

PROFIT AT ANY COST: *A battle between big business and sustainable lifestyles*

Deepak Rughani, February 2009

Mitigating climate change is just another profitable growth industry as far as some businesses are concerned. However many reports are published about the damage to tropical ecosystems, climate, food security and communities by agrofuels, big business in cosy relationships with governments continue to pursue their own agendas in the name of development and environment.

The case of the Kusawgu community in Ghana's Northern Region is an alarming example of business tactics which some would say involved deceit by Norwegian owned BioFuel Africa, subsidiary of BioFuel AS (Norway). It's also a rare success story which hinges on the efforts of a few alert and committed people whose initiative drew in several players including the Environmental Protection Agency in Ghana in a bid to stop the destruction.

At the centre of the story is Bakari Nyari, Vice Chairman of RAINS (Regional Advisory and Information Network Systems), in Ghana, who has been locked in a 'David and Goliath' battle with the corporation for nearly a year.

I interviewed Bakari at the RAINS headquarters in Tamale, the capital city of Northern Ghana, in August 2008, after visiting the sites in question.

Bakari Nyari, a gently spoken man in his fifties, holds a degree in Land Economy from the University of Science and Technology in Ghana, from which he says he learnt most about what not to do! Land Economics offers little when it comes to sustainable development. Today Bakari is a part-time lecturer at the University of Development Studies in northern Ghana, a post which he juggles with his roles at RAINS and with the African Biodiversity Network.

Setting the context I wanted to know if Ghanaians considered climate change to be a real phenomenon. Bakari explained that whilst African communities are not exposed to climate change science, they do experience the effects of climate change in subtle and sometimes devastating ways. He took me back to a time in his adolescence in the late 1970s, recollecting the concern of his father, Saaka Nyari, during the planting season. His father would track the arrival of insects and the maturity of grasses and flowering plants, using them as cues for when to sow. Already in the 70's this was starting to change and there was no explanation. Today, older folk recall several animals which used to be common even 20 years ago and have now all but completely disappeared; species like the 'grass cutter', a rodent ten times the size of a rat, large river fish which required more than one man to haul and 'fingerlings' which fed on white ants. Today everyone notices the changes. For example in 2007, there was no rain from mid-April to August, causing total crop failure. When the rains finally came they were torrential, causing soil erosion and flooding, and temporarily immobilising communities.

Due to these changes communities now live in peril of food shortages, but villagers don't necessarily make the link between the importance of their own savannah-forest habitat and the regional climate which it helps to sustain. It's indeed confusing: excessive fossil fuel burning in the developed world has brought warming and changes in rainfall patterns, but it's the loss of natural habitat in the region (including savannah forest) which dramatically aggravates these changes.



Community land close to Tamale
A mix of forest-savannah, small-scale crops and pastureland

Tragically the demand for biofuels is set to make it a whole lot worse. The Ghanaian government for example has set a target of meeting 10% of the national road transport requirement from agrofuels by 2015, although new discoveries of offshore oil look set to distract from this target. But little distracts from the intent of big agribusiness to acquire ever more land, buoyed up by government false hopes to transform Northern Ghana into a sustainable economy exporting biofuels.

Given the widespread misconception in the rich North, it is ironic that here no one really thinks the biofuels explosion has anything much to do with climate. What's it all about? "Development and profit" I heard one representative of indigenous groups say a week earlier at the UN conference in Accra. 'Development' is the buzzword, but Bakari takes it upon himself to ask communities key questions to help them to realise *what else* 'development' means when community land is converted into vast plantations.

Other voices questioning the implications of large-scale biofuel monocultures include scientists and NGOs (The African Biodiversity Network has called for an African agrofuel moratorium¹) speaking out about ecosystem destruction, climate change and the risks of food poverty and displacement of communities. But it is the local communities who are caught in the firing line; custodians of ancestral lands, rich in biodiversity and functioning as important carbon sinks, they are vulnerable to persuasion by industry 'experts'.

The industry figure at the centre of the storm is Finn Byberg, one of the Directors and Chairman of BioFuel Africa, with a mission to create "the largest biofuel plantation in the world". The region concerned is the land bordering the village of Alipe, 30km West of Tamale. Bakari spoke about the promises of employment and prosperity which later, under closer questioning by the community, Byberg was unwilling to confirm. In return he sought a land lease spanning decades. The deal took advantage of the nature of ownership of community land, which hinged on the decision of one person, the community Chief. Unfortunately the Kusawgu community Chief was illiterate and unfamiliar with the implications of agrofuels. He signed away 38,000 ha of community land with his thumb print, unaware of the full implications. When the chief later asked to withdraw from the agreement, Byberg made it clear that the documentation was legally-binding and therefore not negotiable. In reality, the company had bypassed official development authorisation, rendering the contract invalid. However without intervention this would not have been discovered and the community would have lost their lifestyles and livelihoods.



