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“Competing pathways for equitable food systems transformation:
Trade-offs and synergies”

Climate justice in transforming land-use systems for food and renewable energy

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Abstract

With the growing global awareness of the climate crisis and the need for transition to renewable energy, governments and investors – including many in Europe – have recognised that the drylands in the tropics are highly suitable for generating wind and solar power. Many project planners regard these areas as “empty wastelands”, reflecting a prejudice since colonial times that the drylands are marginal to the economy. Yet these areas are important livelihood assets for diverse groups of pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and crop farmers who have long used the land as a common pool resource to produce and/or harvest food for their families and the market. Large-scale land acquisition for energy projects will expand in the rush to produce not only wind and solar power but also green hydrogen – a trend that intensified with the war in Ukraine. The energy projects in the drylands are displacing local people from their land, disadvantaging particularly pastoralists by blocking access to pastures and hindering movement between them. This reduces pastoralists’ ability to be resilient to climate change through herd mobility. In most of Africa, government do not recognise communal tenure as a legitimate form of land ownership. Therefore, during energy project planning, the local landusers’ rights are ignored. They are not sufficiently informed about the plans and cannot defend their rights or negotiate adequate compensation. They did not cause the energy crisis but they – and their food systems – have become victims of climate injustice. This paper focuses on a study of land acquisition in the Kenyan drylands for investment in renewable energy. The study explored how some pastoralist groups are defending their community rights to their land. It identified the type of research that can help local people gain evidence about the value of their food-production systems and their contribution to the economy and ecosystem services, which puts them in a better position to negotiate sharing of the land and the benefits from energy generation. In the necessary transition to renewable energy worldwide, the challenge is to find synergies between production of sustainable energy and production of food to sustain local livelihoods.

Keywords: Co-existence, drylands, food production, land acquisition, pastoralism, renewable energy