

RIGHT TO LAND: A MAASAI PASTORALISTS' PERSPECTIVE OF A GLOBAL STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

“They come to hunt, to take home a trophy. But the problem is that in order to do so, they grab our land, and leave us nowhere to graze our animals, to live our lives. They come here to do what they can’t do in their own countries”.

Northern Tanzania is home from time immemorial to Maasai pastoralists, by definition the guardians of biodiversity through their culture and lifestyle. They are the country’s main suppliers of meat and milk, significantly contributing to the national GDP*, but even so their pastoral system - albeit completely sustainable – encounters a permanent threat: land grabbing.

Edward Loure, a Maasai pastoralist and Goldman Prize winner in 2016 (LINK), passionately denounced his community’s challenge for survival, during the press conference “**Tanzania: Edward Loure and the Maasai pastoralists’ struggle for land**”, organised by Terra Nuova in the context of the “Hands on the Land for Food Sovereignty” campaign, held on October 19th in Rome.

Loure identifies some of the main causes of land grabbing affecting his community. In the first instance there are the hunting areas, bought by foreign, private hunters “just for leisure”, while grabbing huge tracks of lands where pastoralists usually graze their herds. The second cause is large-scale industrial agriculture, where “they farm crops that we can’t eat” (like biofuels): “If they can’t buy big plots of land, they identify small land-owners and coerce them individually to sell their plots. In the end, they have the massive amount of acres that they need. And where they can’t convince people, they use the political channels through government”.

The government is also an accomplice to the disappearance of ancestral grazing lands’, by creating national parks (such as the Serengeti) for conservation. These parks steal the remaining good grazing land (currently about 35% of national land cover, fast becoming 50%) from peoples whom lifestyle is totally devoted to the conservation of natural resources and local fauna. As a result, another formidable land grabbing cause is tourism (to visit national parks and Maasai culture): “We’re not against tourism” says Loure, “but today there are so many tour operators who use the local communities’ resources and “our” name, and yet leave nothing for us: they grab the land to build hotels, with long term contracts – from 99 years to permanent status – promising on paper benefits for the local population but it never happens”.

Edward Loure and his organisation (Ujamaa Community Resource Team) decided to put a stop to these evictions, sales and ousting of their land. After studying numerous laws and regulations, they found a port of entry through the Land Act (LINK) and developed the “Certificate of Customary Right of Occupancy (CCRO): “We had to document our use of the land, because until now everything was just in the heads of our elders, nothing was written”. Now these lands delineated under CCRO can’t be sold. They are managed by the village, are permanent holdings and represent a strong line of defence against land grabbers. This also explains why Loure and other community members received threats. Nevertheless, to date they have managed to secure some 344 thousand hectares of land, and aim to save a further 2000 hectares by the end of the year.

Land grabbing issues are common for rural populations world over. **Djibo Bagna**, president of the West African peasants’ organisations network (ROPPA), highlighted further examples during the press conference: “Land is like our lungs, it’s the producers’ treasure and it’s what worries us the most. In Africa, land has always been communal. But today we have laws inspired by those in the north, and they don’t reflect our relationship with our land and natural resources”. Each community has its own land use, depending on its predominant activity (e.g. pastoralists, farmers, fisherfolks,...). But the land is not an elastic “good”: with the current demographic growth and the increase of industrial activities related to land (such as mining), there are more and more conflicts, and land grabbing and human rights violations are commonplace. “The first investors are our ministers, our governments, who are wealthy and can afford

land. But then everything becomes more complicated when international institutions and big companies (such as Monsanto, Bill Gates Foundation) start buying our land. They delocalise their companies by creating new ones with African names, and then govern from the other side of the planet” denounces Bagna.

At International level, these issues are increasingly coming to the forefront. In 2012, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) approved the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (LINK), an important tool developed by the international community for governments, outlining principles and practices to which they can refer when managing tenure rights. This year, the CFS monitored the uptake and implementation of the Guidelines to assess critical land issues world over. Civil Society Organisations (LINK) contributed to the exercise with a comprehensive study investigating the situation in some 50 countries from all continents, by interviewing over 60 organisations and people from different sectors: “We wanted to understand if people succeeded in improving their way of life” explained **Delphine Ortega** (La Via Campesina Argentina) during the press conference, “and above all if they managed to stop or solve land conflicts. But we also wanted to understand if people were able to build a dialogue with institutions and governments, to participate in decision making processes”. In the CSOs monitoring report, a number of different activities emerged as a consequence of the Guidelines, such as training on land rights, creating or reforming laws in order to protect people, lobbying and monitoring conflicts. But as highlighted in these days during CFS 43 negotiations, “who defends human and land rights is frequently a victim of violence, abuse, threats and even murders”. Civil society also translated the Guidelines into a “popular manual” (LINK), readily accessible for people to understand how to use this international normative instrument in order to defend their land, their work, their life.

The struggle to guarantee people’s fundamental right to food and land is still long. Whoever tries to stop land grabbing risks his life on a daily basis. But the results of these struggles are now emerging for all to see.

*For more information on Maasai culture, click here (LINK) for some videos.