Cleared Kusawgu community land; plantation pending

Later, under questioning from the community, Byberg was challenged by the women about their lost livelihoods following destruction of over 200 Ha of community land rich with Shea nut and locust bean trees. According to Bakari's original report², Byberg responded with a statement promising not to repeat this.

The conflict continues to run in Alipe. In a recent twist, BioFuel Africa forwarded a letter, allegedly from the local Chief, declaring that Bakari was acting without community support by calling the original agreement into question. According to Bakari, Oxfam investigated the matter further and traced the letter to the Chief's son who had been persuaded to act independently of his father.

Such mixed concerns between safeguarding lifestyles and livelihoods, whilst meeting community aspirations, still creates divisions. Whilst photographing the sites a day earlier, I attracted the attention of farm workers returning on bicycles (they now have to travel several miles from the village as a result of the land clearance). Mistaking me for a corporate representative, they enquired eagerly as to when the *Jatropha* planting would begin. These young men dream of driving tractors and earning money to take back to their families. And here as elsewhere in many parts of the global South they act as unofficial 'foot-men' to the agrofuel industry, carrying a misguided message of hope back to their communities.

In the villages, Bakari is careful not to speak out against 'agrofuels' per se. He speaks only about impacts and builds understanding by asking strategic questions; he even cautioned Peter Murphy who on behalf of Action Aid shot stirring footage associated with this story, to speak of local food security, not of agrofuels. Food security, safeguarding local climate and rainfall conditions (by retaining natural habitat) and sustaining community life appear to be the key issues for Bakari.

However the spread of agrofuels is happening fast in Ghana. *Jatropha* and even more rapidly sugarcane have been expanding following success with small plantations in 2001. Initially the aim was the domestic market but now the export market is an increasing focus. Bakari explained how the Salaga chief (to the South of Tamale) has given away 40,000 Ha for sugarcane. Spreading fast in the African plains too, key influence has come from the US pro-biofuels lobby. One example of influence close to home comes via a chief's son who is lectures in an American university. And as always there are political allies; I later heard from another source who wished to remain anonymous, that a senior

member of the Ghanaian government is reputed to have shares in BioFuel Africa and another is behind the massive expansion by Northern Sugar Estates LTD. Bakari explained that “this expansion of biofuels may not be healthy for us. We’re losing the drought-resistant rice which protects the valleys from flooding. These valleys have hand-sunk wells and agribusiness will expand wells, divert streams and create more dry areas. Many will go hungry but villagers do not understand this; men continue to sign up as labourers.”

Later that day I travelled on to Mole National Park, a six hour bus journey to the North West travelling along dirt roads passing hundreds of miles of unbroken community land peppered with roadside villages; it was easy to see why this lifestyle is so sustainable. However I couldn’t help feeling that with climate change taking hold, and agrofuels masquerading as both a development and a climate change solution, that unless we can change these myths, most of this forest-savannah habitat, Ghana’s key natural asset, is likely to disappear with devastating consequences.

In a final twist Bakari is now looking for resolution on the 200 + Ha of land prematurely cleared by BioFuel Africa. Stripped of Sheanut trees, crops and pasture, this land has lost its capacity to support the community. Bakari explains that now they may have no other option but to reap a biofuel harvest here. And if so, what will the returns be? A low but competitive annual return, Bakari informed me is 6 Ghana Cedis per hectare, but BioFuel Africa are offering just 2 Cedis...and only on the cleared land which they now deem to be cultivatable.

Conclusion:

The case of the Kusawgu community is a microcosm of a global agribusiness model in which governments, hand-in-glove with corporate interests, agree policy and incentives designed to stimulate artificial markets. Their rationale is three-fold; *climate change mitigation* - despite peer reviewed scientific evidence to the contrary, *development* - despite counter claims by most human-rights organisations, and *energy security* – at least until the rapid acceleration of regional climate change (caused by habitat clearance), makes crop-production of any kind untenable. The EU, via the Biofuel Directive and now by Renewable Energy Directive is particularly implicated in this expansion.

There are at least two guiding principles which must underpin any reform. An understanding that:

- 1) Natural and semi-natural habitats (which usually include community land and almost never plantations) are key drivers of the regional rainfall cycle upon which food security and regional climate depend. Without intact ecosystems we make ecological collapse, including catastrophic climate change a certainty.
- 2) If land-conversion happens without community consent, it’s still a ‘land grab’, however differently it may be described.

1. *See here for the African Moratorium Call against agrofuels, [Africaagrofuelmoratorium.pdf](#)
To sign send an email with your name, organization and country to:
agrofuelsafrica@gmail.com*
2. Biofuel Land Grabbing in Northern Ghana, Bakari Nyari http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/files/biofuels_ghana.pdf