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Expansion of biofuel investment in Africa has been supported by indebted poor governments because of perceived potential benefits such as sustainable energy development, support to poor farmers, development of rural economies and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. However, the intensity of the biofuels political economy in poor countries worsens inequality for the vulnerable poor. This is evidenced by large-scale land acquisitions in Africa for biofuel and crop production primarily for foreign consumption – food, animal feeds and energy crops. The search for land in African countries has been triggered by growing concerns over food and energy security in developed countries following the global food crisis of 2008. Moreover, these recent developments in large-scale land acquisitions in Africa are not a new phenomenon, but represent the renewal of old practices in commercial agriculture, which is either conducted through purchases or long-term leases.

In addition to biofuel expansion, this study notes that current large-scale land acquisitions in sub-Saharan Africa have been further driven by demands to access water resources for other commercial agricultural crops. The land purchases or leases automatically guarantee access to African water. This demand for water is a response to climate change: most industrialists believe that acquiring land near a main water reservoir will guarantee future agricultural potential. Few analyses have been done on the land-water access nexus. This article considers recent developments in large-scale land acquisitions in Africa in terms of water security for commercial agriculture to safeguard the production of agricultural crops with a large water footprint. Using political economy analysis, this article examines national policy on these acquisitions, the rights accorded to foreign investors and how land acquisitions undermine indigenous rights to the common resources that have been the main source of livelihood in sub-Saharan Africa.

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From Global Land Grabbing for Biofuels to Acquisitions of African Water for Commercial Agriculture

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