford Biofuels (sub-leasing 160,000 ha from six Tana ranches of which 64,000 is to be put to *jatropha curcas*) and TARDA/Mumias (a Kenyan parastatal and sugar company owning 33,000 ha of which 2,000 ha is under rice and plans to have 16,000 ha under sugarcane for ethanol) had materialized to any significant extent. Discussions concerning these plans seem to have adopted a homogenous stand within the local community.

**Youngsters’ opinions about LSLA**

Employing a youth perspective (16-24 years old) does, however, highlight the heterogeneity of local interests and attitudes towards large-scale land acquisitions in the Tana Delta, with pastoralists largely opposed to the proposed investments by TARDA/Mumias as they are towards land investments in general. Bedford Biofuels, however, is viewed more positive by pastoralists and farmers are generally more receptive to such investments (Figure 1). The reasons for opposing or welcoming these initiatives show a wide range of complex and sometimes surprising motives.

For a start though, it is important to stress that farming youngsters have apparently less interest in continuing farming compared to young herders (Figures 2 and 3).
The differing stand of pastoralists and farmers is also clear in opinions regarding the viability and profitability of people’s own livelihood activities (Figures 4 and 5).

The views of young farmers in particular are not optimistic compared to those of older farmers and pastoralists. Given the diverging local interests, the mainstream argumentation concerning the growing global interest in farmland in developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, seems to oversimplify locally based interests, at least in the case of the Tana Delta.

To assume that land investments would deprive the world’s rural poor of their livelihood while serving only the interests of investors and local elites is not in line with the view of the farming communities in the Tana Delta, where younger members are receptive to the discourses of employment generation through investments and the manageability of any risks attached. Expectations must also be seen in the light of less intense seasonal flooding patterns. Since farmers depend on these flooding patterns as it increases the soil fertility along the river, these changes pose a serious threat to subsistence farming in the area.

Pastoralist communities basically oppose the plans developed by TARDA/Mumias as they would exclude them from the heart of the delta,
an area that plays an important role in their annual grazing cycle. Denying pastoralists access to this dry-season grazing area will increase the insecurity of their livelihoods. Moreover, the livestock keepers expect any outside investors to employ mainly members of the cultivating community and not livestock keepers in the future (Figures 6 and 7).

By contrast, Bedford Biofuels’s sub-leasing of dormant ranches is more positively welcomed by many pastoralists. Bedford operates predominantly in the semi-arid regions beyond the delta and does not plan to tap water from the Tana River for its jatropha project. In addition, very few locals see the Bedford investment as a land grab since the original owners of the ranches are regarded as the legitimate holders and thus the sub-lease to Bedford Biofuels is mostly considered as legitimate too, while the land held by TARDA/Mumias was taken illegitimately, the locals claim. It is hoped that Bedford will be able to clear the area of mathenge (Prosopis juliflora). While this shrub is viewed positively by some, who see it as a source of charcoal, fuelwood, construction poles and fodder, pastoralists regard it as a damaging invader that reduces the quality of grazing land and its thorns injure people and livestock alike. In addition, Orma pastoralists hope that the Bedford investment will be able to block ‘foreign’ pastoralists, who have been using the ranches illegally, and who will have to pay for their presence or leave altogether.

**Conclusion**

All in all, the Tana case suggests that local opinions and interests show far more diversity than assumed in mainstream argumentation regardless of whether they originate from political think tanks trying to stress the manageability of risks and opportunities for locals or from critical scholars and NGO circles that assume only detrimental effects for the local population and thus are strictly opposed to land investment activities. The people from the Tana Delta show a remarkable diversity in their opinions, while both sides are demonstrating reasonable motivations that should be taken into account instead of being made to fit into oversimplified categories.

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**Publication**


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